CHAPTER XVII

THE CANOE OF THE WAŚÉCUN

"Wan ho, Tanké, see what igmu-hanska has left for us!" cried Etapa. His fear had vanished, and he pounced joyously upon the carcass of the young deer. His hunger was now keen and here was fresh meat in abundance.

"Inama! It is wonderful!" said the girl. Her face had not regained its color, and her legs yet felt shaky, but she was very glad of this good meat.

"I am very thirsty, but I can not yet go down to the water;" she said, "and I am also afraid to stay," she added.

"The long-cat will not come back," Etapa assured her. "Look for the Cree arrows, sister," and he took her basin and descended to the stream. He returned in two or three minutes, and then, while he took the skin of the fawn, Zintkala gathered some dry, tender fagots and lighted a little blaze which gave off but a tiny wreath of smoke. Thin strips of venison, scorched over this flicker of flame, tasted wonderfully good and they ate until their girths had visibly increased. They then gathered their few effects and, carrying the "saddles" of the fawn, toiled out of the coulée. At the edge of the

prairie, where the grass was still wet with dew, they came upon the cougar's trail where she had dragged the young doe. In the direction they wished to go they followed this plain trace, and at the point of attack Etapa examined the ground with a young hunter's intense interest. There he read the story of her lying in wait and of her successful still hunt.

They had now set their faces westward, and they walked upon the prairie, scanning frequently the north horizon, ready to plunge into the coulée at sight of any suspicious figure in the distance. For a little way the course of the stream was eastward through prairie and woodlands. Then, until noon, they plodded through a belt of pine country and again came upon the open prairie to a region of beautiful wooded lakes, a land of rich grasses, abloom with a great variety of prairie and wood flowers, and a hunter's paradise.

It was the country their ancestors had fought over for more than two centuries, perhaps for ten of them. This land they had held for at least a century against the combined efforts of Ojibwa, Crees, Assiniboins, fur traders and white adventurers, and with chiefly the bow and arrow to oppose to flintlock guns!

A little after noon the voyagers passed into a great hardwood forest, and in the depths of the woods built a fire and cooked all their meat so as

to preserve what they could not eat. After they had eaten they were attacked with sleep and fell upon their blankets.

They were awakened some hours later by volleys of thunder, and arose to find the sky darkened and to hear a great roar of coming wind and rain. Few are the Indians who do not feel fear in a thunder-storm. In their native state they begin to pray fervently at the first mutterings of the thunder god or thunder bird as the belief may run.

Zintkala and Etapa had been taught a prayer which Dakota children should offer to Wakinyan when lost in a storm. With scared faces they looked at the blackened spaces of western sky and saw clouds and tree tops transfixed by jagged red bolts, and they stepped a little apart and, with faces turned skyward, prayed piteously.

And these are the words they used and the interpretation thereof:

Wakinyan, mi me meya ukiya lo! Wakinyan, mi me meya ukiye lo! Wanyanka yo! ni wakpahte cin tokel yacin ecamon kta. Heon, ni meyaye ni to waśake-tanka kin on napatayuś amayaye, hecel waki-hunni kta.

"Thunder Spirits! Whirlwinds! Ye are coming. See me, pity me! You have great powers. Therefore take me by the hand and lead me homeward. Thereafter I shall do your will."

Thunder, wind and rain, however, were deaf to this appeal for pity. A terrific storm fell upon the woods. Overhead was a swaying, mighty uproar. The tree tops were lashed together as grass blades. Big oaks were snapped off as though stricken by cannon balls. The crash of these, the incessant rattling volleys of thunder, the awful roar of wind mingled with the deafening beat of rain, might well have appalled the coolest brain or the stoutest heart.

The Sioux children flung themselves face downward upon the ground and suffered the terrors of those who expect a violent death. The rain fell as in a cloud-burst until every gully and runlet gurgled or rumbled with its flood. Inches of water fell and the storm passed as quickly as it had come. The little voyagers could hardly believe themselves alive when they faced each other, with sunlight filtering through the torn branches, upon the drenched and leaf-strewn earth.

The life came back into their faces and they laughed joyously. "Inama!" exclaimed Zintkala. "Wonderful! It appears that Wakinyan has spared our lives."

Laughing happily, they squeezed the water out of their soaked clothing and dripping braids. With the best wringing they could give them, their blankets were very heavy. They wished to dry their clothing and so packed their bundles

and trudged on to find an opening where sun and wind could do the work most quickly.

There were fallen timbers and swollen brooks to stay their progress. Several times they were compelled to go up or down a torrent-filled ravine to find crossing on the inevitable fallen tree. But fortune favored them. While the sun was still shining hotly they came out upon an open prairie and, at the edge of a hazel thicket, where they could spread their blankets to catch both wind and sun's rays, they made camp for the night. As they had an abundance of meat they had only to lie at ease drying their clothes.

Yet Zintkala, with a keen scent for wild fruit, soon discovered a patch of strawberries, and the two feasted, eating of the delicious fruit until their hands and faces were stained a vivid red and their stomachs could hold no more. Upon the warm, damp grass they slept until morning. They breakfasted as they had taken supper in the berry patch. They were loath to leave the abundance of strawberries but finally tore themselves away upon the chance of finding more en-route.

They now crossed a prairie and traversed the walled sand beaches of several beautiful lakes. Among these sands they found, upon a number of stretches, the new-laid eggs of some long-legged birds which ran before them, ducking their heads and incessantly piping a single

querulous note. The eggs were very good, and they dined heartily off them. Also, toward night, in one of the lake outlets, they came upon a run of the big buffalo fish—a large variety of suckers—and in the shallow water where the fish's backfin cut the surface they captured a scaly monster about as large as either of themselves.

Upon this big fish they feasted that night and the following morning, and they further cooked and cured their supply of venison, knowing it must be heated often or become sour and stale and, as they wished to travel fast, they could not guess how soon they might need this supply.

Their forethought was justified. The sun had just begun slanting toward the west when they came upon a wooded stream with a deep, rapid current which ran to the southwest. They were trudging along the bank of this river when they stepped from thick brush into an opening and without warning came plump upon a log cabin with a dirt roof, standing by an oak tree newly riven and splintered by wind or lightning. The voyagers were not greatly alarmed. They knew this familiar half-roofed hut for the tepée of a French fur hunter, a domicile seen at all the trading posts and at many Indian villages.

As they stood, undecided whether to go forward or retreat, their eyes fell upon the figure of a man's arm stretched out upon the bare ground

and reaching half its length beyond the corner of the cabin. Was the man sleeping? Softly Etapa stepped forward at an angle which would give him a front view of the hut, and slowly the full figure of a man came into view. The boy did not need to look closely at the swollen upturned face to know that the man was dead. He had been stricken by lightning, or a fallen limb, directly in front of his door. Etapa knew that there could have been no other persons at hand or the dead one would have been buried.

"This waśécun" (white man) "is dead. I think Wakinyan has slain him," he said, in a tone hushed with awe. Zintkala came forward on tiptoe and looked.

"Nakaeś, younger brother, it is so," she said, and then turned her eyes to the river bank. "There is the canoe of this dead one. I think we should take it."

The prow of a birch-bark vessel showed plainly against some bushes and hastening to it they found the canoe moored, with paddle inside, in a sort of bayou notch. The voyagers were glad to be speedily whirled out of sight of that still figure before the hut. The man would not need his canoe further, and they were glad of its aid for what distance the river might run to westward.

The current of the stream was deep and strong, and the paddle was only needed for

steering. When they had flung off the gruesome feeling which a view of the dead man's distorted face had excited they were happy to be borne swiftly past woods and prairie.

Often both prairie banks were massed in wild roses, and as the children descended between the hedges of color they forgot caution and shouted at each other, each as if the other had no eyes, "See, see!" "Oh, do look!" "Nina waśte!"

Now and then they shot rapids that would have wrecked their slight craft at another season. But the water was very high from recent heavy rains and, though the current bore them at a dizzy speed, its center was usually as smooth as glass. At one narrow pass, however, where there was a sharp bend, the waters were rolled together as a scroll. They saw the danger too late to avoid it, and with breathless speed their light craft whizzed through the foaming tumble of waters. The canoe was half filled and the voyagers were drenched to their skins but they suffered no other hurt than a momentary fright.

They brought the craft to land, turned the water out, and again wrung their blankets and clothing with laughter at the mishap. Thereafter they approached sharp curves more cautiously.

When night came they had probably voyaged fifty miles or more to westward, and they

ascended a low bluff to find themselves upon a prairie where no timber could be seen save the narrow fringe which skirted their waterway.

They were overjoyed. This was indeed their own country. They knew the prairie literally "as seamen know the sea." Here were the teepsinna and other roots which Zintkala loved to dig. And here were the whistling antelope which stood at gaze stamping their feet saucily, but safely beyond arrow range. And, yes, almost at their feet there lay the horned skull and bleaching bones of tatanka, the buffalo bull.

For a time these wild children ran about, carefree upon the prairie, reveling in its tonic, untainted breeze, pouncing with joyous exclamations upon familiar flowers and plants. They gathered handfuls of red lilies and yellow moccasin-flowers, and they ate wild turnips and potatoes until they could hold no more.

They would gladly have camped upon the high prairie, where they felt so much at home, but caution forbade and at night they returned to the river's bank. Lighting their fire was now a more serious matter than it had been. Zintkala had hoarded her little store of matches, and the remainder, rolled tightly in buckskins, had even come dry through the rain. But the afternoon's canoe drenching had soaked her tiny bunch and spoiled them. As they had neglected

in daylight to search the river woods for dry and powdery punk, and all the old fog of grass was wet with dew, they were fireless until morning; though they would gladly have made a little blaze for the cheer of it.