TWO WILDERNESS VOYAGERS

CHAPTER I

A SPRING AWAKENING

The crows had gathered at their rookeries among the tall pines of a bluff which overtopped an Ojibwa village. Snow had melted off the bark roofs of the wigwams and in their front—if they may be said to have had a front—lay a far stretch of blue-green ice shimmering under the April sun. To and fro above this ice-field the solemn harbingers of spring flapped their black wings. They scanned its barren space in vain search for open water and the float of winter killed fish. The occasional remonstrant Ääl-ääl-ääl! of one of these winging specters sounded a lean and melancholy note of hunger. Now and then, too, within their range of vision, a wolf, bare of rib and thin to the semblance of a shadow, loped, a flitting wraith, across an arm of the lake. Save for the scream of a scolding jay, the chirrup of a surviving bunting, or the chatter of a red squirrel, the spaces of the skeleton woods had been as the aisles of the dead.

At the village, after moons of semi-hibernation, the warming April sun stirred the people to some impulse of animation. Muffled figures shuffled to and fro between the lodges and their fishing-holes in the ice. Lean wolf dogs skulked from lodge to lodge or yapped dismally as they were kicked away from hanging about the doors. Upon the outskirts a bunch of skeleton ponies rustled in the snow, hardy pigmies browsing upon the remains of last year's vegetation. Here, too, the crows came and perched in the tree-tops—safely beyond the range of small shot—expectant of the annual feasts which spring-poor ponies furnish.

The starving moons are cruel in the far north lands. The manido people get very angry; bad spirits prevail. At times Arctic hurricanes come sweeping the woods, one after another, and the angry wind-gods cast down trees in such dreadful fashion that the hunters are appalled and the moose and deer are driven to the coulées of the highlands for shelter, where none but the wolves dare go after them. And so a half-starved people hail the swiftly returning sun with sober manifestations of joy. Fearing lest his progress may be obstructed they make many prayers and smoke offerings to Ki-tshe Manido.

At Tall Gun's village the people had begun to take the fish which will not stir out of deep waters until the sun's rays begin to glimmer

through the ice. Laboriously the women had worked for several days chopping channels beside the crevasses, which here and there ran far out upon the lake. Into these openings the tribal nets had been lowered. These nets the hungry ones visited frequently. Equable division of small catches had several times been made and there had begun to be heard a low hum of renewed life in the wigwams.

During three starving moons no fire had been built in the long lodge, no drum had been beaten, no gourd rattled, no song chanted. But, as the sun mounted one still forenoon, the tinkle of rivulets of water was heard, pools glittered upon the blue ice-field, and suddenly the roll of the conjurer's drum throbbed, the sound of his rattle clicked upon the still air and his voice was heard chanting in a strange tongue. The people were made glad; their pulses quickened for they knew that the medicine of Ghost Moccasin and their own prayers had prevailed.

Tum-te-tum-tum! at last they heard him beating it—the medicine drum of Dzhe-bi-o-mok-kè-zin! A thrill of unexpressed excitement ran all through the wigwams. Low it began, the music, then increased to a muffled roar like the drumming of a partridge's wings in foggy weather.

The conjurer was alone in his lodge and soon his voice was heard in strange cries calling

upon the manidos; and when the medicine rattle was shaken some people were sure that spirits were arriving. Their arrival became a certainty when the noises of drum and rattle were drowned in a medley of appalling sounds, heard nowhere outside an isolated Indian camp. Thumpings and groanings, strange thrilling cries, rumbling, thunderous noises as if Anemeke himself were speaking, the grumbling, coughing notes of Makwa the bear, lugubrious hootings of Gu-ko-ko-o the owl—a very war of contending manidos seemed to rage inside Ghost Moccasin's wigwam.

Surely this was the greatest conjurer of the Awanse tribes. Very old men could not remember when the spirits had more undeniably manifested themselves. Yet there were those among Tall Gun's wigwams who smiled sourly behind clouds of tobacco smoke.

Tall Gun sat in his lodge well content with his faithful conjurer's performance. The head man's stomach was filled with fish, the season of plenty was at hand, and there was a comely new wife in his wigwam. If his mind held a taint of suspicion as to the origin of the superhuman thumpings, groanings and frenzied cries which issued from Ghost Moccasin's lodge it was hidden behind the mask of gravity which sat upon his face while he blew volumes of blue smoke from his nostrils, turning the stem of his

casse tête a calumet to all points of the compass and reverently skyward. Suddenly the noises of the warring spirits ceased, and for a long time a kind of breathless silence reigned in the village. Even the dogs seemed driven to somnolence by this weird stillness broken only now and then by the harsh startling cry of a crow.

Suddenly out of the sky there dropped a clear booming call—*ga-ungk! ga-ungk! glunk!* The spell was broken—the answer to silent prayer had been given. The people rushed eagerly outside their wigwams. They looked up at aun-ah-quod the sky, shading their eyes with their palms. *Gaa-ungk!* Deliberately the clear call rang down out of the blue ether. Quickly one pointed a hand and the blinking eyes saw high—high above all things—a v-shaped file of moving birds, the advance skirmish line of mi-kah, the wild goose.

While they were yet watching delightedly their conjurer suddenly appeared among them, and his assistant began violently beating a drum. Ghost Moccasin himself was painted and arrayed in his most gorgeous and effective manner.

He began a chant, pointing skyward as he sang of the wonders Manabozho had wrought through his prayers and the working of his powerful medicine. When the people saw that the wings of his new head-dress, stained a vivid green, were those of mi-kah, the wild goose,

they looked at each other in astonishment, and when presently one came running from the nets to announce a great catch of the maskallonge, they marveled in their joy. Truly it was wonderful!

That afternoon there was feasting and a fire was lighted in the long lodge. The people gathered early in the evening, seating themselves around the edges of the big wigwam, where they waited in decorous silence for the great men to appear. Tall Gun came first and seated himself in the place of honor upon a skin reserved for him. As many great men do, Ghost Moccasin kept his audience in waiting until some of them yawned in sheer impatience. For an hour or more the older people sat, and the younger stood in a packed ellipse about the outer circuit of the smoothly worn ground floor of their primitive town-hall.

Now and then the elder men turned to each other with some low-voiced remark, but even these refrained from smoking. The younger ones maintained a decorous silence, their eyes only shining with the light of impatience or of expectancy.

The conjurer's success had that day been so manifested that he thought fit to announce himself by a crier. His approach was therefore solemnly chanted from outside the lodge. There were old men and some younger folk whose

eyes twinkled, but they looked discreetly down their noses. Ghost Moccasin came in, his assistants bearing the sacred drum and medicine pouch. The conjurer had arrayed himself fantastically and carried a powerful medicine fetich and a wondrous rattle.

His assistants began to drum and the medicine man, seating himself before a bright fire of fagots, began a series of public incantations, smoking to all the manidos and mumbling strange incoherences. After a sufficient length of time, during which the younger people were in a great state of suspension, the medicine man began an intelligible chant, and this is what he sang:

I do not know where I am going.
I depend upon the clear sky.
Ho, you sugar maple, fast your sap is flowing,
O my friends, I thank you,
O my friends, I thank you.

The first two measures were chanted very slowly with impressive hiatuses and amid silence, but the last lines rolled off his tongue quickly and were responded to by a general and joyous hand-clap that was like the scattered volley of a skirmish line.

First the young girls came forward and danced. To the barbaric double time of the tom-tom and the rhythmic jangle of its bells

these moved modestly, their elbows at a slight curve, their moccasined toes turned inward.

Ho, In-ne-na-tig! E-shig-o-ma-e-oosh,
Ho, ni-ki-ni-ka-na, migwetsh, ni-ki-ni-ka-na.

The weird cadences of their chant imported in shrilling tones the thrill of awakening nature, the joyous prophecy of plenty, of content and good will among men.

Louder beat the tom-tom, more fiercely jangled the bells, and the voice of Ghost Moccasin, raised in crying repetitive, was like a clarion call to action. Young men took the place of maidens in the dance and the action grew fast and furious until the timed rhythm of those swaying, leaping figures whirled the brains of the on-lookers into its mad, magnetic current. Wild cries of encouragement were shouted by the women and young folk. The feet of the young men beat upon the floor, their sweating, painted bodies writhed, their faces grimaced as they rivalled each other in shouting the cadences of the chant.

There were only two persons who were not apparently pleased with this dance and these were small unnoted people—a boy and a girl, of near a dozen years each, who stood behind an ugly woman, crowded between the inner posts of the big wigwam. These two were thinly clad

and with no attempt at ornament save an unsuccessful face decoration.

The faces of these were indeed flushed but not with pleasure. The girl had disdainfully wiped from her cheeks the red earth with which 'Lizbet, Tall Gun's squaw, had stained it. Her blue strouds sleeve carried most of this adornment, but some faint streaks yet remained to accentuate the hot blood of resentment and disgust which showed in her small round face. She stood erect against a post, her hands dangling, a keenly intelligent and scornful little critic of this Awanse fête dance.

The boy, of the same height, stood on the other hand of their mistress, who was no other than Tall Gun's old wife 'Lizbet. He had a shoulder crowded between two upright stakes as though he would have burst through the thin partition. This one looked out from under a mat of unkempt hair and scowled a Sioux scowl upon the whooping moving crowd.

'Lizbet Tall Gun was of an excitable nature. She stood partly in front of her charges and, in her eagerness to egg on the dancers to some new grimace or contortion, the hostile faces of the boy and girl went unnoted.

For the first time in many weeks, so close had been her surveillance, these children spoke together in their own tongue. As the excited woman crowded forward the better to lose no

movement of the dance, the girl spoke behind her back, taking care not to look at her brother.

"Younger brother," she said, "younger brother, let us soon go homeward."

"The arrows of the Cree fellows," returned the boy, scowling more deeply under his mop of hair, "and the bow of my grandfather and some buckskins are hidden in a hollow-wood."

"Waśte, mi sun!" said the girl, struggling to hide the satisfaction in her face. "Waśte! I also have done something. Secretly I have hidden the awl of this she creature and two bundles of thread."

"Good," muttered the boy, "therefore we shall not go with these good-for-nothings to boil the sweet water of their trees."

He was about to speak further, but some accent of his despised and unknown tongue reached 'Lizbet's ear and she turned, giving the girl and boy each a fierce slap upon the cheek, shrieking Ojibwa maledictions.

When he could see her back again the boy scowled up at her with the face of a small fury. A young *meti* woman at his right hand saw the blow. She noted the look upon the boy's face and she shrieked with laughter, but the kindly French blood in her veins prevented her from exposing him further to the old wife's fury.

The alien boy and girl, however, had said enough. They spoke not again during the dance.

CHAPTER II

THE SIOUX SLAVES

Mahpiya-peta, or Fire Cloud, was a war-chief of the Oglalas. Prior to 1860 he fought frequently in wars against the aggressive whites, the Ojibwas, Pawnees, and Crows, and in defence of the narrowing frontiers of his nation. He was a soldier of renown and, being a person of importance, was chosen as one of a delegation of Northwest Indians who visited the Great Father at Washington.

From that trip he returned to his town upon the Smoky River a changed man.

"I will no longer fight the white people," he declared to his soldiers. "We make ourselves ridiculous. We must become as they are or perish."

In the following spring he took his children, Zintkala-Zi (Yellow Bird) and Etapa (The Right Hand), to the mission school at Traverse des Sioux in order that they might be educated to live after the manner of the conquerors.

For these, he said, would soon despoil his nation and pen the wretched remnant of its tribes upon narrow tracts of land to be held as prisoners of war—to be slaughtered, if they

should resist, as the buffalo are slaughtered in a surround.

How much his heart was wrung in obedience to his judgment, when he left his children at the mission, no one can tell. His Isanti wife mourned for them almost as she would have mourned for the dead. To her it seemed an incredible and cruel thing that she should be asked to part with her children, little more than babies, to be reared and taught among a strange people—to forget their own kindred and perhaps their own tongue. But she could not gainsay her lord and master, Fire Cloud.

The children were not less rebellious in spirit than their mother. They were cruelly homesick from the first. The little girl was obedient to her teachers for some weeks, but when Etapa proved intractable to discipline, and was punished for running away to play with the children of "blanket Indians," she, too, grew rebellious. At the end of four months it became evident to the better judgment at the mission that Fire Cloud's young belligerents would better have stayed among the Oglalas.

One night in September the boy and girl took matters into their own hands, seized an opportune moment and fled, intending to make their way across to the Missouri River, where their mother's people were then living. Once among these they felt very certain their father would

send for them when their wrongs should have been recounted to him.

So fierce was their home hunger, these children trusted themselves to the boundless prairies without food and with no weapons save a horn-tipped bow which the boy's grandfather had made for him and which he had clung to with a persistence not to be denied. But, though he had the bow, he had no arrows save the reeds he was able to pluck from the creeks and sloughs.

So for three days this boy of ten and girl of eleven traveled steadily westward subsisting upon the roots of the teepsinna which they dug with half a clam shell and ate raw.

They had reached the buffalo country when a party of Assiniboin hunters—men and women—swooped upon them and bore them northward as captives. The Assiniboins at this time were nominally at peace with the lower Dakota tribes and, when this party had reached a trading-post on the Red River, they had so far repented of their rashness as to offer their captives in private sale to some Ojibwas who were on a trading expedition.

Thus, for two dumpy ponies and some other property, Tall Gun, of a village in the far eastern woods, came into possession of the Oglala boy and girl. When Tall Gun's party had trailed back to the Red Lake country the chief set up another wigwam and took to wife the comeliest

maid of his village. In propitiation he gave to 'Lizbet, a half-caste, who had kept him in monogamous estate for a quarter of a century, the Sioux captives, that she might with honor set up a household of her own. With the possession of these strong children, the boy already an efficient hunter of small game and the girl able to do most of the work required in her wigwam, with a husband still willing to provide meat and skins from the hunting, 'Lizbet was very well content. Thereupon the wily chief congratulated himself upon the opportune stroke whereby he had grasped the horn of a dilemma. Such are the odd and accidental forces which go to the shaping of destinies where war and plunder obtain.

Zintkala-Zi and Etapa, after the first poignant terrors of capture, accepted their captivity as became the children of warlike people. Had they been taken into a wild tribe whose ways of life were similar to their own, or had they been kindly treated by adoption, it is very possible they might never have attempted to escape and would in time have lost their identity as Dakotas.

But neither of these things happened to them. The son and daughter of a war-chief of the Oglalas, whose mother was daughter of a Yankton chief, had been children of some distinction among their own folk. They were now

slaves to a woman of nondescript people whose every mode of dress and of life they detested.

Their mistress was a virago. She was not thoroughly vicious but tyrannical, which was quite as galling to the Sioux children. As they were—from policy—obedient to her behests, so far as they understood them, it was some time before 'Lizbet laid violent hands on one of her chattels. This happened when she discovered that Zintkala-Zi had cunningly concealed a splendid necklace of polished elk teeth and was unwilling to give it up.

In her irksome prison-pen among the missionaries little Zintkala had been reproved for wearing "heathen ornaments" and so she had hidden her double chain, sewing a strand inside either of a pair of buckskin leggins. These leggins she had worn when captured by the Hohé (Assiniboins). Within their winter folds the valuable ornaments remained hidden until the shrewd eyes of 'Lizbet detected their outlines beneath the worn buckskin. The strings of polished ivories were promptly ripped from their fastenings, and 'Lizbet took possession of the child's beloved ornaments with a scream of delight. Because Zintkala cried, when she hung the chains about her skinny neck, 'Lizbet beat her severely with switches. After this the Sioux children never compromised with her for an instant in their hearts.

At first some Ojibwa youths made an attempt to deprive Etapa of his bow, which they said was too big and strong for so small a boy. They told 'Lizbet that the lad should trade it for one better adapted to his years. But shrewd 'Lizbet, making him understand their criticism, procured some fairly serviceable arrows and sent Etapa into the woods. When he returned with three rabbits and a grouse the bow was secured to him.

The boy, however, unable as yet to converse in Ojibwa, did not understand and, when boys—out of hearing of 'Lizbet—still urged him to trade his bow, he was much alarmed lest they should take it from him by force.

Just before the snow came, a party of Crees, traveling through the country, camped at Tall Gun's village and stayed for a day or two to gamble and to "swap" for such property as could be traded. On the day after their departure Etapa's bow was missing and, although 'Lizbet gave him a severe beating for carelessness, it was generally believed that the Crees had stolen the weapon because of its superior quality. To appease the angry old wife Tall Gun made the boy a bow of dry ash. It was a contemptible weapon in Etapa's eyes yet, needing food, he made effective use of it so long as there were birds and rabbits to be shot.

In 'Lizbet's wigwam the Sioux children, who

were recognized as her property, her slaves in fact, graduated in a stern discipline. She continually talked to them in Ojibwa. After some days, when she had taught them a few necessary words and had established a sign language in aid of their understanding, she never again allowed them to speak to each other in their own tongue. A word in the Sioux was the signal for a blow with a dog whip. In all that dismal winter they had no opportunity to speak together apart from their argus-eyed mistress. 'Lizbet kept one of them beside her constantly. She never allowed the two to pass outside her lodge together and, if she stepped across to a neighbor's wigwam, she took Zintkala with her. How bitterly irksome this life became to these children of the plains the subsequent chapters of this history will reveal.