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PROBABLY THE AVERAGE *white man still believes that the Indian woman of the old days was little more than a beast of burden to her husband. But the missionary who has lived among his people, the sympathetic observer of their everyday life, holds a very different opinion. You may generally see the mother and her babe folded close in one shawl, indicating the real and most important business of her existence. Without the child, life is but a hollow play, and all Indians pity the couple who are unable to obey the primary command, the first law of real happiness.*

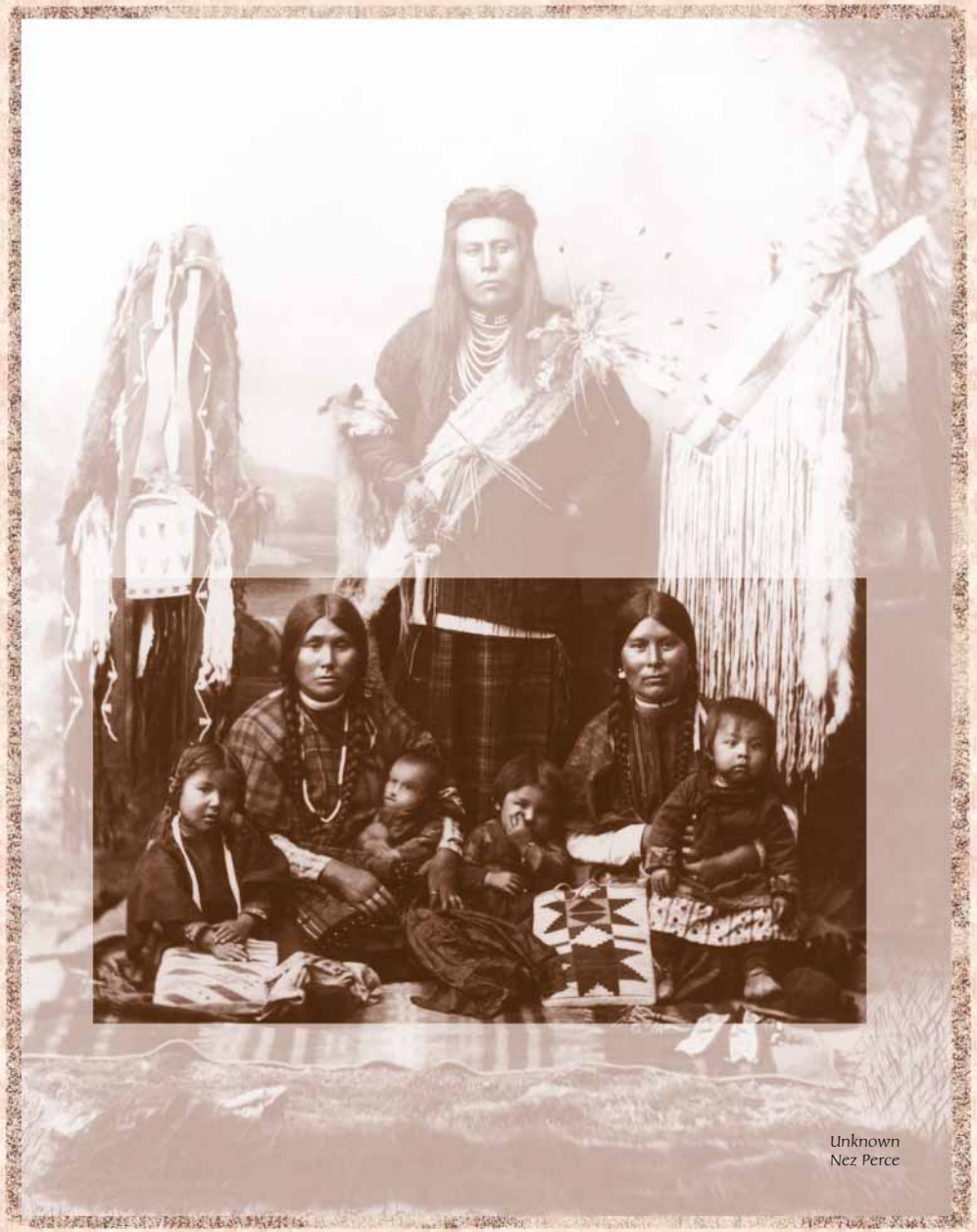
She has always been the silent but telling power behind life's activities, and at the same time shared equally with her mate the arduous duties of primitive society. Possessed of true feminine dignity and modesty, she was expected to be his equal in physical endurance and skill, but his superior in spiritual insight. She was looked to for the endowment of her child with nature's gifts and powers.

She was the spiritual teacher of the child, as well as its tender nurse, and she brought its developing soul before the "Great Mystery" as soon as she was aware of its coming. When she had finished her work, at the age of five to eight years, she turned her boy over to his father for manly training, and to the grandparents for traditional instruction, but the girl child remained under her close and thoughtful supervision. She preserved man from soul-killing materialism by herself owning what few possessions they had, and thus branding possession as feminine. The movable home was hers, with all its belongings, and she ruled there unquestioned. She was, in fact, the moral salvation of the race; all virtue was entrusted to her, and her position was recognized by all. It was held in all gentleness and discretion, under the rule that no woman could talk much or loudly until she became a grandmother.

The Indian woman suffered greatly during the transition period of civilization, when men were demoralized by whiskey, and possession became masculine. The division of labor did not readily adjust itself to the change, so that her burdens were multiplied while her influence decreased. Tribe after tribe underwent the catastrophe of a disorganized and disunited family life.

Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), Wahpeton Dakota

Pretty Nose
Northern Cheyenne



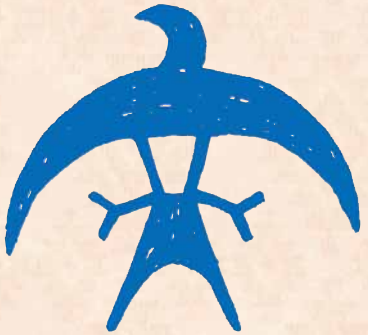
Unknown
Nez Perce

THE WOMAN OF *the household had no "lord and master" when it came to deciding where she and her children were to live.*

In the home there came into being the faith and simplicity that marked the native people. There took root their virtues and cultural attributes. Forces, sensed but not seen, called good, went into the deep consciousness of these young minds, planted there by the Indian mother who taught her boy honesty, fearlessness, and duty, and her girl industry, loyalty, and fidelity. Into the character of babes and children mother-strength left the essence of strong manhood and womanhood. Every son was taught to be generous to the point of sacrifice, truthful no matter what the cost, and brave to the point of death. These impulses—generosity, truthfulness, and bravery—may be dressed and polished in schools and universities, but their fundamental nature is never touched.

After childhood days, mothers still could not forsake the part of guide and teacher—for youth, as well as childhood, must be directed, and there was no substitute. So Lakota mothers taught youth how to worship and pray, how to know mercy and kindness, and how to seek right and justice.

Luther Standing Bear
Oglala Lakota



THE WOMEN OF *every clan of the Five Nations shall have a Council Fire ever burning in readiness for a council of the clan. When in their opinion it seems necessary for the interest of the people they shall hold a council and their decisions and recommendations shall be introduced before the Council of the Lords by the War Chief for its consideration.*

From the Constitution of the Iroquois Nations

Unknown
Lakota

GRANDMOTHER, NEXT TO *mother, was the most important person in the home. Her place, in fact, could be filled by no one else. It has been told and written that old people among the Indians were sacrificed when they became useless. If this is the case with other tribes, I do not know of it, but I do know that it was never done among the Lakotas. Most old people were revered for their knowledge, and were never considered worthless members to be got rid of. Parental devotion was very strong and the old were objects of care and devotion to the last. They were never given cause to feel useless and unwanted, for there were duties performed only by the old and because it was a rigidly-kept custom for the young to treat their elders with respect. Grandmother filled a place that mother did not fill, and the older she got the more, it seemed, we children depended upon her for attention. I can never forget one of my grandmothers, mother's mother, and what wonderful care she took of me. As a storyteller, she was a delight not only to me but to other little folks of the village. Her sense of humor was keen and she laughed as readily as we....Then grandmother, with the help of grandfather, was our teacher. When grandfather sang his songs, she encouraged us to dance to them. She beat time with him and showed us how to step with his tunes. Seldom did she go walking in the woods or on the plains without taking us with her, and these hours were profitable ones in knowledge, for scarcely was a word or an act not filled with the wisdom of life.*

Luther Standing Bear
Oglala Lakota

IN HIS WEAVING, painting, and embroidery of beads and quills the red man has shown a marked color sense, and his blending of brilliant hues is subtle and Oriental in effect. The women did most of this work and displayed vast ingenuity in the selection of native materials and dyes. A variety of beautiful grasses, roots, and barks are used for baskets by the different tribes, and some even used gorgeous feathers for extra ornamentation. Each was perfectly adapted in style, size, and form to its intended use.

This native skill combined with love of the work and perfect sincerity—the qualities which still make the Indian woman's blanket or basket or bowl or moccasins of the old type so highly prized—are among the precious things lost or sacrificed to the advance of an alien civilization. Cheap machine-made garments and utensils, without beauty or durability, have crowded out the old; and where the women still ply their ancient trade, they do it now for money, not for love, and in most cases use modern materials and patterns, even imported yarns and "diamond dyes"! Genuine curios or antiques are already becoming very rare, except in museums, and sometimes command fabulous prices.

Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), Wahpeton Dakota

IT HAS BEEN said that the position of woman is the test of civilization, and that of our women was secure. In them was vested our standard of morals and the purity of our blood. The wife did not take the name of her husband nor enter his clan, and the children belonged to the clan of the mother. All of the family property was held by her, descent was traced in the maternal line, and the honor of the house was in her hands. Modesty was her chief adornment; hence the younger women were usually silent and retiring: but a woman who had attained to ripeness of years and wisdom, or who had displayed notable courage in some emergency, was sometimes invited to a seat in the council.

Thus she ruled undisputed within her own domain, and was to us a tower of moral and spiritual strength.

Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), Wahpeton Dakota

Lizzie Bear Foot
Oglala Lakota

Holds the Pipe
Kiowa

TO KEEP THE *young men and young women strictly to their honor, there were observed among us, within my own recollection, certain annual ceremonies of a semi-religious nature. One of the most impressive of these was the sacred "Feast of Virgins," which, when given for the first time, was equivalent to the public announcement of a young girl's arrival at a marriageable age.*

The coming event was considered next to the Sun Dance in public importance. It always took place in midsummer, when a number of different clans were gathered together for the summer festivities, and was held in the center of the great circular encampment.

Here two circles were described, one within the other, about a ruddy heart-shaped rock which was touched with red paint, and upon either side of the rock there were thrust into the ground a knife and two arrows. The inner circle was for the maidens, and the outer one for their grandmothers or chaperones. Upon the outskirts of the feast there was a great public gathering, in which order was kept by certain warriors of highest reputation. Any man among the spectators might approach and challenge any young woman whom he knew to be unworthy; if the accuser failed to prove his charge, the warriors were accustomed to punish him severely.

Each girl in turn approached the sacred rock and laid her hand upon it with all solemnity. This was her religious declaration of her virginity, her vow to remain pure until her marriage. If she should ever violate the maidens' oath, then welcome that keen knife and those sharp arrows!

Our maidens were ambitious to attend a number of these feasts before marriage, and it sometimes happened that a girl was compelled to give one, on account of gossip about her conduct. Then it was in the nature of a challenge to the scandal-mongers to prove their words!

Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), Wahpeton Dakota

Selections from The Spirit of Indian Women

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