OTHER,” spoke up one day a shy little Indian maiden of the Algonquin blood, “mother, I want to make my own canoe! I am old enough now to make it tight and strong.”

“Ayashe must know when she has the confidence in herself to make her own canoe. I shall be glad if that time is come,” answered the busy mother, with her quiet smile.

The mother of Ayashe, “The Little One,” was a notable wife and mother from the standpoint of the Algonquin woman. Her tepees, canoes, baskets, mats and the garments of deerskin wrought by her hand were models of craftsmanship. No one ever left her home hungry or dissatisfied, and her husband and children were considered to be especially fortunate. She had taught her only daughter these primitive womanly arts, and it was her pride and ambition that Ayashe should in time become as efficient as herself. But like all good, sensible mothers she was practical and economical, therefore she had never yet allowed Ayashe to try her skill at canoe-making, on the ground that she would be sure to waste many sheets of good birch bark!

“It is my heart’s wish to provide for myself every bit of the canoe; its bones, flesh and nerves as well as its fine robe and ornaments,” now exclaimed the happy little maiden.

The chief was informed by his faithful wife that their daughter had determined to make her first canoe.

“My daughter must know that the Great Mystery himself gave us the canoe to be our carriage and beast of burden for untold generations,” he declared with gravity. “The brother tree, the birch, has generously offered us his skin, as is told in the sacred legends, and the other brother, the cedar, has given not only of his skin, but his flesh, and very roots for frame and sinew, and finally our brother pine gives his life-blood, the pitch, for the seams. We have always honored these three in commemoration of their aid. As you all know, it is our custom of old when about to make a canoe, and particularly the first canoe, to make an offering to the Great Mystery and the spirits of the trees, expressing our thanks, and also praying that the spirits which
THE SONG OF THE BIRCH-BARK CANOE

pervade the air and water may handle the frail bark gently. My daughter must not forget this,” ended Medweasunk (which means His-Voice-Is-Heard-Amid-the-Lightning).

“Yes, yes, Ayashe shall go with me to the Manito rock tomorrow; there she will leave her offering and the wind will bear it afar over the lake.” Thus spoke the old grandmother, Kezhikone (The-Fire-Burns-Briskly).

THE sun had just appeared among the treetops; red as a ripe apple in the misty air when the old woman and her granddaughter were already halfway across the lake, nearing a solitary island whose rocky summit rose domelike and venerable, fringed at the base with some ancient pines and cedars. It was a veritable shrine to the wild man, a cathedral of Nature, hallowed by the worship of generations. There tradition had been heaped upon tradition for hoary centuries, until some had been obliterated and others assumed new shapes, even as the boulders that were strewn upon its shores.

The canoe was lifted bodily from the water and laid gently upon the rocks. Then Ayashe, at her grandmother’s bidding, went on until she stood alone and breathless at the summit of the cliff, where the sheer wall of stone descended to deep water. The old woman waited for her halfway up, for no human presence must disturb that solemn communion with the Spirit.

Ayashe, like an eaglet from her giddy height, gazed in ecstasy upon the expanse of deep black water, studded with fairy groups of verdant isles just awakening to life at the touch of the rising sun. Never before had she known such an overwhelming consciousness of the unseen world. Stooping, she laid her bundle of tobacco and paints upon the rock, gathered some dry moss, and with her grandmother’s flint and steel made a tiny blaze, to burn incense of cedar and sweet grass. Then for several minutes she stood in silence, facing the east, and uttering in her soul the simple prayer of a child to the Father of all.

When she descended from the rock, Ayashe placed the canoe upon the water and launched under the cliff a miniature canoe which she had brought with her, freighted with wild rice and maple sugar. Having finished the simple ceremony according to the usage of her people, she came back happy and impatient to seek the forest for the materials of her maiden canoe. Before the next dawn the girl and her mother had set out for a larger island where there stood a stately grove of primeval birches. At the foot of one of the most venerable, Ayashe reverently placed her symbolic offering; then with sharp
knives she and her mother stripped the finest of the bark, making perpendicular cuts as high as they could reach, and then gently loosening the many-layered skin. The mother was an unerring judge of quality in this matter. All birches of smooth surface may look good to the inexperienced canoe-maker, but the complexion tells much to one who is instructed in woodcraft.

"Ah, nishishin!" (very good), exclaimed several of the Algin grandmothers, when they inspected the large, smooth rolls of bark which the proud mother lifted from her canoe, and which Ayashe joyously spread upon level ground, with heavy stones upon the edges, not forgetting to sprinkle each with a decoction to make them more flexible. She accomplished this in the midst of an admiring circle of women of all ages, matrons with their babies on their backs, and young girls who secretly hoped that they might be equally successful when their turn came to go after bark for the maiden canoe.

One more day the good mother spent in the deep woods with her daughter, and at evening they brought back their load, slender poles of the swamp or white cedar, together with some of the flexible roots and inner bark of the same tree. These were stripped into cord or coarse thread and laid aside in coils and bundles, while Ayashe's father devoted himself to whittling the poles to a proper thinness in preparation for the framework of the canoe. Meanwhile the maiden herself went into the pine woods and secured a quantity of pitch for the sealing of it. All having been made ready, both father and mother watched her work while she drew on the level ground the outline of her canoe.

Just outside of the family home of birch-bark, Ayashe's mother had her fireplace, and near by was a commodious arbor, roofed with tamarack poles and balsam boughs. In this scented and shady ground she spread her best mats and skins, and here she invited all the young men and maidens of the camp for Ayashe's canoe-making. The girls were asked to bring their bone and wooden awls, while the boys brought sharpened knives. Meanwhile Medweasunk went after game, and his wife was busy opening her choicest boxes of maple sugar and woven baskets of wild rice.

All was ready. The people came gladly. The old medicine-man, Ogama, offered a short invocation and made his address to the friends in behalf of the maiden. The best singer struck his rawhide drum and there was a lively song and dance.

And then to work. Ayashe had selected the trees whose bark she took under her mother's guidance. With the help of her family, she had prepared this bark, the roots, and the wood for each part, and the
pitch was melted and stood in readiness. She had exerted her utmost
skill to draw the totem of her clan, the beaver, upon the headpiece,
and for her personal emblem she made also the figure of a loon, the
swift and fearless water bird at home in calm or storm.

There were just five pieces of thick flexible bark. The middle one
was six feet long by four wide, and on either side a strip was added,
four feet by one and a half. The end pieces were six feet by three,
save where they projected to meet the short side strips. At head and
foot these pieces were rounded to form the bow and stern, and small
triangular pieces were added for the curve. Stout pegs having been
driven into the ground as marked out by Ayashe, and the pieces of
bark placed in position, the girls were invited to sit on either side, two
workers to each seam. One punched the holes for the strong cords of
cedar roots; the other drew these cords firmly, the two edges being
very slightly overlapped. As the bark had been properly softened
for easy handling, it was very pliable, and the maidens worked fast
and beaverlike, yet not unskilfully or unthinkingly, for they watched
closely for any defect or irregularity; moreover, behind them stood
others to give warning. As they worked, they talked among them-
selves in soft, musical voices, as one would imagine the brook talking
to the pines, or a tree full of blackbirds in the springtime.

Soon the first set of workers was relieved by another, and so on
until the hand of every maiden present had added her love stitch to
Ayashe’s first canoe.

All this time the older people were interested spectators. Lovers
of mirth and humor, they pretended now and then to ridicule the skilful work of the maidens, likening the unfinished canoe to some clumsy or ungainly thing in nature. This drew forth playful retorts and laughter. At last the main seams were finished, and the released bark, true to old habit, again formed itself into a hollow trunk. The suggestion of a canoe was there, but without grace or dignity.

“Do not work all the time, children! You must eat, now.” So
speaking, the good mother brought forward a steaming kettle of veni-
son, and another of ducks with wild rice. Then there were wild ber-
ries to follow. Such simple feasts made these children of the woods
very happy. “’Tis a pure and wholesome joy: to work, laugh, play,
dance and eat!”

After the meal was finished, there came a few drum-beats and
another song, ending in cheers and laughter. Then all was still, and
one could hear plainly the swash of gentle waves on the beach, while
in the distance the loon gave his high-keyed call of inquiry. The
A GROUP OF BIRCH-BARK CANOES MADE BY THE OJIBWAY INDIANS OF LAKE MATABE, ONTARIO: THE BEAUTY OF THE CRAFTSMANSHIP IS ESPECIALLY SHOWN IN THE OVERTURNED BARKS.
From a Photograph by Dr. William Jones.

OJIBWAY MOTHER AND CHILD FLOATING THROUGH THE LAKE REEDS AT TWILIGHT.
From a Photograph by Dr. William Jones.

INDIAN-MADE CANOES AT THE NORTHERN LAKES OF LONGFELLOW'S COUNTRY.
From a Photograph by Dr. William Jones.

INDIANS OR WHITE MEN WHO HAVE MADE THEIR CANOES AND TRAVELED IN THEM A LIFETIME REGARD THEM WITH REVERENT HUMAN AFFECTION.
cheerful gathering again became absorbed in the task, and this time it was the turn of the young men. They must insert the back-bone and ribs of the canoe.

As with the maidens, the work was doubly manned and crew followed crew, each vying with the other. There were neither saws, squares nor planes, but merely knives, awls and stout cords for the work. The light craft was finally completely surrounded by strong warriors, and in the midst of their laughter, yelps and whoops of joy the graceful canoe was born!

Then came the final ceremony, the christening, as it were, which was both serious and impressive. Ayashe not only dressed for it in her finest doeskin robe with long fringes, but prepared her whole soul for the event. She walked at the head of the procession, in silent prayer, carrying in her hand a filled pipe, the customary emblematic offering. The little bark was carried by four warriors to the water's edge, followed by the maidens, then the young men and finally the old people and children.

Ayashe stood upon the white sand, with the deep pine forest at her back, and they laid her canoe at her feet. After holding the stem of the pipe upward for an instant, she turned and gave it to the old man, Ogama, who stood immediately behind her. He lighted it and passed it around the circle in deep solemnity. When all had finished, the young men launched the canoe with a spring, Ayashe holding in her hand a cord fastened to the bow. For the first time it danced upon the gentle waves—the creature of a day, conceived in love and reverence, brought forth in the midst of feast and dance and joyous toil—the canoe of Ayashe, the little Algic girl!