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AN APPRECIATION

“Welcome, Englishmen!”

[*Reprinted from Sylvester's “Indian Wars of New
England”*]

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By Herbert M. Sylvester

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But about y^e 16. of M a r c h a certaine Indian came bouldly amongst them, and spoke to them in broken English, which they could well understand, but marvelled at it. . . . His name was S a m o s e t.

—BRADFORD'S JOURNAL.

Fryday, the 16. (March) a fayre warme day towards; this morning we determined to conclude of the military Orders, which we had begun to consider of before, but were interrupted by the Savages, as we mentioned formerly; whilst we were busied here about, we were interrupted againe, for there presented himself a S a v a g e, which caused an Alarm, he very boldly came all alone and along the houses straight to the Randevous, where we intercepted

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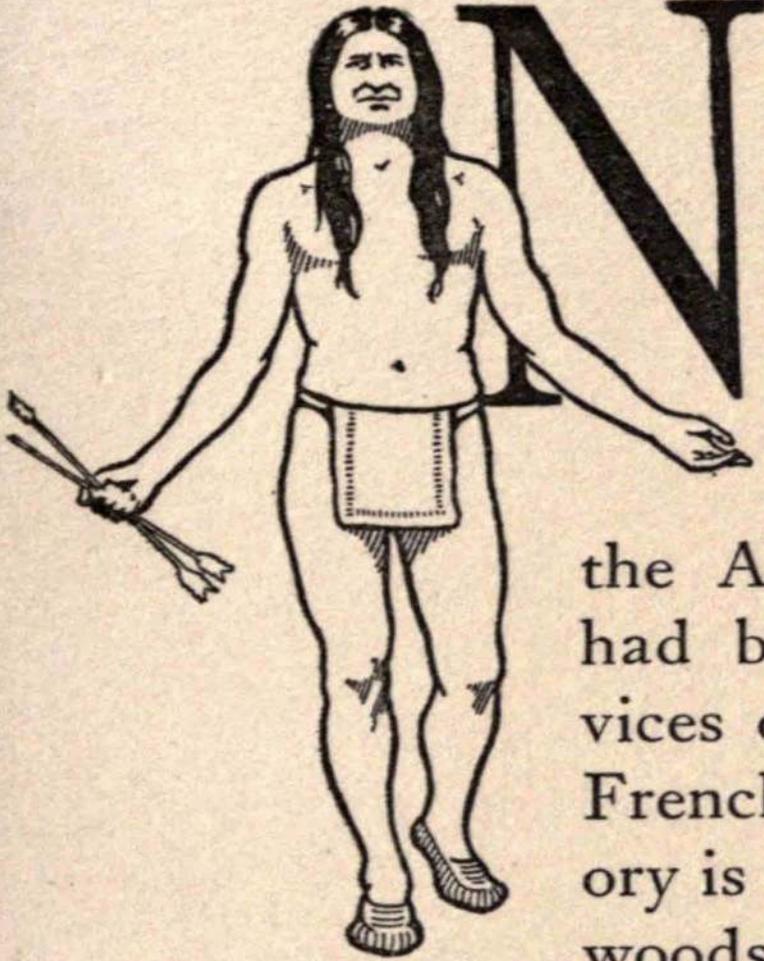
him, suffering him to goe in, as vndoubtedly he would, out of his bouldness, hee saluted vs in English, and bade vs well-come, for he had learned some broken English amongst the English men that came to fish at *M o n c h i g g o n*, and knew by name the most of the Captaines, Commanders & Masters, that vsually come, he was a man free in speech, so farre as he could expresse his minde, and of seemly carriage, . . . the wind beginning to rise a little, we cast a horsemens coat about him, for he was starke naked, onely a leather about his wast, with a fringe about a span long, or little more; he had a bow & 2 arrowes, the one headed, and the other vnheaded; he was a tall straight man, the haire of his head blacke, long behind, onely short before, none on his face at all; he asked some

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beere, but we gaue him strong water, and bisket, and butter, and cheese, & pudding, and a peece of a mallerd, all which he liked well, and had been acquainted with such amongst the English; . . . all the after-noone we spent in communication with him, . . .

—MOURT'S RELATION.

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NO character of aboriginal New England can be likened to Samoset. Like a mountain-peak outlined against the dawn, he stands the one great exponent of the Abenaki race before it had been corrupted by the vices of the English and the French pioneer. His memory is the sweet breath of the woods, the songs of the birds, and all the harmonies in nature. His currents of manhood ran deep, and all his instincts were of gentleness and peace. He was as God made him, a high priest of nature; and one forgets

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that he was a savage, so predominant was his native nobility as a man and a friend.

Samoset was the William Penn of his untutored race, the solicitous friend of the first English who came into the waters about Pemaquid, and no adverse circumstance could sway his loyalty. He was as steadfast in this peculiar virtue as the headland of old Sabino that marked the southern boundary of his domain before he parted with it to Brown.

One would like to know just where his clustered wigwams lent the incense of their fires to the winds. As one writer says, he was first to welcome the English settler in his mother tongue and the first to part with his hunting-lands, voluntarily. It was a significant act, and pregnant with

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ominous prophecy to the aborigine. Among his people he stands alone. Among the traditions of the red man he seems more a mythical personage than a real.

Bradford notes that the afternoon of Samoset's first appearance at Plymouth was spent in conversation. One would have enjoyed being of that famous company. Whether poet or painter essayed the scene, it was a subject for an idyllic treatment. It was a prophetic episode of the highest historic quality, with no setting of palatial seat of government, but, instead, the crudities of a rude shelter whose interior was as barren and homely as its environment was ruggedly primitive, with the shifting sands of Cape Cod and the sailless sea for a foreground. One doubts not

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but the entertainment was ample, and here was a feast of reason and a flow of soul and a congenial mingling of sincerity, unalloyed by the cult of a Richelieu or a Talleyrand, to crystallize the friendship of Samoset into a brilliant of the first water. This seems to be the only instance recorded of Samoset's being entertained at an English table. Levett's account is utterly barren. Brown is silent, though Samoset was undoubtedly a frequent guest of the English after Shurt's advent into Pemaquid affairs. Abram Shurt was evidently a cold-eyed man of business, whose brain could evolve a jurat out of centuries of legal verbiage in a single sentence that should be as impeccable as the point of perfection itself, and Samoset finds no place in his daily round after Brown's

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title to Pemaquid was made secure. Samoset dropped out of the haunts of men as a star from the night sky. His going was as mysterious as his coming. His welcome is a matter of history. His farewell was whispered to the winds.

Over on Tappan's Island, not far from Damariscotta, was the traditional great burial-place of the Monhegan Indians, where numerous skeletons of the aborigines have been found. They were found some two feet below the surface of the ground, and were evidently buried in a sitting-posture, the knees drawn upward, and facing the sunrise. In some instances diminutive sheets of fine copper were found above the skulls. In one grave was a knife with a copper blade, having a bone handle — possibly of French

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origin. It was a custom to leave with the deceased warrior a bit of food and his weapons of the chase, so he might be prepared for his entrance into the Happy Hunting-grounds. Samoset may have found his last abiding-place for the body here, or elsewhere. It does not matter; except that, savage though he was, somewhere overlooking the dancing waters of the Sagadahoc, and sometime when the mad world gets over its rush, the domain of this one of nature's noblemen will be fitly honored with a shaft to this prince of his race.

Samoset was great; great above his environment, if one can be greater than nature; greater than many a paleface whose name is linked with the fortunes of those early days, and because his greatness was *au naturel*.

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With the civilization of Winthrop he would have been a greater Winthrop. With John Winthrop's tact, John Eliot's deeps of humanity, and Experience Mayhew's passionate ardor, he would have been the Lincoln of his time, and possibly the emancipator of his race. He flashed across the low horizon of the English pioneers like a meteor spanning the deeps of night, to leave a luminous trail above the sands of Cape Cod. He recalls the romance of the woods and the realm of nature, where he ruled his little dynasty; and marvel though it be, his memory is as perennial as the mayflower that even yet blooms among the rugged places once familiar to his tread. It is the breath of the wilding blossom itself.

He reminds one of John crying in

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the wilderness, "Make Way!" a divinely appointed prophet unwittingly announcing the doom of his race. One would like to rend the pall off those last days of Samoset. His fall was like that of a giant of the woods, to lie prone among the lesser saplings that have climbed up in its genial shade like children clustering about the tale-making old man; a mute relic of a former grandeur, the stateliest shaft of the forest, whose head was soonest to catch the golden breaking of the dawn and the last to receive the ruddy benediction of the setting sun; the landmark of a little world from whose dusky spire the vagrant crow turned like a weathercock, his head to the wind, or shouted his raucous challenge to the sower as he scattered his seed on some adjacent

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hillside. Here were the poetry and pathos of nature to mark the rounding of a woodland cycle.

So fell Samoset, among his tribe the greatest of his kind, and in the domains of his ancestors the only one to be remembered. Mayhap it was not long after his dividing his coat with John Brown that this fine aboriginal spirit faded away as the song of the thrush into the silence of the night. Nothing more is heard of him; for his voice was drowned in the jealous activities of trade at old Pemaquid; and singular it is that this silence should have been so abrupt. Like the smokes of his fires caught up by the winds to disappear within the mysteries of the deeper wilderness went the spirit of Samoset.

One can feel the drowsy spell that

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lay over the woods and waters of the bay as his sun sank through a cloudless west, and conjure up

“The soot-black brows of men,— the yell
Of women thronging round the bed,—
The tinkling charm of ring and shell,—
The Powah whispering o’er the dead;”

but one likes rather to think Samoset’s ear attuned to the songs of the birds, the myriad notes of the woods that had been his friends, silent yet sturdy, and the sighing requiem of the purring winds to paint along the walls of his lodge the shadow-dance of the leaves.

But the pathos of an Indian burial! How simple, how gently solicitous, and how abounding in faith were these rude children of the forest in these last rites! Those Happy Hunting-grounds were far away to them, yet

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very near to Samoset; for the Great Spirit was everywhere,— in the broad pennons of the spindling maize; the purling streams; the glowing heats of the summer sun; the fulness of the harvest moon; the mist-wrought clouds; and in all things sweet, beneficent, and beautiful as the seasons came and went with their infinite variety; but those illimitable preserves of fish and game, the wide hunting-lands of the Hereafter, were beyond the Waumbek Methna where the sun wrought the fabric of the night. It was a journey of how many sleeps, or even moons, they knew not.

When the sachem had been arrayed in his hunting-suit of deer-skin tanned to the softest of chamois, and his feathered head-dress was as he liked best to wear it, his people hollowed

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out a shallow seat in Mother Earth's lap, and there they gently set him down, with his knees drawn up to his chin, his inert arms folded over them, his head bent statuesquely like that of a seer; for his face was turned to the Spirit of Life when it should next herald the dawn above the far eastern rim of the sea. His bow, arrow, and axe were placed by his side, and a pouch of parched corn,—that of which he was so fond when the winter snows lay deep and he had hung his snow-shoes in the wigwam smoke to dry the wet in their thongs,—that he might have that with which to refresh himself as he traveled his lonely way.

There were no swathings of fine linen; no redolent spices; no magic rites;—only the committing of dust

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to dust. The moist earth caressed his face. He was in his mother's arms, and she held him as closely to her bosom as a nursing babe. It was the hospitality that speeds the parting guest who has gone out into the swift-falling shadows of the night, whose obscurities are veiled by the mists of sorrow.

So Samoset returned to the mysterious fountain which has flowed down all the years since Time began. Those who came after him to upturn the sacred ground with vandal hands may have found but a nameless hero in a nameless grave. The deep Pemaquid woods faded as he went, as if in sympathy. They withered at the white man's touch.

Samoset's nature was the reflex of the scenes he loved best,— quiet, gen-

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erous, and unobtrusive. He is not remembered as a savage, the sachem of a barbarous horde, but as a child of nature, whose copper-colored face was as the sun shining upon many waters; whose voice was as tuneful as that of the white-throated sparrow; and whose heart was as wide as the universe.

Interpreter of the Eternal Friendship, across the silent-footed centuries glows the princely salutation of this rare primeval spirit, long hushed and voiceless, yet ineffably gracious and subtly musical, to breathe the beneficence of Nature,—the brooding of purple twilights, softly palpitant, where odorous woodlands rim the edge of dusk and wait the semblant footfall of the radiant stars.



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