

CONCERNING INDIAN BURIAL CUSTOMS.

BY WILLIAM THORNTON PARKER, M. D.

THE DEAD.

“Under the pure light of the stars
The dead sleep
Wrapped about in a silence unutterable,
The ages come and go, like a tale that is told
Time stretches out to the golden unbarred gate
Of eternity,
But the dead sleep on, sleep on.”—*Edgerton.*

FROM the earliest times, among all races civilised or savage, man has always cared for the remains of his dead. Failure to do so is regarded as inhuman and is promptly condemned. Numerous are the rites employed in mourning, but nowhere can we find evidences of greater respect and affection for the dead than among our North American Indians.

There are those who seem inclined to find little that is praiseworthy in the Indian character, but a people with devoted love for their children, profound religious respect for the Sacred Name, a reverence for their dead and a sincere concern for their last resting-places, certainly possess qualities which are admirable and worthy of universal commendation. All these honorable characteristics are true of our North American Indians.

Among the Ojibways, particularly the Chippewas at White Earth, Minnesota, the old-time heathen rites have pretty nearly disappeared. These Chippewas are Christian Indians, intelligent and possessing all the highest qualities of the red man with much that is good and true which their paleface friends have taught them. They do not practice scaffold¹ or tree burial except in rare instances. “Above-the-ground burial” is also practically unknown to them. Their funerals are conducted with solemnity and devotion, and the services at their churches are remarkably pathetic and

¹Occasionally some heathen Indian will be buried upon a scaffold. As late as 1889 Rev. Mr. Peake saw a scaffold burial at Ked Lake Chippewa Reservation about one hundred miles north of White Earth Reservation, Minnesota.

interesting, to enable friends to look upon the grave and to make offerings of food or flowers or any other thing they may wish for the comfort or happiness of the departed.

The Christian's grave-house is usually surmounted by a cross.

Very often services in memory of the dead take place with much of feasting and dancing, but these latter are usually indulged in by the wild or so-called "heathen" Indians.¹

It is interesting to compare the burial of the famous Chippewa war-chief "Hole-in-the-Day," who died as he had lived an un-



Jordan, the Interpreter. Old Medicine Man. Long Feather. Dr. W. T. Parker.
 Indian Boy. Little Deer. Pelican.

IN THE LAND OF HIAWATHA.

tamed Indian, with that of the brave and good "Iron Heart," who on his deathbed requested that a cross be placed upon his breast and a large one above his grave, so that when anyone should inquire what the signification of the cross might be, this should be the answer: "Tell him that beneath that cross rest the remains of Iron-Heart, who believes in the white man's Saviour."

¹The word heathen is a misnomer for any people who believe and reverence God whom they know as "Getche Manitow," the Mighty, the Great Spirit. A people so deeply and truly religious may not have received the light of Christianity, but heathen they are not.

In 1879 the flags still waved over the grave of the murdered Hole-in-the-Day to signify that up to that time his friends had not yet avenged his cruel death. A more restful picture is the following, which I was privileged to witness: One afternoon the bell of St. Columba's (a *wooden* church it was then) was tolling, Indians were gathering in the building and a two-wheel ox-cart was being slowly driven up the hill. The cart contained a plain board coffin, within it the mortal remains of a young Indian wife. The driver, strange to state, was the husband, and his grief and sorrow were genuine beyond a doubt. Friends helped him bring the remains



CROW INDIAN BURIAL-TREE. (Montana.)

within the church porch, and the beloved Indian priest Emmengabowh of the "Episcopal" communion, met the corpse at the door. "I am the resurrection and the life" came forth the solemn words in clear Ojibway as the funeral procession passed up the aisle of the church. The sweet voices of the Indians with the organ accompaniment sang the old hymn "Jesus Lover of My Soul," and others just as pathetic. The service concluded, the silent Indians with moccasined feet passed by the rude coffin to take a last fond look at the dead. Then took place a curious ceremony. The lid of the coffin was only lightly held in place by nails which had been withdrawn to permit the "last look." A friend

handed the sad husband a hammer, he drove in the nails way home with sturdy blows, the sacred building resounding with the noise and with the sobs of the bereaved friends. Then tenderly the



BURIAL SCAFFOLD AND SCALP-POLE OF TEN BEAR.

The Death-Lodge, the poles of which are on the ground, has been taken down. (Crow Agency, Montana.)

bearers carried the coffin into the churchyard. The procession wound its way by graves and grave-houses till it reached the open grave for this new arrival. Great branches of pine and fir covered

the ground and lined the last resting-place. Emmengahbowh in priestly surplice read the committal service, and then, while the voices of the Indians sang again a sweet hymn, the body was gently and slowly lowered to its resting-place. Broad strips of heavy bark were placed over the coffin, and earth fell almost silently while friends continued the sweet songs of hope in the promises of the Saviour. What a picture it was in the far-away Indian Reservation, this Christian burial, this object lesson of love and duty for Christ's sake, this victory of the religion of Jesus over the mummery and fierce orgies of heathenism. And yet as the hymn of faith con-



BURIAL BOXES.

Above-ground method of caring for the dead. (Crow Agency, Montana.)

tinued, as the sinking sun shone in the western sky, it seemed as if these poor children were but voicing the doom of "passing away" just as the sun was sinking. The emblem of all these tribes of red men is the setting sun.

Soon their race will be completed, soon the last of them will have departed forever

"In the purple mists of evening,
To the Islands of the Blessed,
To the kingdom of Ponemah
To the land of the Hereafter."

The Chippewas bury their dead in almost any convenient

place, often directly in front of their cabin door so that in stepping out one has almost to step upon a grave. Before placing the body in the grave, if no coffin has been provided, it is carefully wrapped in great pieces of birch bark such as they use in building their canoes and summer camps, or it is enveloped in one or more of their beautiful mats, of the finest texture obtainable. Over the grave a long low house is built, about two feet high, and under the front or western gable a little square window is placed.

"The old heathen burial customs of my own people," writes that old hero and Indian Saint, Emmengahbowh, "were that when one dies the body is well dressed, combed well, the hair and face painted, a new blanket wrapped around his body, a new shirt and leggings and a new coat put on him and new moccasins, everything in wearing apparel all well provided. This being done, well prepared to take the body to the grave already prepared, when the body put down to the ground, a gun, powder horn and war club or toma-



SIoux BURIAL-PLACE. (Above-ground method.)

hawk, scalping knife, small kettle, and small dish and spoon, and fire-making implements are among the things put in with the body into the ground. As they are taking out the body from the wigwam the Grand Medicine Man sings a devil song beating the drum as they bear the body away towards the grave. The body is all covered, and, just before another song, one of the braves arises on his feet and says: 'My friend, you will not feel lonely while pursuing your journey towards the setting sun; I have killed a Sioux (hereditary enemies of the Ojibways) and scalped him, he will accompany you, and the scalp I have taken, use it for your moccasin.' The Grand Medicine Man then says after covering the grave: 'Do not look back, but look towards your journey, towards the setting sun. Let nothing disturb you or cause you to look away from your path. Go in peace.' Then another medicine man and all the medicine men speak thus: 'I walk peacefully, I walk on peacefully, for my long journey of life, soon to reach the end of my

journey, soon to reach my friends who have gone before me.' The song completed, all the grand medicine men with one loud voice cry out :

' Meh-ga-kuh-nuh
Meh-ga-huh-nuh (amen-amen).'

Then all disperse and the weird and melancholy and wonderfully pathetic ceremony is completed."

What ritual in any other tongue could be more appropriately funereal or more typical of future life beyond the grave? Surely Christianity need not wait long with the precious message for which these our noble aborigines seem more than ready.

Emmengahbowh also writes me that, "When a great warrior is killed in battle and while the battle is raging, the hottest battle, the battle ceases at once. The warrior is carried away from the battle-field to a short distance. Here the warriors are making preparations to dress him in style with all his best clothing they could find. First washed his face and combed his hair, hair braided down to his shoulders, painted his face with red paint, a new shirt, a new coat and new leggings put on it. A new blanket wrapped about him and a beautiful sash around his waist. This being done and completed he is taken to the battle-field and placed him on the most conspicuous place and position and always preferred to find a high knoll. Here he is placed in a sitting position. A gun placed before him in the attitude of shooting, a war club and scalping knife put on about him. Feathers on his head waving beautifully, each feather indicates a scalp taken in battle. This being done, sometimes the warriors watched the body one or two days. The enemy know it well that a great warrior had been slain in battle and they know it well too that they would not carry him away. Must be buried near about the battle-field or may be found in sitting posture. Sure enough finding him in sitting posture. Here the warriors with all the swiftness they can command run. The fast runner of course touched the head first and count one of the highest trophy among the heathen warriors, and counted a feather for his head."

Occasionally as of old the Chippewas bury their dead in a strong box placed in public view upon a scaffold, with four strong posts. Many moons come and go before the graves are neglected. Every now and then the best cooked food is brought that the faithful friends can obtain. These offerings are reverently laid upon grave or coffin. When the Indian reaches his final destiny in the "happy hunting grounds," his life is perfectly secure and his everlasting

felicity assured. "It is not true that the Ojibways believe in transmigration, neither do I know of any tribe which does," says good old Emmengahbowh. "Transmigration of souls from men to animals! No such horrible faith entertained by my people. Some pale-faces may believe it!"

Emmengahbowh has faithfully taught his beloved Chippewas the creed of the pale-face teachers, the good Bishop Whipple has sent to them, not the least of which is, I believe, "in the resurrection of the dead."

A very interesting letter from the Rev. Mr. Peake, for some time a missionary among the Ojibways, contains the following:

"I myself first observed the Indian life while I was a student at Nashotah (Wisconsin), seeing some families (Chippewas) as they went through the state gipsy-like in 1852.



INDIAN GRAVES. (White Earth Reservation, Minnesota.)

"In 1853 I saw the Oneidas at Duck Creek and preached to them through an interpreter, meeting also some of the Mohawks. In 1856 I saw the Sioux and Winnebagoes of the Minnesota River Valley. In 1856 I went with my bride (Miss Augusta Parker of Delhi, N. Y.) to live among the Ojibways or Chippewas at Gull Lake, and was with them as their missionary at Gull Lake and Crow Wing for six years, and during the Sioux outbreak of 1862." Concerning the mortuary customs Mr. Peake writes: "In winter when the ground is frozen the northern tribes, among whom I served, wrap up their dead in the furs of animals and place them in the branches of high trees." Mr. Peake saw them so placed in January, 1856, on the right bank of the Minnesota river on his first trip up the valley. "I have seen a similar placing of the dead

on a high scaffold or platform at Red Lake (Chippewa Agency, Minnesota) as late as 1889." Usually they (the Chippewas) bury their dead in the ground and wrap them in cotton or such other cloth as they may have. The body is carefully covered with birch bark in wide strips. Over the grave they usually build a roof of boards if they can obtain the necessary lumber. Just below the gable they have a little open window in the front which stands towards the west (the setting sun). "At the open window they deposit food for the departed spirits which soon disappears, and it is supposed to have afforded nourishment for the dead upon their journeyings." Mr. Peake has noted these graves also at Gull Lake and at Crow Wing.

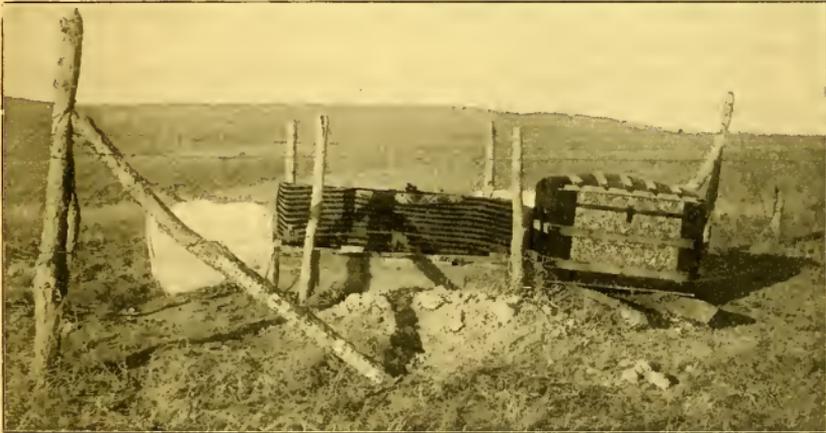
A letter from the Crow Agency, Montana, informs me that the Crows bury their dead with the feet toward the rising sun. Several valuable illustrations of mortuary customs peculiar to this interesting race of aborigines are presented herewith.

From the Rev. A. B. Clark, missionary at the Rosebud Agency (Sioux), information with interesting illustrations has been received.

Mr. Clark states that when an Indian is thought to be dying his hair is combed and oiled and dressed as nicely as possible, the face is painted with vermilion and a new suit of clothing is provided if possible, consisting of blanket, leggings, moccasins, etc. All this may be attended to hours or even days before death actually occurs. The bodies of the dead are not washed. After some "hours, or a day's time, the body is borne to a platform or to a high hill-top, or, in case of a little child, to a large tree, where it is placed in the branches. Occasionally a child's body was laid in the river-side. The body was usually wrapped in a *parflêche* case or a home-tanned robe or skin, the best to be had at the time, when placed on platform or hill or in tree, etc. Immediately on being placed for its final rest the ghost must be fed. So a kettle of coffee or tea and a dish of meat and other foods were placed beneath or beside the body. The bag of tobacco and pipe were not omitted. Whatever fine clothing, ornaments, weapons, or furnishings the deceased had highly esteemed, must go with the body. The favorite pony, too, must be killed beside the body of the dead.

"There was one case in which the Indians always *buried* the dead: When two people of the same camp, neighbors or relatives, quarrelled and one was killed the dead was buried face down and with a piece of fat between the teeth, otherwise, they said, all the game would be scared out of the country. As the Indians become

Christianised these customs change or are dropped, though progress that way is slow. On the death of a friend all begin mourning. The hair is cut short at the neck. Both men and women slash their bodies and limbs with knives and often put sticks or thongs through the wounds as in the old sun-dance ceremony. The mourners, the chief ones, go off to the hill-tops and mourn, perhaps for days. Christian Indians now dress in black, bury the dead as we do in graves, buying coffins or getting them in some way and form, but as yet have not wholly given up the formal mourning at the graves on the hill-top. There is a custom which they call 'Keeping the Ghost.' If a man is very ambitious to be accounted thereafter a good and just man he takes some little article, a ring, a lock of hair, etc., which belonged to the deceased



INDIAN BURIAL. (Above-ground method. Brule Rosebud Agency.)

relative and wraps it up like a little mummy, binds it to a stick and plants it near his door. He keeps the ground swept about it and frequently places food and tobacco there, no matter who helps the ghost dispose of these things. He now also gathers horses and other property for the Ghost-lodge which he will set up after a year or so for a grand feast and give-away to all comers. After the affair of the Ghost-lodge this man must be careful in words and deeds to sustain his reputation as a just and good man which he has thus built up for himself."

Mr. Clark writes further, that there are none of the old-time "platform" or scaffold burial-places near here. In the illustrations we may note the "intermediate stage," bodies placed in boxes of some sort (in one case a trunk shown in the photograph). These

bodies are left unburied at the "Place of the Ghosts." Heavy stones are placed upon and around them to prevent the wind and the wolves from disturbing them. Mr. Clark writes:

"I have frequent appeals for lumber to make plain coffins and must often decline giving aid for want of one board to spare for the purpose. It gives one a pang of regret when we see the body of a child has been placed in a second-hand trunk or that a lumber-wagon box has been made over into a coffin for a Christian Indian rather than go back to the old way.

"Glancing through the little booklet of views you will find 'Resting Place of a Departed Brave,' and there are the bow and arrows and bits of toggery, suggestions of the active life whose sands are now run out.

"The Christian Indians frequently are found to have placed the baptismal certificates, prayer-books and hymnals in their children's coffins. As they become able they buy tombstones to be erected at the head of the graves."

In Colonel Inman's *Great Salt Lake Trail* is found the following account of a funeral of a Bruhl Indian chief:

"The corpse of the deceased chief was brought to the fort by his relatives with a request that the whites should assist at his burial. A scaffold was erected for the reception of the body which in the meantime had been fitted for its last airy tenement. The duty was performed in the following manner: It was first washed then arrayed in the habiliments last worn by the deceased during life, and *sewed in several envelopes of lodge-skin* with his bows and arrows and pipe. This done, all things were ready for the proposed burial. The corpse was borne to its final resting-place followed by a throng of relatives and friends. While moving onward with the dead the train of mourners filled the air with lamentations and rehearsals of the virtues and meritorious deeds of their late chief.

"Arrived at the scaffold the corpse was carefully reposed upon it *facing the east*, while beneath its head was placed a small sack of meat, tobacco, and vermilion. A covering of scarlet cloth was then spread over it and the body firmly lashed to its place by long strips of rawhide. This done the horse of the chieftain was produced as a sacrifice for the benefit of his master in his long journey to the celestial hunting-grounds."

Such is a short and necessarily imperfect account of some of the burial customs of our noble aborigines, the North American Indians. If we read aright the lessons the simple earnest lives of these people teach us, we shall be better and truer men and worship more reverently the God of the red man and of the pale-face, the "Heavenly Father" of us all, white or red, black or yellow. We are his children and He the loving parent.