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Yellow Thunder, Our Little Indian Cousin



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Содержание

YELLOW THUNDER

6

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

16

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Preface

Once upon a time, as you doubtless know, there were no white people in the Western world. In those days our Indian cousins were free to wander wherever they wished, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Some of them had their homes on the great plains, where herds of wild buffaloes supplied them with food and clothing. Others dwelt by the shores of lakes and rivers. Whenever they wished a change, they moved their camps from one spot to another. They had little to fear except the attacks of unfriendly tribes of their own race.

When the white men, with their greater skill and knowledge, came to America, many troubles began for our red cousins. These troubles were such as they had never known before. They were driven away from the homes that were so dear to them. Great numbers were killed. Strong drink, given to them by the white strangers, was the ruin of thousands. Still others died from sickness and want.

The people whom we have called Indians ever since Columbus gave them that name now think with sadness of the old free and happy days before the white traders gave them beads and blankets in exchange for large tracts of land.

There were then no roads, no cities, no stores or factories in all this vast continent, and yet our red cousins were freer and happier than they can ever hope to be again.

Malden, Mass., *May, 1904.*

YELLOW THUNDER

Our Little Indian Cousin

They call him Yellow Thunder. Do not be afraid of your little cousin because he bears such a terrible name. It is not his fault, I assure you. His grandmother had a dream the night he was born. She believed the Great Spirit, as the Indians call our Heavenly Father, sent this to her. In the dream she saw the heavens in a great storm. Lightning flashed and she constantly heard the roar of thunder. When she awoke in the morning she said, "My first grandson must be called 'Yellow Thunder.'" And Yellow Thunder became his name.

But his loving mamma does not generally call him this. When he is a good boy and she is pleased with him, she says, "My bird." If he is naughty, for once in a great while this happens, she calls him "bad boy."

For some reason I don't understand myself, she rarely speaks his real name. Perhaps it is sacred to her, since she believes it was directed by the Great Spirit.

Yellow Thunder lives in the forests of your own land, North America. His skin is a dull, smoky red, his eyes are black and very bright, his hair is black and coarse. His body is straight and well formed. He can run through the woods as quickly and softly as a deer. He lives in a bark house made by his mother. His father

is strong and well, yet he did not help in building it. He thinks such work is not for men. It is fit only for women.

When I tell you how it is made, you will not think it is very hard work. Yellow Thunder's patient mamma chose the place for her home, and then gathered some long poles in the forest. She set these poles in a circle in the ground, bent them over at the top, and tied them. She left a small hole at the top. The framework of the house was now complete. What should she have for a covering? She went out once more into the woods and got some long sheets of white birch bark. At the end of each sheet she fastened a rim of cedar wood. The sheets of bark were hung on the framework, with the rim at the bottom of each one, and the house was finished. The rim would be useful in keeping the bark from being lifted by the winds. But, if there should be a severe storm, the Indian woman would lay stones on the rims to keep the bark down more firmly still.

This is Yellow Thunder's simple home, summer and winter. You would probably freeze there in the cold days of December, but the Indian boy was brought up to endure a great deal of cold.

Let us look inside. We must first lift the deerskin which hangs in the doorway. Does the family sit on the cold, bare ground, do you think? Oh, no; Yellow Thunder has helped his mamma make good thick rugs out of the bullrushes and flags which they gather every autumn. These rugs are very pretty, for they are woven and dyed with the bright colours the Indian women know how to make. There are many of these mats, because they are used for

many purposes. Yellow Thunder sleeps on one of them at night. In the day-time he sits on a mat whenever he is in the house. But he is such a strong lad, he is out-of-doors nearly all the time, both in sunshine and in storm.

In the middle of the house you will notice there is a bare spot covered with clean sand. This is the place where the fire is made. It is carefully swept when there is no fire. If you look directly over the fireplace, you can see the sky. On rainy days, unless the mother is cooking, she keeps the hole covered with a piece of deerskin, that the inside of the house may be dry.

But how does she prepare the food for breakfast, for that is the principal meal of the day to the Indian? A strong hook is fastened in the framework of the house, above the fireplace. The Indian mother hangs a pot on the hook, puts in the meat or fish, and it boils quickly over the burning twigs which her little boy has gathered.

Let us look around the wigwam. Of course, you have long ago heard that name for the Indian's house. What beautiful baskets of rushes those are! I wonder how the red men discovered the way of making such beautiful colours. Besides many other things, the jewelry and clothing of the whole family are kept in these baskets. Look up at the sides of the hut and notice the bows and arrows. And, yes! there is a real tomahawk, with its sharp edge sticking in that corner. Ears of corn braided together are hanging from the framework.

But the prettiest thing we see is the baby's cradle, fastened to

a peg. Two bright black eyes are looking out of it, and that is all we can see of Yellow Thunder's baby sister, "Woman of the Mountain." It took the loving mother a long time to make that cradle. She was very happy while doing it, for she loves her baby tenderly.

It is hardly right to call it a cradle. Baby-frame is a better name. It was made in three pieces, out of the wood of the maple-tree, – a straight board about two feet long for the bottom, a carved foot-board, and a bow which is fastened to the sides and arches over the baby's head. These are all bound together with the sinews of a deer. It is lined with moss, and then Woman of the Mountain is fastened in her queer little bed with straps, which her mamma has made beautiful with bead work. Moss is placed between her feet, her hands are bound at her side, her feet are bound down also, and a beaded coverlet is placed over her tiny body. She looks like a little mummy.

If it is stormy she is hung up on a peg in the hut to swing, but if it is a pleasant day, she swings on the branch of a tree and watches the leaves flutter and the birds sing. She is a happy little baby, although you would hardly think it possible. She got used to her imprisonment almost as soon as she was born. She doubtless thinks it is all right.

When mamma goes out into the forest to gather wood, or into the corn field to work, Woman of the Mountain goes too. The baby-frame is fastened on her mother's back by a pretty beaded strap bound over the woman's forehead.

When the Indian baby was only two days old, she was fastened into her cradle and carried all day on mamma's back while she was weeding the garden. To be sure, the woman stopped two or three times to feed her baby, but the little thing was not once taken out of her frame.

Perhaps you would like to hear a lullaby the Indian mamma often sings to her little one as she swings in her frame. I fear you could not understand the Indian words, so I will give them as Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith wrote them in English:

Swinging, swinging, lul la by,
Sleep, little daughter, sleep,
'Tis your mother watching by,
Swinging, swinging, she will keep,
Little daughter, lul la by.

'Tis your mother loves you, dearest,
Sleep, sleep, daughter, sleep,
Swinging, swinging, ever nearest,
Baby, baby, do not weep;
Little daughter, lul la by.

Swinging, swinging, lul la by,
Sleep, sleep, little one,
And thy mother will be nigh —
Swing, swing, not alone —
Little daughter, lul la by.

You can understand from this how dearly the Indian mother loves her baby, – just as dearly, I do not doubt, as your own mamma has always loved and cared for you.

But what is Yellow Thunder's stern-looking father doing all the time? He has no store to keep, no mill to grind, no factory to work in. There are only three things which deserve his attention. At least that is what he thinks. He hunts or fishes, goes to war, and holds councils with the men of his tribe. Everything else he believes is woman's work, and from the Indian's standpoint, woman is much beneath a man.

After all, the men's work is really the hardest. Sometimes it is easy for them to find plenty of food. Then Yellow Thunder's father comes home rejoicing with the big load he carries. Perhaps he has a red deer hanging over his shoulder; perhaps it is a bear which he has chased many miles before he could get near enough to kill it; or it may be some raccoons for a delicious stew.

But, again, it may be stormy weather. The rivers are frozen over and snow covers the ground. Then, perhaps, the hunter has little success with his bow and arrow, and searches long and far before he can find anything to satisfy his children's hunger. He feels sad, but not for a moment does he think of complaining or giving up. It is his duty to obtain food for his family. It does not matter how cold he gets or how wet he may be. He keeps travelling onward. He will not give up. If he does not at last get enough for all, he will insist on his wife and children satisfying their hunger first. He would scorn to show that he himself is tired,

or hungry, or suffering in any way.

We can understand now why the Indian baby is pinned down in its cradle and not allowed to move freely. It is its first lesson in endurance. It must learn to be uncomfortable and not to show that it is so. It must learn to bear pain, and neither cry nor pucker its mouth. It must learn to appear calm, no matter how it feels.

The hunt is pleasant sometimes, you see, but at others it is work of the hardest kind.

The second duty of the red boy's father is war. He must protect his home from human and wild beast enemies. But I'm really afraid that it is a pleasure for him to fight. If Indians had not been at war so much among themselves, it would have been far harder for the white people to conquer them. I suppose you children have all heard the story of the bundle of sticks, but I will repeat it.

A certain man was about to die. He gathered his sons around him to give them good advice. He showed them some sticks fastened tightly together. Then he asked each one to try to break the bundle. No one could do it. When he saw that they failed, he separated the sticks, and showed them how easy it was to break each one by itself.

"Take a lesson from this," said the man. "If you are united and work together, you will succeed in anything you undertake, for no one can break your strength. If, however, you quarrel among yourselves and try to work each for himself, you will be like the separate twigs, – easily broken."

It has been like this with the Indians. They have fought against

each other, tribe with tribe. They are very brave and have great courage. But they have not understood that they should work together. So the white man came and was able to conquer them.

Besides hunting and going to war, Yellow Thunder's papa is often busy in the council. All matters of business are settled here. New chiefs are chosen at the council; wrong-doers are punished according to what it decides, and treaties with other tribes or the white men are talked over and agreed upon. Sometimes a council will last many days. It is always opened with a prayer to the Great Spirit, thanking him for his good gifts to the people. Each evening, after the business of the council is over, games are played by old and young. It is a time for feasting and pleasure. No business with other people is really settled by a council without gifts of wampum to bind the bargain. Of course you have heard about wampum. Perhaps you have been told it is the Indian's money. There are two kinds of wampum. One is purple and the other white. The white wampum is shaped into beads out of the inside of large conch shells, while the purple is made from the inside of the mussel shell. These beads are strung on deer's sinews and woven into belts. A belt of white wampum is a seal of friendship between two tribes. It is the same as a sacred promise which must not be broken. It is the most precious of all things an Indian owns.

Yellow Thunder's papa is very fond of tobacco. He always carries a beaded pouch filled with it. He believes that the Great Spirit gave tobacco to the Indian. When he smokes it, it opens a

way through which he may draw near God, and be taught by him. His pipe and tobacco will be buried with him when he dies, as he thinks they will be needed on his journey toward heaven. He smokes at the council. He smokes around the camp-fire when he is away hunting. He smokes in the evening time as he sits with his friends and tells stories of the chase or listens to legends of his people.

I hardly know what this Indian father would do without his pipe, as it seems to give him so much comfort and pleasure.

See! here he comes now. Yellow Thunder is at the door of the lodge, watching him as he walks quickly down the forest path. He is truly called a "brave." He looks as though he would fear no danger. How straight is his body, and how strong are his muscles!

He wears leggings of deerskin, finely worked with beads. They are fastened just above his knees. A short kilt is gathered around his waist. It is also made of deerskin, but is worked around the edge with porcupine quills stained in several colours. It is bitterly cold to-day, so he wears a blanket over his shoulders. His head is shaved bare, excepting the scalp-lock at the back. It must be this which makes him look so fierce.

I want you to notice his feet. They step softly and yet firmly. You could not walk as he does. Perhaps you have pointed shoes with high heels. The Indian would look with scorn upon these. What! Cramp the toes with such uncomfortable things! Impossible! He covers his feet in the most sensible manner with the soft moccasins made by his wife. They fit his feet exactly.

He can run like a deer, or creep along the ground like a wildcat in these coverings, and no one will hear him coming. Each moccasin is made of a single piece of deerskin, seamed at the heel and in front. The bottom is smooth and without a seam, while the upper part is worked with beads.

Yellow Thunder's good mamma uses a curious needle and thread. The needle is made from the bone of a deer's ankle, and her thread is of the sinews of the same animal. What would the Indian have done without the deer in the old days before the white man came to this country? I can't imagine, can you?

This animal furnished much of his food and clothing; ornaments were made of his hoofs; needles and many other things came from his bones. Even the brains of the creature were used in tanning skins of animals. They were mixed with moss, made into cakes, and dried in the sun. This mixture will keep a great length of time. Whenever it is needed, a piece of this brain-cake is boiled in water, and the skin is soaked in it after the hair is scraped off. Then it is wrung out and stretched until it is dry. But even then the skin is not ready for use. It will tear very easily. It must be thoroughly smoked on both sides. This work all belongs to Yellow Thunder's mamma. His father has nothing to do with it.

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