

The Hunting Grounds of the Great West - A Description of the Plains, Game, and Indians of the Great North American Desert, Second Edition (Excerpt)

by Richard Irving Dodge

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Always your sincere friend
Richd. S. Dodge

THE
HUNTING GROUNDS OF THE GREAT WEST

A DESCRIPTION OF THE
*PLAINS, GAME, AND INDIANS OF THE
GREAT NORTH AMERICAN DESERT*

BY
RICHARD IRVING DODGE
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
WILLIAM BLACKMORE



WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERNEST GRISET

SECOND EDITION

London
CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1878

TO
WILLIAM BLACKMORE,

OF LONDON, ENGLAND,

KEEN SPORTSMAN, GENIAL COMPANION, FIRM FRIEND,

WITH WHOM I HAVE PASSED
MANY HAPPY HOURS ON 'THE PLAINS,'
AND TO WHOSE FAVOURABLE APPRECIATION OF MY
CAMP-FIRE STORIES THE INCEPTION OF
THE WORK IS PRINCIPALLY DUE,

This Book is Affectionately Inscribed

BY

THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

HUMAN NATURE is so liable to error, and to view facts through the medium of its own idiosyncrasies, that it is only by comparison of the opinions of different men that the world arrives at the truth of any subject.

There is scarcely a man who has reached the middle age of an active life whose experiences and the opinions formed upon them would not, if written out, be interesting and valuable to some portion of mankind.

To be valuable, however, it is of the utmost importance that the opinions be the result of intelligent observation or deduction of the person giving them.

In writing these pages I have carefully abstained from consulting 'authorities,' and have treated the different subjects from my own standpoint. Whether valuable or otherwise, the ideas are my own; and the beliefs expressed are the natural growth of long and varied experiences.

I have had ample opportunity to study the Indian character and habits in his own native wilds.

I have 'nothing extenuated nor set down aught in malice.'

THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER XXV.

LOVE, COURTSHIP, AND MARRIAGE.

‘Love rules the court, the camp, the grove.’

THERE is a vast amount of love making in an Indian encampment. No sooner has the boy passed his ordeal and become a warrior than he begins to look for a wife. Although the only real essential in the affair is that he has ponies to pay for her, yet, for reasons which will hereafter appear, it is always better to win, if possible, the love of the girl. His first approaches are very like those of a bashful backwoods lover. He frequents the lodge of his charmer, does much ‘heavy standing around,’ showing only by *looks* the feelings which agitate his breast. Not meeting with rebuff he takes to serenades, ‘vexes the drowsy ear of night,’ and sets all the dogs and old women in camp frantic with ‘most doleful strains’ on a wretched substitute for a flute. Now he begins to hope, and for hours each night lies in wait near the door of her lodge, watching for the appearance of his beloved, but carefully concealing himself from the observation of any other person.

There being an average of eight or ten people living in the one room of the lodge, his opportunities for private converse with his mistress would be of the fewest, but for her assistance. In case his addresses are not distasteful to her, nor unfavourably regarded by the father, she, after dark, leaves the lodge, and is immediately pounced upon by the lover. If she resists or cries out he is obliged



A DAKOTA OR SIOUX BELLE.

immediately to quit her. If she does neither, he carries her to a little distance, just out of hearing of the lodge. There they seat themselves side by side on the ground, and, throwing a blanket over the heads and forms of both, make love to their hearts' content.

Couples so engaged are never disturbed. It is one of the social fictions of Indian life, that the lover is supposed to be entirely unknown to any but his mistress (love in a man being regarded as a weakness). It not unfrequently happens that two or more lovers are paying addresses to the same girl at the same time. All are lying flat on the ground, as well concealed as possible, but within a short distance of the lodge door. The girl appears. A rush is made. A lover seizes her. If the right one, she yields passively and is borne off, the others disappearing at once. If a wrong one, a slight resistance or exclamation and she is at once released, to repeat the process until satisfied with her captor.

Slight as is the opportunity, no little coquetry can be and is displayed by the Indian maiden in these momentary love passages. The girl is finally won. And now a curious scene ensues between the lover and the cruel parent of his beloved. 'I think of taking your daughter for my wife,' says the lover. 'She is an ugly thing, lazy as a bear, does not know how to cook or to work, and is of no sort of account; but as I am sure you must want to get rid of her, I came to tell you that, as a favour to you, I will take her off your hands.'

'Oh,' answers the father, 'you want my darling girl, the best and most loving daughter man ever had; the best cook and dresser of buffalo skins, the finest bead maker, the hardest and most willing worker in the whole tribe. I cannot spare my darling. I will not part with her to any one, much less to you, who are young, who have taken only one scalp, who have stolen not over two ponies. You, indeed! No; you cannot have my daughter, unless you give me twenty ponies for her.'

‘Twenty ponies!’ cries the lover, with great contempt; ‘twenty ponies for an ugly girl not worth one buffalo robe; I can buy a dozen better girls at the price.’

With many hard words and much personal vituperation the war goes on, the father praising, the lover disparaging, the girl, until after a stormy altercation, running sometimes into weeks (if the old man sees any lover-like weakness or impatience in the younger), a bargain is struck at something like the fair market value of the girl, which is usually from one to four ponies. There is no marriage ceremony. The price being paid, the man conducts his new purchase to the lodge of his father, there to remain until the increase in his family, or his wealth and consequence in the tribe, force or enable him to set up a lodge for himself.

It is impossible to say what the amusements of the Indian women are, but it is a fact that they appear very contented, cheerful, and happy.

Where no one can commit a moral wrong, there is, of course, no opportunity to talk scandal. Mr. Chain Lightning can take to his bosom the spouse of Mr. Scarface without causing even a ripple of remark from male or female. I have heard that the gentle sex holds in great contempt a woman who fails to do everything possible for her husband. I have never seen any such thing. Of the several wives of the same man, one may be an excellent worker, another lazy and worthless, another have one or more slits in her nose, but all seem to get along perfectly with each other and with the other women of the band.

Officers have described to me the squaw fights of the Indians of the Pacific Coast, in which every woman of the band was engaged, while the men stood by enjoying the spectacle. I have not only never seen, but never heard of, a fight between two plains Indian squaws. In fact, the Indians seem to herd together exactly as do the buffalo, amicably, each one doing as he pleases without molesting or being molested by others. Two bulls may fight over a cow, or the cow may exercise her natural right of selection, but the affair possesses not the slightest possible interest to any but those engaged.

The little girls are very fond of dolls, and of playing baby-house, and the mothers take great pains and show considerable skill and taste in making and dressing the puppets.

SINGING AND DANCING.

The singing of the Indian consists in the monotonous repetition of a few half-guttural, half-nasal sounds (notes they can scarcely be called, as they form no music), varied by an occasional yell. Whatever the occasion, the 'song' is the same, however varied the accompaniment.

The religious singing over a sick man is exactly the same as the singing in the scalp dance, except that in the first case the interjections are the most dismal and doleful wails, while in the latter they are the yells which accompany the swooping charge on an enemy, or the blood-curdling war whoop which proclaims a *coup*.

The dance consists of the alternate raising and putting down of the feet, accompanied by a quick jerking motion of the body. It is varied by bounds and springs into the air; but there is no effort at posturing, nor any set position for the feet. In the ceremonial dances, in which warriors alone participate, the dancers form themselves into a circle facing inwards, and sometimes join hands for a few moments. Any position or contact which tends to restraint is, however, soon abandoned in the excitement to which they work themselves. In the ordinary social dances of almost nightly occurrence in the main camp, and in which men, women, and children may all take part, no positions are taken or set forms gone through.

They know nothing of tenors, or altos, or bassos, and have no idea of either waltz, reel, strathspey, or American jig; they do not even take partners, but each dances by himself or herself to the music of his or her own howls. How such singing and such dancing can give the pleasure they undoubtedly do, is one of the problems of humanity; but for all purposes of excitement, almost indeed of frenzy, they are amply sufficient to the Indian.

I was one hot day sitting in the shade of a lodge in an Indian camp, where all was monotonously quiet, when a fat, jolly-looking old woman in a calico gown, and holding a long staff in her hand, emerged from the door of a lodge near by, and, without a word of preparation or invitation to any one, fell at once into the regular song and dance. In a few moments other women came out of other lodges and joined at once in the accompaniment. The loafing lovers and husbands, lying or squatting about on the ground, lifted their heads, looked, and soon first one, then