

## AN INDIAN BUREAU REMINISCENCE

After the close of the secession war in 1865, I work'd several months (until Mr. Harlan turn'd me out for having written "Leaves of Grass") in the Interior Department at Washington, in the Indian Bureau. Along this time there came to see their Great Father an unusual number of aboriginal visitors, delegations for treaties, settlement of lands, &c.--some young or middle-aged, but mainly old men, from the West, North, and occasionally from the South--parties of from five to twenty each--the most wonderful proofs of what Nature can produce, (the survival of the fittest, no doubt--all the frailer samples dropt, sorted out by death)--as if to show how the earth and woods, the attrition of storms and elements, and the exigencies of life at first hand, can train and fashion men, indeed chiefs, in heroic massiveness, imperturbability, muscle, and that last and highest beauty consisting of strength--the full exploitation and fruitage of a human identity, not from the culmination-points of "culture" and artificial civilization, but tallying our race, as it were, with giant, vital, gnarl'd, enduring trees, or monoliths of separate hardiest rocks, and humanity holding its own with the best of the said trees or rocks, and outdoing them.

There were Omahas, Poncas, Winnebagoes, Cheyennes, Navahos, Apaches, and many others. Let me give a running account of what I see and hear through one of these conference collections at the Indian Bureau,

going back to the present tense. Every head and face is impressive, even artistic; Nature redeems herself out of her crudest recesses. Most have red paint on their cheeks, however, or some other paint. ("Little Hill" makes the opening speech, which the interpreter translates by scraps.) Many wear head tires of gaudy-color'd braid, wound around thickly--some with circlets of eagles' feathers. Necklaces of bears' claws are plenty around their necks. Most of the chiefs are wrapt in large blankets of the brightest scarlet.

Two or three have blue, and I see one black. (A wise man call'd "the Flesh" now makes a short speech, apparently asking something. Indian Commissioner Dole answers him, and the interpreter translates in scraps again.) All the principal chiefs have tomahawks or hatchets, some of them very richly ornamented and costly. Plaid shirts are to be observ'd--none too clean. Now a tall fellow, "Hole-in-the-Day," is speaking. He has a copious head-dress composed of feathers and narrow ribbon, under which appears a countenance painted all over a bilious yellow. Let us note this young chief. For all his paint, "Hole-in-the-Day" is a handsome Indian, mild and calm, dress'd in drab buckskin leggings, dark gray surtout, and a soft black hat. His costume will bear full observation, and even fashion would accept him. His apparel is worn loose and scant enough to show his superb physique, especially in neck, chest, and legs. ("The Apollo Belvidere!" was the involuntary exclamation of a famous European artist when he first saw a full-grown young Choctaw.)

One of the red visitors--a wild, lean-looking Indian, the one in the black woolen wrapper--has an empty buffalo head, with the horns on, for his personal surmounting. I see a markedly Bourbonish countenance among the chiefs--(it is not very uncommon among them, I am told.) Most of them avoided resting on chairs during the hour of their "talk" in the Commissioner's office; they would sit around on the floor, leaning against something, or stand up by the walls, partially wrapt in their blankets. Though some of the young fellows were, as I have said, magnificent and beautiful animals, I think the palm of unique picturesqueness, in body, limb, physiognomy, &c., was borne by the old or elderly chiefs, and the wise men.

My here-alluded-to experience in the Indian Bureau produced one very definite conviction, as follows: There is something about these aboriginal Americans, in their highest characteristic representations, essential traits, and the ensemble of their physique and physiognomy--something very remote, very lofty, arousing comparisons with our own civilized ideals--something that our literature, portrait painting, &c., have never caught, and that will almost certainly never be transmitted to the future, even as a reminiscence. No biographer, no historian, no artist, has grasp'd it--perhaps could not grasp it. It is so different, so far outside our standards of eminent humanity. Their feathers, paint--even the empty buffalo skull--did not, to say the least, seem any more ludicrous to me than many of the fashions I have seen in civilized society. I should not apply the word savage (at any rate, in the usual sense) as a leading word in the description of

those great aboriginal specimens, of whom I certainly saw many of the best. There were moments, as I look'd at them or studied them, when our own exemplification of personality, dignity, heroic presentation anyhow (as in the conventions of society, or even in the accepted poems and plays,) seem'd sickly, puny, inferior.

The interpreters, agents of the Indian Department, or other whites accompanying the bands, in positions of responsibility, were always interesting to me; I had many talks with them. Occasionally I would go to the hotels where the bands were quarter'd, and spend an hour or two informally. Of course we could not have much conversation--though (through the interpreters) more of this than might be supposed --sometimes quite animated and significant. I had the good luck to be invariably receiv'd and treated by all of them in their most cordial manner.

[Letter to W. W. from an artist, B. H., who has been much among the American Indians:]

"I have just receiv'd your little paper on the Indian delegations. In the fourth paragraph you say that there is something about the essential traits of our aborigines which 'will almost certainly never be transmitted to the future.' If I am so fortunate as to regain my health I hope to weaken the force of that statement, at least in so far as my talent and training will permit. I intend to spend some years among them, and shall endeavor to perpetuate on canvas some of

the finer types, both men and women, and some of the characteristic features of their life. It will certainly be well worth the while.

My artistic enthusiasm was never so thoroughly stirr'd up as by the Indians. They certainly have more of beauty, dignity and nobility mingled with their own wild individuality, than any of the other indigenous types of man. Neither black nor Afghan, Arab nor Malay (and I know them all pretty well) can hold a candle to the Indian. All of the other aboriginal types seem to be more or less distorted from the model of perfect human form--as we know it--the blacks, thin-hipped, with bulbous limbs, not well mark'd; the Arabs large-jointed, &c. But I have seen many a young Indian as perfect in form and feature as a Greek statue--very different from a Greek statue, of course, but as satisfying to the artistic perceptions and demand.

"And the worst, or perhaps the best of it all is that it will require an artist--and a good one--to record the real facts and impressions. Ten thousand photographs would not have the value of one really finely felt painting. Color is all-important. No one but an artist knows how much. An Indian is only half an Indian without the blue-black hair and the brilliant eyes shining out of the wonderful dusky ochre and rose complexion."