

THE WOOING OF AH-KEY-NES-TOU.



MANDAN CHIEF.

A

t a period late in the twenties, the Mandans, one of the most intelligent tribes of Indians on the continent, were almost swept out of existence by the small-pox. The story comes down to us in the form of a tradition among other savages, but it is nevertheless true, as there are a few old trappers yet living who remember all the particulars of the event.

The Mandans resided in the vicinity of the mouth of the Yellowstone, where their villages were permanent for untold centuries, and at the time of the visitation of the fell disease which nearly annihilated them they comprised about three thousand families.

Shortly after sunrise, one morning in June, 1828, a young white man was reclining idly on

one of the grassy knolls overlooking the village, the great river, and the vast prairie stretching westwardly from its bank. He was intently watching certain movements in the town, where the warriors were preparing for a grand hunt. In the distance, the buffalo could be seen grazing in immense herds, whose presence was the cause of the commotion among the Indians. Soon he saw hundreds of warriors, armed with bows, their quivers filled with arrows, emerge from the shadow of their lodges, and in a long line ride out toward the unsuspecting animals so peacefully feeding. The old men and squaws alone remained in the village, and they were gathered in anxious groups, applauding the husbands, sons and lovers as they went proudly forth to battle for that subsistence which was their only dependence when the snows of winter filled the now sunny valley.

A few moments after the warriors had disappeared in the purple morning mist of the prairies, a bevy of lightly dressed dusky maidens, in all their savage beauty, wandered toward the sandy margin of the Yellowstone to indulge in their favorite amusement of swimming in its clear sparkling tide,—for that stream in summer, like a great brook, ripples and babbles over the rounded quartz pebbles which compose its bed,

with as rhythmical a flow as the tiniest rivulet in the recesses of the mountains.

It was this group of Indian maidens that now attracted the gaze of the young stranger; one



among them particularly, not yet seventeen, but more beautiful than the others, walked like some society queen on the beach at Newport. In a few moments she purposely separated herself from the rest and directed her steps toward the mound

on which the young man was lying. He smiled when he saw her evident intention, and a flush of pride swept over his bronzed cheeks as he came down to the base of the elevation to await her approach.

The young girl thus seeking the intruder was the affianced bride of "In-ne-cose" (The Iron Horn), principal chief of the Mandans—old enough to be her grandfather. She, the handsome Indian maiden, was known as "Ah-key-nes-tou" (The Red Rose), and was the pride of the Mandan nation.

The young man, who had with impatience waited for her coming all the morning, was of course an American; an incipient doctor who had enlisted in the service of the great Fur Company a year before, whose agency was at the junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, near the Mandan village. He had imagined himself in love many times in St. Louis, where was his home, but was now satisfied that he had really never felt the tender passion until he saw Ah-key-nes-tou at the general store one day, some months before the story of their fate commences.

When he discovered that the beautiful girl was destined to be the fifth wife of the old chief In-ne-cose—a cross, ugly Indian, and moreover

not a full-blooded Mandan—he took pity on her, loved her more than ever, and resolved to win her for himself. Ah-key-nes-tou had often admitted to the “White Medicine,” as the band of Mandans called the youthful doctor, that she had a decided predilection for him; that she could never love the old chief; but as her father had been paid for her by the present of two horses, she felt bound to the bargain according to Indian usage.

The doctor in a dozen interviews had told Ah-key-nes-tou of his deep love; that he was willing to leave his home forever for her sake, and, marrying her, would become an adopted son of the tribe. But poor “Ah-key,” as her white admirer always called her, considered herself in honor bound to become the wife of In-ne-cose; consequently both the youth and the maiden were perfectly miserable.

In a few moments the doctor and Ah-key met at the foot of the mound, where, without speaking, they seated themselves on the grass with which the ground was covered. After looking at her silently for some time, he took the maiden’s hand and said:

“It is a long time since Ah-key has come to her white lover. I have been very sad; the sun shone

brightly, but I could not see its brightness, for you were far away. I learn that In-ne-cose intends soon to take you for his fifth wife. I want but one; you are that one; my lodge is empty—I cannot live without you.”

The Indian maiden trembled for a moment, then answered: “Ah-key-nes-tou’s heart is small, but it is very red. My father has given me to the great chief. Two lovers have come to me; my heart can hold but one. I see in it the face of my young White Medicine only; but a river as wide as the Missouri parts us. In-ne-cose has given two horses for me; my father has spoken; I must be the fifth wife of the great chief. What can I do?”

The idea of Ah-key-nes-tou becoming the bride of any other than himself, made the young doctor almost wild, and he would have given vent to some very emphatic language had not the girl at that instant said to him: “There is a snake in the grass that the pale-face does not see,” and she pointed with her tapering index-finger to a spot not far off, where the weeds and sunflower-stalks seemed to move by some other power than the wind. It was In-ne-cose himself, who had stealthily followed and was watching Ah-key-nes-tou. “You must go to the village and eat with my peo-

ple to-day," continued the trembling maiden, as she looked imploringly toward her lover.

The doctor was now satisfied they had a dangerous spy upon their actions, and grinding his teeth, hastened to obey her injunction at once. He dared not kiss Ah-key now, but they exchanged glances,—a language that is understood by all



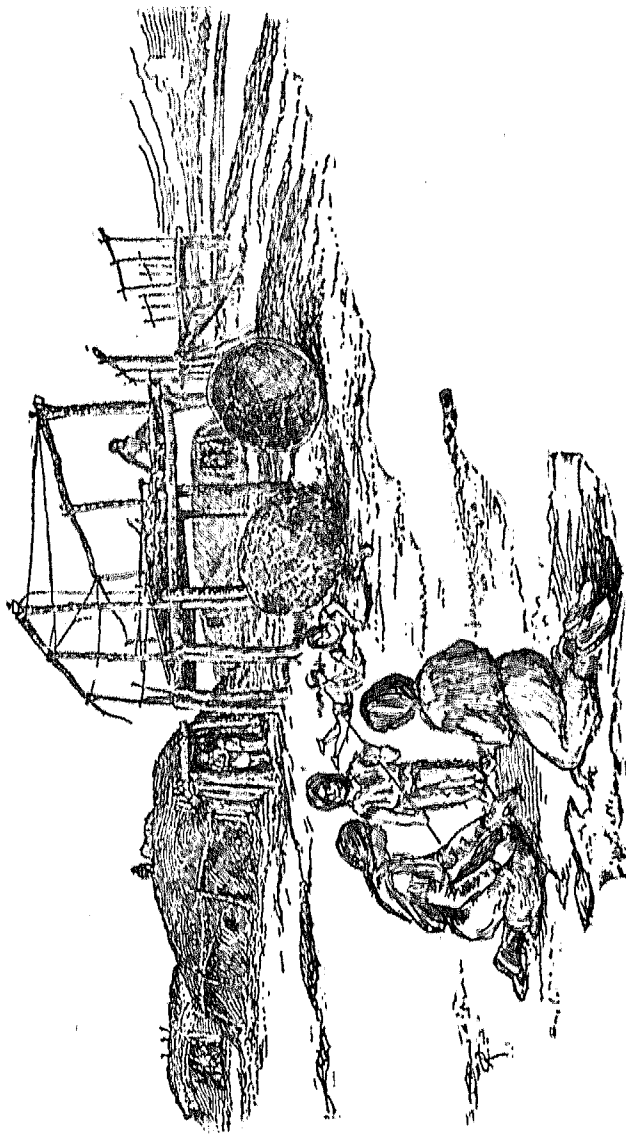
MANDAN CANOE.

who love, whether white, black, or red; and as she walked away he shouldered his heavy rifle and ascended the knoll again, where he stood erect for a few minutes so that the whole village might see him. Remaining where he stood until Ah-key-nes-tou had rejoined the group of her friends on the beach, where they were preparing for their

bath, the doctor descended, and moved quietly toward the nearest group of lodges.

First, he made a visit to that of a subordinate chief who was friendly to both Ah-key-nes-tou and himself, looking with decided favor on his efforts to win the girl. Then he went to the lodge of Ah-key-nes-tou's father. He was received very kindly, invited to breakfast, and when that was disposed of, the pipe was passed around, an evidence of the warm feeling the Indian entertained for his white guest. After some time devoted to the fragrant fumes of the "kin-ne-ke-nick," the doctor opened up the subject always nearest his heart—his desire to marry the old savage's daughter. The father of the girl freely admitted that he should be highly honored by such an alliance, but that his word had been pledged to the "Iron Horn," and as presents had been accepted from him, the matter must be considered as settled; that the tribe would never condone any deceit on his part—he could not break his word.

The doctor agreed with his honorable host, that the difficulties were great, according to the Indian code of honor; nevertheless, he believed that the thing could be so arranged that it would be acceptable to all concerned. He then informed the old man that a steamboat (or "fire-ship," as the



MANDAN VILLAGE.

savages called it,) would arrive at the village that evening. On it were his trunk, tent, and all his belongings; he proposed to take up his abode with the tribe. To this, War Eagle, the father of Ah-key-nes-tou, cordially gave his approval; suggesting that the mound from which the villagers had first seen him that morning would be a suitable place to establish his lodge.

Just before sunset the guns of the steamboat were heard in the village as she rounded a sharp point near her proposed landing-place. Immediately the entire population, men, women and children, flocked to the beach to see the wonderful canoe that moved without oars. They regarded it as a monster, gazing upon it with fear and trembling every time it came up the river.

Early the next morning, with the assistance of some of his Mandan friends the doctor landed his traps and erected his tent on the spot designated by War Eagle. His equipments consisted of a neat camp bed, rich blankets, arms, ammunition, and a medicine chest, together with hundreds of little trinkets pleasing to the taste of the Indians of both sexes.

The enthusiastic young doctor had hardly gotten his things in shipshape before a messenger from In-ne-cose arrived, demanding his presence

at the council lodge. He obeyed the summons from the head chief, of course, but he could not divine why he had been sent for so suddenly, just as he had fixed himself comfortably in his new home. Reaching the lodge where the chiefs and head men were assembled, he found there also many women and children of the tribe, evidently expectant of some serious matter to be discussed.

In-ne-cose sat in the center of his counselors, on a magnificently embroidered buffalo robe, smoking his great pipe trimmed with eagle-feathers, as stoical as an Egyptian mummy, excepting that around his mouth there played a smile of devilish import.

Standing near her father, who had also been summoned to the council, was Ah-key-nes-tou, dusky and beautiful in her savage grace, with a look of pride on her countenance; for was it not certain that she was to be the subject for discussion by the suddenly assembled warriors?

Wrapped around the shoulders of the stern In-ne-cose was a curiously wrought Mexican blanket, the sight of which, as the doctor's eyes fell upon it, caused his whole frame to tremble. He turned pale, and his entire aspect was that of fear and deep solicitude; but not a word did he utter.

As soon as those who were called to the council had seated themselves, In-ne-cose rose and said:

"A pale-faced medicine-man has fixed his lodge by those of the Mandans. We have plenty of ground here; there are great herds of buffalo roaming over the prairie, which the Great Spirit has sent to furnish food for his people; the rich young warrior with a white skin is welcome to his share of these. His heart is red, and he is the friend of the Mandans. But he is alone; he has no squaw to cook his meat or saddle his horse; no one to make his bed of the soft skins of the buffalo; no one to shape the moccasins for his feet; he has no wife to bring home the game that he kills. He cannot get a slave to do all these things, for we are at peace with every nation; there is no war. He must therefore take a wife from among the young women of the Mandans; there are many. He can buy two wives, for he is rich; let him choose when In-ne-cose takes Ah-key-nes-tou. I have said."

The doctor immediately arose from his place, full of indignation and disgust at the old chief's cunning. Familiar with the language of the tribe, he addressed the assembled warriors in their own tongue. All eyes were riveted on him, for the majority of those present, and many who

were absent, were in perfect accord with him in his honorable efforts to win Ah-key-nes-tou from the "Iron Horn," whom they feared but did not respect.

"In-ne-cose is a dog!" boldly began the doctor. The chiefs gazed upon him with wonderment, but without betraying any emotion. "The Great Spirit is angry," continued the orator. "In-ne-cose is a vulture among eagles, and would carry off the prettiest eaglet. But the Great Spirit says that it shall not be so. Before the sun goes down seven times more, In-ne-cose will be dead! He will take with him to the happy hunting-grounds many Mandan warriors; many young women and children—perhaps Ah-key-nes-tou;" and the young man was deeply affected. He merely added the chief's own words, "I have said," then sat down.

In a few moments, when his feelings had partially regained their normal state, he rose again to explain to the now bewildered and wondering warriors and women what he meant by the awful prophecy he had just uttered. He told them that on the passage of the steamboat up the river, only two days before she had landed at their village, a Mexican merchant on board had died of a frightful disease, the smallpox! He explained how ter-

ribly contagious it was to those who were not guarded against it by a great medicine operation performed by the white man. That the merchant who had died of the disease possessed a blanket, upon which he had breathed his last. In-ne-cose had stolen that blanket off the boat, and had it now wrapped around him. He told them that every Indian who went near him, who touched that blanket, or even breathed the same air where he sat, would die unless with his medicine he could save them. The doctor continued:

"The Great Spirit is very angry. Darkness is coming over the lodges of the Mandans. In less than one moon, perhaps, not a lodge will be full. You love Ah-key-nes-tou; let her go to the lodge of the pale-faced Medicine Man, and he will go to that of the 'Iron Horn'—but I fear it is too late."

By the time the doctor had completed his remarks so fraught with portent, all those assembled within the council lodge rapidly moved themselves from the presence of In-ne-cose. He however sat stoically smoking, apparently not the least disturbed by the fearful predictions of the doctor. In a few moments the old chief rose again, and thus addressed himself to the presumptuous white man:

"The Great Spirit lives in the clouds. If he

wills that all my people shall go to him, they must obey. My little ones slept on the mystery blanket last night; they awoke this morning and were well. Will the Bad Spirit touch them?"

Then drawing the "death-blanket" closer around him, In-ne-cose apparently defied the evil effects of the wrap. But shortly afterward his dusky skin showed a slight pallor and he seemed strangely agitated. He again spoke, though this time in a disturbed voice, addressing himself, as before, directly to the doctor:

"The chief of the Mandans is rich. He has four squaws already. If the young pale-face will drive away the Bad Spirit from the little ones of In-ne-cose, he may take Ah-key-nes-tou for his wife."

The doctor, delighted at these words of the head chief, grasped the old man's hand, and told him that he would do his best to save the children. Then, ordering Ah-key-nes-tou's brother to lead his sister to his lodge on the knoll, he told another Indian to go and bring his medicine chest to the lodge of In-ne-cose. He then went to the chief's lodge himself, but on examining the little ones discovered it was too late for vaccination: the blanket had done its work!

The next day the pestilence broke out in a hun-

dred lodges. Very soon the Indians were not able to bury their dead—the latter outnumbering the living. In less than a month, out of three thousand families only eight survived. Where the Mandan village once stood, even as late as thirty years ago the traces of over eight thousand graves could be seen. It was an awful visitation, almost annihilating a whole nation!

In-ne-cose, as predicted by the doctor, was the first to die. Ah-key-nes-tou was saved by prompt vaccination. The doctor took her to St. Louis, where they were married, the ceremony being performed by that grand and good old Catholic priest, Father DeSmet, who was stationed there at the time, and whose memory is kept green by every tribe of Indians on the continent. Ah-key-nes-tou was educated at one of the convents in the Mound City, became the pet of society, and her worthy husband a State Senator.