CHAPTER IX

THE SPIRIT WOODS

The watcher slept at daylight and when both awoke the sun was shining. They had no meat for breakfast and the birds had not returned since both had flown away together; so they prepared at once to leave the swamp and continue their flight southward.

Yet, while they were tying their blanket rolls, the far-away scream of an eagle was heard, and, feeling sure that the bird was bringing a fish, they sat upon the fallen tree and watched with expectant faces.

It was but a moment when the eagle appeared, again flying heavily and bearing a large fish. It swooped downward and was about to alight upon its nest when up from the center rose a creature with hunched back, hair standing on end, and a snarling miaul of remonstrance.

The startled fisher dropped its prey to the ground and darted upward, wheeling high and screaming angrily at the intruder upon its nest. The bird poised for an instant and then, with whistling wings, swooped down to the attack. The cat bounded upward with a fierce snarl and a wild sweep of its paw. Some feathers were struck from the eagle's breast but the bird

passed on, wheeling upward again, with continued shrill screams.

Suddenly there were two great birds poising above the angry wildcat which held its ground, or rather the nest, with bristling back. The cat was a big gray lynx with pointed ears and a wicked spread of jaws. It had no mind to give up the comfortable perch it had chosen for a sun-warmed nap.

And now the excited little Dakotas watched a combat the like of which it has been given few to see—a strange and thrilling sight, a beautiful game of fence played by accomplished hunters and fighters of the wilderness. The cat upon the nest, each bird in the air, sought by its peculiar tactics to inflict without receiving injury.

One after the other the poised eagles swooped down, seeking to strike the bouncing, spitting lynx. Several times the cat leaped upward, turning cunningly in mid-air and with an upward stroke of one forepaw which, fairly delivered, would have finished the charging bird. And each time the four-foot alighted easily at the point from which it had jumped. But the birds had timed and calculated too many flights from aloft to be caught by such wiles.

Suddenly, as the lynx leaped higher than ever to meet its attack, an eagle flattened its wings, retarding its progress the brief part of a second, then darted on with lightning speed, and struck

its talons into the scalp and ear of the vaulting cat, as the latter spent its stroke.

Like hurled projectiles, lynx and bird were borne over the edge of the nest and shot downward, the cat squalling frightfully, the eagle beating its wings and, for a moment, almost bearing up a creature of several times its weight. Bird and beast had almost struck the ground together when the eagle loosed its hold and again, screaming defiance, soared spirally aloft.

"Ho, igmu hota," (gray cat) "you are a coward!" shouted Etapa, as the lynx leaped away among the dense tamaracks.

"And you, eagles," cried the boy, arising and looking up with great admiration, "you are very brave. I have seen that you fight well. I also consider it a great favor that you have brought another fish."

And forthwith he secured the fish, which was quite large enough to furnish a good breakfast. Very gravely, however, the two considered the wisdom of building a fire now that the sun was shining. It hardly seemed, after canvassing the matter, that the Ojibwas had so long lingered in their vicinity, and there were some dry sticks scattered about which would make a fire with not much smoke.

So, in a little time, they had a breakfast of broiled fish smoking hot and, greatly cheered

by this comforting meal, they took their bundles and again waded into the swamp.

Etapa's keen ears had taken strict account of the howlings of a wolf during the night. Many times he had turned himself facing the sound, listening intently, noting the position of his fire and the mimic tepée as he stood. Where the wolf sat howling was dry ground, open timber, and at no great distance.

The position of the sun appeared a secure guide, for the skeleton tops of the tamaracks were nowhere thick enough to wholly cut off its light. Their progress was slow but certain. Their course, for the most part, led them through a thick growth of young trees where there was much stooping and even crawling over the bogs but fortunately very little water after half an hour or so of advance. By this token they knew that, at last, they were passing out of the dismal swamp which had both terrorized and protected them.

Of a sudden they came out upon dry ground among tamaracks of thinner growth and larger body. Above and in advance of these sturdier trees there loomed the immense tops of sky-scraping evergreens, and in a moment the little voyagers were launched into the marvelous spaces and the stillness of a forest of Norway pines.

The children had neither seen such trees nor

heard of them. They stood with awe and great wonder in their faces and their eyes turned upward, following to dizzy heights the lines of magnificent trunks which towered eighty or a hundred feet before giving off a limb.

The ground upon which these trees stood was quite level in surface with a slight rise away from the swamp. It was covered with a carpet of pine needles and cones and was bare of small growth save here and there, where the midday sun filtered a flickering light, there stood a pencil-like growth of sickly ferns and conifers. The pale yellow-green foliage, the tall wand-like stems of these plants, standing under a faint web of sunlight, frail, spiritual, delicate as the tracery of old lace, gave a fairy-world appearance to the solemn trunk-grown spaces.

To the prairie children this was indeed a wonderland. They trod softly, certain of stepping upon sacred ground. This might even be the abode of the Wakan-Tanka of their mother's people, the Waniyan Tanka of the Oglalas—the Great Spirit of all the world.

They were in doubt as to whether they should go forward boldly. Such conduct might be displeasing to the Maker of these wonderful trees, and this spirit land in no way fitted for their rude presence.

"See, brother, these little ones," breathed Zintkala softly. She stood at a little distance look-

ing upon some frail baby pines and she spoke reverently as one does before the new-born mysteries of life.

"Are they not wonderful?" she asked.

"Indeed, they are truly so," murmured Etapa.

For a time they forgot all else save the mysteries before them, and went forward hesitatingly. Among the vast aisles of tree trunks there was no sign of life, no stir of twig or leaf—there never could be stir of vegetable life while those mighty trees stood—and there was no breeze to rustle the dense foliage of their far-away tops.

Although the children advanced ever so softly they were startled by their own footfalls which crackled upon the forest mast, each little snapping twig and cone sounding its report like the breaking of a fire-fagot. When they stood still their own heart throbs oppressed them, strumming upon their ears as plainly as the beats of a conjurer's drum.

Slowly, seeing nothing to alarm or to stay them in this wonder country, the voyagers gained in confidence. They became accustomed to the marvelous silence, the awe-inspiring shadows, the frail wood-folk, and they went forward more boldly.

But they walked slowly, their eyes often lifted to the vast heights of the tree-tops. Silently they prayed to these trees, which they thought

might reach upward to the abode of Wakinyan, the thunder god.

Occasionally Etapa stopped to exclaim, "Ece tuwe kakéśa!" (Who would believe it!) Then, startled at the explosive sounds of his own voice, the lad would go on marveling. At this use of her mother's favorite expression of wonder or disbelief Zintkala would for the moment forget the presence of the mysterious woods. Quickly in imagination she saw the inside of a large Oglala tepée—a tepée always covered with the best of skins, ornamented with colored figures of beasts and men and of an armored horseman, a war-chief and hunter of his nation—a tepée whose floor was strewn with soft skins and mattings, whose walls were hung with ornamental work, and wherein want and hunger had seldom entered.

In that beautiful retrospect a figure moved, a straight and always neatly dressed woman—a woman with a low, broad forehead, a wealth of black hair and the whitest teeth and kindest smile in all the Oglala towns. Oh, how the little heart longed for that dear Sioux mother!

With her lips Zintkala murmured a prayer to the tall trees. "O trees, O you wonderful ones, help ye these little ones to go safely homeward. You that reach so high, you may talk with Wakinyan, ask the thunder spirits that they shall take us by the hand."

The two had quite forgotten their enemies, the Ojibwas. They seemed, indeed, to have reached a strange country far, far removed from the hated Chippewa village. It is doubtful if they would have been greatly astonished had they suddenly emerged from this mysterious world to find their native sage-bush plains and the tepées of the Dakotas waiting to receive them.

Presently, as they were looking ahead, a whirring brown thing arose from the ground and hurtled like a whizzing missile into the high tree-tops. The thunder of its wings, a hollow droning roar that was re-echoed from all the vast walls of tree trunks, nearly stunned them. The bird was a ruffed grouse, and the first thing of life to startle them among the giant pines. It settled upon a branch but so high above their heads as to seem a mere brown speck upon a field of green.

When their eyes returned to earth Etapa was astonished to see a cock grouse walking in his front but a few steps distant, its ruff and tail spread as it uttered a faint and warning little "kroo—kroo—kroo."

"It is for us," said the boy, and fitting an arrow to his bow he shot the bird. He picked it up in the devout belief that the bird was a gift from a beneficent spirit who ruled in the mysterious woods. "Older sister," he asked, "do you not think that we should smoke to these trees?"

"I think that you should make a smoke and that we should pray to them," replied Zintkala.

Etapa hesitated, seeing no dry wood at hand. He could scrape together fallen twigs, but, though fire is sacred, there was the chance that it might displease Wakinyan to burn wood upon his silent and holy ground. He struggled plainly with this doubt, so that Zintkala read the emotion in his face.

"Let us go farther, younger brother," she counseled. "If there be dry wood it will be for our fire."

When they came at last upon a fallen giant, with broken limbs flung far and wide, they no longer doubted. While Zintkala built a fire and dressed the bird Etapa went somewhat apart and smoked reverently, turning his pipe-stem often to the trees.

Neither of the voyagers gave further thought to the Ojibwa—so far did they seem removed from all things human. They ate their bird gratefully, strong in the sense of protection in this land of spirit trees.

CHAPTER X

ETAPA COUNTS A COUP

For a good part of the day the voyagers walked among the gigantic pines. The sun had passed its zenith when they came suddenly to the edge of the woods and into the open, lighted world.

Again they entered upon a burned-over tract of unseen extent. But this time the young growth stood much higher than a man's head. A tremendous fire had raged some years before, and a rain had fallen before its work had been quite completed. Immense blackened stubs loomed everywhere above the young pines and hard-woods, and the charred and half-burned trunks offered continuous obstruction to the walking. It was an uncanny kind of country where the young took vigorous root upon the ashes and among the half-consumed skeletons of the dead.

The travelers would gladly have avoided crossing this forbidding and difficult piece of bush land, but there was no way around for, on the outskirts, lines of dead tree trunks with only their tops burned off, like an army of cloud-touching flagstaffs, extended as far as the eye could reach.

It was with a sense of loss, almost of desola-

tion, that they passed out of the clear spaces of the great trees, but once within the burnt-wood jungle they gave themselves wholly to the task of making their way across. There were tangled thickets, heaps of charred refuse, briar grown, and there was rough ground, and dark holes tumbled with dead wood and debris, to weary the body and depress the spirits. But the sky was cloudless and the sun their guide and again they heard the aerial cries of migrating geese, swans, brant and cranes. This talk of the upper world served in a degree to balance the dismal features of an irksome travel.

It was near mid-afternoon, and they were slowly working their way for perhaps the hundredth time over a raft of fallen trees, scaling the obstructions as noiselessly as a pair of foxes, when they came upon a huge tree trunk, a fallen giant, scarred with many fireholes, so immense that they paused to gaze at this new wonder.

Etapa was about to speak when they heard a stir among the bushes and upheaved tree-roots upon their right. Some person! An Ojibwa! With fluttering hearts they sank to the ground. But their fears were quickly relieved, in part, for the sounds of claws scratching upon wood admonished them that a large four-foot was close at hand.

And quickly thereafter the big one heaved itself, scrambling heavily, upon the fallen tree

near its roots. Peering fearfully from under bushes, the children saw the shaggy hulk of mato-sapa moving leisurely along the top of the great log. Keeping on he would pass almost within arm's reach and Zintkala stirred as if about to run. She was greatly frightened, but Etapa knew that it was now too late to run and he laid a warning hand upon her shoulder.

The bear advanced, a gaunt, ragged creature, with humped shoulders and swaying head, until its sharp snout and wicked little eyes were brought to bear directly upon the half-hidden bipeds beneath. Doubtless the animal had been disturbed by the slight sounds of their approach and, supposing some small animal had come near its lair, had mounted the log to investigate.

The beast gave a sniff, a little "whoof!" of discovery, and glared down upon the unhappy voyagers apparently minded to pounce upon them in a twinkling.

Then Etapa, who was nearest the bear, believing that his last moment had come, was seized with a fierce thrill of emotion. He leaped to his feet and struck the astonished four-foot a hard rap with his bow.

The result was two sharp surprises. The bear, frightened beyond measure by this strange and unexpected attack, turned a back somersault off the log and lunged away among the bushes, grunting with fear and the pain of a keen stroke

upon its snout. Etapa, unbelieving that he could have won a victory so easily, climbed upon the log to see if truly the bear had run away. When he realized that the animal had wholly fled and would not return to attack, his fortune seemed yet quite too great for belief. He turned slowly to look down at Zintkala.

She was gazing at him wonderingly and with an understanding of his emotion. "Younger brother," she asked gravely, "is it indeed true that you have struck mato-sapa?"

The boy's face flushed. "I did indeed strike him strongly upon the face," he said, his eyes glowing. He leaped to the ground and took the position and posture in which he had delivered the stroke. "I hit mato-sapa thus," he said, striking the log with his bow.

But Zintkala had both seen and heard the blow, and she did not need further proof. "Ho, young warrior, you have counted coup on mato-sapa; henceforth choose ye a name," she said. And it may be safely said that no moment of greater pride or elation was ever reached in the lives of the little voyagers.

From the point of view of the plains Indian, to strike a dead enemy with the coup-stick or a weapon of war was more honorable than to slay him. For, they said, if you are near enough to strike the dead you must have advanced within the enemy's lines or have driven him from his

position. You can shoot and kill your foe from a safe distance or when you are in retreat.

But the highest honor to be attained in a single exploit was to strike a living enemy and to hit a live bear with a weapon in hand was an event to give even a tried warrior a new name.

Etapa was a very human boy of eleven years and, when the full significance of his deed came to him in the grave words of his sister, he gave a whoop—his war-whoop—of elation.

"It is so," he cried; "I have done thus, and when the Oglalas are told of this they shall call me Strikes-the-Bear."

"Waśte, it is a good name," said Zintkala. And, as an hereditary chief, this boy had indeed begun well.

"My father will not now wish to make of me a white man," said Etapa, exultantly. "He will wish me to go against the enemy."

As they plodded on with high hearts over the debris a thirst came to dampen their ardor after a time. They had found no water since coming upon the brush land. They suffered greatly before night came on but, as the sun was about to fall behind the bushes, they came upon a small pond with tracks of deer and moose leading to and from.

As Etapa had killed two grouse and a squirrel, by the way, they had wherewith to serve their hunger. They built a cheerful fire for they no

longer had fear of Tall Gun's trailers. They reasoned that these had never taken up their tracks after losing them upon the stony ground, and how could any one find them in this land of the bush?

To the hoot of the owl, the jarring of the bittern, the chatter and gabble and the far cry of incessant migrators, and the distant mournful cadence of the timber-wolf, they fell asleep each upon a fragrant couch of young pine boughs.

In the night, after their heaped-up fire had smouldered low, a bull moose came to the pond to drink. This ponderous creature stalked silently, considering his bulk, out of the jungle and had reached the water's edge when, probably, the expiring snap of an ember exposed a glow of firelight, and the monster gave a shrill snort of surprise. Instantly two small electrified specters stood upon the sands and the moon looked down upon three startled wild things, all, for the instant, too much scared to take to flight.

To the Sioux children that colossal, shadowy figure, barely outlined against the shadows of the jungle, seemed indeed that of some underwater monster arisen from the lake to devour them. Perhaps it was Unk-té-hï, from whom flight is impossible, or it might be I-ya, the giant whose mouth gapes to swallow all things.

Their awful fears were only relieved by a second snort of the big bull who, having thus

vented his utter amazement, crashed away among the young trees.

Then these children of habitual alarms lay down and fell asleep again. Later they were several times partly aroused by deer which came to drink and, catching sight or scent of the sleepers, whistled their shrill snorts of warning. Just before daylight a herd of tired geese settled upon the pond. The birds talked to each other in undertones for a time, and the voyagers, having been awakened by the beating of their wings, listened contentedly to their low gabble.

When daylight began to appear and he could no longer hear their sleepy voices Etapa cautiously raised his head and took note of the newcomers. There were scores of them sitting upon the sands, with heads under their wings, and a single watcher riding upon the rippling surface of the pond. Silly creatures! How easily the wolf or the fox could pounce upon them from the cover of the bushes! But there is individual safety in numbers and even wary geese, when tired from a long flight, exhibit this universal feeling.

Etapa uttered just the slightest hiss of warning to Zintkala whom he knew by intuition rather than by evidence to be awake and listening. Having thus put her on guard the lad cautiously shed his blanket and, with bow and arrow in hand, flattened himself like a big turtle and

moved with as little noise upon the sands until he had entered the cover of the jungle.

Amid the bushes he trailed with the gliding caution of a cougar until he had approached to within ridiculously short arrow range, when he fitted one of the Cree arrows to his bow and spitted two dozing geese upon a single shaft. The herd rose squalling in late alarm.

When Etapa returned, dragging his heavy game along the sands, Zintkala was putting sticks upon some uncovered embers.

"Nakaeś, younger brother, you that are a hunter, you are very cunning, it seems," said the sister.

Etapa was secretly elated. This older sister was usually a very quiet and dignified little person and, like most Indian maidens, sparing of compliments. Yet twice now she had openly acknowledged his bravery and skill. He felt that she really depended upon his sagacity as a hunter and acknowledged him as leader in meeting the difficulties of their long trail.

When they had first set out Zintkala had spoken of digging edible roots with a long stout knife, and now the brother reminded her—"You do not now speak of digging tinpsela, older sister." Whereupon the sister began with preoccupation to take the skin from a goose.

The roast goose flesh was delicious, and they ate an enormous quantity. Still there was much

remaining and this they half broiled in thin strips and carried with them. They had wholly forgotten their enemies.

Yet, far away, upon the outskirts of the burned tract, a cunning Ojibwa had laboriously climbed a tall pine. At the height of one hundred feet he stood upon a limb, an arm holding to the slender trunk, looking out over a wide belt of brush land. He had taken his position at daylight and some time later his shaded and scanning eyes were rewarded by the sight of a thin and distant smoke wreath floating upon a blue horizon.

He, too, built a fire upon descending, and, from green pine which he piled thick upon his blaze, a black column arose higher than the tree-tops. He smothered this black smoke, fanning it down with his blanket, and three times let it rise in a vertical column, and then he kicked the burning heap apart and scattered its embers far and wide.