

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE COUGAR'S LAIR

It may be that they fled from the camp of Black Otter unwisely. This can not be known, as there was no discovered attempt to follow them. They ran as they had once run before, until their legs refused the office.

After an hour or so of early semi-darkness, Wimima, the full-moon, dropped her brilliant webs and skeins of light into all the trunk-grown spaces. So, where there were not bushes to hinder, the chase away from fear was almost as if they ran in daylight. Much of the way they passed through pine woods. Two or three times an arm of the big rambling lake was thrust across their front, turning them aside at wide angles. Then they slipped into woods beyond its shore lines and came upon a hilly country of small pines with frequent open tracts of burned over lands.

They had become hardier voyagers than those of the tamarack swamp and "spirit woods." The novel fears of the first nights—the first they had ever spent alone—in the forests had been in a measure schooled out of their minds. To the weird night cries, the strange silences, the influ-

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ences of the shadows, they were becoming inured by experience.

Yet startling things befell and frightened them. The ruffed grouse whizzed from its covert and they caught their breath, stunned by the thunder of its wings. A wolf heard the light pit-pat of their footfalls and lay in wait for some easy quarry. Its gruff snarl of surprise and chagrin as it sprang away at the point of contact brought them to stand with prickling skins. The hoarse squawk of a bittern which sprang from the marsh grass at their feet, the hushed swoop of an owl across a moonlit space, the star-fire of a decayed log, the ghostly arms of a dead white birch, the near shrill yapping of a red fox, the lighted flash of a deer's white flag—all these things and many more gave them momentary terrors.

At last, when the moon had outridden its zenith, and their legs were extremely weary, they came upon a prairie with a soft carpet of grass, and a huge elk, with great black clubs of antlers, confronted them, stamping and snorting as if minded to attack. They stood close together, panting and talking in low tones while hehaka threatened. They could not run away; they were too tired. Presently, however, the big bull trotted off, and they walked on. They could no longer run, and it was Zintkala who first spoke of stopping.

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"Younger brother, let us lie down," she pleaded. "I faint from weariness."

"Not so, sister, come ye on to the woods again, lest the enemy shall find us when we are awakened," said the boy, who was again the hardy leader he had been.

Against so sound advice the sister could not protest, and so she plodded on, her little feet dragging and stumbling in the grass, her eyes closing now and then from sheer fatigue. Etapa led the way for some time over a high prairie country, when they came suddenly upon a coulée stream, sunken deep in the bosom of the level lands, gurgling and tumbling through a sharply-cut and wooded ravine.

On the bluff looking down to this shadow gulch they walked for a little way, hesitating to take the plunge into its abyss-like depths. They could not know that they might cross the stream, rumbling among the rocks below. At last, however, they were too weary to longer hesitate, and at the head of a dark, rocky and bush-grown coulée they paused for a moment confusedly.

"Tanké," muttered Etapa, sleepily, "I think we should rest here, where the thick bushes will hide us from the enemy."

"I wish to lie down," murmured Zintkala, staggering as she spoke. So they began to descend the steep, ragged ravine, the sister

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clinging to the brother in order to keep her feet upon the steep scarps of the bluff. From the first descent was arduous. Rough rock ledges, sudden steeps, dense growths of bush, were all hidden from the moon's light by a beetling bluff above.

As they dropped lower into the coulée the blackness became intense. Nothing could be seen below. They would gladly have retraced their steps but for the arduous and well nigh impossible effort of the climb.

Overcome by sleep and fatigue they were thus toilsomely descending when Etapa's feet slipped and he fell. Involuntarily he seized upon Zintkala's skirt, and the two, whirling over and over, dropped to the bottom of an almost perpendicular notch.

"O younger brother," muttered Zintkala, "I fear that we die." Yet the little girl lay upon a bed of leaves and debris and, despite her bruises, turned herself upon her side and almost instantly fell asleep. Etapa sat up for a time trying to collect his battered senses; then he, too, fell back upon the leaves and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

But for the weary stupor which was upon them the two would doubtless have noted a musky and peculiar odor in the dark pocket into which they had fallen. If their ears also had not been deaf to all sounds in the sleep-ridden jar of their fall,

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some faint little hissings, from the darkest corner of the crevasse into which they had fallen, would have driven them speedily to another shelter. As it was they lay unheeding, a blanket roll here and another there, the boy's bow caught upon a bush part way up the steep, his arrows, thrown from their quiver, scattered among the rocks below.

If the moon could have shone at a certain angle into this crevasse, a deep, bush-grown triangular notch in a rock-ledge, its light would have fallen upon two pairs of innocents. One, unconscious of peril, lay as motionless as the cleanly gnawed bones of the dead which were scattered on every hand; the other, with recently opened eyes, cowered within the deepest corner of their lair, amazed and distressed at the ominous and disagreeable odor which filled their sniffing nostrils. These two crawled over each other, hugging an earth bank beneath a shelving rock. They buried their small noses each beneath the other's body or between its own furry paws. Unable to shut off the offensive smell they bared their pin-pointed fangs and hissed and spat in faint sibilant breathings like the warnings of a harmless snake.

In the meantime a cougar dam trotted stealthily among the bush-grown ravines of the coulée. During all the long day she had lain alternating between the luxury of sleep and the pleasure of

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suckling and caressing her babies. She was now very hungry. She had been out since midnight, perhaps, but the moon's light was too brilliant for good hunting. The hare was abroad and alert, sitting nowhere long enough to give scent for the still hunt. The grouse whizzed from cover far beyond reach, as keen of eye as in the daytime; and the wood duck and her young moved calmly out from shore, dipping their bills and nodding wisely. Two or three insignificant and stupid ground birds, snapped from their nests in the upland grass, served only to whet the appetite. So as meat must be had to nourish her young kits, the huntress of the long claw repaired to a deer's runway, to play the waiting game.

Upon the coulée's bluff, at the head of a ravine which was traversed by a narrow and hard-trodden path, she concealed herself among the low bush. She lay at the edge of the prairie where her eye could sweep a wide half circuit of grass land. A number of deer were feeding, scattered here and there, but, though she waited patiently and cunningly after her wisdom, none of the animals came to the creek for water. A heavy dew had fallen, and the succulent, wet young grass offered food and drink in abundance.

Daylight came, the sun arose, and found her lying in wait. Most of the deer moved away

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toward a highland. Only one, a yearling doe, lingered near. This one lay down and chewed the cud. Its back was turned to the cougar, and now the sly one stole forth upon the chance, against long odds, of taking the shy one unawares. Flattened to the semblance of a huge yellow snake, her tail following like a smaller snake, her back barely showing above the short grass, the great cat wormed her way inch by inch toward the ruminant.

Fortune favored her, for the long ears of the young doe were lopping lazily, thus cutting off the line of vision of one eye, which must have noted unusual movements across her shoulder.

Doubtless yet she might have escaped had not her face for one fatal moment been buried under her flank to bite at some offending insect. In that instant the cougar dam gathered all her whipcord muscles into knots and launched herself. Too late the fawn's ears caught the sibilant sounds of that skimming, whizzing rush. She leaped wildly in air, and the cougar struck home her talons deep into flank and shoulder. The animals rolled together like a ragged yellow ball, and the fawn's neck was broken with a snap. After tasting the blood of her quarry the hungry one remembered her kits and hastened back to her lair.

The hot scent of blood in her nostrils and the blind savagery of triumph prevented her dis-

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covery of the voyagers until she had leaped from a rock, half tumbled and half dragged her prey into the mouth of the notch.

Then her threats, suddenly launched, would have electrified any but the dead. At the first rattling vibration of snarls the little Sioux leaped to their feet with nerves strung for flight. But there was no line of flight open. The cougar dam had flattened herself as if for a leap, with bared fangs and claws tearing at the soil, within the one narrow pass from her lair.

Zintkala sprang to an opposite rim of rock and cowered, her hands shielding her face. "Oh, brother, we die," she wailed.

Eta was scared. His knees shook and his teeth chattered with fear. Yet the boy, seeing no chance of escape, looked instinctively for his weapons. Only his tomahawk was within reach, and this lay half-way between himself and the cougar. As he dared not take a step toward the threatening creature he backed away to where Zintkala cowered and drew her long knife from its sheath.

The spirit within him was braver than the flesh, for his hand shook as he raised the weapon and his voice was thin and quavering as he cried, after the manner of his kind, to the snarling beast, "If you come to fight I will cut your skin, igmu-hanska! I will make holes in your flesh!"

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As the boy had receded the cougar dam advanced, now standing upright, with distended jaws and deep chest roarings, whipping her tail to and fro, the incarnation of savage ferocity.

She halted midway in her lair, and the notch rang with her threats. Yet, though her muscles were knotted in a half-crouch, her yellow-green eyes ablaze and all her fangs bared, she hesitated to attack.

The boy saw this hesitation, and his nerve came back in a reactive shock. Again, as when the bear had threatened, he flared into savagery. He shouted an Oglala war-whoop. "Hi-yi-yih! yi-hi! Come on, igmu-hanska! I will cut your skin. Yih-hi! It is even so. I will do it." He made his knife blade whirl before him, and the rocks re-echoed his fierce shouts.

Suddenly, as he whooped at her, the beast before him ceased her threats. The hair fell upon her skin, the tail ceased to snap, and she craned her neck with a hoarse whine of anxiety. She seemed to be calling, and the mother solicitude was written so plainly in her intent gaze, her eager, anxious face and piteous whine, that a child could not have mistaken.

The boy unconsciously followed the line of her gaze, directed to a point under the rock rim against which he had planted his back. He stooped and looked obliquely into a pocket within a step or two of his feet. He saw the

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reason for the "long-cat's" threats, the object of her yearning anxiety.

"Ho, igmu-hanska!" cried the boy, "you desire your children's safety. I will not hurt them. See, I will give them to you." And without an instant's hesitation he thrust his foot into their nest and poked her hissing, spitting kits out into the open. Then he seized and tossed them one after the other quite over the old dam's head and into the mouth of the notch.

The cougar's eyes followed her kits, and she eagerly sprang after them, stooping over them with strange inquiring cries. Then she gathered both tiny creatures in her mouth and slipped into the depths of the coulée.