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Death of the Last Survivor

by H.J. Taylor

As flowers become few with the approach of winter we see them as individuals. There is a love and tenderness for the last rose that no other can awaken; this one has gathered unto itself the beauty and fragrance and sadness of all its family. The lone tree, representative of a by-gone forest, stays the woodman's ax by the strength and power of its aloneness. The Indian band driven out of Yosemite Valley by the Mariposa Battalion in 1851 became intensely personified in Maria Lebrado, granddaughter of Tenaya, Chief of the Yosemite. As its last survivor she symbolized the history of her people. In her own lifetime she had experienced the tragic disintegration of the Yosemite tribe. Her death on April 20, 1931, broke our last link with Indian Yosemite.

Born in Yosemite Valley about 1840, she knew the trails that led up the steep slopes to the hunting grounds of the Monos, with whom acorns were exchanged for obsidian to make arrowheads. She knew also the days of terror when the melodious call of Chief Tenaya assembling his people to feast or fandango was changed to the alarm call of threatening dangers. She knew the sorrow and humiliation of being driven out of her home, ever after to be homeless and tribeless. She experienced the life of an exile. In the effort to maintain her tribe she bore a daughter and four sons by her Yosemite husband. The husband and the four sons died. She married a Mexican miner and bore three daughters. She yet felt the pride of tribal blood; these, her later children, were "not Yosemite," she said, adding humorously, "half-breeds."

After 78 years of hardship and suffering, sorrow, and anguish, Maria, a woman of nearly 90 years, visited the Yosemite Valley in July, 1929. That she was a distinguished guest moved her not. Dignified in bearing she revealed strength and courage rather than years. Standing with arms folded she looked a statue and her silence was ominous. Her well-kept shock of steel gray hair that once hung in thick black braids to her knees had for many years been cut. This was an outward expression of sorrow for the four sons who met tragic deaths. One looked at her time-worn face and words were lost in reflection. Deep experiences had left their traces, yet she had not lost the memory of joyous years. She still retained delicious laughter and a quick sense of humor. Deep in her breast was a heart of love that gave itself in true friendship.

In response to a message, I visited her in the summer of 1930 and again in the early autumn. Her look, her touch, her voice, were full of unuttered expression. She took from my arms a little child and held it to her breast saying, "Baby, baby," then in a low, sad voice she whispered, "All gone, long, long 'go, my all gone." I wanted to hear once more Tenaya's call as he summoned his people. Extending her hands and lifting her head she gave in clear, musical notes a call that vibrated in the surrounding hills. The marvel was her sustained breath. A moment of silence and she repeated the beautiful call. Never again shall I hear that music. The memory of it lures me to the freedom and

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naturalness and charm of Indian life that understands the streams and rocks and skies.

Early spring in 1931 brought word of Maria's illness. It was late afternoon when we arrived at her cabin on Bear Creek. The sun no longer shone and clouds were lowering. Surprised and overjoyed at our coming she stroked my arm with her feeble, bony hand, saying, "White daughter come far, far see me." She motioned to the blanket wrapped about her. I had given it. Then she laid her hand over her heart, then over mine. I sat in silence by the bedside of my friend.

I spent the night with my Indian friends. The Indian welcome, "This house is yours," invites refreshing rest.

The clouds dropped their rain; the sun shone on a new day. Maria seemed stronger. Taking leave she clasped my hand in both of hers. "Gracias, gracias, you come far, far. Thank, thank. I sick. I go." She pointed upward, then moved her hand over her body and said, "Graveyard."

Five weeks later, on April 21, I received a telegram announcing her death. A few hours later another telegram informed me that the funeral would be at ten o'clock Wednesday morning. We left at once by auto, spending the night en route. With an early start and good roads we soon reached Myers, eight miles east of Mariposa. There we left the highway and for a mile or more followed a "throughcut," rough and winding, that leads up Cocoyade Gulch and Bear Creek to Maria's cabin, and arrived shortly after eight o'clock Wednesday morning. From within came rhythmic wailing moans of relatives paying tribute to one they loved.

We entered. The body of Maria lay on a white covered board. The daughters alone had closed her eyes, folded her hands, and clothed her body for burial. My childhood conception of a princess lay before me. She wore a black silk dress. Over the knees and reaching to the feet lay a beautiful piece of bright pink satin. A similar piece, green in color, covered the body. The sleeves were ornamented at the wrists with beaded bands. A beaded belt, the gift of her daughter, lay diagonally across her breast. A beaded headband, such as Indian hands alone can make, lay across her forehead. The canvas-covered casket stood beside the body. Ten o'clock proved too early for the funeral. "Two o'clock," some thought, "would be better." Others said, "Perhaps three o'clock." Another said that "At four o'clock surely all who were coming would be there." And so it was held at four o'clock.

Maria had requested an Indian funeral such as so often she had given to others. "White people do White funeral, Indian like Indian funeral," she had told her daughters. So the funeral dance of Tenaya's day—a custom unused for many years—was decided upon.

The granddaughter of Chief Tenaya was no ordinary Indian. His blood flowed in her veins. At his funeral, in 1853, with unceasing wail and dance, she paid him tribute for three days and all these days she touched no food. His sons had been killed, and with their death she had become the embodiment of her people. Maria was a medicine woman. She had diagnosed

and cured many ill. Her funeral must not be wanting in tribute due her rank.

The tom-toms played. For more than an hour relatives and friends joined in the song and dance as they circled about Maria. As four o'clock neared, the body was placed in the casket. The green veil lying at the head was spread over Maria's face. With heartfelt cries the daughters placed one last kiss and said their last good-bye. The casket was closed. Four young Indians, grandsons and relatives, with four other young Indians beside them, took up the casket and led the procession of one hundred and twenty-five up the winding trail for half a mile or more. The cemetery is on a hill-top which commands a view of mountain meadows, deep canyons and distant ranges.

The grave was lined with white muslin and covered with fronds of woodwardia. Here and there a flower added a touch of color. The casket was placed. Five or six Indian youths stood beside the grave and sang, swaying as they measured time. At the foot of the grave stood half a dozen women interpreting the singing with outstretched or uplifted arms. As the casket was lowered, "earth to earth" was said. The last distressing cries of the younger daughters were heard. Mary—Yosemite and Maria's firstborn—stood apart with head erect, shoulders back, and arms folded. Every muscle of her face was fixed. Her eyes were partly closed. The universal event of death had no terror for her. There was courage and understanding and triumph in that statue. She stood as the interpretation of Browning's *Prospice*.

Into the grave were placed things dear to Maria. First a woolen blanket. An Indian youth went into the grave and spread it smoothly over the casket. All through her illness it had been wrapped about her. It touched me deeply, for it was the one I had given her. A blanket of Indian design she had used and treasured for many years was also placed on the casket. The grave was filled. The flowers were placed upon the mound. The wreath we had made of blue and golden brodiaea we laid at the head of the grave of this native daughter. The slanting rays of the sun shone warm and bright on the last survivor's grave.

We possess her Yosemite. She sleeps in a lonely and unknown spot. Time may place a tablet on this grave. Pilgrims may wear an everlasting trail to the hilltop—a belated tribute for the suffering and exile—inflicted upon her.

