

OLD-TIME SUGAR-MAKING.

AFTER the Ides of March, the faint exhalations that always pervade the forest are overborne in maple woodlands by wafts of an odor of mingled pungency and sweetness. A native need not trace it to its source to be informed that sugar-making has begun. But if one were impelled to run counter on the aerial trail, here dissolved to invisibility in the tempered air, there crawling through it, an attenuated film of blue vapor, further on enfolding twigs and branches in a thicker cloud, it would soon lead him among maples dripping their sap through metal spouts into bright tin buckets, with a liquid, musical tinkle as pleasant to the ear as the subtle aroma of the woods is to the nostrils. In the midst of a wide cordon of these steadfast sentinels that signal with a faint clangor of fairy kettledrums the approaches of spring, he would find the modern sugar-house, windowed, doored, chimneyed, and perhaps painted, and in every way quite at odds with its sylvan neighborhood. The homely picturesqueness that the artist and the poet love has been sacrificed to profit, comfort, and convenience, in the prim modern sugar-house with its patent evaporators and automatic feeders.

The rude shanty that sheltered the old-time sugar-makers was part and parcel of the woods, as picturesque as an old tree, its log walls and bark roof as mossy, and gray with lichens. The whole front was its always open door hospitably welcoming every comer to the freedom of the interior, a seat on an inverted sap-tub, or a place on the bed of straw or fir twigs. There were a few utensils — a dipper, skimmer, and frying-pan — hanging on the walls; a gun leaning in one corner, a pair of snowshoes and a neck-yoke for carrying sap in the other. Its furniture was scarcely as complete as that of an Indian wigwam.

Close in front was a fireplace of rudest construction, a mere low wall of rough stones, partially fencing in the heat on three sides, while from the fourth warmth and light poured into the interior of the building. The chimney was wide as the world, and the smoke at the will of every wind, often making a smoke-house of the shanty, whose inmates took refuge outside, or held steadfast in the belief that smoke is wholesome, or flattered themselves with the old adage that beauty draws smoke.

A great potash-kettle was hung over the fire by a log chain from the end of a goodly straight tree, trimmed of its branches, and pivoted and balanced on a stump so that the kettle could be swung off or over the fire at will. At a convenient distance, beside the fireplace, stood the store-trough, hollowed out of a huge trunk, and large enough for a giant's bathtub. There was a small kettle at hand for the final process of sugaring-off: and this completed the outfit of the camp, which with everything that pertained to it was in perfect harmony with its wild environment.

Old-time sugar-makers tapped the trees by chopping a slanting notch in the sap-wood; then they drove a gouge well in beneath the lower end of the notch, and inserted a wooden spout in the gouge cut. The method was primitive and barbarous enough to have originated with the Indians, and it is not unlikely that it did, and was learned of them by the first white sugar-makers, then passed down from generation to generation of their descendants, till some one hit upon the neater device of using the gouge for the entire operation, and a later some one invented the more expeditious plan of boring the tree with an auger, and plugging the hole with a round-tipped spout of pithy sumac.

The old giants bore their wounds bravely, healing them year after year, and year after year suffering new ones, till they were belted with scars, and out of a fresh wound in an old cicatrix their colorless blood dripped where it had first fallen into the rough-hewn sap-trough, or it may be into the more convenient wooden bucket.

It does not appear that any record was made of aboriginal methods of tapping the maple and converting its sap into sugar, nor is the oldest maple old enough to tell us, though it had the gift of speech or sign-making intelligible to us. We can only guess that the primitive Algonquin laboriously inflicted a barbarous wound with his stone hatchet, and with a stone gouge cut a place for a spout, so far setting the fashion which was long followed by white men, with only the difference that better tools made possible. Or we may guess that the Indian, taking a hint from his little red brother, Niquasese, the squirrel, who taps the smooth-barked branches, broke these off and caught the sap in suspended vessels of birch bark, than which no cleaner and sweeter receptacle could be imagined. Doubtless the boiling was done in the earthen kokhs, or pots, some of which had a capacity of several gallons. According to Indian myths, it was taught by a Heaven-sent instructor.

The true story of the discovery of maple-sugar making is in the legend of Woksis, the mighty hunter. Going forth one morning to the chase, he bade Moqua, the squaw of his bosom, have a choice cut of moose meat boiled for him when he should return; and that she might be reminded of the time he stuck a stake in the snow, and made a straight mark out from it in the place where its shadow would then fall. She promised strict compliance, and, as he departed, she hewed off the desired tidbit with her sharpest stone knife, and filling her best kokh with clean snow for melting, hung it over the fire. Then she sat

down on a bearskin, and began embroidering a pair of moccasins with variously dyed porcupine quills. This was a labor of love, for the moccasins, of the finest deerskin, were for her lord. She became so absorbed in the work that the kokh was forgotten, till the bark cord that suspended it was burned off, and it spilled its contents on the fire with a startling, quenching, scattering explosion that filled the wigwam with steam and smoke. She lifted the overturned vessel from the embers and ashes by a stick thrust into its four-cornered mouth; and when it was cool enough to handle, she repaired it with a new bail of bark, and the kokh was ready for service again. But the shadow of the stake had swung so far toward the mark that she knew there was not time to melt snow to boil the dinner.

Happily, she bethought her of the great maple behind the wigwam, tapped merely for the provision of a pleasant drink, but the sweet water might serve a better purpose now. So she filled the kokh with sap, and hung it over the mended fire. In spite of impatient watching it presently began to boil, whereupon she popped the ample ration of moose meat into it, and set a cake of pounded corn to bake on a tilted slab before the fire. Then she resumed her embroidery, in which the sharp point of each thread supplied its own needle.

The work grew more and more interesting. The central figure, her husband's totem of the bear, was becoming so life-like that it could easily be distinguished from the wolves, eagles, and turtles of the other tribal clans. In imagination she already beheld the moccasins on the feet of her noble Woksis; now stealing in awful silence along the war-path; now on the neck of the fallen foe; now returning jubilant with triumph, or fleeing homeward from defeat, to ease the shame of failure by kicking her, in which case she felt herself bearing, as ever, her useful part. So she dreamed and worked stitch by stitch, while the hours passed un-

heeded, the shadow crept past the mark, the kokh boiled low, and the cake gave forth a smell of burning. Becoming aware of this obvious odor, she sprang to the fire. Alas, the cake was a blackened crisp, and lo, the once juicy piece of meat was a shriveled morsel in the midst of a gummy dark brown substance!

She snatched kokh and cake from the fire, and then, hearing her husband coming, she ran and hid herself in the nearest thicket of evergreens; for she knew that when he found not wherewith to appease the rage of hunger he would be seized with a more terrible one against her. Listening awhile with a quaking heart, and catching no alarming sound, but aware instead of an unaccountable silence, she ventured forth and peeped into the wigwam. Woksis sat by the fire eating with his fingers from the kokh, while his face shone with an expression of supreme content and enjoyment. With wonder she watched him devour the last morsel, but her wonder was greater when she saw him deliberately break the earthen pot and lick the last vestige of spoiled cookery from the shards. She could not restrain a surprised cry, and discovering her he addressed her:—

“O woman of women! didst thou conceive this marvel of cookery, or has Klose-kur-Beh been thy instructor?”

Being a woman, she had the wit to withhold the exact truth, but permitted him to believe whatever he would.

“Let me embrace thee!” he cried, and upon his lips she tasted the first maple sugar.

The discovery was made public, and kokhs of sap were presently boiling in every wigwam. All were so anxious to get every atom of the precious sweet that they broke the kokhs and scraped the pieces, just as Woksis, the first sugar-eater, had done. And that is why there are so many fragments of broken pottery, and so few whole vessels to be found.

If our own early sugar-maker loved his ease, he might sometimes wish the

art had never been discovered; for his occupation was still less than it is now “half work and half play,” as described by one who never could have had the work to do in earnest. His shoulders laden with the neck-yoke and heavy buckets, his feet with the trailing snowshoes that alone made walking possible, it was downright work for a man to tramp for hours over the yielding snow, from tree to tree, at each of which a heavy, clumsy sap-trough had to be lifted and emptied. Perhaps there were oxen and sled and cask to ease the longer journey to the camp, but even then there was enough of plodding work to keep him from amusing himself with close observation of nature. Yet he was alert for all signs.

While exploring a path for his broad shod feet, he noted the littered surface of the snow becoming gray with restless myriads of snow-fleas, black atoms, as innumerable and unstable as storm-blown snowflakes, and therefrom he forecast a thaw. When the prophecy was fulfilled, the raccoons awoke, and journeyed forth in the night. He was likely to see crossing his yesterday’s track their later tracks, and sometimes the broad trail of a whole fat and furry household, well worth his turning hunter for and following to their next lodgings, in times when coonskins were a standard of values. It might be that a bear, not having seen his own shadow on St. Matthew’s Day, had made a record of his wanderings.

Sometimes the sap-gatherer saw the light imprint of a hare’s pads, blotted out at intervals by the long leaps of a pursuing lynx. Sometimes he saw the ingathering wolves’ tracks, spun one by one like strands into a fateful cord that the tireless pack had drawn on to its end among the scattered bones of a hunted deer. More rarely, the round footprints of a panther were seen beside the netted impressions of the snowshoes. It could hardly have been pleasant to read the record so recently made of the great cat

nosing along the human trail, then stopping and gazing hungrily after it, then slouching stealthily away, perhaps not so far but that the wicked eyes were even now watching the burdened, unarmed figure toiling slowly over the snow. If it is the proof of a good panther story that it makes chills run down one's back to read or hear it, it must freeze one's spinal marrow to be part of such a story, with its possible conclusion impending.

The solitary worker had visible and harmless attendants and interested observers in the nuthatches, nasally piping their spiral course down the gray boles; the friendly chickadees, flitting an arm's-length above and about him, and clinging, topsy-turvy, to the nearest twigs; the jays, raising a hue and cry after him; and the squirrels, at times thrown into paroxysms of rage or derision at his appearance, at other times rasping their butternuts with perfect indifference to his coming and going. With the same disregard the hairy and downy woodpeckers turned their backs upon him while they industriously chiseled the trees for their meagre fare, and he caught but occasional glimpses of their great relative, the log-cock, traversing the woods with loping flight and far-resounding cackle. Almost daily he shared surprise with one or more partridges; he always having the larger part, whether the unsuspected bird burst forth from the naked branches above him, or a gray stump before him suddenly became animated and took noisy flight, for which he was never quite prepared, even when he saw the "sugar snow" newly embroidered with the dainty track. On this fair page of snow were recorded the nightly wanderings of the fox and skunk, whether direct or devious, hurried or deliberate, and also hints of their purpose. The hare, too, had made fresh inscriptions, but it could only be guessed whether a dozen had held a midnight revel or one had gone March mad.

While the sap was being brought in, the kettle was kept boiling and the greedy

fire fed from hand to mouth, as many a household fire was a hundred years ago, when the near forest stood with bountiful hand outstretched to the door. Here it was held to the very fireside, where from a huge log the ready axe cut and split the proper lengths as needed. When store-trough and kettle were full and a supply of wood had been chopped, labor was not relieved by a play-spell, but only by a respite of alert leisure, wherein the walloping caldron was frequently replenished, the fire fed, the snowshoes mended, the ripped mittens restitched, the gun oiled and its priming refreshed, or some fur-bearer's skin taken off and stretched.

Meal-getting came at irregularly recurrent periods, when hunger and opportunity were in conjunction, and was spiced with the excitement of uncertainty that always attends amateur cookery. The fried pork might chance to be done to a turn, or be rescued, half scorched and half raw, from the flaming pan; and the potatoes might come out of the ashes at the right minute, fit food for an Irish king, or, belated, be outwardly a cinder, inwardly desiccated emptiness. If the cook was luxurious enough to toast his rye-and-Indian bread on a forked stick, it was apt to fall into the fire at the last turn, but, though gritty with ashes, it was still a luxury when overlaid with sugar or syrup; and concerning the eggs boiled in sap in a convenient skillet there was no question.

One unreckoned item of cookery, the bit of fat salt pork suspended from the kettle bail, that kept the sap from boiling over, swallowed and cast up by the saccharine billows, was constantly boiled, but never eaten, except in the infinitesimal contribution to a sea of sap. A suspicion of its savor, lapped wafts of smoke, the subtle aroma of the woods' breath, wind-blown leaves, and bits of bark gave the old-time dark-colored maple sugar a wild, woody flavor that has been tamed out by the neater modern processes, just as modern culture has well-nigh taken the

tang out of our dialect, — refinements, no doubt, yet one likes to know a Yankee by the flavor of his speech, and maple sugar by its taste.

If the sugar-maker had a helper to share his labor, the loneliness was relieved; otherwise it was only mitigated by some visitor bringing into the woods a waft of humanized atmosphere from the farms, with neighborhood news, and possibly that of the world, but two or three months old, in the latest paper. There might be a grand invasion of the camp by a score of young folks coming to the feast of "sugaring-off," when the hot syrup was cooled into dabs of waxy sugar in sap-tubs filled with clean snow, and each tub was a centre of love-making and merry-making, and the old woods rang with an unwonted clamor of jest and laughter and song. When the merry-makers were gone, and the last echo of their departing voices had faded out far behind them, a deeper silence brooded in the forest and a heavier loneliness fell upon the enforced hermit, who invoked no blessings on the unknown inventor of maple sugar, though but for him there would have been no sweet for the pioneer save the uncertain spoils of the wild bees.

It might be that he, though solitary as the owl whose solemn challenge of the coming storm boomed through the starlit woods, was not lonely when alone, but was a true woods-lover, finding congenial comrades in the humblest visitors: the chickadees that came for scattered crumbs, the scolding jays, the jeering squirrels, the woodpeckers that explored his recent woodpile and hammered the logs of his shanty.

When daylight climbed out of the woods and departed from the mountain-tops, and night encompassed the camp, the fire was his boon companion, that for the bountiful food bestowed upon it fed his imagination with pictures in its shifting flames and pulsing embers. It sang roaring battle-songs to him. It fired booming cannon-shots and rattling vol-

leys of musketry of mimic battle, while armies of soot-sparks charged up the black slopes of the kettle toward the shore of the turbulent sea that surged and seethed under clouds of steam and smoke. It encircled itself with tall spectres that came and vanished, and came again; with shadowy goblins that danced in the edge of gloom, and leaped up as if snatching at other goblins that briefly soared on vaporous wings and then dissolved in darkness. Daylight itself could not give such cheer as the fire's warmth and radiance, nor greater protection; for the fire held at bay, far out in the darkness, unseen prowlers, whose slow steps could be heard stealthily crunching the snow-crust. It kept guard while the spent watcher slept. When he awoke at dawn it was burned to ashes and embers, snapping out with muffled explosions, and spinning slender threads of smoke that trailed away and unraveled into invisible air, and the quiet surface of the kettle gave off only a fluctuating web of vapor.

Perhaps a "sugar snow" had fallen while he slept, and he awoke to a transformed scene. The littered, dingy surface of the old snow was overlaid with immaculate whiteness, every branch and twig laden with it, the furrowed trunks inlaid with it, and yesterday's pervading gray so changed to universal whiteness that it all seemed like the unreal vision of a dream which further waking might dispel. It became a very apparent reality when the round of the tapped trees was made, and every trough and spout cleared; for though April snow has as great virtues as May dew, being a sovereign balm for weak eyes, a most excellent cosmetic, and a fertilizer of the earth, it will not make sugar nor improve it. He was fortunate who escaped a howling storm that filled the woods with the roar of the angry wind and the clash of naked branches, and blurred earth and trees and sky with a wild scurry of driven snow. The swinging kettle was a dusky blotch, the long crane reached

out of the misty chaos without visible support, and flame, smoke, ashes, and snow drifted alee along the ground in a torn, fluttering tangle. The beleaguered sugar-maker cowered under his blankets in the furthest corner of his shelter, salving forth only to succor the fire; and thus coldly fed and housed, he waited in solitary discomfort till the fury of the storm was spent. After such a storm came the wearisome labor of mining for the drift-covered woodpile and various articles that lay unmarked beneath the new surface, and then the weary round on constantly loading snowshoes, and the toilsome delving for each buried trough.

So in fair weather and foul the work went on, while the breath of spring grew softer, and the tops of cradle-knolls, warm with color of last year's leaves and bright with patches of green moss, began to show above the coarse-grained snow. There was a wholesome odor of naked earth and the subtler fragrance of quickened trees; bees began to journey abroad in the tempered air, gathering diluted sweets along the slow trickle of the sap-spouts, and busy to little apparent profit over the scentless squirrel-cups just unfolded from their downy buds; a butterfly voyaged indolently in the flood of sunshine, and flies buzzed to

and fro in spasms of purposeless flight, and drowned themselves by scores in the troughs; the buds grew plethoric with swelling life, and tinged the gray woods with a blush of purple; and presently the hylas rang their shrill bells for the final run of sap, with the disposal whereof the sugar-making season closed and the sugar-maker departed.

The drifting last year's leaves and the fresh verdure of the forest floor began to obliterate the traces of human occupancy, covering the cold ashes and foot-worn mould with dun decay and verdant life. Nothing looked strange but the black dome of the inverted kettle. The shanty asleep in the thickening shade became the home of wood-mice and squirrels, the wildest wood-birds perched and sang on its roof, and the fox peered in at the open front with bold curiosity. The trees slowly healed their wounds, and one may find some patriarch of maples still bearing the scars of its ancient tappings, and in the black leaf-mould at its foot a shell of crumbling wood that was once a sap-trough.

These are the passing memorials of the old-time sugar-maker's rude craft, and you will scarcely find so distinct a trace of the woody flavor of his sugar in the product of his successor's art.

Rowland E. Robinson.

A SON OF THE REVOLUTION.

AN EXTRACT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE HON. DAVID COBB TRUE, MEMBER OF THE LEGISLATURE FOR BLANKE COUNTY, IOWA, PREPARED FOR HIS SON, THEN AGED ONE YEAR AND THREE MONTHS.

THE year 1894 found me keeping the first anniversary of my marriage on my own farm. The farm was well worth ten thousand dollars, but I had bought it for thirty-eight hundred because of the cloud over the title. I have told you, my dear boy, how, the year after I was graduated

from the state university, I bought the farm, selling my share in my father's estate (which consisted of farm-lands in Scott County, mainly), and putting every penny I owned into this farm, the repairs and the stock. But the farm was a beauty. To be sure, there was the ques-

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