

INDIAN FUNERAL SCENE.

BY M. D. CHATTERTON.

In 1851 there were but three dwelling houses, and they of logs, between Okemos and Lansing. Asa Proctor lived one-fourth mile west of the mouth of Pine Lake outlet, on the north side of the road; one-quarter of a mile further west, on the other side of the road, just east of the bridge across Cedar river, lived Horace Havens, the place where the writer commenced his residence in Ingham county; about half a mile further westward on the bank of the river nearly ten rods west of where the Botanical Laboratory now stands, was the log shanty of Robert Burcham. A building one story high, the roof of which consisted of split logs, hollowed out like troughs, and laid according to the English style of tiling houses. The road leading to the "Middle Town" of Lansing left the plank road at a point near where the frame house now stands in the east orchard of the college farm, and running nearly in a straight line to Burcham's house, and continuing as now located to town. The country on each side of the road from Okemos to Lansing was an unbroken wilderness, except, two or three acres cleared around each of the log houses.

Roving bands of Indians, with their ponies and camp equipage was no uncommon sight to the early pioneer of 1851. The central figure of Indian history of Ingham county, around which all others cluster, is the

noted chief, Okemos. He was not a chief by reason of hereditary descent, but it was conferred upon him by the Chippewa tribe on account of bravery and skill exhibited by him as a warrior in the battle of Sandusky in 1813. His prowess had long ceased to exist, and he was known to the pioneer of that day as a harmless beggar, supplicating his daily food from the hand of the early white settler. Almost any old resident of Ingham county, referring back of 1858, can relate some instance of the chief's visits to his house for food. His reputation of being a "good Indian," as well as a noted chief, made him a welcome visitor, although a gluttonous eater. It was not unusual to see him loosen his girdle to accommodate his enlarged condition by reason of the hospitality of some friendly pioneer. He did not possess a social nature; it was with difficulty he could be persuaded to relate incidents of his own experience—questions propounded to him were generally answered by a "Ugh."

I remember some time before the Agricultural College was located, while a small boy returning from the summer school at Okemos, I found the old chief stretched at full length on the floor of our log cabin, sleeping off the effect of an overloaded stomach. He was a short, thick set person, and from his general appearance, had been a leader, and any one might claim, with a great deal of propriety, that at that time he was an hundred years old. On the left side of his head, near the top, was an ugly looking scar, four or five inches long, showing what was claimed to be a saber cut received by him in battle at Sandusky.

The only conversation I have any distinct recollection of as falling from his lips, was his account of hunting deer and wild turkeys. The former, he said, were not as difficult to capture as the latter. The seeming hesitating disposition of the deer, when approached, was to stop and investigate the situation to see if it really was an Indian or not. He said the deer would seem to say, "Guess taint Ingin;" while the turkey was a different nature, he never stopped to reason or to investigate, but would seem to say, "Ingin be G—d." and was out of sight.

The old chief had three papooses, two boys and a girl, John and Jim, the girl's name I have forgotten, or never knew. In the summer of 1852, while some Indians were camped on the south bank, at the rapids in the bend of the river, about eighty rods east of where the college buildings now stand, the daughter of the chief died. Three or four hundred Indians immediately assembled to perform their funeral services over the dead child of their distinguished leader. They constructed a rude drum by cutting off the end of a hollow log and stretched a deerskin over it, upon which the Indians kept a constant thumping night and day while the body remained in camp, in order to attract the Spirit of the Great Father to this spot who would take charge of the departed one, and safely conduct it to the "happy hunting ground" of the good Indians' future home.

During the first night of this performance, in company with those much older, we visited the camp to witness the scene. A number of Indians, with their squaws, collected around a fire and performed a sort of dance, without any seeming regard to order, and gave vent to the most horrid groans, screeches and gesticulations imaginable; echoes of their wild, hideous cries and lamentations reverberated through the dense forest. The moving bodies before the light of the funeral pyre reflected ghost-like shadows in the inky darkness, which seemed like the cast of Danté in describing his Inferno. The old chief sat in his tent, silent, sad, mournful and alone, the pictorial embodiment of grief. This hideous ceremony lasted the entire night, and we remained for hours the unmolested spectators of this strange drama, and, as we were informed, until their natures were exhausted, and the morning daylight appeared. My father's house was only about eighty rods from the camp, and long after we returned, could be heard the thumps on the drum, the groans of the mourners, and see the light reflected on the trees surrounding the scene.

My father and the hired man, at the request of John and Jim Okemos, had prepared the day before a long, narrow, straight rough board box as a coffin; the next morning, in company with them, we went to the camp with this rude casket. Indians fast asleep were seen in all directions, lying in the leaves about the camp. Nothing had the appearance of intoxicating liquors having been used. The dead body was lying upon a bed of leaves, finely and gayly dressed in a short skirt, moccasins on its feet, its neck, wrists and ankles were decked with strings of beads; its glassy eyes wide open staring at us as we passed along. After the body was placed in this rough box, our hired man, Mr. Solomon Bruce, made an attempt to nail down the lid, but was stopped by an Indian who said, "She could no get out." So an Indian peeled some bark and tied the cover to its place, it was then put in a canoe made of elm bark, and in company with two other canoes proceeded down the river to Shim-ni-con, an Indian burial ground near Portland, Ionia county, while the large company of Indians took the more direct route to await the arrival of the body.

This strange event formed an impression upon my young mind that time will never erase.

December 5th, 1858, the old chief died near De Witt, Clinton county, and was buried by the side of his daughter.