

HIAWATHA AND THE ONONDAGA INDIANS.

BY CHARLES L. HENNING.

[CONCLUDED.]

THEN came the election of the chiefs :

“And Hiawatha said: ‘There shall be one head-chief for each nation, and that man shall be the only man to transact the important business of the tribe.’

“And they made Hiawatha the head-chief of the Mohawks, and after having invested the chiefs with extraordinary power the people said to Hiawatha: ‘You are now the first of your people and the ruler of your government.’

“And the Oneidas elected Dadjede as their head-chief, who held the same position as Hiawatha.

“And it happened that there appeared at that time a man who had not been seen before at the council. His name was Deganahwida; he assisted in the framing of the constitution and the laws of the five nations. The people said to him: ‘You have assisted in the framing of the constitution of the five nations, and for that reason you shall also be a legal member of the confederacy if you will also hold the office of chief.’ He replied to the people: ‘I will accept your offer to be a member of the confederacy, but I shall soon go away from here, and I forbid any other person to have my name, Deganahwida, or to hold the office of chief. Only at the time of a condolence meeting shall my name be mentioned.’

“Next it was the task of the Onondagas to select their head-chief.

“While they were holding general councils at different places in their territory, they often saw a strange-looking man. His form was half human, but his hair was of snakes, and snakes hung all around his body. People believed that he had something in view, and so they went close to him and cut off all the snakes around his hair and body, and they called him Tadodaho, i. e., ‘he could

not wrest himself.' And Tadodaho became one of the head-chiefs of the Onondagas; the people tried in every way to make of him a human being, but finally they became disgusted because they could not succeed in their efforts.

"He lived quite a while among the Onondagas, but he disappeared at last.

"But the name Tadodaho remained in the tribe, and when a man was obliged to hold the office of head-chief of the Onondagas, he was always called Tadodaho. The Tadodaho is the only proper man to invite the people to the general council of the five nations, and for this reason he is considered the 'fire keeper,' because the Onondagas were the keepers of the great council fire.

"And Hiawatha said further at that last great council to all the people who were assembled: 'You shall have a head-man over the five nations. And he shall have a throne, and his throne shall be set close to an elm tree the roots of which shall spread out from north to south, from east to west, and the top of the tree shall reach unto the heaven.

"And the five nations shall lay their heads on the roots of the tree, and if any enemy shall come along to cut off the roots of the tree, the people shall rise and put him to flight.

"And the head-chief shall have the power of a king.

"And the people shall furnish eagle's wings to their king to drive away everything wrong from this throne; and the people shall also furnish him a stick, so that the king may use it, if any monster should come into his mansion.

"The Cayugas appointed one head-chief with authority over the tribe, and he was called Hagaanyunk.

"The Senecas elected as head-chief Ganiadaejo, and because the Senecas had made a gate at the west side of their territory which no foreigner was allowed to enter, so they elected two keepers of the gate. One was called Ganoganedawhi, i. e., 'burner of the scalp'; this means that should anybody try to enter the territory by force, that keeper would scalp him and burn his scalp.

"The other man was called Deonihogawan, i. e., 'the opener of the door.' In case a foreigner had obtained permission to enter the territory, that keeper opened to him the door.

"And they elected also a door-keeper for the eastern gate on the territory of the Mohawks; his name was Degahihogan, i. e., 'the one between the two important business.'

THE CONDOLENCE MEETING.

“When Hiawatha was on the point of departing, he said at the last meeting to his people: ‘I have now finished my work. We have now provided for the election of chiefs to transact the business for the welfare of our people of the five nations. In case the office of chief should come to an end at his death, another man must be appointed immediately in his place, so that the position shall never remain vacant. In case of the death of the chief, it is the duty of his tribe to select a man who must notify the other tribes. And the people shall furnish him a black string of wampum, signifying that they are in a state of sorrow. Then when he comes near to the place where the other tribes live, a distance so near that the people can hear him, he shall halloo so that the people may know he is in a state of distress; and he shall go to the head-chief of the tribe and notify him that one of their chiefs had fallen, and he shall deliver the black string of wampum. All the five tribes shall be notified in the same way, and a neutral party shall fix a certain time for a condolence meeting.

“‘The old women of the tribe to which the deceased chief belonged shall select a man of the same clan to become the new chief. The other chiefs shall afterwards investigate the case, and if it is found that the man selected by the old women is not the right one, then another one shall be elected by the authority of the other chiefs.

“‘But if the man selected by the old women be found satisfactory in every respect, the new chief shall be elected and proclaimed at the condolence meeting.

“‘And the neutral party shall appear at the place of the condolence meeting, not going to the place where the meeting is to be held, but staying a certain distance away.

“‘The mourning party, i. e., the party of the deceased chief, shall go to receive them, and must announce the place where the meeting will be held. When they arrive at the appointed place, the neutral party will surrender the wampum string of mourning that has been used in inviting them to be present.

“‘When the neutral party is received by the sorrowing party, the first will form a procession to the council house, and a man selected by the people will sing a mourning song and mention in it the names of all the chiefs of the five nations, including the de-

ceased chiefs, renewing the authority invested in the chiefs since the formation of the confederation.

“ ‘When the procession reaches the council house, they will occupy either the east or the west end of the building (the mourning and neutral parties have separate seats), and the song of mourning will continue to the end.

“ ‘When the song is finished they will sit down, saying nothing for quite a time.

“ ‘Then a line will be stretched across the room and the blankets hung on it, so that the sorrowing party and the neutral party cannot see one another.

“ ‘At the place where the mourning singers are sitting on the benches, seven black wampum strings will hang on a stick. The neutral party will then sing the same song as the mourning party.

“ ‘After its conclusion, another man from the neutral party will be appointed to walk from one end of the building to the other, having in his hand the black wampum strings; he will sing the following words: “ ‘I have arrived at your place and have seen your situation. You are in a mournful state. Also you are in a state of darkness, because one of yours is now flying away, and is going farther and farther. He was once a co-worker for the benefit of your nation, and now he has gone away, as it will be with you all, with your men, women, and children. I counsel you to remember always the work your co-worker has done for your welfare. While you are in this state of darkness I have come to you to furnish you a sun of light, and on the next morning you will see this sun of light breaking up before you. Continually looking at this sun, you will be held in a state of happiness. When I came here to your council house and saw the remnants of the woods scattered through the room, I ordered that these remnants be gathered and set at the proper place, and I have already set the fire, so that you will now transact your business for the welfare of your people. I was at the grave of the deceased chief, and saw that leaves were scattered upon it. I discovered that the office of chief lay on the top of his grave, and it is now your duty to point out to me a man who is taking his office.”

“ ‘When the man says these words, one of the war-chiefs will rise and take by the hand the man who is elected as the new chief and places him before the people at a place where everybody can see him. The war chief, having in his hand a short string of wampum, will thus publicly speak to the people: “This man who stands before you will take the office of chief.”



THOMAS LA FORT.
(Shoehendonah—"Large Feather.")

“ ‘Then the war-chief will turn to the man just appointed chief and counsel him always to be steadfast in his office and encourage him in his work. He says to him that many people will try to oppose him, and it is his duty to be watchful. Then he says: ‘Do not think that you are entirely independent. You should never say: ‘I shall do *as I want to do.*’ You are not at liberty to do so, but are bound in all your actions by the laws of our confederacy, and you shall always and in everything follow the best chiefs, and you shall work for the good of our people and never undertake to make sorrow for our people.’ And when the newly elected chief gives his consent to these words, he shall be considered elected.

“ ‘Such is the condolence meeting.’

“Then Hiawatha still spoke the following words before the meeting was brought to an end: ‘This law shall operate as long as the five nations exist, and it will end when the world too will come to an end. I will now go to make all the necessary arrangements from generation to generation for the benefit of all our people. I will disperse all the magical monsters, and also in the wilderness I will disperse them, so that only such animals are left as are good to eat; and all these lakes will be for your fishing, and in the wilderness the animals for hunting will be for your refreshment. I shall prepare all these things before I leave, for your safety and for the safety of all generations.’

“Then Hiawatha left his place and rowed in his white canoe through Oneida Lake and also Onondaga Lake, Cayuga Lake, and Seneca Lake.

“Then he came back somewhere near the city of Syracuse to say a last farewell to his people of the five nations, and they were assembled all together close by the Onondaga Lake, and these are the last words which he uttered: ‘I have finished my work and have made a constitution for your people, and it shall last as long as the world shall last.’

“Then he said a last farewell to his people, expressing the hope that they should always remain in the state of prosperity. Slowly rose his white canoe up into the air, but remained for a while standing in the air, high enough that the people could see and hear him. Thus he spoke:

“ ‘I shall now go home to my place; should it happen that the government which I have framed does not last as long as the world, then it will be my bounden duty to appear again.’

“Such were the last words of the great reformer of his people before his white canoe rose higher and higher.

"Thus departed Hiawatha,
 Hiawatha the Beloved,
 In the glory of the sunset,
 In the purple mists of evening,
 To the regions of the home wind,
 Of the Northwest wind Keewaydin,
 To the Islands of the Blessed,
 To the Kingdom of Gonemah,
 To the Land of the Hereafter."

Such is the story of the foundation of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, told to me by the good chief Daniel La Fort of the Onondaga Indians; it was not without deep emotion that he spoke, and I myself was deeply impressed by the touching tale.

When I asked him how it happened that so many stories had been told, most of them widely differing from each other, concerning Hiawatha and his work, and that especially the "Holder of Heavens" is considered by many as the founder of the League, he answered: "We all know that Hiawatha was the true and only founder of the League; he was our great forefather and has really dwelt among us. We believe in him, and when some people say that the 'Holder of Heavens' founded the League, I can only say that he is considered to have been a superhuman being who lived long before Hiawatha. He had the power to make himself invisible, and he called all Indians his brothers and sisters. He destroyed all the numerous monsters, but he made no constitution."

When asking Chief Daniel La Fort the meaning of the word "Hiawatha," he answered that it meant "the awakener." A few days later I asked Albert Cusick, who also lives on the Onondaga Reservation, the meaning of the word and received the same reply. Rev. Beauchamp, however, gives in his book, *The Iroquois Trail*, the following explanation: "Mr. Horatio Hale interprets it 'He who seeks or makes the wampum belt.' This would bring the name down to the seventeenth century, if the ordinary wampum belt is meant, for until then the Iroquois had none of the small beads used in making these." Beauchamp then continues: "L. H. Morgan translated Ha-yo-ment-ha 'he who combs,' understanding an allusion in this to his combing the snakes out of Tadodaho's head. Père Cuoq suggested: 'The river maker.'" My Onondaga friend, Albert Cusick, told me that the name meant "one who has lost his mind, and seeks it, knowing where to find it."—The reader will see that the interpretation I obtained from Cusick is somewhat different from the one Mr. Beauchamp gives, but I think that



DANIEL LA FORT.
(Lajunwais—"Striking the Gulf.")

the definition "The awakener" will come nearest the truth, because Hiawatha indeed was an "awakener" of his people; he awoke them from the sleep of indifference and gave them a constitution.

Daniel La Fort told me further that "The Holder of Heavens" had prophesied to his people that at some future time a large nation would arrive to drive the Onondagas from their homes and take their land by force, so that they would have no place of rest. How this prophecy was fulfilled, we all know: when the "pale faces" came, they drove them away and made themselves masters of the land.

Summing up the views I obtained from the facts communicated to me by La Fort, I suggest that Hiawatha was not a mythical being, but a man of flesh and blood, who lived towards the end of the sixteenth century, and was the founder of the Confederacy of the Five Nations.

The origin of the different clans, as well as the origin of the names of the tribes, seems to point to the original economical occupation of the respective tribes; because the replies of the people when asked by Hiawatha what they were doing: "we are hunting the bear," "we are hunting the eel," and so on, and then the name-giving of "bear clan," "eel clan," and so on, indicates that the clan-symbol or totem stood for the social mark of distinction of the different tribes. When Hiawatha said to the people that they should set up a pole with the idol of the clan on its top, he doubtless wanted to say that there, where the pole with the bear was to be seen, lived the bear-people, and so forth.

With religious belief the clan-symbol has nothing to do, and when asking La Fort whether these idols were worshipped, he denied it most emphatically. Accordingly, if a member of a tribe said: "I belong to the bear-clan," this does not mean that his forefather was a bear, nor that he worshipped the bear, but simply that the bear is the coat-of-arms of his clan.