

An Indian Tale by William J. Snelling

Edited by Lucille B. Emch

TO THE LIST of the works of William Joseph Snelling, an early figure in the literary annals of the Northwest, may be added "The Last of the Iron Hearts," a short story which to date has been overlooked by bibliographers. Appearing in the *American Monthly Magazine* in 1836 and labelled as the work of the author of *Tales of the Northwest*, "The Last of the Iron Hearts" follows the general pattern of the stories contained in the volume of Snelling's collected tales.¹

Interest in the study of Snelling and his western narratives may be justified on several counts. Snelling is among the first of American authors—such writers as Washington Irving, Richard Henry Dana, William Cullen Bryant, and William Leggett having preceded him—to issue a volume of collected short stories. In choosing for backgrounds the territory forming the northern watershed of the Mississippi River, he presented to readers new areas of fiction. He writes with such attention to accuracy of detail that his stories are of value to the historian and to the ethnologist. His chief contribution, however, is his realistic portrayal of the plains Indian, a field in which he is a pioneer. Snelling's picture of the red man avoids both the Rousseauistic conception of the noble savage and the "dirty varmint" of the Indian hater.²

It is possible that Snelling's appeal is greater to modern readers than it was to his audience in the 1830's. Simple in style, direct in

¹ Lists of Snelling's writings have been published by John T. Flanagan in his edition of *Tales of the Northwest*, xvii-xxiii (Minneapolis, 1936) and in an article on "William Joseph Snelling's Western Narratives," *ante*, 17:437-443. Another list appears in an unpublished doctoral dissertation on Snelling by Allan E. Woodall, prepared at the University of Pittsburgh in 1932. Previously unnoted, in addition to "The Last of the Iron Hearts," are a "Colloquy between a Bank Note and a Gold Coin" and an article on the "Decline of the Modern Drama," in the *New England Magazine*, 8:45-48, 106 (January, February, 1835); and extracts from an address, in the *Abolitionist*, 1:53-56, 70-73 (April-May, 1833).

² For studies of these contrasting attitudes, see G. Harrison Orians, "The Cult of the Vanishing American," in University of Toledo, *Bulletins*, vol. 8, no. 3 (November, 1935), and "The Indian Hater in Early American Fiction," in *Journal of American History*, 27:34-44 (1933).

approach, his narratives are free for the most part from the affectation and sentimentality which were prime ingredients in many literary works of a century ago. Contrasted with the stuffy, drawing-room atmosphere of once popular tales, Snelling's stories of the Northwest bring with them a breath of fresh air from the open prairies. According to one critic, Snelling's "Indian stories are undoubtedly the best written during the early period."³

When he began his literary career, Snelling drew upon his personal experiences in the West to provide material for fiction. This is significant because few of the hardy souls who ventured beyond the frontier devoted themselves to polite literature. The characteristics which prompted men to forsake civilization were seldom those which encouraged works of the imagination. The trader in the vast wilderness usually left his legacy in the form of a diary or personal narrative; often illiterate, the hunter or trapper seldom made a written record. The explorer was scientific; he charted the unknown, walked where no white man had walked before. His log was an accurate description of the land and its people. The soldier had many duties—to subdue the Indian, to extend boundaries, to protect life and property. His reports covered the many incidents which disturbed the routine of the army post. During seven years in the wilds of the Northwest, spent largely in the Minnesota country, William Joseph Snelling led the life of trader, hunter, trapper, explorer, and soldier, yet he found the inspiration to record his observations in the form of fiction. One explanation lies in the fact that Snelling had education and background superior to many inhabitants of the frontier. He was born in Boston, a leading literary center, and there he spent his childhood. After studying for two years at West Point, he went to the Northwest to join his father, Colonel Josiah Snelling, who was commandant of Fort St. Anthony at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. The post later was named in honor of the elder Snelling. By 1828, the year in which his father died, Joe Snelling was back in Boston.⁴

³ Fred L. Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story*, 63 (New York, 1923).

⁴ There are several references to a duel in which young Snelling participated at Fort Snelling. New details, including the information that he participated not as a substi-

When *Tales of the Northwest* was published in 1830 its author declared that his purpose was to give to the public a true picture of the character and habits of the Indians and to present an antidote to the romantic novels and tales which teemed from the presses in the 1820's. Not only were works of fiction dealing with the Indian berated by Snelling for their failure to portray the truth, but fairly reliable chronicles of travel through Indian territory, like those of Henry R. Schoolcraft and Jonathan Carver, were also criticized severely.⁵ Snelling insisted that a man must live with the Indians for years before he was qualified to describe their ways of life. In the six years following the publication of his collected tales, Snelling found no reason to change his point of view, nor had he discovered any work of fact or fiction worthy of the subject of the red man.⁶ In the introductory paragraph to "The Last of the Iron Hearts," he mourns the fact that the brave race is passing, to be remembered only by the dull records of hasty travelers.

As far as is known at this time, "The Last of the Iron Hearts" is Snelling's final venture in the short story field. He probably based his narrative on a tradition of the Indians, as he had done previously in "Weenokhenschah Wandeteekah," "The Hohays," and "The Lover's Leap."⁷ The simple recital of the plot is suggestive of the streamlined effect of an Indian legend. The protagonist of the tale is Fleet Foot, a Yankton amazon who forsakes the duties and garb of her sex to hunt and fight side by side with men. She swears that no man

tute for his father, as other versions state, but entirely on his own, and that he "lost the first finger of his left hand," are given in an obituary sketch published in the *Literary World*, 4:125 (February 10, 1849). See also Flanagan, in Snelling, *Tales of the Northwest*, xii.

⁵ Snelling remarks that neither of two works by these explorers "is worth a brass pin as authority," in the *New England Magazine*, 3:22 (July, 1832).

⁶ Snelling was unnecessarily severe in his criticism of the works of explorers, travelers, and others acquainted with the Indian. Whether his censure was due to unusually high standards or whether it reflected his own inner doubts cannot be said. His failure to mention certain works of travel and Indian lore leads one to doubt whether his reading was as broad as he would have his readers believe. In a footnote to his *Truth: A Gift for Scribblers*, 31 (Boston, 1832), he remarks that James K. Paulding's Indians were "by no means like any Indians I have ever seen."

⁷ For the earlier stories, see *Tales of the Northwest*, 24-38, 170-182, 224-236. Another short story published by Snelling in 1836 is "A Night in the Woods." It is to be found in the *Ladies' Companion*, 4:98-100 (January, 1836), and in the *Boston Book*, 40-48 (Boston, 1836).

shall call her wife except he who is declared the bravest and best at the council fire. After many ordeals in which his rivals are bested, Mahtoe, a Yankton brave, is proclaimed the winner and is offered the hand of Fleet Foot in marriage. But Mahtoe, having achieved the victory, refuses the prize, because he already has three wives and does not wish to espouse another.

Not only is Snelling's "The Last of the Iron Hearts" an interesting work of fiction, but it is also a valuable source of material on Indian life and customs in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The accuracy of the descriptions has been borne out by various ethnological studies, both of contemporary and later date.⁸ He describes the ordeal of the virgins, and the bloody and gruelling dance of the sun; he depicts the Indian as insensitive to pain, courageous in battle, but a weakling in the face of superstition. Many of the characteristics which set the Indian apart were the result of a moral system widely different from that of the white man. A warrior's position in the tribe was dependent on the number of scalps he took. Stoicism in the face of death was a virtue taught from early childhood. With polygamy an established social custom, no man was criticized for having more than one wife. Mahtoe, whom white men would call "murderer" and "adulterer," was honored among his tribesmen as a "good son, brother, husband, and friend."

"The Last of the Iron Hearts" is a good narrative and one which will take its place beside "The Hohays" and "Payton Skah" as characteristic of the author's better work. The material is fresh, the style for the most part unencumbered. There are none of the digressions which mar "The Bois Brule" or "The Captive." The characterization of Fleet Foot adds a new contribution to the gallery of fictional heroines.⁹ Unlike the Indian maidens of song and story, Fleet Foot is a flesh and blood creature endowed with courage and ambition. In construction the major fault of "The Last of the Iron Hearts" lies in

⁸ George Catlin, the well-known artist of the American Indians, pronounced Snelling's *Tales of the Northwest* the "most faithful picture of Indian life ever written," according to the *Literary World*, 4:126 (February 10, 1849).

⁹ The title heroine of Morgan Neville's "Poll Preble; or the Law of the Deer Hunt," in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1839*, 68-100 (Philadelphia, 1838), resembles Fleet Foot in her ability to hunt and shoot like a man.

the concluding paragraphs, where a shift from emphasis on Fleet Foot to emphasis on Mahtoe occurs. "The Last of the Iron Hearts" nevertheless adds to Snelling's reputation as a teller of Indian tales, and it brings to a total of fifteen his contributions in the short story field.

[From the *American Monthly Magazine* (Boston), 1:239-244 (March, 1836).]¹⁰

THE LAST OF THE IRON HEARTS

By the author of "Tales of the North-west."

It is an ungrateful task to write an Indian tale as it should be written; and, what is more, the man is not in America who can do it; or, if he be, he has not yet made his appearance in print. So the brave and unfortunate race, so deeply wronged by our fathers and ourselves, pass away, and no data are left to posterity by which to understand their character, save the dull records of incompetent or one-sided chroniclers, and the vague speculations of hasty travellers, most of whom are about as much entitled to credit as Captain [Basil] Hall. We are not going into a dissertation, but beg leave to assure our readers that the Indian is not the ferocious brute of [William] Hubbard and [Increase] Mather, or the brilliant, romantic half-French, half-Celtic Mohegan and Yemassee created by Symmes [*William G. Simms*] and [James Fenimore] Cooper.¹¹ How can men, however talented, describe what they never saw?

A plum-pudding cannot be made without plums, or a story, now-a-days, without a sprinkling of what fools call love and wise men folly. Our tale, therefore, shall have a little of the fashionable spice.

Once upon a time there lived, among the Yanktons of the far Northwest, an amazon, who whatever mischief was done by her eyes, certainly inflicted literal wounds with her hands. Such things have been before; we read of Clorinda, Camilla, and Marphisa in ancient days, and are

¹⁰ A file of this periodical is in the Library of Congress, which supplied the writer with a photostatic copy of Snelling's story. It was reprinted in the *Cincinnati Mirror* for April 9 and June 18, 1836. In the later issue it bears the title "Fleet Foot, or the Last of the Iron Hearts." Files of the *Mirror* are available in the libraries of the Philosophical and Historical Society of Ohio in Cincinnati and of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society in Columbus.

¹¹ Snelling here indicates his familiarity with Hall's *Travels in North America* (1829); Hubbard's *Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New-England* (1677); Mather's *Brief History of the War with the Indians* (1676) and *Relation of the Troubles Which Have Happened in New-England by Reason of the Indians There* (1677); Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826); and Simms' *Yemassee* (1835).

assured by Tyrone Power that the modern Irish women assist their husbands in *faction fights*, each armed with a stone tied up in the foot of a stocking. How much more likely, then, that such characters should sometimes be found among a people to whom refinement is utterly unknown, with whom animal bravery is the highest moral attribute, and whose first-lipped sounds are war and battle. The Penthiselea in question was the daughter of a tremendous warrior, who never had fewer than three scalps drying in the smoke of his lodge at a time, and she had stood side by side in fight with her father and loaded one of his two guns before she was fifteen years old. More; on the same occasion she right valiantly knocked two wounded men in the head with her own (alas! not *fair*) hands, after the fray was over. From that time she renounced the avocations, and sometimes the garb, of her sex. She rocked no cradle, her back bore no burthen, her hand planted no corn, dressed no robe, and wrought no moccasin. She reined the steed, wielded the lance, and drew the bow instead. She accompanied war and hunting parties, and sat in the councils of men; and in both situations her merit was cordially acknowledged. For all this she was especially qualified. The daughter of a giant, she exceeded the stature of her sex; trained to incessant exercise, she was quite equal to the fatigues of war. In council, taciturnity is the prime merit of an Indian who has nothing to say, and, strange as it may seem, she was able to hold her peace.

The main spring of this woman's character was ambition. Conscious of powers inferior to those of few men, she saw herself doomed to be an Indian wife, that is, an inferior being, a mere drudge, a bearer of burthens, a hewer of wood and drawer of water, the slave of an inferior, and the victim of his caprice. The proud and haughty soul she inherited from her father revolted at a lot so abject, and she possessed the only qualities which could raise her above it, namely, physical strength and determined courage, active and passive.

The Fleet Foot (we will not inflict on our readers the sesquipedalian torture of an Indian name) became the hate of the women of her tribe and the admiration of its men. For envy, petty malice, and calumny she cared nothing. She heard her name the subject of rude praise, her deeds the themes of rude song, her wisdom the admiration of the old, and her beauty the discourse of the young. She was eminently beautiful, that is, if a form cast in a gigantic mould of perfect symmetry and very regular and very dark features, can be said to make a woman so. Before she was twenty she was wooed by half the males of the tribe who had any

pretensions to rank among its men, but to none of them would she incline her ear, gravely or seriously. To have married would have been to lose her rank, to become the Paria we have described an Indian wife to be. Therefore she scoffed at their proposals and returned their presents. If they came to whine their love-sick ditties before her door, she broke their heads with their own three-holed flutes; and if they persisted, she shot their dogs and horses. Nevertheless, so much was she annoyed, that she was obliged to find an expedient to prevent the nuisance at once and for ever.

Her tribe have a ceremony, or rather had it (for it has for many years been obsolete), of particular interest and importance to its females. It was a dance of virgins. After appropriate religious rites and dances, the unmarried women advanced, one at a time, into the centre of the assembled multitude, and challenged each and all who knew any thing against her maiden fame to declare it. Were it his betrothed, any one having such knowledge was held bound in honor to proclaim it without reservation. It may therefore be supposed that many took no part in the rite, and its manifest inconveniences have caused it to be discontinued.

The Fleet Foot stepped into the circle, drew up her commanding form to its full height, and with mingled pride and dignity addressed the crowd: "I have been for these six years," she said, "a woman set apart from women. In plain and forest, in peace and war, in village and camp, my intercourse has been wholly with men. The clear river is ruffled by the least breath; the snow is sullied by the pressure of the lightest foot. Let him breathe on the stream of my life, and trample on the snow of my character who can!"

There was a breathless silence, but no one spoke.

She then commanded her medicine bag to be brought forward. This is a collection of charms, amulets, &c., to which great reverence is paid by its owner. Each Indian has his own, and you may swear him upon it more safely than you can most whites on the Evangelists. Putting her hand on this shrine of savage superstition, our Thalestris spoke again.

"I have now done what would have secured any maiden a hunter and a warrior. No dirt has been thrown; no bird has uplifted a single note of shame. And now, with my hand on this medicine bag, I declare, O Yanktons, that no man shall ever call me wife but he who shall be proclaimed the best and bravest warrior of the tribe at its council fire, or who can make me cast down my eyes at the Ordeal of Maidens. I have spoken."

A deep roar of approbation went up as the martial maid retired from a purgation not less terrible than the trial by fire of old. Each warrior of repute now bethought him how he should gain the name of the best of his band. The young performed prodigies. Those who slept in the shade of former laurels, aroused to fresh and more terrible action. Never before was the wail of Pawnee, Chippeway, and Assiniboin widows heard so far and so widely. Nevertheless, no Yankton obtained the envied distinction. As it could only be given by general suffrage, it was impossible that it could ever be won by any individual of a tribe of emulous and brave men. The stratagem of the Fleet Foot was completely successful.

A year passed, and the emulation the Minerva of the tribe had excited gave rise to a savage order of chivalry, in comparison with whose reckless contempt of death the frantic valor of the Crusades and the desperation of the Assassins becomes reason and common sense. Twelve warriors, approved the boldest and best of their race, associated themselves for the avowed object of winning the Fleet Foot and the dangerous title she had proposed as the price of her hand. Their reputation being equal, or nearly so, and the competition being narrowed down to themselves, it was only with each other they could strive. We must describe the rite of initiation into the order and its rules in detail.

After fasting and praying three days and nights, the band came forth before day, and performed a solemn dance around a lofty pole. Mahtoe, or the Grizzly Bear, the most distinguished, was then stripped to the waist and painted black. Two oaken skewers, each half an inch thick, were next forcibly thrust through the muscular parts of his arms. Two strong cords were then attached to the skewers, and the ends were drawn tight to the top of the pole. At sunrise the initiate began to dance around the pole, with half his weight resting on his lacerated arms, and chanting his former exploits. This agonizing torture he continued to inflict on himself till sunset, without wincing, when he was released, and the next morning another took his place. Let not the reader think that we exaggerate the Indian capacity to endure privation and pain. Such a scene as we have described we have witnessed, and have diminished rather than added to its horrors.

The rules of the "Iron Hearted" were, never, when on any military enterprise, to turn one inch out of the direct line of march that led to its accomplishment for any danger whatever, until one or more were killed. If opposed by a superior force, they were to cut their way through;

if they came to a precipice, one, at least, was bound to walk over it, and the order of precedence was to be settled by emulation.

The dress of the Yankton brave is singularly picturesque. A tunic and a pair of leggins, snow white, and ornamented and fringed in wild profusion, a pair of moccasins and a buffalo robe, covered with hieroglyphics representing the wearer's exploits, are the main article. For every wound received or given, a slender painted stick is thrust into the hair. For a scalp taken or an enemy slain, a pair of skunk skins are appended to the heels, and a tuft of swan's down and a war eagle's feather placed on the summit of the head. Hang round the warrior's neck a necklace of grizzly bear's claws, to denote that he has killed such an animal, mount him on a fine horse, with two or three scalps dangling from the bridle rein, set him careering over the prairie with lance and shield, with his eagle's feathers streaming in the wind, and you have a Yankton desperado in full costume—none of the *Metamoras* of the stage, but an arm to do, a heart to dare, and a tongue to speak common sense, like any other person. Each of the Iron Hearted were entitled to wear all these decorations.

Strange as it may seem, their bond of brotherhood considered, the Iron Hearted were not extinct for three years, during which time one leaped over a bluff, three were burned by the Pawnees, two perished in the flames of the burning prairie, a seventh walked under the ice of the Missouri, and four more died in battle and lost their scalps. Not one was known to violate his desperate pledge. And now Mahtoe alone remained, after having braved as many and as great perils as any of his defunct comrades, acknowledged the Bravest and Best of the Yanktons.

With no objection on the part of the Fleet Foot, her father offered the last of the Iron Hearted his daughter's hand in full council. The stoic of the prairie, after a decorous pause of about an hour, in order to make up his mind, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and replied, that "All the use he had for a wife was, to do the work of his lodge and take care of his children; for which the proposed lady was no way qualified. He had never, he said, the least idea of espousing the Fleet Foot—he had three wives already, quite enough for one man. His motive for joining the devoted band had been that it made his heart sick to have it doubted that he was the bravest man on earth. That doubt was now removed, and with much gratitude he declined the favor intended him."

The Fleet Foot went to war no more. Stung with a slight she could

not avenge, she put herself under the tuition of an eminent sorceress, for of such professions there is no lack in an Indian tribe. When she thought she had made such progress in necromancy as did credit to her application, she cast a spell on Mahtoe. She drew a picture of him in the sand, and with many a magic ceremony effaced the feet to destroy his swiftness, the arms to prostrate his strength, the eyes to blear his vision, and devoted him to the blade of the slaughterer by driving a knife into his bosom to the haft. Having charitably informed him of her affectionate proceeding, she went into the woods and hanged herself, according to the judicious custom of squaws when slighted or jealous.

The heart of Mahtoe, iron to every thing beside, was wax to superstition. Apprehension of evil had the effect evil itself could not have produced. He became a changed man, and a settled melancholy constantly rested on his features. His gun missed fire, the Buffalo carried off his arrows and lived, his huntings were unsuccessful, his canoe was upset, his corn was blighted in the milk, and his children died. In short, he considered himself a man bewitched, no uncommon thing among Indians, and gave himself up to despair.

Two years after he went to the Mandan villages on the Missouri with a small party of his people. While there, a war party of forty Pawnees, who were lurking about the vicinity, heard of their arrival. Presuming on the forbearance of the Mandans, with whom they were at peace, the Pawnees entered the village and attacked the visitors. For once they reckoned amiss. The Mandans and their guests set upon them together and compelled them to a fight of several miles, killing some and wounding all. Not a man escaped wholly unhurt. Indeed, so hard were the Pawnees pressed, that they were obliged to throw away their clothes, and even their weapons, to make better speed.

The old spirit of Mahtoe revived in the excitement of the chase. One Pawnee, who appeared to be a chief, made almost superhuman efforts to check the pursuit; frequently turning, and bearing back the foremost of his hunters. Mahtoe met him. The chief discharged his gun unavailingly, being brought down in the very act by a bullet which broke his thigh. As the Yankton ran in to finish him, the wounded man drew a reserved pistol and shot him through the body.

His slayer was instantly scalped by the comrades of the slain Yankton, who then passed in hot pursuit. When, after an absence of three hours, they returned, they witnessed another example of the fortitude of their

race. The Pawnee had recovered from his swoon, and was quietly engaged, though blind and powerless, in smoking his pipe. They sacrificed him to the manes of their dead.

So died, on the field of battle, his nursery and his dwelling-place, with his war-cry on his lips, one who, fierce and pitiless to foes, was yet a good son, brother, husband, father, and friend, according to his knowledge of his social duties—the Last of the Iron Hearted.



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