



Christmas, York Factory

By R. M. BALLANTYNE, in *Hudson Bay*

THE sound of a fiddle struck upon our ears and reminded us that our guests, who had been invited to the ball, were ready; so, emptying our glasses, we left the dining room and adjourned to the hall.

Here a scene of the oddest description presented itself. The room was lit up by means of a number of tallow candles stuck in tin sconces round the walls. On benches and chairs sat the Orkneymen and Canadian half-breeds of the establishment in their Sunday jackets and *capotes*; while here and there the dark visage of an Indian peered out from among the white ones. But round the stove—which had been removed to one side to leave space for the dancers—the strangest group was collected. Squatting down on the floor in every ungraceful attitude imaginable, sat about a dozen Indian women, dressed in printed calico gowns, the chief peculiarity of which was the immense size of the balloon-shaped sleeves and the extreme scantiness, both in length and width, of the skirts. Coloured handkerchiefs covered their heads, and ornamented moccasins decorated their feet; besides which each one wore a blanket in the form of a shawl, which they put off before standing up to dance. They were chatting and talking to each other with great volubility, occasionally casting a glance behind them where at least half a dozen infants stood bolt upright in their tight-laced cradles. On a chair in a corner near the stove, sat a young, good-looking Indian with a fiddle of his own making beside him. This was our Paganini; and beside him sat an Indian boy with a kettle-drum, on which he tapped occasionally, as if anxious that the ball should begin.

All this flashed upon our eyes; but we had not much time to contemplate it, as, the moment we entered, the women simultaneously rose and, coming modestly forward to Mr. Wilson, who was the senior of the party, saluted him one after another. I had been told that this was a custom of the *ladies* on Christmas day, and was consequently not quite unprepared to go through the ordeal. But when I looked at the superhuman ugliness of some of the old ones—when I gazed at the immense and, in some cases toothless, chasms that were pressed to my senior's lips, and that gradually, like a hideous nightmare, approached toward me; and when I reflected that these same mouths might have, in former days, demolished a few children—my courage forsook me and I entertained for a moment the idea of bolting. The doctor seemed to labour under the same disinclination

with myself; for when they advanced to him he refused to bend his head, and, being upwards of six feet high, they of course were obliged to pass him. They looked, however, so much disappointed at this, and withal so very modest, that I really felt for them and prepared to submit to my fate with the best grace possible. A horrible old hag advanced towards me, the perfect embodiment of a nightmare, with a fearful grin on her countenance. I shut my eyes. Suddenly a bright idea flashed across my mind; I stooped down, with apparent good will, to salute her; but, just as our lips were about to meet, I slightly jerked up my head and she kissed my *chin*. Oh, happy thought! They were all quite satisfied, and attributed the accident, no doubt, to their own clumsiness or to mine!

This ceremony over, we chose partners, the fiddle struck up, and the ball began. Scotch reels were the only dances known by the majority of the guests, so we confined ourselves entirely to them.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock, our two tables were put together and spread with several towels, thus forming a pretty respectable supper-table, which would have been perfect had not one part been three inches higher than the other. On it were placed a huge dish of cold venison and a monstrous iron kettle of tea. This, with sugar, bread and a lump of salt butter, completed the entertainment to which the Indians sat down. They enjoyed it very much—at least, so I judged from the rapid manner in which the viands disappeared and the incessant chattering and giggling. After all were satisfied, the guests departed in a state of great happiness; particularly the ladies, who tied up the remnants of their supper in their handkerchiefs and carried them away.

