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Pink Skin Strangers

By ELIZABETH WILLIS DEHUFF

MISS HOWPER suddenly put on the brakes. Before the car stopped, it almost bumped the Indian, who had intercepted her. Pah-ah-pi, in gala costume for fiesta, had stood his ground, waving a baton-like stick at the car that was about to run over him, determined to make him give way.

"You no can come here. Put car outside, over there!" In Indian fashion he pointed behind them with a quick upward jerk of his chin and a pursing and twisting of his lips.

Miss Howper opened her mouth to remonstrate. Then closed it without a word, for there was something final in the mien of Pah-ah-pi, as he stood firmly in his beaded moccasins, crowned with a circlet of scarlet silk about his shiny black hair. Below a lavishly beaded vest, hung the tails of a turquoise blue silk shirt and the deep fringe of yellow buckskin leggings, so tight that he looked as if he had been poured into them.

Having given his order, Pah-ah-pi stood there apparently no longer concerned with the coupé.

With difficulty in the narrow space, Miss Howper turned and drove back to the parking place behind the Mission. She stepped briskly out of the car with a thick ankle and mannish walking shoes. Heavy-set to fatness, she made all of her own clothes out of sombre, *sensible* materials. Her brown tweed, cut on simple, straight lines, lacked the well-pressed look of the tailor. Well-brushed bobbed hair, showing a touch of gray, surrounded her full face, in which, most conspicuous, were heavy brows over eyes that shone with self-assurance. She had been called "typically New England!"

She had come out to spend a few weeks in the Pueblo Indian country to get material for her dissertation upon "The Customs, Traditions, and Religious Beliefs of the Pueblo Indians." This subject she had chosen for her Ph.D. Afterwards she would publish it as an authoritative book upon these Indians.

She was fortunate in being here at the time of an Indian dance festival. Of course, she could have talked to someone who had seen these dances, but it was rather nice to see one for herself. It was opportune, too, to find the Indians all together in the village. She would be able to quiz them more conveniently, without a waste of time.

As she got out of the car, she grabbed her note book and hastened back toward the sudden sound of drum beats.

She was just in time to see it from the very beginning! That was fortunate! A half hour more and she would have missed the first of it! So glad she had not waited until afternoon to come!

The dance had been in progress intermittently since daylight, with a sacred, preliminary ceremony in the *kiva*, the underground chamber of secret ritual, the evening and night before. The drum beats were merely signalling a fresh relay of the dance. Miss Howper came breathlessly into the plaza whispering to herself "Just in time!"

It was the pageant of the coming of the White Man, an annual ceremony, since "my grandfather's grandfather he be one little boy," according to a venerable old Indian.

"What is the name of this dance?" Miss Howper addressed the first Indian man she passed. He stood, a bur-noose-wrapped figure, leaning in relaxed position against the nearest house wall.

"I don't know how you calls it," he answered; not looking at her and turning his shoulder more squarely away.

On one side of the plaza, two covered wagons were parked. Indians dressed in cast-off clothing of White men were roasting food and brewing coffee over a camp fire.

Miss Howper found the place in her note-book. "Imitative of White centennial celebrations in cities! Probably saw one in Albuquerque," she wrote, with a cluck of disgust.

Other performers, now gathering in a group, had their faces and hands blackened with grease and soot. Upon their heads were matted masses of hair for wigs, with similar bunches of unkempt beards. Their European clothing was in tatters. Among the rank and file of the early Spanish soldiery, who accompanied the *Conquistadores*, were many with Moorish blood. These had become fearfully sun-burned and battered from exposure on their long, hazardous trek from Mexico. The Indians saw them as black, disheveled men, caricatured through hatred.

"A sort of minstrel show!" wrote Miss Howper, as an added note.

These blackened men, having arranged themselves as a chorus before the stage-set of covered wagons, began to sing. It was a familiar tune, one that Frederick Logan once collected from these Indians and used.

"Why, that's *Pale Moon!*" Miss Howper looked horrified. "Must find out how they learned a Lieurance song, perhaps at Government boarding school. Thought these Indians genuine!"

Along the house fronts, the audience of Indian families were grouped, some sitting upon bent-wood chairs, others upon Indian blankets spread upon the ground, while still others stood leaning against walls or clustered upon the roofs; a riotous scene of audacious coloring contrasting with the sombreness of the costuming of the pageant.

"I have never seen such unconscious art as your people show. The colors in their costumes are ravishing and stimulating. They even group themselves with perfect balance and symmetry, naturally without plan!"

Miss Howper turned toward this pleasing voice. It was a young woman, who had previously attracted her attention at the hotel in Santa Fe. Slim and athletic in her movements, the young woman's expression was always serious. Her

face was not pretty, but radiant with intelligence and framed by brown hair carefully waved without being precise. She always wore sports clothes, well cut and inconspicuous in coloring. Miss Howper now noticed how the Indians were stopping to speak to her so cordially. She would speak to her, herself, as soon as there was an opportunity. At present she was watching the pageant with intent interest, mingled with a certain calm detachment. Miss Howper felt she could not intrude at the moment upon such absorption.

A young Indian husband, near Miss Howper, handed his young wife something in a paper and then hastened away.

"An occasion for courtship," she jotted. "Young men give presents, as with Whites."

On the lower recessed roof of a two-story house, a group of White people sat on automobile rugs, some swinging their legs over the top of the house wall. They were dressed in imitation of cowboys or pseudo-Indian. Evidently they were a class of some sort for an elderly gentleman sat among them giving instructions and explanations.

Here and there were other groups of White strangers; one cluster evidently tourists judging from their chic hats and fashionable suits. With them chatted incessantly a young woman in uniform, wearing a cerise velvet Navajo blouse as a background for a load of Navajo jewelry. All of these groups made false notes to the otherwise harmonious Indian symphony.

One White woman stood alone with three strange Indian Men, who called her by her first name. She wore moccasins, with a dress a loose cotton affair, and bobbed hair, circled by a cerise silk scarf.

"That woman has certainly gone Indian!"

Miss Howper noted everything. She scribbled notes in her book. Suddenly it was almost snatched from her hands. Jerking it back against her chest, she looked up into the stern eyes of Pah-ah-pi.

"No can draw pictures of dance. No let draw pictures!" he commanded.

"I'm not drawing pictures," explained Miss Howper, stiffening with indignation.

"No let write 'bout dance. Put book away!" He stood before her until she had closed the book and put a rubber band around it. Then he walked away, still looking back to see if she would use it again.

Miss Howper drew in her chin, stretched up her head and shoulders and looked him squarely in the eye. Pah-ah-pi did not change his expression nor his gaze at her until he had gotten some distance away. Then Miss Howper turned her attention back to the dancers, her face still flushed with anger.

As she cooled down, she decided there must be a meaning to the dance. She would find out. Three little girls stood near her, with gaily flowered Spanish woollen shawls over their heads, drawn closely around their slender faces. She moved beside them.

"Why do the men in the chorus have black faces?" she asked.

The three little girls drew closer together, nudging each other. One of them looked up at Miss Howper out of the corners of her eyes, but none of them spoke.

Miss Howper repeated her question more slowly. Perhaps they had difficulty in understanding English. The nearest one finally replied explosively, "We don't know!"

They moved away, glancing back to see that the "pink skin stranger" was not following.

Miss Howper turned to a woman busily re-arranging a tiny baby, held tightly in a turkey-red, flowered shawl upon the back of another small girl. Its little head was wobbling in sleep, as if its wrinkled, skinny neck would snap, while its little rump and straddling legs were sharply outlined by the tightness of the shawl.

"What is the meaning of this dance?" she asked the woman.

Without stopping in her task, the woman looked up at Miss Howper and answered: "We don't know. The womens, they don't know. The mens they know." She turned and with evident dismissal of the stranger, gave her attention to the dance.

"Yes," noted Miss Howper, "women are slaves. Just as I thought!"

Miss Howper looked about. Sitting alone upon a low adobe porch wall, with a baby in his arms, was a man who seemed to have an unusually intelligent face. Miss Howper approached him.

"Can you tell me the meaning of this dance?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "The Old Mens in the dance they knows. I can't tell you about this dance, but you come to my house when they stops for dinnertime. My name Okah. That my house." He pointed toward a door in the long irregular line of mud walls. "You come. I tell you somethings about Indian religions."

It was not long before the recess for food arrived. Other visitors went to automobiles to eat lunches, which they had brought along. Miss Howper had intended to return to her hotel for a late lunch. Now, she decided, she had better find something to eat. In the long front room of one of the houses, she discovered a store. In here she bought a can of Vienna sausages and a box of crackers. She wanted water, but the only water was in a great olla by the door, upon which floated a gourd dipper. Every Indian, who came in, drank a little from the dipper, throwing the remaining drops upon the clay floor, before dropping the dipper back into the olla. Miss Howper decided she would rather have a bottle of warm soda pop, even if it made her sick. She purchased it and hastened away to the home of Okah.

Here she found the other tourists awaiting her arrival. Immediately Okah began his little speech:

"You must not write down anythings I tell you. This very sacred things I goin' tell you. Very sacred to Indians.

They won't like it to have it printed down in books." Miss Howper's lips twitched in a smile. He would never know what was published. She did not know that in the old trunk beside her, so carefully covered with an Indian blanket, were four old magazines containing articles about the Pueblos, with a much-thumbed volume of Indian folktales. Nor did she know that by some mysterious channel everything printed about the Pueblo Indians finds its way into the pueblos.

"I do not tells this to peoples around here. They might tells it to Indians and Indians no like it. I tells it to you. You go far away and not tell Indians and not write it down in books." Collecting a quarter from each as they passed, Okah allowed the visitors to go up a few steps into a small dark room, which was undoubtedly very, very old. "This room," continued Okah, "it my grandfather's *kiva*." (Of course, the *kiva* is the Indian's church, a place for general ritual.) "It very old. My grandfather he was Cacique to the Winter peoples. That jar," he pointed to a jar partly filled with red Rio Grande water, in which the silt had not yet settled, "it have melted snow. The first snow that fall in the spring time, that snow in that jar. My grandfather he always make ceremony when first snow it fall. He get that snow to make much snows to come in winter to make ground wet for corns to grow when summertime it come back. One time he go in mountains. That first snow it come and it catch him up in mountains. He not here to fill this jar with that snow. No more snow fall all that year. Very bad dry year for Indians. Now I fill it every year just like my grandfather.

"That circle," he pointed to a line of whitewash drawn around a post in the center of the room, "that circle it mark wintertime from summertime. The sunshine it come down. It shine down on that circle." No one looked up to see that light from the small window would never touch the circle! "My grandfather he put little feathers to mark where it shine. That how he tell when planting time come for corns

to be planted. If he forget, then nobody they can't plant no corns that year. Nobody he can't step in that circle. If he step in that circle, he die that year." Okah looked in the opposite direction. Miss Howper stepped quickly within the circle while he was looking away. Such foolish superstitions! She would just prove it!

Finding his audience appreciative, Okah went on and on with his story for some time, drawing more and more upon his imagination, his flights based upon a smattering of truth to add plausibility. When he finally stopped, Miss Howper hurried out to write down what she had heard before she might forget some of the details. Okah's wife mumbled to him, "You tell some true things with all that rubbish you tell to those peoples. Old Mens they punish you!"

"Those peoples they don't know what true and what not true. They think it all true!"

It was not yet time for the dance to start again. Miss Howper remembered that she wanted to find out about the making of pottery. Having heard that a woman by the name of Anita was the best potter in the village, she inquired her way to the house of Anita. Several members of the group she had seen sitting upon the roof-top were going in just ahead of her.

"Hel-lo, Anita," exclaimed one of the young women in possessive tones. To herself she was the only White person who had really known Anita. It was she who had "discovered" Anita the month before. Anita smiled and nodded her head. She had been selling pots for many years.

"How *are* you, Anita," called another, in the familiar tones one might use to a child. "Where are all of those pots we saw you making the other day?"

"Did you finish the pot I wanted?" asked a third, as if she alone had ever ordered a pot.

An array of pots stood on a pine wood table covered with green oilcloth. The guests began to handle and examine them, making occasional friendly remarks to

Anita, as if each owned her as a special pet of some sort. Miss Howper went up to her and began asking questions.

"Did you make all of these pots yourself?"

"Yes," replied Anita.

"Did you make them on a wheel?"

"No, we just turns a saucer sometimes. We makes them with coils."

Just as I thought—turning a saucer. Miss Howper wrote: "a crude type of potter's wheel is used."

"Do you decorate them with paints?" continued Miss Howper.

"No, my husband he paints on them!"

"Decorated with ordinary black paints" scribbled Miss Howper. She went over to the table to examine a pot.

"Oh, isn't this a beauty!" cried one of the visitors. "It looks like a lovely old piece. Wasn't it the Etruscans who were such famous potters?"

As I thought, the methods are evidently a combination of those now used in Italy and those employed by the early Etruscans. Miss Howper made notes to that effect.

Suddenly one of the other visitors cried out, "The dance is beginning again!" Gently pushing each other in haste, the guests all rushed out, followed by Miss Howper. None were conscious of Anita's peering after them through the window with a smile of pity.

For the rest of the day the dance went on. In the late afternoon a ludicrously realistic impersonation of a bull appeared. As he dashed around the plaza, with long red tongue hanging out of his mouth or being drawn in and out, children ran screaming to bury their heads in mothers' laps. If it had not been for his having had only two human legs, Miss Howper felt sure that from a distance he could easily have been taken for a real bull. A bull fight was then performed until the weary bull was finally slain. "A touch of Spanish influence!" she noted. All of the dancers rushed forward to lay their hands upon the dying animal, that its spirit might enter their bodies to give them strength.

"What is the meaning of that?" thought Miss Howper. Then she heard someone nearby say, "They are certainly pressing the poor bull into the ground."

"That's it," decided Miss Howper. "They worship the Earth. Just like the Parsees. The two must be related ethnologically! I shall state that. The Indians are really pressing the spirit of the bull back into the Earth. Up from the Earth, back into the Earth!" And she jotted it down, secretly, in her notebook.

At length the animals returned into one of the houses. Gathering up chairs, blankets, babies, and all other possessions, the Indian women hurried into their homes. They must get ready for the real, religious part of the ceremony. The chorus began to disperse slowly.

Thinking the ceremony was over, the White visitors went to their automobiles. Soon there was a growling of starters, the chugging of motors, and scraping of shifting gears as they set off, each with his own individual conception of what he had seen; a conception based upon observation fitted into the pattern of his preconception of what it was all about, mingled with bits of information and misinformation he may have gleaned through the day.

When all was quiet again, the horsemen pranced out into the plaza and stood side by side.

From one of the houses an elderly Indian woman came with a flat basket piled with food. On top were small crusty loaves of bread with squash blossoms fashioned from the dough. This she held to the mouths of the horses, whose riders pretended that they ate. At length she sprinkled corn meal, mixed with pollens, over the horses' heads and handed the food to the riders. Once more they all went away.

Here and there women appeared at their doors, sprinkling a line of meal across the door-sill.

Separately the horses and bull, with accompanying dancers, entered the houses whose doors were marked with meal, where they were fed upon the best food the house

could afford and where they blessed the family with a simple ceremony, finally sending their wishes for all that is good to the four world corners.

Meanwhile Miss Howper sat in her hotel room, busily enlarging upon her notes. She had been fortunate. She had seen the whole thing from beginning to end: nothing but the crudest imitative pageantry and a religion of superstitions, but it would make a wonderful, authentic dissertation for her Ph.D.

She leaned back to stretch her tired shoulders and to relax. Her glance fell upon a letter she had intended to mail. It must get out on that early morning air mail. She had better go down and post it at once, for it was then midnight.

As she approached the mail box in the lobby of La Fonda, the young woman, whom she had wanted to speak to at the dance, came in, looking very tired. Miss Howper spoke to her:

"Are you just getting back from the Indian dance?"

"Yes," replied the pleasant voice that Miss Howper remembered noting. "I always stay to the end. I went down last evening for the beginning and stayed tonight until after the blessing ceremonies, but I could not remain for the all night feast, for I am going away in the morning and I have yet to pack. Good-night!" She smiled and walked over to speak with the clerk.

Miss Howper's mouth had dropped open. "A blessing ceremony!" she exclaimed in surprised whisper. She stood a moment looking at the young woman. She would like to ask her some questions, but the young woman walked away briskly in another direction.

"Oh, well," muttered Miss Howper, "I can just add at the end that there was a blessing ceremony. I need not say what sort."

There was a slight droop to her shoulders as she walked back toward her room.