

THE PLIGHT OF LIVING SCALPED INDIANS

The practice of scalping, the taking of a small patch of skin from the top of a slain enemy's head as a battle trophy, sometimes, though very rarely, resulted in the scalping of a man who was not dead, but who in the confusion of battle appeared so from having been knocked unconscious by a blow on the head. No warrior would knowingly remove the scalp of a living man, but if he found an apparently dead enemy on the field of battle he might take the scalp.

In the Arikara language the term applied to a living man who had been scalped by mistake is *tsohonúǎu*. Such a man was most unfortunate, for by tribal custom he could not return to take his place among living men. On recovering from his wounds, he had to live in solitude. He made a shelter for himself in some isolated place far away from the villages and the customary resorts of his people. He cunningly concealed his dwelling to keep it from being seen by anyone who chanced to pass by. Since he was regarded as a dead man and a ghost, the sight of him would have been a shock and an offense to the living.

A *tsohonúǎu* confined most of his movements to the nighttime or the dusk of evening, in order to lessen the risk of being seen; if he did move about in broad daylight it was only at times when he had assured himself by scouting that no one was in the vicinity. Being absolutely without human companionship, he was separated as if by death from the community of the living. He had to take care of himself as best he could, unaided by friends or relatives. He had to find and prepare his own food, contrive his own raiment and footgear, and manufacture his own utensils and weapons. Any manner of communication with him was likely to bring bad luck.

This paper has to do with the plight of two living scalped men. When the first one whose story is recounted here went away to war, he left at home a wife and a little boy, both very dear to him, but after he had lost his scalp he was irrevocably separated from them. Because of his deep love for his wife and child he could not resist, however, the desire to be near them, although custom and

religious practice made it impossible for him to go openly into the village and make himself known to them.

His wife mourned for him very deeply and sincerely. Often she would go away from her people and the village that she might be alone in the silence of the hills at evening and undisturbed while wailing and mourning. Her husband, as he hovered about outside the village, concealed by the twilight and the darkness, heard her crying many times, yet restrained himself from approaching her. But a time came when his longing overpowered him and very quietly, so as not to startle her, he came near and spoke in a low voice. On hearing him, she supposed him to be a suitor who had come to court her. She tried to repulse him, "I do not wish to talk with you. Do you not understand that I am grieving for my husband who is dead, and that I cannot think of any other man?" Then he very gently made her realize that it was her husband who was speaking to her; that a mysterious power had come to him after his death on the battlefield and resuscitated him. But because the enemy had scalped him he was forever separated from her and their child and from all the living. He told her that for this reason he could not come to her; that for him to have any connection with the living was contrary to the will of the holy mysterious beings who had revived him. But he said his love and longing for her and for their child were so great that his feelings had compelled him to come often at night to a place where he could sit overlooking the village and think of his dear ones.

After he had thus made himself known and after they had conversed for a while, the young woman returned home to the village and the *tsohoníhu* went back to his cave. Before they parted they agreed to meet again in a similar manner, and to take great care that they should not be discovered. By means of these meetings, the man kept informed concerning affairs among the people. After a time, famine came upon the village and he was anxious about the welfare of his child. When his wife informed him of the situation, he told her of his anxiety and promised to supply her with provisions for their need if she could keep the matter secret. From time to time, he brought supplies for her to their meeting place.

Her father and mother noticed that she was obtaining food and concluded that a suitor was

making the gifts. Her father was content and said, "Our daughter is a widow, but she will now have a husband to provide for her and our grandchild. It is well." So matters continued for a while, but the husband replied to entreaties, "I cannot come home. That is not permitted by the mysterious beings who resuscitated me. Evil consequences would result if the requirement that I remain apart should be broken." Finally, he sent provisions to his own parents also, and eagle feathers to his father. They, too, concluded that the gifts came from a suitor and were not displeased. They thought that their daughter-in-law would soon have a husband, with security for herself and her child.

The secret meetings continued, and the feeling of strangeness that was due to his abnormal condition gradually wore off a little. The intimacy, which they had experienced in their earlier, happier days, now returned to them. One evening as they sat and talked together the wife asked to be allowed to see the scar of the wound on his head. As he complied, their tender feelings for each other became so great that their restraint was wholly overcome and they joined in conjugal embrace. Then realization came to him. He felt stricken, and said with remorse, "Now we should not have done this. I think that tomorrow I must die. If tomorrow night I do not come here to you, it will be because of my death. You will then go to the place of which I have told you, where I have been keeping myself since I was resuscitated by the supernatural powers. You will find me dead or dying. There I have all manner of supplies. These you will divide with my relatives."

Near morning, they parted, after he had given her careful instructions how to find his cave. He told her he would leave broken branches and twigs to mark their way. He gave her these directions, "The place is in the face of a steep hillside. You will find on it stones which serve as steps to mount to the entrance of the cave. As you ascend upon these stones, you will come to a clump of sagebrush. When you pass it you will see, a little higher up, a large root that seems to protrude out of the hillside. You will pull upon this root. It will open my door. Then you will enter. On each side of the entrance there is a storage place. In the bins you will find all kinds of supplies; there are food, clothing, robes, weapons, war bonnets, and many other things of use and value which I have seized from enemies."

The next evening the young woman came again to the rendezvous where she and her husband

had been meeting, but he was not there. She waited in the hope that he might yet come. Through the long night she stayed, but he did not appear. She recalled the foreboding words he had spoken to her at their last meeting, when he had told her he expected to have to die because of having broken the restrictions imposed upon him. As the night wore on she was convinced that she would never see him again in life. She returned home before dawn and took steps to carry out his last instructions. She rekindled the fire and prepared food. Then she summoned her own parents and his to come and have breakfast with her. She explained that she had something to tell them. They expected her to announce her engagement to the donor of the food and other supplies, for they knew nothing of the fate of the husband who had been lost in battle.

What she had to say was far different from that which they had been anticipating. She startled them all by telling them that she had been visiting her husband and that he was a *tsohonúhu*, who could have no relations with the living. She recounted the occurrences of their last meeting and repeated the words he had spoken at that time. Then she concluded, "We must now go out there. I am sure he is dead. He told me that he expected to die and that, if he failed to meet me last night, it would be because he was dead."

Thereupon the young woman guided them to the cliff, which her husband had described. On approaching the cave, they saw the man's feet extending from the entrance, where he had died as he was going into the cave. They lifted up the body, carried it inside, and laid it upon the bed. Then they sat down upon the ground and wailed for him. After the mourning ceremony the young man's father spoke, "We will leave him here. We will not take him to be buried in the cemetery of the village. This was his home. It is inside the earth. Mother Earth has received him back again. We will leave him here to her protection."

Before departing, the wife told them about the storage bins and the goods, which he had directed her to divide among them. After carrying out his wishes, they sealed up the entrance to the cave and went home.

"His bones must be there yet," said my informant when he told me the story. The time of this

event was very many years ago, and the location was somewhere near the Missouri River, much farther downstream than the present home of the Arikara tribe, to which they came in their later migration.

Another *tsohonúhu* lived among the Arikara within the period during which the tribe has occupied its present territory. The location of his cave was discovered about forty or fifty years ago. It is on the land of Mr. William Deane, about two miles south of his house, and faces the Missouri River. I visited it in August 1932, with Mr. Deane as my guide. The roof had fallen in long ago, and erosion and weathering have left their marks upon the face of the bluff, which is partly overgrown by vegetation. A scraggly growth of chokeberries, buffalo berries, and other shrubs surrounds it. It was twelve to fifteen feet wide and fifteen to eighteen feet long. In his boyhood and youth, Mr. Deane had often heard from his people the story of the wretched man. He had seen the cave while it was still in nearly the same condition in which it had been abandoned. From his description and from the ruins I was able to visualize it as it must have been during the time of its occupation.

The story, as Mr. Deane had heard it from older members of his tribe, was that a certain Arikara warrior who had been wounded in battle had fallen unconscious and, while lying in a deep swoon, apparently dead, had been discovered by the enemy. On regaining consciousness in the night, he found, to his horror, that he had been scalped and hence could not return to his people for help. With great effort, he dragged himself away and reached the river, where he slaked his feverish thirst. Then he hid and remained in concealment until he felt his strength gradually returning. Thanks to a strong constitution, he fully recovered his health, whereupon he sought refuge in the Little Bad Lands on the north side of the Missouri River below the point where Elbowoods is now, the location of the Fort Berthold Indian Agency. In these desolate, craggy hills, he found the cave, which he fitted for his abode. From springs no great distance away, at the foot of the bluffs, he obtained water for drinking and cooking. The smoke from his fireplace was drawn away through a fissure concealed among the rocks and earth and overgrowth of shrubbery, so that there was slight risk of detection by chance passers-by. By having only a little fire, and that only at night or after twilight had fallen, he

lessened the chances that the smoke would betray his hiding place.

After the battle, surviving comrades who had noted the place where they had seen him stricken down and, as they supposed, slain, returned with some of his relatives to recover the body for burial. They could not find it, although they searched a large area. Sometime later, the dogs of the village frequently were heard barking at night, and in the morning strips of meat would be missing from the drying poles. The circumstances led the people to suspect that the victim of the battlefield had had the misfortune to become a *tsohonúǰu*, that the barking of the dogs had been caused by his coming into the village, and that it was he who had helped himself to the strips of meat. They thought that he must have found shelter somewhere in the rough, broken Little Bad Lands, which lay upstream not far away to the northwest, yet they never saw any trace of him. Many years later, while his story was still being told among the tribe, but after all or most of the people who had known him were dead, the cave was found abandoned, though the remains of the occupant were never discovered. The people think that death may have overtaken him in some unknown shelter.

While the *tsohonúǰu* was still alive the Arikara had their winter quarters in the shelter of the thick woods on the flood plain of the river, about a half mile to the southeast of the cave in the bluff. At intervals during the winter, his grandmother came to a place on a terrace at the edge of this region of rugged hills and ravines where she thought he might possibly have found shelter. Each time she brought parcels of food, moccasins, clothing, and other useful articles. She would sit and wail and cry, and call her grandson's name aloud, telling him that she had brought these gifts, hoping that he might be somewhere within sound of her voice and thus would know that she had placed comforts there for him. It could be noticed on the following days that the supplies were gone, so that the popular supposition that the young man was living and had a shelter somewhere in this wild region was strengthened.

Since the winter village was so near it is probable that in the solitude of his cave he saw and heard much of the activities of his people, though none of them had ever seen any trace of him or heard any sound from him. The pleasantly exciting winter sports went on near him, but he could have

no more part in them than a ghost. The water flowed from a copious spring a few hundred feet to the west of his cave and spread upon the flood plain of the river. There it froze and provided a large area of smooth ice. On moonlit evenings, the young people would come with their gliders made from buffalo ribs. No doubt, the *tsohonúhu* frequently heard their gleeful shouts and laughter. Finally someone would shout, "Come, it is time for us to go home. The *tsohonúhu* may be somewhere about!" These words, too, must have reached his ears as the merrymakers trooped past in mock alarm hurrying toward the village.

When the cave was first discovered, it was in the condition in which its occupant had left it. His fireplace was in the earthen floor. His bed was on an earthen bench against the back wall at the northwest corner. Some of his gear was stored in the northeast corner. A bin for provisions had been excavated in the clay at one side of the entrance. On the other side, a reservoir for water had been dug in the clay. It had been puddle with clay to make it impervious.

At the present time the cave lies open to the sky because of the collapse of the roof. There is no reminder of the tragic life, which was lived in this remote and wild place. Behind it rise the high gray buttes and bluffs, and groves and thickets of native fruits. Before it, in the flood plain of the Missouri River, stretches the green forest of cottonwood, elm, ash, and other trees. High in the blue sky above an eagle is frequently soaring.