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Appleby's Jour.  
Feb. 77

THE BLACKFEET INDIANS.

Robinson

WHOEVER has studied the geographical position of the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company cannot fail to have noticed the vast extent of country intervening between the forty-ninth parallel of latitude and the North Saskatchewan River, in which there exists no fort or trading-station of the company. This is the country of the Blackfeet, that wild, restless, erring race, whose hand is against every man, and every man's hand against them. With the Rocky Mountains and the forty-ninth parallel as a portion of the circumference, a line drawn from the latter through the elbow of the South Saskatchewan River and the Bad Hill, thence trending northwest along the course of the Red-Deer River, nearly to the Rocky-Mountain House, would inclose the British American territory of the Blackfeet nation. In the United States, it extends along the course of the Missouri River to a point below the Sun River, thence diverging north of east to the elbow of the South Saskatchewan. A line drawn from the latter point to the Rocky-Mountain House would measure six hundred miles in length, and yet lie wholly in the country of the Blackfeet. Along its northern border lies a fair and fertile land; but close by, scarcely half a day's journey to the south, the arid, treeless, sandy plains begin to supplant the rich, verdure-clad hills and dales, and that immense central desert spreads out those ocean-like expanses which find their southern limit down by the waters of the Canadian River, full twelve hundred miles due south of the Saskatchewan.

Within the territory of the Blackfeet nation not a trace of settlement exists, not a trading-post stands to welcome the booty-laden warrior to its rude counter. Along its entire border there prevails, during the months of summer and autumn, a state of perpetual warfare: on the north and east with the Plain Crees; on the south and west with the Kootanais and Flatheads; on the southeast and northwest with the Assiniboinis of the plain and mountains; on the south there are ceaseless predatory excursions against the Americans on the Missouri. Ever since the tribes first became known to the white traders, there has existed this state of hostility among them. The red-man has always three great causes of war—to steal a horse, to take a scalp, or to get a wife. On the north, the Crees and Assiniboinis continually force on hostilities, for the sake of stealing the Blackfeet horses, which are far better than their own; while, on the south, the Blackfeet make war upon the Crows and Flatheads for a similar reason. At war with every nation that touches the wide circle of their boundaries, these wild, dusky men sweep like a whirlwind over the arid deserts of the central plateau. They speak a language distinct from that of all other native tribes; their feasts and ceremonies, too, are different from those of other nations. Not absolutely stationary residents of a domain, and wandering much by fam-

ilies and tribes, yet they are not nomads; a confederacy, there is not the semblance of a national government anywhere. In fact, they form the most curious anomaly of that race of men who are passing away beneath our eyes into the infinite solitude. The legend of their origin runs thus:

"Long years ago, when their great forefather crossed the Mountains of the Setting Sun, and settled along the sources of the Missouri and South Saskatchewan, it came to pass that a chief had three sons: Kenha, or The Blood; Peaginou, or The Wealth; and a third who was nameless. The first two were great hunters; they brought to their father's lodge rich store of moose and elk meat, and the buffalo fell beneath their unerring arrows; but the third, or nameless one, ever returned empty-handed from the chase, until his brothers mocked him for want of skill. One day the old chief said to this unsuccessful hunter: 'My son, you cannot kill the moose, your arrows shun the buffalo, the elk is too fleet for your footsteps, and your brothers mock you because you bring no meat into the lodge; but see! I will make you a mighty hunter.' And the old chief took from his lodge-fire a piece of burnt stick, and, wetting it, rubbed the feet of his son with the blackened charcoal, and named him Sat-sia-qua, or The Blackfeet; and evermore Sat-sia-qua was a mighty hunter, and his arrows flew straight to the buffalo, and his feet moved swift in the chase."<sup>1</sup>

According to tradition, from these three sons descended the three tribes of Blood, Peaginou, and Blackfeet, but for many generations there have been two other tribes or parts of tribes recognized in the confederacy. These are the Gros-Ventres, or Atsinas, on the extreme southeast, a branch of the Arapahoe nation who dwelt along the sources of the Platte; and the Sircies, on the north, a branch or offshoot of the Chippewyans of Lake Athabasca. The latter are a small but very mischievous band, which, last of all the tribes, joined the confederacy. How the former tribe became detached from the parent-stock has never been determined; but of the latter tradition tells how a tribe of Beavers, fighting over the wanton killing of a dog, concluded a peace only on condition of separation; and the friends of the chief whose arrow had killed the dog marched out into the night to seek their fortunes in the vast wilderness lying to the south. A hundred years later, a Beaver Indian, following the fortunes of a white trader, found himself in one of the forts of the Saskatchewan. Strange Indians were camped about the palisades, and among them were a few braves who, when they conversed together, spoke a language different from the other Blackfeet; in this the Beaver Indian recognized his own tongue. And to this day the Sircies speak the language of their original tribe—a guttural tongue which may be heard far

<sup>1</sup> Major Butler, "Great Lone Land."