

THE BATTLE AMULET OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY WILLIAM THORNTON PARKER.

“THE symbolic tendencies of the North American Indians and especially the Indians of the Great Plains have been very highly developed.”

When we begin to study the influences which operate in the development of the Indian warrior we come at once upon that remarkable term well understood by the Indians and known as “Medicine.” It is impossible to make any investigations concerning the Indian warrior without coming in contact with the magic and the medicine which influences so deeply his military career. What the medicine man has to say about good or bad medicine is of the highest importance in initiating the beginning of hostilities, in postponing or preventing them altogether.

We are indebted to Dr. Harrington’s scientific and interesting work on the sacred bundles of the Sac and Fox Indians, that mentions “the use of objects which are supposed to have mysterious power in influencing the affairs of life among the tribes of the North American Indians. Sacred bundles, signs and symbols occupy a prominent position in the so-called ‘powerful’ agencies known as ‘medicine.’ Apparently the objects themselves ‘are endowed with a certain degree of supernatural power by which this can directly or indirectly influence the phenomena of life in the interest of the owner.’”

Dr. Harrington states that the sacred war bundle is one containing “charms, amulets, fetishes or often a collection containing objects of all these classes, together with sacred paints and offerings and ceremonial paraphernalia.” The Indians regard these emblems of mysterious power with the greatest reverence and even fear. They believe them to contain a consciousness of their own and to understand what is said to them. Harrington eloquently sums up the matter when he says, “Well may the Indian view these mysterious agencies with reverence and respect, for within them still lingers the spirit of yesterday, the days he loved, the days of freedom of forest and prairies and the glory of war.” All these mysteries the Indians believe were the direct gift of the Manitou, the Great Powers of the world. “The glorious powerful sun, the terrible thunders whose wings darken the sky, whose roar shakes the prairie

and whose dazzling fiery darts shatter the trees of the forest, the bold eagle, the swift hawk, the night-seeing owl, the sturdy buffalo, the tireless wolf, the sly weezel approaching his prey by stealth, and the snake slipping unseen through the grass."

The most superficial student of Indians, their manners and customs must be struck by the continual exhibition of devotion to native traditions. How can we find in any people a more fixed and determined loyalty to national methods and customs than among our North American Indians?

These facts were most emphatically brought to the notice of the writer in his personal experiences among the North American tribes. In 1879 the writer reported for duty at White Earth Indian reservation, Minnesota. The flags of revenge were still flying over the grave of the famous war chieftain "Hole-in-the-day" who had been murdered but whose death had not been avenged. Hole-in-the-day was a war chieftain of great influence and superior sagacity. One of his pictures in the possession of the writer represents him with his eagle-feather decorations, his gleaming tomahawk, and what is of greater interest, his arm-band amulet. Such arm-bands have been described as made of buckskin decorated with porcupine quills, with thongs at the four corners for tying the ends together about the arms. Where the buckskin joins the band there are four little packets of magic medicine and paint. At the point where the eagle feather is attached are two packets: such an amulet seems to be formed from the buffalo tail bent over to form a loop. While often worn on the belt these amulets could be used as arm-bands by simply passing the hand through the loop. Hole-in-the-day's arm-band was of fur worn on the left arm and was a remarkably fine specimen of decorated arm-band amulet of an Indian.

The grand medicine bag or "Me-Shaum" is a parcel or bundle which is decorated with knots, strings, stones etc., and also with hieroglyphical figures of their wars in ancient times. Here are some of the ordinances of the "Me-Shaum": to fast every morning in the wintery season: to fast ten days to obtain signal revenge upon an enemy: to invoke and sacrifice every time a man has killed a bear or choice game: that no woman shall come near the lodge at certain seasons or eat anything cooked in the same lodge; to give away property to the poor for the good of departed relatives to the land of the shades. If an Indian fulfils in his lifetime the requirements of the "Me-Shaum" he believes he will go to Chi-pah-munk or the Happyland, but if bad, he will fall into the waters of Mah-na-so-no-ah, or river of death. "The Happyland is far at the west and

abounds in everything that is pleasing to sight or taste." This is quoted from Dr. Harrington also.

These bundles and fetishes and sacred amulets must always be treated with respect, never opened except for a good cause, nor must they ever be allowed to touch the ground, and one of the strictest rules provides that no woman shall ever touch them or any part of them when open, or when in a periodic condition she shall not even approach them when closed. Should this be allowed it was believed that the powers of the medicine would be spoiled and that the woman would be likely to bleed to death.

Those who are followers of the theory of Lieutenant Totten of the U. S. Army and others, that our North American Indians are remnants of the lost tribes of Israel, will find in the laws of hygiene governing Indians and in those relating to the sacredness of medicine or magic, very much to confirm such theories. "Every precaution was taken to care for the medicine, the war bundles, the war amulets and every night they were hung on a lance thrust into the ground so they might not touch the earth. When the enemy came in view, and not until then, was it opened and distributed to the warriors who, stripping themselves, put on the medicine headbands and the protective amulets and painted themselves with the magic paint. With the shrilling of the war whistles and the sound of the rattles they joined in the war dance.

It is interesting in this connection to consider how early in life the Indian comes in contact with the mysteries of Indian medicine. "When a child is four years old it is then entitled to a name; dog feasts are prepared and ceremonial war whoops and prayers are employed. Some old man is asked to pray for a blessing; he prays for the child's name and for the one who gave him his name." Now the sun must know the child's name so in the morning they pray to him to take care of the child until he is gray. A man's life, they say, goes like the sun; it rises and sets to a certain height and then begins to decay; so they tell the sun they want this child to grow and live to old age until like the sun he finally goes down. Make this child live to old age and believe in the Indian teachings. Let him then live until he is like some one with four legs, meaning, that he walks with two canes, and until his hair turns from gray to white."

In Schreivogel's splendid painting "A Sharp Encounter," the mysterious symbol of the open hand is pictured on the left fore-quarter of the warrior's horse in the battle charge. This symbol of the open hand seems to express profound meaning to the Indian

leaders. Mee-shee-kee-gee-shig (whose name in English is "Dark-lowering-day-clouds-touching-all-around") was the war chief of the Chippewas and a personal friend of the writer. One evening, sitting smoking together, as an act of personal regard and as a token of his sincere concern, he drew for the writer a picture of an open hand and impressively stated that should trouble ever attend him he was to seek out the most influential Indian chief and show him this symbol and all possible protection would be afforded to him.

In the writer's collection of Indian books, numbering quite one hundred, he has failed to find any reference to this symbol of the open hand. A recent letter from the Bureau of Ethnology states, in answer referred to Mr. James Mooney of the bureau, the following information. "There is nothing secret or sacred about the Indian hand symbol. Painted on the breast, pony or tepee of an individual, it signifies among the Plains tribes that he has met an enemy in a hand-to-hand encounter.

"In the instance noted it may be that the Indian who drew the picture could claim such honor, and hence the picture served as his card of introduction."

With all respect to Mr. Mooney's opinion Mee-shee-kee-gee-shig who wore suspended from his skunkskin garters four eagle feathers, for Sioux he had killed in battle, was by no means the only warrior among the many valiant warriors of whom he was the war chief. We must look for a deeper meaning in the symbol of the open hand. As the writer had the honor of being initiated into the rights of grand medicine he witnessed much which reminded him of the Masonic ceremonies, and he fully realizes that powerful secret organizations existed among the Indian tribes and that the open hand symbol represented a very high and exclusive degree in Indian secrecy. Study the North American Indians from whatever point we may, they are a wonderful people, strong, keen and tremendously influenced by their belief in mysteries. The half of the Indian story has not been told and from before our very eyes are passing away traditions and customs more interesting than those of any other primitive people in the world.

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES.

THE SOCIAL LEGISLATION OF THE PRIMITIVE SEMITES. By *Henry Schaeffer*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1915. Pp. 245.

This book contains a survey of social conditions of the primitive Semites as known at present to Semitic scholars. It is a careful summary of the results of a large number of investigations made by European and American scholars.