

## LINES WRITTEN ON AN INDIAN FACE

*By Jessie Randolph Moore*

A picture of an Indian was found pinned on the wall of a postoffice in a small town in Oklahoma. The writer trusts these lines bear not the high coloring of one who would revive the faded glories of an ancient but dilapidated house, but let them have the appearance of simplicity, and good faith which may convince the reader that when she errs, it is from no worse cause than National partiality; and surely such partiality is excusable in the descendant of a proud race, shorn of its ancient splendors, and soothing to her feelings to revive again on the canvas history:<sup>1</sup>

'Tis only an Indian face, but on it is pictured the tragedy of a race. Like a ghost of yesterday it looks out over the hurrying throng, with a cynical smile for the sordid realities of today. The keen inscrutable eyes seem piercing the veil which covers the Indian's future, the firm lips guarding with sacred tenderness the story of a nation's past. I stop and ponder the sphinx-like countenance.

Who are you, old Indian? Who was the artist that lined your noble features? I see in you a racial type, an epitome of the whole race; in you I read the future of the Indian as it might have been, and his tragic past. Your proud head is bent as though under a foreign yoke, and I see the wild, unquenched, old world pain of the conquered in your eyes. You have lived long and endured much and have no more illusions. Your face is not the portrait of one man or one generation, but an epoch in the world's history. One of nature's aristocrats, they call you a savage, yet centuries before the foundation of classic Rome, when the Angles and Saxon savages were roaming the forests of northern Europe, your own ancestors, in the land of the Fair God, were writing on parchment and stone the history of your race—and but for the ruthless hands of Christian fanatics those hieroglyphic writings would class you among the most ancient of civilized nations. The history of your deterioration is one of the world's mysteries which only He who holds the key of destiny can solve.

I fall to dreaming about it all, and what refreshment to turn

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<sup>1</sup>This contribution, "Lines Written on an Indian Face," has an historic and unusual place in State history itself. It was judged the best prose writing on Oklahoma, for which the writer, Mrs. Jessie Randolph Moore, was awarded the gold medal in the state-wide contest sponsored by the Oklahoma State Federation of Women's Clubs in November, 1910. Mrs. Moore is a well known member of the prominent Love family of the Chickasaw Nation and served as Clerk of the State Supreme Court from 1928 to 1932, the first woman elected to this office in a state-wide election. She holds an outstanding record as Treasurer of the Oklahoma Historical Society and member of its Board of Directors, having served continuously as its Treasurer for twenty-five years (1919 to date). —M.H.W.

away from the hurry and noise of modern life to a world of golden and gray dreams. Long forgotten legends and traditions of your people and mine, old Indian, come back to me from the land of forgotten things; legends of magic and of mystery whose characters are like dim figures in some half-effaced tapestry of olden time. Yet there is a dark fate that beats its way up through all the legends and traditions, spreading its atmosphere of gloom and distaster over all the bright romance and glamour of mystic dreams.

Alas for those who feel no thrill as they read the epitaphs of nations. 'Tis then the past ages come and sit beside us, show us the leathern doublet or hunting shirt, bend the keen tempered or seasoned bow, sing us the old songs, and halting the centuries in their solemn march, bid them turn around for a little while and march the other way. How my heart thrills and takes fire as I recall the freshness of that Arcadian existence in the days of the Indian Commonwealth—a flowery oasis in the wilderness of life—whose fairest flowers had not been gathered nor its beauties despoiled by the rude hand of those who in after years affected to cultivate them. Would that some bard might immortalize the scenes of life and death enacted beneath the sunny southern skies of the frontier, telling the story of as peaceful life drama as the world has ever known—the golden age of a nation confident in the future lying fair before it.

The light of civilization was poured in, but it was the light of a consuming fire, before which our national glory, our institutions, our very existence and name as a nation, melted away like the morning mist. The only memorials left of the old regime are the crumbling walls of the abandoned Forts, the forsaken council houses, and the streets of the old towns seen against a background of romance and history. The treaty and peace-pipe are relegated to the curio cabinet, the wild rose clambers and the coyotes howl around the old stomp grounds. You only, old Indian, are left like an aged pilgrim dreaming by his camp-fire, while on the tall straight spirals of smoke drifting up toward heaven are wafted the prayers of a broken people. I question the eternal verities, and am answered by the metaphor of the potter's wheel.

You, who have climbed the steps in the palace of life and looking out the windows have seen through the mists of the centuries the panorama of your nation's history, does not the arc of your experience give you some comprehension of the divine circle of God's plan, does the arc give key to the whole? Or are you, like myself,

“An infant crying in the night,  
An infant crying for the light!”

Prophet with the calm and farseeing eye, can you not fathom the abyss of human problems and tell me what is the Indian's future? Read for me the dark characters traced by the finger of destiny? Is there not some knight within your vision with a high unconquerable spirit standing like some proud column alone amid the fragments and ruins around it, some brilliant leader with a clear-sighted sagacity piercing the thin veil of pretended friendship and penetrating the future, discern the coming miseries of his people—and with a noble patriotism rescue them from the gathering darkness, infuse his own intrepid spirit into their hearts, animating them with high ideals and dreams of nobler lives?

Your face has given me a message of Old Indian Territory—the glory of her days, a breath of the past from across the river of Lethe—of sorrow, and joy, and sweet life. Like the harpist you have swept my heartstrings, and listening to the sweet symphony I see shadowy forms and faces loved “long since and lost awhile,” and hear the call of voices low and sweet. The tones brighten and I hear the twilight song of Indian home life—a mother's lullaby comes crooning to me from across the years, the birds sing low, the rose leaves are falling, and the high soaring sky that arches all, mysterious and deep. Into the melody there creeps a minor strain—'tis a funeral knell, and with aching heart and falling tears I see another grave in the cemetery of nations. What recks it that thou are dead? In the song of the brave and the strong spirit, thou shalt live evermore, a type, a proud cynosure in the path to freedom and to light. The music strikes a splendid jubilant note—joy bells are ringing, cannons are booming, people are shouting Hosannas to a Star, and I bow low in the dust to this Star from the east that has risen Phoenix-like from the ashes of our old Indian civilization; for under its bright rays lies the child Oklahoma who may prove to be the Messiah to my people.

As nature takes back the dead leaves to nourish and fertilize the spring flowers and vegetation, so may God in some mysterious way take the ashes of our dead empire to nourish and fertilize the flowers of Oklahoma's civilization, — rich blossoms of promise whose perfume and beauty will, like the flower Immortelle, live forever. How precious are the memories evoked by this grand symphony—'tis the song of the ages after all, drawing the soul up to the Stars, whose morning song is but the “Psalm of Life.”