

Luther Standing Bear

THE STORY OF MY INDIAN BOYHOOD



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CHAPTER I THE SIOUX

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My parents belonged to that great plains tribe which is now called the Sioux. But before the white man came, we called ourselves the Lakotas. The first white men to come to this country thought they had discovered India, a land they had been searching for, so they named the people they found here Indians. Through the mistake of these first white settlers, we have been called Indians ever since.

Now the big Missouri River runs through the country that my people inhabited. The part of the tribe that lived on the east side of the river called themselves Dakotas, and those who lived on the west side of this stream called themselves Lakotas. And I was born a Lakota.

Later, when many white people arrived in this country, they saw that my tribe was a very powerful and independent one. We kept our land to ourselves by making all other tribes stay away from us. Our warriors were brave and noted for their skill in fighting. Therefore, they were feared by all other tribes. The white people, seeing that we were feared by the tribes that surrounded us, began to fear us too, so they called us Sioux. The word 'Sioux' is a French word and means 'cutthroat.' So that is how we became known as the Sioux. Some writers have called us the 'Fighting Sioux'; others have called us the 'Mighty Sioux.' Our people were full of pride, but our women were quiet and gentle and our men were brave and dignified. We earned our right to pride, for it was a cardinal principle for the Sioux to be brave, and to be a coward was unforgivable.

Some of the great Sioux were Two Strikes, Swift Bear, Quick Bear, Good Boys, Black Crow, and Iron Shell. All of these men were brave and had qualities that made them admired. They have now passed on, for they were men of my boyhood. Iron Shell was the father of my brother-in-law, Hollow Horn Bear, who was also noted for his bravery. Hollow Horn Bear dared to talk when others thought it best or more comfortable to remain quiet. Then there was Little Wound, who was a great brave, and One Horse, who was a great chief and my grandfather. Both of these men were respected for their kindness and wisdom in dealing with the tribe. Standing Bear the First, my father, was known as being extremely just. In his decisions he used good judgment and never wronged any one. His whole thought was to do the best for his tribe, and no sacrifice was too great for him to make. He would give to the needy until he was almost in need himself. He will always be a great man among the Sioux.

Perhaps the man who stands the highest of all in the tribe as a great and fearless warrior was Crazy Horse. The faith of Crazy Horse in the power of the Great Mystery to guide and protect him was a marvel to all the people of the tribe, given to faith as they were. He seemed to lead a charmed life in battle. He exposed himself openly to both Indian foes and to the troops of the white man, yet he was never even wounded.

My father, I claim, was the greatest chief who ever lived the lives of both the Indian and the white man. For in his later years he lived according to Christian principles and tried to be a good citizen of this country. He encouraged me to go to school and to learn as much as I could of the life that was so different from the one we had known. My father was truly a man of great vision. He foresaw the great

change that the Indian had to make, and it must have hurt him to see me plunged into a life that was just the opposite to what had been planned for me and that was foreign to all our traditions. But he sacrificed his feelings for the good of the tribe. Father was the first man to see the need of day schools on the reservations. Then he made it more convenient for the Indians to get their rations. For a time it was necessary for the Sioux to travel fifty and sixty miles to get their rations, but my father succeeded in getting the stations placed closer together. A personal habit that I always admired in him was neatness and cleanliness.

Now, in the naming of these great men you will notice that I have not mentioned the names you usually see mentioned in books written by white men. The white men who have written histories of the Indian could not, of course, know of inner tribal matters nor of the attitudes of the people in general.

The home of my tribe, the Western Sioux, was all that territory which is now called North and South Dakota, and all this land once belonged to my people. It was a beautiful country. In the springtime and early summer the plains, as far as the eye could see, were covered with velvety green grass. Even the rolling hills were green, and here and there was a pretty stream. Over the hills roamed the buffalo and in the woods that bordered the streams were luscious fruits that were ours for the picking. In the winter everything was covered with snow, but we always had plenty of food to last through the winter until spring came again. Life was full of happiness and contentment for my people. The Sioux have lived a long time in this region. No one knows how long. But there are many legends about my tribe and also about the Bad Lands and the Black Hills, showing that we have lived

there many, many years. These legends are historical and interesting and will be told in another book.

A tipi was my first home. In it I was born, and my earliest recollection is playing around the fire and being watched over by my Indian mother. As a baby I swung in an Indian cradle from poles in the tipi. I was the first son of a chief and I was expected to grow up brave and fearless like my father. I was named Plenty Kill. My parents called me Ota K'te, for that was the way to say 'Plenty Kill' in Sioux.

As I grew up, my father began to teach me all the things that a little Indian boy should know. When I was old enough to be put on a pony, he taught me to ride. He tied my pony to his with a rope and I rode this way until I had learned to handle the pony myself. When I had learned to ride, I went on short hunts with him and he taught me how to butcher small game. Finally, the eventful day came when I went on a buffalo hunt. That was an important day in my life when I went home to the tipi and told my mother I had killed a buffalo. She was proud of me and that made me happy.

I learned about the habits of wild animals and how to trap them. I learned to shoot birds with a bow and arrow and to roast them on the fire. I soon came to know much about the weather and how to prepare for the coming of winter by tanning skins for warm clothing. By knowing all these things, we had no fear of Nature, but on the contrary loved Nature. She seemed bountiful to us with all the things she had provided for our comfort.

At this time we lived close to Nature and knew nothing but Nature. We observed everything of the outdoors, and in this way learned many things that were good and helpful for us to know. The Indian knows that Nature is wise, and that by keeping our eyes open, we learn her wise ways.

For instance, we were taught to go to bed when the rest of the world went to rest. When darkness came and all the birds and animals went to sleep, we were sleeping too. That helped us to become strong and healthy, so that we grew up to be strong, stout-hearted men.

We were taught to rise early in the morning before sunrise. Our parents knew it was good for us to rise early, so they began to train us when we were quite young. You see, animals are all awake and stirring about before sunrise, so you can understand that it would be a poor hunter who would start for a hunt after the game was gone. Then in early days, when our tribe had enemies, it was necessary for us to rise early if we were to go on a war party and not let the enemy get the advantage of us. The white people have a saying, 'The early bird catches the worm,' which means much the same that I am telling you. Of course, we tried to obey our parents when they called to us in the morning and we were supposed to get up at the first call. Not all Sioux boys, however, were obedient. Some were lazy and would not heed their father's or mother's voice. When it became necessary for a parent to punish a disobedient child, it was not done in a harsh manner. The worst thing a Sioux parent did was to pour cold water on a child's face.

This would awaken sleepy boys and girls, and they would be ashamed of themselves. We were never whipped nor severely punished, for Sioux parents did not believe in whipping and beating children.

Through this method of upbringing, a bond or a tie was formed between Sioux parents and children, so that as we grew in years our respect for our parents grew also. Finally, as we grew to manhood, we looked forward to the day when we should repay our kind parents by taking care of them in

their old age. We looked upon this as a pleasure and not a duty.

Now, what did we do after we were up in the morning and our day had begun? In those days we did not have nice bathtubs and bathrooms nor even a washbasin. But our tipis were always close to a pure running stream, so the first thing we did was to run to the stream, take a mouthful of water, rinse our mouths well, wash our faces, then take a big drink. This last we did, for we knew it was good for our health, and is something every one should do on getting up in the morning. The use of pure running water and never breathing anything but pure air kept us strong and clean in body. It is a well-known fact that the Sioux people were a healthy people and were seldom sick. Most of us died from old age or from wounds received in battle. Sometimes, too, a man was injured during a hunt. When we were through at the brook and with our bathing, we felt fine and had a good appetite for breakfast. Once in a while one of the boys would jump into the stream and enjoy a bath. Then more than likely the rest of us would follow, and we would all have a fine bath before going back to the tipi to begin the day by eating breakfast. This morning meal, as did all other meals, consisted of meat cooked in one of the various ways in which Indian women prepared meat for food. We did not drink strong coffee, and would not have cared for it, anyway. Neither did we have bread in those days. Sometimes our meat was boiled, and if so we had soup which we enjoyed. Then sometimes our meat was roasted over the open fire. This means of cooking gave our meat a very fine flavor, and if a few ashes got on the meat, we did not mind, but rather liked it, for the Indian knows that a little ash eaten with his meat is a good tonic for the stomach. It acts as a cleanser and helps the digestion. Though we did not have bread in

those days, we did not miss it, for we had other things to take its place. There were many plants that were good served with our meat either raw or cooked. These plants and herbs, aside from being good for food, were good to use as medicine in case of sickness and then again in the treatment of wounds. About these I will tell you later. When summertime came, we boys had the fun of gathering and eating the wild fruits. There were blackberries which we liked very much and the red currants which were so pretty when ripe; the wild plum which had such a fine flavor and the cherry black and luscious when ripe. Then from the wild-rose bush we gathered a fruit of which we were very fond. In the autumn, after the petals of the rose had blown away, there formed, just where the bloom had been, a little fruit that looked something like a tiny crabapple. They were a pretty red, sometimes streaked with yellow, and we thought they were delicious. Our mothers sometimes gathered these and pounded them and made them into balls, as popcorn balls are now made. Oh, what fun to gather and eat these delicious fruits! What fun to play along the bank of the stream and look for currants and blackberries! There were no signs here and there, 'Keep out!' or, 'Boys stay out!' All was free to us and all we had to do was to 'go get it.' I also remember a small fruit or berry which grew in sandy soil on low bushes. When ripe, they were black like cherries, so the white people called them 'sand cherries.' Our name for them was *e-un-ye-ya-pi*. There is something peculiar about these cherries. When we gathered them, we always stood against the wind and never with the wind blowing from us across the plant. If we did, the fruit lost some of its flavor, but if gathered in the right way, they were sweeter than if gathered in the wrong way. This, I believe, is one of many secrets which the Indian possesses, for I have never met a

white person who knew this. But Nature has given more of her secret knowledge to us than to the white man. Maybe this is so because we lived so close to her and appreciated her so much. Then another reason is because the Indian's senses of sight, hearing, and smell are keener than the senses of the white man. Life for the Indian is one of harmony with Nature and the things which surround him. The Indian tried to fit in with Nature and to understand, not to conquer and to rule. We were rewarded by learning much that the white man will never know. Life was a glorious thing, for great contentment comes with the feeling of friendship and kinship with the living things about you. The white man seems to look upon all animal life as enemies, while we looked upon them as friends and benefactors. They were one with the Great Mystery and so were we. We could feel the peace and power of the Great Mystery in the soft grass under our feet and in the blue sky above us. All this made deep feeling within us, and the old wise men thought much about it, and this is how we got our religion.

The trapping and catching of game was also one of the first lessons learned by the Indian boy. Before we were old enough to use a bow and arrow, we learned to kill small animals such as rabbits, squirrels, and quail, or other birds by throwing stones. We killed these small animals for food and not for sport. We were told by our parents not to kill animals or birds, then leave them lying on the ground.

For practice and also because we enjoyed it, we would select a small bush or shrub, imagine there was game in it, then throw and throw until we became expert and could hit almost anything we wished to. Even to this day I am good at throwing stones and can hit my mark. I remember when my brother got a new shotgun and how anxious he was to show me how well he could use it. He asked me to go with him to

look for ducks. When we got to the creek there was our duck. My brother, eager to get the duck, crept closer and closer. I saw that the duck was getting ready to fly, and though I was standing far back of my brother, I picked up a stone and throwing it over his head got the duck. He plainly showed his disappointment in not getting a chance to show me how his gun worked, yet we were lucky to get our duck. I was the one, to be sure, who laughed first, and though my brother could not help being a little disappointed, he laughed with me.

While still too small to use bows and arrows or guns, we not only threw stones by hand. We had throwing games in which we became expert marksmen. We would select a pliant willow stick, flatten it a little at one end, leaving the other end round for a handle. Having a number of stones of suitable size close at hand, we would place one on the flat end of the stick and bending it back with the right hand, throw it with considerable force. With practice we would hit anything at which we aimed, and, used as a weapon, this stick would kill rabbits, squirrels, or prairie chickens, all of which were excellent food when cooked. We even learned to flip gravel with the forefinger of each hand in such a way that they would strike with a sting like shot. We boys would line up and play at battle, shooting these pebbles back and forth at one another, never missing our mark.

When it came time to take up the bow and arrow, a very real and serious training began for the boy. The making of both the bow and arrow required skill and knowledge. There is a long history connected with the first use of the bow and the influence it has had on man. Some writers who realize the importance of the bow have written entire books on it. The man who made the first bow was a real inventor and gave to the world a weapon that was to live for centuries of