

THE CRAWLER, NAVAHO HEALER

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I^N February, 1928, I was given the privilege of directing a moving picture of the Navaho nine-day ceremony of the Mountain Chant. The late Lorenzo Hubbell, Jr., and his brother, Román, made it possible for me to accomplish the task. I studied intensively the description of the ceremony as witnessed by Washington Matthews in October, 1884,¹ on the margins of which I marked the positions for two cameras. This was necessary as they must be focused in anticipation of what was to take place, for there could be no rehearsal.*

I was taken to Ganado to meet the Hubbell family who lived in the historical adobe built by the elder Don Lorenzo, near which the ceremony was to be performed. On arriving, I learned that the medicine-man who was to have given the ceremony had become ill, hence another singer must be found. Mention was made of a certain Na-Nai, "The Crawler", whose knowledge was great, but who was physically imperfect—he had been *born without feet*. The patient, whom we shall call Hasteen-Tsosi, had been dreaming of bears and of his child who had died some years before. He must have help, so he sent for Na-Nai. The Star-gazer and other friends rode many miles over the desert to a poor little hogán with a meager fire burning beneath the smoke-hole. All were greeted solemnly by the dignified old man who sat on a sheepskin at the western side of the fire. The parley began. When it was The Crawler's time to give his answer, he said with great feeling:

"It is not wise for me to sing the Mountain Chant in public. The people are kind to me, it is true, but if I sing the songs of our uncles, the people will not see the gods and the prophet. They will see only The Crawler, the singer born without feet."

The Star-gazer pleaded: "Hasteen-Tsosi dreams of his dead children. His sleep is torn from him. The stars have said, 'Find him who knows the power of the Star of the North, the star which lives between the horns of Klishtso, the great snake.'"

The Crawler's dignity changed to a mood of exaltation. His eyes closed for a moment and his lips moved without uttering audible words before he answered:

¹Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, Washington, 1887.

*NOTE—Through the generous coöperation of Mrs. Armer and another friend of the Museum, a replica of the unique The Crawler moving picture will now be in possession of the Museum.—ED.

"Think, my grandson. Perhaps it was your mother who saw a slain bear."

"That is true. My mother told me when I was a small child that before I was born she had looked upon a bear killed by lightning."

"It is as I thought. The bear has been offended. We shall sing his songs taught to Dsilyi-Neyani when the Bear Gods showed him the first sandpainting of the sacred plants. Then you will no longer dream of the dead. Your mind will be restored. You will feel light within."

This conversation was carried on as naively as if the words had never before been spoken. It was a traditional formula used in diagnosing the ailment of a patient. By this time clan brothers of Hasteen-Tsosi were building the House of Song. The hills resounded to the axe-blows. Many an old piñon fell to the ground to be barked and built into the sacred lodge. The green-bough kitchen was made for the family. With pots and pans, blankets and sheepskins, dogs and children, the wife of the patient moved into her temporary home, ready to cook for family and friends.

In a recent book on the Southwest the author states:

"Like modern psychiatrists, no Navaho singer is permitted to conduct a ceremonial unless he himself as a patient has had it held for him. The reason is obvious. A novice singer may be too weak to stand its great power and may suffer harm. Matthews asserted that mistakes made in the superlative Night Chant cause crippling and paralysis. Peculiarly enough, he himself suffered a paralytic stroke while learning it. And of late years, it has been recorded that the singer Crawler incurred paralysis of the legs (and his name) because he was too weak to stand the power of this same chant. He then switched to learning and practicing the Mountain Chant successfully."

I have written the following account of Na-Nai, The Crawler, to prove that he was born without feet. His crippled condition was not due to paralysis. Every singer of a Navaho chant must have been through the ceremony four times in his life.

Inside the clean lodge of hand-hewn logs Hasteen-Tsosi sat with old medicine-men awaiting the arrival of The Crawler. The patient was garbed in his best clothing and embellished with silver jewelry set with turquoise. He watched a stalwart young Indian enter, bearing the medicine-bundles. Then he saw The Crawler lift the blanket at the doorway and move sunwise to sit on the ground at the west to give a blessing for



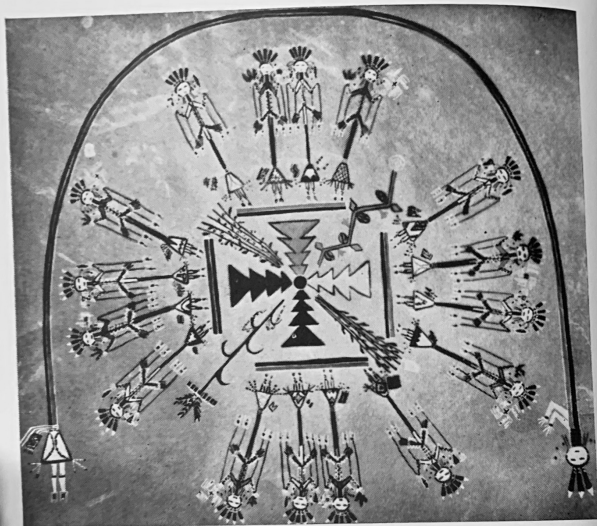
THE CRAWLER, NAVAHO PATRIARCH AND MEDICINE-MAN
(Photograph by Laura Adams Armer)

"It is enough. I go."

In his old gray clothes Na-Nai rode in the wagon of the Star-gazer to the hogán of Hasteen-Tsosi. In the sunshine he sat with the afflicted man, whom he asked:

"At any time have you looked upon a slain bear?"

"No, Grandfather, I have never looked upon a slain bear."



One of The Crawler's Sandpaintings from the Mountain Chant. The head of the rainbow is round, denoting the male.

the House of Song. Four days of fasting, cleansing, and chanting took place. Emetic was given to the patient and to any of his friends who wished thus to be purified. After the desired effect was produced, the piles of sand which held what was ejected were carried in bags to be deposited outside, far to the north. The men were naked, the women wore only their skirts. Out of the hot lodge they ran into the winter cold. Snow which had fallen the night before rested in purity upon the ground and upon the piñon boughs. The participants ran to the north and back, their bronze bodies dark against the dazzling white snow.

On the sixth day the first sandpainting was made. So accommodating had been The Crawler and his patient that our two cameramen were allowed to photograph every detail. Certain boards were removed from around the smoke-hole to allow sufficient light to enter. That was a busy time for all. Diligently I copied the weird figures of Navaho mythology, while the cameramen succeeded in making the first moving picture of a sandpainting inside of a medicine-lodge. The sun

shone for us. Was it because The Crawler had prayed for me on a certain cloudy morning, asking the sun to help his mother make the picture?

On the ninth night an enormous fire burned in the center of a circular space enclosed with evergreen branches.¹ The circle with its opening to the east symbolized the horns of Klightsso, the great serpent which carries the stars upon his back. The fire symbolized the North Star. The night was stormy. Silence of two thousand Navaho waiting for The Crawler proved that his fear of ridicule was baseless, when he had said:

"The people will see only The Crawler, the singer without feet. They will not see the gods and the prophet."

The silence enfolding the assembled Navaho made them one. The great fire leapt to black depths above as The Crawler came through the eastern opening of the dark circle of branches: a little gray figure with white hair, oblivious of physical defects, thinking only of the holy office he must fulfill to complete the healing of Hasteen-Tsosi. Silence of two thousand tribesmen transcended any ovation a white audience could give to a beloved performer. They felt the power of sincerity, of simplicity and of faith.

After various entertainments prepared for the evening show, came the fire-dance, the spectacular event of the nine-day ceremony. The tall trees piled conically in the center of the dark circle had been burning fiercely all evening. The firelight shone on the assembled tribesmen awaiting the coming of the fire-dancers.

Out of the east they came, ten nude young men, their bodies painted white. In their hands they bore bundles of shredded juniper-bark. East of the fire they halted, sculptured bodies gleaming white in the light. They formed a line facing the fire, waving their bark toward it, taking mincing steps back and forth. Four times they moved sunwise around the blaze, dancing in the four directions. The leader lighted a fagot at the fire and touched it to the shredded bark. Wildly the white figures ran about the roaring flames. The torches grew brighter and brighter. At times the burning brands were applied to the backs of those in front. Dancers threw themselves upon the ground, wriggling as close to the fire as possible to relight their extinguished torches, daring with their naked bodies to do obeisance to the Star of the North, daring to greet the Winds

¹See Mrs. Armer's *Dark Circle of Branches*, New York and Toronto, 1933.

of the Four Quarters, daring to meet Cold Woman with her flock of snowbirds from the north.

Toward the close of the festivities came the bear dance, which was not in the least spectacular, but extremely important in indicating that the ancestors of the Navaho had brought with them from the far north memory of bear festivals. The impersonator of the bear crawled on all fours, clad in bear-skins and led by a man with a rattle. Twice he lumbered around the fire, occasionally lunging toward the spectators. Before the long night's program was finished, snow fell from the clouds. When dawn came a white world stretched for miles—pure, serene, a promise of good to come from the earth. While the people packed their pots and pans to carry home, the small company of chanters in the west sang:

“The curtain of daylight is hanging;
From the land of day it is hanging.”

Inside the House of Song The Crawler sat with Hasteen-Tsosi. He blessed him with pollen that he might go on his way assured of health, good dreams, and peace. With closed eyes, impassive, calm, and content, the gray-haired shaman chanted, his lips barely moving. As he proceeded he lost consciousness of his surroundings. Far spread the land of his dreams. It was not dim to him. The trail of his mind led him back to the Old Age River, that flowing water where dwell the beneficent gods of his people.