

HIAWATHA AND THE ONONDAGA INDIANS.

BY CHARLES L. HENNING.

AMONG the master-pieces of American literature, the Song of Hiawatha by Longfellow holds a first place. Although published about fifty years ago, its charming verses still delight every noble heart and set before our children the example of a man who taught his people the "golden rule" and himself lived the noble life which he wished his tribesmen to live.

When Longfellow published his poem in 1855, he said of it: "This Indian Edda, if I may so call it, is founded on a tradition prevalent among the North American Indians, of a personage of miraculous birth, who was sent among them to clear their rivers, forests, and fishing grounds, and to teach them the arts of peace. He was known among different tribes by the several names of Michabou, Chiabo, Manabogho, Tarcuyawayon, and Hiawatha. The scene of the poem is among the Ojibways on the southern shore of Lake Superior, in the "region between the pictured Rocks and the Grand Sable."

The benefits which Hiawatha conferred on his people were of course only of a material order; but they were such as were capable of being thoroughly appreciated by the simple tribes to which they were rendered.

The example of Hiawatha as a reformer and benefactor stands, however, not alone in history; there are many others of that kind, and we find in nearly every history at the very beginning the figure of a man—more or less ideal—who taught the first principles of civilisation to his fellowmen.

Let me mention here Oannes, the well-known figure in primitive Babylonian history. We learn from the tradition that at the beginning of history a superhuman being of strange appearance came out of the waters of the Erythræan Sea to teach the people letters, science, and art, the rules for founding cities and construct-

ing temples, the principles of law and geometry, and so forth. At sunset Oannes disappeared in the water but came again in the morning. This lasted until the Babylonians became civilised.

It is not quite impossible that the fable of Oannes is based upon historical fact.

A similar example of a civiliser is found in the history of the primitive inhabitants of Arakan. "Once upon a time," writes Rajah Surey Bunkshee in a letter quoted by Lord Teignmouth in his *Life of Sir William Jones*,—"one Boudah Outhar, otherwise Sery Boot Tankwor, came down in the country of Arakan, and instructed the people and the beasts of the fields in the principles of religion and rectitude."

Many more examples could be quoted, but it is not my intention to enter into details here, nor do I desire to analyse the poem of Longfellow from a scientific point of view: this task having been fulfilled by abler scholars. I merely wish to show here the rôle which Hiawatha played in the history of his people, and to treat of the great work which has made his name famous for all generations: the foundation of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, commonly called the Iroquois.

During a trip which I made in August 1898 to the Onondaga Indian reservation near Syracuse, N. Y., I was so fortunate as to obtain from Chief Daniel La Fort a story of Hiawatha, which had not been told in its present form to a pale-face before.¹ Daniel La Fort is not only the head chief of the Onondaga Indians but also the chief of the Six Nations; he is a very talented and kind-hearted man, and has lived with his brother Thomas on the reservation for many years.

Before repeating the story of Hiawatha, as told to me by La Fort, I will review briefly the history of the Hiawatha story as it has been regarded by scientific research.

It is a matter of fact that the name of Hiawatha was entirely unknown in ethnology fifty years ago. In the *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* by Daniel Cusick, which appeared in 1825, the name of Hiawatha is not mentioned, and the superhuman being Tahiwagi ("Holder of the Heavens") is considered as the founder of the Confederacy. The "Holder of the Heavens" was one of the numerous mythological figures of the Iroquois pantheon, and the Jesuit missionaries used to call him "the great god of the

¹ I lectured on the subject before Section H of the American Association for the Advancement of Science at the Boston Meeting, Thursday, August 25, 1898. The essay, however, is here published for the first time.

Iroquois." The fact, that Daniel Cusick speaks in his *Sketches* of "six" nations (the Tuscaroras as the sixth nation joined the Confederacy in 1715) makes it evident that the story he relates in his book must be of recent date, and for that reason cannot contain the true history of the Confederacy. Besides it is so intermingled with impossibilities that it may be regarded as having only an antiquarian interest.

Horatio Hale, the late anthropologist, in his excellent *Iroquois Book of Rites*, says of Cusick's book: "His confused and imperfect style, the English of a half educated foreigner, his simple faith in the wildest legends, and his absurd chronology, have caused the real worth of his book as a chronicle of native tradition to be overlooked." (Page 12.)

In Lewis Morgan's *The League of the Iroquois*, published in 1851, we find the following statement: "Tradition has preserved the name of Dagaenowedae (Deganahwida) as the founder of the League and the first lawgiver of the Hodenoshioni (People of the Longhouse). It likewise points to the northern shore of the Ganuitaah, or Onondaga Lake, as the place where the first council-fire was kindled, around which the chiefs and wise men of the several nations were gathered and where, after a debate of many days, its establishment was effected" (p. 61). The name of Hiawatha is not mentioned in the book.

Later, in 1877, in his famous work *Ancient Society*, Morgan mentions Hiawatha as the traditional founder of the League, but he does not give the history of the tradition (p. 127).

The latter we find in Schoolcraft's *The Myth of Hiawatha*, published in 1856, from which we learn that Hiawatha was an Ojibway Indian; but the founder is made a person of miraculous birth, and from this source Longfellow's poem has come.

Another student of ethnology, I. N. B. Hewitt, who has devoted his entire life to the study of the Iroquois (he himself is a half-blood Tuscarora), narrates in the *American Anthropologist*, Vol. V., p. 131, the following concerning the Confederacy: "To Hiawatha a supreme preëminence is not given, and he is placed merely on an equality with the leading spirits who took part in the formation of the confederacy. Deganahwida was the true founder of the League." There is another story of the foundation of the League in Horatio Hale's book, mentioned above. He states there in the second chapter that the terrible war-chief Tadodaho, whose head and body were entangled with snakes, founded the League in connection with Hiawatha.

Such is the history of scientific research with reference to Hiawatha!

I now pass over to the story which I obtained from Daniel La Fort; I repeat it in his own words, his brother Thomas serving as interpreter.

La Fort said:

“A little over three hundred years ago, one of our forefathers, who was an Onondaga, and whose name was Hia-wa-tha, met the Mohawks for the purpose of getting married. He raised quite a family, but his wife became sick and died, and he became a widower. Soon after her death he began to travel.

“The law at the time when Hiawatha lived, did not allow a person to appear before the people for the space of a year after the death of his wife, and forced the person to live at a place where he could not be seen by anybody.

“Since Hiawatha was now a widower, he obeyed this law, and lived in seclusion for a whole year.

“Furthermore, it was the law at that time that the people in authority in the nation should come to the mourning person at the end of the term and say: ‘Let us rejoice together in some way.’ But it was not so when Hiawatha’s time had expired. He also had expected that the people would come to him and say: ‘We will rejoice together,’ but nobody came. He was patiently waiting at his hiding-place and said to himself: ‘The people do not regard me as the useful man that I always was among the nation.’ Then he made up his mind that he would appear in other places; he started entirely alone and came to the Oneidas (their original name was Rock Indians). He saw there a group sitting close by a tree and asked them: ‘What are you doing here?’ They said to him: ‘We are hiding behind the body of the tree, so that the wind will not strike us.’ And he said to them: ‘I shall call you a large body of trees (ni-ha-di-än-da-go’na).’

“Travelling farther, he saw a group of people lying on the ground, and asked them the same question: ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘We are hiding against the wind on the hill side,’ they answered. Then he said: ‘Well, I shall call you the hilly people (i. e., Onondaga).’

“Then he went to the Cayuga lake and saw there another settlement of Indians. He asked them the same question: ‘What are you doing here?’ They answered: ‘We live close by the lake.’ Then he said: ‘I shall call you Cayuga Lake Indians.’ Then he went down to Geneva, where the Seneca Indians lived and asked

them the same question. They answered, that they kept the door of the West; they had a kind of fort where they could take refuge from their enemies, and they had a place on the western side where they could go out and in.

“Then he said: ‘I shall call you doorkeepers.’ And he said: ‘It shall be the same at the eastern part of the region, where the Mohawks guard the entrance of the East.’ So the Senecas became the doorkeepers of the West, and the Mohawks those of the East.

“This was his second visit among the Mohawks, because he first lived among them when he took his wife.

“And he left the Mohawks again and went away in a canoe; as he was paddling his canoe along, he saw people close by the waters and asked them: ‘What are you doing here?’ They replied: ‘Our business is hunting the wolf;’ and he actually saw many wolves lying on the ground. Then he said: ‘I shall call you the wolf clan.’

“This was the first time that the name ‘clan’ was given, and it is not known to which tribe that name was given.

“Then he said: ‘Whenever you build a wigwam, all of the wolf clan shall stay together and set up a pole, high enough that one can see the image of a wolf on the top of the pole, and so the people will know to what clan you belong, and as long as you exist you shall be called a wolf clan.’

“And Hiawatha went farther—it is not known how far—and he saw other people working together, peeling barks with turtles. ‘What are you doing here?’ he asked them. ‘We are peeling the barks with the turtle,’ they replied. ‘Then I shall call you a turtle clan,’ Hiawatha said to the people, ‘and whenever you build a wigwam, all of the turtle clan shall stay together and they shall set up a pole, high enough that one can see the image of the turtle at the top of the pole, so that the other people may know to what clan you belong, and as long as you exist you shall be called a turtle clan.’

“And then he went quite a distance farther, where he saw a stream of water and people making a dam there. He again asked them the same question, and they replied: ‘We are hunting for beaver.’ ‘I shall call you a beaver clan,’ Hiawatha said, ‘and whenever you build a wigwam, all of the beaver clan shall stay together, and they shall set up a pole, high enough that one may see the image of the beaver at the top of the pole so that other people may know to what clan you belong, and as long as you exist you shall be called a beaver clan.’

“Then he was travelling through the Onondaga creek and was going farther south to Talla Lake. There was no white settlement among the Indians, and he saw a group of men and saw a bear lying in the midst of them; they had killed him. ‘What are you doing here?’ he said. They answered: ‘Our real business is the hunting of bears.’ ‘Then I shall call you a bear clan, and as long as you exist you will also be called a bear clan. And whenever you build a wigwam,’ etc. . . .

“Then he went farther south, where he heard people making a great noise, which came from deer bones hanging around their legs; when they moved, the bones made a rattling noise. ‘What are you doing here?’ Hiawatha asked. ‘We are playing with bones,’ they answered. ‘I shall therefore call you rattling deer bones and secondly I shall call you a deer clan, and so you shall always be called as long as you exist. And whenever you build a wigwam,’ etc. . . .

“Then he went farther south, and he heard a considerable noise on his way. There was a large pool of water and different kinds of grass growing in the water, and he saw people coming out of it, and he asked them: ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘We are running through the water, and in rushing through it we cause it to make a considerable noise.’ Then he said: ‘I shall call you the eel clan, and you shall have this name as long as you exist. And whenever you build a wigwam,’ etc. . . .

“And he went farther south, following the line of the Onondaga creek; far away he saw people running along a sandy place and at the same time saw snipes running to and fro, and he asked them: ‘What are you doing here?’ They said: ‘We are playing with the snipes, because they are so very numerous here.’ ‘Well, he said, ‘I shall call you the snipe clan, and as long as you exist, you shall always be called so, and whenever,’ etc. . . .

“Having travelled some distance, when he was close by the creek, he heard a considerable noise and loud talking. ‘What are you doing here?’ he said. ‘We are chasing the small spotted turtle.’ ‘So I shall call you the small spotted turtle clan, and you shall be called so as long as you exist, and whenever you build a wigwam,’ etc. . . . “And then he said to the people: ‘I have finished my work in forming the different clans; you will not see me immediately again, because I have to form a law of government for the different clans.’ And then he went farther and gathered the small shells on the banks of the river, and made strings of different lengths and widths, and built himself a wigwam and retired into it.

“And the people stood outside and looked at it, and saw Hiawatha sitting within and heard him talking to himself, and saw how he read the different strings, of which he had made one for each clan. And the wampums he was making were purposed to be the different laws for the different clans.

“And the people that stood outside went back to their tribes and told to the principal men what they had seen and heard. People at that time had not yet chiefs, but only ‘principal men.’

“And these principal men said: ‘We must invite that man to provide a council.’ And they suggested that a general council should be held, and informed the people that Hiawatha should tell what he proposed to do.

“And the principal men selected certain men to invite him by a verbal invitation to attend the general council; and they went back to their places after they had invited him, and they expected he would come at the time they had designated. This was the first verbal invitation.

“And when the time of the meeting arrived, the people came together to attend the council. They waited and waited for his coming, but he did not come. They talked to one another: ‘There must be something amiss, that he did not come.’

“And they sent a spy out to his wigwam to listen to what Hiawatha should say. And the man stood outside and heard what he was saying in his wigwam. ‘These people,’ Hiawatha said, ‘are not wise enough in inviting me to attend the council. They invited me only by a verbal invitation. It is not sufficient for me to accept their invitation, because it was only a verbal one. They had nothing *to show* that I was invited; if they had been wise enough, they would have made strings of shells, and also a small stick on which to fasten the string of shells, and on this stick they ought to have made marks to tell me on which day the meeting should take place.’

“And the man who had listened to what Hiawatha said, went back to the people and told them what he had heard: That they had brought nothing to show when they had invited him to attend the council. And therefore the people did as the man told, and they made a mark on a little stick to show that the meeting should take place at such and such a time.

“And they selected a man to invite him; and when he came to Hiawatha he said: ‘This is the way I ought to be invited. I shall come now to attend the council.’ When the time arrived for the general council to take place, there were a great many people

assembled together. Then Hiawatha arrived at the council and said: 'I am now here to attend your council, and what is the proposition that you have invited me for?' One of the members of the council, selected as their speaker, stood up and said: 'We have heard that you were working at some very important business, and we are very anxious to know what it is about.' Hiawatha said: 'It is true, I am working to establish, if possible, some kind of organisation for your people and for the other tribes, so as to unite all the five nations.' Then the speaker said: 'That is true; we are at present in a state of terror; we are unsafe and are fighting against each other. This must be stopped.' Hiawatha said then: 'If you will accept my proposition, go back with me whence I came, and I shall try to unite the minds of the five different nations and to bring them together.'

"And they accepted his proposal, to go back with him.

"And because the Onondagas were the first who proposed that a general council should be held, so it was concluded that at the place where the Onondagas lived the great council of the five nations should convene.

"And the five different nations, the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas, were convened together to hold a general council at the place where the Onondagas lived.

"But in this council they were not able to create a government for the five nations; and they concluded that another council should be held close by the Onondaga Lake.

"The conclusion of the council at Onondaga Lake was this: that the five nations should be considered as one confederacy, but also in this council they did not make a government for these five nations. And therefore they concluded that another and last general council of the five united nations should be held to finish the entire work of the constitution.

"This last general council was held where to-day stands the city of Syracuse, at the place between the corner of Warren street and Tennessee street.

"At this last council they made it a rule to have chiefs, a certain number for each clan; the Mohawks 9, the Oneidas 9, the Onondagas 14, the Cayugas 9, the Senecas 8. These numbers have been maintained up to this time.

"And at that time they made the wampums of bones instead of shells, 'because they would be more durable,' they said."