

Some Experiences with Indians.

By Hon. Carl Schurz,  
Ex-Secretary of the Interior.

THE question has often been discussed whether the "noble Indian" with his lofty ways of thinking and his generous impulses, as he is depicted in some of Fenimore Cooper's novels, has ever existed in reality. I had occasion for forming an opinion on this subject while, as Secretary of the Interior, I was charged with the supervision of Indian affairs, and my official duties brought me into personal contact with the "wards of the nation."

I not only made the acquaintance of some of the most famous Indian chiefs of the time, when they came to Washington to "see the Great Father," but I also visited several of the most important Indian reservations for the purpose of studying the condition of the various Indian tribes under government care, and of satisfying myself of the efficiency of the service.

One of my tours of inspection in 1879 took me to the Rosebud Agency in Dakota. There were several thousand Sioux Indians living on that reservation. The Sioux, a very vigorous and martial race, had been on the war-path not long before, and had filled that part of the country with terror; but they were then at peace, and the government was making efforts to set them to work as agriculturists, as teamsters, and in various other ways.

My little party, seated in light wagons, had a hard drive of about ninety miles from the Missouri River across the arid plains, which on that day were swept by one of those scorchingly hot winds from the south characteristic of that region in summer-time. Arrangements had been made for several changes of horses at convenient intervals.

Two young Sioux Indians, serving as guides, rode ahead of us on their ponies and gave us an illustration of Indian endurance. We observed them scampering to and fro, occasionally disappearing in the distance far in advance, then galloping back to report something to the interpreter accompanying us, then dashing forward again. We arrived at the agency after nightfall, thoroughly jaded. But our two Sioux guides, who had been on horseback all day in the stifling heat, having, as I learned, changed ponies only once, were, after their ride of far more than ninety miles,—for they had many a time doubled their tracks,—seemingly as fresh as ever.

The next morning, stepping out on the veranda of the agency house, I saw emerging from the clusters of teepees—wigwams—covering the plain around us, a cavalcade of Indians in white blankets advancing in single file toward us. There were about thirty of them. This procession of Indians in white, slowly and silently moving on, had something solemn about it.

"What does this mean?" I asked the agent.

"They are chiefs who want to speak to the Great Father, I guess," was the answer. The title "Great Father" is bestowed by the Indians not only upon the President, but also upon the Secretary of the Interior, or indeed upon any high officer of the government representing the President.

"Do you know what they want?"

"No," said the agent. "Probably some complaint. They were told that you would come, and have been looking for you anxiously. I recognize the man at the head of the procession. It is White Thunder, one of the best Indians on the reservation."

"Why does not Spotted Tail—the head chief—come with them to see me?"

fixed upright in his hair. There was in his whole appearance and expression something of chivalrous honesty, which could not fail to inspire confidence.

He advanced toward me, offered me his hand, heartily shook mine with the customary "How!" then stepped back, gathered his white blanket about him as we might imagine a Roman senator to have draped his toga when addressing the senate, and spoke, as translated to me by the interpreter, somewhat in this wise:

"Great Father, I have come to welcome you and to speak with you. I have long been expecting you. My heart is glad because you are here. My heart is good. I am obedient to the Great Father. What the Great Father tells me to do, I do. What have I done that the Great Father does not trust me?"

He stopped for an answer. I was puzzled, for I did not know of anything done by the government that might have provoked such a question. So I looked inquiringly at the agent, who whispered: "I do not know what he can mean. These Indians have very strange notions sometimes."

I then turned to White Thunder and said: "Why do you say that the Great Father does not trust you? Here I am. Your people are many thousands. I have come among you, not with an army, but alone, accompanied only by a few friends. Is not this proof enough that I have confidence in you? What stronger proof would you have?"

When the interpreter reported these words there came from the Indians a grunt that sounded like a sign of satisfaction. But White Thunder answered:

"Great Father, what you say is true. You have come because you know that my heart is good. And I am glad that you have come. But why have you sent soldiers upon my land? That shows that you do not trust me, and makes me sad."

I was surprised, for I knew nothing of there being soldiers on the reservation. When setting out upon my journey I had expressly declined to have a military escort with me, for the very reason that I wished to show the Sioux my feeling of security among them.

In answer to my inquiry, the agent explained that there was a party of government surveyors on the reservation, to stake out farm lots for the Indians; that these surveyors, being a little afraid of the Sioux, had asked for a military guard to protect them; that a squad of soldiers had been furnished for that purpose from the nearest military post, and that there seemed to be good reason for this precaution, as the Indians were night after night pulling up the stakes set by the surveyors during the preceding day, and trying to stampe their horses.

Having received this information, I spoke to White Thunder again.

"Your agent tells me that the men who survey land for you have asked for soldiers to protect their camp. I knew nothing of this. Had I been asked I would not have permitted the soldiers to come. I would have said to the surveyors that they were safe among you. But would not that have been a mistake? I am sorry to hear that your young men have pulled up during the night the stakes set by the surveyors, and tried to drive away their horses. This is wrong. It makes me sad. If such evil things are done, is it not necessary to have soldiers here for the protection of the surveyors' camp? What say you?"

"Send Away the Soldiers."

White Thunder drew himself up to a majestic posture and with a wave of the hand replied: "Great Father, trust me. My heart is good."

the Indians would catch it and bring it back; and they did everything to make the surveyors feel safe and comfortable.

On the following day I visited White Thunder in his teepee. The interior of the roomy tent I found to be a model of order and neatness. White Thunder welcomed me with the easy



WHITE THUNDER SPEAKS.

dignity of a person whose standing in the world is above question.

With the true instinct of a gentleman who receives a friend as a guest in his house, he entirely abstained from urging—even hinting at—any of those complaints or requests which usually form the staple of the Indian's talk when he comes into contact with a representative of the government. He touched business only in reply to a question on my part, and then merely by expressing his satisfaction with the treatment he received and with the promptness of my order sending away the soldiers.

With assurances of mutual "good hearts" we parted, and I have always remembered White Thunder as one of the Indians of my acquaintance whose faithful portraiture would have fitted a place among Fenimore Cooper's noble savages.

During the autumn of the same year a revolt broke out at the White River Agency in western

Colorado. The rebellious Indians killed their agent and held his family and the agency employes captives, among them some women. It was a wanton outrage, for which, however, only a few of the Ute Indians were responsible.

Great excitement arose in the State of Colorado. Horrible stories flew about of Indian atrocities and of the perils to which the settlers and the miners in the mountains were exposed; and they were widely believed, as is usually the case under such circumstances. It looked for some time as if there would be an irresistible movement among the people of Colorado to take the matter into their own hands and to exterminate the Utes living within the boundaries of the state, the innocent together with the guilty.



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"Oh," said the agent with a smile, "Spotted Tail feels himself a very big Indian. He will come when you invite him."

Meanwhile the procession had arrived and the chiefs dismounted. White Thunder stepped forward, and his companions squatted down on the ground in a half-circle, outside of which gradually a large crowd of dusky young men, squaws and children gathered.

#### The Speech of White Thunder.

White Thunder was a splendid model of vigorous manhood, tall and erect, with a remarkably handsome face, strong and noble features, keen but frank eyes, the eagle feather

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#### "Send Away the Soldiers."

White Thunder drew himself up to a majestic posture and with a wave of the hand replied: "Great Father, trust me. My heart is good. Send away the soldiers and you will see."

I stepped down from the veranda, gave my hand to White Thunder, and said, "I will trust you. I shall send the soldiers away this instant. They will be gone before the sun sets."

White Thunder shook my hand vigorously, and the Indians heaved a grunt which was evidently one of pleasure. The council dissolved, the chiefs mounted their ponies and rode away, and in a few hours the soldiers were on the march back to their post.

From that moment not a stake set by the surveyors was touched by the Indians; the horses of the surveyors not only remained entirely unmolested, but when one strayed away



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#### Danger of Bloody Collisions.

The information received convinced me that the trouble at the White River Agency had been participated in by only a small number of mischievous spirits, and that the bulk of the nation were perfectly peaceable and well-disposed. But it became clear at the same time that, if after so exciting an occurrence the Utes remained in Colorado, there would be constant danger of bloody collisions, apt to lead to the most disastrous consequences.

After having taken the necessary steps to rescue the white captives still in the hands of the rebellious White River Utes, and to bring

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about the surrender of the guilty Indians, I invited the head chief of the Ute nation, Ouray, to come to Washington with some of the most influential men of his nation for the purpose of consulting about what it might be best to do under circumstances so perilous. This invitation was promptly complied with.

Ouray was a man of about forty years, of medium stature, broad-chested, and somewhat inclined to corpulency. His round face and rather heavy features were lightened up by a pair of singularly keen and intelligent eyes. He brought his wife Chepata with him—a remarkably handsome squaw, to whom he was said to be very much attached.

They always appeared, while in Washington, in their best Indian clothes—coats of antelope skin, adorned with embroidery of many-colored porcupine quills.

Ouray was a "rich Indian." He possessed large herds of cattle and of horses, and lived in a house that had a staircase in it—a thing of which Indians are apt to be especially proud. He also had a carriage and table-knives and forks, which he was said to use occasionally at his meals. He spoke a little Spanish, and could write his name.

He and Chepata often visited me at my house, and they always on such occasions conducted themselves with perfect propriety. They observed the various belongings of the drawing-room with keen but entirely decorous curiosity, and were especially attracted by a large crystal chandelier which was suspended from the ceiling. They wished to know where such a chandelier could be bought, and what it would cost; it would be such an ornament to their house!

#### Chief Ouray, the Statesman.

My official conversations with Ouray were of a grave and melancholy character. But his astonishingly clear comprehension of the difficulties of the situation greatly facilitated a mutual understanding. His talk was quite different from that of the ordinary Indian chief. He spoke like a man of a high order of intelligence and of large views, who had risen above the prejudices and aversions of his race, and he expressed his thoughts in language clear and precise, entirely unburdened by the figures of speech and the superfluities commonly current in Indian talk.

He had evidently pondered much over the condition and the future of the Indian in North America, and expressed his mature conclusions with the simple eloquence of a statesman. He comprehended perfectly the utter hopelessness of the struggle of the Indians against the progress of civilization. He saw clearly that nothing was left to them but to accommodate themselves to civilized ways, or to perish.

He admitted that it was very hard to make many of his people understand this; that so long as they did not fully appreciate it, they should, as much as possible, be kept out of harm's way; that it was the duty of influential chiefs to cooperate with the government to make the transition as little dangerous and painful as possible; that he, therefore, recognized the necessity of removing the Utes from Colorado, hard as the parting from their old haunts might be, and that he depended upon me to bring about that removal under conditions favorable to his people. Ouray was by far the wisest Indian I have ever seen.

After the conclusion of our negotiations, which resulted in the restoration of peace and in the eventual removal of the Utes to a reservation in Utah, Ouray returned to his Western home. Soon afterward he fell ill and died. Then something of a very touching character happened.

and in addition his tobacco-pouch and an old powder-horn which he had used in his younger days. This was Chepata's present.

It was accompanied by a letter from the agent, giving me from Chepata this message: If I accepted the present, to keep it while I lived and for my children, whom she had seen, without sending one in return, it would be regarded by Chepata and her people as a proof of true friendship on my part, and they would esteem that friendship very highly. But if I made a present in return, it would be understood by them as signifying that I did not value their friendship much and simply wished to get rid of an obligation and be quits with them; and this would make them sad. Chepata therefore hoped I would accept the present and let our friendship stand.

It will be admitted that greater delicacy of feeling is seldom met with, even in the most refined society. It must be added, however, that this was an exceptional case. Ordinarily the Indian, when he makes a present to a white man, expects one in return, and his equanimity is by no means disturbed when that which he receives is much more valuable than that which he has given. Nor does he differ much in this respect from a majority of the more civilized race.

What I wish to show is that the "noble savage" with chivalrous impulses and fine sentiments, as he occasionally appears in romance, should not be regarded as a mere figment of the imagination. He has existed, and no doubt he exists even now. It should, indeed, be remembered that the same superior Indians are at the same time in many respects not above the barbarous habits and the ways of thinking of their tribes.



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Some time after Ouray's death I received from a government agent on the Ute reservation a letter which Ouray's widow, Chepata, had dictated to him. In it she told me that I had been her departed husband's best friend. He had said so. I had also done much to save his people from grave disaster and was therefore their best friend. She wished to give me, in memory of her husband, as a present, the things she valued most. Would I accept that present?

#### The Gift to the Great Father.

I thereupon wrote to the agent, asking him to inform himself whether my accepting such a present would have a good effect with the Utes, and also, whether, if such acceptance were thought advisable, it would be the proper thing on my part to send a present in return, and if so, what it should be.

A few weeks afterward I received a box containing the clothes Ouray had worn when negotiating the treaty with me in Washington,

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