

A POTLATCH.

BY MRS. JEROME MERCIER.



WHAT is a potlatch?

Well, in the first place, it has nothing to do with either a "pot" or a "latch." It is a word in use among the Red Indians of North America; or at least, this is the best representation of the word our English spelling can give, and it signifies a memorial gathering which takes place in the fall of the year,

to repay those who have shown kindness in helping to bury the dead. The Indians have their *etiquette* in such matters, and it is very strict. An Indian girl writes about it as follows:—*

"The potlatch is always one of our chief affairs. It is our way of paying for the burial of our dead. The Indians would not think it honouring the dead just to pay in money the people who help to bury their dead, just the same as they pay the people who build their house—that is a common way. But to pay for a funeral they have to save for years, and the workers are willing to wait for long time, years and years, to be paid in what we think the right way."

There is something dignified about this. The burial of the dead is too noble and sacred a service to be paid in the common way. So thinks the Indian, and we cannot deny that he is right.

The Yale Indians, as we have said, always hold the potlatch in the autumn, probably associating the fall of the leaf with the close of man's life, by one of those poetical intuitions which have so much power over their lives. It is accompanied by a dance, a ceremonial and solemn dance.

Last year a potlatch was given by Chief Sam in memory of the burial of his wife, and his brother's wife and child. Although Chief Sam is old and poor, and his potlatch was not a very grand one, yet a large number of persons assembled from North Bend and Spuzzum, Yale and the Lower Fraser.

Sam had his son Peter and his daughter Mary to help him, and the ceremony took place in the house of a certain blind old Indian named Tom, because it is a larger house than Sam's. In spite of his blindness, Tom recognised all his friends, and entertained them till supper with lively conversation. During this time, Chief Sam came in at intervals, making long speeches to his guests, thanking them for coming so far to comfort him, and bidding them welcome. Chief Sam's wife died nine years ago, but still this is her funeral feast, for which her husband has been preparing and saving all these nine long years.

Chief Sam is a Yale Indian, but many of his guests were Thompson Indians, who use another dialect, so that the words of welcome were hardly understood; but all knew "he meant something kind."

Let our Indian girl friend, Mali, tell her own tale in her simple and yet wonderfully good English. She has been taught in the English Sisters' School at Yale, B.C. (not Yale of the university), where a good education is given to white girls in one department, and to Indian girls in another. The Indian girls' fees are paid by Government, those of the white girls by their own friends. They are very moderate fees, and so great is the demand for such a school that efforts are now being made to build a new wing.

"When supper was over," says Mali, "the dance began. First some planks were put round the room in front of the people who were sitting on the ground, and then small sticks were given to them. There was no kind of music, but everyone just beat time to the dance, and everyone who could sing the dancer's song joined in it; but if anyone made a mistake in beating time, that offended the dancers."

"The first one who danced at this party was an old woman, and she began moving slowly, waving her arms about to the time of the beating sticks, and the singing and all was so mournful. Then it got a little louder and faster, and then louder and faster still, but all together in time, singing, beating and dancing. When the old woman got tired, someone else began, and so on till all had had their turn."

Every guest does not dance on these occasions, only those who know the proper ritual. Blind old Tom distinguished himself; but one man let his enthusiasm carry him away and danced till he could not stand. This is regarded as a lapse of decorum and somewhat of a blot on the festival.

The guests rested on the second day, but in the evening the dancing was resumed. And then began the distribution of gifts, which is at once the object and the climax of the gathering. The gifts are all blankets; some English, some of Indian manufacture. Chief Sam and his son piled their blankets in a heap in the middle of the room, and the real business of the potlatch began. All who had helped in the family burials received their gifts first, blind Tom, with much ceremony, making a speech, and then each blanket was lifted up, exhibited, and given. No guest went away empty-handed, and the festival gave much satisfaction, as there was no gambling, no "dancing until they fell ill" (*i.e.*, hysteria), and nothing went wrong.

Mali concludes by saying, "Potlatch is an old custom, and I do not think the Indians will ever give it up. It is a very solemn kind of meeting of the living in memory of the dead. If our real white friends would come, they would see for themselves, and the Indians would be so glad, and there would be a good chance to teach them more to be good Indians and Christians too, and not what they often feel, that to be Christians they must leave off being Indians and try to be like white people, giving up even what is harmless in their old customs."

Mali has got hold of the right idea here and no mistake.

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