Recent Writings By American Indians

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OF late years we who call ourselves Americans, but, after all, are only foreigners "changed by the climate," have had opportunities to read a small amount of purely American literature in the writings of some of the educated American Indians. Three authors in particular — Dr. Eastman, Mr. LaFlesche, and the Indian girl Zitkala−Sa — have notably enriched our records of the characters and customs of their people. It is interesting to observe that each of them has emphasized the finer aspects of the old order — which, for them, has changed forever — with a pride that cannot fail to be recognized by the casual reader, even where it is accompanied by the most courteous acknowledgment of the merits and advantages of civilization.

Dr. Eastman's little book is a collection of papers originally written for the St. Nicholas under the title, "Recollections of the Wild Life." In a simple, narrative style he tells the story of a Sioux boy's life among his kindred before he has come into contact with any of the influences of civilization. The training of the boy begins, he says — or, to make a necessary discrimination, it did begin, according to the customs of forty years ago — with lullabies of war, of the chase, and of the "Great Mystery," and very early was added the task of preserving and transmitting ancestral legends. "Almost every evening a myth or a legend of some deed done in the past was narrated by one of the parents or grandparents, and to it the boy listened with parted mouth and shining eyes. On the following evening he was usually required to repeat it. If he was not an apt scholar he struggled long with his task; but, as a rule, the Indian boy is a good listener and has a good memory, so that the stories were tolerably well mastered. The household became his audience, by whom he was alternately criticised and applauded." The habit of observation was as carefully cultivated as the faculty of memory. Whenever the little fellow left the "tepee," or tent, for his day of wandering in the forest, he was told to "watch everything closely, and observe its characteristics," and, upon his return at night, he was subjected to a catechising that lasted an hour or so. He was asked on which side of the trees he had found the lighter bark, on which side were the branches most regular, where he found the fish−eating birds, and how he could tell whether or not fish were in the lake, and a hundred other questions by which his care in studying nature might be tested. "Follow the example of the wolf," his wise teacher would say. "Even when he is surprised and runs for his life he will pause to take one more look at you before he enters his final retreat. So you must take a second look at everything that you may see." Nor were the moral qualities neglected. To acquire courage the boy went after water through the woods in the dark, to bring back his pail full, empty it, and start again. Sometimes he would be wakened in the morning and challenged to fast all day, as a warrior at any time must be prepared to do. Sometimes he was awakened by war−whoops, and expected to leap up with perfect presence of mind, ready to grasp his weapon. Always he was expected to control his temper. He was taught generosity to the poor and respect for age. The code of etiquette must be perfectly observed, and it contained many a precept worthy of the white man's acceptance. "Much has been said," says Dr. Eastman, "about Indian children's 'instincts.' To be sure, we inherited some of the characteristics of our ancestors, but the greater part of our faculties we had to acquire by practice. All the stoicism and patience of the Indian are acquired traits." Some of the acquired traits he also found, upon entering the civilized life, astonishingly easy to shed. For example, severe training had made him as able as his companions to endure cold and hunger; but "now, if I miss one meal," he writes, "or accidentally wet my feet, I suffer as much as if I had never lived in the manner I have described, when it was a matter of course to get myself soaking wet many a time."

Concerning the white people, with whom he was later to hold such close relations, Dr. Eastman as a boy heard most unflattering reports. At the time of the Sioux massacre in Minnesota he was about four years old, and was

among those who took flight into British Columbia. A couple of years later his father was betrayed by a half−breed to the United States authorities, and was separated from his son for ten years. The boy believed him to have been killed by the whites, and was taught to count upon avenging his death as soon as he was old enough to go on the war−path. It turned out that the father was only imprisoned, together with his two elder sons, for four years, and then pardoned by President Lincoln. While in prison he was taught by missionaries, and, upon coming out, was convinced that life on a government reservation meant only physical and moral degradation, and he determined to try the white man's way of gaining a livelihood. With a number of others he took land, under the United States Homestead Law, on the Big Sioux River, and then, at the risk of his life, set out to seek his son. He found him, and brought him back to live among the white people and to exchange his traditions for theirs. A fair impression of the clear idea of the white men which the boy brought with him is gained from a conversation he had with his uncle prior to leaving the wild life:

"Certainly they are a heartless nation," said the uncle. "They have made some of their people servants — yes, slaves!* We never believed in slaves, but it seems that these Washichu do. It is our belief that they painted their servants black a long time ago to tell them from the rest, and now the slaves have children born to them of the same color!

"The greatest object of their lives seems to be to acquire possessions — to be rich. They are desirous to possess the whole world. For thirty years they were trying to entice us to sell our land to them. Finally the 'Outbreak' gave them all, and we have been driven away from our beautiful country. They are a wonderful people. They have divided the day into hours, like the moons of the year. In fact, they measure everything. Not one of them would let even a turnip go from his field unless he received equal value for it. I understand that their great men make a feast and invite many, but when the feast is over the guests are required to pay for what they have eaten before leaving the house."

Dr. Eastman, it will be remembered by many, married Elaine Goodale, the Berkshire poetess, and has contributed to a number of periodicals. He is a graduate of Dartmouth College and of the Boston University School of Medicine, and now Government physician at Crow Creek, S. D.

An interesting pendant to his "Recollections of the Wild Life" is a little book, published a couple of years ago by Francis La Flesche, son of the former head chief of the Omaha tribe, giving his experience at the Presbyterian Mission School, where he was educated. In the main it is an account of this school−life, but in its references to the author's pre−civilized existence it tallies with the impression given by Dr. Eastman. The Omaha tribe, like the Sioux, apparently take the greatest interest and pride in the up−bringing of their boys. "Among my earliest recollections," says Mr. La Flesche, "are the instructions wherein we were taught respect and courtesy toward our elders: to say 'thank you' when receiving a gift or returning a borrowed article; to use the proper and conventional term of relationship when speaking to another, and never to address anyone by his personal name. We were also forbidden to pass in front of persons sitting in the tent without first asking permission, and we were strictly enjoined never to stare at visitors, particularly at strangers. To us there seemed no end to the things we were obliged to do and to the things we were to refrain from doing." The Omaha child was also strictly trained in the grammatical use of his native tongue. No slip was allowed to pass uncorrected, and children soon spoke as accurately as their elders. There was nothing corresponding to slang, to localisms, or to profanity, and the boys and girls who have been set to learn our language have found it difficult to realize that there can be both good and bad English. Mr. La Flesche translates the speech of the older Indians in his story into excellent and idiomatic English, but he declares it impossible to reproduce the beauty and picturesqueness, the gravity and playfulness, and euphony of diction which he has heard among his own people, and among other tribes as well. "No native American can cease to regret," he says, "that the utterances of his fathers have been continually belittled when put into English, that their thoughts have frequently been travestied, and their native dignity obscured."

In the narrative, the character of the boys rather than the character of the school is dwelt upon; but the life seems not to have been an unhappy one, and the manly little fellows undergoing the very radical transformation are not

indifferent to their advantage — certainly not rebellious or bitterly opposed to their surroundings. When, however, we read the biographical papers of Zitkala−Sa, contributed to the Atlantic a year or so ago, a very different note arrests our attention, a poignant and utterly despairing note of revolt against what Stevenson calls "the dingy, ungentlemanly business of civilization." "She was always that way," said one of her school−mates, in speaking of these papers. "She was born to be melancholy." But it is a kind of melancholy that forces sympathy, even where it is not admitted to be rational. Many of the grievances, set forth with truly compelling eloquence, are those which only an intensely sensitive nature would nurse and remember, and, after many years, record. The troubles of the poor little Indian girl began with her first car ride from the free Dakota plains to the "Red Apple Country," where she was to be educated according to English ideas. Pale−faces stared at her as she had never been allowed to stare at others. Arrived at her destination, she was frightened and insulted by being tossed in someone's arms by way of a rather boisterous welcome; her long hair was shingled "like a coward's;" not a soul reasoned quietly with her as her mother had been used to do; misunderstandings brought unjustifiable punishments into her life; every morning, "from happy dreams of Western rolling lands and unlassoed freedom," she "tumbled out upon chilly bare floors back again into a pale−face day." "It was next to impossible," she writes, "to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun its day's buzzing, and as it was inbred in me to suffer in silence rather than to appeal to the ears of one whose open eyes could not see my pain, I have many times trudged in the day's harness heavy−footed, like a dumb, sick brute." After three years of this Zitkala−Sa went back to her home, "neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one." Four years of spiritual turmoil and strife between old and new influences drove her again to an Eastern school, and thence, against her mother's will, to college. At college she distinguished herself, and won oratorical honors "among a cold race, whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice." From college she went to teach in an Indian school in the East, and here again she was in no mood to strain her eyes in searching for latent good in her white co−workers. She found an opium−eater holding a position as teacher of Indians because he had a feeble mother to support, "an inebriate pale−face" sitting stupid in a doctor's chair, "while Indian patients carried their ailments to untimely graves because his fair wife was dependent on him for her daily food," and other instances as shameful. Visitors came and gaped at the industry and skill of the Indian children, asked shallow questions, and walked out of the school−house "well satisfied: they were educating the children of the red man!" Finally a new way of solving her problem occurred to her. What it was she does not say, but we may hope it brought her peace in place of the temper of mind in which she wails: "For the white man's papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. For these same papers I had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. On account of my mother's simple view of life, and my lack of any, I gave her up also. I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. I was shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends. The natural coat of bark which had protected my over−sensitive nature was scraped off to the very quick." To express what civilization did for Zitkala−Sa, judging from her own account, we must turn again to Stevenson, the unrivalled interpreter of the aboriginal heart, who says: "You cannot change ancestral feelings of right and wrong without what is practically soul−murder."

One cannot, however, pass over her contribution to our literature without a comment upon its literary value. Strange, pathetic, and caustic, her phrases burn themselves into the reader's consciousness. Speaking of her first "pale−face" teacher, she says: "Her words fell from her lips like crackling embers, and her inflection ran up like the small end of a switch." Of a race over the prairies, she writes: "Within this vast wigwam of blue and green I rode reckless and insignificant. It satisfied my small consciousness to see the white foam fly from the pony's mouth." Of her studies, she says: "By daylight and lamp−light I spun with reeds and thistles until my hands were tired from their weaving the magic design which promised me the white man's respect." And not alone by isolated metaphors does she attest the richness of her style. Whole descriptions, such as that of her mother calling down curses upon the white man's lodge, are instinct with passion and significance, and curbed by a fine restraint. Her emotions, concentrated and violent, strike us with an electric shock; the form in which she wraps them is luminous and highly synthetic. She gives even to the absurd episode of the mashed turnips, the broken bowl, the childish revenge, an element of tragedy that must have been destroyed by the slightest deviation from the standard of brevity, emphasis, and incisiveness set for the adequate rendering of a dramatic situation. Zitkala−Sa is not only an educated Indian, but a writer of unusual quality. Her work is nine times heated by the cruelty of her

mental and moral experience. If she continues it she can hardly fail to make an impression in a field where differences of race count for nothing and greatness of achievement counts for everything.