

INDIAN SUPERSTITION

The Indians were superstitious in the extreme – believers in dreams and observers of omens.

No enterprise was inaugurated, nor journey commenced by them, without consulting of signs and portents, and in the most ordinary operations of life – the planting of their maize, or erection of their rude wigwams – critical attention was has to weather-sign, and to the position and supposed influence of the moon. In this last named peculiarity, however, they did not materially differ from many of the most substantial farmers in Penny=Sylvania at the present day.

Of the incredible folly and weakness which, in this direction, were universally exhibited by the otherwise self-reliant aborigines, the gentle Heckewelder thus discourses:

“Great and powerful as the Indian conceives himself to be, firm and undaunted as he really is, braving all seasons and weathers, careless of dangers, patient of hunger, thirst, and cold, and fond of displaying the native energy of his character, even in the midst of tortures, at the very thought of which our own puny nature revolts and shudders; this lord of the creation, whose life is spent in a state of constant warfare against the wild beasts of the forest and the savages of the wilderness, he who, proud of his independent existence, strikes his breast with exultation and exclaims, ‘I am a man!’ – the American Indian has one weak side which sinks him down to the level of the most fearful and timid being; a childish apprehension of the occult and unknown power which, unless he can summon sufficient fortitude to conquer it, changes a once the hero into a coward.

“It is incredible to what a degree the Indian’s superstitious belief in witchcraft operated upon their minds. The moment that their imagination is struck with the idea that they are *bewitched*, they are no longer themselves; their fancy is constantly at work creating the most horrid and distressing images. They see themselves falling a sacrifice to the wicked arts of a vile unknown hand, of one who would not have dared to face in a fair combat, dying a miserable ignominious death, a death to which they would a thousand times prefer the stake with all its horrors. No tale, no tradition, no memorial of their courage or heroic fortitude, will go down with it to posterity; it will be thought that they were not deserving of a better fate. And (O! dreadful thought to an Indian Mind) that death is to remain forever unrevenged; their friends, their relations, the men of their own tribe will seek the murderer in vain, they will seek him while perhaps he is in the midst of them unnoticed and unknown, smiling at their impotent rage, and calmly selecting some new victim to his infernal art.

“Of this extraordinary supposed power of their conjurers, of the causes which produce it, and the manner in which it is acquired, the Indians, as may well be supposed, have not a very definite idea. All they can say is, that the sorcerer makes use of a ‘deadening substance,’ which he discharges and conveys to the person whom he means to ‘*strike*’ through the air by means of the wind, or of his own breath, or throws at him in a manner which they can neither understand nor describe. The person thus *stricken* is immediately seized with an unaccountable terror, his spirits sink, his appetite fails, he is disturbed in his sleep, he pines and wastes away, or a sickness seizes him, and he dies at last a miserable victim to the workings of his own imagination.

Such are their ideas and the melancholy effects of the dread they feel, of that supernatural power which they vainly fancy to exist among them. That they can destroy one another by means of poisonous roots and plants is certainly true, but in this there is no witchcraft. The prejudice which they labor under can be ascribed to no other than their excessive ignorance and credulity. I was once acquainted with a white man, a shrewd and correct observer, who had lived among the Indians, and being himself related to the Indian family, had the best opportunities of obtaining accurate information on this subject. He told me that he had found the means of getting into the confidence of one of their most noted sorcerers, who had frankly confessed to him that his secret consisted in exciting fear and suspicion, and creating in the multitude a strong belief in his magical powers. ‘For,’ said he, ‘such is the credulity of many. That if I pick a little wool from my blanked and roll it between my fingers into a small round ball, not longer than a bean, I am by that alone believed to be deeply skilled in the magic art, and it is immediately supposed that I am preparing the deadly substance with which I mean to strike some person or other, although I hardly know myself at the time what my fingers are doing; and if at that moment I happened to cast my eyes on a particular man, or even to cast a side glance at him, it is enough to make him consider himself as the intended victim; he is from that moment effectually *struck*, and if he is not possessed of great fortitude, so as to be able to repel the thought and divert his mind from it, or to persuade himself that it is nothing but the work of a disturbed imagination, he will sink under the terror thus created, and at last perish a victim, not indeed to witchcraft, but to his own credulity and folly.”

But men of such strong minds are not often to be found; so deeply rooted is the belief of the Indians in those fancied supernatural powers. It is vain to endeavor to convince them by argument, that they are entirely founded in delusion and have no real existence. The attempt has been frequently made by sensible white men, but always without success."

More than a hundred years ago, while the *Delawares* still occupied this portion of the State, there was a Quaker named John Anderson, a traveling merchant among the Indians, known far and wide by them as "*the honest Quaker trader*." This man, knowing the almost unlimited confidence which the natives reposed in him, endeavored to convince them of the utter fallacy of their foolish superstition; but finding argument vain, at last requested that their most powerful sorcerers might be produced, and in presence of the tribe and the chiefs and the old men, might exercise on him the most potent spells of their magic, and if they should succeed in working harm upon him, never in so slight a degree, then he would not only acknowledge their supernatural power, but would pay a goodly amount of merchandise, of such kinds as Indians most covet, in forfeit for his discomfiture. His only stipulation was that the conjuror should be unarmed, and, to guard against the possibility of poison, that he should not attempt to approach nearer than a specified distance of about twelve feet.

The first magician, to whom this opportunity was offered, utterly refused to injure so good a man; one who the Indians all loved for his uprightness; No! the Great Spirit forbid that he should turn the terrible glance of the evil eye on the *honest Quaker*?

This most considerate and conscientious course was greeted with the warmest admiration and applause by the assembled *Delawares*, and caused them to regard the conjuror with more reverence than ever.

But another was found who was less conscientious, and who boasted that neither the distance of twelve feet, nor yet of twelve miles, could in the least interfere with the certain effect of his deadly spells.

So honest John Anderson brought out the enticing goods which were to forfeit, and then stood firm and serene before the fearful man who claimed such wonderful powers. He was dressed and tricked out in a manner most infernal; covered from head to toe with a bear skin, black as jet, and closed together just as it grew upon the animal. In addition to this were a pair of satanic horns upon the head, all intended to strike the victim dumb by its terrible appearance. But it had no such effect upon the shad-bellied Ajax. The spectators had implored him to desist from his fool-hardiness, as they thought it to be, and when he persisted, they looked upon him with the profoundest pity, and some covered their eyes with their blankets to shut out the fearful sight, for they loved this man of integrity with a surpassing affection, and they would not that he should incur a fate so dreadful. It is barely possible that at this time, with all this commiseration, there may have floated through the red man's mind, some consolatory visions of the delights of an Indian administration upon the personal effects of the upright Quaker, who so persistently courted his own doom, but, however that may have been, John Anderson boldly faced the diabolical antics and gesticulations of the horned wizard, and never blenched through an interminable half-hour of wool-picking and contortions; at the end of which the red trickster suddenly ceased his incantations, announcing that the pale face was impervious to them on account of *having been accustomed to living on salted provisions*, that salt having a repellant effect in that invisible substance, which was always so fatal in its effects when directed against Indians.

But though the chiefs and sachems and warriors saw with their own eyes the discomfiture of their sorcerer, and the triumph of the good Quaker – congratulating him on his miraculous escape, and gazing pensively upon the bright-colored merchandise as it now disappeared from their sight and was returned to the packages; yet their superstitious belief in the power of conjuror had not diminished one iota.

Even in the administering of medicines to the sick, we are told by an old Moravian chronicler that these preparations were "mixed with superstitious practices, calculated to guard against the powers of witchcraft, in which, unfortunately, they have a strong fixed belief. Indeed, they are too apt to attribute the most natural death to the arts and incantations of the sorcerers, and their medicine is, in most cases as much directed against those as against the disease itself. * * * * * There is a superstitious notion, in which all their physicians participate, which is, that when an emetic is to be administered, the water in which the portion is mixed must be drawn *up* stream, and if for a cathartic, *downward*. This is, at least, innocent, and not more whimsical perhaps, nor more calculated to excite a smile than some theories of grave and learned men in civilized countries."