

SLAVERY AMONG THE INDIANS OF NORTHWEST AMERICA

Slavery in some form or other has existed in this world throughout all times known to man, and there is evidence to show that it prevailed in those long periods of developing eras prior to the beginnings of any recorded history. It is not the purpose of this paper to try to show the beginnings of this pernicious institution nor to explain how it had its origin in the experiences of men, and yet, as a sort of introduction to my subject, *Slavery Among the Indians*, I wish to read a quotation from the *History of Germany*, written by Tacitus about eighteen hundred years ago. It reads very much like a paragraph out of some of the journals of the early explorers of the Northwest Coast of America many centuries later. Tacitus, writing of these early Germans, says: "Of public diversions they have but one sort, and in all of their meetings the same is still exhibited. Young men, such as make it their pastime, fling themselves naked and dance amongst sharp swords and the deadly points of javelins. From habit they acquire their skill, and from their skill a graceful manner; yet from hence draw no gain or hire; though the adventurous gaiety has its reward — namely, that of pleasing the spectators. What is marvellous, playing at dice is one of their most serious employments, and even sober they are gamblers; and, nay, so desperately do they venture upon the chance of winning or losing that when their whole substance is played away they stake their liberty and their persons upon one and the last throw. The loser goes calmly into voluntary bondage. However younger he be, however stronger, he tamely suffers himself to be bound and sold by the winner. Such is their perseverance in an evil course; they themselves call it honor.

"Slaves of this class, they exchange away in commerce, to free themselves too from the shame of such a victory. Of their other slaves they make not such use as we do of ours, by distributing amongst them the several offices and employments of the family. Each of them has a dwelling of his own, each a household to govern. His lord uses him like a tenant, and obliges him to pay a quantity of grain or of cattle or of cloth. Thus far the subserviency of the slave extends. All the other duties in a family, not the slaves but the wives and children discharge. To inflict stripes upon a slave, or to put him in chains, or to doom him to severe labor, are things rarely seen. To kill them they sometimes are wont, not through correction or

government, but in heat and rage, as they would an enemy, save that no vengeance or penalty follows. The freedmen very little surpass the slaves, rarely are of moment in the house—in the community never, excepting only such nations where arbitrary dominion prevails.”

It must be evident, I think, that in any discussion at this time of the subject of slavery among the Indians that we are forced to rely almost entirely on the journals and writings of the early explorers, travelers, traders and missionaries. The Indians have left us very few records of any kinds and no written history—and the rapidly advancing tide of the white man's civilization is changing the manners and customs of the red man of the forests, and at the same time removing, changing and burying under new deposits all the oldtime evidences. But the journals and writings of these early explorers have preserved, we have reason to believe, a fairly correct picture of the conditions which they found. And there is an abundance of such material. There were many men who dared to take their chance in lands unknown to white men, and who endured the hardships thereto, some in the love of adventure and to satisfy their restless, roving spirits, some in the interests of trade—for the explorer is quickly followed by men whose minds are centered on profit and trade—some whose minds and hearts were burning with religious flame, ready to make any sacrifice that the tribes might by written in the Lamb's Book of God. Among these explorers, traders and missionaries were some mighty heroes, really great men living up to the highest ideals of life with its manifold duties and sacrifices, men of truth and integrity. Then there were men of a very different type, men who were influenced solely by purposes of selfish gain, who mistreated the Indians cruelly,, often murdering and destroying them ruthlessly. We have the journals and experiences not only of men comprising these two extreme classes that I have mentioned, but also of the men who would in a proper classification fall between these two extremes. We have to bear in mind, then, that the sources of our information on these manners and customs of early tribal life come to us from the writings and journals of two kinds of men: one from those who are strong and mighty for the truth; the other, those who are mighty big liars.

In general it can be said that most of the data that is available on the life, manners, customs, institutions and government of the Indians of the Northwest is generally considered as fairly authentic and reliable. Furthermore, it is an interesting and refreshing fact that practically all of the accounts agree on essentials. We have to use caution, however, in not making conclusions too quickly, since

our writer may have been limited to a small field of observation, or have given too short a time to the investigation, or perhaps over-emphasized some rather unusual incident.

Practically every man, whether explorer, traveler, trader or missionary, who left any account of his experiences in the Northwest Coast at least mentions slavery among the Indians. There can be no doubt that slavery as an institution existed at some time or other in some form or other in most of the tribes north of northern California, all the way to northern Alaska.

"Among the Eskimos slavery was unknown, although in Alaska immediately north of the Thlingits, where the Indians borrowed much of Indian culture and arts, it is possible that it existed in some form as Bancroft affirms." (*Handbook of American Indians.*)

Dall states that he found no traces of slavery in Alaska and doubts if it ever existed there. He further says that if slavery gained a foothold in Alaska it was foreign to their own culture and habits and was comparatively recent in introduction.

Livingston F. Jones in his book *A Study of the Thlingets of Alaska* gives quite an account of slavery in this tribe. He says, page 116, writing in 1914: "Slavery is another of their obsolete customs. It was at the bottom of most of their wars, as they were conducted chiefly to obtain slaves. There are living today [1914] not a few who were once held as slaves. They and their children are still looked down upon by those who never had the misfortune to come within the grasp of slavery."

"A full third of the large population of this coast are slaves, of the most helpless and abject description." So writes Bancroft in his *History of Alaska*.

"While free men and women captured in war were made slaves, many were born into bondage. None but the high caste, however, were allowed to hold slaves, and the chiefs were, as a matter of course, the largest slaveholders."—Jones.

We will remember that the general name given to all the Indians living along the coast north of 55° (about the location of Ketchikan) to 60° (in the region about Skagway) is Thlingets. North of the Thlingets and extending into the interior are the Tinneh. Along the southern and western coasts, including the Aleutian Islands and the Peninsula, are the Aleuts, while the shores of Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean are the abodes of the Eskimos. That part of the coast region, with its thousands of islands, south of the Thlingets, between 55° and 52° was the home of the Haidah. This is the nation that lived in the Queen Charlotte Island country. Coming on south into

the Vancouver Island country, we find the Nootkas. South of the Nootkas were the Sound Indians of Washington; north and south of the Columbia River and extending well into Oregon were the Chinooks.

Of course, these are general names of Indian nations, and these divisions are divided into many tribes, and these tribes into families. Slavery prevailed among the tribes of all these nations from California to the land of the Eskimos in the far distant regions of the north. Of course, it varied among different tribes, as did other manners and customs. Some tribes were naturally more cruel in their treatment of slaves, some more merciful than others, but in essential characteristics there was great similarity among the tribes. In a Congressional Document we find the statement: "Over most of the area in question [Northwest Coast] slaves consisted of prisoners taken from neighboring tribes, chiefly women and children, and among most tribes of their descendants. Also among most of these tribes there appears to have been a regular traffic in slaves, the source of a considerable part of private wealth." Jewett states in his *Adventures*, page 131 (an account of his experiences while he was held prisoner on Vancouver Island in the year 1803) that a Nootka chief had in his home nearly fifty male and female slaves, no other chief having more than twelve. Simpson estimated that slaves formed one-third of the population of the Thlingets. The price of an adult slave was about \$500 in blankets; of a child, about fifty blankets, about \$150.

Hazard Stevens, in his *Life of Isaac I. Stevens*, Vol. I, page 451, says: "The Indians on the Sound, including those in the Straits of Fuca, numbered some 8,500 canoe Indians, and were divided among many tribes and bands. They held as slaves the captives taken in war and their descendants, and, singularly enough, the heads of the slaves were left in their natural state, while the skulls of the freeborn were flattened by pressure during infancy into the shape of a shovel."

Franchere, speaking of the Chinook Indians along the Columbia River, in 1811, says: "They procure their slaves from neighboring tribes and from the interior in exchange for beads and furs. They treat them with humanity while their services are useful, but as soon as they become incapable of labor, neglect them and suffer them to perish of want. When dead they throw their bodies without ceremony under the stump of an old decayed tree or drag them to the woods to be devoured by the wolves and vultures."

In Clark's *Journal* of the Lewis and Clark's Expedition, he writes: "The boy which this Indian offered to sell to me was about ten years of age. The boy had been taken prisoner by the Kilamox from some

nation on the coast to the southeast of them at a great distance. Like other Indian nations, they adopt their slaves in their families and treat them very much like their own children."

Rev. Samuel Parker says: "The Walla Walla Indians are descended from slaves formerly owned and liberated by the Nez Perce Indians. They permitted their slaves to reside among them and to intermarry in their families, and, reasoning on the principles of natural justice, they concluded that it was not right to hold in slavery their own descendants, and liberated them, and they are now a respectable tribe."

Herbert J. Spinden, in the *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, Vol. II, writes of the Nez Percés, who, we remember, were in Idaho, Oregon and Washington: "In early times the Nez Percés owned a few slaves. They did not buy slaves, merely using as such the male prisoners of war. The women taken in war became the wives of their masters. Slaves were the personal property of their owners and could be traded or even killed at will. As a matter of fact, they were treated kindly. It is said that the women could gamble away their freedom, but the men were not allowed to do this."

In general it may be said that throughout all this great Northwest country, including the islands and the entire coast from California to Bering Sea, that slavery existed in rather a mild form. That in general the slaves were well fed and for the most part kindly treated. Jewett, in *Adventures*, page 110, says of the Nootkas: "The slaves eat at the same table, and of the same provisions, faring in this respect as well as their masters, being seated with the family and only feeding from separate trays."

It seems that the slaves were little inferior to their masters in many tribes, and that they assisted them in fishing and hunting and even in war. They helped to make the canoes, they cut and carried the wood, they brought the water, and helped to build the houses. The women were household drudges, and were used to perform laborious and menial tasks. There were, however, some sharp distinctions between slave and freeborn. They were rigidly excluded from all ceremonies; they could not marry a free man or woman. They had no well defined rights, could not own property, and were subject to the caprices of their masters, who had the power of life and death over them.

Among the Thlingets it was customary to kill slaves and bury the bodies beneath the corner posts of the chief's homes at the time they were erected. At other times they were given away or freed to show that their owner was so wealthy that he could afford to part with

them. James G. Swan states that when a chief died among the Makali his favorite slaves were killed and buried with him.

Among the Hupa of northern California a bastard became the slave for life of some male relation of the mother, and was compelled to do menial service, nor could he or she marry a free person. Jewett, in *Adventures*, page 131, writes: "The females among the Nootkas are employed principally in manufacturing cloth, in cooking, collecting berries, etc., and with regard to food and living in general have not a much harder lot than their mistresses, the principal difference consisting in these poor unfortunate creatures being considered as free to anyone, their masters prostituting them whenever they think proper for the purpose of gain. In this way many of them are brought on board the ships and offered to the crews, from whence an opinion appears to have been formed by some of our navigators injurious to the chastity of their females, than which nothing can be more generally untrue, as perhaps in no part of the world is that virtue more prized."

Of course, there are many records showing that some tribes treated their slaves with great cruelty. We somehow have come to think of the Indian as cruel. He often tortures his captives before killing them. As the chief had the power of life and death over his slaves, it is not surprising that he was often very cruel in his treatment of them. Alexander Henry, fur trader, in his *Travels and Adventures*, in Canada and the Indian territories in 1776, page 278, writes: "At the fort was a woman of the Assiniboines, taken far to the westward of the mountains, in a country which those Indians incessantly ravaged. She informs me that the men of this country never suffered themselves to be taken, but always die in the field rather than fall into captivity. The women and children are made slaves, but are not put to death nor tormented." Again Henry says: "The Osinipoilles [Saskatchewan country] treat with great cruelty their slaves. As an example, one of the principal chiefs, whose tent was near that which we occupied, had a female slave about twenty years of age. I saw her always on the outside of the door of the tent, exposed to the severest cold; and having asked the reason was told that she was a slave. The information induced me to speak to her master, in the hope of procuring some mitigation of the hardship she underwent, but he gave the answer that he had taken her on the other side of the western mountains; that at the same time he had lost a brother and a son in battle, and that the enterprise had taken place in order to release one of his own nation who had been a slave in hers and who had been used with much greater severity than that which she experienced. The wretched woman fed and slept with the dogs, scrambling with them for the bones which

were thrown out of the tent. When her master was within she was never permitted to enter; at all seasons the children amused themselves with impunity in tormenting her, thrusting lighted sticks into her face, and if she succeeded in warding off these outrages she was violently beaten. I was not successful in procuring any diminution of her sufferings, but I drew some relief from the idea that their duration could not be long. They were too heavy to be sustained."

Reference has already been made to the fact that many of the Indian tribes of the Northwest had the custom of flattening the heads of their infants by pressure. The flat head was the mark of the free man in these tribes. The round or normal head was also the mark the slave. It is not easy to discover just how this custom originated, nor to understand on what principle of thinking or non-thinking it developed. Perhaps it had its origin as a religious rite growing out of their hazy musings on the mysteries of life and death and the hereafter. More likely, perhaps, it was another one of their customs that were imagined to add greatly to their personal ornament and appearance. This is a long story in itself. Perhaps the Indians should not be censured too severely for flattening their heads on the outside, since their successor, the white man, has been known, frequently to flatten his head on the inside.

Franchere, in his *Narration*, pages 324, writes: "On arriving among them [Indians of the Columbia] we were exceedingly surprised to see that they had almost all flattened heads. This configuration is not a natural deformity, but an effect of art, caused by a compression of the skull in infancy. It shocks strangers extremely, especially at first sight. Nevertheless, among these barbarians it is an indispensable ornament; and when we signified to them how much this mode of flattening the forehead appeared to us to violate nature and good taste, they answered us that it was only slaves who had not their heads flattened. The slaves, in fact, have the usual rounded head, and they are not permitted to flatten the foreheads of their children destined to bear the charms of their sires."

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