

INDIAN RICE MAKING.

The lake was roughened by a heavy south wind when we set out in search of the rice camp, while from the burning forests of Minnesota there came a smoke which covered all the land, obscuring every point and land mark along the lake shores. •

Presently we were conscious of a dull beating sound, something like that which one hears when a steamboat is beating her way in the distance. As we advanced down the lake, this sound resolved itself into the monotonous "tom tom" of the Indians' drumming. Directing our course towards the sound, we by and by approached a long, low, sandy point reaching out into the lake. Here among the trees stood a dozen or so of birch bark lodges, and a whole fleet of bark canoes lay along the sandy beach before them. Every living thing in the camp came forth to array itself upon the upper bank as we drew near. A curious crowd of wanderers they were: old men with long, grey hair; young men with a kind of half crop, and ill-fitting clothes, neither a grace to savagery or civilization; and women and half naked children, with the usual contingent of howling, half-starved, mangy dogs.

When we landed, an English-speaking half-breed came down to the water's edge, shook hands gravely, then stood aside whilst his comrades went through the same ceremony in the same mechanical manner. One old fellow particularly impressed me. He was an old man, and an old savage. Civilization had not touched him. He wore nothing but a waist cloth and a loose blanket, yet he filled his position as a savage with dignity. If he had tried to fill any other he would have looked a fool.

He courteously showed us where to land our canoe, then led us up to one of the largest lodges. The drumming, which had ceased for a space, once more began, and the painted, bell-begirt band forsook the novelty of our appearance for the never failing charms of the drum. We entered the lodge by one of the end doorways, and passing up the centre way shook hands with numerous women and children who were seated on the ground in various places. Then we sat down to a council, as the residents of the neighboring lodges dropped in one by one to see us. The Chief Counsellor came in. He had red triangles painted on his cheeks and black circles about his eyes, as well as a band of dog-bells about his waist and a yellow and black eagle feather in his long black hair. We were duly impressed by his magnificent appearance, whilst we held mute council together, learning how it went with them in their hunting and their rice making. They had but one great sorrow: there was no tobacco in the camp. So I gave them all I had, and universal smoking and happiness banished this woe also.

In another lodge near by lay a poor sick boy. They asked us how it was with him, looking eagerly for some hopeful reply; but there could be none. Consumption had wasted him to a skeleton, and as he lay panting there upon the ground, he had but little time before his hereafter should reveal itself.

Nearly all these Indians are heathens. Their medicines are the tricks of the conjurors and the drum-beating. One ancient upholder of savagedom was discovered busily prancing up and down in a little pit dug in the ground. This pit was lined with hard baked clay, and the old fellow was husking the parched, wild rice by the primitive method of treading it out, somewhat after the manner of the oxen in the Biblical record. He had not a rag upon his body save the afore-mentioned loin cloth. A few minutes of this jumping up and down with a slight rotary movement served to make the rice and its husk part company.

At many large fires scattered through the camp there were women busily roasting the fresh gathered rice in great pots, to parch its husks, before it should pass under the treatment described above.

Others were out in the rice marshes beating out the grain into the bottoms of their canoes. So each one takes part in this happy harvest time, when all the world to them is bright and peaceful and there is plenty in the camp.

I looked into one tent, where there was an Indian woman sewing moccasins as usual, and behind her peeped out two little fair-haired children, blue-eyed as any Saxon. Their father was a white man, and this was the inheritance of his children.

Be sure we did not leave without a visit to the scene of the drum beating. Here we found a cleared space encircled by a periphery of heathens, whilst four of their number beat a solemn tattoo upon a big drum placed in the centre. Nearly all of them were painted and feathered, and otherwise adorned, more than is usual in these days. After a short pause in the proceedings, one of the number arose and gave the rest an address upon the state of hunting prospects, and the delight his tribe would experience if the friends of this camp would pay them a visit. Then carefully producing a small paper of cut tobacco, the speaker went round to each particular star of the constellation and presented him with a pipeful, receiving a grunt of approbation in return. They then all lighted their pipes, and the drumming went on again.

So we left them, and as we passed on before the south wind down the lake, the sound of their drum-beat followed us long after the smoky air had hidden from us all other signs of their existence.

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