

**FOUR WEEKS AMONG SOME OF
THE SIOUX TRIBES OF DAKOTA
AND NEBRASKA. TOGETHER WITH
A BRIEF CONSIDERATION OF THE
INDIAN PROBLEM**

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HERBERT WELSH

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A MONTH
AMONG THE SIOUX INDIANS.

WE FOUND ourselves about midday, June 17th, at the little town of Chamberlain, Dakota, a place of some three hundred inhabitants, lying upon the east bank of the Missouri river. To this distant point we had come by the request of Bishop Hare, in order to gain some knowledge of the schools and missions established, under his direction, by the Episcopal Church, among the Sioux Indians. As we left the train, our eyes sought eagerly for the Rev. Luke Walker, a full-blooded Sioux and a presbyter of the Church, who was to have met us at the station and thence to have conducted us to his mission among the Lower Brulés, four miles distant, and within the limits of the reservation upon the other side of the Missouri. Our search was in vain, and not until late in the day, after we had made two ineffectual attempts to cross the river, did we find our friend, who, in company with Rev. Mr. Burt, had been detained later than was his expectation, at a distant point. Mr. Burt is one of those who came to this country ten years ago, from Berkeley Divinity School, after hearing William Welsh plead the Indian cause. He has ever since labored among the people as a faithful missionary and has acquired not only a knowledge of their character and customs, but also great proficiency in the Dakota tongue. We crossed the Missouri as the sun sank behind the reservation hills, with the blue sky above us from which the storms that had risen suddenly during the afternoon, and threatened an hour before, had now dropped to the horizon. Beneath us rolled a fierce muddy stream in whose waters, swollen by spring rains, our oars labored slowly. The evening was delightful, though

windy, and nature about us so fresh that we could not but feel a sense of joyful anticipation as we crossed the moving boundary line which separates two distinct people. Our road to the Indian Agency lay through country quite similar to that which we had seen upon the east bank—broken hills, with their steep ascents and descents—which the reckless driving of our Indian friend made at times rather suggestive of a break-down. A fine characteristic of this region is the singular clearness of the atmosphere, which gave a touch of peculiar beauty to the lonely hills about us, and an additional brilliancy to the young moon and Venus setting beyond. About nine o'clock we reached the outskirts of the Indian settlement, heralded by the barking of numerous dogs, who serve not only as guards to their owners, but also in due time as a replenishment to their larders. On our arrival at the parsonage, which stands close to the Mission Church, we were welcomed by Mrs. Walker, the wife of our Indian friend. This lady is a white woman, well fitted by kind heart and courteous manner to aid her husband in his work among their dark-skinned brethren. Later in the evening we were visited by the head chief of the Brulé tribe, Iron Nation, a tall, well-built man, whose cleanly dress and dignity of bearing would, doubtless, have surprised those among my readers who imagine all Indians to be filthy and degraded. He wore moccasins, dark trowsers, a neat linen shirt, and a red handkerchief tied loosely around his neck. His black hair hung down in two plaits upon his shoulders. He greeted us with the ordinary Indian salutation, strange, though attractive to our unaccustomed ears, "How! How!" followed by soft, indescribable intonations, and a gentle clapping of the hands, when any remark of ours gave him pleasure. The expression of his face seemed, to our perhaps prejudiced eyes, to indicate neither cruelty nor treachery, but rather kindness and good will. We slept that night for the first time in a community of 1,500 Indians, among whom were, probably, not more than a dozen whites, including the United States Agent, his family and employees. Early Sunday morning, I looked out upon the view which my chamber window commanded—some level fields partly under Indian cultivation, a piece of timber land, a sunny strip of the Missouri, and beyond a line of

rolling hills. As my eye happened to glance at the foreground of this picture, on a little plot of grass lying close to the house, I noticed, with some curiosity, two pieces of white canvas flapping up and down in the strong wind. At times a slightly different movement than that which the wind produced drew my attention more carefully to them, when, to my surprise, one of these objects was transformed into the figure of a woman seated upon the earth, her white drapery drawn close about her head and person, whilst her face, which peered from beneath its folds, bore an expression of stolid grief. The woman, I learned, was one of the two wives of an Indian called Useful Heart, whose daughter, a maiden of sixteen, had but recently died. This young girl, some time before her death, had become a Christian, and was the only member of her family who had professed that faith. Her father, though a savage, and at one time bitterly opposed to the whites, seems not to have been wholly without natural affection, as his grief at the prospect of losing his child was excessive. He resolved to take his own life, a fact which greatly troubled his daughter, who begged him to relinquish his purpose, telling him that if he loved her he would no longer think of it. She had followed the "new way" because she thought it the true one, and she therefore believed it would be impossible for them to meet hereafter if he died by his own hand. Her father at last yielded to her wish, and before her burial refused to allow her body to be painted according to Indian custom, as such was contrary to her desire. One of her brothers came shortly after, in obedience to her last request, to Mr. Walker's house, in order to part with his scalp lock, and to wear his hair thenceforth after the manner of the whites. This act is regarded as the first evidence of a leaning toward Christianity. The little lock of carefully braided hair, which this Indian boy once wore, is now in my possession and seems to me a mute reminder that the best and deepest instincts of human hearts belong not to one race, nor to one color, but are the universal property of God's children upon the earth.

A little before half-past ten o'clock the ringing of the Mission Church bell summoned us to service. As we left the parsonage we saw the members of the Indian congregation gathering from all sides,

clothed in garments varied and picturesque. Many of the women were neatly dressed, and had red shawls or pieces of brilliant drapery thrown about their shoulders. They carried their babies in their arms or bound upon their backs. The men displayed a great variety of costume; some were wrapped in blankets, and looked as though just emerging from the old ways; some wore coats, and were dressed very much as white men, while about some fluttered that unique emblem of American civilization, the linen duster. We found the church a plain, wooden building, with capacity for about 150 people, bright and cheerful inside, and enriched by a stained glass window above the altar. Those who shrink from the thought of contact with Indians and who conceive the war whoop their only utterance, and murder their daily pastime, would have been both astonished and edified could they have been present and have seen a native Sioux Indian, clothed in white surplice, conducting, in his own tongue, the service of the Church, and have heard the full responses and sweet singing of his fellow worshippers, men, women, and little children, who, but a few years ago, were utterly destitute of Christian instruction, and in many cases hostile even to the presence of white men among them. After service was over many of the men pressed forward to shake hands with us, and manifested redoubled interest and pleasure when the name of William Welsh was mentioned in connection with ours. We found he was remembered not only among the people at Lower Brulé, but among all others whom we visited, as the staunch friend of the Indian race. More than one gift of considerable value was presented to us as a token of gratitude for his service of past years. The memories of these men are retentive as well of the kindness of their benefactors as the injuries of their enemies. At Lower Brulé we took up the first link of a chain of evidence, in reference to the Indian question, which we were able to follow without break during the entire course of our trip, to the effect that the Indian, like most men, brings forth good or evil fruit according to the treatment he receives or the circumstances with which he is surrounded. If he be treated with kindness and justice, and be given opportunities for improvement and encouragement for industry, he will become a *man*; if, on the contrary, he be treated with

contempt and injustice, if it be taken for granted that he is a degraded creature, worthy of any indignities his superiors may choose to inflict upon him, then he is likely to become, not a man, but a devil. The truth of this assertion might be apparent to any one who chose to make an unbiased investigation of facts. Unfortunately there are but too many who scoff at the elevation of the Indian, not so much because they believe him incapable of improvement, but upon the same principle, as, in former years, the slaveholder ridiculed the elevation of the negro, because there is more money to be gained from him when ignorant than when instructed. On Sunday afternoon we paid our respects to Major Parkhurst, who holds the position of agent at Lower Brulé, and were received by him very courteously. In the evening, after service, five or six of the leading Indians connected with the Mission called upon us at the parsonage. They pleaded with eloquent dignity the hopeless outlook of their people, and urged an awakening of sympathy in the East, which might render their condition more favorable. Gladly, had it been in our power, would we have given them an assurance of such aid. On Monday we again called upon Major Parkhurst, who afforded us an opportunity of seeing the agent's office, issue house, and the class-room of the government boarding-school. Monday afternoon was spent in visiting many of the Indian cabins and tepees, in all of which we were received with courtesy, and in some with hearty cordiality. On Monday evening service was again held in the little church, where, notwithstanding a severe rain-storm, quite a goodly number of Indians were present. On Tuesday morning we reluctantly brought to a close this, our first visit to an Indian community, much impressed by what has already been accomplished among a people whose temper, but a few years back, was hostile and dangerous. What has been done, however, is trifling compared with what might be done were such civil and religious opportunities afforded them on a large scale as has been proved indispensable to the proper development of our own race. After crossing the Missouri to Chamberlain, we went by train to the little town of Springfield, situated on the river, about one hundred miles below Lower Brulé Agency. Here we found Hope School, an institution founded and sustained by the

missionary effort of the Episcopal Church, under the direction of Bishop Hare. We reached the school at about seven o'clock Wednesday morning, after a journey of singular discomfort and fatigue, rejoicing to find ourselves in what we then surmised, and what afterwards proved to be, an oasis in the desert. Hope School lies a short distance from the town upon the breezy prairie-land which breaks into precipitous bluffs, whose sides are fretted and worn by the swift waters of the Missouri. Its situation is suggestive of health, air and freedom. It is a simple two-story frame structure, home-like in appearance, and pleasantly shaded by trees. We were cordially welcomed by Mrs. Knapp, the house-mother, who showed us into a cool, tastefully arranged parlor, fragrant with the odor of wild roses. As we sat there, surrounded by everything suggestive of peace and comfort, and heard from the adjoining rooms the sweet voices of Indian girls singing at their household work, we could not but ask ourselves, "Can this be the home of savage children whom some hold it money wasted to care for and to teach?" After breakfast we visited the school-room, where we found about twenty children, boys and girls, varying in age from six to eighteen, quietly assembled. Before beginning the lessons of the day, under the supervision of Miss Knight, each child was asked by Mrs. Knapp what duties he or she had previously performed. To this question, some such reply as the following was given in clear, distinct English, "I made my bed, washed the dishes, picked up chips, took bugs off the potato vines, swept the school-room." Thus we learned that all had shared in the performance of household work before beginning the duties of the class room. The advantage of such training is, of course, manifest, as not only are the girls thus accustomed from an early age to work that will be most valuable to them in the future, but also the baneful idea, so prevalent among the Indians, that there is degradation in labor, is early counteracted in the boys. We could not but experience a feeling of amusement and satisfaction, when, at the closing exercises, a week later, we saw these Indian youths, and among them a lad of eighteen, march into the school-room, each bearing upon his shoulder that peaceful emblem of industry, a common broom. After all of Mrs. Knapp's questions had been answered, Miss Knight began the

lesson for the day. A large card, upon which was a neat wood-cut, hung over the school-room door. This picture represented a little boy sleeping upon a carpenter's bench, with tools and playthings scattered in confusion about him. The children were required to write upon their slates a description of what they saw upon the card. We had an opportunity of examining the slates, when the children had finished their lesson, and were much surprised with the variety and clearness of the descriptions, and the excellent handwriting in which they were expressed.

The day following, Bishop Hare joined us on his return from a visitation to the various Mission stations, higher up the Missouri. His arrival gave us great pleasure, as it afforded us not only the society of a friend, but also the conversation of one whose long experience in the Indian country made his opinions interesting and valuable. Each additional day at Hope School impressed us more forcibly than the last with the good such an institution can accomplish. The change wrought in the children, by the devoted labors of Mrs. Knapp and her assistant, from their unpromising condition when taken from camp life, has indeed been marvellous. To witnesses of such work, the greatest difficulties of the Indian question melts away. The boys and girls about us, and with whom we lived under the same roof, were as bright, as active, and as happy as the best of those one might meet at home. Whether in the class-room, at play, or when attending to the simplest duties of household or garden, their conduct seemed to us equally admirable. Their obedience and respect towards their teacher, when engaged in school work, did not strike us more forcibly than the joyous freedom of their games when study hours were over and books had been cast aside. During our week's stay at Hope School, we heard no angry or unkind word from any of the Indian children, nor did we see any brow clouded by ill temper or discontent. Such happy results as these, however, were not obtained in a day, for when the school was begun, some four years ago, difficulties were encountered which promised little hope for the future, and were overcome only by patience which never tired, and faith which nothing could daunt. The popularity of the Bishop's schools is now so great among the Indians that numerous applications for admittance must be refused, through lack of