

PASSION PLAY—IMPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS SPECTACLE

By J. Gordon Smith.

B.C. Indians Present the Story of the Cross.

UPON the Chilliwack valley of British Columbia, a short distance from where the Fraser rolls downward to the Gulf of Georgia, is the quiet Indian village of Skwa. This picturesque residence of the Stalo or Frasey Indians, where whitewashed frame buildings, brightened by their deep blue awnings, door-steps and window-frames, stand on either side of a green lawn, is the scene of a religious celebration on Saturday, June 8, which, won from its spectacular effect, has scarcely ever been rivaled. Not even in Oberammergau, the world-famed home of the Passion Play, could such a scene be beheld as here in the hamlet of the Stalos, on the reservation in the Chilliwack valley, when, under the direction of Rev. Father Chironse, and under the patronage of His Lordship Bishop Dometenwill, the Sechelt tribesmen presented their impressive Passion Play, portraying in the most realistic manner the sacred story of Christ's last days on earth, while over 3,000 British Columbia Indians circled about the various tableaux in procession, chanting and praying.

It is a great gathering that took part in this wonderful religious celebration at Skwa. Over three thousand Indians, people of many customs and many tongues—nearly thirty tribes were represented—had flocked from the mountains, by train and by flotillas of war canoes. There were Skwas from the mountains, with their koochmen and papooses; Thompsons from the canyons of that far-away tributary of the Fraser; Sechelts from the shining beaches where the tides of the Pacific ebb and flow; Lillooets, Tsiliamens, Fort Douglas, and many other peoples from the upper country; Squamish, from Burrard Inlet; Lummi, from the islands of the Gulf of Georgia; Cowichan, from the valleys of Vancouver Island; and representatives from many corners of British Columbia. All had gathered from far and near when the call of the Bishop had been sent to the priests of their missions; and each one, from the "tenness" Indian of tender years to the old man of ninety years, who had tales to tell of the days before the white man came, and the wrinkled koochman had a personal interest in the successful outcome of the presentation of the sacred story of Christ's last days on earth. Differing as they did in customs,

and in speech and habit, this motley gathering was most interesting, and more so because of the fact that, although at variance on all other matters, Indians were all alike in their impressive devoutness. The tourist contingent assembled at the village to witness this religious celebration, which culminated in the Passion Play, was not a large one. Not over thirty sight-seers had made their way by the C. P. R. to Harrison, whence passage was taken down the Fraser, and Frasey to the flooded along, where the little stern-wheeler Minto connected with the stage, which carried the travellers to Chilliwack, close by the bank of Skwa. The writer was one of a party of camera-laden travellers who landed from the half saw, half steam, under the trees, where, when the river is in its normal condition, they had been a cattle pasture. His Lordship Bishop Dometenwill was another visitor, and because of his coming this little landing was the scene of the first part of the Indian celebration.

Several thousand Indians were lined up along the road, standing in their decorated Chatham wagons, jackboards and other vehicles, grouped here and there with their unique church flags with the large cross in red, on white ground, covered by various colored borders, and with their hands playing sacred tunes. They had come from their village, five miles away, in procession, along the muddy country roads, with their flags waving and hands playing, to welcome their much-beloved bishop. With all tenderness Chief George assisted him over the little plank which formed the landing stage, and when he was safely ensconced on a bear robe in a well-decorated wagon, the procession started for Skwa, five miles away, beyond the cluster of cotton-woods. Arrived at the hamlet, addresses of welcome were read, and the bishop and the priests, with the various tribes assembled standing on a raised platform in the centre of the village square, replied, calling upon the red men to renew their pledges of temperance and religion, and then, as the snow was slowly sinking beyond the town-lined peaks in the background, the opening ceremonies were complete.

It is a picturesque village, this home of the three or four hundred Stalos of the beautiful Chilliwack valley, where the government had made a reservation, after its custom, for the Indians. The dwellings are ranged along the sides of a great square, bright in their coats of whitewash, and, with its high-reaching steeples standing high above its flat sloping single roof, their shining white-painted church stands like a monument to their religion, at the head of the great square.

One side is the dyke built by the farmers to hold back the rising Fraser, on the other the heavily clustered cotton wood, while in the background are the great peaks of the coast range standing on either side of this valley, through which the Fraser rushes to the sea. Now the village has a more than ordinary picturesque effect for added to its usual appearance is the effective grouping of the many encampments of the visiting tribes. Like little lakes of canvas in the sea of green, the tents of the visiting tribes are grouped in uneven avenues, their ridge poles pointing to every angle of the compass, and rising high above each encampment beyond the houses which line the square are large pavilions in which the golden candelabra and altars are set up for the worship of the tribesmen. Here in the canvas churches the Indians could be seen reverently kneeling on the pine boughs spread over the grass, telling their rosaries and murmuring prayers, some bowed low in reverence, while others knelt with heads erect looking solemnly up at the altar at the tent head; koochmen whose papooses were strapped in the strangely made baskets on their backs, young maidens, all were engaged in prayer, and their devoutness was impressive. Near by the bandsmen could be heard practising behind the tents, and wafted slowly by the winds which filled out the multi-colored flags, the white clouds were sailing across the blue sky to break upon the pine-covered mountains beyond, making a scene, the uniqueness and picturesqueness of which would be hard to rival.

This was the scene on that bright day of June 8, when the opening ceremonies of the great religious celebration were held. This day had been given over to the respect of the memory of the late Bishop Dometenwill. The bell in the church tower was slowly tolling, and in the tents and church thousands of Indians were kneeling praying for their dead Bishop. In the afternoon they assembled in the big square and with the women and children leading, and the men following, with the eight bands interspersed among them, they marched slowly with beads bared and bowed in solemn procession to the little cemetery at the cross roads beyond the dyke. There the Bishop celebrated requiem masses, the Indians sang chants and prayers in many tongues, the hands played slow and sacred music, and then chanting the Latin hymns and telling their beads as they walked, the procession slowly returned to the square and dispersed.

The ceremonies were not complete yet, for although the collective worship was over, the Indians proceeded individually to the tents in which the altars stood and to the church where they again knelt in prayer. At night a great gathering was held in a big pavilion on one side of the square—a meeting for the renewal of the pledges of temperance—and here, carrying their banners thirty-three chiefs, were massed on the platform to pledge the temperance of their tribesmen to the fathers. Service was then held by Father Robe of the Port Douglas Indians until at length the boom of the four cannon of the Stalos reverberated through the mountains, and then the gathering dispersed and some three thousand natives hurried to their homes and encampments.

The feast of Corpus Christi was celebrated next day, in the church, an edifice built by the unaided Indians. The bucks and koochmen had filed in and knelt, the men on one side and the women on the other, until the building was full. All squatted and knelt for the church is without seats, and there Rev. Bishop Dometenwill, assisted by Rev. Fathers Chironse, Wagner, Rohr, Peiryau, LaHausse, Marchal, Tavernier and Donnelly, as deacons and sub-deacons, celebrated high mass, the Indians, singing the chants in Latin, an attainment taught them by the missionaries. The mixing of the voices and accents of these many and women of many tribes had a strangely beautiful effect, and the whole scene was one long to be remembered.

The Bishop was kneeling before the brightly lit altar, and on either side of him were the attendant priests, all with their white surplices over their robes of office, and at either side of the kneeling Bishop were two strangely attired old Indians. These were the tribal guards, Chief John of the Ekwawas, a tribe at Union Bay, stood on the right, his back bowed and his bronzed face wrinkled by his eighty years. Immovable as a carved

image, the old chief stood there in his old red tunic, with heavy epaulets, red-ribbed artillery trousers, and black artillery helmet, presumably the gift of an officer of the early days of the province. A sailor's heavy cutlass was swung from his waist, and his hand rested on the hilt, the old chief stood in ever with his hand gripped tightly on the hilt, the old chief stood in reverent silence. Opposite, on the left side of the kneeling Bishop, as still and as solemn as the older chief, stood Chief Michael, a younger and more athletic Indian. His uniform was that of an old-time beadle, of the days before the O. P. R. The cocked hat was worn sideways, a la Napoleon, and the heavy braided tunic, with its divided tails, was surmounted by a wide red sash draped from his shoulders. His unbuttoned knickerbockers flapped over red woollen socks, and his untied boots added to the incongruous effect. For two hours the two effect of counterbalancing the incongruity. For two hours the two struck garbed natives stood on either side of the Bishop, without moving in the slightest, and then, as the ceremony ended and the worshippers trooped from the church, the younger man, spear in hand, stopped before the Bishop, and the older chief fell in behind, and thus, proud of their opportunity, they escorted the Bishop to his residence.

This is a time-honored custom, and the kind-hearted priests cannot bring themselves to abolish it, far were such a step taken it would bring the greatest grief to the deposed guards.

The evening was given over to the children of the mission, who, under the guidance of Father Collins, delighted the elder people by their programme of dialogues, songs, recitations and fancy drills, and then was to come the culminating event of the celebration, the Passion Play, which was arranged for the following afternoon. That night, however, rain fell heavily, and the sodden square was too wet and muddy for the performance. The Passion Play was therefore postponed until the following day, and Friday was spent in hearing confessions in the church and the larger tents, by all excepting the actors of the Sechelts, who spent their time in rehearsals for the portrayal of the Passion, and the Stalos, who were further beautifying their village by the erection of a great altar and fancy arch, resembling the facade of a church.

On Saturday the sun shone through a blue sky, but clouds traveling towards the peaks at whose heads stood Mount Chean, and the Indians looked wistfully at the sun, speculating on the weather. However, there was no occasion for their anxiety, for when the stands had been erected at the square end, and the figure of Christ hoisted upon the Cross of Calvary, amid the pine-hung background of the embryo hill, ready for the last great picture of the Sacred Story, the sun broke out in all its brilliancy through the clouded sky. It was at 8 o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday, June 8, that the great gathering of 3,000 Indians took their places for the procession. There they stood, these wrinkled old men and old women, tottering downward to the grave, stalwart young men, round-shouldered maidens, whose raven hair shone in the sunlight, women with their papooses wrapped in their shawls and tied in their baskets of straw, of varying tongues and differing customs, dissimilar in everything but their reverent piety, all waiting for the signal to begin their solemn march past the tableau portraying the sacred story of Christ's last days on earth. Gathered before the church, the Sechelts were arraying themselves

Picturesque Scene at the Village of Skwa.

for the tableaux in the pavilion, and at length they swung out in little groups and hurried to their places. Quickly they grouped themselves, and in short order they stood immobile beneath the rays of the sun, which intensified the bright color of their costumes, portraying in realistic pictures the sacred story of Christ's agony.

Standing on the steps of the church, Father Chironse was watching the grouping of the pictures, while photographers were placing their tripods near by, and when he saw that all was in readiness he raised his hand, and then began a chant in many tongues. The Indians, slowly forming, were singing "O Cross, Our Only Hope," familiar to those who have heard Gounod's "Redemption," but it is doubtful if they would recognize the chant in the strange melody of the thousands of forest people who sang as they moved forward from the church at Skwa. First came the children of the Missions, fling across from the church in two lines, around the corner of the village and through the tented encampment to the field beyond. Following them were the maidens, then the older koochmen and their families, and then the men, young and old. Tribe after tribe had taken up the refrain of the chant, and now the long lines, reaching out for nearly a mile, had surrounded the village, and the Chief with the large cross, who was leading, was nearing the first scene of the Passion. The effect of the chanting, recitative prayer, the tolling of the bell and other sounds and scenes of this great procession to Calvary, was startling in its impressiveness, for the long lines of devotees presented a picture to inspire the onlooker. One moment their chanting could be heard close at hand, and then, as they were rising and falling, footfalls which rolled away to where Chean peak lifted its snow-clad head back echoes of the chant, and the very air seemed filled with murmuring of the melody.

It was nearly 4 p.m. when the head of the procession, led by the priests, neared the scene of Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, amid the pine branches representing the garden in fancy away Jerusalem, old Chief George was kneeling as the Christ, passive as a wax figure, and as the procession filed along on either side, singing and praying, his brown face shone with religious fervor. Behind him the young men, clad in the loose flowing robes of biblical time, soft in texture and bright in color, were lying as though asleep. As the Fathers, each one marching between the lines abreast of his people, advanced with their part of the procession to the realistic picture, they repeated the story of how Jesus had called in his agony in that awful night in Gethsemane to have the cup taken from him, while behind him, his disciples slept. Slowly they told the old tale in Chinook, the volapuk of the Indian of the West, originated by the Indians of the Bay Company, and thus the Sacred Story of the Passion Play was firmly impressed upon the simple minds of the tribesmen in its every detail.

On from tableau to tableau the procession marched, chanting hymns, reciting prayers, and telling beads. Coming to the portrayal of the treason of Judas the worshippers reverently looked upon the grouped Sechelt actors, standing brightly clad in costumes of the highest order, representative of the garb of the days of that first century. There the Indian actor representing Jesus was seen, with the traitor disciple standing beside him, about to impress that traitorous kiss upon the cheek of the Saviour, while beyond the figure of Jesus, spear in hand is one of the men gathered by the traitor to seize his master. Explaining slowly how the traitor sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver, and pointing the lessons drawn from the scene to their flocks, the priests led the Indians on to the next tableau—Christ before Pilate. The watching spectators could not fail to evince the deepest interest in the wonderful spectacle. Father Le Jeune—of the Shuswap Mission—

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"AND THEY CRUCIFIED HIM."

"WEEP NOT FOR ME, BUT FOR YOUR CHILDREN."

AT THE FOOT OF CALVARY.

"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM"