

TWO WILDERNESS VOYAGERS

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—

TWO WILDERNESS VOYAGERS

and of his adroitness in hiding his bow so that the Ojibwas had believed the Crees had stolen it.

And Zintkala, riding upon the smooth water, listened, well pleased with the sound of her own tongue again. So they paddled on, keeping The Dizzy People upon their right and, most of the time, a faintly outlined shoreline upon the other hand.

They were not alone—far from it. On every hand were the puddling, quacking, squalling water-fowl. These rose at times in such numbers that the noise of their wings was as the voice of Wakinyan the thunder god. There were many flashes of white wings sailing by and strange voices, which startled them, came out of the night.

The steady dip-dip of the light paddles did not cease for an instant and after a time the land shadows disappeared upon their left and appeared upon their right. By this token they knew that they were entering the channel between the two lakes, and so turned their course southward. When they had left the headland they did not see the shoreline again and they had paddled until their arms were very weary when a fog began to rise upon the lake. Soon this mist became so dense that the stars were obscured, and the little voyagers were literally at sea as to direction.

INTO THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

They paddled about for a time much puzzled and distressed. This fog might well mean death to them, for, unless the lake were very long indeed, the Ojibwa runners might come within sight of them when the mist should lift with the rising sun. Soon the folly of continued paddling became apparent—for they might even be going back into the teeth of the enemy. Therefore they remained silent in the midst of silence, for the water-fowl seemed to have gone asleep; only now and then a pair of wings flapped or a faint, contented chuckle sounded within their hearing. Soon, in spite of anxiety, sleep overcame the little voyagers and with blankets closely wrapped they lay upon the canoe's bottom.

When they awoke the sun had begun to glimmer from a height into the low mist which lay upon the lake. Instantly they seized their paddles and steered their canoe southward.

As the sun rose higher a light fog still hung over the lake and overhead the sky was hazy also. This made the hearts of the paddlers glad, for they knew the atmosphere would not clear until a breeze came. There would be opportunity to land their canoe without danger of observation if they should arrive at the shoreline within a reasonable time. Though their canoe could still be seen at a long bow-shot's distance, the chance that an Ojibwa should be within sight was too small to give them uneasiness.

TWO WILDERNESS VOYAGERS

The rise of water-fowl in its front as the canoe advanced would, in clear weather, have marked its progress for many miles to keen eyes on the lookout. At a little distance, however, the mists swallowed all these hurtling crowds of birds.

After paddling for some length of time the voyagers were alarmed by hearing a medley of strange noises in their front. Shrill outcries, whoops of wild laughter, screams, groans and gruntings, came to their ears out of the fog.

At first the children were much alarmed, fancying that they heard a multitude of the strange manidos of the Ojibwas. They ceased paddling and were in doubt as to what course they should pursue. They were thus hesitating in silence, fearing to converse together, when a bevy of big white-winged birds appeared, skimming low over the water. These screamed and laughed in a manner which left no doubt as to the origin of the alarming noises. Whole tribes of these strange whoopers, white, gray and black, now came yelling through the fog. Some of these birds alighted upon the water, cocked great red and yellow eyes at the canoers and then rose and flew away with odd cries and yells of shrill, mocking laughter.

All this was most astonishing to the Sioux children to whom these noisy Arctic birds, their sudden appearance and disappearance, their transient gavaeian medley—annual events in the

INTO THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

north lake country—were wholly unknown. In the unknown there is always mystery to the Indian, and the boy and girl looked at each other, and spoke in low tones, in much amazement.

They resumed their paddling and held their direction mechanically while their eyes were for the birds. Presently they began to encounter ice-floes, and upon these melting, spongy masses the strange birds were gathered in great numbers and their antics gave fresh cause for wonder. They certainly acted strangely. Some fluttered their wings, holding them grotesquely aloft as buzzards do, while their huge bills gaped threateningly; others seemed to be executing a dance, crooking their necks and hopping from one foot to the other, while others strutted with a great show of fierceness; and each seemed to vie with another in screeching, laughing, scolding or grunting, until the ears were pierced with their outcries. Barring the fact that they wot not of the comparison the onlookers might have fancied themselves sitting in a gallery of the Inferno.

"Do look, younger brother!" Zintkala exclaimed, presently. "On this one side the people are really dancing the buffalo dance."

Etapá turned his face, as directed, toward an ice-field upon his left and, near at hand, a group of birds were certainly prancing, hopping, jumping and posing their wings and bodies in such

TWO WILDERNESS VOYAGERS

impossible attitudes as suggested a violent dance of the Dakotas. The birds were very probably quarreling over the carcass of a fish which each wished the privilege of pecking out of the ice for its individual benefit.

"Older sister," said Etapa, with conviction, "these people will surely go to war. It is the buffalo scalp dance."

The children spoke naturally of these birds as "people." All animals, to the Indian, in his native state, are a mysterious folk. Some are sent by the Great Spirit to furnish food and clothing, others to harass and annoy and perhaps to cast an evil spell, and yet others to furnish warning and instruction.

"It may be, brother," ventured Zintkala, "that Wakinyan has sent these strange warriors to protect us from the enemy."

"Ho, Tanké!" cried Etapa, "I think that is so."

At any rate, they declared, it was evident that these scolding birds were debating what should be done to some very bad people, and there could be none worse than the Rara-ton-wan (Ojibwa).

Thus, seeing the birds apparently well disposed toward themselves, they took comfort from their mysterious conduct, supposing it might mean confusion to their enemies. Therefore Etapa addressed the terns and laughing gulls as follows:

"Ho, you birds, you strange ones, you are very

INTO THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

mysterious. Anyone can see that you have a great medicine. Therefore we desire greatly that you shall help us, so that you shall all shout very mysteriously at the enemy. If you will do so for us he shall not find our trail."

When a whooping outcry arose among some gulls, at the close of this speech, the children were quite certain these birds had understood and would try to help them.

Thus, with hearts comforted, the little voyagers paddled on amid a whooping tumult until suddenly there loomed in the fog a line of skeleton tree-tops and shore was near at hand. They hastened joyfully to land, for they were getting woefully hungry, and must travel, hiding their trail, a good distance in the woods before they would dare to stop and build a fire.

The shore they now approached was gorged with ice, a high north wind having driven the ice-fields upon it, piling huge white masses on the beach and hoisting fresh walls of sand and gravel.

Very cunningly the voyagers came to land amid this debris. They left the canoe overturned at the edge of a gorge, that it might drift with wind and wave, and scrambled over the honey-combed masses until they could pass to hard ground upon the trunk of a fallen tree. Then, bearing their small bundles, they launched themselves into the wilderness of woods.