

Dance Mad



IT SOMETIMES happens when many people are gathered together for dancing and singing and feasting that one or another of those who are dancing does not stop when the others stop, does not eat or sleep or rest, but goes on dancing and dancing. He goes dance mad.

Once long ago a whole people went dance mad, dancing while the moons and seasons came and went, dancing all around the world.

It began one day of spring after the heavy winds had quieted and the bare ground was green with young clover, in a village on Swift Creek, midway between the top edge of the world where the three principal rivers are small streams and the lower edge of the world where these rivers, wide and deep, flow together to make the Nom-ti-pom—that is, the Sacramento River—and empty

into the sea. This village, like the sea and the rivers, was old, its people unchanged in their ways since the world was made.

The occasion was a feast celebrating the initiation into full womanhood of Nomtaimet, the daughter of one of the village families. Nomtaimet's father and mother had neglected nothing of the customary observances and training belonging to this period in a girl's life. They knew that it is an important and indeed a dangerous time for her, and for others, too, if she does not learn to keep its prohibitions, to follow its complex ritual, and to behave with decorum.

Nomtaimet's mother built for her daughter a little house. Here, separated from the family but close by, she lived alone during the moons of her initiation. She fasted and kept to herself, seeing only her mother and her mother's mother, who brought her food, bathed her, combed her hair, and cared for her, for she was not allowed, by old custom, to touch herself. She left the little house only after dark, and then briefly, keeping her head covered and her face screened from sight all the time she was outside. She spent the long days and nights inside and alone, doing only those tasks appropriate to her state, learning from her mother and her grandmother the role and behavior of a good woman and wife.

She learned that on the day and the night before her husband should go to hunt or fight or gamble, she must help him to avoid her and by no means tempt him to sleep with her, for this would spoil his luck. She learned that

she must again help him to avoid her during all of her moon periods until she was an old woman unable to bear him children, that she must live in her own separate house during these times, apart from her husband. There were further rules of continence and food prohibitions which she must faithfully follow each time she should be with child. Each rule and prohibition came embedded in ritual, song, and story, and these, too, she learned.

When the long moons of learning and fasting and praying came to an end, her mother and her grandmother were more than satisfied with her behavior and her knowledge. They and her father, and her mother's and her father's brothers and sisters, made a feast in her honor, sending runners to invite the people from villages all up and down Swift Creek to come to feast and dance and sing with them.

Her young friends, boys and girls, had sung to her often in the evening outside her little house to let her know she was not forgotten, but she never broke the rule—she neither looked out nor showed herself nor answered them. They were as happy to have her back as she was to be there, and now the young married women came up and talked to her as if she was already a grown woman and one of their group.

Nomtaimet emerged from her long seclusion pale, much changed, and very beautiful. The old as well as the young exclaimed at her beauty, while the old recalled that a girl is never so beautiful as at this time when she is newly returned to the world from her long initiation. She was care-

fully dressed for her great day. Her new buckskin skirt was elaborately ornamented with shells and beads. In her ears were enormous polished shell earrings and about her neck many strings of beads which half covered her breasts. Her hair, washed and shining, hung in two thick braids tied with mink. She carried rattles made from deer's hooves and a slender willow staff given her by the young married women to symbolize her coming of age.

The women who were not taken up with cooking or caring for children gathered around Nomtaimet, admiring her. First one man and then another joined them until someone said, "We should dance—we are enough to make a circle dance." Holding hands and singing, they formed a moving circle around Nomtaimet, dancing the old circle dance which had been the coming of age dance for girls since the beginning of time.

Hearing the singing and the familiar rhythm of the shuffling side step of the dance, the old men and women came from their fires and their houses, and the children who were big enough to dance came with them, all of them joining the moving circle which grew bigger and bigger. The only ones not dancing were the women who were pounding acorns or stirring the food which was being cooked in large baskets in preparation for the feast. One by one even they put down their pestles and their stirring paddles and became part of the circle. They circled and sang until above the stamp of their dancing feet came the echo of distant voices and the silken sound of arrows flying swiftly overhead. The dancing stopped while the people from the neighboring villages appeared from

behind the hills, running, shouting, and singing, the young men among them releasing arrows to whirl, level, over the heads of the dancers.

In this way the guests came to the village, and there were greetings and talking and laughing until Nomtaimet's father invited them all to eat.

It was a great feast. For ten days and ten nights they ate and sang and danced. At last the feasting was over. The tenth night of singing and dancing came and went. But the pale dawn of the eleventh day found all those people still dancing. They kept right on dancing, all of them. They went dance mad.

In a long line, singing as they went, they danced up the trail leading out of the village to the east. Soon the last house was left behind and they were dancing among the hills they knew, the hills of home, up and over them until they could no longer see their houses. Through briars and chaparral, over rocks and rough ground, up and down hill, they danced on and on.

It is possible to retrace much of their dancing journey around the world, for it is known that they came to the Trinity River, the first of the great rivers, and that they forded this river as they forded all streams—by dancing straight across them. On the far side of the Trinity there is a flat, open and bare today as it was then, where the dancers again formed in a circle and danced the round dance. In a line once more, they danced on east through a gap in the hills to the Hayfork and across it and up the steep ridge beyond. At the top of the ridge they found a spring, Paukaukunmen. Here they stopped to rest and

drink from the spring. You can still see the large basins in the rocks where they sat. This was their first resting place.

From Paukaukunmen, they danced down the other side of the ridge. They might have become faint from hunger, except that they learned to gather berries and to catch small animals without breaking the rhythm of their dance, crossing ridge after ridge, fording small streams, and so finding themselves at last on the banks of Middle River, the McCloud. Here they made their second resting place.

By this time their moccasins were cut to pieces and nothing much but belts and a few maple bark and buckskin shreds of aprons remained of their clothes. They did not try to replace their worn-out clothing; instead they filled their pouches with clays and dyes for face and body paint, and for the rest of their dancing trip they wore no clothes at all, keeping their faces and bodies freshly painted.

The dancers were far, far from home now, farther than any of them had ever been, in country they knew only from the tales told them by the old ones. The old ones themselves knew only so much as was learned from an occasional meeting with strangers who had, rarely and at some earlier time, wandered west as far as Swift Creek—strangers who spoke in the same tongue and observed the same way of life, but who nonetheless lived far from the center of the world and close to the borderland of peoples of other ways and tongues. The dancers found the Middle River Country much as they had been told it was, that is to say, a rich country of many people and many deer, of

bushes loaded with hazelnuts and berries of many sorts. There was an abundance for all, and they hunted and gathered and ate there by the river, growing fat and sleek while they made friends with the people of the Middle River. One of the things they learned from their new friends was to catch and cook salmon—something which, strange as it seems now, they had not known about.

With this fresh salmon diet they felt new strength and new power, and they set off dancing again. They were no longer interested in hunting and gathering; they wished only to dance and dance, and then to fish and cook and eat more salmon. So now they danced close beside one stream or another, wherever the salmon were best, learning the names of the many different kinds of salmon, their size and appearance and their favorite rivers. Dancing and fishing, they went farther and farther downstream as the season drew on and the salmon swam shorter distances upstream to spawn.

Having left home in the time of winds and new clover, they had by now passed the warm moons dancing and spearing salmon. As the leaves began to dry and fall from the trees, the dancers were on the banks of the third great river, the Pitt; and dancing far, far to the south, they came where the rivers join for their trip to the sea. They were in country different from any they knew even by report from the old ones, a country whose people spoke in a tongue they did not understand. The land on both sides of the lower Sacramento River stretches as far as eye can see, marshy, swampy, full of water birds. They danced

THE INLAND WHALE

through the marshes and swamps and among the water birds until there came to them the smell of salt on the air. Leaving the marshes behind, they danced down the Sacramento where it broadens at its mouth. And they stood and watched it empty into the sea.

Wearied at last of watching, they danced again, this time on the lower rim of the earth where the river meets the sea. Keeping to the rim, they turned their backs to the river, dancing away from the Nom-ti-pom toward the north. The time of the dead leaves was past. The fog moon came and went, and it was already the time of the mud moon and of frosts. They saw all about them storms and rain and floods, but there on the lower rim of the earth there were no storms, and they continued to dance along its sometimes rocky, sometimes sandy shore.

The season of storms and cold, like the other seasons, came and went, blown away by the big winds of the awakening earth. And now the dancers turned inland, away from the sea, dancing and half blown towards home. They reached Swift Creek as the new clover was making a green mat over the earth, just as it had done when Nom-taimet first came out of her seclusion at the beginning of the dance journey.

The dancers were home, and the dance madness was no longer on them. It had lasted through all the moons and seasons and had carried them all around the world. As long as she lived, Nomtaimet told her children, as her children's children tell even today, of the feast her father made for her, and of the dance madness that came after it.

Love Charm

baby alone for long would come to anything but a bad end, of course. But, there is no need for the end to be too brutal to Tolowim-Woman. It is sufficient that her heart should go away.

4. DANCE MAD

"DANCE Mad," light, tripping, its periods marked by the beat of dancing feet, carries a mood rare in the literature of California, and, I should hazard, in most oral literatures.

The recited tale of the "high and far-off times" lends itself to the dignified discursive rhythm of prose epic style and of history, building slowly, architectonically, block of leisurely episode on block of careful detail. If the teller of the tale is thoughtful and of good memory, the cement which holds his blocks together will be that of cultural explication; if he is also an artist in his craft, he will probably indicate as well the cosmological significance of the whole.

And when the tales are not in the grand manner, they will be of another *genre* altogether, most usually that of the trickster. Trickster themes are true "folk" themes. They may explain the blackness of the crow, or why the skunk is striped, or any one of hundreds of other phenomena, natural and supernatural. Something always happens in these stories. Action is intrinsic to their pattern, while motivation need not be appropriate or adequate or consistent; the goodness and the badness of Coyote, or whoever the trickster is, vary from story to story, from mood to mood. These are stories generously salted with the sadistic humor of outwitting and humiliating, and

with scatological and erotic humor. The trickster stories are ubiquitous—almost anyone can oblige with a new tale or two.

But there are also stories which are not epic or trickster, whose movement and direction differ from both. These are the odd and probably unique tales that find their way sporadically and unpredictably into literature; these are the stories the ethnologist or folklorist could not have expected to be told, and he could have no formula by which to ask for them. The best storyteller, or let us say the one with the greatest pride and sense of responsibility, will wish, as will the ethnologist, to record first the ancestral myth of a people whose culture is shrinking and giving ground to other ways and other myths. But—this done—if there is time left, and leisure, he may recall a story he has always liked for itself. "Umai," "Butterfly Man," "The Inland Whale," "Dance Mad," "Love Charm," and "About-the-House Girl," of this collection, are such stories. Otherwise unlike, they share the quality of singleness and uniqueness; they are not in any of the travelling, diffusing motif-complexes; they belong to one people only. They are differently organized from other stories, suggesting that they have not "grown," but are rather the creation of a single imagination, close enough to the aesthetic of their culture to have "taken on" and become incorporated into the variety of remembered oral materials, with implicit recognition of their finishedness. One cannot of course say this must have been how it was with them: there is no carbon fourteen proof and no statistical demonstration. They do stand apart *vis à vis* the mythic and diffused and changing tales as singular, as works of art.

"Dance Mad" is a pastoral of the seasons, born of soft air, warm sun, and new green clover, and celebrating the spring-

time of the earth and of girl-become-woman. Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring" grows out of a primitive, earth-renewing myth of blood sacrifice from the Russian steppes. "Dance Mad" grows out of the Wintu configuration of ritual and psychological and real-life significance centered on a girl's coming of age. This is the crucial experience of a Wintu woman's life. How her family prepare her and themselves for it and how she responds to it will reflect pretty much her adult life experience: her behavior before marriage, particularly toward suitors and possibly lovers; how well and whom she will marry; what sort of wife and mother and grandmother and old woman she will be.

In the story, the fantasy of the dance around the world is an imaginative projection of the actual Wintu feast and dance celebration of the coming of age of a well-born daughter whose family rounds off her completed ritual preparation for womanhood with a general invitation to friends to feast and dance in her honor.

Such a feast and dance could not have been held for Tesilya because her people, the Mohave, attach far less ritual importance, far less *tabu* to a girl's age and maturation, and put less stress than do the Wintu and many others on the unwilling power with which a woman's menses endow her. Where this belief has a strong hold a woman, so long as blood is upon her, may merely by her defiling presence undo a cure a doctor is effecting, or spoil the luck of her husband, or perhaps of a whole village, in war or hunting or gambling.

On the other hand, she has her day of glory as the Mohave woman does not. As "Dance Mad" relates, Nomtaimet, her initiation over, emerges to be made much of. Her beauty is remarked upon; the young matrons treat her graciously; her

father gives a feast and dance for her; eligible young men of her village and other villages are aware of her as never before.

But the belief that a woman is dangerous for the period of her menses, until she is no longer able to bear children, takes from her the full human choice to be or not to be good or evil, and to the extent of the limitation on her the belief is surely primitive. It is—at least in California—among peoples backward and underdeveloped as compared with their peers that the fears and *tabus* attaching to the menses become full blown, and include even the Medusa-like covering of the head and face to stay the power for disaster contained in a single glance.

One might expect tensions and release from tensions arising from the restrictive and demanding code to show up in the literature. All there is, however, is an occasional story of the evil resulting from failure to abide by the pattern. Some versions of the "Cannibal Head" story contain this moral, as do some of the versions of "Loon Woman." But both stories ranged over other territory and amongst peoples of greater sophistication than the Wintu, who were by and large more recipient than originating, and had not yet the articulateness nor the story style to take a strong tension in a woman and make of it a full story. That approach might well have had to wait for the beginnings of doubt toward the desirability of the restrictive belief itself. An extremely talented Wintu could—and did—elaborate the creation myth, carrying farther its philosophical implications and its organization. He could not have conceived "The Inland Whale," his culture lacking the self-awareness requisite to envisaging such a story situation.

What the Wintu story style could and did do to admiration was to elucidate and elaborate the bright side of the rite: its

resolution of tension. "Dance Mad" is the only story of my nine which has a single and unshadowed mood of gaiety from beginning to end, and gaiety is an exceedingly rare quality in oral literature. The Wintu style of recitation was perfectly suited to such a mood.

"Loknorharas," the source story for "Dance Mad," was not recorded in text, and to give something of the peculiar story style of the Wintu, I will quote from two other stories in the same volume which were taken in text and then translated by Dr. Dorothy Demetracopoulou. "Yiyehunenes' Big Time" begins: "Right there at Redding lived some people. They were going to call a dance. Those that lived there came together right there in the evening. They came together and conferred. They conferred five nights, they conferred five days. They conferred five more nights, they conferred five more days. . . . So they invited, they invited all the world; they invited to a dance, they invited to gambling, they invited to a foot race, they invited to a jumping race, they invited to a round dance, they invited to a beauty contest, they invited all the people. So all who had been invited arrived, kept arriving all night long, arrived all day long, the people who had been invited."

And one of the Wintu accounts of "Loon Woman" begins: "Many people came into being. There was a couple who had many children, nine boys, one girl, ten children. . . . They lived there, and lived there, and lived there, and soon some of their children walked around, some played. The girl lived there, grew up into a woman, and then one morning she went down to the stream, she went to the place where they got water, she sat down, that woman." A dance trip around the world and through the seasons is subject matter appropriate to this staccato, repetitive rhythm, to a style at once so like bal-

lad and ballet. As with lyric poetry, the style is untranslatable in the sense that it becomes quickly monotonous to our ears.

"Dance Mad" is a story born of a gentle people. In stories or actual accounts from other peoples, when dancing takes over after feasting and sociability and excitement, the disruption of the monotonous routine of life, the breaking through puritanical behavior barriers, lead to orgiastic expression—sometimes in real life, more often perhaps in a story account which becomes imagined orgy, or wish fulfillment.

But the dancers in "Dance Mad" break routine drastically without ever departing from the first gentleness of mood. Clothes are shed, but bodies are painted. A sort of choral formality is never lost. The circling of the earth is accomplished as a chorus might dance around the perimeter of a dance plaza or stage, with stops at set intervals for a special dance, for ritual resting, hunting and fishing. The supposed route can be followed on a map of the area traversed in the dance, but it is nonetheless an abstraction of geography. The three rivers do of course come together; the Sacramento River does empty into the ocean. But the order of the dancing is rather that of choreography than geography, the hills, the rivers, and the ocean shore belonging more to fantasy than to topography.

5. LOVE CHARM

"THE Love Charm" is a spell said by a Yana girl to bring her beloved to her and to keep him faithful.

The Yana were neighbors of the Wintu and the Maidu in