THE THREE R'S AT CIRCLE CITY.

BY ANNA FULCOMER.

IN the fall of 1896 the first government school in the interior of Alaska was opened by me, a few miles south of the arctic circle, at Circle City, on the banks of the now famous Yukon. At that date Circle City was enjoying a "boom," as it was then the richest mining-camp on the river. The white population numbered fifteen hundred, and could boast of "the biggest log-house town in the world."

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH. NATIVE SCHOOL-CHILDREN.

On October 1 the dirt roof was on the log school-house, and I opened school, despite the fact that for two weeks the carpenter worked among us, planing benches and doors, putting in a partition, and, of course, driving nails. Teaching under such circumstances was difficult, particularly while getting acquainted with the capacities of the pupils. At the same time, it was so cold that during half the session I was shivering, and sometimes my teeth chattered. The arctic winter was upon us. The ground was covered with snow, the Yukon was frozen over, and the thermometer dropped lower and lower. Our good-sized modern heater could not warm the large room, especially as our four windows were not yet in. Cotton-drilling was tacked over the openings, for there were no windows in the camp. Toward the latter end of October the weather moderated sufficiently to open a channel in the Yukon enabling a steamboat to reach Circle City. It brought us the needed windows, so for a while we were more comfortable.

The Bureau of Education had instructed me to induce the white people to allow Indian children to attend the school; but I soon decided to say nothing on the subject, for I found that white and Indian children ate and played together, without hindrance from any one.

Thirty-six pupils were enrolled, where I

had expected hardly a dozen. In age they ranged from five to thirty. Three races were represented—Caucasian, American Indian, and Mongolian; that is to say, whites, Indians, and Eskimos, with all degrees of mixture of the three. The six white children who were in attendance during the entire school year did good work, though they were not far advanced. It was no trouble to classify them; but it was difficult during the first two weeks to classify the native children, very few of whom, however, were full-blooded Indians. The majority of them had attended school before, though few of them for a longer period than three months. Two bright girls of fourteen had lived for two years in the Church of England mission at Forty Mile Post. Both were in the same reading, writing, and spelling classes with a ten-year-old white boy who had had about the same amount of schooling.

All the native children who entered school at the beginning could speak English. They belonged to the "upper class," according to the Indian notion, which meant that their parents, or at least their mothers, followed the miners from camp to camp, lived in log cabins, dressed like white people, learned something from the miners about housekeeping and cooking, and looked with contempt upon their sisters who adhered to their tribal life.

Most of my half-breed scholars were as light-skinned as the white ones; some were really good-looking, many were exceedingly bright, and a few were quite naughty, mischievous, and full of pranks, the boys especially. There was nothing really mean about them, but they seemed to be possessed with an inborn restlessness, and a desire to be doing something with their hands. Twelve-year-old Charley Pitki was one of these unquiet souls. He was a perfect genius in originating mischief, and even after he knew what was proper at school he would sometimes unload his pockets of strings, buckskin thongs, pieces of boards, sleigh-bells, and nails.

DRAWN BY E. W. DEMING, FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

A GROUP OF SCHOOL-GIRLS.

With one or two exceptions, the pranks of the native children could not be called cases of premeditated meanness; but one of my white boys, fifteen years old, who had attended public school in the States, played such mean tricks on the children, and proved to be such a disturbing element in the otherwise peaceful school, that I soon found it necessary to expel him. Either he could not, or would not, learn anything. I soon saw

that all the good I could do him would not compensate for the harm he was doing the other children. My two other white boys played with the native children, helped them with their lessons, and studied hard to get their own lessons. As a rule, the pupils did not need correction as often as the same number of white children packed together in such close quarters. My supply of seats was so limited that I had to put three children on a seat, and several remained to decorate the edges of the platform.

The greatest drawback to my school work was the lack of books. Naturally, most of the children required chart and primer, neither of which was included in the school outfit, nor could they be obtained at Circle City. Had there not been a good blackboard and a plentiful supply of crayon, I scarcely know how I should have managed. I would group the little ones about me at the blackboard, and make up the lessons, day by day, in both printing and writing. They liked to write,—it came easy to them,—and each one tried to make his writing look plainer and neater than that of his fellows. The little ones were ambitious to read out of books, "like the big girls." As I had none for them, they hunted up "books," as they called them, seizing upon stray leaves from novels and pieces of newspaper.

A good many grown girls and boys were just learning to read. They were ashamed and awkward at the blackboard, and at first did not progress as fast as the little ones. This made such uphill work, and was so discouraging, that I was afraid I would lose many of the older ones altogether. At this juncture, however, the missionary of the Church of England who was stationed for the winter at Circle City kindly helped me out by the loan of a number of books, slates, and pencils. Among these books were six primers and first readers. How happy I was to get them, even though they had to be divided among twenty-six children! I doubt if such a medley of books was ever before seen in a school-room: a set of ordinary school-books for intermediate grades, including a physical geography and a world's history; English readers, spellers, and little paper-covered arithmetics; twenty pages from "Christy's Old Organ"; about half of the New Testament; one hundred pages from "The Woman in White"; parts of four other novels; newspaper scraps; and a couple of the queerest possible little religious primers, published by a London tract society. The leaves of some of the books were yellow with age, having been taken into that region by some miners who had studied them thirty or more years ago. It was amusing to watch the children spelling out the words and trying to read in these scraps of old books and papers.

The scarcity of books made my work all the harder. It took every moment of my time to devise ways and means of keeping all the children at work. From nine o'clock until four I could think of nothing else. Often for an hour after school I would be mapping out work for the next day. On the whole, the work done was commendable. Advanced books for the white children were so scarce that it was necessary to adopt a method which, to chance visitors, seemed strange—boys and girls sitting together in order to study out of the same books. One white boy and two native girls were together in several classes, and when sitting on the same bench the girls would try to get the boy in the middle, with the idea of teasing him.

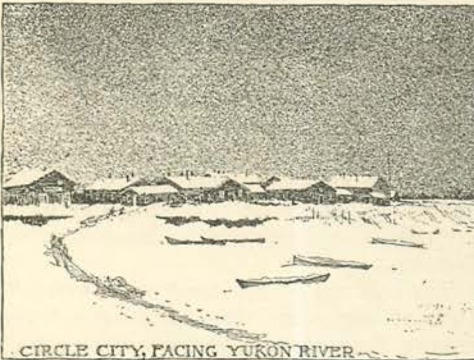
I had been in Circle City scarcely three weeks before I was invited to a dance. I declined, with thanks, on the plea that I did not dance. "But this is a school dance, and you *must* go," said the chairman of the school board. "More miners will go if it is known that the teacher will be there; and we are anxious to raise the money to pay the debt on the school-house." So I pocketed my prejudices, and attended a dance in a mining-camp.

The ball was held in the "opera-house,"—built of logs,—and the "gentlemen" were miners, dressed in a variety of clothing—moccasins, blanket suits, overalls, flannel shirts, ordinary woolen suits, and four or five wore black suits and white shirts. The "ladies" were white women and squaws, who danced at the same time, but not in the same sets. Little half-breed children ran about among the dancers, and their baby brothers and sisters slept, or cried, in a corner. I sat and looked on, enjoying the novel scene. The same men danced with both white and Indian women; but the floor was sharply divided off, three sets in which were white women occupying one half of the floor, while three corresponding sets with squaws occupied the other side. While resting, the women sat on backless benches on their respective sides of the hall, while the men crowded together in one end. The majority of the squaws were dressed about as well as their white sisters, wearing silk waists and satin or nice wool dresses. The squaws were Eskimos and

Indians, including all degrees of mixture, and hailed from all parts of Alaska. A few were rather good-looking, and others were nearly black and extremely ugly. They knew the popular dances of the whites, and for the most part were very graceful. No native men were admitted. After the midnight refreshments I slipped away home, while the rest danced until three o'clock. The sum added to the school fund by that festivity was $276.50. I soon discovered that money was raised in this way for a miners' hospital, library, and other public purposes. The understanding between our Bureau of Education at Washington and the people at Circle City was that the bureau would supply the teacher, the fuel, and the coal-oil, while Circle City would furnish the school-house and the needed furniture. The Alaska Commercial Company had kindly loaned the money to build the school-house, and from five dances $1714.55 was realized. The remaining $544.27 would have been raised in the same way that winter, if the "Klondike fever" had not carried off all the men. The school-house consisted simply of rough unhewn logs, chinked with moss, and covered with a pole and dirt roof; but any building costs money when wages are ten dollars a day. The cost of a stove was fifty dollars, and it took a dollar to purchase a fire-shovel.

CIRCLE CITY OPERA-HOUSE.

SCHOOL-HOUSE.


CIRCLE CITY, FACING YUKON RIVER.

OFF FOR A SLEIGH-RIDE.

DRAWN BY HARRY FENN.

In November the thermometer dropped to twenty and thirty degrees below zero, and how we shivered in that large room with only our ordinary wood heater! The government had made no provision for the services of a janitor, so the school trustees hired a man, at forty dollars a month, to build the fire in the morning and fetch a pail of water. The stove was kept full of wood; still the children were obliged to wear their fur coats, caps, and mittens while in their seats. At times they would stand in a circle round the stove, three or four deep, those nearest the stove, when warm, giving place to others. The books were cold, and the slates like so many chunks of ice. When the children breathed on a slate in order to erase the work, the moisture instantly froze. I kept on my fur boots and fur coat all day long.

In December the miners obtained permission to hold the meetings of their literary society in the school-house. I did not attend the first meeting, but understood that they were nearly congealed, notwithstanding their "heated" argument. As we sat shivering at the second meeting, the chairman asked me how the school managed to keep warm with such a stove. "We don't pretend to keep warm, for it is simply impossible to do so," I answered. After some discussion, the miners took a vote on a resolution declaring that

"if there 's a Yukon heater to be had in camp, the school-ma'am shall have it, no matter what it costs." Three days later the school-room was furnished with a "Yukon heater" which made the air vibrate. It was a monstrous big coal-oil tank, round and black, one end cut out and fastened upon hinges for a door, and with legs of sheet-iron plate supporting it lengthwise upon the floor. Fur coats were no longer needed. Once filled with cord-wood, it was sufficient to keep the school-room warm for half a day —in fact, almost too warm.

It seemed to please the children to hear me read a story to them on Friday afternoons. I had difficulty in finding stories that could be understood by the native children without being too childish for the white children. I always thought it best to interject considerable explanation as I read. It cheered me, after a trying week's work, to see the children's faces brighten as story-telling time came, and to watch their eager movements. When some particular story took their fancy they would talk about it for months afterward. Reciting was also something in which they delighted. This was not often indulged in, for I did not have the time to teach them "pieces," word by word.

The day before Thanksgiving I explained the meaning of the holiday, which, in that region of frequent food-shortage, they could understand perfectly. I read them a Thanksgiving story, and invited them all to spend Thanksgiving evening with me. When school was out, I was overwhelmed with questions, and dusky little hands clutching at my sleeves. "Are you going to give a party?" they cried. "Can we come and *play* in your room?" "Can my baby sister come, too?" The children fairly danced about the school-room. The next evening the children began to come a full hour before the appointed time. My large room was crowded, and they thoroughly enjoyed themselves, looking at pictures, playing games, and eating the candy, nuts, and pop-corn which had been provided. Many of the native children had never before seen pop-corn, and the amount which they stowed away was astonishing.

Several families of full-blooded Indians were living in tents and dugouts on an island in the Yukon a couple of miles down the river. When their children came to school my task increased, for they could not speak English, and understood but little. They were slow to learn, but behaved well, and tried to do the work which was required of them. I pitied the poor things, they were so shy and strange. This was probably the first time they had been among noisy, romping children. In the Indian camps they were half starved and half frozen, and were compelled to work so hard that they looked and acted more like dwarfed men and women than like little children. When they first began to laugh and play with the other children, it gave me more pleasure than when they read their first lessons. I knew that their real reason for coming to school was to be in some place where they could keep warm. These Indian boys and girls dressed almost alike, with fur boots, heavy trousers, and long, sack-like coats, usually made of bright blankets. The girls' coats, made long enough to hide their trousers, were usually belted at the waist with ordinary rope. The only difficulty I had with these children was in making them understand that they must wash their faces and hands, and comb their heads, before coming to school. My greatest dread, in teaching a native school, was of crawling things.

During the short winter days it would often be noon before all the children put in an appearance. When I arrived, at nine o'clock, it would either be dark, or brilliant moonlight. Smoke might be seen lazily rising from four or five cabins out of the four or five hundred. I would light one lamp, and wait. By ten o'clock a few children would straggle sleepily in, just as day began to dawn. By eleven o'clock, shortly after sunrise, the majority of the children were at school, some coming without their breakfasts. By half-past twelve all who were coming that day would have appeared. It was hard to get up before daylight on those cold, dark mornings. I often used to wish that I was one of the little girls, so that I too might sleep until daylight. No one in camp pretended to get up early, unless there was some special work on hand which must be done. As I was going home to my lunch at noon, friends would sometimes call out to me: "Good morning! Come in and have some breakfast. We have fine moose-steak and hot cakes." On Saturdays and Sundays I lived and slept as did other people. Even when one did not sit up later at night than ten or half-past, it required an effort to rise before daylight. There is something in the air and in the manner of life which makes one sleepy. As the days lengthened the children came earlier to school.

It was necessary to light the lamps at half-past one, which was trying to the eyes, as we could not get enough lamps to light the large room. The children would crowd

about the lamps, sitting on the floor, platform, and seats. A visitor might get the impression that there was little order in the school; but strict order was a necessity. Perhaps one reason why I liked the school so much was because it kept me so busy. Recess was limited, in order to make up for the tardiness of the morning. At half-past three fifteen or twenty of the little ones were sent home. If it was moonlight, they would race away noisily over the snow. If it was dark, the more timid ones would take my hand, and whisper, "Please, I want to go with you." Most of the children were so used to the dark that they did not mind it much. The majority of the nights, though, were filled with glorious moonlight. It seemed to me that for days at a time the moon never set. It would shine through the day about as bright as did the weak, pale sun. For about three weeks the sun would slowly rise in the south, skim along for a short distance, its lower rim almost touching the horizon, then suddenly drop out of sight.

As the school-house faced south, the sun did not shine in the windows for several weeks. One afternoon I was startled by the sudden cry: "Look! look! The sun 's coming! the sun 's coming!" and little Henry fairly danced with joy at seeing the sun once more shine in at the window. The children wanted to go to the windows and lay their hands in the sunshine. The change made a difference in our feelings. The children felt brighter, studied better, were more active and better-natured.

Of course the children could not play out of doors when it was so cold and dark; so I set off a corner of the school-house for their playground, and encouraged them to romp and laugh. So long as no harm was done, it made no difference how much noise they made. They studied better and were quieter for this outburst, and it increased their liking for the school. Some of the inmates of the neighboring cabins called the school-house their "clock"; they could "hear" the time of day. The native children played the same games that children in the States do. The boys were particularly fond of leap-frog and standing on their heads. The girls liked tag, drop the handkerchief, and rope-jumping. As all wore moccasins and fur boots, the noise was not troublesome.

Some copies of the comic papers were sent to me, and the pictures greatly amused the children. The political cartoons, often showing human heads on the bodies of different animals, and other monstrosities, so aroused their curiosity that they would jabber away excitedly in the Indian language. Sometimes they would bring the pictures to me, and ask, "Do they make men like that where you live?" Caricatures of "the new woman" and "the bloomer girl" amused them greatly.

It seemed almost impossible to teach the native children when to use the pronouns "he" and "she." Not only the children, but the grown natives, would invariably use "he" in the feminine sense, and "she" in the masculine; "he" was also generally employed for "it." The children were so persistent in misplacing these pronouns that I concluded that they would never learn to use them correctly. But one morning I overheard a little girl talking to her Indian mother: "Mama, you must say *she* when you talk 'bout Mary; *he* is a boy; now, 'member"; and away the six-year-old maiden trotted to school.

In October a young man asked permission to attend school. He was an Arab about thirty years of age, had made a little stake in the mines, and now wished to learn to read and write the English language. I told him that my time was more than occupied with the children, but that I would help him all I could. He studied hard; but when several new Indian children came to school I was kept so busy that the young man had to find some one who could give him more time. Soon after the holidays another miner, from the farms of Minnesota, applied for admission. As he went into regular classes with my fifteen-year-old white children, but little extra time was required from me. Several other miners, including a gray-haired man of fifty and a young woman, wished also to join, but I could not give them attention. Then several native women took it into their heads to come to school, but, finding it hard to be under restraint, only two persisted in attending. They went into the same classes with the children. Both were at the time living with white men, and were about thirty years old. They were as industrious as any of the pupils, and I felt elated over their advancement, for it was harder for them to get the lessons than for the children.

A thorough drill was given the school, especially the white children, on the history, geography, mines, resources, and schools of Alaska. Great interest was taken in this subject. The only map we had was a good chart of Alaska, which was presented by the agent of the Alaska Commercial Company.

Hygiene was an important feature of the course, the information being imparted in

talks upon certain subjects as they came to my notice. Indeed, it was not book knowledge that those native children most needed, but information concerning their daily life. I talked plainly to them, and they understood me, and I would go to their homes, where the children would translate what I said to their parents. I had reason to think that some good was accomplished.

As the days lengthened we organized short excursions after school and on Saturdays. The children were fond of coasting, and when "teacher" went the whole school followed. Big dog-sleds, holding twelve and fifteen children, were used in coasting. The older ones took me sleigh-riding, using dogs, of course. But the favorite sport was snow-shoeing with the wide-webbed shoe. I had no trouble in learning to walk with them, and the children were experts in running, walking, and jumping. We would go across the river, up the creeks, and to the lake, often traveling several miles. A general shout was raised whenever there was a stumble and fall. Our last excursion on snow-shoes was taken on May-day, though a week later than this the snow was in excellent condition.

By the middle of April the weather had so moderated, and the days were so much longer, that the children could play out of doors. How they did enjoy the bright sunshine! Everybody rose early now, and the children had time to work and play for an hour or so before school-time. One morning little six-year-old Bella came late. Upon being questioned, she answered: "My mama he know no time. Clock got sick last night; he no go." Bella had an Indian mother, and was one of the brightest children I have ever seen. With her large, black, dancing eyes, she was really pretty, though her hair was black and straight. In reading and spelling she was far in advance of children of her own age, but with them in number work. I grew exceedingly fond of Bella and of two other little half-breeds. After I became acquainted with my children, I seldom thought of them as being Indians or half-breeds, but grew just as fond of them as of the white scholars.

During the spring the school became sadly reduced. In March many of the older ones left for the Klondike, the mines, and to go on hunting-trips. Food was getting scarce, and flour sold at a dollar a pound. The Indian population of the camp changed completely before the snow showed signs of poor traveling. The new Indian children did not have time to become interested in the school before the days were long and pleasant. By the 1st of May scarcely twenty were in attendance. The sun was shining now for nearly eighteen hours in the twenty-four, and the snow began to melt about the houses. It was so warm in the school-house, even with a little fire, that new features of life in a log-house appeared. One warm afternoon I noticed the children were intently watching a place on the floor near the platform. A child sitting on the platform soon jumped up and moved nearer to me. Upon looking closely, I saw a long green worm crawling over the boards. From that day on we had to keep a sharp outlook; the moss chinking between the logs was literally alive with worms, bugs, and mosquitos. They were harmless,—there are no poisonous animals in Alaska,—but disquieting. The children sitting near the walls were obliged to change their seats. The first mosquitos came long before the snow disappeared; but as they were large, very noisy, and not quick in biting, they could be endured.

When it became muddy the children discarded their moccasins for shoes and rubber boots. They had been kept under restraint by the weather so long that now they were perfectly happy. They splashed about in ice-cold water, and then came stamping into the school-house with annoying uproar.

About the middle of May came the great event of the season—the breaking up of the Yukon. It was a sight to see the huge cakes of ice rush madly along with the current. Last May the ice would run for a time, then stop, so that the river was nearly a week in breaking up. I would have had no children in school all this time had I not promised them that just so soon as the ice "ran" they also could run to the river-bank. Those children have so little joy in their lives that I felt it my duty to give them all the pleasure I could.

On the 27th of May the first steamboat came, on her way to the Klondike. Wild excitement prevailed. The grown people, as well as the children, acted as though they were beside themselves. Everybody in camp wanted to go to the Klondike on this boat. When school was opened the next morning, only six children answered the roll-call; and on the 4th of June I closed the most enjoyable year of school work that I had ever known.