

TAKING STOCK

It is a matter of general knowledge that in the shaping of courses—destiny—it is the mind that sees things, rather than the eye. The mental view-point seems to be the guide for the majority of us and if we are in error in our mental picture of things it seems impossible for us to accept what we see with our eyes. For many generations our people have carried with them a mental picture of the Indian race—often wholly wrong and at variance with the truth in the matter, but they have stuck to their views. And, stranger still, many clung tenaciously to their erroneous views regarding the Indian and his characteristics even though they had never seen an Indian.

Often these are the views of prejudice and do great injustice. We boast of our great superiority and yet many of us have not yet advanced far enough along the paths of civilization to be able to render strict justice in our decrees and to "call a spade a spade." Pride of race is a splendid thing until it is overplayed—then it is a pernicious trait, indeed. There are many people who accept as truth the charge that Indian people are utterly cruel, dishonest, and immoral—a matter of which they have no first-hand knowledge. When we look over the past ages, as revealed to us by our histories, we cannot escape the conviction that the so-called civilized races of the world have been past-masters in almost every conceivable branch of crime.

This sounds harsh to a pure-minded and sensitive person, but if our statement be doubted we ask you to get out your histories and do a bit of reviewing. It is an easy matter to "give a dog a bad name and then hang him." Many of our Indian people have fared about as the dog, at least so far as a name goes. Because customs are different with different peoples there is no ground for the assumption on the part of any one race that the people of another race are lacking in intelligence or in the finer qualities of life—truth, honesty and a highly moral sense. One who intolerantly holds to such an opinion is himself either ignorant or prejudiced, or both. What we want and need is the truth.

In the year 1796, in Wilkesbarre, Pennsylvania, was born George Catlin. This man became quite famous in his time as an authority on matters pertaining to Indians and their customs. A part of his method of studying Indian character was to make paintings—portraits—of typical Indians from life. It is said that more than 500 of these portraits are now preserved by the United States government. Mr. Catlin traveled among the various Indian tribes of North America for seven years and discovered and gave to the world many interesting facts—the results of his own personal investigation. We are impelled to quote a

few paragraphs from his article on the "Character of the North American Indians," as follows:

"These numerous races. . . whose past history is sunk in oblivion from want of books and records, three-fourths of whom, at least, have already perished by firearms, by dissipation and pestilence introduced among them by civilized people. . . present to the scientific and sympathizing world one of the most deeply interesting subjects for contemplation that can possibly come under their consideration; and I feel assured that parents will justify the inculcation of just notions of these simple and abused people into the minds of their children, as forming a legitimate part of their education."

Mr. Catlin goes on to state that the civilized races, finding the Indians a race who live and act differently from themselves, "Are, therefore, mostly in the habit of treating the character of the American Indians—which, from the distance they are from them, is more or less wrapped in obscurity—as a profound mystery; but there, owing to their ignorance of them, they judge decidedly wrong; for, like everything else nearest to Nature, they are the most simple and easy of all the human family to be appreciated and dealt with, if the right mode be adopted."

Mr. Catlin's travels took him into the Bering Sea country and even into Eastern Siberia—a tour of seven years' duration—and it speaks well for the hospitality of these people when he cites the fact that he was unarmed and that he received no "personal injury or insult, or loss of my property by theft," and he adds, "this should go a great way to corroborate the fact that, if properly treated, the American Indians are among the most honest and honorable, and hospitable people in the world."

Continuing further, this author stated: "To estimate the Indian character properly, it should be constantly borne in mind that these people invariably have, as their first civilized neighbors, the most wicked and unprincipled part of civilized society to deal with; and these white people use rum, and whisky, and firearms, in a country where they are amenable to no law: and amongst a people who have no newspapers to explain their wrongs to the world." Now, reader, which race was the worst?

In summing up, does it not seem even probable that the desire of George Catlin that "just notions" be "inculcated" into the minds of the children of the white people has had something to do in promoting a better understanding between the races? Does it not appear possible that the work of this man may have helped in some degree in getting what we term "Indian Education?" Who knows but George Catlin had more than is dreamed to do with our present great schools for Indian learning—possibly Chemawa, among others?

George Catlin died in Jersey City in 1872.