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THE TRAGEDY OF THE SIOUX

BY CHIEF STANDING BEAR

Sixteen years ago I left reservation life and my native people—the Oglala Sioux—because I was no longer willing to endure existence under the control of an overseer.

For about the same number of years I had tried to live a peaceful and happy life; tried to adapt myself and make readjustments to fit the white man's mode of existence. But I was unsuccessful. I developed into a chronic disturber. I was a bad Indian, and the agent and I never got on. I remained a hostile, even a savage, if you please. And I still am. I am incurable.

I was born during the troublous days of the 60's, the exact year is not known, when the Sioux were succumbing to the trickery of the whites and the undermining of their own tribal morale. My first years were spent living just as my forefathers had lived—roaming the green, rolling hills of what are now the States of South Dakota and Nebraska. I well remember the first white habitation I ever saw. It was a dugout in Northern Nebraska, whither we had gone on a buffalo hunt. Prior to that time there was not a fence, a field nor even a log-cabin to break

the natural beauty of the land. That too, was the first time I ever saw dead buffalo lying around on the plain.

After the death of Crazy Horse in 1877 abrupt changes came for the Sioux. As long as this great leader lived there was a Sioux nation, but his passing meant its death knell. There was no other leader with his power to uphold the integrity of the people. Up to the time of his death some of them were still pursuing their life of freedom, but after that tragic and disrupting incident quick and drastic changes came for the Oglalas. Two years afterward I saw the agency buildings erected at Rosebud. Reservation life then became an actuality for me.

In 1879 I was sent, with some eighty other boys and girls, to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, to be made over into the likeness of the conqueror. I went dressed in the traditional apparel of the Plains tribes—moccasins, breechclout, leggins and blanket. My hair was long. I left my people trying to settle down and put the ancestral life back of them—the older with resignation or with bitter, resentful memories; the young with wonderment and bewilderment. When, some three or four years later, I returned, things were different. I heard the old men talking of the last buffalo hunt and everyone was learning to eat "spotted buffalo." Instead of the council of chiefs to guide us the White Grandfather (in Washington) sent his emissaries; then came the agent and the white soldiery. The white soldier has always stayed close to us; he is there today.

But it was upon the Indian police, perhaps, that we looked with most disdain. With them was injected into our lives the idea of physical force—something not known in our intertribal life. The Indian police compelled a conduct contrary to all our

ancestral notions of lawful and manly action. In organized Sioux society there was no punishment—no jailing, no whipping, no denying of food, no taking away of personal liberty. But there was a very effective system of ostracization: the wrongdoer was ignored—and Sioux society was peculiarly free from crime. A few weeks ago, as I left the reservation for my return to the city, one of my relatives expressed his concern for my safety on the journey, and especially after I reached the city. He asked me if I had a weapon and I said no. He thought that I should be prepared to protect myself against the robbers and thieves that infest the city!

Always, in the tribal days, the young deferred to the old, and were so trained from babyhood. It was the old who held the wisdom of the tribe—they were the teachers and instructors.

But under the agency system, often-times the policeman was a young fellow who was sent out, by order of the agent, to handcuff and bring in an old man. This happened in the instance of one of my brothers. I felt dishonored and asked him to quit the force, which he did.

There was still another influence that came, almost as soon as the agency buildings were established, and took a place in routing the old life—the church. These things were very foreign, very upsetting, to minds and bodies that had, out of centuries of struggle, achieved a harmony with their surroundings. The Indian fitted the broad plains and loved them just as did the buffalo; and those great grassy spaces, even today, are fit only for the raising of the four-footed beast.

The country at large little knew what these sudden changes

meant to my people—both as individuals and as a nation. It simply felt safe in the thought that a "warlike" race had been quelled and quieted; that it had been led into ways of peace and progress; that the "savages" were being kindly treated and their well-being carefully considered by a beneficent government.

There is not and never has been a human attitude taken toward the Indian; no acknowledgement of his virtues; no friendly acceptance of his native abilities. He has been made to feel his segregation. Since the Indian wars ended the white man has so busied himself wresting riches from the land that its people have been forgotten. Forgotten save for a few friends and humanitarians whose sensitive souls are uneasy and irritated as long as the voices of the oppressed are audible.

II

A few weeks ago I went back to my people for the first time in sixteen years. In the intervening time I have lived constantly in the society of white men, ostensibly one of them, but in spirit and sympathy still living with my people, working for them, listening to their entreaties, and trying to help them with their problems. So, almost as soon as I sat in camp on the reservation, many old friends, hearing of my return, came to see me. They greeted me with tears of gladness in their eyes, but with discontent and dejection in their hearts.

I found the destruction of my people continuing; I found conditions worse than when I left them years ago. I knew, of

course, that the Sioux were in desperate straits last Winter—that they suffered from cold and insufficient food, so my first inquiry was about food. An old-time friend pointed to a house from which he had just come. He said, "See that meat drying on the line? That is horse meat. I have just had a meal of it."

Everywhere we went horse meat was drying in the sun. We came to one place—a log cabin near Medicine Root creek—and there was the usual line of it hung up to dry. A fine young colt had just been killed. My friends came out from the house, trying to be happy to see me. The older people were stalwart, the strength and vigor of their forefathers still apparent. But the young—they showed weakness coming on. Their cheeks were hollowed and their lower jaws drooped down—the inevitable sign of hunger. What will my friends do this Winter when the snows drift high?

Further on we stopped to see more friends. Three men leaned against the car as they talked. An older one looked thin and weak. A member of the party inquired if he were ill. He replied that he was not ill but that he did not get enough meat to eat. A Sioux, especially an old Sioux, must have meat. They have been raised on meat and their bodies cannot now be denied.

Another day we knocked at the door of a dirt-floored log cabin where a woman lay sick. We asked her if she would not like to go to the nice new hospital just completed at Pine Ridge. She said that nothing could induce her to go there, for she had heard that the patients were not given enough to eat. We asked what she desired to eat and she said a fresh raw kidney would please her. The ladies of our party lost no time in getting the raw kidney, a delicacy with the old Sioux.

Nancy Red Cloud told us that she was in an agency office one cold wintry day when an old Indian whose money was on deposit there came in. He told the agent that he would like to have some money, for he had been without food for several days and was hungry. The agent put him off, saying he would see about it. The old Indian, Big Head by name, while sitting in a chair, waiting, toppled over dead, Nancy catching him in her arms. The death was pronounced heart failure by the agency doctor. Nevertheless, so much talk was caused by the agent's treatment of Big Head that he resigned.

I went to see my old-time friend, Chief Black Horn. He said, "Conditions last year were very bad. The rations allowed were insufficient. The amount which was supposed to last two weeks was actually enough for just one day. If an old person sells a piece of ground the money is placed in the hands of the agent and rations are at once stopped. When the money has been exhausted, rations are again resumed." I asked Black Horn why more land was not cultivated by the Indian farmers and his reply was: "The white farmer can beat us farming because he has tractors. We can't farm extensively, so we raise small gardens. If our land is not leased to the white man it lies idle." Then I inquired about the cattle situation. He corroborated what I had heard from others: "There was a time when all the Indians had plenty of cattle, but after the white man was allowed to bring his stock in on our reserve there was much confusion. We would like to raise cattle but it's useless to try in the present condition of things."

Food! Meat! Everyone wanting meat! Yet the Sioux live in the finest cattle country in the land. The white farmers scattered liberally all through their reservation have fine-looking cattle,

as well as pigs, chickens, turkeys and horses. But not the Indian; he is poverty-stricken!

The truth is that the Sioux has been disinherited; there *is* no reservation. The fence that once surrounded it, defining its territory, has been torn down. White cattlemen have been allowed to bring their cattle on Sioux grazing ground on the promise to pay twenty-five cents a head for pasturage. But it was not long after the white man's cattle came that the Indian's cattle began to disappear, and the white man's herds began to increase. The Indian's herds have now ceased to exist. My party and I tried to purchase a steer for the feast which we gave for our Indian friends. But no Indian owned one, so we made our purchase from a white man.

We talked of a solution to the cattle question. The country is manifestly a cattle country. The Sioux are not farmers. They can raise cattle and if given a chance will become independent. The logical procedure is to give back their reservation to them. Remove the white man entirely. Fence the reservation if necessary. Stock the land with cattle and let the Sioux do the rest.

III

The old Indians today are pictures of lost hope. Many of them travel daily to the agency office and sit there. Day in and day out—sit and wait. The office is where they draw, now and then, a pittance in tribal money. Last year the amount was \$7.50 a head

for the sick, disabled and all. The agent told us that it came at a most needed time, but what is \$7.50 in purchasing power at a trader's store, where prices are two and three times as high as they are off the reservation?

Most of the old people wear canvas moccasins and almost without exception they need dental treatment. In fact, the most noticeable thing about the Sioux people in general is their dire need of dentistry. Spiritual deterioration is in an advanced stage also. Incentive is gone. Old and young are meek to the point of docility, obeying every command of the agent. They settle no questions for themselves; their overseer decides everything. The system has crushed them; they are nonentities.

For years the Oglala council had been meeting, attended by most of the old men, until recently. Some time ago a meeting had been arranged, and some of the members traveled a distance of fifty miles to attend, when word came from the agent through an Indian policeman forbidding the meeting to take place and ordering the visiting members to return home. During my sojourn at the reservation word came from the agent again, saying that the Oglala council could meet once more. Last Fourth of July the people of several districts wished to get together for a big celebration, but were commanded to hold only district celebrations. This dictatorial order was still causing much comment when I left.

If an Indian wants to leave the reservation he must get permission. Even free-born American citizens—the people who assist in making the laws of the land and pay taxes to keep petty officials in office—are under surveillance once they walk on the ground of this government prison. My party and I were

summoned by the agent to make statements concerning the reasons for our presence in the reservation. Not deigning to answer his inquiries over the telephone, we called in person at his office at Pine Ridge and answered the following questions:

What are your names?

What are you doing while on the reservation and what were your purposes in coming? [Here the agent remarked that we had been seen writing in a book.]

Who heads the party?

Who finances the party?

Who owns the car in which you travel?

What is the license number?

Chief Turning Hawk is one of the fine old councilors—as splendid a character as one meets in any society, and in spirit of the old school. He is tall, has clear-cut features, and wears his poverty with the same quiet grace as he wears his tribal garments. He showed me a document in embellished writing which was sent to him after the World War:

The
United States of America

E Pluribus Unum

*To All To Whom These Presents Shall Come,
Greetings:*

The thanks of the Nation are extended through the President, Commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, to the people of

THE DAKOTA OF THE PINE
RIDGE RESERVATION

for their unswerving loyalty and patriotism, the splendid service rendered, the willing sacrifice made, and the bravery of their sons in the military and naval service of the United States when the nation was in peril during the World War of 1917-1918.

I asked Turning Hawk if the powers of the medicine men were as strong as ever. He said they could no longer perform their wonders; that the presence of the white people and the rule of the agent had destroyed the faith of the Indians. There had been a time when everyone ate or no one ate; when a man's word was never broken; when there was plenty, for no man killed except for food.

It is this loss of faith that has left a void in Indian life—a void that civilization cannot fill. The old life was attuned to nature's rhythm—bound in mystical ties to the sun, moon and stars; to the waving grasses, flowing streams and whispering winds. It is not a question (as so many white writers like to state it) of the white man "bringing the Indian up to his plane of thought and action." It is rather a case where the white man had better grasp some of the Indian's spiritual strength. I protest against calling my people

savages. How can the Indian, sharing all the virtues of the white man, be justly called a savage? The white race today is but half civilized and unable to order his life into ways of peace and righteousness.

IV

Against the young there are many complaints. The government school is changing everything and the young are losing their tribal ideals and manners. One old lady said: "With all the education of the young they do not read or study the treaties in order to help us. We sometimes ask them, but they pay no attention to us." There is undoubted need for the young Indians to help the old ones, who cannot speak English and are bewildered by the routine of an office and legal phrases.

Here is an instance: Mrs. Big Boy brought to me a paper regarding her widow's allotment of \$500. Not understanding the correct procedure, she had been holding the paper since early in 1929. She asked me to go to the agent for her and see if it granted her the allotment. I did so and in fifteen minutes the matter was straightened out in favor of Mrs. Big Boy.

Here is an instance which shows how the white farmer is favored: About a year ago I received a letter from one of my friends saying that a white man had taken his horse and would not return it. My friend appealed to the agent but after months of waiting nothing had been done. I at once wrote to the agent asking for an investigation of the matter but my appeal also was

ignored. I was on the point of writing to the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Washington when I suddenly arranged to go to the reservation. I had been there but a few days when my friend came to me saying that his horse had mysteriously reappeared and was in his corral. I have reason to believe that my presence had something to do with the matter.

The government school—the segregated school—is a curse and a blight. The mission school is credited by both parents and pupils with being far better than the government school, for all its fine buildings and equipment. But all cannot get into the mission schools. Applications for admittance far exceed the capacity. After graduation from the government school most girls find their life's work in city kitchens and most boys who do not drift back to the reservation lose their identity in a shop.

There are great possibilities in the young Indians. They are capable of becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects and road-builders on the reservations. Then too, they should be trained in the history and arts of their people; it is they who should perpetuate the native dances, songs, music, poetry, languages and legends, as well as the native arts and crafts. Music and dancing are talents peculiar to the Indian—no other people on this continent sing and dance for the same reasons that he does, or in the same way.

With this sort of training the young Indian would be better able to cope with the discrimination he now encounters. In my motion-picture work I have come in contact with much of this discrimination. Always a white actor is given preference and no Indian girl is given a chance to lead, even in an Indian picture; and I want to say that I know of instances in which no Indian girl

could exhibit more stupidity than the white girl who was being coached and actually shoved into a star part in a picture. This discrimination is not based on looks either. The Indian girl, and especially the mixed blood, is sometimes very handsome.

Both sexes of the young are addicts to drunkenness and cigarettes and their language has become profane. These things fill the old Indian with shame. Black Horn said that vices were destroying their young. Self-mastery—which the old Indian knew so well—is weakened and the young have not the strength to deny themselves. When Black Horn was asked if the training of the white man could be offset he answered: "No, they have been taken too far away. Their faith is gone. We are powerless to save them."

But they can be saved. If the public conscience can be brought into action against the slavery of the American Indian it can be wiped out of existence. When the enormous sum of \$20,000,000 has been supplied by the taxpayers of this land to uphold an evil system it is manifestly their business to look into it.

When I was handed my papers of citizenship in the Washington office, the commissioner, Belt I think it was, said as he extended his hand: "Here, Standing Bear, are your papers. You are now a citizen and a free man. The cloud from over your head is gone." I walked out of the office feeling an exaltation I shall never be able to describe—feeling once more the sweet freedom of my youth.

But the clouds are not yet gone from over the heads of my people—they are not free. And as long as they are in bondage I

shall never cease to be a hostile—a savage, if you please.

[The end of *The Tragedy of the Sioux* by Chief Standing Bear]