

The Wild Indian

George Bird Grinnell

Table of Contents

<u>The Wild Indian</u>	1
<u>George Bird Grinnell</u>	1

The Wild Indian

George Bird Grinnell

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

IF after a long period the Indian problem remains a problem still, it is because we have no sufficient knowledge of the people we are striving to teach. The solution of the problem is not to be reached until the stronger race shall understand the weaker, and, in the light of that understanding, shall deal with it wisely and well. I say this with the more confidence because for many years I have lived with the plains people in their homes, engaging in their pursuits, sharing their joys and sorrows, standing toward them in all essentials as one of themselves. I have thus learned to think and feel as an Indian thinks and feels, and to see things as he sees them and from his point of view.

To contribute in some measure to a better comprehension of the Indian as a man, and thus to an appreciation of the real nature of the Indian problem in its present phase, I shall attempt to show very briefly what the Indian was and is; to describe the old-time savage in his old home and his old free life twenty-five years ago, and then the new Indian, who, amid surroundings but dimly comprehended, is staggering under the heavy burdens which civilization has laid upon him.

The wild Indian exists no longer. The game on which he lived has been destroyed; the country over which he roamed has been taken up; and his tribes, one by one, have been compelled to abandon the old nomadic life, and to settle down within the narrow confines of reservations. This change, by which an entire race has been called to give over the ways of wanderers, and to adapt itself to the life of a people of fixed abodes, is most momentous. The magnitude of it is equaled only by the suddenness with which it has been wrought, and by its completeness. The transition is not material alone, but intellectual. To fit himself to it, the Indian of middle age must become literally as a little child, that he may think new thoughts.

The plains Indian on the reservation of to-day is a "reconcentrado," taken from his old home and shut up within narrow limits beyond which he may not pass. He is ignorant unless he be taught, helpless unless he be helped. His is the problem of conforming to unwonted conditions, of adjusting himself to the ways of a new life, of meeting its exactions, reconciling himself to its privations, comprehending the larger opportunities it offers, proving its compensations and winning its rewards. Ours is the problem of helping him in the new life. The responsibility is one we can neither evade nor escape. We shall assume it the more intelligently and discharge it the more successfully when we know the real character of the natural Indian, and understand the influence which his former wild life must have upon the life he is now living on the reservation. We cannot deal with the Indian of to-day unless we know the Indian of yesterday. The average man seldom thinks about Indians, and when he does he thinks of them either with entire indifference or with contemptuous dislike. He is moved in part by that narrowness which leads us to despise those who in appearance or by birth or tradition are different from ourselves,—the feeling which leads many a white man to speak with contempt of negroes or Chinamen. More weighty than this feeling, however, is the inherited one that the Indian is an enemy, who from the time he was first known has been hostile to us. Even nowadays most people seem to think of the Indian only as a warrior, who is chiefly occupied in killing women and children, burning homes and torturing captives. From the days when Indians fought the Pilgrim Fathers, and then the settlers of the Ohio Valley, and later still the emigrants crossing the plains, nine tenths of all that has appeared in print about them has treated them with prejudiced ignorance; and the newspapers, which now constitute so large a portion of the reading matter of the American public, seldom print anything about Indians except in connection with massacres and uprisings. The effect of all this literature on

The Wild Indian

the popular estimation in which the race is held has been very great.

The popular impressions are entirely erroneous. The Indian was a fighter, yet war was only an incident of his life. Like any other human being he is many-sided, and he did not always wear his war paint. If certain of his characteristics repel us, there are other aspects of his nature which are pleasing. If in some relations he may appear to the civilized man ferocious and hateful, in others he seems kindly and helpful. The soldier sees the Indian from one point of view only, the missionary from another, the traveler from a third, the agent from a fourth. Each of these is impressed by some salient feature of his character, yet each sees that one only or chiefly, and the image shown is imperfect, ill-proportioned, and misleading. Only the man who for years has shared the Indian's home, who has seen him under all the varying conditions of his life, who has learned what motives govern him and how he feels and thinks and reasons, can, in the present mood of almost universal prejudice, form a just estimate of him; only one so well acquainted with the Indian can look at things as he looks at them, and so can fairly judge in what respects he differs from a white man and what his needs really are. Knowledge such as this can be had at first hand only by one who has had a long association with him. You learn him as in the first instance you learn any other human being,—by living with him. And after you have lived with him for a time you will see that if he is a savage, he is also a man. The same wind that freezes you chills him; he is warmed by the same sun, rejoices in the same kind of success, resists when he is ill treated, and when trouble comes is downhearted and depressed. He is a man, but one in the child stage of development, in which passions and impulses are stronger and reasoning powers are more feeble than they are with civilized men.

Perhaps the first thing that impressed the visitor to the old-time Indian camp was its picturesqueness; for whether one viewed him with eyes friendly or hostile the wild Indian was always picturesque. It was a fine sight to watch him on his fleet pony, charging down upon you, when with long hair, feather-decked, streaming in the wind, and weapon ready for instant use, he swept toward you, a perfect master of horse and seat. And it was not less fine to ride in the midst of five hundred such men—your friends—in the hurly-burly of the charge on the buffalo herd, when you felt yourself part of a confused blur of dust, flying pebbles, great brown beasts, naked men, and straining horses. As striking, though in a different way, was the long line of the marching camp, as in slow procession, stretched out over a mile or two of prairie, it wound its course among the hills. Viewed from a distance, it looked like a long ribbon, spotted here and there with bright bits of color; but if you were a part of it, as it advanced, you saw that it was made up of groups of silent men with bows and quivers at their backs, of women riding or leading patient pack ponies that dragged their travois, of racing boys, of loose horses, and of vagrant dogs. The barking, the neighing, the shouting, the scolding, that fell on your ear, told something of the vitality that animated the component parts of the procession.

Hardly less picturesque were the quiet scenes of the Indian's home life, when you lived with him in his village of conical skin tents. Sitting in the shade of the lodge when the sun was hot, you smoked the long-stemmed pipe and talked with your friends, while all about you the people came and went. Men returned from the hunt, riding horses heavily laden with fresh meat and hides; women were at work pegging out the skins or dressing them; from neighboring lodges men were shouting invitations to the feast; all about there were little groups like your own, smoking, chatting, and laughing. For the Indian is not, as the popular idea figures him, stolid, taciturn, or even sullen in his every-day life. He may be shy and silent in the presence of strangers, but in his home life he is talkative,—eager to give and receive the news, and to gossip about it. He is merry and laughter-loving, and likes to make good-natured fun of another's personal peculiarities. Thus, one of her companions may jeeringly call a very slender woman the shadow of a moccasin string. Once, on the prairie, in the bright hot sunlight, I heard one Indian say to another who was very stout, "My friend, stand still for a little while. I want to sit down in the shade and cool off."

Some years ago I was on the reservation of a tribe known as the Big Bellies—Gros Ventres—at Fort Belknap, Montana; and while I was there a new agent came to them. He was a fat man, and one of the Indians, who met the agent for the first time in my presence, said, as he shook hands with him, "Ah, you are one of our own people. You, too, are a Big Belly."

The Wild Indian

It is true that Indians are savages and have savage vices; but they also have savage virtues, many of which are admirable, among them honesty, bravery, hospitality, consideration for their neighbors, family affection, and fidelity,—the keeping of pledged faith even with an enemy. These people have a respect for their promises which seems remarkable to a white man. A liar is regarded with contempt, and when a man has once been detected in an untruth it is almost impossible for him to regain his reputation. Often when I ask a man to tell me a sacred story, he sits silent for a while, to arrange his ideas. Then he holds his palms up toward the sun, and passes them over his head, arms, and body, rubs them on the ground, and again passes them over his head, arms, and body. Then he prays: "O Wise One Above, listen. Earth, listen. All you Spiritual Powers, listen. Take pity on me. Help me. I am going to talk to this man. I am going to tell him a story of ancient times, of the things which used to happen a long time ago. Help me to talk straight to him. Watch me, and do not let me tell a lie. Make me tell these things just as they used to be. Listen carefully, and make me tell him the truth."

A striking example of the faithfulness with which the Indians keep their engagements was shown by the northern Cheyennes, who in 1879 surrendered, as prisoners of war, to General Miles, and immediately afterward enlisted under him as scouts. For four years, as prisoners of war and mindful of the promises they had made, they faithfully served the government, scouting by themselves over hundreds of miles of territory, and fighting hard against hostile tribes, often against their own people. Instances even more impressive occur at intervals among the civilized tribes of the Indian Territory. Among these people, if a man kills one of his fellows, he is tried by the tribal court, and if convicted is sentenced to be shot. The day for his execution having been fixed, he is released on parole and goes away, promising to be present at the place of execution at the appointed time. He is always there. In a case recently reported, the convict was a member of a famous ball team which had engagements running through the summer. He was sentenced to die early in August, but in view of the inconvenience which his death would cause to the ball team he was reprieved until the last days of October, so that he might fulfill his engagements with the team. After being sentenced, he married the girl on whose account he had killed his rival, set his affairs in order, played the different games of ball, and on the morning set for his execution went alone to the ground and paid the penalty of death.

Nowhere in the world was property more safe than in the old-time Indian camp. To take what belonged to his neighbor was something that could no more have occurred to an Indian than it would occur to a guest at dinner to pocket the spoons and forks from the table of his hostess. This perhaps is not to be imputed to the Indian for righteousness: the very idea of theft was wholly foreign to him; he was never exposed to the temptation. If in the camp you lost any piece of property, such as your knife or your pipe, and if at your request the old crier shouted through the village that you had lost something, the article, if found by any one in the camp, would be returned to you immediately. Several years ago my brother and I, with an interpreter, visited a camp, took up our quarters in the lodge assigned to us, and unpacked our things there. When we went out, we left our possessions scattered about. Just after leaving the lodge, my brother, who was new to Indian camps, said to the interpreter, "Bill, I left all my things lying on my bed. Will they be safe?" "Safe," returned Bill, "sure; they'll be safe all right. There ain't a white man within thirty miles of here." The Indians of to-day have picked up from white people many of the white people's ways, and are not always honest, but they do not yet take things from one another or from their guests.

Like ourselves, Indians are fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. In order to exist with any comfort, they must live on good terms with their neighbors; they love, their wives, their children, their friends, their tribe. Their lives are wholly devoted to securing the welfare, first of the immediate family, then of the tribe. No people are more patriotic. They love their tribe as we love our country; an Indian believes that his own people are better than any others. Though so intensely loyal—true clansmen—they are yet sufficiently fair-minded to see the qualities, good and bad, of alien and hostile peoples. I have heard the Cheyennes—one of the bravest tribes of the plains—speak in highest praise of the courage and fighting qualities of tribes who were their enemies, and with contempt of others who might perhaps be their friends. Thus of the Sioux they say that to fight them was like chasing buffalo cows; for the Sioux ran away so fast that the Cheyennes had to ride hard to overtake them before they could kill them. But of the Pawnees and the Crows they say that when they met either

The Wild Indian

of these in battle, the contest was like that between two buffalo bulls fighting: they would come together with a great shock, and push and push, yielding this way and that, and presently one body of men would push harder than the other and would drive their opponents back, and then the latter would make a supreme effort and drive the others a little way; and so the battle might sway backward and forward for hours, before either party gained the victory.

In daily intercourse within the tribe Indians might teach many white people lessons of patience, courtesy, and generosity toward their fellows, and of family affection and consideration for the comfort of wives and children. When a number of men are sitting together, discussing some subject, each speaker is listened to with the same grave patience, whether he is the wisest and most important or the most foolish and least considered of the group. He is never interrupted, but is allowed to finish his remarks. Even if he should lose the thread of his speech and stop short, striving to remember something he wished to say, no one smiles or laughs or moves. All sit quiet, and wait until he signifies that he has finished what he has to say. If one individual in an assembly begins to pray, all the others are silent until the prayer is ended. No one speaks, no one whispers. When the prayer is over, conversation may begin again. Indians are not ashamed to show their affection for one another. Close friends who have been separated for any length of time, when they meet, put their arms around and hug and kiss one another. Often two young men will be seen standing or sitting close together and holding hands, or with the arm of one about the neck of the other. When we meet after a long absence, my old father among the Blackfeet puts his arms around me and hugs me. The purely social side of life in an Indian camp could not fail to interest any one who might be introduced to it. The gatherings of mature men for discussion of subjects affecting the general welfare, the assembling of old women for gossip and of middle-aged women for gambling, the active games of young men and women, the visiting, the dancing, and the feasting, all remind us as closely as possible of what is going on about us in our own surroundings every day; in fact, these represent our round of town meetings, mutual improvement clubs, whist clubs, and golf meetings, calls and afternoon teas and dances and dinners.

In the family relation the Indian shows a side which is attractive. He loves his wife and family as we love ours, and he thinks of them before thinking of himself. But besides the natural affection that any animal has for its young the Indian cares for his children for another reason. He is intensely patriotic. His pride in his tribe and its achievements is very strong. He glories in the prowess of its braves and the wisdom of its chiefs; his soul thrills as he hears told over and over again the stories of the victories which his people have won over their enemies; he rejoices at the return of a successful war party. In the children growing up in the camp, in the boys shooting their blunt-headed arrows at blackbirds and ground squirrels, or yelling and shouting with excitement in the mimic warfares which constitute a part of their sport, and in the girls nursing their puppies or helping their mothers at their work, he recognizes those who a few years hence must bear the responsibilities of the tribe, uphold its past glories or protect it from danger, as he and his ancestors have done. No wonder he loves them.

Indians seldom punish their children, yet usually they are well trained, though chiefly by advice and counsel. When a tiny little boy, who has just received his first bow and arrows, starts out of the lodge to play with his fellows, his mother is likely to say to him, "Be careful, now; do not do anything bad, do not hit any one, do not shoot any one with your arrows. You may hurt people with these things, if you are not careful. Pay attention to what I say."

If older people are sitting in the lodge, and a child comes in, it sits down by its mother and remains quiet. It seldom speaks or makes any noise or disturbance. If a very small child comes in and begins to talk, its mother lifts up her finger and says Sh! and at once it is quiet. I have never seen children who seemed to be better behaved at home. Out of doors they are as full of animal spirits, as boisterous, and as fond of playing in the dirt as healthy children are the world over. The boys hunt birds, engage in sham battles, and go in swimming. The girls play with their dolls, make clothing for them, and pitch or move their mimic camps. Some of the older people enjoy the society of the children. The father delights to play with his little boys, and the grandfather pets the tiny child, perhaps painting its face or hanging about its neck some cherished charm or ornament that he himself has long worn. Here is the advice given by a poor Pawnee widow to her young son who was growing to manhood. Her

The Wild Indian

precepts of industry, courage, singleness of purpose, charity, and devotion to friends might worthily have been spoken by any woman of the highest civilization.

"You must always trust in God.¹ He made us, and through him we live. When you grow up you must be a man. Be brave and face whatever danger may meet you. Do not forget, when you look back to your young days, that I have raised you and always supported you. You had no father to do it. Your father was a chief, but you must not think of that. Because he was a chief it does not follow that you will be one. It is not the man who stays in the lodge that becomes great. It is the man who works, who sweats, who is always tired from going on the warpath. When you get to be a man, remember that it is his ambition that makes the man. If you go on the warpath, do not turn around when you have gone part way, but go on as far as you were going, and then come back. If I should live to see you become a man, I want you to become a great man. I want you to think about the hard times we have been through. Take pity on people who are poor, because we have been poor, and people have taken pity on us. If I live to see you a man, and to go off on the warpath, I should not cry if I were to hear that you had been killed in battle. That is what makes a man,—to fight and to be brave. I should be sorry to see you die from sickness. If you are killed, I would rather have you die in the open air, so that the birds will eat your flesh, and the wind will breathe on you and blow over your bones. It is better to be killed in the open air than to be smothered in the earth. Love your friend and never desert him. If you see him surrounded by the enemy, do not run away. Go to him, and if you cannot save him be killed with him and let your bones lie side by side. Be killed on a hill, high up. Your grandfather said it is not manly to be killed in a hollow. It is not a man who is talking to you, advising you; yet heed my words, even if I am a woman."

¹Atius Tirawa==Spirit Father, or Father Above

Though the Indian woman—like her husband—works hard in behalf of her family she is not the slave which popular fancy pictures her. If it is true among civilized people that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world, in an Indian village it is not less true that the hand that scrapes the parfleche rules the camp. The impression is firmly fixed in the popular mind that in an Indian camp the woman does all the work, yet I have seen no place in the world where woman was better able to take care of herself than there. In many tribes it is the woman who owns the property. In some tribes women are the chiefs. In all they are treated with respect, receive consideration from men, and possess great influence. In former times young and unmarried women sometimes went off with a war party, usually not as warriors, but as helpers. When they did this, they were treated with the utmost respect and consideration by every member of the party.

Just as in a white community, in an Indian tribe the man is the provider, the woman cares for the household. Among the plains tribes it was the duty of the man to keep his wife supplied with food for the lodge, and with skins for clothing or shelter. He strove to add to the consideration in which he and his family were held by going to war and exposing himself to danger, gaining glory and wealth by killing enemies or capturing property. As among white people, the wife cooks for her husband, prepares clothing for the family, attends to the packing up when the village is moved, and, in the case of agricultural people, helps to cultivate and gather the crops. White people look upon hunting and war in the light of pastimes or recreations, but with Indians each of these occupations was a serious one. Often in winter, if food were scarce, men traveled many miles to get buffalo; and they were obliged to go, no matter what the weather was. Though the cold were bitter and the fine snow flying in level clouds over the prairie, his family must eat, and the man must hunt. After he had killed the game, he had to skin and pack his meat; though often before he got it on his horse it might be frozen solid. He might get lost in the storm, and have to lie out for two or three nights, freezing hands or feet, or even perishing. Perhaps the buffalo might disappear from a district, and young men might be obliged, in the worst of weather, to make long journeys, scouting to see where food could be obtained.

The men's toil on the warpath was more severe. The party started out on foot, carrying upon their backs heavy loads of food, extra moccasins and arms. They might be forced to go two or three hundred miles before turning back, every day exposed to discovery and death by the enemies through whose country they were passing. If they

The Wild Indian

made a successful trip and captured a herd of horses, they were obliged, in order to escape pursuit, to ride these naked animals for two or three days, literally without stopping, except to change from tired horses to fresh ones. No one who has not lived the hard life of the plains can imagine what such a journey was. It was far more laborious than anything that the women had to do, and besides it was full of danger.

While the men were engaged in this hard and dangerous work, the women were at home in the comfortable lodges, and had no labor to perform more arduous than cutting and collecting a supply of fuel, which occupied them only for an hour each day. In mild and pleasant days they often worked at the dressing of robes, but in the severest weather they did little or nothing at this. In some sheltered place among the timber they would clear away the weeds and undergrowth from a considerable space, and hanging up about this robes or lodge-skins to serve as wind-breaks, would build a great fire in the middle and work at their tasks before it. Such a place was comfortable, almost like the inside of a lodge, except that it was open at the top.

The Indian woman does not stand in awe of her husband. On the contrary, if in her presence he says something with which she does not agree, she is very likely to correct him, and tell him that he knows little about the matter. I have seen an angry woman enter a lodge in which were sitting half a dozen of the wisest old men and bravest warriors of the tribe, and, irritated by some innocent remark, turn on them and rate them with high-pitched scoldings, until one by one they drew their blankets over their heads and fled from the lodge to escape her clamor. If you wish to have anything done in an Indian camp, and can get the women on your side, you will obtain your desires. At the same time, they are conservative and opposed to change. They sometimes hold the tribe back when the men are willing to make a step in advance and abandon an old custom for the ways of civilization. They are good wives and mothers, and devotedly attached to their families. Frequently the tie of affection between husband and wife is remarkably strong, and this not only between young couples, but even between the middle-aged and the old. Often the two accompany each other everywhere, and are seldom seen apart. If you stop an old man to talk with him, his wife stops too, and very soon she begins to take part in the conversation. In other words, in a very large proportion of cases the sexes stand on an equality.

This family affection is one of the most striking characteristics of the Indian, and permeates all his legend and folklore. It is the motive which induces many a hero to start off on his travels, striving to accomplish some great thing. Numerous examples might be cited from the literature of those tribes whose stories have been recorded, which exemplify the truth that the family relation among the buffalo savages of the plains is essentially the same that holds good among civilized people. Stories having this motive are Comanche Chief and the Ghost Wife in Pawnee, and Scarface and the Origin of the Worm Pipe in Blackfoot literature. An abstract of this last tale will give an idea of its character, and incidentally show its resemblance to one of the most familiar classical myths.

There was once a man who was very fond of his wife. After they had been married for some time they had a little boy. After that the woman fell sick and did not get well. The young man loved his wife so dearly that he did not wish to take a second wife. She grew worse and worse. Doctoring did not seem to do her any good, and at last she died. The man used to take his baby on his back and travel out from the camp, walking over the hills crying. He kept away from the village. After some time he said to his child, "My little boy, you will have to go and live with your grandmother. I am going to try to find your mother and bring her back." He took the baby to his mother's lodge and asked her to take care of it and left it with her. Then he started off to look for his wife, not knowing where he was going nor what he was going to do. He traveled toward the land of the dead; and after long journeyings, by the assistance of helpers who had spiritual power, he reached it. The old woman who helped him to get there told him how hard it was to penetrate to the ghosts' country, and made him understand that the shadows would try to scare him by making fearful noises and showing him strange and terrible things. At last he reached the ghosts' camp, and as he passed through it the ghosts tried to scare him by all kinds of fearful sights and sounds, but he kept up a brave heart. He reached a lodge, and the man who owned it came out and asked him where he was going. He said, "I am looking for my dead wife. I mourn for her so much that I cannot rest. My little boy, too, keeps crying for his mother. They have offered to give me other wives, but I do not want them. I want only the one for whom I am searching."

The Wild Indian

The ghost said to him: "It is a fearful thing that you have come here. It is very likely that you will never get away. There never was a person here before." But the ghost asked him to come into the lodge, and he entered. Then this chief ghost said to him: "You shall stay here for four nights, and you shall see your wife; but you must be very careful or you will never go back. You will die right here."

Then the chief went outside and called for a feast, inviting this man's father-in-law and other relations who were in the camp, saying, "Your son-in-law invites you to a feast," as if to say that their son-in-law was dead, and had become a ghost, and had arrived at the ghosts' camp. Now when these invited people, the relations and some of the principal men of the camp, had reached the lodge, they did not like to go in. They called out, "There is a person here!" It seemed that there was something about him that they could not bear the smell of. The ghost chief burned sweet pine in the fire, which took away this smell, and the people came in and sat down. Then the host said to them: "Now pity this son-in-law of yours. He is seeking his wife. Neither the great distance nor the fearful sights that he has seen here have weakened his heart. You can see for yourselves he is tender-hearted. He not only mourns for his wife, but mourns also because his little boy is now alone, with no mother; so pity him and give him back his wife."

After consultation the ghosts determined that they would give him back his wife, who should become alive again. They also gave him a sacred pipe. And at last, after many difficulties, the man and his wife reached their home.

I have thus briefly indicated some of the more striking personal traits of the Indian in the old time, from which his character may be judged. He was childlike in his simplicity, in his eagerness to revenge a wrong, in his shyness, and in his fear of things that he did not understand. A creature of quick impulses, he could endure the keenest sufferings and the greatest dangers, yet was subject to groundless panics, when, like one of a herd of stampeded animals, he fled in headlong terror from he knew not what. So with the Indian of to-day. His powers of observation are highly trained, yet on matters without the range of his limited experience he reasons like a child. On the prairie, from the appearance of the sky, the direction of the wind, the actions of birds or animals, or of people at a distance, he will make predictions whose accuracy will startle you; but if you attempt to explain to him some of the most ordinary events and methods of civilized life, he fails to comprehend you and seems quite unable to use his wits. A little investigation will show you that you are talking over his head and about something which is utterly strange to him, and that you are using terms for which his vocabulary has no equivalents. Most of the processes of civilization are as obscure to him as is the art of writing to a four-year-old child, and, like a child, the Indian must have instruction—often repeated—before he can comprehend these processes, and much practice before he can perform them.

The old-time Indian had the stature of a man with the experiences and reasoning powers of a child. He was a nomad, a free wanderer, limited in his ordinary hunting journeys only by his natural range, and in war roaming without limits. In summer he followed the game or the fish, accumulating a store of provisions to carry him through the winter. Among the buffalo tribes the winter hunt usually took place during November and December, when the robes were at their best and the buffalo fat, and before the weather became very cold and stormy. When really severe weather came he retreated to his permanent village, or, if his tribe was one that had no permanent habitation, he chose some sheltered place where wood was abundant and remained there with the camp. Except in case of necessity the men did not venture far nor hunt much in bad winter weather, but if the food supply ran low they were forced to brave the storm.

Until about fifteen years ago the old free life still prevailed over much of the Western country. Fifteen years earlier than this it had first in some degree been interrupted by the building of a transcontinental railroad, and every railroad built afterward imposed new and stronger limits on the freedom of the old-time dwellers of the West. The railroads brought hunters and settlers, and made a market for the flesh and skins of the wild beasts on which the Indians subsisted, and so caused extermination of this food supply. With the railroads, too, came the speedier movement of troops, and the punishment and gathering in of hostile or vagrant camps. Thus little by little the Indians were collected on reservations; the wild West began to be settled, and of a sudden was wild no longer.

The Wild Indian

The Indian ceased to wander.

He has ceased to wander, but he has not forgotten. The fierce joys of the warpath still live in his mind: the long weary marches under a sun like fire, the stealthy approach, the successful charge, and the long flight. Sometimes in memory he feels again the sense of swelling triumph that filled his heart as, with blackened face and bearing his trophies, he rode over the hills and swiftly passed on down toward the village; he sees as if but yesterday the people streaming out from the lodges to meet his party, singing for joy and shouting out the names of the fortunate warriors, his name among the rest; he recalls how old men praised him and old women danced before him, singing a song in his honor, and how all the people, old and middle-aged and young, down to the tiniest children, honored him as one of those to whom the tribe owed its triumph. Nor does he forget the pleasures of the more peaceful pursuits of the old life. Often he recalls his scouting as a young man after buffalo, when the camp was hungry, and each scout prayed that he might be the one who should find food and bring life and happiness to the people. He remembers the times when he was successful, and how, when he brought the good news, they said that he was smart and had good luck; how his name was called through the camp, and every one was glad that he, and not another, had been sent out; and he remembers, too, how, on one of these triumphant returns, that young woman—now the mother of his children—had heard about it, and the next time he met her, instead of looking at the ground, she raised her eyes to his face and smiled.

There were many buffalo chases to remember, even from the time when he was a little boy; the shouts of the criers saying that the tribe should hunt, the orders to men and women, the start, the control exercised by the soldiers, the headlong race of the final charge, all the active life and quick changes of the pursuit, and the confusion of the killing; then the happiness that came of plenty in the camp, when the drying-scaffolds hung red and white with sheets of meat and of rich backfat, and the feast shout had no end.

This was the old life in the free days, the life which moulded the Indian and made him what he was and is. No marvel then that to the older men of the tribe, though but a memory growing dim, that old life is yet more real than this new existence on the reservation, with its limitations and perplexities, its white man's ways, which the centuries of his training have made it so hard for the Indian to assume.