



CHAPTER X.

SIGNS AND HIEROGLYPHICS.

IT has been asserted by many persons that the languages of the Indians are deficient in words, and that, in order to make themselves understood, they are obliged to resort to motions and signs with their hands. This is entirely a mistake. I do not know a nation of whom foreigners do not say the same thing. The fact is, that in every country, signs and motions with the hands more or less accompany discourse, particularly when delivered with a certain degree of earnestness and warmth. Foreigners, who are not very conversant with a language, pay in general as much and sometimes more attention to these motions than to the words of the speaker, in order the better to be able to understand what falls from him. Hence, almost every nation charges the others with too much gesticulation in speaking. For a similar reason, a foreign language is generally thought to be spoken quicker than our own, while the truth is, that it is our ear which is slow in distinguishing the words, not the voice which speaks that is too quick in uttering them.

The Indians do not gesticulate more when they speak than other nations do. In their public speeches they will, like our preachers and lawyers, enforce what they say by gestures and motions of the body and hands, in order to give greater weight to their observations, or to represent the subject they speak of in a more lively manner than can be done by words alone; but in common conversation they make few of those motions, and not more, I believe, than we do ourselves; even the women, who every where speak more than the men, never want words to express themselves, but rather seem to have too many, and

they do not oftener employ gestures in aid of their conversation than the vivacity of their sex induces them to do every where else.

It is true that the Indians have a language of signs, by which they communicate with each other on occasions when speaking is not prudent or proper, as, for instance, when they are about to meet an enemy, and by speaking they would run the risk of being discovered. By this means they also make themselves understood to those nations of Indians whose languages they are not acquainted with, for all the Indian nations understand each other in this way. It is also, in many cases, a saving of words, which the Indians are much intent on, believing that too much talking disgraces a man. When, therefore, they will relate something extraordinary in a few words, they make use of corresponding signs, which is very entertaining to those who listen and attend to them, and who are acquainted both with the language and the signs, being very much as if somebody were to explain a picture set before them. But they never make use of signs to supply any deficiency of language, as they have words and phrases sufficient to express every thing.

I have frequently questioned Indians who had been educated at our schools, and could understand, read, write, and speak both English and German, whether they could express their ideas better in either of those languages than in their own, and they have always and uniformly answered that they could express themselves with far the greatest ease in their own Indian, and that they never were at a loss for words or phrases in which to clothe every idea that occurred to them, without being in any case obliged to gesticulate or make motions with their hands or otherwise. From the knowledge which I have acquired of their language, I have reason to be satisfied that it is so. Indeed, how can it be doubted, when we have the whole of the Bible and New Testament translated into one of their dialects, and when we see our ministers, when once familiar with the language of the nation with which they reside, preach to them without the least difficulty on the most abstruse subjects of the Christian faith? It is true, that ideas are not always expressed in those languages in the same words, or under the same grammatical forms as in our own; where we would use one part of

speech, we are obliged to employ another, and one single word with them will not seldom serve a purpose for which we would have to employ several; but still, the ideas are communicated, and pass with clearness and precision from mind to mind. Thus the end of oral language is completely obtained, and more, I think, cannot be required.

The Indians do not possess our art of writing, they have no alphabets, or¹ any mode of representing to the eye the sounds of words spoken, yet they have certain hieroglyphics, by which they describe facts in so plain a manner, that those who are conversant with those marks can understand them with the greatest ease, as easily, indeed, as we can understand a piece of writing. For instance, on a piece of bark, or on a large tree with the bark taken off for the purpose, by the side of a path, they can and do give every necessary information to those who come by the same way; they will in that manner let them know, that they were a war party of so many men, from such a place, of such a nation and such a tribe; how many of each tribe were in the party; to which tribe the chief or captain belonged; in what direction they proceeded to meet the enemy; how many days they were out and how many returning; what number of the enemy they had killed, how many prisoners they had brought; how many scalps they had taken; whether they had lost any of their party, and how many; what enemies they had met with, and how many they consisted of; of what nation or tribe their captain was, &c.; all which, at a single glance, is perfectly well understood by them. In the same manner they describe a chase: all Indian nations can do this, although they have not all the same marks; yet I have seen the Delawares read with ease the drawings of the Chippeways, Mingoes, Shawanos, and Wyandots, on similar subjects.

While Indians are travelling to the place of their destination, whether it be on a journey to their distant hunting grounds or on a war excursion, some of the young men are sent out to hunt by the way, who, when they have killed a deer, bear, or other animal, bring it to the path, ready to be taken away by those who are coming along, (often with horses) to the place of en-

¹ For "*or*" read "*nor*."

campment, when they all meet at night. Having hung up the meat by the side of the path, these young men make a kind of sun-dial, in order to inform those who are coming of the time of day it was at the time of their arrival and departure. A clear place in the path is sought for, and if not readily found, one is made by the side of it, and a circle or ring being drawn on the sand or earth, a stick of about two or three feet in length is fixed in the centre, with its upper end bent towards that spot in the horizon where the sun stood at the time of their arrival or departure. If both are to be noted down, two separate sticks are set; but generally one is sufficient, namely, for the time of departure.

Hunters have particular marks, which they make on the trees, where they strike off from the path to their hunting grounds or place of encampment, which is often at the distance of many miles; yet the women, who come from their towns to fetch meat from these camps, will as readily find them as if they were conducted to the spot.

I shall conclude this chapter with an anecdote, which will at once shew how expressive and energetic is this hieroglyphic writing of the Indians. A white man in the Indian country, met¹ a Shawanos riding a horse which he recognised for his own, and claimed it from him as his property. The Indian calmly answered; "Friend! after a little while, I will call on you at your house, when we shall talk of this matter." A few days² afterwards, the Indian came to the white man's house, who insisting on having his horse restored, the other then told him: "Friend! the horse which you claim belonged to my uncle who lately died; according to the Indian custom, I have become heir to all his property." The white man not being satisfied, and renewing his demand, the Indian immediately took a coal from the fire-place, and made two striking figures on the door of the house, the one representing the white man taking the horse, and the other, himself, in the act of scalping him; then he coolly asked the trembling claimant "whether he could read this Indian writing?" The matter thus was settled at once, and the Indian rode off.

¹ For "*met*" read "*saw*."

² For "*days*" read "*hours*."