CHAPTER III

AT THE SUGAR CAMP

On the morning after the fête dance there was confusion indescribable at Tall Gun's village. The weather had come off uncommonly warm and the wigwams were turned inside out in a mad scramble to make hasty exit toward a sugar-camp.

Their skeleton ponies could not travel in the snow nor drag travois packs over the ice; so there was tying and untying, packing and repacking of blankets, skins, clothing, kettles, pans, cooking utensils, axes and fishing tackle to meet the limited capacity of a limited number of dog sledges.

Women and children hustled to and fro, yelling themselves hoarse, while men seized upon half-trained wolf-dogs and fought with the snarling, vicious brutes to get them into harness. There was need of frantic haste, for already there was much water upon the ice and, by noon, or a little later, the lake would be impassable for sledges and the slush snow of the woods equally so.

Ho-ho-ho! E-shig-o-ma-e-oosh! Fast the sap is flowing! People ran hither and thither in a

frenzy lest they should overlook some necessary dish, chipping adz, or other utensil. As fast as a family had its dogs or its women loaded with packs the members set out at a dog trot upon the sloppy ice. Every rivulet of a hundred miles and more of shore-line was pouring its flood out upon that bottle-green waste.

So they ran, slopping in shallow pools, with sweating shoulders and icy feet, women and papooses chattering and screaming, and men belaboring dogs and swearing strange French oaths. When one slipped and fell, getting a shower-bath from the splash, shrieks of laughter greeted the mishap. By holding to the ice-ridges they were able to keep their feet out part of the time, else the ice-water would have proven intolerable long before the twelve-mile stretch was crossed.

Numbers of crows and ravens followed this long file of bipeds and four-foots over the ice. Where these shouting creatures should stop the winged caravans knew that many fish would be taken and out of a wasteful abundance the empty craw could be filled. So the funereal birds flapped alongside, alighting upon the ice-ridges to utter hoarse, anxious notes, stalking singly or in solemn files just far enough from the movers to be out of range of a boy's blunt-ended arrow.

Of all the scurrying, human crowd only two

were utterly discontent. These were the young Dakotas. During the rigors of an Arctic winter they had not dared to attempt escape, for they could not have survived a march in the awful cold.

But now that spring had come both were eager to fly and they had only awaited an opportune moment to seize such things as they needed and had hidden. By secret signs, made when 'Lizbet's back was turned, they had agreed that some dark night when the "she creature" was asleep, they would steal from her wigwam and take to the woods. Not only did this early flight across the lake carry them further into the unknown country, but they were compelled to carry burdens which nearly crushed their young backs before the goal was reached. 'Lizbet had no dogs, not being able to support them, and so she loaded herself and her slaves with such effects as Tall Gun's sledge could not accommodate. And she forced the burdened children to travel in her front, shrieking at them French and Ojibwa maledictions or threatening the dog whip when their tired legs lagged. The impulse to fling down their hateful packs and speed with swift feet to the nearest dark line of woods was strong upon them. But this rash prompting was resisted and finally the dreadful journey came to an end.

At high noon the sledges were gathered at the north rim of the lake where, at a well-known

inlet, fish were slaughtered in such numbers as justified the wisdom of the attendant crows. The open current of the brook had tolled the finny ones out of winter quarters until, within its narrow channel, they were crowding upon each other. There men and boys, armed with all sorts of spears, attacked them in hilarious excitement and soon the snow on either bank was heaped with the slain and, like a miniature battle ground, stained carmine. This carnage continued until the fish were run out of the open brook.

The Ojibwas had also reached the country of In-ne-na'-tig, (the sugar maple). Along both banks of the small stream were many groups of the tall, shapely trees. Hundreds of trunks bore rings of fissured scars where the tomahawk or the chipping adz had tapped them.

At some distance up the brook, hidden away amid ranks of tall maples, stood the skeleton frame-work of a huge wigwam, the Ojibwa sugar camp. Its poles were yet partly covered with the bark of last year's laying. Many hands make light work and by night the ragged roof and sides were snugly pieced with freshly peeled birch-bark.

This camp, after the manner of a Huron long house, was arranged to accommodate a large number of families, only in this instance each family hung up blankets or skins to partition off

its section. This was done not so much for the sake of privacy as to mark a line which should divide each family's household goods from those of its neighbors.

Notwithstanding the bustle of their hurried dash from village to sugar-bush the Indians discovered quickly that the sap was not flowing—that Ghost Moccasin was not wholly infallible. In this far north land the frost sets its teeth deep into the ground and many days of warming sun are required to start even the volatile sap of the sugar maple flowing.

But there was much to do in the days of waiting. Every year they must make a new set of birch-bark sap-vessels and spouts, *casseaux* or troughs for catching the sap, buckets for carrying, and the *gaujé*, a yoke which was borne across the shoulder. For, with the improvidence of nature's children, they took no care of these things but left them scattered about, where they were used last, to be burned or buried in snow and forest debris. Upon only one set of the implements of their sugar-making did they bestow absolutely necessary care. They kept within their wigwams the several large brass kettles, which a post trader furnished them for the sake of the trade they brought him. These kettles were religiously scoured, polished and guarded with the care bestowed upon sacred articles.

Their sugar-making was a profitable industry, and annually they sold many mococks, of a brick-like consistency, at the upper Red River post—and the article brought them three-point blankets, red strouds and trinkets more than the skins they took. And besides, in the season of making, there was the delicious diet of syrup and sugar of which they ate enormous quantities.

In their days of preparation for the sap catching, of tapping trees, whittling *gouttières*, making and setting the *casseaux*, and repairing the stone furnaces, abundance came to them from the south seas. Overhead the near blue sky was flecked with clouds of geese, brant and ducks, and, stretches of open water having appeared along the lake shore, the birds tumbled into these spaces in myriads.

The noise of their wings, their flappings, splashings, gabble and quacking, the murmur of a multitude, sounded far through the still woods.

Among the bush alongshore the hunters secreted themselves and with small shot secured an overabundance of meat and feathers.

During a slow migration of weeks these birds, because of their vast numbers, had fed, almost undisturbed, upon the wheat and corn fields of the lower and central Mississippi countries. In these early years of western settlement we indeed furnished to the Indians, in fat and juicy migrators, our only ungrudging supplies.

The people of the sugar camp took on flesh visibly during these days of abundance. The fat goose flesh and the maple syrup and sugar gave their brown skins a healthy glow and put spirit and sparkle into their eyes. A new and vigorous life possessed them, and the hum of it ran as a pleasant murmur in their camp. The sounds of the drum, of weird Ojibwa chants and French roulades, mingled oddly with the medley of the lake, the cawing of crows, the screams of jays, and the piping of blackbirds.

During the morning hours women, girls and boys were busy at gathering sap and again in the late afternoon. To and fro they shuffled in and out among the tree trunks, each carrying the *gaujé* with a birch-bark bucket at either end. All day and all night the kettles boiled merrily with women or girls taking turns in constant attendance.

'Lizbet Tall Gun was in her glory. She had charge of the great brass kettle which was the head man's chief possession and article of distinction. And she had his young wife, a niece, and the Sioux boy and girl to do her bidding. She was thus high priestess of the sugar-making and she made a large show of authority. She sat upon a colored mat, smoking and giving commands, though she arose occasionally to examine critically the bubbling contents of the kettle. Occasionally, also, when it appeared that the

syrup was too low or too high or that there was a suspicion of burning about the rim of the kettle, she snatched the hemlock paddle from the Sioux girl's hand to bestow a sounding thwack upon her shoulders.

Zintkala-Zi bore this with impassive face, and went about her task as before. As became a daughter of the Dakotas she accepted the inevitable without a show of emotion. She even laughed at times when something amusing occurred; and, when the sap was not running and the big kettle had been scoured, she played with the young girls of the camp and made for the little ones wooden dolls with carved heads, dressing them with bits of bright clothes and cast-off buckskins.

In all this demeanor 'Lizbet read submission and the growth in the girl of an Ojibwa heart. Etapa, too, seemed to have undergone a change. At times during the winter he had been sulky and ill-mannered. It was especially difficult to teach him the Ojibwa words. In six months he had barely learned enough of the tongue to know what was required of common necessity. When 'Lizbet was not at hand he sometimes taunted the Ojibwa boys with their babbling tongue. He spoke of it contemptuously as "bi-wab-ik-shik-wik!"—a name which the young mimic had invented.

However, at the sugar camp, in the midst of

excitement and of plenty, with as much of the sweet as he chose to eat—for no one was stinted at the boilings—Etapa seemed to have shed his surly disposition. He brought wood for the furnace, carried his *gauje* with cheerfulness, and took on flesh and a shining skin.

'Lizbet was much pleased at the apparent change. She had conceived a secret liking for the boy, who was a keen hunter and quick to see things. "See," she said to her husband, who daily honored her by lighting his pipe at her fire, "see, how it is with my children."

Zintkala had gone a little distance after wood and Etapa was coming along a path bearing buckets of sap. "They are now of our people," boasted 'Lizbet and Tall Gun was also pleased. He seated himself upon 'Lizbet's mat and smoked contentedly the while her charges came and went. He had noted that 'Lizbet's kettle was continually filled to the boiling point and that her furnace never lacked wood. As a great number of trees had been tapped, that all the boilers might use as much sap as they could reduce, he foresaw that 'Lizbet would this season much surpass her former tale of cakes and mococks. Thus he did not hesitate to express tacit approval by sitting a decorous length of time at her fire.

His complacent sitting so pleased the elder wife—who saw signs of jealousy in the younger—that one afternoon she grew quite hilarious and

excited and drank a great deal of warm syrup. She also made a delicious wax for her lord. She was thus attending the kettle herself to serve Tall Gun, and her boiling ran low.

It was about sunset, after the sap-gathering time, when she noted her remissness and to make amends she called the young wife to see after the kettle—and incidentally to take the blame which would attach to burning on—put a *gauje* upon her shoulders and, with Zintkala and Etapa, went out to collect sap from any drippings which might remain.

Thus they hurried, going on parallel lines and within sight of each other, from trough to trough.

They were a good distance from camp at dusk, and still their buckets were not filled, when 'Lizbet was suddenly taken with fearful pains and fell upon the ground, spilling her sap and shrieking in agony. She rolled upon the earth, writhing to and fro and howling like a mad thing.

Awed and astonished, the Sioux children stood gazing for a moment. Some evil spirit had seized upon this woman. Doubtless it was in answer to the prayers they had offered in secret. They were quick to seize upon this probability. For many days they had been praying to Waniyan Tanka to help them to escape.

'Lizbet was plainly hors de combat, senseless,

shrieking with pain. Zintkala was first to act. She ran to the groveling woman, snatched her long knife from its sheath and, seizing the strings of elk teeth about her neck, struggled with the frantic creature until she had cut away their fastenings and secured the treasure.

"Younger brother," she said, in great excitement, "let us now go homeward! Hither let us run among the trees, taking the canoe with which a man has arrived."

A hunter, who had returned to the village by way of the woods, had that day paddled a birch-bark vessel across the lake. It was the first thus far to be brought to the camp. Etapa looked at 'Lizbet, whose contortions and screams did not cease. Very evidently an evil spirit had been sent to attack her.

"Ho, Tanké," (older sister), said the boy, "we shall run toward these people, crying that some enemies have arrived. We shall take some parflêches to make us proper clothing."

Seeing the wisdom of this very young warrior, his sister ran with him. They shouted: "The enemy! The enemy! Those wicked ones have attacked 'Lizbet!"

Keen ears at the sugar-making had heard 'Lizbet's screams, and presently, catching the purport of the Sioux children's cries, the camp was thrown into an uproar. Men, old and young, seized their weapons and, supposing that

a bear or a cougar had seized upon 'Lizbet, ran through the woods to her succor. Women and girls, not deeming it prudent to go into the darkened woods, gathered in excited groups upon the outskirts of the camp.

The little Sioux, so soon as they heard the footfalls of the runners, ceased their cries, and, avoiding the Ojibwas in the darkness, passed around them, and so on swiftly to the rear of their camp. Seeing no one on that side of the big wigwam, they dodged in at an opening and seized such things as they needed or could lay their hands on in the semi-darkness. In 'Lizbet's and Tall Gun's apartments they knew, in particular, where the household goods were stowed, and they thus secured two parflêches of buckskins, a small bag containing hanks of thread, bundles of sinews and other needful things, with a light and convenient tomahawk which belonged to the young wife of the chief.

They had no difficulty in stealing away from the camp in its rear for all was hub-bub and confusion out beyond the furnaces. Their first difficulty was encountered upon reaching the canoe which had been drawn out upon the creek bank. There were no paddles at hand. It was some minutes before they found a single broad-bladed one concealed among some bushes. With this Etapa made such haste as he could, but they were not out of the creek channel when they

heard the sharp gasp of a fleet-footed runner in pursuit.

Frightened, they were about to leap from the boat when the man broke from cover near at hand. It was too late to escape by running, and Etapa thrust his paddle upon the bottom and gave the boat a fierce shove. At the same instant the runner leaped at them from the bank. Even as he jumped the light craft shot away from under him, and the man sprawled his length in the shallow brook.

When he recovered the canoe was darting out upon the waters of the lake. This runner had no fire-arm, but he yelled frantic directions to those who were chasing in his rear and, a moment later, the beach alongshore was ablaze with popping guns.

It was too dark for rifle shooting, else this story could never have been told. Bullets skipped and whizzed about the receding canoe and small shot struck it and the occupants repeatedly. Undoubtedly, when they had discovered the ruse of the young Sioux, the Ojibwas immediately connected their flight with 'Lizbet's attack and they were fierce to capture or slay them.

Though feeling the sting of small pellets upon the arm and shoulder, Etapa plied the paddle with all his strength and, in two or three minutes, the canoe had slipped out into the darkness and beyond the range of shots.

"Tanké," said the boy, inquiringly, "those people have hit me with some shots."

"I also am struck in my hand," said Zintkala, simply. "But, younger brother, it does not hurt greatly."

"It is nothing," said Etapa and in their greater anxiety to steer their course aright they did not again mention their hurts. Without the bow and arrows, which Etapa had hidden in a wood at the village, they could not hope to make the long journey which lay between them and their own country.

Therefore the canoe's prow was turned southward. The night was clear and, as all Indian children know "The Seven Dizzy People," who swing nightly around the pole star—these and their native instinct for direction guided the Sioux children, who took turns in plying the paddle and who worked as those work who race with death upon their heels.

They knew perfectly that two lines of runners, one upon either shore of the lake, would be launched after them to take up their trail wherever they should come to land; that they must fly—fly—fly if they would live.

The night favored them, for there was no air stirring. There were no ripples upon the lake save those made by the water-fowl which rose flapping and squalling in their front.

The one who was not paddling sat in the bow

watching for the ice-floes which endangered their frail craft. Zintkala's wound bled freely. A swan-shot had passed through her palm and lodged under the skin upon the back of the left hand. She trailed the hand in cold water until the blood ceased to flow and thereafter the hurt troubled her little.

Two hours of swift paddling brought them under a bluff behind the Ojibwa village. By no possibility could runners coming around the lake reach this point before morning. The young Sioux had often heard the Ojibwas say it was a long day's run by the shore and one way they could not come at all without boats because of a wide neck of water which connected with a very long lake.

So Zintkala and Etapa were very cautious in approaching the village. An old man, his wife and their lame son, had been left to guard the wigwams. While the children were not afraid of being caught by these, the family might yet be on the alert and so prevent them from securing the necessary bow and arrows.

However, they had no difficulty at all. The wigwams were silent and fireless when they arrived. Etapa recovered his bow and the arrows which he had cunningly stolen from the Crees, and Zintkala, from behind a certain piece of bark in the roof of 'Lizbet's lodge, took the awl, thread and small articles she had hidden.

CHAPTER IV

INTO THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

When they returned to the canoe Etapa and Zintkala bore each a light strong paddle, much easier to handle than the heavy one they had used and had needed to use alternately. Their progress was now rapid. They sped faster than anyone could have made his way through the woods and tamarack swamps alongshore. They were elated. The night, the long lake and the wilderness were before them and when they were far beyond ear-shot of the village they talked freely and excitedly of their recent experiences. Etapa counted the little "mosquito bites" where the small shot had hit him and found that ten or more of them had gone through his skin in various places. He felt proud of these wounds and thought that he should be able to show the scars when he had arrived at home.

And he would not have been a genuine little Sioux had he not boasted greatly of how he had darted the canoe out from under the leaper who sought to jump down upon them from the creek bank, and also of his exploit in stealing a quiver of arrows from the Crees—he had seven, finely toothed and feathered, and of superior wood—