

Comment by the Editor

THE SPIRITUAL TRIUMPH OF THE INDIAN

For more than three hundred and fifty years, Indians and white men fought for the possession of North America. Not that pitched battle was waged incessantly, but two hostile races struggled relentlessly to the tragic end. The white man took the land, but the spiritual victory was won by the Indian. Singly, or with wife and children, the pioneers penetrated into the vast American forest. There generation after generation, the spell of untamed nature awakened dim, fleeting impressions of primeval human experience. The delicate tracery of leafy branches overhead, the illimitable woodland murmur, the ghostly shimmer of the moonlit glades, the sense of encompassing power to be mastered single-handed might have made mystics of the whole western race — as the wilderness did affect Lincoln. But the ever-present danger of sharp and sudden death from a hissing Indian arrow banished soulful meditation and turned the thoughts of men to physical self-preservation, to matter-of-fact reality. Like an undammed flood the overwhelming great white tide emerged from the forest and swept out over the prairies. Long before their last desperate resistance on the plains, the red men were doomed.

A Hindu would consider the defeat of the Indians inevitable, because they were the more spiritual people. And so they were. Cruel, treacherous, dirty — yes; but spiritual nevertheless. To them, as a people, the spirit was real. Sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, wind, cold, life, and death were all expressions of the omnipotent, universal Presence. Good and evil spirits were thought to dwell in rivers and hills, in beasts, birds, trees, and herbs. They deified both animate and inanimate objects, and for each curious phenomenon of nature they devised a fabulous explanation. Infinitely rich in symbolism and mystic conception, Indian mythology possessed contemporary meaning and application. The legends of the culture hero, incorporated in the ritual of tribal customs, were a part of their very life. Unlike imaginary Mount Olympus beyond the clouds, the spiritual resources of the Indians were visible. According to Neihardt,

They turned to One who, mightier than Man,
Could help them most — the Spirit in the Sun;
For whatsoever wonder-work is done
Upon the needy earth, he does it all.
For him the whole world sickens in the fall
When streams cease singing and the skies go gray
And trees and bushes weep their leaves away
In hopeless hushes empty of the bird.

J. E. B.