

TRIBAL DANCE OF THE OJIBWAY INDIANS

In July, 1911, at the Bois Fort Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota, I was a spectator of the tribal dance of the Bois Fort Ojibways. I call these Indians Ojibways because that is their true name, acknowledged by them and understood in history. The name "Chippewa," by which they are known locally, is merely a corrupt form of the word "Ojibway." "Bois Fort," freely translated, means "thick woods," so that the term "Bois Fort Ojibways" means "Ojibways of the thick woods." It may be added that this is their ancient Indian name. They were known as "wood Indians," and were, in this way, distinguished from Ojibways of the river, the plain, or the lake.

The dance took place at night, beginning at about nine o'clock. Although during all the preceding day a large number of the Indians had participated in a pagan religious ceremony, beginning before sunrise and ending at sunset, marching, dancing, singing, and invoking, yet nearly all of them appeared at the tribal dance apparently fresh and unwearied.

The scene of the festivities was within a round, coliseum-like building. The structure contained little sawed lumber. Its uprights and walls were of split cedar. The floor was formed of pounded clay, and, no matter how active the dancers were, little dust was raised. The great chamber, fifty feet in diameter, was illuminated by large, old-fashioned lanterns. A bench was nailed around the wall for spectators and participants. But it seems that white spectators, who were entirely free to enter and look on, and even to dance, if they chose, were expected to sit on the west side, near the entrance. No one noticed or intruded upon the spectators. It was their privilege to see and be silent. The first familiarity, if any was indulged in, had to come from the whites.

In front of this bench, which extended around the hall, was

the circular track, eight or ten feet in width, of beaten clay and very smooth, on which the dancers traveled. In the very center of the room was a great drum, the tom-tom, whose "boom-boom-boom" could be heard a mile. This sweet-sounding drum was of Indian manufacture, and during the dance it was beaten by four or five drummers striking the great diapason in unison with sticks padded on the striking end. The drummers sat on benches around the drum; and back of and around them sat a score of vocalists who, during the dance, sang in a high, clear, smooth treble, harmonizing with the drum. The booming drum and chorus of Indian voices made stirring dance music. Behind the singers, all around, most of the women, girls, and children sat, gossiping, laughing, listening, and watching.

About nine o'clock the people came straggling in, stately warriors, lissome girls, fat dames, raw-boned youths, and groups of lads and lassies. All glanced at me, a white man, where I sat with the reservation doctor, but that was all. They were neither curt nor courteous; they ignored my companion and myself with Indian taciturnity.

The drummers took their places around the drum, the choristers behind them. Then some singer broke out in a wailing, monotonous treble, the drum joining in. But the dance did not then begin very actively. A few boys circled around, a group of the elders tried their paces a little and subsided. Most of the women who came in carried bundles containing bead headdresses and sashes for their husbands, lunches, and gifts. In general, the women donned no ornaments. They wore, in truth, their best gowns, but it remained for the warriors to gleam and glisten in bead and feather, in bright sashes, head-dresses, leggings, and moccasins. Some wore the footwear of the white man, as being better to dance in.

Let us now acquaint ourselves with some of the participants. Chief Moses Day (Day-bway-wain-dung, which, freely rendered, is "One-who-can-be-heard-from-afar") was there. He is over seventy summers old, but is erect and active. I saw him at sunrise that day; he had been for sixteen hours par-

ticipating in the Medawe religious dances, had made many speeches, had eaten a man's share, and yet here he was ready to dance and frolic until another sunrise. What white man of seven decades could do as much? During the day ceremonies he was attired in solemn black; his coat was of that cut worn years ago by professional men; his hat, a high-crowned derby; on either cheek he had daubed a small, modest splash of vermilion. At the tribal dance at night he wore the same garb, supplemented, however, by a headdress of feathers, very moderate and becoming, a beaded sash, and a few other brightly-colored trappings. He was a very Chesterfield in courtesy, a Washington in urbane dignity. No wonder he was admired by the women and honored by the men. He is a fine old Indian politician, chief of the tribe, that is, the civil chief. He had no hereditary right, but had succeeded in pushing aside *No-be-day-ke-shig-o-kay*, the heir to the throne, son of Farmer John. It seems that among the Ojibways heirship is in the male line, as at common law; not in the female line, as among the Iroquois. This old warrior likes white men very well. I am certain that old Moses was that sort of Indian who, in ancient times, raised his voice for mercy when others shouted for death by fire at the stake.

May-jish-kung, John Johnson, was in attendance, in full regalia. His name signifies "One-equal-to-an-emergency," or "One-who-does-things." This Indian was the chief medium, sorcerer, invoker. He claims knowledge of the occult and the future, and is the high priest of the *Me-da-we-win*, that is to say, the man among them who knows the future, can invoke spirits, and advise wisely. He is clearly a deceiver, but I think an honest one; on the whole, auto-deceived, he deceives the others. He did not dance at all; perhaps he felt that it would lower his dignity. May-jish-kung is an old-time conservative, a veritable standpatter. He stands for the past, for all things Indian, and bitterly resents innovations, while he sees them coming on all sides.

We have often read of that chief who, in the woodland

council, always stood for war, for death and the stake, for the forest life as against that of the whites. This old medium is of that temper, that is, he lives and will die a hostile, although, to be sure, he is no lawbreaker now. Of all the company, he sat apart alone, erect, his brown eyes blazing, dreaming of the days of old when his clan was known and honored from the salt sea west to the Mississippi, in all that region where now an alien and hated race holds sway.

All informants said that Kay-ke-way-aush was over eighty years old. His English name is O. M. Johnson; I missed getting the translation of his Indian name. It should be said that these English names have been merely tacked on to these people for convenience, sometimes by a logger for whom they have worked, or by the United States authorities. They answer to the English name in English-speaking company and to the Indian name—their real name—among their own people.

Kay-ke-way-aush was a fine old sprite. Merry and urbane like Moses Day, he lacked the latter's ability and ambition. He was one of those who, in days gone by, would have merrily applauded a burning at the stake, or as cheerfully acclaimed the release of the intended victim. He would be happy under any and all conditions, whether it rained or the sun shone; whether there was wild rice and moose meat in the tepee, or nothing but old skins to chew on. Nothing really mattered to him. There are millions like him who are not Indians.

Ne-be-day-ke-shig-o-key, a good-looking hunter and guide of fifty years, was at the dance. His name, translated literally, signifies "Sound-traveling-from-cloud-to-cloud"; more freely rendered, it becomes "Rolling Thunder." He is known to the white world and on the government records as George Farmer, and is one of the few Bois Fort people who speak English.

His younger brother is A-win-e-be-nais, Charley Farmer, a clever boat-builder. His Indian name means "Bird-that flies-in-fog." Perhaps its figurative significance is Sharp-Eye, or Hawkeye, as a bird which flies in fog must see clearly, but I

am not sure about that. He speaks very little English, but one is led to suspect that he knows more of the hated tongue than he admits.

These two are the sons of old Pe-ta-wah-na-qua-be-nais, Farmer John, who died three years since. They said that he was then one hundred years of age. He was the acknowledged chief, and his own memory went back to the early days of the nineteenth century. Their mother still lives. Her name is Ta-tah-guash-eke, meaning "Cold-winter-storms," or something like that. George Farmer is a capable guide, a good hunter, and a man well esteemed. He usually holds some small post under the government in the tribal service. Charley Farmer is an able mechanic. His boats, built of half-inch cedar, sell readily and are well known. Both of these respectable men are pagans and stand for the ancient Indian beliefs. They were present all day at the Me-da-we-win ceremonies carried on under the direction of the four high priests of the Medawe lodge, and they and their families were at this tribal dance at night, well dressed, as village business men might be, but, in addition, decorated with little crowns of feathers, bead sashes, and leggings. They circled in the dance actively. Both of these men have enough knowledge of reading and writing to be able to conduct their simple affairs. They are Indians through and through, the younger brother being a real fanatic in red patriotism; the elder is no less patriotic but has probably grown colder with years, and is, perhaps, conscious, from long observation, of the hopeless inferiority and incapacity of his race, but he adheres to his people.

The grand leader of the dance, the master of the most intricate gyrations, he who was the cynosure of all eyes, was a lithe veteran of seventy years, Ah-mah-kah-me-ke-mung, or, as he is known to white people, Andy Fields. His dance costume was gorgeous. Over his ordinary dress he wore large sashes, breech clouts, aprons and leggings of black velvet decorated with thousands of beads of various colors. On his feet were moccasins of the whitest moose skin, highly ornamented.

He wore a headdress of bright feathers, fastened in a band of beaded skin. He carried in his hand a tomahawk gaily trimmed with bright ribbons. When Andy circled the dance path, leading a special group of dancers, swinging his tomahawk and shouting his dance cry, carrying his seventy years as though they were but twenty, there was no one, squaw or warrior, who saw him who could refrain from feeling admiration and expressing approval. His dancing was so far superior to that of any of the others, his activity and skill were so much greater, the grace of his movements was so surpassing, that no one challenged his leadership. He was, indeed, the belle of the ball.

At Indian dances it is the men who shine in splendor of dress and color. The women, like the female birds in the woods, are content with quiet apparel. They are less forward than the men and less prominent, like, for instance, white men at a civilized function. They admire the dress and personal beauty of the warriors in the same way that white men at a ball admire the dress and bask in the charm of white women.

At this tribal dance few of the women stood out from the mass, but Sah-kah-me-quay-beake, wife of Chief Moses Day, was noticeable. She was a fine, capacious dame, weighing easily two hundred pounds, with bright eyes and broad brow, and wearing ever on her fine face a pleasant look. She had wound about her a great coil of green ribbon, and when she moved in the dance, the ends and loops trailed after her. Possibly the success of Moses Day in tribal politics was in a measure based on the advice of this capable squaw.

There were present about thirty warriors or adult males, the same number of married women, thirty or forty young men and women, as many boys and girls, and at least a score of children under ten years, not counting the babes in arms. The mass of the men were ordinary persons, very much alike in appearance. The married squaws as a rule were corpulent. The young men were raw-boned and active. Several of them bound strings of round sleigh bells about their knees and added

this jingling melody of the bells to that of the Indian orchestra, but they did not go in strong for bead work and feathers. The young women were plain and retiring. The children under ten years danced with the others, and it was pleasant to see the tiny lads and lasses participating side by side with their grandfathers in the festivities. The dancing of some of the clean-limbed lads was delightful to look at. They were easy, graceful, and tireless.

I have told how the old Indians took part in this tribal celebration. It should be added that their age was no bar at all to their full participation. The aged led the dance and were honored at all times. This seems a little contradictory to what has been said about the Indians abandoning their aged and suffering them to die without care. That this has been done is unfortunately true, but the fact is that a person was never abandoned because of years, but because of helplessness, incapacity to keep upon the march, or inability to hunt. No one was abandoned who could bear a fair share of the burdens of life.

At intervals during the tribal dance it is customary to have short orations. These are given by anyone who wishes to speak, and all who take part, however unpopular they may be, are listened to with respect. If the sentiments expressed are disapproved of, they are heard in silence. If they meet with approval, words of satisfaction are heard here and there through the assembly. There is no set program; the speakers arise during the intervals between the dances and speak impromptu. These orations at the tribal dance are usually devoid of religious significance. They deal with the business of the tribe, its affairs with the agent, its land questions, and its litigation. Occasionally someone will be moved to tell a story, or will try to "get the laugh" on a friend by exposing some blunder he has committed, but all is done in the best of humor. In fact, it is remarkable how contentedly these Ojibways live together, how affectionate they are to one another, how tender of one another's feelings and rights. I have heard it said that

one can not be profane in Ojibway, and that when a warrior for any cause is angry to the swearing point, he expresses his ire in the vile English lingo he has picked up in the lumber camps of the region. The speeches, however, are delivered with calm urbanity. No one beats the air, rages, and thunders. The voices are well modulated, the talks short, and it seems as though each speaker had something important to say or some humorous tale to relate.

The task of describing the dance itself is not an easy one. Some fancy steps are indulged in by the more distinguished beaux and young men, but these consist, on the whole, of a side-stepping of the feet, always close to the ground, with back to the outside wall, and face to the music in the center, the movement keeping time to the Manitou drum and the singers. Aside from the special dances, which are only occasional, there is only the grand tribal dance on this occasion. Those who take part all circle, facing the music, without joining hands. A few will start, and then others will join them, until perhaps practically all the natives are in the circle, calmly dancing, dancing, in a sort of dreamy hypnotism. Elderly women consort together and so do the children and warriors, but there is no fixed rule. Mr. Winchell thus describes this tribal dance step: "The steps were a uniform double-treading, with the forward part of the foot, first on one foot and then on the other, the knees but little flexed and the body bent slightly forward, keeping time with the drum beats."¹

It is not really an elaborate dance, but one in which all, from the toddling babe to the venerable patriarch, can and do participate. This makes the dance what it is, the tribal prayer. Conceive a band of these aborigines in the dim light of the coliseum, circling to the boom of the tom-tom and the high notes of the singers, feeling a glowing spirit of natural companionship, forgetful of all else in the world but themselves. The dance is a

¹ Newton H. Winchell, *The Aborigines of Minnesota*, 612 (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1911).

sort of inarticulate speech arising from the crowd, which says: "We are the people, the original people, the An-ish-in-aub-ag. We are the spontaneous ones, and this world is ours. We know and love the land and water, the sky, the sun and moon and sparkling stars. We love the birds and beasts and fishes, and we are a part of everything. We have always been here dancing. We own everything and we will possess everything when we die. What do we care for anything, we, the spontaneous ones."

When they dance, all worry seems to pass from them. The nation is in motion, and that begets a fine, general sympathy, each for all and all for each. Rancor melts, and affection takes its place. In the tribal dance the pagan Indians express a national prayer to their gods. As the dance proceeds, everything seems small to them, except kindness, mercy, good nature, and mutual affection. Forgotten are cold, hunger, weariness, and trouble; forgotten the long vigil of the chase, the injustice of the white man, the wrongs of the Indian.

Let it be remembered that this Indian dance has been practiced by these people for untold ages. They danced before ever a Spaniard found his way across the sea. In various parts of this country there are many civilized Indians, many to whom the culture of the whites is an open book. They have discarded everything of savage life, except a love for the wilds and a love for the tribal dance. This love persists and will continue to persist as long as Indian blood flows, and, where three or more possessing this love do meet, they will dance. Many Indian children of both sexes have gone out from their native homes, and the boys have become cultured men, and the girls refined and civilized women. Such as these have come to love civilization and even to think in its language. To them the sordid lodge in the wilderness is repulsive; the smoke of the wigwam chokes them; the half-cooked flesh fills them with disgust. Yet when they are brought into contact with the tribal dance, all else is forgotten, and they feel, at least for the time, that they

need not be ashamed of their race, that it has its roots deep in the past, and that its place is secure in the hereafter.

The dance, beginning at sundown, lasts indefinitely into the night. There is little feasting, but occasionally a young warrior circulates among the company and distributes a little food, consisting of cooked wild rice, a few crackers, cakes of maple sugar, pinches of tobacco. I saw also the circulation of the calumet, or peace pipe, well filled and lighted. Each person puffed once or twice. The pipe-bearer, holding it in his hand by the bowl, proceeded from one to another. This refreshing puff was tendered even to the small boys; and, while no one could fail to admire the friendly spirit in which the big pipe was carried about, it seemed to me that no more certain method of circulating disease could be contrived. But these Ojibways have no knowledge of germ theories and contagion, and it can not be said that they would be more healthy if they had. They eat, drink, and smoke as our grandfathers did.

As the night advanced and the people warmed up in the dance, their hearts grew soft towards each other and an exchange of gifts began. This gift-giving is very characteristic of all Indians. At the religious and ceremonial dances which took place during the preceding day, the sick woman, *May-nin-way-bun-dun-oke*, had given away to her guests clothing, utensils, and provisions, worth at least one hundred dollars. These gifts represented the family savings of many months, but all were freely given. We often read how the redskins of the Pacific Coast give away at their potlatches the savings of a lifetime. The Indian agent at Bois Fort reports that his charges at their dances had, on occasion, impoverished and disarmed themselves by their impulsive gifts to Canadian Indians, who were guests in their village, presenting them with their clothing, their rifles, their ponies.

A proud Ojibway at a public dance will not rest content to be the recipient of a gift. Forthwith he cancels the obligation by a reciprocal offering. Hence at times this exchange of gifts

seems sordid and from this circumstance has been derived the expression, "Indian giving." A generous redskin impulsively gives his coat to his friend; that friend, overwhelmed with gratitude, forthwith shows his appreciation by giving in return his rifle, his pony, his blankets, or something else of value.

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