

American Notes, Ch. XVII: Chief Pitchlynn



"Leaving Cincinnati at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, we embarked for Louisville in the Pike steamboat, which, carrying the mails, was a packet of much better class than that in which we had come from Pittsburg. As this passage does not occupy more than twelve or thirteen hours, we arranged to go ashore that night: not coveting the distinction of sleeping in a stateroom, when it was possible to sleep anywhere else.

There chanced to be on board this boat, in addition to the usual dreary crowd of passengers, one Pitchlynn, a chief of the Choctaw tribe of Indians, who *sent in his card* to me, and with whom I had the pleasure of long conversation. He spoke English perfectly well, though he had not begun to learn the language, he told me, until he was a young man grown. He had read many books; and Scott's poetry appeared to have left a strong impression on his mind; especially the opening of *The Lady of the Lake*, and the great battle scene in *Marmion*, in which, no doubt from the congeniality of the subjects to his own pursuits and tastes, he had great interest and delight. . . .

He told me that he had been away from his home, west of the Mississippi, seventeen months; and was now returning. He had been chiefly at Washington on some negotiations pending between his Tribe and the Government: which were not settled yet (he said in a melancholy way), and he feared never would be: for what could a few poor Indians do, against such well-skilled men of business as the whites? He had no love for Washington tired of towns and cities very soon; and longed for the Forest and the Prairie.

I asked him what he thought of Congress.

He answered, with a smile, that it wanted dignity, in an Indian's eyes.

He would very much like, he said, to see England before he died and spoke with much interest about the great things to be seen there. When I told him of that chamber in the British Museum wherein are preserved household memorials of a race that ceased to be, thousands of years ago, he was very attentive, and it was not hard to see that he had a reference in his mind to the gradual fading away of his own people. This led us to speak of Mr. Catlin's gallery, which he praised highly: observing that his own portrait was among the collection, and that all the likenesses were 'elegant'." ----- Charles Dickens