

A Cree Reception.

Christmas Among the Indians in the Far North-West.

BY KATE WESTLAKE YEIGH.



CIRCUMSTANCES cause people to spend Christmas in many strange ways, and the one just past, which I spent on an Indian reservation in our Canadian North-West, was the most singular in my experience.

It was glorious weather, mild for that far northern clime, and the landscape all around us—hills, lake and wood—was a veritable fairyland. On the ground lay the glistening, spotless, untrodden snow; and fences, buildings, bushes, tall pine and scrub, all were covered with soft feathery frost-work, fine as lace, brilliant as diamonds. Never was maiden bride so daintily dressed, never was wedding cake so curiously iced, never was elfin web so cunningly woven, and upon all shone the frosty sunlight in supernal radiance, such as our eastern provinces dream not of.

And when the sun set behind the hills in a blaze of wondrous color, the white world, an idealized Christmas world, was flooded with a mystical glowing light, and the sky burned with a fire from the infinite, unspeakable in its glory.

The Indians do not observe Christmas day with any degree of ceremony, although New Year is always kept by them as a feast, and great preparations are made to do it honor. They usually dance out the old year and dance in the new, keeping up the revel from sundown till dawn, and on New Year's day they receive and pay visits and make great festivities.

We were therefore very much surprised to receive formal notification on Christmas eve, that the Indians were going to call upon us on Christmas.

The word came through the "old man," there is always one "old man" *par excellence* in every band, and it was given with the solemn dignity that the case demanded. It was intended as a compliment, a mark of extreme favor, and as such it was accepted, with due thanks.

It would involve work, but we went about our preparations for their entertainment with a good deal of excitement and much studying of ways and means. When people live twenty long miles from anywhere, it is impossible to borrow dishes or get extra help, and if they have not what is wanted in the house, they do as we did, go without.

For our afternoon tea we could not even have our usual help, because the squaws who were our washee-washee and scrubber on ordinary occasions, and the brave who did our chores, would join their respective kindred and be among our guests.

We used up all the fruit nuts and peel made ready for our own Christmas pudding in making cakes for the reception, and we were obliged to work off our family Santa Claus before retiring, in order to save time next day.

Christmas dinner was timed perilously soon after breakfast that we might be ready in good season, but alas, for our calculations, the turkey was barely carved when a knock was heard at the door; we hastily threw a cover over the feast and composed ourselves to "receive."

Our guests all came to the back door and knocked, (on common occasions they enter without warning), and it did not disturb their equanimity a particle to have to be marshalled through kitchen and dining-room before they could be seated in state in the parlor.

Only an archway divided the two rooms, but with true politeness our callers ignored the fact, patent to sight and smell, that they had disturbed us at our meal; and we, of course, behaved as if

we had been seated with folded hands waiting for them.

After the first-comers left we scrambled through dinner as best we could, and in another interval were able to clear away.

They gave us very little rest for the balance of the afternoon, coming by families, by twos and threes, by whole sleigh loads in the case of those who lived farthest away.

They all entered gravely and shook hands, wishing us "Melly Kismas," shyly. Poor pagans, few of them had any idea of why Christmas is a happy time to us, or what the day signifies!

They all came in their best blankets with their hair profusely oiled, slicked and braided.

The majority of our visitors were Crees and almost all were purely pagan. There were a few Sioux who have married Cree women and joined the band to which their wives belong, as in their custom.

The Sioux are much handsomer than the Crees, possess finer features, are better developed physically and seem mentally of a higher type. They think more of their appearance, too, and in our honor had donned their bead-worked leggings and moccasins, only worn on great occasions, and were lavishly painted; whereas the Crees were not painted at all.

Among the Sioux braves I have an especial favorite. Wee-chee-hun, who, by the way, has a most romantic history.



He came with his pretty Cree wife and two children, and was a sight to appal the timid with his gorgeous decorations. He had bright red patches on each bronze cheek, a band around his classic brow close to the raven hair, and a strip down the parting, besides crescents above both eagle eyes.

No bronze statue of Jupiter was ever more nobly proportioned, or more instinct with lithe grace than my red-skin hero, and no Apollo could ever have had more purely classical features.

He comes at times to borrow hay, with all the grandeur of a Greek god.

Our callers numbered over sixty, not counting papooses in arms, and there were lots of them.

They looked around at everything with the curiosity and pleasure of children, not intrusively, but with warm interest, and their admiration of our stuffed birds was intense.

When only a few were present they would walk about and inspect the household treasures closely, but when we were crowded they stayed quietly where they were placed.

They talked very little to each other, only an occasional word, and they did not laugh much, except when we would misinterpret what they said.

I asked Kah weechy-may tah may nat if he would have more tea. I took his "no" for "yes,"

brought him another cup, and when I handed it to him he looked so comical, and they all had a hearty laugh. There were twenty in the room at that time.

If conversation languished a little it was simply because our visitors spoke no English and we no Cree.

At a Toronto five o'clock tea one might easily see more examples of maladroitness in managing cup and saucer than our wild Indians showed over their tea and cake.

They have a grave self-possession that is admirable, and yet they are such children, so readily beguiled, so easily amused, so simple minded!

They behaved beautifully. The parents or grandparents kept the children beside them, and there was perfect order. They were so polite, hardly any of them would take more than one cup of tea, and one piece of cake, and nothing was either broken or spilled.

After eating they would rarely stay more than ten or fifteen minutes, that appearing to be the limit for a call, according to Indian etiquette.

I would hold the papooses when there were not more than two armsful, while their mothers took their tea, and I fed the children with milk and cake.

The children interest me, poor, shy, little half-starved mites, and I love the cute papooses tied up like balls in their tight moss bags. They are so sweet and good.

A bale of Christmas gifts sent from Toronto friends had arrived a few days before, enabling us to gladden the hearts of our younger guests by giving away such things as were "frivolous." They are so thankful for clothing and needful articles, but oh, how delighted they are with trash.

We pinned some gaudy bug and butterfly brooches into the neck-bands of the young squaws, and to the mothers with babes we gave bright ribbons, laces and flowers and patches of fancy silk; they were all charmed.

Wee-chee-hun's little daughter received a toy frying-pan (given away by a thrice-blessed stove dealer at Toronto Exhibition and sent in the bale), and her fawn-like eyes almost bulged out with joy.

A fancy box went to a little girl, and her twin brother howled quite like a white child because he had none. We hunted him up a pill box, minus the pills, and he was quite content.

I treasure up every little box and carry them in my pocket to give to the dusky children I meet in my walks. They never have a doll or a toy, poor little souls, and a paste-board box means measureless fun to them. They so love anything to play with—a wooden box that they can drag around for a wagon makes them as happy as kings.

Our last callers were three young girls, who were charming for awhile, but they did not know when to go. We fed them, talked our few Cree words with them, showed them photographs and other treasures, but still they stayed. The other members of the family basely deserted me—they sauntered off in different directions and did not come back.

I was left alone with those Indian maidens who spoke not to each other, nor to me, nor did they giggle.

I'd have given anything for just one giggle!

An inspiration came to me. I gave them the mammoth Christmas numbers of the *New York World* and *Herald* and they spread them out on the floor, got down on all fours and looked at the pictures entranced.

They looked at them long after they were tired, I am very sure. They were dying to go, but did not know how. I wanted them gone but knew as little how to send them. At length they went.

Our last visitors reminded me more of the boredom of civilization than any we had, but on the whole our Indian reception was as pleasant as it was unique.