

The Great Déné Race.

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(Continued.)

CHAPTER XVI. Puberty customs.

Menstruation and its Consequences in Antiquity.

"The woman who, at the return of the month, hath her issue of blood, shall be separated seven days. Every one that toucheth her, shall be unclean until the evening. And every thing that she sleepeth on, or that she sitteth on in the days of her separation, shall be defiled. He that toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes: and being himself washed with water, shall be unclean until the evening. Whosoever shall touch any vessel on which she sitteth, shall wash his clothes; and himself being washed with water, shall be defiled until the evening."¹

These stringent prescriptions of the Mosaical Law are well known, and that they were strictly observed among the posterity of Jacob there can be no reasonable doubt. But, apart from the well understood sanitary considerations that prompted them, the fidelity with which they were followed was, in part at least, consequent on the fact that they were apparently but an official consecration of sentiments and customs which prevailed long before Moses' time. The state of a menstruating woman must, indeed, have been extremely repulsive to the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, since when Laban, furious at the disappearance of his family idols, was looking for the same among the goods of his daughters, one of whom, Rachel, had taken them away, it sufficed for her to sit upon them and say quietly: "it has now happened to me according to the custom of women"² to send her father away, and avert from her head the sentence of death which had implicitly been pronounced against her by her husband.

Among the Jews of old, puberty gave rise to at least five distinct observances. First, the woman in her menses was legally impure, and all contact with her entailed defilement. Second, she was sequestered from the company of men. Third, even at the expiration of her menstrual discharges, she remained in a state of mitigated seclusion until the time of her marriage. Fourth, she had then to wear a special costume whenever she went out; and, lastly, she was under the guardianship of a close relative, who was responsible for her conduct and whose duty it was to avenge any wrong done her.

¹ Levit., XV, 19—23.

² Gen., XXXI, 35.