

FINNISH CHARMS AND FOLK SONGS IN MINNESOTA

Then the aged Väinämöinen
Spoke aloud his songs of magic,
And a flower-crowned birch grew upward,
Crowned with flowers, and leaves all golden,
And its summit reached to heaven,
To the very clouds uprising.
Then he sang his songs of magic,
And he sang a moon all shining,
Sang the moon to shine forever
In the pine-tree's emerald summit
Sang the Great Bear in its branches.

Thus the magic of the magician hero of the Finnish "Kalevala," the ancient folk poem still read, sometimes chanted, by the Finns of Minnesota. Perhaps because of this folk hero, his harp playing and singing, respect for music and love of it have been traditional with the Finns since their earliest days. This feeling came with them from the old country into the northern Minnesota towns and homesteads and lake country, and, with a suitable setting, it is responsible for the survival of many old songs and customs. Even fragments of the ancient magic songs and poetry may be found, although they are of a more commonplace type than those in the "Kalevala" — usually charms to be used in the household or on the farm, rather than incantations for the sun and moon. In this country, the *loitsu* or magic charm is quite rare, and is remembered without being used, or even believed in, any more. The remarkable thing is to find it surviving at all, in a state all too full of highways, cars, and radios.

Of these bits of magic, survivals of a pre-Christian art, several concern cattle. The most interesting — and, in the Finnish, a very beautiful chant — is used to bring a herd of

cows back to the home farm at night, after it was first let out in the spring to the wild pastures. The *loitsija* (sorcerer or wise woman) fastened a bell to the lead cow's neck, chanting:

Sound, bell, echo, bell,
 Echo from the farthest meadows.

 You are the largest of the cattle,

 Bring ye home the herd,
 Clanking to the farmyard,
 Lead it to the evening smudges,
 While yet the sun is shining.

This charm and some others concerning elves both friendly and unfriendly were given to me by an interesting old lady from Oulu in Finland and Chisholm in Minnesota. When I went later to her summer cabin at Crooked Lake for more information about the incantations, she was too busy making fish stew and blueberry pies to answer any questions; but I believe that there is not much more to be found out in this country about the practice of magic and the ritual surrounding it. One must just be grateful that some of the incantations have survived, thanks to the Finnish memory for folk poetry and respect for ancient things. In Winton, on the edge of the Superior National Forest, I learned two useful charms, one to cure hiccups and the other to keep the cold away. In a country where it is often forty below zero, magic to guard against frozen hands seems a very good idea. The charm says:

Cold, thou son of Wind,
 Do not freeze my finger nails,
 Do not freeze my hands.
 Freeze thou the water willows,
 Go chill the birch chunks.

The charm for getting rid of hiccups is even more practical, and was evidently used by the hiccuper rather than by

the *loitsija*. Counting to ten, he wishes the hiccups, in an alliterative jingle, onto a list of objects:

Go to the loom, the bark, the birch
To the needle, to the thicket, to the spruce . . .

And finally, "Go to the neighbor!"

From some other sources in northern Minnesota come some spells to cure burns, scratches, and other injuries. These charms are of a very old type, as they were originally known only to the professional sorcerers. They show their age, too, by using the formula which traces the origin of whatever caused the injury. An idea as old as the "Kalevala" was that naming the beginnings of an evil force would cure the damage it had caused.

Aside from these rare magic chants, many very old Finnish songs survive in Minnesota. Recently I heard an old woodsman sing a drinking song that is, musically, the sort of thing that Shakespeare's people sang when they did their drinking, as we know from the music of that period. Elizabethan types of song, however, are not very old as Finnish folk songs go. One of the best-known songs in the Finnish communities is a ballad generally sung, according to folk-song experts in Finland, before the year 1500. The story of the ballad is familiar to Americans of British and Scandinavian descent. It is called "Edward" in England, Scotland, and the Appalachian Mountains; in Sweden it is "Sven i Rösengård"; in Finland, "Velisurmaaja" — "The Brother-murderer." Wherever it originated, probably in Sweden or Scotland, the Finnish version of the ballad has the advantage of an especially fine air, as well as many verses of good folk poetry. To hear, in one's first days of folk-song collecting, as I did, this old ballad, with its perfect, tragic air, is a curious and thrilling experience to a collector. Many of the existing twenty verses are known to Finnish singers, usually the first four or five, in which the story by question and answer comes to the climax:

Why is your sword so red with blood,
 O my gallant son?
 I stabbed my brother, he is dead,
 Mother, dearest mother.

Most of the singers know, also, the concluding verses :

When will you come back again,
 O my unhappy son?
 When the raven turns snow-white,
 Mother, honored mother.

When the snow-white swan turns black. . . .
 When the moon turns burning hot. . . .
 When the stars dance in the sky. . . .
 When we all come to Judgment Day.

Even older airs than that of "The Brother-murderer" are heard in the characteristic songs from north Finland given to me by a singer in the iron range town of Virginia. Her province—barren, rocky, and curiously lakeless for Finland—is noted for a special kind of rough song with words celebrating the deeds of the "bad men" who once made that country notorious. An example of this type is the ballad of "Ison-Talon Antti"—"Big-house Andy"—with its blood-thirsty story and grand, spirited tune, very generally sung in Minnesota. But the songs from the same locality which this Virginia woman sings are the exact opposite—the gentlest songs imaginable. They are sung very softly and slowly—ancient songs, with odd inflections. With each song the singer tells a story of how she first heard it, giving a picture of the countryside, the manor farms of her childhood and young girlhood in Finland. Often the songs have verses as lovely as the airs—for instance, the "wake-up" song sung at dawn by people going out to work in the fields, which ends :

The cuckoo calls, then all the birds are singing,
 And now the herdsman sounds his horn of birchbark.

Songs about trees are common, often with some symbolic meaning:

Never does the aspen cease from quivering in the wind,
Never does my heart cease remembering past love.

There are many songs about trees—juniper, birch, spruce, pine, and alder seem to be the most common. Rather oddly, the sacred tree of Finnish legend, the mountain ash, is not mentioned in the songs surviving in this country. But the tree itself—the rowan tree of Scottish superstition—has not been forgotten in this country, for one may see it growing in many a Finnish yard in the streets of mining towns, and planted beside the house doors of farmhouses, to bring good luck. Its red berries become associated with the Finnish-American scene; they are as characteristic as the red-walled houses by the gray-rocked lake shores. A touch of Finnish mysticism, of ancient magic, suits the north country, where, in spite of vast public buildings in the towns, and busses on the highways, the ragged surrounding forest is never forgotten, and people still travel by ski in winter and canoe in summer. For a few more years, perhaps, one may still meet black bears in the woods and red foxes on the roads, find magic on the homesteads, and hear strange music beside the lakes.

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MARINE ON THE ST. CROIX, MINNESOTA



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