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BY  
RALPH R. PERRY



ANGEL DE CORA

AN  
AMERICAN  
INDIAN  
ARTIST

BY  
NATALIE CURTIS

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# AN AMERICAN INDIAN ARTIST

BY NATALIE CURTIS



NOTED American illustrator, Mr. Howard Pyle, was once asked if he ever had "a real genius" for a pupil. He answered, "Yes, I had—once. But unfortunately she was a woman and still more unfortunately an American Indian.

She was so retiring that she always kept in the background of my classes. When I tried to rouse her ambition by telling her how famous she might become, she answered: "We Indian women are taught that modesty is a woman's chief virtue."

It was this innate, retiring instinct that held back "Hinook-Maŋi'wi-Kilina'ka" from greater efforts and from wider recognition. Known to the white world as Angel De Cora (her name, "Woman Coming on the Clouds in Glory," finding a practical condensation in the single word "Angel"), she was acclaimed by the few to whom her gifts as decorator and designer were fully revealed as an artist of strong originality and racial character. In her death the Nation has lost a personality of unusual picturesqueness and significance.

It was some forty years ago that Angel De Cora was "caught wild," as she delighted to describe it, on the Winnebago Reservation, not long after her harassed tribe, uprooted and driven ever further westward by the settlers' demands for their lands, had taken a final refuge near the friendly Omahas in Nebraska. The Indians were despairing and destitute, and it was from a seemingly hopeless future that the little "Woman Coming on the Clouds," a shy, startled child, was rescued by a kindly teacher of Hampton Institute and taken to General Armstrong's school in Virginia, where friends became interested in her and her talent

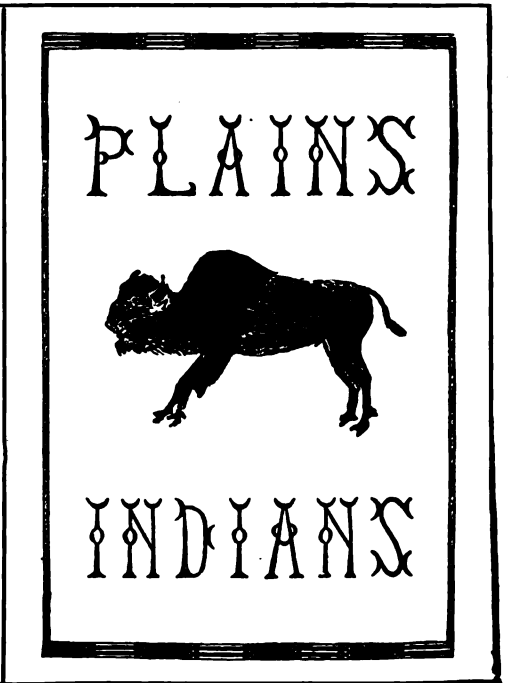
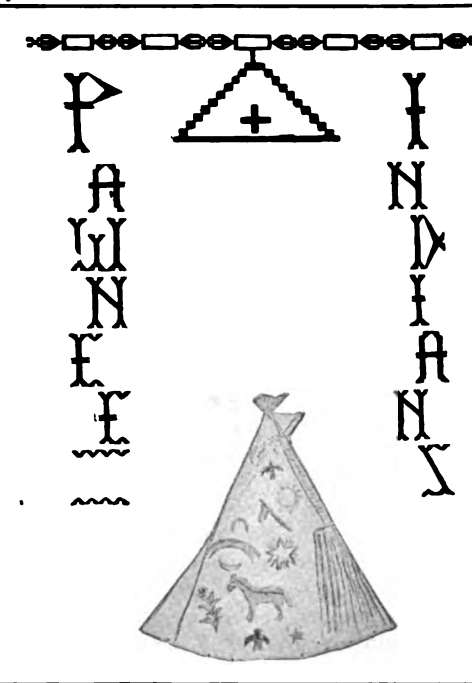
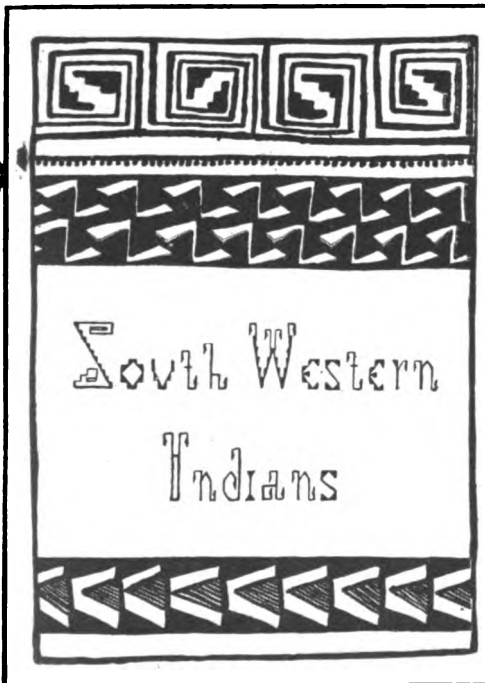
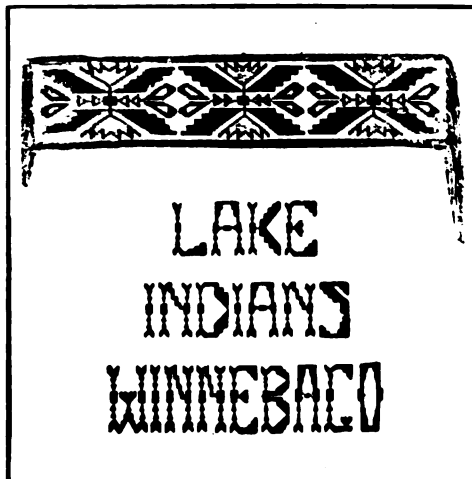
for drawing was allowed complete freedom. After graduating from Hampton, Angel enrolled in the drawing classes of Howard Pyle, the best-known illustrator of the day. But it was not long before she left her teacher because she found that all the pupils copied their master. "And I am an Indian," she said, "and don't want to draw just like a white man."

Angel always insisted that she had no more talent than any other Indian woman. "My people are natural craftsmen," she used to say. "The Indian woman from prehistoric times has been an artist. The work of her hand, the product of her thought, has been enshrined in the white man's museums throughout the world. Each basket, each pottery urn shaped by the Indian woman is an individual art expression created by its maker. The imagination that prompts the symmetry and beauty of pattern, and the dexterity that gives the skill of perfect workmanship—these are inherent in every Indian. The only difference between me and the women on the reservations is that I have

chosen to apply my native Indian gift in the white man's world. We are a race of designers, and I look for the day when our art may be as generally recognized as that of the Japanese, and when America will be proud to have her Indians make beautiful things for all the world."

Angel De Cora was sanguine; a potentiality for art expression, even when practically applied to crafts and industries, is unfortunately the very last thing that the mechanically minded American considers of the smallest value. This is another reason why the gifted Indian girl, with all that she stood for, passes to-day without public recognition; though she blazed a new trail, she now treads the "Pathway of Departed Spirits," wept only by the few (and these either Indians or artists) who know how rare was the quality of her work and who realize how fruitful to the Indian people and to America at large might yet be the prophecy of her life.

Though she started her career by illustrating books of Indian tales, she later looked down upon these early efforts, for her greatest work lay in decorative design. It was in this field that my own personal contact with her ripened into warm friendship. I was about to publish my collection of Indian songs and legends, decorated by original Indian drawings and the names of the tribes represented. Most of the drawings had been made on the reservations by the old Indians, but I asked Angel De Cora to make a design for the title-page of her own tribe, the Winnebago people. When she brought me the finished page, it bore, in addition to the design, the legend, "Lake Indians—Winnebago," in letters so beautiful and of such startling originality that my publishers declared: "We can't have one page looking like this and the others



SPECIMENS OF ANGEL DE CORA'S DECORATIVE LETTERING

labeled with prosaic printing! We must have this sort of lettering all through the book. We will show this to our designer upstairs and ask him to copy this style."

"Our designer" looked at the page and gave a low whistle. "I never saw anything like this in my life before," he said. "Whoever did that lettering is a genius! Don't ask me to make letters like that. I really advise you to get the person who did this page to do all the others."

"You would be surprised," I said to the designer, "to know that the 'genius' is a young Indian girl!"

He thought a minute, then said, "Well, no, I am not really surprised, because no white man could have done this."

This was true, for the letters were not conceived as *letters*; the Indian girl had looked on them as so many different shapes and as structural ideas for decorative forms. And the forms were Indian.

"Take my advice," said the designer again. "Get that girl to do all the lettering in the book and you will have something unlike anything that's ever been done with the alphabet before."

So the order was given; but when the pages came back we found to our astonishment that the lettering was not in the least like that with which Angel had decorated the Winnebago section. She had invented a different kind of lettering for every Indian picture, and the forms of the letters were composed of *motifs* from the drawings which they accompanied. Her artist nature had compelled her to go on creating, even though this was more than had been asked of her. And in response the publishers, not to be outdone, sent her a check that surprised her. "She's deserved it!" they said; "and our art department is so enthusiastic that they're ready to wear feathers themselves."

It was at about this time that Theodore Roosevelt, as re-elected President, appointed Francis E. Leupp Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and Angel De Cora was asked if she would accept the post of Art Instructor at the Carlisle Indian School. "I will take a Government position on one condition only," said she, "and that is that I shall not be expected to teach in the white man's way, but shall be given complete liberty to develop the art of my own race and to apply this, as far as possible, to various forms of art industries and crafts."

Angel's heart must have sunk, however, when as a newcomer at Carlisle she surveyed the work of her predecessors. For our widespread tuition of Indians has been based on the principle that the Indian must copy the white man. The Art Department at Carlisle had been engaged in teaching Indian children, whose own mothers were masters of decorative design, to paint pansies on plush pillows and forget-me-nots on picture frames. It was not the fault of Carlisle that the standard of art in an American school should resemble the counter of a department store; it was the fault of our whole civilization. Before Angel De Cora could begin her work the slate

had not only to be wiped clean but thrown bodily out of the window!

First of all, her classes were told that they need not copy the teacher, nor anybody else. The children were to express *themselves*. Angel was encouraged by the experience of a white teacher in a Canadian Indian school, who, for lack of funds with which to pay workmen for the repainting of the Indian boys' dormitory, had turned the boys themselves loose in the room with a brush and a paint-pot.

Her manner of teaching was to set her scholars a given task and then leave the room, freeing her pupils from the restraint of the teacher's presence.

"But," said an educator to whom Angel was narrating her experience, "where was your discipline?"

"Children only have to be disciplined when they are bored into refractoriness." Angel answered. "No one is bored when he is creating something."

To a group of professors who were visit-



ANGEL DE CORA

The result had astonished the teacher by its beauty of color and originality of decorative conception. Later the boy who had made the main plan for the dormitory painting found a lucrative position in a large Canadian shop as arranger of show-window displays. Here was indeed a practical evolution!

Under Angel De Cora's guidance the Indians at Carlisle worked in beads, in clay, in basket and rug weaving, and applied their native talent for design to stencil work, wall-papers, book covers, head and tail piece decorations, lettering, and other forms of art industry. It is said that they painted the school wagon in a way that caused a commotion when it drove into a near-by Quaker town!

ing Hampton Institute, Angel told with a laugh how she had one day set her pupils at a certain kind of weaving and had given them new knives with which to cut the ends of the threads. When she came back, the looms were still untouched; not a pupil had done his work, but perfect order prevailed. As Angel walked through the room one of the pupils held out to her his new knife, whose handle was beautifully incased in a woven hilt. The weather was warm, and the Indians had found the new, shiny handles uncomfortably slippery. So they had turned their ingenuity to the weaving of little bright-colored handle covers. They had invented both the idea and the stitch, and the result was so original that Angel De



Cora, as she examined each child's work, praised heartily the skill expressed, all untaught and untrammelled.

"But," objected one professor, solemnly, "they hadn't done the work that you had told them to do. Did you not reprimand them for that?"

"Why, they were doing nothing intentionally wrong and they had invented a new bit of art craftsmanship. In my classes we are all there simply to learn how to make beautiful things. So I said to them, 'I want to learn your stitch; now you must teach me!' and I became their pupil. I believe that teachers and pupils should interchange ideas." (If the white race, in its contact with other races, had ever come upon this conception of education, how much richer might have been the world!)

It was Dr. Felix Adler, ever a pioneer in freedom of ideas, who then turned to Angel De Cora and said, "Young woman, you have taught a lesson not only to your children but to pedagogues as well."

It was typical of Theodore Roosevelt's administration that initiative work like that of Angel De Cora could put forth flower and even bear fruitage under officials appointed by him. But, un-

fortunately for Angel, Mr. Leupp, who had "backed her up" because he in turn had been steadily "backed" by Roosevelt, resigned as Commissioner of Indian Affairs when Roosevelt left office. Then the weight of inertia in a great Governmental educational machine, with its "blanket" system of tuition for all Indian schools throughout the country, gradually killed the spirit of Angel De Cora's work. What headway could a shy Indian girl make against avalanches of red tape? Her struggle became a losing fight against inevitable conditions of traditional discipline and routine, and sank later into a resigned pessimism. Yet, though there is little tangible evidence that now can be shown of what Angel De Cora wrought, and, above all, of what she dreamed, yet she did enough to prove abundantly that there is not only room but need for the American Indian in the art and in the industries of his own land—even against such prejudice as was expressed by an Irish employee of a transcontinental railway, who, when he saw a gang of Pueblo Indians working on the tracks in New Mexico, exclaimed, "Sure, there ought to be laws in this free counthry against givin

such good jobs to them *furriners!*" The Indian is indeed a foreigner on his own soil when it comes to recognition as a human being. And the Labor Commission at Washington has done well to find him jobs on the railway, in the beet fields, in the reclamation service, and in other forms of manual toil. But the Indians can do more than this. A people who are natural potters, weavers, designers, workers in metal and in textiles, should be recognized as such—particularly since they are absolutely the only people who can give us a decorative art of distinctive National character. It would seem as though any other nation would have seized upon such an opportunity as has been ours to build up an American art, vital, individual, and indigenous to the soil. And does not this period of general reconstruction offer the right "psychological moment"? The death of Angel De Cora, the first Indian artist to express in the white man's world what her people might become, should rouse us to a keener realization of the significance of her conviction:

"My people are a race of designers. I look for the day when the Indian shall make beautiful things for all the world."

## KENTUCKY MOUNTAIN RHYMES

BY ANN COBB

OF THE SETTLEMENT SCHOOL, HINDMAN, KNOTT COUNTY, KENTUCKY

### THE WIDOW-MAN

I've brung you my three babes, that lost their Maw a year ago.  
Folks claim you are right women, larnd, and fitten for to know  
What's best for babes, and how to raise 'em into Christian men.  
I've growed afeared to leave 'em lest the house ketch fire again.  
For though I counsel 'em a sight each time I ride to town,  
Little chaps get so sleepy-headed when the dark comes down!

A body can make shift somehow to feed 'em up of days,  
But nights they need a woman-person's foolish little ways  
(When all of t'other young things are tucked under mammy's  
wing,

And the hoot-owls and the frogs and all the lonesome critters  
sing).

You'll baby 'em a little when you get 'em in their gown?  
Little chaps get so sleepy-headed when the dark comes down!

### THE MAIL-BOY

Lonesomest part of the road I foller,  
Jest at the edge of dark,  
Little ole frogs in a swampy holler  
Allus begin to bark.

Sensible critters are gone to their sleeping—  
Jay-birds and chickens and hogs—  
Quare how it jest sets your innards a-creeping—  
Nothing but little ole frogs!

Sets you to thinking of ghostes and dying—  
Everything sorry and sad.  
Gee! but I go past that holler a-flying!  
Cain't even *shoot* straight, by gad!

### "OLE BALD EAGLE"

(A DANCE TUNE)

"Back an' forth across the floor—daylight's gone!"

Gabriel scraping his ole gourd fiddle,  
Clear Creek running a set,  
Preacher he reckons that ole man Satan  
Aims ter fill up his net.  
I'm of the notion they're stouter Christians,  
Dancing away their fret.

"Watch Miss Maggie sail across—daylight's gone!"

Wyatts hev allus been master fiddlers,  
Ready to play their part.  
Many's the couple I've holpen courting

Out of a joyous heart.

Now little maids call me Ole Bald Eagle  
Jest to be gayly and smart.

"Ole Bald Eagle sails across—daylight's gone!"

Now I can set in the chimley-corner—  
Nary a frolic I fail—  
Jest pine-blank like the ole bald eagle  
Watching the young birds sail,  
Wishing they'll happen on pretty weather  
Out on the Eagle Trail.