

CHAPTER VII.

THE MEDICINE CHIEF — HIS GREAT POWER AND INFLUENCE — AN OFFICE WON BY RECKLESS DARING.

The Medicine Chief — His Power and Standing in the Tribe — How the Office is Won — Proving His Own Medicine — A First-Class Aristocrat — The Idol of the Squaws — An Indian Physician — His knowledge of Herbs — No Cure no Pay — A Pandemonium of Howls — Incantations Over the Sick — A Remedy Worse than the Disease — Heroic Treatment — My Reception in an Indian Camp — Black, Beady Eyes — An Aspirant for Fame — Sitting Bull — Medicine Arrow — A Favorite of Fortune — The Most Remarkable Chief of His Time — His Famous Arrows — Arrows for Ponies and Ponies for Rum — End of a Strange Career — Splendid Types of Courage — The Charge on Forsythe's Rifle Pits — Indian Quacks. *



FROM the lowest form of Fetichism to the Church of Christ, there has been no religion without its priests.

The faint glimmer of a spark of religious sentiment is no sooner awakened in the breast of the savage, than there immediately appears one "clothed with authority" to tell him all about it.

Priestcraft has been in all ages the strongest of earthly powers, and man is so constituted that it will probably remain so until "time shall be no more."

In the preceding chapter I have described the religious belief of the Indian, and gone with him through the ordinary routine of his private devotions. But though each warrior head of a lodge is the

priest for himself and family, there is in each tribe a "Medicine Chief," whose word, in spiritual affairs, is all-powerful. He is necessarily a man of strongly marked character, with brains, dignity, and knowledge of men. He is not necessarily a chief by birth, nor even the head of a band, though his position as Medicine Chief always gives him a following.

His sacerdotal dignity brings no immunity from the dangers of war. On the contrary, the fighting force of the tribe never takes the field without his presence. In battle, his are the most reckless dashes on the enemy, for, to prove to his flock the efficacy of his medicine, he must show the perfect safety it affords him even in the midst of the greatest dangers. He claims to have power to overcome the devices of the Bad God, and his standing amongst his people depends on the ease and certainty with which he makes his claim good.

The reduction of the power of the head chief and the subsequent breaking up of the tribe into small bands has reduced the temporal standing of the medicine chief, and may have had some little effect towards diminishing his priestly authority; but the religious sentiment is so strongly implanted in the Indian nature, that he must always be the man of his tribe most worthy of consideration.

Formerly he relied upon his influence with the head chief for prompt punishment of any contempt or violation of his orders. Now their respect and obedience depend on the estimation in which he is held by his people, and on their religious training and enthusiasm.

The Indian has no Sabbath or Sunday; no regular time is set apart for the ordinary duties of religion. The Nez Percés, and one or two other small frag-

ments of tribes, observe Sunday as a church day, and have a form of worship, corrupted from that taught them by Roman Catholic priests long years ago; but among the Plains Indians the priest is not expected at ordinary times to hold any meeting for worship, or to perform any ceremonies.

He has one or more wives, a fine herd of ponies, for he is always rich, and lives as do the other Indians. He has no social intercourse with the commons of the tribe, never entering (unless in sickness) any lodge except that of the chief or head men, and permitting no inferior warrior to enter his lodge, except on business. He maintains a grave and dignified demeanor, suited to his sacerdotal office and functions. He is a great favorite with the women of the tribe, all of whom have free access to his lodge, and to them he owes something of his power over the husbands. He is the recipient of constant offerings, nothing specially nice being cooked in any lodge that the women do not bring him a share of it.

Besides being the chief priest, he is also the physician of the tribe. This requires no special knowledge of the healing art, for as all disease is only a manifestation of the presence of the Bad God, if "He" can be exorcised by the spiritual power of the priest, the patient will get well at once.

Almost all Indians have some rude knowledge of herbs and simples in the treatment of wounds, so that the medicine chief is only called in sickness, and in extreme cases. He is paid only in case the patient recovers, a rule which it might be well to adopt in civilized life.

The exorcism of the evil one is accomplished by incantation.

In each tribe and band there are more or less old women who do the howling in all cases of sickness, and who stand only a little lower than the priest in power over the Bad God. These are immediately sent for in any alarming illness, and whether the patient is dying of consumption, or suffering from an acute attack of cholera morbus, the treatment is the same. Howls, only howls, most doleful and lugubrious. As the patient gets worse, the women of the lodge "lift up their voices" and howl in chorus; then the women of other lodges come around and join the howl, until the whole camp is a pandemonium of howls. If all this does no good, the medicine chief is sent for. He mutters incantations, performs some mysterious ceremonies, and finally putting a tom-tom into the hands of a lusty young acolyte, has it beaten with all force immediately over the head of the patient. This treatment generally very promptly finishes the matter one way or the other.

The Indians have an idea that strangers, particularly white strangers, are oftentimes accompanied by evil spirits. Of these they have great dread, as creating and delighting in mischief. One of the duties of the medicine chief is to exorcise these spirits. I have sometimes ridden into or through a camp where I was unknown or unexpected, to be confronted by a tall, half-naked savage, standing in the middle of the circle of lodges, and yelling in a sing-song, nasal tone, a string of unintelligible words.

At the first sound of his cry, the women and children huddle into their lodges, and in a moment no evidence of life can be seen, except the lank figure of the priest, the black, beady eyes of the occupants of the lodges, as they watch the new-comers through the

partially closed doors, and the half-famished curs that sniff and yelp around.

The position or office of medicine chief is not hereditary (though there are a few instances where a father and son have held it), and is not conferred by chief or council. A man gains it by general, and not unfrequently, tacit consent of the people of the tribe.

The constant thought of every Indian man or woman is, "How shall I evade or counteract the power of the Bad God?"

The medicine chief is dead; the tribe in mourning. A warrior comes forward who says, "I have found the proper 'medicine.' I set at naught the power of the Bad God."

In time of war every opportunity is given him to prove his assertion. Every risk that a man can run he has to take. Time and again he must put himself in the "imminent deadly breach," and his "hair-breadth 'scapes" must be so numerous and so marvellous as to be accounted for in no other way than that his medicine is perfect. That point once conceded beyond doubt or cavil, and his character and standing being satisfactory, he glides into the coveted position by general acquiescence.

When the native honors and dignity of hereditary chief are united with the acquired honor, military renown and spiritual power of the medicine chief, the result is an individual most dangerous, most potent for good or bad. Such an one was Black Hawk, and such an one is Sitting Bull. Other than the last named (of whose personal history little is known) the medicine chief most renowned of late years for his power over the Bad God was the Cheyenne, Medicine Arrow (Min-vitz-in-nan-epivomanist).

His father was medicine chief before him. Early in life the young man had gained such renown for his wonderful daring and marvellous escapes from apparently certain death, that when the father died he had no competitor for the vacant place.

He ascribed his wonderful immunity from wounds and sickness to his discovery of the secret of making an arrow so potent in its charm against the "evil one," that no warrior who carried one could ever be hurt in any way.

Fortune favored him, and in the later years of his life, he found a ready sale in the spring, at a pony each, for all the arrows he could make during the winter. The fame of his arrows extended to all the tribes of the Plains; Sioux, Northern Cheyennes, Pawnees, all became his customers, and contended for the privilege of buying one of the life-preserving arrows.

More than any Indian on this continent since Black Hawk, he had the power to have united tribes, hostile to each other, in one grand crusade against the whites.

Fortunately for them, and for the Indians, he was a confirmed drunkard. The ponies gained so easily in spring and summer, were drunk up in autumn and winter. He would give a pony for a gallon, or if specially thirsty, even for a bottle of whiskey. On those terms he, of course, always got what he wanted.

He died on Tongue River in 1874, retaining to the end (in spite of his drunkenness) more repute for spiritual power, and more influence over the Plains tribes, than any Indian before or since.

A vacancy in the office of medicine chief is not necessarily or even usually filled at once.

The Indian sets much store by his life, and a posi-

tion reached and retained only by most reckless exposure to an endless series of dangers, has attractions for few except the most ambitious, or those who really believe in themselves or their powers.

I have already spoken of the earnest effort made by each individual warrior to discover the proper secret ingredient of his medicine. Should the Indian have a "run of bad luck," he accounts for it at once; his special ingredient is not good. He therefore tries some other, and keeps trying until his luck changes, when he has, of course, found the proper thing at last. The Indian is in solid earnest, and childish as all this appears to us, he has firm faith in himself and his medicine. The medicine that has enabled a warrior to pass unscathed through all the dangers of the road to the position of medicine chief, must be perfect, and the faith in it of its fortunate possessor is supreme.

The medicine chief is not an impostor or hypocrite. In 1868 when Forsyth's little band, buried in their rifle pits, were holding at bay an overwhelming force of red-skins, a Cheyenne medicine man, ambitious to be medicine chief, and firmly believing in the efficacy of his medicine, dashed alone almost into the lines of the whites. His medicine failed him at the critical moment, for he was shot and killed.

Any specially remarkable and long continued run of good luck is attributed at once to the medicine of the fortunate warrior. Others begin to look upon him as a medicine man, and not to be outdone in faith, he firmly believes it himself. These men drop into the practice of medicine, and become healers of the sick by the same gradual process, already described, and under the influence of the same belief in the efficiency of their medicine.

Recollect, "good medicine" does not argue any special preference of the Good God (who is already as good and kind to all Indians as he can be); it shows power over the Bad God — or devil.

All disease is simply the manifestation of the presence and power of the devil.

An unfortunate Indian is stretched upon a bed of sickness, tortured with fever, or racked with rheumatism. The devil has him in his power. What more natural than to send for the warrior of the tribe, whose medicine is known to be the most efficacious charm against the power of the evil one?

And just here is where the hypocrisy and deceit come in. While he may really believe in the power of his medicine, he has sufficient knowledge of human nature to be aware that its effect on the patient depends somewhat on the mental condition of the latter. Like the civilized doctor who gives a bread pill when medicine is not really necessary, or like the French surgeon, who cut off the leg of a dying man "to amuse him," the ordinary Indian doctor resorts to every humbugger that he can invent.

Socially and pecuniarily the office of medicine man is a good one, and when from lack of success with his patients, he has lost faith in the power of his own medicine, he carefully hides the knowledge in his own heart, and keeps up appearances by increase of noise and mystery, and redoubled activity in "blowing" about his powers, advertising himself.

The power of faith can be no more strongly exemplified in any race or sect than is manifested among these ignorant people.

The Nez Percés are a superior race of Indians, and their Chief, Joseph, a man of courage, intelligence,

quick perception, and other qualities sufficient to make him much above the average man, either white or red.

When Joseph and his band were held as prisoners of war at Fort Leavenworth, his favorite child, about a year old, was seriously ill. Though he and his band claimed to be Roman Catholics, and though they had the attendance of white physicians, as able as the country affords, when the latter pronounced the case critical, their services were dispensed with, and the medicine chief (who is also priest of the tribe) was called in. All night long a tom-tom was beaten immediately over the head of the poor baby; this music accompanied by the sing-song incantations of the priest and the mournful howls of half a dozen old women. Joseph's good judgment was demonstrated, whatever we may think of his humanity. The child got well.

The medicine chief of the Plains tribes is an essentially different person from the medicine men of the Pacific coast, or those most commonly described by writers on the North American Indian. He does not descend to the tearing and eating of human flesh, or other horrible practices designed to strike terror into the beholders. He ignores posturing dances, or conjuring tricks, and rarely has recourse even to excess of absurdity in dress. His influence is a moral one, founded on belief in himself and knowledge of human nature, and his means are (with a difference) very similar to those practised by civilized doctors and ministers. He gives no drugs, but he beats his tom-tom; he makes no prayers, but sings his incantation.

He is the outgrowth, the expounder and interpreter of that higher order of religion of which I have given account.

But by far the largest portion of the Indians are not on that higher plane of religious belief. Just as our ignorant communities select or accept the spiritual ministrations of some self-sufficient donkey, as ignorant, but more brazen than themselves, so most of the Indians put their faith in some one of the number of pretenders who eagerly thrust themselves forward.

From the highest to the lowest, human nature is the same. Be he civilized or be he savage, man delights in being humbugged, and any pretender to mysteries, either medical or spiritual, is sure to find some one to believe him.

In the Indian tribes can be found all grades of medicine men, from the chief, with the firmest faith in himself and his medicine, to the lowest conjuror, without character or standing as a warrior, and who relies, like the fortune-teller of civilized life, on hocus-pocus, and his skilful execution of a few stale tricks of legerdemain. All these quacks, both white and red, make a living, or they would not follow the trade.