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Huron Folk-Lore. I. Cosmogonic Myths. The Good and Evil Minds

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# THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

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## HURON FOLK-LORE.

### I. — COSMOGONIC MYTHS. THE GOOD AND EVIL MINDS.

THE Canadian nation of Indians whose native name of Wendat, or people of one speech (*wenda*, speech; *at*, root of *skat*, one), was corrupted by the English into Wyandot, received from the French colonists, in their *patois*, the nickname of Hurons, or “shock-heads,” from the lines of bristly hair which adorned their half-shaven crowns. The name, euphonious in its English pronunciation, has adhered to the great freshwater sea near which they dwelt, and has been made by Bancroft and Parkman historically classic as the designation of the people. It seems, therefore, to have better claims even to scientific use than the somewhat barbarous English corruption of the native appellation.

Of the few hundreds who survived their deadly wars with the Iroquois, the greater number removed, many years ago, to the United States, and now, under the name of Wyandots, reside in the Indian Territory, on lands which the Cherokees have resigned to them. A few linger in Eastern Canada, at Lorette, near Quebec, but these have lost their native tongue, and have become French in language, and in great part French in blood. A still smaller number, less than a hundred, remain in the extreme west of Old Canada, on a strip of land once known as the “Anderdon Reserve,” a reservation of five or six thousand acres, stretching along the eastern bank of the Detroit River, a few miles north of its entrance into Lake Erie. The reservation, as such, exists no longer, having lately been divided in severalty among its occupants. Before this event occurred I paid — in the years 1872 and 1874 — two visits to this little remnant of a famous people, and, to my great gratification, found among them some who not only spoke their original language fluently, but were familiar with the ancient traditions of their people. What was specially noteworthy was the fact that their dialect proved to be the most archaic form of the Huron-Iroquois speech that had yet been

discovered. One of the most striking peculiarities of that linguistic family has always been understood to be the lack of the labial articulations. In the Huron speech, as transmitted to us by the French missionaries, and in the languages of the Six Nations, no sound of *m*, *b*, or *p* is heard, and the lips are never closed in speaking. But the Hurons of the Anderdon Reserve frequently uttered the sound of *m* in words from which it had disappeared in the other dialects. For *unkwe*, man, they said *ume*; for *yaweheon*, dead, *yameheon*; for *onwa*, to-day, *oma*. It is evident that, in this respect, this Huron dialect retains the older form of the language. I believe it to be the dialect which was spoken by the tribe formerly known to the French colonists as "the Tobacco People" (*Nation du Petun*), but among the Hurons and Iroquois as the *Tionontates* (corrupted by the English to *Dionondaddies*), which means, apparently, "People beyond the Hills." They lived west of the proper Hurons, and were in friendship with them, though not members of their confederacy. They were regarded as of the same speech (Wendat); and they shared the fate of the Hurons, being conquered and driven from their country by the Iroquois. They fled to the island of Michilimackinac, and thence finally took refuge near Detroit and in Northern Ohio, under the protection of the French forts in those quarters. Their character, customs, and traditions were the same as those of the Hurons proper, from whom they differed only in retaining an independent tribal organization and in a slight variance of dialect.

From two elderly men, both of more than average intelligence, I obtained many particulars concerning the modern history of the tribe, corresponding closely with what we learn of them from the missionary records and other authorities; and with these facts I gathered many of their ancient traditions and the legends of their mythology. My informants were Joseph White, the recognized chief of the band, and Alexander Clarke, sub-chief and official interpreter. The former, a man of fine presence, whose physiognomy showed evidence of his mingled French and Indian parentage, bore in the Wendat tongue the somewhat peculiar name of Mandarong, which was rendered, "We are unwilling." No name could have more utterly belied the frank and kindly disposition of the worthy old chief and his fine family. The interpreter, who, as I learned, was the son of an Indian woman by an English colonist, had spent most of his life among the Indians, and regarded himself as belonging to them; for the child, by Wendat law, follows his mother's sept. He also had an Indian name, Chehteh, meaning "War-club," and possessed a good knowledge of the language and mythology of his people. His brother, Peter Dooyentate Clarke, who ordinarily resided in the

Indian Territory, but whom in one of my visits I met on this reservation, had published, a few years previously, a little book on the "Origin and Traditional History of the Wyandotts," showing considerable intelligence in the writer, and containing much that is authentic and valuable.

The old chief's wife was of French origin, but had been brought up with the Indians, and understood their speech. French was, however, the language usually spoken in the family; and it was in this tongue, and with much spirit and animation, that the chief related the many traditions and popular tales which I obtained from him. I was much struck with the general cast of these tales, and their difference in style from the Algonkin stories. Mr. Parkman, in his fascinating work, "The Jesuits in North America," observes on this subject: "Some of the Iroquois tales embody conceptions which, however preposterous, are of a bold and striking character; but those of the Algonkins are, to an incredible degree, flimsy, silly, and meaningless." This opinion of the Algonkin stories, though certainly well warranted by many of them, is perhaps somewhat too sweepingly expressed. Other investigators, and notably Dr. Brinton and Mr. Leland, have been able to show that some of the Algonkin legends embody, under trivial forms, conceptions not devoid of sense or of poetical beauty. But with regard to the Iroquois tales, there can be no question that they deserve the commendation bestowed upon them. What chiefly struck me, in listening to the narratives of the old chief, was the strong moral element apparent in them. That this element was not given to them by the narrator, but was inherent in the tales themselves, was evident from the fact that it appeared in the same stories when related by others, in widely different versions; for, like all popular stories, from those of the Trojan war and the Niebelungen cycle to the fireside tales of our childhood, these Huron legends take many forms, varying with the line of tradition along which they have been handed down.

This moral element is present even in the myths of their cosmogony, though mingled, as in all such myths, with childish details, some of which are as absurd as any in the Greek or Hindoo mythologies. These details were, in a certain sense, articles of their religion, and were handed down with scrupulous exactness. The story of the first formation and peopling of the earth was related to me by Alexander Clarke in terms very similar to those in which it had been told by the Hurons to the Jesuit missionary Brébeuf, two centuries and a half ago.<sup>1</sup> Clarke, however, added many particulars, evidently genuine, which the learned missionary did not think important enough

<sup>1</sup> See the *Relation* for 1636, part 2, chap. 1, p. 100, of the *Relations des Jesuites*, in the Quebec edition of 1868.

for the purpose of his record, but which have their significance for students of mythology. The following is perhaps the most complete account of the Huron cosmogonic myth which has yet been obtained, and may be deemed to represent the primitive belief of the oldest branch of the Huron-Iroquois race. Clarke was about seventy-five years of age in 1874, and as he had heard the myth in his youth from the elders of his people, their joint recollections would carry it back to the middle of the last century, when the customs and traditions of the Wendat were retained in their full vigor.

#### THE MAKING OF THE WORLD.

In the beginning there was nothing but water, a wide sea, which was peopled by various animals of the kind that live in and upon the water. It happened then that a woman fell down from the upper world. It is supposed that she was, by some mischance, pushed down by her husband through a rift in the sky. Though styled a woman, she was a divine personage. Two loons, which were flying over the water, happened to look up and see her falling. To save her from drowning they hastened to place themselves beneath her, joining their bodies together so as to form a cushion for her to rest on. In this way they held her up, while they cried with a loud voice to summon the other animals to their aid. The cry of the loon can be heard to a great distance, and the other creatures of the sea heard it, and assembled to learn the cause of the summons. Then came the tortoise (or "snapping turtle," as Clarke called it), a mighty animal, which consented to relieve the loons of their burden. They placed the woman on the back of the tortoise, charging him to take care of her. The tortoise then called the other animals to a grand council, to determine what should be done to preserve the life of the woman. They decided that she must have earth to live on. The tortoise directed them all to dive to the bottom of the sea and endeavor to bring up some earth. Many attempted it,—the beaver, the musk-rat, the diver, and others,—but without success. Some remained so long below that when they rose they were dead. The tortoise searched their mouths, but could find no trace of earth. At last the toad went down, and after remaining a long time rose, exhausted and nearly dead. On searching his mouth the tortoise found in it some earth, which he gave to the woman. She took it and placed it carefully around the edge of the tortoise's shell. When thus placed, it became the beginning of dry land. The land grew and extended on every side, forming at last a great country, fit for vegetation. All was sustained by the tortoise, which still supports the earth.

When the woman fell she was pregnant with twins. When these

came forth they evinced opposite dispositions, the one good, the other evil. Even before they were born the same characters were manifested. They struggled together, and their mother heard them disputing. The one declared his willingness to be born in the usual manner, while the other malignantly refused, and, breaking through his mother's side, killed her. She was buried, and from her body sprang the various vegetable productions which the new earth required to fit it for the habitation of man. From her head grew the pumpkin-vine; from her breasts the maize; from her limbs the bean and the other useful esculents. Meanwhile the twins grew up, showing in all they did their opposing inclinations. The name of the good one was Tijuskeha, which means, Clarke said, something like saviour, or good man.<sup>1</sup> The evil brother was named Tawiskarong, meaning flinty, or flint-like, in allusion probably to his hard and cruel nature. They were not men, but supernatural beings, who were to prepare the world to be the abode of men. Finding that they could not live together, they separated, each taking his own portion of the earth. Their first act was to create animals of various kinds. The bad brother made fierce and monstrous creatures, proper to terrify and destroy mankind, — serpents, panthers, wolves, bears, all of enormous size, and huge mosquitoes, "as large as turkeys." Among other things he made an immense toad, which drank up all the fresh water that was on the earth. In the mean time the good brother, in his province, was creating the innocent and useful animals. Among the rest he made the partridge. To his surprise, the bird rose in the air and flew toward the territory of Tawiskarong. Tijuskeha asked him whither he was going. The bird replied that he was going to look for water, as there was none left in that land, and he heard there was some in the dominion of Tawiskarong. Tijuskeha then began to suspect mischief. He followed the course which the partridge had taken, and presently reached the land of his evil brother. Here he encountered the snakes, ferocious brutes, and enormous insects which his brother had made, and overcame them. Finally he came to the monstrous toad, which he cut open, letting the water flow forth.<sup>2</sup> He did not destroy the evil animals, — perhaps had not the power to do so, — but he reduced them in size, so that men would be able to master them.

<sup>1</sup> This name, *Tijuskeha* (the *Ioskeha* of the French missionaries), may be a derivative from the root *io* (*io*, *iyó*) or *iju*, which signifies both "great" and "good." This root forms the concluding portion of the name *Hamendiju* (Huron), *Rawenniio* (Iroquois), applied to the chief divinity, and signifying "the great good master."

<sup>2</sup> See an interesting discussion of the origin of this widely diffused myth (of the waters engulfed by a toad, frog, or serpent) in Lang's *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*, vol. i. p. 39, and vol. ii. p. 146.

The spirit of his mother warned him in a dream to beware of his evil brother, who would endeavor to destroy him by treachery. Finally they encountered, and as it was evident that they could not live together on the earth, they determined to decide by a formal combat (a duel, as Clarke styled it) which of them should remain master of the world. It was further agreed that each should make known to the other the only weapon by which he could be overcome. This extraordinary article of their agreement was probably made necessary by the fact that without such a disclosure the contest would have lasted forever. The good brother declared that he could be destroyed only by being beaten to death with a bag full of corn, beans, or some other product of the bread kind; the evil brother rejoined that he could be killed only by the horn of a deer or of some other wild animal. (In these weapons it seems evident that there is some reference to the different characters or attributes of the brothers.) They set off a fighting-ground, or "list," within which the combat was to take place. Tawiskarong had the first turn, or, as duellists would say, the first fire. He set upon his brother with a bag of corn or beans, chased him about the ground, and pounded him until he was nearly lifeless and lay as if dead. He revived, however (perhaps through the aid of his mother's spirit), and, recovering his strength, pursued in turn his evil brother, beating him with a deer's horn until he killed him. But the slain combatant was not utterly destroyed. He reappeared after death to his brother, and told him that he had gone to the far west, and that thenceforth all the races of men after death would go to the west, like him. "And," said Clarke, "it is the belief of all the pagan Indians that after death their spirits will go to the far west, and dwell there."

The old chief, Joseph White, on another occasion, supplied a curious addition to the foregoing narrative, in exemplification of the opposite character of the two brothers. This story was in substance as follows:—

"When the brothers were preparing the land for the Indians to live in, the manner of their work was that as often as the good brother made or designed anything for the benefit of mankind, the bad brother objected, and devised something to counteract the good intention, so far as he could. Thus when the good brother made rivers for the Indians to journey on, it was his design that each river should have a twofold current (or rather, perhaps, a double channel), in which the streams should flow in opposite directions. Thus the Indians would be able always to float easily down-stream. This convenient arrangement did not please the bad brother. He maintained that it would be too good for the people. 'Let them at least,' he said, 'have to work one way up-stream.' He was not content

merely to defeat his brother's design of the return current, but he created at the same time rapids and cataracts for the further delay and danger of voyagers."

It is certainly remarkable that in the primitive mythology of the Huron-Iroquois people the idea of two hostile creators, a benevolent and a malignant being, coeval in origin, and for a time equal in power, should have been so clearly, however rudely, developed. Nothing of the kind is discoverable in the Vedaic or the Hellenic cosmogonies. This idea of the original antagonism of the good and evil principles, to be finally destroyed by the victory of the benignant power, is commonly supposed to have been the main element in the Zoroastrian reformation. In David Cusick's well-known "History of the Six Nations," the two brothers are styled the "Good Mind" and the "Bad Mind," in the very terms of the Zend-Avesta. The origin of this belief, and the extent to which it exists among the American tribes, other than those of the Huron-Iroquois stock, is a matter for inquiry.<sup>1</sup> That the latter firmly held it before they were acquainted with the whites is unquestionable. The strong moral sentiment manifest in it will be found to color their folk-lore throughout.

*Horatio Hale.*

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<sup>1</sup> See the question discussed briefly, but with great acuteness and force, in the concluding pages of Dr. Brinton's philosophical work, *American Hero-Myths*. I may add that this original version of the Huron myth of creation was communicated by me to Dr. Brinton for that work, and is in part embodied in it. It is now first published in the complete form.