

HOME AGAIN

By Thomas M. DeTitta
Copyright 1998

The clash of cultures that is the essence of this story is best seen from the perspective of the Missionary, Dr. Marcus Whitman and his wife Narcissa, who believe they are doing God's work by trying to train the Indians in the ways of the white man. This scene takes place at their mission in western Washington State, where they are attempting to preach to, and civilize the native Cayuse tribe.

From Act One, HOME AGAIN:

(An assembly for services begins at the WHITMAN mission. The singing begins with the clear, and beautiful voice of NARCISSA. The song is one of the hope and love of Christianity. She is singing to a small group of CAYUSE. Concurrently, MARCUS WHITMAN is on another side of the stage, building a fence that continues being built through the play. As the scene transition is complete, NARCISSA is trying to get the group of CAYUSE to sing. She is focusing particularly on a young Indian girl.)

NARCISSA:

Now you must sing, too. Yes, you must. It is the word of God. Come now -sing after me.

(What ensues is an odd sort of scene, whereby Narcissa is both condescending and loving in her approach. She seems to show an unusual interest in the child, almost treating it as if she were her own, making the actual mother -LIMA-SHAMPT - uncomfortable.)

NARCISSA:

Come now, be a good girl for you mother. We want our little girl to grow up in the Christian way...

(The child is confused, mumbles a few sounds that seem appropriate: It is clear she does not speak the same language. Finally the girl's mother intervenes.)

LIMA-SHAMPT:

(Pulling the girl away)

She does not speak your tongue, Misses Whitman.

(NARCISSA appears genuinely hurt by the separation -her arms remaining extended towards the child even after she is gone.)

NARCISSA:

Child...

LIMA-SHAMPT:

Misses Whitman. Do you miss your own baby girl?

NARCISSA:

Alice Clarissa.

LIMA-SHAMPT:

She was much loved by our people. A white baby born among the Cayuse.

NARCISSA:

And then she drowned...(Then suddenly) Why do you talk about her?

LIMA-SHAMPT:

(Taking her child away)

Be careful of this pain of losing a child. It is a strong and bitter wind that may make you cold.

(Awkward pause, then NARCISSA WHITMAN turns and runs towards WHITMAN, who is still building the fences.)

NARCISSA:

Husband, the Cayuse are ready for the word of God!

WHITMAN:

I'm almost finished...

NARCISSA:

Salvation will not wait.

WHITMAN:

I've got to get these fences up!

NARCISSA:

Husband, your fences laid end to end would extend from here to our home in New York State.

WHITMAN:

Fences bring definition; civilization.

NARCISSA:

And Jesus Christ offers salvation to the heathen.

(WHITMAN succumbs, drops his implements and continues towards the increasingly restless group of CAYUSE. Perhaps NARCISSA rings bell in transition.)

WHITMAN:

All right then! Everybody come together to receive the word of God!

(They settle in. His first speech incidentally reflects his mission as a missionary)

WHITMAN:

And God said, go ye into all the dark places and shine the light of Christ into the world. So let us look at the Bible...

SHOWAWAY:

(Interrupting)

Dr. Whitman! Tell us about the power of the white man's God.

WHITMAN:

The power of the white man's God?

SHOWAWAY:

When my boy is baptized as you say, what will he get?

OTHER CAYUSE:

(In Cayuse)

How can we beat our enemies with this?

SHOWAWAY:

He wants to know: "How can we beat our enemies with this?"

WHITMAN:

Yes, well, this will all come in due course. What is important right now is that you listen to the word of God. That and farming -building fences and the like -civilization. (Pause) Now, where was I?

NARCISSA:

About being a light and hope unto the world, Dr. Whitman?

WHITMAN:

Oh, yes, of course. A light and hope unto the world...Turn to your Bibles, John, chapter eight, verse twelve: "Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' The Pharisees therefore said to Him, 'You are bearing witness to yourself. Your witness is not true.' Jesus answered, and said to them...

(As he continues, the profundity of his words lie in contrast to the increasing restlessness of the Cayuse audience. Activities begin to take place among them, which eventually leads to the Young Girl from earlier appearing fixated with something in the sky. She points, then the other children notice it as well. The parents try to calm their children, as WHITMAN continues, but eventually they are distracted, and go running in erratic patterns after this thing they see in the air.)

WHITMAN:

Hold on there! Just what are those children doing while I am preaching the word of God!

SHOWAWAY:

(Steps forward)

Don't you see, Dr. Whitman -it is the chook, chook in the air! The seed of the cottonwood tree. It means that Spring is here, Dr. Whitman! Spring has come at last!

(They pack up and leave, transition out.)

WHITMAN:

Wait a minute! Where do you think you're going?

SHOWAWAY:

The Spring means the salmon returns to the rivers, and the koush roots are ready to be dug. Our people must go to the food mother earth provides us in Spring.

WHITMAN:

If you stayed here and learned from me, you need not wander the earth for sustenance. You simply claim your own piece of property and farm the ground beneath your feet!

NARCISSA:

Children! Don't go!

SHOWAWAY:

We will return Dr. Whitman. We will return to learn more about the white man's book of heaven!

(Concurrently, the Pioneers are beginning to enter upstage as this scene concludes.)

WHITMAN:

(To himself, now)

Don't you understand. The Pioneers are coming. They are expecting to live in a land where men stake their claim and believe in one God. Without these shared beliefs, there will be tension, discord, war!

NARCISSA:

Husband -remember Job.

WHITMAN

(Turning to her)

The pioneers continue to arrive, Narcissa.

NARCISSA

Yes.

WHITMAN:

The Indians have not understood.

NARCISSA:

No.

(Pause)

WHITMAN:

We are alone, out here, Narcissa. We are so very alone.

(Long pause. Finally they turn to the Bible, and bury themselves in a sort of call-and response, to gather the strength to exit.)

NARCISSA:

Let us pray.

WHITMAN:

Yes...Pray.

NARCISSA:

The Lord is my Shepherd...

WHITMAN:

...I shall not want.

NARCISSA:

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures...

WHITMAN:

He leadeth me beside quiet waters... (Continue as they exit)

(In wake, SHAM-KAIN, who has been
pondering the question put to him,
finally speaks.)

SHAM-KAIN:

Awhile ago, you asked me about the long winter. I have thought and now I am ready to speak. I see a beaver talking to a bird, saying, "Mr. bird, if you were like me, you wouldn't have to flap your wings anymore. You could swim around in the water, like me." And the bird agrees, so the beaver continues: "And Mr. bird, if you were like me, you could feast on the roots and plants all along the river!" This is true -both of these things, and the bird thinks about it all. But I say, if the bird were to stop flying and swim in the river like a beaver, he still would never be a beaver. Only a foolish bird.

Play continues.

The impending clash of cultures is seen from the Cayuse perspective as well, in the words of SHAM-KAIN, the elder to his tribesmen.

SHAM-KAIN:

Awhile ago, you asked me why we are having such a long winter: Are we being punished for trading with the white man? I have thought and now I am ready to speak. I see a beaver talking to a bird, saying, "Mr. bird, if you were like me, you wouldn't have to flap your wings anymore. You could swim around in the water, like me." And the bird agrees, so the beaver continues: "And Mr. bird, if you were like me, you could feast on the roots and plants all along the river!" This is true -both of these things, and the bird thinks about it all. But I say, if the bird were to stop flying and swim in the river like a beaver, he still would never be a beaver. Only a foolish bird.

Play continues.