

CHAPTER 3 — Spirit Costume of the Ste-Ye-Hah' Mah

There was among the Yakamas a young man, poverty-stricken and useless to his tribe. His parents and all his relations were dead; he had no home. He traveled from place to place, subsisting on the generosity of friends. It is the Indian custom to turn none away without first supplying their physical wants. The young man was the Wanderer among the tribes.

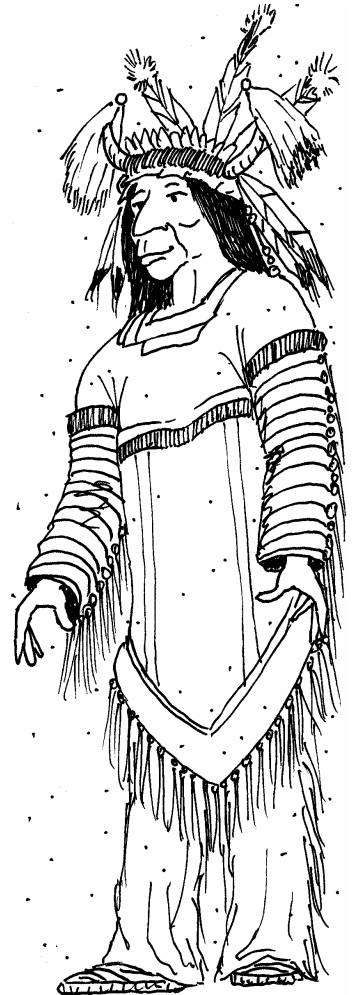
The Wanderer came up the Yakima River to *Pah'-gy-ti-koot*. There he saw five Indians disputing and contending among themselves. They were *Ste-ye-hah' mah*, the Stick-Showers Indians. The Wanderer inquired about the cause of their trouble, and one of them said, "You see these clothes, these buckskins? We found them here. We cannot agree on how to divide them. This man wants the coat, the shirt. This other man wants the leggings. This man here wants the moccasins, and I want the headdress. That man over there wants the entire suit. We cannot agree."

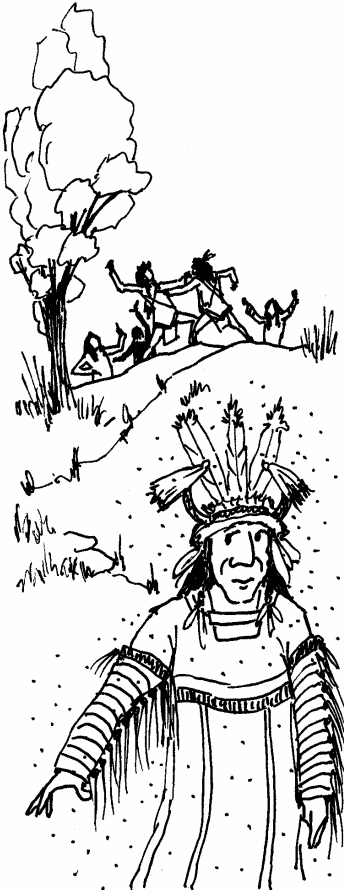
The Wanderer thought for a moment. He knew that the *Ste-ye-hah' mah* were great runners. They were swifter than any other Indians. He said, "Let me decide this for you! I can help you out." The *Ste-ye-hah' mah* replied, "All right! We will let you manage it for us."

The Wanderer rejoined, "All of you go across the desert to *Pal-lah h-lee'*. Go to the big greasewood. Line up for a race. The one who reaches here and puts his hand on the buckskins first gets them. He will have the entire suit." The *Ste-ye-hah' mah* agreed and headed toward the starting point.

The young man examined the buckskins. He found them fine and showy. He thought, "The *Ste-ye-hah' mah* will not be back soon. My own garb is poor. It is about worn out. I will see if these will fit me." He tried on the buckskins, leaving his own on the spot where they had been lying. They fit him nicely. He thought, "I think that I would like to have these buckskins. I wish that I could get away with them. But no! The *Ste-ye-hah' mah* can run faster than any Indians of all the tribes. They would catch me for sure. I had better let them alone. I had better replace the buckskins, better not have anything to do with them. The *Ste-ye-hah' mah* want these buckskins badly. Otherwise, they would not race for them as they do."

While thus debating, the Wanderer saw the approaching dust cloud. It was far down the desert but coming fast. The five runners were as eagles flying. The young man had decided too late. He could not change the buckskins. Instantly in view, the *Ste-ye-hah' mah* would be upon him, would catch him. Scared, he stood aside from his discarded garb. There was no use trying to run away, no use hiding. The five *Ste-ye-hah' mah* all touched the old buckskins at the same





time. Then they saw what had been done. They began to accuse each other for the loss. They said, "You did this. You wanted all the buckskins, all the dress. Now this Indian has stolen all of them. We will get nothing."

"No! You caused it. You wanted the shirt."

"No! It was you! You wanted the leggings."

"Had you not contended for the headdress, we would now have the entire suit. It is your fault that all is lost."

"Why do you say that? It was you who wanted the moccasins. You would have the moccasins, and now everything is gone."

During this trouble, the Wanderer stood only a few steps away. None of the *Ste-ye-hah' mah* seemed to notice him, did not look at him. He wondered why this was, why they did not attack him and take the buckskins. But no! They began to fight among themselves. He decided quickly what he would do. He would get away with the suit. He began to think what an impression he would make at the village with such buckskins.

So while the *Ste-ye-hah' mah* were fighting to the death, the Wanderer left. He went through *Pah'-gy-ti-koot*, traveling north. He reached the village at the mouth of the Naches. A great tribal festival was in progress. He was soon surprised and disappointed that none of his friends paid any attention to him. His fine costume counted for nothing. A woman carrying food would have walked over him had he not stepped aside. He began to think, to wonder what was wrong. Maybe his friends did not want him? He went to different lodges. It was the same everywhere. Nobody noticed him. Then he remembered that the *Ste-ye-hah' mah* had done the same thing, had not noticed him. Might it be the buckskins he was wearing? He would test it out.

Procuring some old buckskin, he went to the river. There under the bank, he changed his costume. He hid his new buckskins and went back to the village. Immediately some of his friends called to him, "Come and eat! You have been gone. For a long time we have not seen you."

Yes! It must be the buckskins. Some great power was in them. He sat down to the feast. He talked of his travels among the different tribes. He went to another group of feasters. As he approached, they called, "You're here? When did you come? We are glad! Come eat."

It was so everywhere he went. He now understood that it was his *Ste-ye-hah' mah* costume. The buckskins must be a spirit suit, invisible. But he kept his secret from his friends, from all the people.

He left and soon came upon a tribe of Yakamas. The chief of the Yakamas had a daughter, a fine-looking girl. All the young men wanted her for a wife. She was nice, good to look at. Her father, the chief, was proud, rich, and haughty. The young man who would wed the chief's daughter must first prove his ability to provide for her. He must show his strength and agility as a hunter, as a warrior. The daughter must marry well.

The chief had a high platform built in front of the long, or council, lodge. Four posts were planted in the ground, the tops inclining inward. On these, a platform of sticks was laid. A ladder made of cross poles tied to two of the posts reached this platform. On the side facing this ladder was a long, level strip of ground, cleared of brush and stone. When all was ready, the daughter was placed on the platform in sight of all the lodges. A crier went the rounds of the village with this message, "Young men! Hunters and warriors! Listen to the words of our chief! His daughter is now of the age to marry. She knows how to tan skins, how to make them into robes and clothing. She knows how to cook the *yah'-mas* and the *camas*. She knows how to prepare the different roots, how to cure the salmon for winter food. She will make a good wife, knowing how to care for the lodge and her husband's moccasins. But he who would marry this maiden must first prove his strength and courage. He must show his ability, his power to provide the game, the skins. He must be able to protect her from harm."

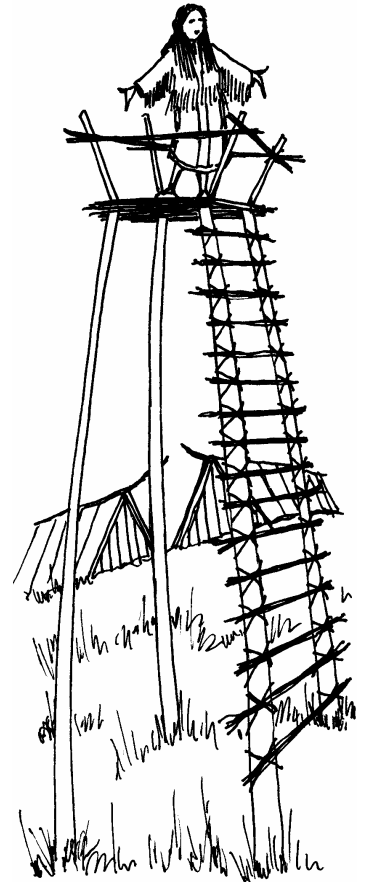
"Listen! The young man who can run and leap over the girl seated on the platform, who can take from her hand the *sunny-kol-wash* in passing, will be given her for his wife. Listen! The chief will also bestow on the husband half of his wealth, half of his power as chief. The offer is to all, to all the tribes. Let runners be sent to the different tribes that they may come to the feast and take part in the sport. Let their young men enter in the contest against our young men. In five days after all are gathered, the feasting and the contest will begin. I have spoken the message of our chief."

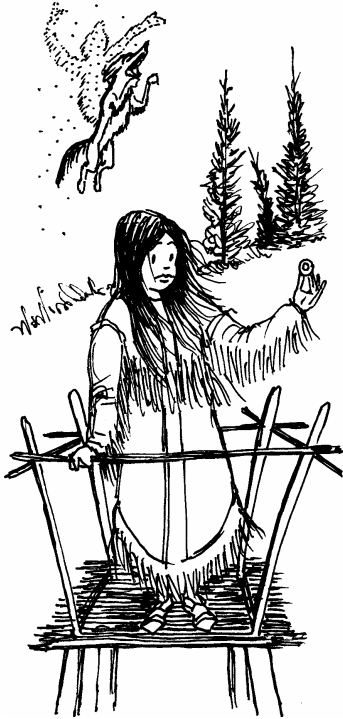
The village was all excitement. Swift runners were dispatched to the different tribes. It would take the Spokanes, the Umatillas, and the *n-C he'-wana* many suns to travel to the land of the Yakamas. All would come. The fame of the Yakama chief and the beauty of his daughter were widely known. The feasting, games, and sports would last more than a moon. The young men of the village began to make ready for the contest.

The chief selected a cook to prepare the game food for the great feast. The young man who had the spirit costume joined the cook. He would help with the food. There he would find plenty to eat. The cook took him in. He helped with the cooking; he was content.

In the meantime, many of the young men attempted to leap the platform where each day the girl was seated. None could do it. They landed against the ladder side and fell to the ground. The people watched the sport and laughed. To leap that platform was impossible, beyond human ability. The chief had been cunning, had been wise.

One sun the Wanderer found near the village a great yellow dog, gaunt and weak from starvation. The Wanderer hid the dog in the brush. He carried it food stolen from the cook lodge. Every sun, he fed the dog, watching it grow in strength. He began to teach the dog to jump, to spring into the air. He taught it to spring higher and higher. He trained it to bear him on its back, to run, to leap over a high pole or other obstruction. In time it could leap high, higher than the girl on the platform. The dog could do this with the





Wanderer on his back. This was good! The young man had a scheme. He said to the cook, "I know how to win the girl. I can do it. I will win her. I will give her to you for a wife."

The cook was scared! He said, "H-h-hu-sh! Do not let anyone hear you say that! The chief will kill you if he hears you say that. The chief is higher than we are. His daughter must marry a great warrior, a good hunter. You cannot leap the platform. Do not speak of it again. You will make trouble for us."

The suns went by. The feasting and the trial of leaping the platform continued. Many young warriors, many hunters, had tried, but all failed. They only drew the laughter of their companions, the fun-making of the people. One sun the cook said to his helper, "I am going to see the sport. The young Spokane warrior is to try the leap. I will see the fun, will see him fail."

The Wanderer said, "I will be there, win the girl, and give her to you. I don't want a wife."

The cook looked around. He said, "H-h-hu-sh! Do not say such things! The chief will kill you if he hears your words." The people all assembled to watch the Spokane's trial at leaping. He ran the length of the race path. He leaped higher than any of the other young men. But he struck the ladder, falling to the ground. He met with a big laugh from the crowd, a big, fun-making laugh. Ashamed, the Spokane warrior left the space. The people still laughed at him.

"Eh!" Everyone was still. A great yellow dog was coming over the top of the mound. He was at the head of the track. All looked. A fast runner, he loped down the track. He came near the base of the scaffold. He leaped, clearing the platform and passing over the girl's head. In the passing, a strange thing happened. The *sunny-kol-wash* disappeared from the girl's hand. The dog continued loping, disappearing in the thick brush near the river.

By the words of the chief, the girl had been won by the dog. She must become the wife of that dog. The chief questioned his daughter, how she had lost the *sunny-kol-wash*. She knew nothing. They had been snatched from her as the dog went over her head. She had seen no one, seen nothing but the dog. The chief was scared and angry. He did not want his daughter to go to the dog. He was going to test this mystery. That evening he announced that his daughter would sit on the platform the next sun, holding his own ring. It would be seen if the dog or evil spirit would come again, if he would meet this second trial.

The next sun the girl mounted the platform with her father's ring. The people lined up in silence. Soon, the same big dog appeared over the top of the mound. That dog came down the runway in long, easy lopes. He made no noise, did not bark. That dog leaped over the girl's head. The ring disappeared, as had the *sunny-kol-wash*. That dog loped on toward the river, pursued by the people. They could not find him. He was lost in the brush as on the day before. That dog was to be the girl's husband. The words of a chief must not be broken. But the father was not satisfied. He said, "Tomorrow we will see about this strange business."

The next day the chief called all the people together. He questioned each separately. He asked if anyone knew of such a dog. No one knew. Then the cook was called. He thought, "Nothing will be lost if the Wanderer loses his life, if he is killed. I will tell what I know about him."

The cook told all. Then the chief called the Wanderer. The young man said, "The cook has talked with a straight tongue. I rode the yellow dog in the contest for the girl." The chief said, "Have you the *sunny-kol-wash*?" The Wanderer produced the *sunny-kol-wash*. "Have you the ring?" The Wanderer produced the ring. They were the same that the girl had held in her hand. The chief asked, "Why were you not seen?"

The Wanderer answered, "The spirit costume! You cannot see me when I have it on."

The chief asked, "Where did you get it?"

The Wanderer replied, "The *Ste-ye-hah' mah*. Five of them fought. All were killed."

The chief again spoke. "Where is the costume? Where is the dog?" The Wanderer answered, "The brush at the river is thick. They are there." The chief told him to go bring them. The Wanderer went, followed by many of the people. He brought from the brush the buckskins and the big dog. All returned to the village. The chief said, "This young man must now prove his power, prove his words. If he cannot do so, he shall die by the arrow."

Then he said to the Wanderer, "Climb to the platform. Strip off your buckskins. Strip naked; then put on the spirit costume as I tell you." The Wanderer was soon on the platform. He stood naked where all could see him. The chief commanded, "Put on the spirit moccasins."

The young man did so. His feet disappeared. "Eh!" said the people. The chief spoke, "Put on the leggings." The young man did so. His legs disappeared. "Eh!" said the people. The chief ordered, "Put on the shirt."

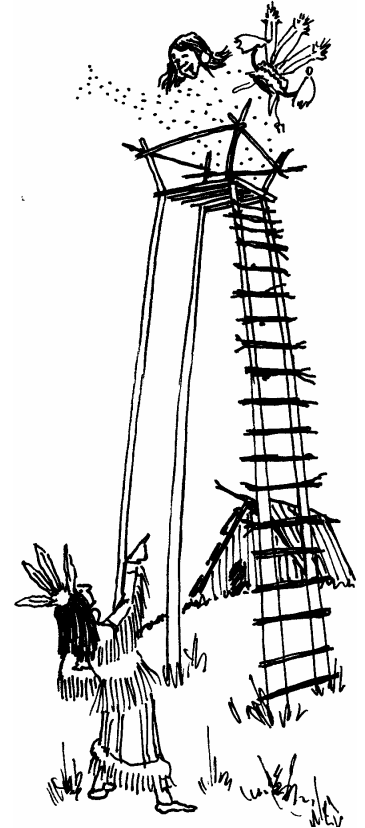
The young man did so. His body disappeared. "Eh!" said the people. There was one other piece of the costume. The chief said, "Put on the headdress."

The young man did so. His head disappeared. "Eh!" said the people. The chief called to him, "Are you there?"

The young man answered back, "Yes! I am alive! I am here!" Then the chief told him to remove the costume, to begin with the headdress, then the shirt, then the leggings. The moccasins would be last. The Wanderer removed the headdress; his head came to view. He removed his shirt; his body was seen. He removed the leggings; his legs were there. He removed the moccasins; his feet were there. The Wanderer stood, seen by all the people. The spirit costume was no lie.

Tears came to the chief's eyes. He had been beaten by the worthless young man, beaten by the Wanderer.

The girl thought, "It is all right. I will be his wife. He is strong, is good looking. He has the spirit costume. He will get half of my father's property. He will be equal in power as chief."



The chief spoke to the Wanderer, "It shall be as I said. My daughter will be your wife. Half of all that I have is yours. Half of my power as chief is yours."

The Wanderer spoke from where he stood on the platform, "Tomorrow we will have a big feast. I will give the feast. After we eat, I will tell you my mind, what I will do."

The next day the people had the feast, a big feast. Then the young chief spoke, "I will now show you my mind. You know me. I have no parents, no brothers, and no sisters. I am nobody. I go from village to village, from tribe to tribe. I want no power. I do not want to be chief. I want to be free to go, free to do my work. You see this man here, this cook? He is a good young man, has good sense. There is nothing bad about him. I give him the girl for a wife. I give him all that the chief has given me. He will take my place as the new chief. You have heard my words."

So the cook got the girl and all the property that went with her. Then her father gave his son-in-law the balance of his wealth. He could not let the worthless young man outdo him in gifts. The old chief was now without anything, poor and without power. He lived with his daughter and her husband. He had fallen to the level of the poorest of his tribe, while the poor cook had risen to the highest chieftaincy of the Yakamas.

The Wanderer went on to other tribes. He continued tearing down the class power of the big chiefs. He continued creating chiefs from the lower ranks, from the honest poor. He broke up the bad-class chieftaincy. Now anyone could be chief who was capable, who was honest, who was brave.



How Well Did You Read and Understand the Story?

Hint: *It is OK to be analytical when you read a story. Many great stories can be improved even more. What one author takes out another may add.*

1. Does the Wanderer intend to steal the spirit costume?
How do you know?
2. The chief of the Yakamas has a daughter. What are some of the things she knows how to do that make her good wife material?
3. How many *Ste-ye-hah' mah* Indians are fighting over the costume?
4. Why doesn't the Wanderer want to be married to the daughter of the chief of the Yakamas?
5. What is one of the Wanderer's goals?
6. As you were reading the story, you probably came across words that are not very familiar to you. Find at least five of these words, look them up in the dictionary, and write the definition in your own words.
7. What do you think is the theme or themes of this legend?
8. Do you think that the chief of the Yakamas was popular after he lost his power? Briefly describe what you think happened to him.
9. Re-read the last paragraph. Do you think that our country's leaders are elected for their money and power or for their honesty and bravery? Explain.
10. This author has a unique style of writing. Describe some things that make it unique. Tell what you like or dislike about it. Does the style make it easier or harder for you to read?