

Leaves from my Omaha Note-Book

by Alice C. Fletcher (1838-1923)

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LEAVES FROM MY OMAHA NOTE-BOOK.

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE.

TO-DAY I came upon a group of little girls too busy to note my approach. Their black hair glistened in the warm spring sunlight as they bent over their brown hands, looking at each other's nails, and chattering like magpies. When my shadow fell across them, they looked up and laughed, showing rows of white teeth; then, as by one impulse, fled from me like a covey of partridges. At that moment the mother sauntered by on her way to the creek that was slipping merrily over last year's brown leaves, as if happy that winter had gone. I turned to her, saying, —

"I could n't make out what the children were about, looking at their nails."

"They were seeing if there were any white spots on them."

"What would that mean?"

"That summer is coming."

I looked on my own hand; there was a white line on the nail of the little finger.

"I have one; that tells me I have a journey to go."

The mother looked at my nail, then at me, while I continued, —

"We white folk say, if we see a white spot on the nail," and I touched each finger on my hand in succession, beginning at the thumb:

"A gift; a foe;
A friend; a beau;
A journey to go."

"We Indians say, when we see the white lines, 'fair weather, and summer is coming.'"

Not far from the spot where we stood, my eye caught the gleam of a hepatica on the soft earth, the first flower of the year.

Wandering forth to-day in search of spring flowers, as I looked among the trees growing near the creek, I was arrested by a sudden flash of light among the branches. "Some young man is near," I thought, "signalling with his mirror, to a friend or sweetheart." I have hardly seen a young fellow who did not carry a looking-glass dangling at his side, or hid among his ornaments. The flashing signal was soon followed by the wild cadences of a flute. In a few moments the girls came in sight. Their faces were merry and bright, their braids shining, their voices blithe with the chatter of the intimate friendship of girlhood. Each one carried a bucket. Down the

hill on the other side of the brook advanced two gallants, stepping with the conscious pride of youth, the sun sparkling on their ornaments, their gay blankets hanging from one shoulder, revealing to the full their elastic figures. The girls did not look up, but dallied as they dipped their pails in the stream that reflected in a shimmer their red tunics. It was a pretty scene in which I found myself entrapped.

Suddenly one of the young men dropped on the grass, while his companion with a light bound reached the creek and crossed it. The girls turned with their dripping buckets to leave the stream, but one was confronted by the youth, who stood in her path, shading his brow with a spray of leaves. One of the girls passed on a little way, then putting down her bucket, sat beside it, and busied herself among the herbage at her feet. The arrested girl put down her pail, turned sideways toward her lover, and with her moccasined foot brushed the tender grass. Maintaining this position, between their two watchful friends, the lovers stood some three feet apart, she with downcast face, he evidently pleading his cause to not unwilling ears. By and by the girl fumbled at her belt, and drew forth a little package; opening it, a gay necklace of beads fell about her fingers. This was shyly reached out to the young man, who took it gently from her hand. A moment more, and the girl's friend sprang from the grass giving a signal, while the young man gave a look at his sweetheart that seemed to clothe her with consciousness, then stepped to one side and leapt the brook. The girls with their buckets passed silently up the glen without a backward glance. The youth on reaching his friend flung himself down on the grass, and the two examined the necklace. Finally, they rose and ascended the hill. Again I heard the flute, and listened as it grew fainter and fainter in the distance, until it gradually died away.

While I was busy writing in my note-book to-day, A—— sitting near me, working on her moccasins, her dandy brother and his friend entered the lodge. The young men seated themselves, and the brother began to open his treasure-packs. As I had often admired the brightly painted skin articles, which folded up like a sort of valise, I kept my eyes on them. Evidently the two youths were about to prepare for some festivity, for they looked over the various articles of finery stored in their packs, and then settled themselves to business by beginning to brush out their hair with the stiff, round brushes made of tough grass. I wondered that they should succeed so well, for I have tried those made for me, and they tangle more than they help under my unskilful manipulation. When the long tresses were straightened and smoothed, the brother called A——

to dress his scalp lock. She dropped her work and went over to him, while he reclined so that she could easily reach his head, as she squatted beside him. Her fingers moved dexterously, she unwove the braid and brushed out the long lock that was beautifully crimped, then she straightened the parting, and began to plait the lock in a fine, narrow braid, tying the end skilfully with a buckskin thong. When the brother's hair was dressed, she was asked to beautify his friend in a similar manner, which she did.

Then the young men began to decorate each other from the stores of the wide open packs. Slides and ribbons and beads were fastened on their scalp locks, and when the men stood up the appendage reached to their knees or below. They turned their backs to each other and adjusted their finery, until each was satisfied with the result. A hollow dish was taken and the paint rubbed in it, the round paint stick was drawn from the case, and the young men, sitting on the ground face to face, entered on the second stage of their decoration. This part of the toilet took much time, as each painted the face of the other. The partings of the hair were made red, and the face colored in bands and dots of red, yellow, and green. While this was going on, these close friends and confidants were arranging a delicate affair.

The friend of the brother was greatly smitten by a certain maiden, but his heart was faint, he could not win the fair lady. Said he, as his friend touched him with dabs of yellow, —

“My friend, I can't speak to her. When I get a chance, then my heart beats so fast that my mouth will not open. You must speak to her for me, and ask her to be kind to me.”

“She is not my relation. I have no right to speak to her, and she might get angry.”

“I do not think she would get angry, and I want you to help me, I cannot get her out of my mind.”

The painting went on in silence, until finally the brother said, “My friend, I will help you. I must think over what I shall say to her.”

Another pause, while the paint stick clicked on the dish, and made touches on the face of the friend.

“When will you speak to her?” asked the friend.

“I am going to see another person who let me speak to her last evening; she stopped at the creek. She likes to have me address her. She gave me this match case,” he added, with animation, picking up the article.

“Be careful!” broke in the sister, as she bent over her work. “If a man tell of his favors, the news flies!”

“I know when a girl likes me,” retorted the brother.

A long silence followed this interruption, during which the friend was made quite a marvel of decoration.

It was now the brother's turn to be painted, and his friend evidently meant to do the work handsomely. Either his elaborate dabs and lines, or his own remarkable visage, seemed to inspire the brother with a friendly determination to forego his own plans and devote himself to friendship on that evening; at last he said, —

"I have thought how I will speak for you. I will step before her and say, —

"Wait. I bring a message to you from one who has for many days been wishing to speak to you, but hesitates because of his inferiority. He has at last begged me to speak to you in his behalf, that you might listen kindly to him, even if your thought should be in another direction, when he comes to make known his wish to you. I myself am beneath your family, and am not worthy of your notice. But the hopeless desires of my friend have touched my heart, and made me bold to come to you. My friend is one of many who desire to be of your people, even if it be to carry burdens and to take care of animals belonging to your father; may it please you to speak kindly to my friend even if your heart declines him. To-morrow as the sun goes down and the shadows of the hills are over the camp and faces cannot be distinguished, the falling of a pole supporting the flaps of your tent shall be a signal that my friend is near and waits to see you. Pity him and come to him that he may open his heart to you."

Early in this speech the paint stick had ceased to do its office and the friend listened intently as the brother delivered himself, hesitating now and then to adjust the sentences. After a pause the friend said: —

"That will be very good. When you have opened the way for me, I will speak to her myself."

"I must say it over, lest I forget some of the words," and the brother delivered the speech almost verbatim. Then the painting was resumed. By and by the brother remarked: —

"You shall see me speak to her, but you must be hid. Should you show only the top of your head she would be angry with me."

"I will not be seen, I will watch," rejoined the friend.

At last the painting and dressing was complete, and the gallants stood up resplendent in necklaces, armlets, garters, and sashes. Suddenly the brother turned, saying: —

"I must perfume my blanket that I may be successful." Opening his pack, he took out seeds, crushed them in his mouth, and blew them over the blanket, then putting it about him passed out of the lodge.

Later, when I stepped out, I saw them on an elevation overlooking the tent of the maiden, in a position where they could make a rapid

circle through a grove toward the creek, and catch the girl as she went for water.

I think the tent pole must have fallen successfully and the young man have found heart and won the maid, for I hear to-day he has taken her to his father's and they are married.

To-day — told me how a friend of hers served a faint-hearted lover's go-between. This young man stepped before the girl, plead his own unworthiness and his friend's desire to speak with her, and begged for her favor; as he had finished his speech, the girl looked at him with flashing eyes and said:—

"I'll have nothing to do with your friend, or you either."

The young man hesitated a moment as if he was about to repeat his request, when a dangerous wave of her water-bucket made him leap to one side to escape a deluge.

To-day as — and I sat together, I asked her if Indian men when they wooed a girl always talked to her of their own unworthiness, and humbled themselves to win the maiden.

She looked up in my face and then said after a moment's hesitation:—

"Yes, they always do. What do white men say?"

"About the same thing."

"Do they mean it?"

"Sometimes, I suppose. Do Indians mean it?"

"Sometimes, I suppose," she answered.

And we both burst out laughing.

The complications incident to relationships, real and those growing out of marriage connections and possible marriage claims, seem to make elopement the only means by which a girl can exercise her choice of a husband. Runaway marriages certainly seem to be the prevailing custom. After stolen interviews the young man rides up to the girl's lodge some fine evening, and at a concerted signal she slips out and off they gallop to one of his relations; in a day or two he takes her to his father's house, where she is received as the son's wife. Then follows a feast, and gifts to the bride's relations. These, however, are returned in value to the bride within a few minutes by her parents or relatives. There is no trousseau to get ready, no bother of any kind in the bride's house or family, since the maid keeps her own counsel as to lover and elopement.

Of all the domestic tyrants I have ever read of or met, the Indian

father-in-law is the worst. He seems almost to own the body and soul of the young man who has married his daughter. For the girl soon after marriage returns to the parental lodge, bringing with her her bridegroom, who must work hard to earn his wife. The son-in-law is made to labor, and both he and his property must minister to his father-in-law's pleasure and prosperity. He is in no sense his own master, and if he rebels the father-in-law intimates that the young man must obey or lose his wife. I wonder any man endures it, or any woman either, but I suppose one generation takes its pay out of the next.

To-day the young folk had a laugh at the grandmother, all owing to the custom that the son-in-law must not speak to his mother-in-law, nor must she mention his name. It has been an *ugly* rainy day, and as the grandmother came in, one of the young men said : —

“Grandmother, how is the weather ?”

“Drizzles.”

“Oho!” they shouted. “What have you done, that is your son-in-law's name.”

“I mean,” she said, correcting herself, “it rains gusts.”

“Why, that is his name, too,” they cried, for the old woman had given a translation of the name.

“I tell you, the rain comes down in pieces!” the grandmother retorted, determined to avoid the error this time; whereat the whole lodge laughed, and even the son-in-law joined. He was not able to pretend that he had not heard it.

This has been a prosperous day, for I have had long talks with the old men, and have learned much about the customs of long ago when white folk were seldom seen. . . . If a girl was married off by her parents, that is, made a fine match in the worldly sense, she was dressed in a gala costume, mounted on a pony, tricked out with paint and ornaments, and accompanied by four old men, who fired guns and shouted as the bridal procession moved across the camp to the lodge of the husband elect, who there awaited the coming of the bride. He had already made large gifts to the bride's family and shown himself to be a man of wealth, after the fashion of the people. “When we were young men, we used to deride such marriages. We would rather run off with the girl of our choice. There is an old saying: ‘An old man cannot win a girl, he can only win her parents!’”

There is a young fellow, with a fine tenor, who is courting somebody in the neighborhood. Every morning I hear his voice echoing

among the trees, and falling in with the song of the birds and the stir of dawn. I rather enjoy lying and listening to his love-song, having no responsibility in the matter. I wish I could write in between the lines of the music the glory of the morning skies, the cool dewy breezes, and the reedy modulation of his clear voice, that seems a part of nature, as it rises and falls, and mingles with coming day.



The one bachelor I have met has always interested me. He is so neat and tidy in his ways ; winter and summer he never misses his bath. He is accounted holy, for he has had visions, and can see and talk with the dead. He is one of the kindest, as well as most industrious men I have met with in the tribe. No one but himself knows why he has not married. He evidently believes in matrimony for others. To-day I was told something of his history.

He has two brothers. These men for some reason were unattractive to the girls, and although they tried year after year they could never get a wife. One day the bachelor brother said to one of the two, "I'll help you get the girl you want."

Great was the surprise of every one when it was known that the bachelor had been seen at the creek as if courting. Greater still was the astonishment of the girl to find herself addressed by this attractive but hitherto obdurate young man. The wooing sped prosperously, and the elopement was planned. At the appointed time and place the couple met and together rode to the lodge of one of his own relations, where the brother had been sent to wait for his bride.

On the arrival of the runaway couple the suitor handed the girl over to his brother. Having compromised herself by an elopement, and being ashamed to return, she concluded to accept the situation and make the best of it. The bachelor left the couple together, and relapsed into his old ways, while the people were more astonished than ever at this turn of affairs. It was intimated that he had made use of charms potent with women, in order to secure the girl and hand her over to his brother. Twice this young man courted, both times for the benefit of his brothers, and having settled them in the married state he washed his hands of it ever after.

— sat beside his wife's dead body, wailing as he held the cold hand, and calling her by the endearing terms that may not be spoken in the ear of the living, and crying:—

"Where shall I go now you are gone? There is no place left for me."

An old man looked earnestly at the mourner, and at length spoke:—

"My grandson! It is hard to lose one's mother, to see one's children die, but the sorest trial that can come to a man is to have his wife lie dead.

"My grandson, before she came to you, no one was so willing to bring water for you; now that she has gone you will miss her care. If you have ever spoken harshly to her, the words will come back to you and bring you tears. No one is so near, no one can be so dear as a wife; when she dies her husband's joy dies with her. My grandson! old men, who have gone, have taught me this. I am old. I have felt these things. I know the truth of what I say."

The foregoing leaves are left with all the touches of note-book intimacy upon them, in the hope that by the lifting of the veil here and there upon days passed in Indian homes, something of the human life of the lodge may be seen, and the touch of nature there revealed may "make the whole earth kin."

Alice C. Fletcher.