

Medicine Songs

Mary Austin

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Transcribed from the Indian Originals

IT IS the peculiarity of American Indian poetry that its full meaning is never expressed in the words it utters. These are, in fact, only a sort of shorthand note to what the Indians themselves call the "Inside Song." This "Inside Song" may be a long story, actual or mythical, a dramatic episode, or the progressive emotional phases going on in the mind of the poet any one of these giving rise to the music, dance, and phrase that inseparable constitute the Indian song. An experience involving the greater part of a man's life may thus be sung in a single sentence. Since this is the case, it is impossible that these should be adequately transcribed except by one familiar with the Indians' paths of thought, incidents of daily life, and figures of speech, and by one possessing some knowledge of the cadences natural to the expression of aboriginal emotion.

As far as my acquaintance with these things goes, I have attempted to render the "Inside Song" of some Indian poems that seem to afford common ground with sophisticated understanding.

M.A.

THE HEART'S FRIEND

FAIR is the white star of twilight,
and the sky clearer
At the day's end;
But she is fairer, and she is dearer.
She, my heart's friend!

Far stars and fair in the skies bending,
Low stars of hearth fires and wood smoke ascending,
The meadow-lark's nested,
The night hawk is winging;
Home through the star-shine the hunter comes singing.

Fair is the white star of twilight,

Medicine Songs

And the moon roving
To the sky's end;
But she is fairer, better worth loving,
She, my heart's friend.

Shoshone Love Song.

A SONG IN TIME OF DEPRESSION

NOW all my singing Dreams are gone,
But none knows where they have fled
Nor by what trails they have left me.

Return, O Dreams of my heart,
And sing in the Summer twilight,
By the creek and the almond thicket
And the field that is bordered with lupins!

Now is my refuge to seek
In the hollow of friendly shoulders,
Since the singing is stopped in my pulse
And the earth and the sky refuse me;
Now must I hold by the eyes of a friend
When the high white stars are unfriendly.

Over-sweet is the refuge for trusting;
Return and sing, O my Dreams,
In the dewy and palpitant pastures,
Till the love of living awakes
And the strength of the hills to uphold me.

From the Paiute.