

# **When the Snows Drift**

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ALL through the "month of the bellowing of the bulls" the war with the Sioux had raged; all through the dry hot "month of the sunflowers" the sound of the hurrying battle had swept the broad brown plains like the angry voice of a prairie fire, when the Southwest booms. But now the fight was ended: the beaten Sioux had carried their wrath and defeat with them into the North; and the Pawnees, allies of the Omahas, had taken their way into the South, to build their village in the wooded bottoms of the broad and shallow stream.

On the banks of a creek the Omahas had built their winter village. The tepees were constructed by driving trimmed willow boughs into the ground in the shape of a cone, about which buffalo hides and bark were securely fastened, leaving an opening at the top, through which the smoke of the winter fire might pass.

In accordance with an ancient custom, the village was built in a great circle with an opening to the east. One standing in this opening and facing the west would divide the tribe with his line of vision into two bands, the one to his right would be the Hunga Band, the duty of which is to defend the holy relics. The one to his left would be the Ishta Sunda band, or the "thunder men." To the right, within the circle and near the opening, would stand the lodge of the council, consisting of seven chiefs, and the great tepee where the totem pole and the holy relics are kept. This has ever been the village of the Omaha.

The tribe was happy, for its inveterate enemy, the Sioux, had been driven with broken bows against the blowing of the north wind.

The tribe was glad: but none so glad as Mun-chpe (Cloud.) As he sat in his tepee with the thunder men, he was thinking of how proudly he would ride his pony before the old chiefs, when the pow-wow was held over the recent victory. Yes, he would ride swiftly past the smoking council, and they would call him to them and place the eagle feather in his hair, for had he not touched and slain a big Sioux chief, fighting so closely that he breathed the breath of his foe? "Hi-Hi!" his heart cried within him as he thought. Would not the whole tribe shout? Would not the old men say "Mun-chpe is a brave youth?" Perhaps the big medicine man, Wa-zhing-a Sa-ba (Blackbird) himself, would praise him, as he dashed around the circle on his fleet pony, with the shout on his lips and the eagle feather in his hair! Yes, and she would see him: Wa-te-na would see him, and then she would be proud to be his squaw. "Hi hi!" he shouted with his great gladness; for he was a young man and the world was very beautiful and glorious.

Then he arose and went to where the seven big chiefs sat before their tepees, smoking their long red pipes in profound silence; for they were men who saw far. Then he raised his voice and spoke to the chiefs.

"Fathers, give Mun-chpe the eagle feather to wear; for has he not touched and slain a big chief, fighting so closely that he breathed the breath of his enemy?"

A swift light passed into the stolid faces of the council, then died out, and stern justice made their faces cold. Again the youth spoke.

"Fathers, give Mun-chpe the eagle feather that men may know him as a brave man."

Then the big medicine man, Wa-zhing-a Sa-ba himself, laid down his pipe and spoke.

"Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga says he killed the big chief; many times he has seen the Hunga Mubli, when the snows drift against the Hungas; he is an old man; Mun-chpe is a young man."

With a grunt of suspicion he ceased speaking. Then Mun-chpe spoke, impetuously, after the manner of youth.

"Fathers, may the thunder strike Mun-chpe; may the buffalo bulls horn him in the hunt; may the wolves devour his bones if he lies! Mun-chpe killed the big chief; give him the eagle feather that men may know he is brave!"

Then Wa-zhing-a Sa-ba spoke: "Wakunda is a wise god; Wakunda will help the truthful. Bring the otter skin, and summon Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga that we may know who lies."

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The otter skin was brought. It was a hide, down the back of which a piece of grooved wood was fastened. This was considered a holy relic and was used in deciding the truthfulness of disputants. Each of the disputants was to hold an arrow above his head at arm's length, dropping it at the groove. If Wakunda caused the arrow to fall in the groove, then he who dropped it was truthful.

Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga and Mun-chpe took places before the holy relic, and the second, raising the arrow high over his head, prayed aloud: "Wakunda pity Mun-chpe. Wakunda, help Mun-chpe!" Then he dropped the arrow. With a cry, he fled from the sight. The arrow had fallen away from the groove. Rushing into his tepee he buried his face in a buffalo robe and wept, moaning "Wakunda lies; who will tell the truth?" The thought drove him mad. What! Wakunda who moulded the glorious brown prairies! Wakunda who made the great bright sun! Wakunda who put the song in the bird's throat! Wakunda lie! The thought was terrible, for Mun-chpe was a young man.

Now, Wa-te-na would not be his squaw! Maybe she would go to the lodge of Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga! The thought hit him like a poisoned arrow shot by a strong man.

All night he wept in his lodge, moaning, "Wah-hoo-ha-a, Wah-hoo-ha-a, the exclamation of sorrow. And the thunder men, awakened from their sleep by the moaning of Mun-chpe, trembled as they crept closer under their blankets, saying, "Wakunda is punishing Mun-chpe; it is a bad thing to lie." Then they shut out the sound with their blankets, and slept again.

But Mun-chpe did not sleep. No! He would not sleep until he had seen the blood of Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga's breast. Until then he would not sleep. And till the dawn crept in through the chinks in his tepee he moaned and cried for revenge.

Some hours later he was roused from his brooding by shouting and the gallop of ponies. Creeping to the door of his lodge he pushed back the flap and looked out. There was a long line of braves, decked in their brightest colors, with eagle feathers in their hair, urging their ponies about the circle of the village, shouting their war cries.

A tall cottonwood pole had been placed erect in front of the lodge of the council, where the seven chiefs sat glorying in the prowess of the young men. As the braves rode at full gallop past the pole, they discharged their arrows and spears at a dead eagle which was fastened to the top. In all possible manners they rode, hanging by their bare legs to the pony and shooting under his belly and beneath his neck, combining feats of marksmanship with feats of riding. Mun-chpe noted the applause of the old men when an arrow quivered in the breast of the eagle; and oh, how he longed to try his skill!

But, ah! There rode Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga, mounted upon a fleeter pony than the rest, dashing at a full run! As he drew near to the pole he stood up on the back of his plunging steed and hurled three arrows in swift succession into the breast of the eagle. The beholders went mad with delight, but Mun-chpe crept back into his tepee, for his heart was fierce within him; he had seen his eagle feather on the head of Wa-sa-ba Tun-ga!

The day passed; but Mun-chpe did not appear. As the evening came on, the southeast grew black with storm clouds, and with the fall of the night the wind and rain burst howling upon the village. The thunder shouted and the lightning glared like the eyes of an angry man, but it was sweet to the heart of Mun-chpe, for it seemed that the elements were angry with him. He laughed when the fierce light leaped into the lodge; and he was glad to hear the groaning of the poles; it was like the voice of a brother!

When the night was late he took his knife and went out into the storm. He knew where Wa-sa-ba slept among the Hungas; and thither he ran. Raising the flap of his enemy's tepee, he saw, by the glare of the lightning, Wa-sa-ba sleeping. With the step of a mountain lion he crept to the side of his foe. He knew where to strike. Wa-sa-ba would not cry out. Carefully he pulled the robe from the bare breast, and waited for the lightning. The knife found his enemy's heart. The dying man groaned.

"Hi hi," Mun-chpe cried to himself. "Wa-sa-ba will not need the eagle feather now. Mun-chpe will wear his eagle feather now!"

He snatched the coveted trophy from the dead man's head, and rushed out into the storm, shouting "Hia, hia!" back at the thunder. Then he went into his tepee, and wrapping himself in his blankets, slept. It was so sweet to kill!

But at that time of the morning when scarcely the flight of an arrow could be discerned, a spirit came into Mun-chpe's dream. Its eyes were like two cold flames that dance in a swamp; but its face was Wa-sa-ba Tung-a's, drawn with the last pang of death! Dolefully the spirit moaned, putting its clammy face against the face of Mun-chpe — its blue lips against the lips of Mun-chpe! It seemed to be drinking his breath. And oh, the eyes!

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Gasping, the dreamer shrieked and leaped to his feet; and there, outside his lodge, in the glad light of the morning, he beheld the seven stern chiefs of the council, peering in at him.

He knew what they had come to say, for it was forbidden to a murderer that he remain within the circle of the village. Proudly he threw back his head and folded his arms.

"Fathers, Mun-chpe is ready," he said, and he followed them to the council lodge.

When the dusk of the evening came, the village was out to witness the ejection of the murderer. Wrapped in a buffalo robe, so that his face alone was visible, Mun-chpe was driven with the lash about the circle of his people for the last time. But suddenly his eyes lit up with a wild glory, as he saw, standing with her father and mother before their lodge, Wa-te-na!

As he passed her he cried softly, "Wa-te-na, Wa-te-na," and as he was driven on by his guards, he heard a low plaintive sob, and his heart grew lighter within him.

Mun-chpe was driven out of the opening to the east, and there the jeering crowd stopped; but he could not stop; he must go out into the night — out on the desolate prairie alone!

The shouting of the crowd died out, and the night was very dark and lonely. When the night was old he grew weary, and climbing to the top of a hill, he lifted his voice and cried, "O Wakunda, pity Mun-chpe!" He listened as though expecting to hear an answer. He could hear a far-away pack of coyotes yelp among the hills, ending in a long, dirge-like howl. The sound terrified him, for it seemed the dying groan of Wa-sa-ba Tung-a! Mad with fright he looked behind him into the darkness. There were the two flaming eyes and the drawn, set face of the dead man, with parted lips that jeered at him while they moaned! Wildly shrieking, he turned and dashed down the hill, running, running, running from that hateful face behind him. He ran, until with exhaustion he fell; and there in his delirious dream he could hear the moan and see the terrible glowing eyes, until the big fair dawn leaped above the hills and wakened him. Then he arose and wandered on toward the sunrise.

A sense of terrible loneliness seized him. The limitless prairies were desolate and brown, for it was near on to the time when "the elk break their antlers" (October), and he shivered as he thought of the nearness of "Hunga Mubli," (December), the time when the snows drift from the north. As the day passed he grew very hungry, and he looked lovingly at his bow, the one thing dear left him in his loneliness.

The night came down, and the wolves yelped and howled in the darkness. But Mun-chpe was hungry, and hunger is fearless. He stealthily hurried toward the sound of the wolves; and creeping on hands and knees down a ravine skirted with plum thickets he could see their glaring eyes and hear the gnashing of their teeth. Fitting an arrow to his bow, he aimed it between the lurid eyes of a beast as it sat upon its haunches, howling. The bow string twanged; the arrow shrieked like the voice of a dying squaw. The wolf, with a mournful howl, leaped in the air and fell back moaning; and as Mun-chpe looked and listened, the moan was the dying moan of Wa-sa-ba Tung-a, and there arose from the quivering carcass that terrible pair of eyes — that drawn, set face with its frozen leer!

Mun-chpe fell on his face in terror. When he looked again, the vision was gone, and he ran to the dead animal, hurriedly tearing away the skin and devouring the meat ravenously. Then he lay down and slept a heavy sleep. In his dream Wa-te-na came to him with out-stretched arms, weeping, "Come back, Mun-chpe, come back to Wa-te-na," she moaned. He awoke, and the pale dawn was on the hills.

Many suns passed and Mun-chpe wandered alone on the prairies, longing for his home and Wa-te-na, and he said to himself, "I will go closer to the village, that I may hear the braves sing, as they dance about the fires!"

But the north wind awoke, and the snow scurried through the short buffalo grass, and Mun-chpe was weak from hunger. The sharp gusts crept under his buffalo robe and stung his bare legs. When he came in sight of the village it was evening. He waited for the night, and then crept close to the tepees and heard the old men talk. Oh, if he could sit with them by the crackling logs and hear their stories. Never, never, could he do this again. He was as the coyote that howls for loneliness among the frozen hills and dies of hunger.

With a sigh he turned away from the sight and set his face against the storm, for he wished to die.

"Wa-hoo-ha-a, wa-hoo-ha-a," he cried.

The old men heard the cry blown upon the storm, and they told weird tales that made the staring youths shudder.

That night Wa-te-na, sleeping in the lodge of her father, had a dream. It seemed to her that Mun-chpe came to her and his body was gaunt and weak, and his eyes were wild and fierce like a hungry wolf's. "Wa-te-na," she

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heard him say, imploringly, "Wa-te-na." She awoke, and wrapping her blankets about her went out into the storm.

She could hear the faint cry of anguish in the distance, and she hurried toward the cry.

"Wah-hoo-ha-a-a, wah-hoo-ha-a-a," tremulously came the wail through the storm, and soon Wa-te-na stumbled upon the form of Mun-chpe.

She rubbed his face and hands, striving to warm them; but the body grew colder. Then she covered him with her blanket and pressed her body close to his, her lips close to the frozen lips.

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Some time afterward, a party searching for the lost Wa-te-na, found her frozen body outstretched upon the cold form of Mun-chpe. And to this day the old women tell their daughters of the devotion of Wa-te-na. But the name of Mun-chpe is not spoken.