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HURON FOLK-LORE.[1]

III. THE LEGEND OF THE THUNDERERS.

THE story of "The Thunderers," as told by my esteemed Wyandot friend and instructor, Chief Joseph White (Mandarong), and carefully translated and explained by Mrs. White, seemed to me specially valuable, inasmuch as it comprehends in one spirited narrative the main outline of the Huron (or Wyandot) mythology, whose elements reappear in a fragmentary form in the myths of the Iroquois tribes, as related by L. H. Morgan, Mrs. Erminnie Smith, and other writers. The narrative, in its present shape, must be regarded as a comparatively modern composition, or at least recension, due to some native mythologist of much imaginative genius, who lived within the last two centuries, or since the removal of the Hurons from their ancient seat on the Georgian Bay to their later abode in the region embracing both sides of the Detroit River and both shores of Lake Erie. It is only since their settlement in that more southern region that we can suppose them to have come into contact, either friendly or hostile, with the Cherokees. But the myths comprised in the narrative certainly embody — as all the authorities show — the most ancient and widespread beliefs of the tribes of the great Huron-Iroquois family. We might indeed naturally expect that the Hurons, as being the elder branch of the family, would have preserved its legends in their fullest and what might be deemed most authentic shapes.[2]

[1] The first article of this series appeared in vol. i., No. 3 of the *Journal*, and the second article in vol. ii., No. 7.

[2] This "folk-tale" was communicated by me, in an abridged form, to my late lamented friend, Mrs. E. Smith, in the summer of 1881, for a paper on "Animal Myths," which she was then preparing for the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, held in that year. It was afterwards included in her interesting collection of "Myths of the Iroquois," which appeared in the Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (for 1880–81). Its value, both as an embodiment of Huron-Iroquois mythology and as an evidence of aboriginal narrative talent, seems to warrant its reproduction in the fuller form in which it appears in my journal, written in September, 1874.

By way of preface, the chief remarked that the Indians held the opinion that each species of animal had for its head and, so to speak, its spiritual representative, one of its own kind, very much larger than the ordinary size, and endowed with preternatural powers, among which was the power of assuming the human form. Some of these powers could be communicated by them to any human beings who might form an alliance with them. Thus all the Wyandot men had their peculiar friends among the animals which surrounded them, — that is, each man had selected one of the preternatural creatures as his special ally, much as a Roman Catholic might select a patron saint. When the missionaries came among them, and urged them to become Christians, one of their strongest objections was that they could not give up their forest friends. The chief added that since the white men came, these peculiar animals had disappeared. The Indians, he averred, — and he seemed fully to share in the opinion, — held that they are not extinct, but, being alarmed by the throng of white people and the destruction of their ancient haunts, they have fled to a distance, — perhaps, he added, under the sea. Even in the ancient times they kept mostly underground, being afraid of the thunder, — and, as the following narrative shows, with good reason.

From the earliest period the Wyandots and the Cherokees have been at war. The war was carried on sometimes by large expeditions, sometimes by parties of two or three adventurers, who would penetrate into the enemy's country, and return proud of having slain a man. On one occasion, in the ancient time, three Wyandot warriors set out on such an expedition. When they were far distant from their own land, one of them had the misfortune to break his leg. By the Indian law it became the duty of the others to convey their injured comrade back to his home. They formed a rude litter, and, laying him upon it, bore him for some distance. At length they came to a ridge of mountains. The way was hard, and the exertion severe. To rest themselves they placed their burden on the ground, and, withdrawing to a little distance, took evil counsel together. There was a deep hole or pit, opening in the side of the mountain, not far from the place where they were sitting. Returning to the litter, they took up their helpless comrade, carried him near the brink of the pit, and suddenly hurled him in. Then they set off rapidly for their own country. When they arrived they reported that he had died of wounds received in fight. Great was the grief of his mother, a widow, whose only son and support he had been. To soothe her feelings they told her that her son had not fallen into the enemy's hands. They had rescued him, they said,

from that fate, had carefully tended him in his last hours, and had given his remains a becoming burial.

They little imagined that he was still alive. When he was thrown down by his treacherous comrades, he lay for a time insensible at the bottom of the pit. When he recovered his senses, he observed an old gray-headed man seated near him, crouching in a cavity on one side of the pit. "Ah, my son," said the old man, "what have your friends done to you?" "They have thrown me here to die, I suppose," he replied, with true Indian stoicism. "You shall not die," said the old man, "if you will promise to do what I require of you in return for saving you." "What is that?" asked the youth. "Only that when you recover you will remain here and hunt for me, and bring me the game you kill." The young warrior readily promised, and the old man applied herbs to his wound, and attended him skilfully until he recovered. This happened in the autumn. All through the winter the youth hunted for the old man, who told him that when any game was killed which was too large for one man to carry, he would come and help to convey it to the pit in which they continued to reside.

When the spring arrived, bringing melting snows and frequent showers, the youth continued his pursuit of the game, though with more difficulty. One day he encountered an enormous bear, which he was lucky enough to kill. As he stooped to feel its fatness and judge of its weight, he heard a murmur of voices behind him He had not imagined that any human beings would find their way to that lonely region at that time of the year. Astonished, he turned and saw three men, or figures resembling men, clad in strange, cloudlike garments, standing near him. "Who are you?" he asked. In reply, they informed him that they were the Thunder (*Hĭnō'*, — in English orthography, "Henoh"). They told him that their mission was to keep the earth and everything upon it in good order for the benefit of the human race. If there was a drought, it was their duty to bring rain. If there were serpents or other noxious creatures, they were commissioned to destroy them; and, in short, they were to do away with everything that was injurious to mankind. They told him that their present object was to destroy the old man to whom he had bound himself, and who, as they would show him, was a very different sort of being from what he pretended to be. For this they required his aid. If he would assist them he would do a good act, and they would convey him back to his home, where he would see his mother and be able to take care of her.

This warning and these assurances overcame any reluctance the young man might have felt to sacrifice his seeming friend. He went to him and told him that he had killed a bear, and needed his help

to bring it home. The old man was anxious and uneasy. He bade the youth examine the sky carefully, and see if there were the smallest speck of cloud in any quarter. The young man replied that the sky was perfectly clear. The old man then came out of the hollow, and followed the young hunter, urging him constantly to make haste, and looking upward with great anxiety. When they reached the bear, they cut it up hurriedly with their knives, and the old man directed the youth to place it all on his shoulders. The youth complied, though much astonished at his companion's strength. The old man set off hastily for the pit, but just then a cloud appeared, and the thunder rumbled in the distance. The old man threw down his load, and started to run. The thunder sounded nearer, and the old man assumed his proper form of an enormous porcupine, which fled through the bushes, discharging its quills, like arrows, backward as it ran (as the Indians believe to be the habit of this animal). But the thunders followed him with burst upon burst, and finally a bolt struck the huge animal, which fell lifeless into its den.

Then the Thunderers said to the young man, "Now we have done our work here, and will take you to your home and your mother, who is grieving for you all the time." They gave him a dress like that which they wore, a cloudlike robe, having wings on the shoulders, and told him how these were to be moved. Then he rose in the air, and soon found himself in his mother's cornfield. It was night. He went to her cabin, and drew aside the mat which covered the opening. The widow started up and gazed at him in the moonlight with terror, thinking that she saw her son's apparition. He guessed her thoughts. "Do not be alarmed, mother," he said, "it is no ghost. It is your son, come back to take care of you." As may be supposed, the poor woman was overjoyed, and welcomed her long-lost son with delight. He remained with her, fulfilling his duties as a son. What was done to his treacherous comrades is not recorded. They were too insignificant to be further noticed in the story, which now assumes a more decided mythological character.

When the Thunderers bade farewell to the young man, they said to him, "We will leave the cloud-dress with you. Every spring, when we return, you can put it on, and fly with us, to be witness to what we do for the good of men." They told him that the great deity, Hamendiju, had given them this authority and commission to watch over the people and see that no harm came to them. Accordingly the youth hid the dress in the woods, that no one might see it, and waited till the spring. Then the Thunderers returned, and he resumed the robe, and floated with them in the clouds over the earth. As they passed above a mountain he became thirsty, and, seeing below him a pool, he descended to drink of it. When he re-

joined his companions, they looked at him and saw that the water with which his lips were moist had caused them to shine, as though smeared with oil. "Where have you been drinking?" they asked eagerly. "In yonder pool," he answered, pointing to where it lay still in sight. They said, "There is something in that pool which we must destroy. We have sought it for years, and now you have happily found it for us." Then they cast a mighty thunderbolt into the pool, which presently became dry. At the bottom of it, blasted by the thunder, was an immense grub, of the kind which destroys the corn and beans and other products of the field and garden; but this was a vast creature ("as big as a house," said the chief), the spiritual head, patron, and exemplar of all grubs.

After accompanying his spirit friends to some distance, and seeing more of their good deeds of the like sort, the youth returned home and told his people that the Thunder was their divine protector, and narrated the proofs which he had witnessed of this benignant character. Thence originated the honor in which the Thunder is held among the Indians. The Wyandots were accustomed to call Hino their grandfather (*tsutaa*). I asked how it was that the god had appeared as three men. The chief said that only three thunder-spirits were required on this occasion, but there were many of them. When thunder is heard to roll from many parts of the heavens, it is because there are many of the Thunderers at work. They are all called Hino, who may (for the Wyandots rarely use the plural of nouns) be regarded as one god or many, — the Thunderer or the Thunderers.

The chief added that the young man learned from his divine friends the secret of rain-making, which he communicated to two persons in each tribe. They were bound to strict secrecy, and possessed, the chief affirmed, the undoubted art of making rain. He had often known them to accomplish this feat. He himself had become partly possessed of this secret, and had been able in former days to bring rain. Of late years, in obedience to the injunctions of the church, he had forborne to exert this power. I asked him if he had any objection to disclose the secret. His wife urged him to tell; but on consideration he said that he would rather not. He had received it in confidence; the church had forbidden the practice of the art; and he thought it best that the knowledge of it should perish. It was evident that he entertained the most entire faith in the power of this charm, whatever it might be.

The pantheon of the Huron-Iroquois nations is not an extensive one. The principal deity was Ioskeha or Tijuskeha, who was known by several honorary epithets, which have sometimes been mistaken for names of distinct divinities. One of these epithets, which as-

sumed various dialectical forms, Hamendiju and Awendiyo among the Huron tribes, Rawenniyo and Hawenniyo (in English orthography, Hawaneeo) among the Iroquois, signified "The Great Master," and is commonly rendered, in the "Relations" of the early French missionaries, "The Master of Life." Another stately title in use among the Iroquois was Teharonkiawakon (or Tharonhiawagon), which means "Holder (or Sustainer) of the Heavens." And still another recorded by the missionaries is Agreskoué, or Areskui, the meaning of which is unknown. All the accounts represent him as a benevolent deity, always ready to exert his powers — which, though great, are not unlimited — for the purpose of alleviating the natural ills which beset the human race. His chief assistant is Hino (or Hinu), the Thunder or Thunderer, who, according to one opinion, has several assistants, and, according to another, is himself a sort of multiple or composite deity. Probably no better account of his supposed nature and attributes has ever been given than is comprised in the foregoing legend, as related by my intelligent host, Chief Mandarong.

For further information on this subject, reference may be made to L. H. Morgan's excellent work, "The League of the Iroquois" (Book II. chap. i., "Faith of the Iroquois"), to Dr. Brinton's "American Hero-Myths" (page 53, "The Iroquois Myth of Ioskeha"), and to Mrs. E. Smith's "Myths of the Iroquois," already referred to. It is to be noted that not only the principal deities of the Huron-Iroquois race, but almost all their minor divinities, — spirits of the winds, of the plants, etc., — are of a benignant nature. If the character of a people, as is commonly assumed, can be inferred from the character and attributes of the objects of their worship, the tribes of this race must be deemed a naturally kindly and peace-loving people. Elsewhere I have endeavored to show how the whole social and political system of the race, throughout its various septs, displays the character thus manifest in its religious faith, — a character differing as widely as possible from the evil and undeserved reputation which the history of its desperate struggle for life against its foreign supplanters has unjustly stamped upon it.[1]

Horatio Hale.

[1] See *The Iroquois Book of Rites*, in Brinton's "Library of Aboriginal American Literature," chapter viii.: "The Iroquois Character;" and, for confirmation, Dr. Brinton's recent work, *The American Race*, pp. 81–84.