

CHAPTER V

THE DANGER OF DELAYS

Through alternate growths of hard woods and pines the little voyagers passed on until they walked unsteadily from fatigue. As much as possible they kept to the hard ridges and stony ground, avoiding spots where moldy vegetation or moist earth might leave a trace of footprints.

They had no set plan other than to travel southward with all the speed possible, for in that direction lay the Minnesota River and a narrowing strip of territory still occupied by Dakotas. They knew nothing of the country which lay before them, for the Assiniboina had carried them over the prairie regions far to westward, and the Ojibwa had brought them eastward over a country partly wooded.

Despite hunger and weariness they felt a mounting sense of freedom with each step which carried them further from a hated drudgery among a despised people. They did not feel that they were alone for squirrels barked and birds chirruped among the trees. Now and then a startled deer stood at graze for an instant and then sailed gracefully away among the tree trunks. Overhead, too, a myriad folk called down to them out of the hazy sky and

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there was a cheery whistle of wings above the tree-tops as flights of small ducks passed from one wild rice lake to another.

After a time they neared one of these marsh lakes where there was a deafening uproar of water-fowl tumbling in and out of the reedy swamp.

"Younger brother," said Zintkala, "I think you must now kill some birds. I faint with hunger."

"Stay here, sister; I will do so," answered the boy. He dropped all burdens but his bow; then, breaking some straight, hollow reeds from the edge of a bayou near at hand and selecting some pebbles from the lakeshore, he sat down and with the aid of some pieces of pack-thread manufactured several arrows. This he did by fitting small stones into the split ends of his reeds.

These were primitive weapons, yet the lad passed around among the bushes, approached the lakeshore near to where flocks were feeding, and easily killed a couple of fat ducks.

Zintkala had, in their raid upon the sugar-camp, secured 'Lizbet's small hoard of matches as well as flint and steel and she had a small fire going when Etapa returned.

Although desperately hungry Etapa was the warrior in miniature. He allowed Zintkala to dress the ducks and roast them the while he

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whittled at a bit of hardwood, with tiny transverse holes, fitting one hollow with a reed stem that he might have a pipe wherewith to smoke to the earth, the sky and thunder spirits. He had no tobacco, but pulverized willow bark makes a sweet smoke and is thus a proper incense offering.

By the time his pipe was finished the ducks, spitted upon two sticks, were roasted and the children attacked them smoking hot. Ah, how good to bury the teeth in that sweet meat! They ate ravenously, panting with enjoyment, until every bone was clean picked.

"Younger brother, you should have killed another," said Zintkala.

Etapá looked at the scattered bones regretfully.

Just then a squirrel barked near at hand. "See, brother, shoot—shoot!" said Zintkala, pointing her finger to a tree beyond him.

Etapá turned about and saw a large gray squirrel upon a limb near to the ground. The saucy creature was barking at five or six steps' distance. The boy cautiously took up his bow and a reed arrow and, a few minutes later, bunny was spitted over a bed of embers.

While the squirrel was cooking, the brother and sister took account of their bundles of effects. Each had come off with a gray blanket and a parflèche (whole-skin sack) of buckskin.

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Etapá besides had secured, with the tomahawk, a roll of pieces of buckskin, tanned moose hide, bundles of sinews and of pack thread. Zintkala had retained 'Lizbet's long knife and had seized upon various small and useful articles in her apartment at the sugar-camp—a bag of work threads, odds and ends and ornamental bits, a hank of buckskin strings, and, best of all, a small metal basin in which she would be able to cook meat and roots when they should really make a camp.

When they had finished the squirrel they were very tired and sleepy. They reclined upon their blankets intending to rest a brief time longer. Sleep seized upon them in a twinkling and the sun had passed the zenith before either pair of eyes had opened.

They were rather cross when they awoke and each was inclined to find fault with the other for remissness. But they packed their small bundles quickly and, strapping them to their shoulders, hurried away from a camp which hunger and fatigue had certainly made an imprudent one.

The unknown lake stretched for an unknown distance upon their left and they were thus compelled, much against their will, to turn to the east. They avoided the lakeshore and kept to the woods.

They had walked a considerable distance

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when they came upon a fresh difficulty—a black and barren tract, recently desolated by a forest fire, lay before them. Across this they must go or turn back and attempt going around the lake to westward. Thus there was but a choice of evils and the little voyagers, after sage counseling together, elected to go ahead.

They could not fail to leave tracks upon the dust of the burned ground, but they took what precaution they might to alleviate the danger of being seen by some trailer or stray hunter while they were crossing. Etapa climbed a tree upon the edge of the tract and scanned the reaches of the burned district closely. Seeing nothing to alarm he descended and the two made up their bundles and wrapped their blankets in a peculiar way about their bodies. Then, stooping until their heads were low to the ground, half walking, half crawling, they went one behind the other, imitating the movements of mato-sapa, the black bear.

By this means they hoped to escape the dangers of a chase should any hunter come within sight. For at this season the black bear was little but skin and bone and ill-temper and the Indian hunter usually avoided the animal. There was no one there to judge of their imitative performance, yet it may be set down as certain that the average hunter, seeing at a distance those dark gray figures ambling among the

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blackened stumps, would have adjudged them bears and would have passed on to the chase of more desirable game.

A half hour of this kind of going proved a wearisome business and the little Sioux were overjoyed when they had again safely reached the shelter of woods and bush, where they could straighten the kinks out of their backs.

They were yet for a time forced to travel eastward by the trend of the lakeshore. They did not know it, but they were now entering a region famous for its wild rice lakes, and never in one day had they seen so many water-fowl. Great flights were passing to and fro overhead and the murmur and spatter of them came up from the lake in continuous accompaniment to their walk. Now and then, in response to some sudden alarm or impulse, clouds of birds would rise from the water with a roar of wings which was simply astonishing.

"Hoye, Tanké!" Etapa would shout, forgetting caution in this tremendous din. "Magakšíkca ota-ota!" (Hey, older sister, ducks are wonderfully plenty!)

An hour or two before sunset the children reached a southward trend of the lake and, coming upon a low ridge, saw before them another burned tract which had been swept bare of trees. But this district had been desolated some years previous and was grown to young jack pines

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and other bush to an average height above the voyagers' heads.

They betook themselves to the bush joyously. It was exactly such covert as they would have chosen until assured of safety from pursuit. Within this copse they felt the security of rabbits in a warren of hazel bush.

Toward sunset they came upon an open grass plat where the last year's dry "fog" lay thick upon the ground and a small clear brook ran through the midst. Here they were tempted to rest and, having carefully examined the thickets near by until they had found dry and charred wood which would make little or no smoke, they determined to camp for the night. It truly seemed that no one could find them in this bush land.

Yet they were soon startled by a crashing among the small pines and were about to scud away when they distinguished the footfalls of some large animal and, squatting upon the grass, awaited its appearance with anxiety. The creature came toward them and broke from cover at a little distance. It was a huge and hornless bull moose, which, catching sight of strange creatures upon the grass, stood at gaze with its ungainly muzzle reared, and half-grunted, half-snorted, mingling fear with threat.

Zintkala feared the big animal was about to attack, and counselled flight in alarmed panto-

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mime, but Etapa stood up boldly and addressed the moose.

"I know you, bull moose," he said. "You are a good fighter, but you have no horns and I do not fear you. With my knife, should you attack, I could cut your skin in small pieces. We are not at war at this season, O bull moose! Your flesh is poor and you have no back fat, therefore let us make a peace. I will cut some willow bark and you shall smoke with me."

But the moose did not stay to smoke. He stood throughout the harangue gazing in continued astonishment, then, having concluded that there was nothing to fear or to further interest in these small bipeds, he moved indifferently away.

"Older sister," said Etapa, "we shall not build a fire until after Wi (the sun) is hidden, therefore make yourself to rest. I will make some arrows and kill geese."

So the sister lay at ease upon a luxurious bed of dry grass while the brother cut straight willow rods for his arrows and searched the bed of the brook for fitting stones with which to head them. When he had weapons enough the boy approached the lakeshore, creeping among the shrub and the still standing grass. Some white-faced geese which he had heard continuously flapping their wings and gabbling, were sitting upon the sand or puddling in the shallow water near at hand. Etapa succeeded in stealing

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within a few steps of one of these and buried a jagged shaft in its side. Before the bird could struggle into the water and while a hundred others rose flapping and squalling above his head, the lad pounced upon his game with a little whoop of triumph. It was the first time he had killed magá, the wild goose.

Zintkala also was highly pleased with the young hunter's success. An hour or so later, while they were making savory roasts of their goose meat, their evening was rounded out by another adventure.

While eating and talking in low tones their acute ears caught a light patter of footfalls and, looking about, they saw a shadow figure flit across the fire-lit grass plat. It was sung-manitu, the wolf, and the brother and sister looked at each other inquiringly.

"Why is this one come to us?" they asked each other and neither could give an answer. They were not afraid. The wolf does not attack people at their campfires—never at all unless driven by maddening hunger. Neither, in the Dakota belief, does this animal, which is invested with sacred and supernatural qualities, approach near to human beings except to convey information or warning from the higher powers of intelligence.

Therefore these children ceased eating and sat in hushed expectancy, awaiting the further

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movements of sung-manitu. Every slightest rustle of bush or twig fell upon their ears as the animal moved now here, now there, keeping within the toss of a stone of their campfire. Occasionally the wolf stopped stock still, as if listening intently, and their ears were filled only with the distant spatter and gabble of water-fowl. Then sung-manitu moved again, and they heard nothing else.

Presently the animal came into the open upon the side opposite to where it had just been seen and, sitting upon its haunches, looked intently toward the silent watchers and their fire. Its gray outlines, its lighter-colored forelegs, its pointed nose and ears, and a fire flicker of reflection in its eyes, were plainly visible. Thus it sat, solemn and motionless, seeming to convey to the voyagers some occult message of the wilderness. So they accepted its action, listening and looking with all their souls to interpret the signs.

When the wolf finally trotted into the bushes, going away from the lake, and passed beyond earshot, the brother and sister again looked at each other with deep inquiry. "I think—" said Etapa. "I think—" repeated Zintkala, but neither of them got any further, and they resumed eating in a ruminant mood. They finally rolled themselves in their blankets, saying nothing and much puzzled by the conduct of sung-manitu.

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Their bed was dry marsh grass, their roof a low sky set with stars, and their lullaby the tumultuous murmur of a million water-fowl.

They awoke in the pale twilight of a morning which the pen hesitates to set forth—a spring morning of the north land—a morning with a clear, near sky, a soft, cool air, pine-scented, fresh with the breath of pure waters and beat upon by the wings and cries of a myriad of migrators. The emotions of any creature with five senses are stirred by such a morning. Its air is breathed as a tonic and the pulse is quickened with a desire for exertion.

As by common impulse the Sioux children separated and, each seeking a bath pool, stripped and splashed in the cold water of the brook with an enjoyment whetted by long abstinence from the privilege. When they returned to their camp each was filled with elation and excitement, and they would dearly have liked a noisy race upon the lakeshore, but there was caution to observe and breakfast to obtain; for some sly creature had made away with the remains of their goose during the night.

Upon going to look for game Etapa found the birds all out at sea. But there were many fish running in the brook and, affixing Zintkala's long knife to the end of a pole, the boy quickly killed enough for a breakfast.

During the meal some ducks alighted, squal-

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ling, upon the beach where he had looked for them. As that day's journey must take them into the woods again, where there might be no lakes and streams harboring game, Etapa stole to the waterfront to try for a shot.

His first arrow was effective in knocking over two small ducks, but when he ran to pick them up the lad made a discovery which turned him cold from head to feet. There were fresh moccasin tracks upon the sand of the beach!

Three men had passed that morning, doubtless before himself and Zintkala were awake, certainly before the light had come, else they would have discovered his own tracks where he had chased the goose. When he had recovered from surprise and dismay Etapa stepped quickly back to the cover of overhanging bush.

This boy was possessed of a keen intelligence and the gifts of intuition which the wilderness bestows upon its children. Therefore the situation quickly shaped itself in his mind. From a slight elevation the evening before he had noted that a bog marsh, leading back to a tamarack swamp, extended as far as the eye could reach upon his left. He had perceived that he was making his way along a neck between this swamp and the lake. What if the marsh were merely an arm of the lake crooked back from some point in advance!

His eye scanned the shore-line. Yes, it was

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so—away down the nearly regular inward curve birds were flying to and fro, apparently going in and out of some tall pine woods. Those birds were following an arm of the marsh. How foolish he had been not to think of this before! He had run into a trap. He had been trailed across the burned ground and marked down as hiding somewhere between swamp and lake. At that moment he hazarded no guess in the swift conclusion that he and Zintkala-Zi were hemmed in by Tall Gun's Ojibwa trailers.

CHAPTER VI

AS THE RABBITS HIDE

Even as the boy stood, considering how he might best cover his tracks in the sand, two men appeared, not five bow-shots distant, walking down to the water's edge. Nothing but instant flight and a cunningly blinded trail could save the little voyagers.

Etapá sped back to camp and, as he burst into the opening, Zintkala read the evil tidings in his excitement. She had already buried the embers of a smokeless fire of charred wood, had packed their blankets and other articles in two small, tight rolls, and she looked at her brother with a scared, inquiring face. He put up a warning hand until he had come very near.

"The Raratonwan!" he said. "They are coming—we must go quickly."

As by a lightning stroke the sister's mind reverted to the mysterious visit of the wolf. "Brother!" she said, as Etapá seized his pack, "sung-manitu said thus—go in this direction!"

"It is so," said Etapá, struck by the thought, "we should have gone more quickly." He looked at the ducks in his hand. It would not do to leave so much as a feather upon the trail they must make and he flung his birds into the