Our Life Among the Iroquois Indians

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OUR LIFE AMONG THE IROQUOIS INDIANS

BY

MRS. HARRIET S. CASWELL

If I live, this accursed system of robbery and shame in our treatment of the Indians shall be reformed.—ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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Dedicated

to

The Iroquois

and

His Friends
A FEW hours' ride from the nearest railroad station in a wagon not the easiest, over a road not the smoothest, meeting with narrow escapes as to mud holes and deep ruts, and you will find yourself upon the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation. You might as well be west of the Rocky Mountains for any indications of the pale face that you see here. Indians in the homes, on the roads, working on the farms, and building houses; Indian children with ball clubs, snow snakes, and arrows; Indian babies upon the backs of their mothers; Indian corn bread boiling in the kettles under the trees; Indians here, there, and everywhere. The straight black hair and shining black eyes that mark the race everywhere meet you here. You hear the curious intonations of the strange language all about you, and yet you are only thirty miles south of Buffalo and five hundred miles from New York City. As you ride through the Reservation you note many farms of which Indian owners may well be proud and others of which they should be ashamed. You will see corn, wheat, potatoes, tomatoes, and other products of the farm in better condition than those of the neighboring white man; and you will see the crops of others sadly choked with weeds and perishing for want of care. The owners of these last expect to live next winter upon the corn and beans and potatoes of their more industrious neighbors. Would that for white man and for Indian the ancient law might be enforced, "If a man will not work, neither shall he eat."

A few years ago the old Mission church was rapidly falling into decay. Now you hear the progressive sound of the hammer and saw. This church building, which the Indians are repairing with
their own hands, was erected thirty-five years ago through the efforts of Father Gleason. Have this people been taught the trade of the carpenter, the mason, the paper hanger? No. And yet they can design and build a house, plaster and paint it, and when out of repair make it over as good as new. This Mission church is the prettiest church in this part of the country. The walls have been delicately tinted and ornamented, the pulpit and seats re-modeled, and this, with the painting and other repairs, has all been done by Indians. The only exception is the "graining," which was the work of a white man, who, having once plied his trade in plain sight of those sharp eyes, will never more be needed in Indian land.

Why are Indians of all tribes natural mechanics? How is it that they use all trades without instruction in any? What a blessed movement in Indian affairs is this experiment in industrial education now carried on at Hampton, Carlisle, Santee, and at Lawrence, Kansas!

You decide to spend the Sabbath. It proves to be the rededication of the newly repaired church. It is a highly satisfied looking congregation that fills the freshly painted seats. The remodeled pulpit is occupied by the missionary and his Indian interpreter. Upon the same platform a fine choir of young men give us musical selections accompanied by the cornet played by one of the Indian brass band. The cabinet organ is admirably managed by an Indian maiden. The music is soul-inspiring. The sermon upon the text, "The glory of the Lord filled the temple," describes the experience of the Israelites under similar circumstances. The preacher believes that the time has come when this Indian church, having fulfilled the conditions, may expect the glorious experience of the builders of old. The sermon is well adapted to their needs and very practical, especially when the hearers are exhorted not to defile the house of God by the use of tobacco within its sacred walls. The people bear this sharp thrust at their favorite weed with their usual dignified composure.
Having lifted the curtain a moment to take a glance at the present condition of these Indians, let us turn back to the beginning of a life which for more than half a century is to be closely interwoven with every dark thread and every bright thread of their history.