Selections from "With the Nez Perces", Alice Fletcher in the Field, 1889-92 By E. Jane Gay

Briggs tells us that the white people generally are greatly excited over the "opening of the Reservation," as they call it. The newspapers are swelling the excitement with fabulous accounts of the riches "locked up" in the Indian land, and men are actually, at this early date, flocking into the nearby towns, so as to be ready to "go in" when the rush comes. But the people who show the most interest in us are the cattlemen of the vicinity.

A good many of them have come in person to announce their wishes and to "sound" the Special Agent as to her purpose. What they want to know is: Are they to be defrauded of their rights to free grazing on the Reservation; is the cutting up of the Indian's land into homes for people to cut also into the ranges of these cattlemen, or will Her Majesty kindly locate the Nez Perces down in the canyons where they belong? They are embarrassed, these "bold highwaymen," as the Cook calls them, not knowing how to "approach" a lady.

It is a study to watch Her Majesty as she listens so respectfully to their intimations; the way she persistently misunderstands them, taking it for granted that they desire above all things the welfare of the Indians; the obtuseness of her to the hints of what might be "to her interest" which are quietly let fall, and are as innocuous as rain drops upon a placid lake. The men hang about day after day, with profuse expectoration, and finally go away. Her Majesty bidding them a cheerful adieu with an encouraging word about the better times coming, when there will be a reign of law and order in the country, which does not always call up a pleasing prospect in the mind of the cattlemen. One of them lost his self-control in the enforced contemplation of such an innovation.

"Law!" said he, with what the Cook calls "border emphasis," "Law! _____it; what do we want with law? We don't want no law. Never had no law; we've got along so far taking care of ourselves; we done as we wanted to and ain't got no use for law in this country."

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I suppose I am expected to tell you something about our special work; what progress we are making in the allotting of the Indian's land.

We started from Washington with instructions which read easy. "Anybody can allot Indians," said a callow clerk to me one day.

I did not argue with him. I only said, "I suppose you first catch your Indians." He stared at me and I saw that he expected them to be found, all in a row at the Agency, waiting in immovable patience to be labelled in consecutive order and numbered upon the nicely photographed plates furnished by the department. He was dumb when I spoke of "catching" his Indians.

We have now been on the Reservation long enough to have gained an inside view of the peculiar workings of the Agency System, and have learned, as well, the difficulties in the way of our just dealing with the Indians in the matter of their allotments.

We were told that the Nez Perce tribe numbered from eight hundred to two thousand souls and we were to convince them, man, woman and child, of the desirableness of breaking their tribal relations, giving up their tribal rights under U.S. treaty, for American citizenship and a very moderately sized farm cut out of their tribal inheritance.

There might be a little time consumed in this simple preliminary work, but that accomplished, things would move quickly.

"It is not going to be a long job," said the callow clerk, "The Indians are all ready for allotment."

A good many other people said pretty much the same to us. Some, who did not live in Washington, seemed to believe that the wards of the Nation under its paternal care had been led quite out of barbarism up to the very gate of citizenship, that we had but to open the gate and they would tumble over each other in their haste to come in.

Well, my dear J., here we are and it is lonesome, it is queer, and the loner we stay the queerer it grows. Our energies ae worn out in trying to get a start. There is no fulcrum whereon to rest a lever, no reliable data to be found. We are in an irresponsible world, where everything hangs in the air – and the air is full of ominous rumors.

It is a significant fact that we have had to go off the Reservation to find the first man who knows anything about the Nez Perce tribe. He is a little wiry Scotchman "of meek demeanor and strong sense," who served in the Joseph war, fought the Indians with all his might, became interested in them, and ended by becoming their fast friend. We found him in Lewiston, working for the most important merchant of the place.

"Yes," said he, "I know the Nez Perces and they know me." He expressed a grave concern for the condition of things on the Reservation, saying that "the Nez

Perces are men and not to be trifled with, but easily manage by fair play. I am fond of them as of my own children."

Mr. McConville offered every assistance in his power to give Her Majesty. He advised me to have great patience as it would take time to win the confidence of the Indians, without which the proper accomplishment of her work would be impossible.

"And the soldiers might have to be sent for," suggested the cook. "God forbid," she said the Scotchman, himself an old soldier.

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Lapwai -- June 29th, 1889

When I last wrote, we were expecting the Indians to meet us in council the coming Monday. We were told that the prospect of a council always "brought them in," but we had so universally found them out on our various expeditions to their nominal homes and had met with so slight a trace of human occupancy anywhere, that but for the one fact of having seen a church full at the Agency on Sundays, we might have come to the conclusion that the Nez Perce tribe was a myth. There are so many things in the conduct of Indian affairs that have nothing more tangible than a name to live; so many opinions concerning the red man not warranted by facts; so many orchid ideas growing in the air; so many parasitical beliefs hanging on to inherited prejudices, that it would not have greatly surprised us if, on going over to that council room, we should have found it filled with nothing more substantial than U.S. Indian treaties.

But the Nez Perces were there, a handful of them; enough to fill the small room and overflow about the doorway.

It does not seem as if there could be anything in that room to impress very deeply an allotting agent. . . There is tangible silence within; dark forms are ranged against the walls, some on wooden benches, others standing, and some prone upon the floor. The attitude of all is simply that of waiting – waiting to know what is wanted of them.

You catch no inspiration from their faces as you are introduced by the agent in charge, but you make a little speech as graciously as you are able. There is no halfway meeting of your overtures; only the silence which can be felt.

You read the Severalty Act and explain its provisions. You think you make it plain but the rows of old red sandstone sphinxes make no sign. Their eyes are fixed in stony dumbness. They never heard of the "Dawes Bill"; they cannot take it in.

Imagine yourself, some bright May morning, sitting out upon the horse block in your back yard, waiting for breakfast in that calm state of mind induced by early rising and the prospect of a savory meal. Before you lie broad acres, your own well tilled fields, that were your fathers' before you. They have been in the family for many generations; so long that it has never come into your mind that they could ever be any anywhere else. In retrospect you behold the bent forms of your aged grandparents, standing amid the heavy topped wheat, ripened like themselves; and glancing down the future, you see the children of your boy Tom playing out there upon that sunny knoll among the buttercups and daisies, when you are awakened by the slam of the front gate and the lightening-rod man or a book agent comes round the house and tells you that the Empress of all the Indies, or some other potentate with whom you have treaty relations, has sent him to divide your lands according to an act of Parliament, in the year of our Lord, February 8, 1887.

You stare wildly while the lightening-rod man proceeds to explain, that, s head of the family, you are to have 160 acres of your own land; your boy Tom, being over eighteen, will have 80 acres; and the little girl, the pet, the black-eyed darling, she will have 40 acres.

Mechanically you repeat, "160,80,40, -- 280 acres." That is just the size of your meadow where the cows and horses pasture, but what of the rest?

The lightening-rod man goes on: "The remainder of your land will stay just as it is, unless you want to sell it." Ah! It looks queer, does it?

Little by little you begin to think. Your suspicions are aroused and – you look exactly as those North Americans looked in that Council room.

But now, as Allotting Agent, you stand before them, and, with reddened cheeks and stammering tongue you try to impress them with the advantages of the proposed arrangement. You had prearranged your arguments and expected to convince this docile people as easily as you had convinced yourself, but somehow you weaken. Your arguments give way before the logic of voiceless helplessness.

Your arteries throb so loudly in the silence that you can think of nothing to say. You ask the Interpreter to tell the Indians that you will be glad to answer any questions, and you sit down. Your cravat is tight and you loosen it. There is a stricture about the cardiac region. You unbutton your coat and look along the line of dark faces. They do not light up as they meet your gaze and it is your own eyes that first seek the ground. But at last an old man rises, with a dignity which renders invisible his poor garments and his low estate and makes you do him reverence.

"How is it," he says, "that we have not been consulted about this matter? Who made this law? We do not understand what you say. This is our land by long possession and by treaty. We are content to be as we are." And a groan of assent runs along the dark line of Sphinxes as the old man draws his blanket about him, as if for evermore to shut out the subject.

The action rouses you and gather your forces, while the next man in less quiet tones asks if you are not "afraid to come among them on such an errand"! "Our people are scattered," says another. "We must come together and decide whether we will have this law."

You tell them that there is nothing for them to decide, they have no choice. The law must be obeyed, but you will wait until they can understand better all about it. And then, with rare discretion, the ad interim Agent adjourns the council.

As the people disperse amid low mutterings in cheerless tones, you clearly realize that you have not caught your Indian.

You shake hands with one or two as they pass out, but for the most part they avoid you. A few linger and you talk a little. You do not say "I am your friend." That phrase means nothing now to the Indian. You tell them that by and by, when you know each other better, perhaps you may trust each other. And they do not dispute you; it looks reasonable. At any rate, it postpones the issue and the Indian likes that. He cannot be hurried and you know better than to try to hurry him. He goes home to think over this allotment business or to forget all about it, according to the manner of man he is, but the Special Agent takes the outcome of this her first Council very much to heart. It does not seem to have altered anything; she is just where she was before. But, while the Cook lays violent hands upon her inclination to resist the patient endurance of inaction, and the Photographer gracefully accepts his laissez-faire role, and the unfeeling Surveyor, who is not new to Reservation experiences, jokes incoherently, as it seems to us, about "tenderfeet" and "eye openers," the Allotting Agent betrays no waver of discouragement at the forbidding aspect of the situation. She studies the topography of the country with Mr. Briggs and opens up a peripatetic school of instruction to inform the "actual settler," who is in Egyptian darkness as to the provisions of the Severalty Act. She loses no opportunity of getting the Indians together in little groups for informal councils, she talks and reasons in the hope of making ever so slight an impression to work out from.

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The work of registering the Lapwai Indians drags its slow length along. They have not yet become reconciled to the allotment. The ground gained in Kamiah

does not seem to help much here; it looks as if, in a sense, we had to begin all over again.

It requires all Her Majesty's tact to avoid open conflict, for she is constantly meeting decided opposition and in quarters where it would naturally be least looked for; from those Indians nearest the Agency, those most under the influence of the officials. It is not easy to understand some of the obstacles thrown in her way.

One can have unlimited patience with the unreasoning old men whose splendid obstinacy is invincible; who refuse to take their quota of land on principle, holding to their tribal right to roam at will all over the Reservation. It is of no use to explain to them that the world is so rapidly filling with people that no tribe can longer hold unused land against the clamor of a multitude of homeless men and women: that the earth, in a sense, belongs to all that are upon it and that no man can be allowed to claim more than he can use for his own benefit or for that of others; that no treaty could be enforced that sought to hold back the living tide that had set in upon this continent: that any tribe of Indians that stood out against that flood would be overwhelmed.

It would be a waste of words to say all this to these superb old colossal, who stand upon their treaty as their own hills upon their basaltic foundations. Nor is it worth while to try persuasion upon the chiefs who, Her Majesty says, "oppose because the land in severalty breaks up completely their tribal power and substitutes civilization and law."

But one would expect that the younger men, who have for years been under the enlightening influence of the governing centre of the Reservation, would be able to see that treaties are abrogated by the logic of events.