

The
Sacred Council Hills

A Folk-Lore Drama

By Mary Alicia Owen

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*Dedicated to all Children born in
The Sacred Council Hills now
known as St. Joseph, Missouri*

The Sacred Council Hills

I.

SCENE. *A verdant glade, with wooded hills in the background. Indians advancing, single file: first, the warriors, led by the war-chief or general, in all the bravery of holiday or hunting gear, eagle feathers nodding, buckskin fringes waving, elk-ivory and wampum clicking like castanets, their round, painted shields on their arms, their embroidered quivers at their backs. Next, the hereditary chief and the old men, the councillors, dignified, severe, without ornament except the red-tipped eagle feathers surmounting their scalp-locks. Then, the ruck of common men and the boys not old enough to be accounted men, nor young enough to appear with the women. After these, the busy matrons, encumbered with babies, dogs, packs of clothing, folded tents, all the impedimenta that constitutes forest house-keeping. Then, the gay, frolicsome, bedizened, painted young girls. Lastly, the old women, some, fiercely playing the part of duennas to the girls in front of them, others tenderly caring for the sick they drew on their rude sledges or travaux.*

CHORUS.

We come! We come! Oh, safe and happy people!
Back to the Sacred Ground, in safety, we have come!
Famine and distresses, lurking foes, the ambush,
All, all are past and gone, sound the sacred drum!
The drum, the sacred drum!
Let it speak to Manitou
For chief, for child,
For fierce, for mild,
For highest, lowest,
Speak to Manitou.

We come! We come! A safe and happy people.
Long was the way for us, broken was the trail.
Like wolves were we for hunger, crawling ants for
slowness

For young, for old,
For timid, bold,
For wisest, weakest,
Speak to Manitou.

NANA-BY-YEH. My children, we have given Manitou the praises of our lips, the emotions of our hearts, it now behooves us to add to these the incense of the sacred tobacco smoked at the council-fire, and the savor of the food he is graciously pleased to allow us to prepare for ourselves. This will be done when the hunters, whose duty it is to provide the meat, even as it is the women's duty to provide the bread for the families, have gone forth and procured game—the turkey and prairie hen, the fat buck, the tender and unctious buffalo hump and the tongue, or the bear with flesh sweetened at this season by feasts of honey, tender young leaves and the sap of the sugar tree.

CAHAQUAS. It is my right to lead in this.

SONG.

CAHAQUAS.

To the hunt! To the hunt!
How soon will fade the day.
'Tis our duty calling,
We must, swift, away.

CHORUS.

Gliding o'er the prairie,
Stealing through the wood,
Lurking, hasting,
As we should,
A finger on the bowstring,
An arrow poised to fly,
More silent than the south wind
That passes with a sigh,
We are the hunters
Going to seek our prey,
Like a dream, we steal upon it
When we go out to slay.

TALINKA (*confused*)

I wish not to be seen.
I think I will not go.
I know not what you mean.
The sun has sunk too low.

CHASKALA.

She knows not what I mean!

ALL. (*mockingly*)

She knows not what we mean.

CHASKALA.

The sun has sunk so low,
She could not catch a gleam,
And that would grieve her so.

ALL.

And that would grieve her so.

TALINKA.

Nay, tease not, dearest maid,
Indeed, I am afraid.

CHASKALA.

Indeed, she is afraid!

TALINKA.

I fear the shining shell,
I really cannot tell
If this be love or woe
That thrills my bosom so.
Of both, I am afraid.

CHASKALA.

She really cannot tell
If this be love or woe
That thrills her bosom so!

ALL.

Of both, she is afraid.

CHASKALA.

Talinka, bashful maid,
She will not courted be.

ALL. Or me!

SECOND OLD WOMAN. I was a beauty, myself.

ALL. So was I!

OLDEST WOMAN.

I was once a beauty, myself,
And warriors fought for my smile,
I was modest, and shy as a fawn.
But I had an air to beguile.

Now, I'm old, and my warrior is dead,
My children are gone, every one,
I'm a slave to the camp and the field,
Wherever there's work to be done.

I must beat, beat, beat on the corn,
Beat, beat all the tent-poles in place,
For the dressing of leather,
I must beat in all weather,
For luck has beaten me in the race.

CHORUS.

We must beat, beat, beat on the corn,
Beat, beat until night, from the morn,
Beat, beat till the tents are in place,
Beat, beat without comfort or grace.
In the dressing of leather,
We must beat all together,
For luck has beaten us in the race.

OLDEST WOMAN. That's it! All women are bound to
come to it.

SECOND OLD WOMAN. Unless Gitchee Manitou has
pity, and sends them over the Long Ghost Road, early. It
is good for women to die young, and so have perpetual
youth in paradise. Now we will forever be old.

THIRD OLD WOMAN. If I thought that, I'd kill myself so
that my soul would explode, and I'd have no hereafter.

OLDEST WOMAN. I'll never do that, I'll sit and fish, if
I renew not my youth.

II.

SCENE. *The same as in I. with the addition of wigwams faintly visible. Time: the approach of the dawn. CAHAQUAS has been serenading TALINKA with his courting flute.*

CAHAQUAS. There was no sound within. My heart mis-gives me. Could it be that when the girls were running yesterday, with faces hidden, it was that mischevious Chaskala looked back, and not Talinka? They are alike in stature and dress. I will not believe it! But what can I believe. Her mother says she is not ill-affected toward me, yet so cold and shy is she I cannot win a glance—unless—oh, surely it was not Chaskala! Come, my flute, once more,—nay, nay, already the morning star, the day-bringer, appears, and the Watchers—watching-for-the-dawn have given the first faint tap of the drum. Till Manitou's boat has made another circuit of the sky, I must stifle my passionate impatience. And yet, perhaps there is an intercessor. Oh, Morning Star, the lover's star, ere I go, I invoke thy aid!

Oh lovely star of the morn,
All night, my vigil I make,
And my sighs in my flute I breathe,
Thus sweetly my maid to awake.
But never a sound I hear
From within the fast-closed door,
A warrior shorn of his pride,
Humbly, in vain, I implore.
Help me, oh lover's friend,
Help me the maid to awake,
Dazzle her eyes, so she'll waken and know
How I mourn through the night for her sake.

Oh lovely star of the morn,
Look on my maid where she lies,
Past the poles of her tent send a ray

COUNCILLORS. Say not so, Nana-by-yeh. No other eye noted such ill fortune.

NANA-BY-YEH. The light has been dimmed.

COUNCILLOR. In thine eye. The eye of age furnishes its own shadows.

NANA-BY-YEH. Gladly would I accept the portent as mine own infirmity. Alas! Manitou has given me the seeing mind as well as the seeing eye.

COUNCILLOR. To see clouds.

NANA-BY-YEH. Aye, and the clouds of my prophetic vision are blacker than the clouds that spew hail upon our harvests.

COUNCILLOR. We had hoped that the prophetic visions would brighten in this halting-place on the Road to Paradise. Has not the year been peaceful and prosperous? Saw one ever such fruits and corn?

NANA-BY-YEH. I would that I could not see them—in Manitou's fallow land. Woe! Woe, to the women who harried the sacred ground. Woe to us all for we have tolerated the profanation of the Council Hills, we have made our own the neutral ground set apart for the refuge, the resting-place, the consulting-place of the nations. Never again shall the council-fires of a hundred camps blaze upon the hills! Never again can this be holy ground!

COUNCILLOR. We have not wronged the nations. They come not, because the palefaces are on all the trails. Not one is open. And, Nana-by-yeh, remember! You forbade not the planting.

NANA-BY-YEH. I knew naught of it. I was making my nine days fast in a lonely hollow of the hills, and waiting for the enlightning dreams. When none came to me, but only a horror of blackness and a formless dread, I fasted and prayed again, and then a third time, so that a whole moon went by ere I dragged myself back to the encampment. *Then* I knew. Blame that froward woman-with-spots-on-her-face, Shomenobo, she of the twelve sons, and the twelve spots of sacred red paint on her face because of

MOHOSCA. He may have spoken. The ice broke up suddenly while we were on the hilltops saluting the day, and there was no one to listen.

NANA-BY-YEH. Kah-mee dared not speak, when his message would be of the sun and moon in contention. Never, nevermore, shall a prophecy come from the River. The days of the prophecies are fulfilled.

Nevermore shall the Fish-God speak from the river,
Nevermore, nevermore!

'Tis the winds repeat, when the willows quiver,
"Nevermore, nevermore!"

Not the sighing prophet-voice
Bidding our hearts rejoice,
Or breathing solemn warning
That we, heaven's law scorning,
Shall hear,
Shall fear
Nevermore, nevermore!

Nevermore, as soft as the winds of even,
Nevermore, nevermore!
Shall Kah-mee's prophecies be given.
Nevermore, nevermore!
He is fled! He is gone!
Blind, deaf, we'll live on,
Forgetting the old daring,
Driven forth despairing,
We shall hear,
Shall hope,
Nevermore, nevermore!

(Exit NANA-BY-YEH).

MOHOSCA (*anxiously*). Think you the old man has dreamed the dream, or has too long a fast fevered him? After a year of cheer and thankfulness, this dolor is a grief and perplexity to us.

OLDEST COUNCILLOR. It must be that some small disease demon has slipped into his mind while he slept. He was ever careless about keeping his face covered. Well do I mind that after he made the mighty medicine dance to rid

TALINKA and CKASKALA.

Come to the feast of the corn
Brought down, long ago, from the moon.
Our mothers rose up ere the morn
To prepare us this mid-summer boon.

CHORUS.

Come all to the feast of the corn,
Come, come! Come, come!
Let no one, this day, be forlorn.
Come, come! Come, come!
Come chief and the lowest,
Come, come! Come, come!
The swiftest and slowest,
Come, come! Come, come!
Gay with bead, paint and feather,
Come, come, all together,
Come, come! Come, come!
Come beldam and maid,
And be not afraid,
But come, surely come.

TALINKA and CHASKALA.

Come to the feast of the corn,
Never was harvest like this,
Manitou blesses the morn,
Deigns us a foretaste of bliss.

CHORUS.

Come all to the feast of the corn, *etc.*

CHASKALA. When you sang of bliss, Talinka, thought
you of poor Cahaquas, or of the paleface with blue gar-
ments and buttons of gold with eagles carved on them?

TALINKA (*with dignity*). I was not thinking of young men.
I was thinking of Manitou and our mothers.

CHASKALA (*giggling*). Of Manitou and our mothers.

TALINKA. Of Manitou's beneficence, and of our mothers' good-
ness in preparing the feast he gave. We came here, poor
refugees, driven westward from the Mississippi, in the Moon
of strawberries, thinking only to tarry until the Moon of

MAIDS. Yes, at Talinka's wigwam.

CHASKALA. But his flute would have sounded like a medicine-man's whistle to call ghosts if he had seen what *I* saw the day before yesterday.

TALINKA. Chaskala!

(*CAHAQUAS takes a step forward.*)

CHASKALA. I will not be silenced. I have something worth telling.

MAIDS. Then tell it.

CHASKALA. So will I. You all do know the cold and coy Talinka, and how, when the hunters and trappers led by the paleface Chief Robidoux came among us and asked the maids themselves to marry them, and then spoke to the *fathers* instead of the mothers, and *then* took their wives without any moons of fluting, she disdained the hunters and trappers, and held to the old way of having no speech with a young man.

MAIDS. Yes! Yes! We know.

CHASKALA. Then came in the men of blue garments and gold buttons, who had drums and flutes like ours, and yet unlike them, and who pleased our elders by saying they had come to prevent the palefaces from crowding upon us.

MAIDS. Yes! Yes! We know, but what has this to do with Talinka?

CHASKALA. She liked them not, she said, nor their bold way with the maidens; they were worse than the hunters and trappers.

MAIDS. That we know to be true.

CHASKALA. But when I was out at the edge of the hazel brush, looking for ground-cherries, what did I see?

MAIDS. What did you see?

TALINKA. *Chaskala! Chaskala!* Stop ere your jest becomes an insult.

CHASKALA. Nay, pretty Talinka, do not try to stop my mouth. You cannot deny that I saw you talking to the

(Enter MATRONS, tumultously).

MATRONS. Woe! Woe! Seven fold woe to us! Our joys have become our sorrows, the pride of our lives our despair! The day of our greatest satisfaction is the day we look back on with anguish. We exulted over the women who bore no sons, and this is their day of satisfaction. They are gone! Forever gone, our hope, our strength, the sons to whom we gave our youth!

MAIDS. We do not understand.

A MATRON. Black Hawk came to the corn-feast. He would fain have had the council-fire lighted and the war-pipe smoked, but the chiefs and old men refused him. Keokuk had sent a runner ahead of him advising against war. The tribe had been sorely wronged; the palefaces had from sub-chiefs of no authority a thing they called a "deed", that has the power of a treaty-belt, and by it they claimed all the beautiful Iowa country, and are even now driving out the red men. Keokuk's heart is hot with all this, but he has seen the multitude of the blue coats and knows the power of their fire-sticks, and also he has dreamed a dream that his people shall do well in the new territory which has been offered them by the palefaces to whom it does not belong.

MAIDS. Why grieve thus if all is well?

MATRON. All is not well. Cahaquas left the feast, when he had agreed with the old men, but bye and bye he rushed back and urged the young braves to go on the war-path at once. "Are we men, or skulking coyotes?" he concluded. "If we are men, let us prevail like warriors, or die like heroes!" And with that, he and they were away like a whirlwind, with Black Hawk following after.

MAIDS. *Chaskala! Chaskala!*

(Enter NANA-BY-YEH).

NANA-BY-YEH. Said I not so! Said I not so! Said I not that the women had torn the breast of the sacred mother-earth, and that in requital their breasts would be torn? Feel yourselves childless, you women! Weep, rave, fling

III.

SCENE. *A desolate winter landscape. TALINKA discovered leaning against the trunk of a tree.*

TALINKA. Here is his totem symbol, and here is mine below it. Perhaps *he* cut them in the bark. No, my fancy plays the cheat. It was doubtless boys, who had made a blood-friendship, that carved their clan marks on the tree. I walk as in a dream, and everything misleads me. Every figure that approaches, for one ecstatic moment, seems to me his, and the voices of the night bring me tones of his voice. Oh, Cahaquas, Cahaquas! Where are you? Did a friend give you burial, or do you lie untended in a hollow of the Iowa hills? Did you chant your death song, or did the white man's bullet give no time for that? If I could know! If some messenger would come from this world, or that other, and ease my aching spirit with certainty of knowledge! The shamans tell us the disembodied know more than we, do *you* know all? Has it been revealed how causeless was your jealousy, how childish was my unawakened soul?

How could I know I loved thee?
My heart was all too young.
Oh, come thou now from shadow land
And hear my faltering tongue.
Return, my love, return,
For thee mine eyelids burn,
For thee my tears are falling,
For thee my soul is calling,
Return my love, return.

Come to me from thy grave, love,
I know the secret now,
In spirit or in flesh, love,
Hear me my love avow.
Return, my love, return,
For thee mine eyelids burn,

TALINKA and CAHAQUAS.

There is bliss for the wanderer,
Homeless and cold,
There's a treasure far dearer
Than silver or gold;
'Tis the love of two hearts
That may still be together,
'Tis the faith that outlasts
Storm and stress, or fair weather.
"Together," yes, 'tis bliss,
Though other joys we miss.
Though we stray 'neath alien skies,
This, this is paradise.

(CHASKALA, entering, sings with them as they repeat.)

"Together," yes, 'tis bliss,
Though other joys we miss.
Though we stray 'neath alien skies,
This, this is paradise.

CHASKALA. Talinka under the robe! Now, I know that I
am forgiven.

TALINKA. I could have no harsh thought today, Cahaquas
has come back to me from the dead.

CHASKALA. He has to me a very solid appearance. Where
have you been Cahaquas?

CAHAQUAS. Nearer to death than you would care to be,
saucy little girl. I was left for dead on the battlefield.
When the night wind revived me, I crawled away into a
little ravine. There, a paleface medicine man found me,
took me into his wigwam and, after many days, healed me.

CHASKALA. A paleface did this?

CAHAQUAS. Yes, he was like a father to me.

CHASKALA. Our fathers have told us that Manitou can do
anything. If he has made a paleface like this, he *can*!

CAHAQUAS. His deeds are better than any other man's
words. I was one of many whom he befriended. It is
enough for him that one is poor in mind or body, and it is

TALINKA. Will the mothers long have space allowed them whereon to pitch a tent? The Apaches say there is a great blue water west of us like the one to the east from whose shores our ancestors were driven. Think you that we shall be driven into that western water?

CAHAQUAS. They have taken Black Hawk's country, that should have satisfied them.

CHASKALA. They cannot be satisfied. They are as the gnats of summer-time for multitude, they can take what they choose, and they choose to take all the land next to what they have. They took the Iowa country because it was next the Illinois, and now they must have this because it is next the Iowa.

TALINKA. 'Tis true, Cahaquas. The fathers have made a treaty called a deed, because the palefaces must needs have the strip along the river to piece out their State of Missouri. They wished us to cross the river at once, but as we had no boats, and Nana-by-yeh would not allow us to go in that terrible, screaming thing that pours out a black breath as it tramples the waters, we tarried till such time as the ice should be strong enough to bear our weight. Nana-by-yeh says it is not a boat, it is a water demon the palefaces have caught and tamed for their uses by their magic.

CAHAQUAS. The demons of the palefaces are in their heads, teaching them to make these great boats and the fire-sticks that kill at a distance farther than an arrow can fly, and, worst of all, how to make treaties that bind us but not themselves.

TALINKA. Ever towards the setting sun, they push us.

CHASKALA. Have courage. Our feet are still on the Road to Paradise.

CAHAQUAS. Save my one friend, all are determined to send us the whole way at once.

TALINKA. Do they believe in our paradise?

CAHAQUAS. No, they have one of their own. They have medicine men of their own also, whom they call priests or

OLD WOMEN (*solemnly.*) It is for the last winnowing. The corn is new-parched, and we design not to carry away chaff. We take no useless burden, however small, to the new country, nor shall it blind the eyes in the old camp.

(*The young people retire into the background. The old women spread the winnowing-cloth on the ground, empty the contents of their baskets upon it, and, as four of them lift it by the corners and begin to winnow, chant:*)

The chaff flies on the wind,
The corn is left behind.
'Tis the winnowing, the last winnowing.
Which is bad, which is good?
The chaff flies, the corn would,
In the winnowing, the last winnowing.
'Tis our heroes that have flown,
Even as the chaff outblown,
In the winnowing, the last winnowing.
We were like the sea sand,
When our camp was by its strand,
Ere the winnowing, the first winnowing.
But the hatchet and knife,
If the Iroquoian strife,
Made a winnowing, a sad winnowing.
Since then, to the west,
Inch by inch, are we pressed.
Still the winnowing, the sad winnowing,
Our treaties, they are nought,
Our battles, they are fought.
Here's the winnowing, the last winnowing.
Of warriors bereft,
Old women only left,
What a winnowing! What a winnowing!

CAHAQUAS (*starting forward.*) I offered my life, as a warrior should! Almost, I gave it!

TALINKA. Disquiet not yourself. They think not of you. See! They look toward the encampment, where the last council-fire has been lighted, where, for the last time, the

Woe! Woe sevenfold, my people!
He finishes what we began.
Recall ye the fire ye set in the hazels,
How far and how fiercely it ran?
Recall ye the sound wood cut down for the firing,
When the dropped dead branch was enough?
Recall ye the soil, outraged, agape for the planting
For the maize-bread, while the stuff
The god gave rotted untouched? Acorns uncounted,
Lotus seeds in their wide cup,
The store of the walnut and hickory and hazel.
All these ye should garner up
With the black cherry seed and pulp, disdaining
Ye ground not, nor kneaded.
While ye tore at the breast of the earth-mother,
Scorned, they mouldered unheaded.

Woe! Woe sevenfold, my people, my people!
The paleface maketh the end.
To our beginning of sorrow and sinning
The paleface maketh the end!

OLD WOMEN. Lay it not to the women, Nana-by-yeh. The
maize the women planted, the men ate.

NANA-BY-YEH. Said I not so? The gods themselves are
gods because they are not gluttons. Did ever a woman
kindle the fire under the feasting-pot, if no man was there
to feast?

CAHAQUAS. Rail not at the people, Nana-by-yeh. Encour-
age them. All is not lost. The tribe may renew its
strength in the new country.

NANA-BY-YEH. The old cannot blaze new trails. If their
feet leave the beaten track they are lost.

OLD WOMAN. They come! Let us join in the farewell.

*(Enter tribespeople, led by MOHOSCA. They are arrayed
and burdened for the journey. As they pass, in single file they sing:)*

Farewell, farewell, oh, beautiful Hills, farewell
To your whispering forests, your valleys between,
In winter snow-mantled, in summer so green.

