

XIV.

“LO! THE POOR INDIAN!”

Denver, *June* 16, 1859.

I Have been passing, meeting, observing and trying to converse with Indians almost ever since I crossed the Missouri. Eastern Kansas is chequered with their reservations—Delaware, Kaw, Ottawa, Osage, Kickapoo, Potawatamnie and others—while the buffalo-range, and all this side belong to, and are parceled among the Cheyennes, the Arapahoes, and the Apaches—or perhaps among the two former only, as Indian boundaries are not very well defined. At all events, we have met or passed bands of these three tribes, with occasional visitors from the Sioux on the north, and the Camanches on the south—all these tribes having for the present a good understanding. The Utes, who inhabit the mountains, and are stronger and braver than any one of the three tribes first named, though hardly a match for them all, are at war with them; the Aarapaho chief, Left-Hand, assures me that his people were always at war with the Utes—at least, he has no recollection, no tradition, of a time when they were at peace. Some two or three hundred lodges of Arapahoes are encamped in and about this log city, calculating that the presence of the whites will afford some protection to their wives and children against a Ute onslaught while the “braves” are off on any of their fighting—that is, stealing—expeditions. An equal or larger body of Utes are camped in the mountains, some forty or fifty miles west, and the Arapaho warriors recently returned in triumph from a war party, on which they managed to steal about a hundred horses from the Utes, but were obliged to kill most of them in their rapid flight, so that they only brought home forty more than they took away. They are going out again in a day or two, and have been for some days practising secret incantations and public observances with reference thereto. Last midnight, they were to have had a grand war-dance, and to have left on the war-path to-day; but their men, sent out after their horses, reported that they saw three Utes on the plain, which was regarded as premonitory of an attack, and the “braves” stood to their arms all night, and were very anxious for white aid in case of a Ute foray on their lodges here in Denver. Such an attack seems very improbable, and I presume the three Utes who caused all this uproar were simply scouts or spies, on the watch for just such marauding surprise-parties as our Arapaho neighbors are constantly meditating. I do not see why they need take even this trouble. There are points on the mountain range west of this city, where a watchman with a sharp eye and a good glass would command the entire plain for fifty miles north, south, and east of him, and night hence give intelligence of any Arapaho raid at least a day before a brave entered the mountains. For, though it is true that Indians on the war-path travel or ride mainly by night, I find that the Arapahocs do this only after they have entered on what they consider disputed or dangerous ground—that they start from their lodges in open day, and only advance under cover of darkness after they are within the shadows of the mountains. Hence, the Utes, who are confessedly the stronger, might ambush and destroy any Arapaho force that should venture into their Rocky Mountain recesses, by the help of a good spy-glass, and a little White forecast.

But the Indians are children. Their arts, wars, treaties, alliances, habitations, crafts, properties, commerce, comforts, all belong to the very lowest and rudest ages of human existence. Some few of the chiefs have a narrow and short-sighted shrewdness, and very rarely in their history, a really great man, like Pontiac or Tecumseh, has arisen among them; but this

does not shake the general truth that they are utterly incompetent to cope in any way with the European or Caucasian race. Any band of schoolboys, from ten to fifteen years of age, are quite as capable of ruling their appetites, devising and upholding a public policy, constituting and conducting a state or community, as an average Indian tribe. And, unless they shall be treated as a truly Christian community would treat a band of orphan children providentially thrown on its hands, the aborigines of this country will be practically extinct within the next fifty years.

I have learned to appreciate better than hitherto, and to make more allowance for, the dislike, aversion, contempt, wherewith Indians are usually regarded by their white neighbors, and have been since the days of the Puritans. It needs but little familiarity with the actual, palpable aborigines to convince any one that the poetic Indian—the Indian of Cooper and Longfellow—is only visible to the poet's eye. To the prosaic observer, the average Indian of the woods and prairies is a being who does little credit to human nature—a slave of appetite and sloth, never emancipated from the tyranny of one animal passion save by the more ravenous demands of another. As I passed over those magnificent bottomns of the Kansas which form the reservations of the Delawares, Potawatamies, etc., constituting the very best corn-lands on earth, and saw their owners sitting around the doors of their lodges at the height of the planting season and in as good, bright planting, weather as sun and soil ever made, I could not help saying, "These people must die out—there is no help for them. God has given this earth to those who will subdue and cultivate it, and it is vain to struggle against His righteous decree." And I yesterday tried my powers of persuasion on Left-Hand—the only Arapaho chief who talks English—in favor of an Arapaho tribal farm—say of two hundred acres for a beginning—to be broken and fenced by the common efforts of the tribe, and a patch therein allotted to each head of a family who would agree to plant and till it—I apprehend to very little purpose. For Left-Hand, though shrewd in his way, is an Indian, and every whit as conservative as Boston's Beacon street or our Fifth Avenue. He knows that there is a certain way in which his people have lived from time immemorial, and in which they are content still to live, knowing and seeking no better. He may or may not have heard that it is the common lot of prophets to be stoned and of reformers to be crucified; but he probably comprehends that squaws cannot fence and plow, and that "braves" are disinclined to any such steady, monotonous exercise of their muscles. I believe there is no essential difference in this respect between "braves" of the red and those of the white race, since even our country's bold defenders have not been accustomed to manifest their intrepidity in the corn-fields along their line of march, save in the season of roasting-ears; and the verb "to soldier" has acquired, throughout Christendom in all its moods and tenses, a significance beyond the need of a glossary. Briefly, the "brave," whether civilized or savage, is not a worker, a producer; and where the men are all "braves," with a war always on hand, the prospect for productive industry is gloomy indeed. If, then, the hope of Indian renovation rested mainly on the men, it would be slender enough. There is little probability that the present generation of "braves" can be weaned from the traditions and the habits in which they find a certain personal consequence and immunity from daily toil, which stand them instead of intelligence and comfort. Squalid and conceited, proud and worthless, lazy and lousy, they will strut out or drink out their miserable existence, and at length afford the world a sensible relief by dying out of it.

But it is otherwise with the women. Degraded and filthy as they are, beyond description or belief, they bear the germ of renovation for their race, in that they are neither too proud nor too indolent to labor. The squaw accepts work as her destiny from childhood. In her father's lodge, as in that wherein she comes in turn to hold a fifth or sixth interest in a husband—(for all Indians are polygamists in theory, and all who have means or energy become such in practice)—she comprehends and dutifully accepts drudgery as her "peculiar institution." She pitches and strikes the tent, carries it from one encampment to another, gathers and chops the wood, and not only dresses and cooks the game which forms the family's food (when they

have any) but goes into the woods and backs if home, when her lord returns with the tidings that he has killed something. Tanning or dressing hides, making tents, clothing, moccasins, etc., all devolve on her. Under such a dispensation, it is not difficult to believe that she often willingly accepts a rival in the affections of her sullen master, as promising a mitigation rather than an aggravation of the hardships of her lot.

And yet even the Indian women are idle half their time, from sheer want of any thing to do. They will fetch water for their white neighbors, or do any thing else whereby a piece of bread may be honestly earned; and they would do ten times more than they do, if they could find work and be reasonably sure of even a meager reward for it.

I urge, therefore, that in future efforts to improve the condition of the Indians, the women be specially regarded and appealed to. A conscientious, humane, capable christian trader, with a wife thoroughly skilled in household manufactures and handicraft, each speaking the language of the tribe with whom they take up their residence, can do more good than a dozen average missionaries. Let them keep and sell whatever articles are adapted to the Indians' needs and means, and let them constitute and maintain an Industrial School, in which the Indian women and children shall be freely taught how to make neatly and expeditiously not only moccasins, but straw hats, bonnets, and (in time) a hundred other articles combining taste with utility. Let a farm and garden be started so soon as may be, and vegetables, grain, fruits given therefrom in exchange for Indian labor therein, at all times when such labor can be made available. Of course, the school, though primarily industrial, should impart intellectual and religious instruction also, wisely adapted in character and season to the needs of the pupils, and to their perception of those needs. Such an enterprise, combining trade with instruction, thrift with philanthropy, would gradually mould a generation after its own spirit—would teach them to value the blessings of civilization before imposing on them its seeming burdens; and would, in the course of twenty years, silently transform an indolent savage tribe into a civilized christian community. There may be shorter modes of effecting this transformation, but I think none surer.

Doubtless, such an enterprise demands rare qualities in its head—that of patience prominent among them. The vagrancy of the Indians would prove as great an obstacle to its success as their paltry but interminable wars. Very often, in the outset, the apostle of industry and civilization would find himself deserted by all his pupils, lured away by the hope of success elsewhere in marauding or hunting. But let him, having first deliberately chosen his location, simply persevere, and they will soon come round again, glad enough to find food that may be had even for solid work; for all I can learn impels me to believe that hunger is the normal state of the Indian, diversified by transient interludes of gluttony. Meat is almost his only food; and this, though plentiful at seasons, is at others scarcely obtainable in the smallest quantities, or dried to the toughness of leather. The Indian likes bread as well as the white; he must be taught to prefer the toil of producing it to the privation of lacking it. This point gained, he will easily be led to seek shelter, clothing, and all the comforts of civilized life, at their inevitable cost; and thus his temporal salvation will be assured. Otherwise, his extermination is inexorably certain, and cannot long be postponed.