IX

THE VILLAGE OF CRAZY HORSE

Meanwhile among the Powder River breaks,
Where cottonwoods and plums and stunted oaks
Made snug his village of a hundred smokes,
Young Crazy Horse was waiting for the spring.
Well found his people were in everything
That makes a winter good. But more than food
And shelter from the hostile solitude
Sustained them yonder when the sun fled far
And rustling ghost-lights capered round the Star
And moons were icy and the blue snow whined;
Or when for days the world went blizzard blind
And devils of the North came howling down.
For something holy moved about the town
With Crazy Horse.

No chieftainship had run,
Long cherished in the blood of sire and son,
To clothe him with the might he wielded then.
The Ogalalas boasted taller men
But few of fairer body. One might look
And think of water running in a brook
Or maybe of a slender hickory tree;
And something in his face might make one see
A flinty shaft-head very keen to go,
Because a hero’s hand is on the bow,
His eye upon the mark. But nothing seen
About his goodly making or his mien
Explained the man; and other men were bold.
Unnumbered were the stories that were told
(And still the legend glorified the truth)
About his war-fond, pony-taming youth
When Hump the Elder was a man to fear;
And where one went, the other would be near,
For there was love between the man and lad.
And it was good to tell what fights they had
With roving bands of Utes or Snakes or Crows.
And now that Hump was gone these many snows,
His prowess lingered. So the legend ran.
But neither Hump nor any other man
Could give the gift that was a riddle still.
What lonely vigils on a starry hill,
What fasting in the time when boyhood dies
Had put the distant seeing in his eyes,
The power in his silence? What had taught
That getting is a game that profits naught
And giving is a high heroic deed?
His plenty never neighbored with a need
Among his band. A good tough horse to ride,
The gear of war, and some great dream inside
Were Crazy Horse’s wealth. It seemed the dim
And larger past had wandered back in him
To shield his people in the days of wrong.
His thirty years were like a brave old song
That men remember and the women croon
To make their babies brave.

Now when the moon
Had wearied of December and was gone,
And bitterly the blizzard time came on,
The Great White Father had a word to say.
The frost-bit runners rode a weary way
To bring the word, and this is what it said:
“All bands, before another moon is dead,
Must gather at the agencies or share
The fate of hostiles.” Grandly unaware
Of aught but its own majesty and awe,
The big word blustered. Yet the people saw
The snow-sift snaking in the grasses, heard
The Northwind bellow louder than the word
To make them shudder with the winter fear.
“You see that there are many children here,”
Said Crazy Horse. “Our herd is getting lean.
We can not go until the grass is green.
It is a very foolish thing you say.”
And so the surly runners rode away
And Crazy Horse’s people stayed at home.

And often were the days a howling gloam
Between two howling darks; nor could one tell
When morning broke and when the long night fell;
For ’twas a winter such as old men cite
To overawe and set the youngsters right
With proper veneration for the old.
The ponies huddled humpbacked in the cold
And, dog-like, gnawed the bark of cottonwood.
But where the cuddled rawhide lodges stood
Men laughed and yawned and let the blizzard roar,
Unwitting how the tale the runners bore
Prepared the day of sorrow.

March boomed in,
And still the people revelled in their sin
Nor thought of woe already on the way.
Then, when the night was longer than the day
By just about an old man’s wink and nod,
As sudden as the storied wrath of God,
And scarce more human, retribution came.

The moony wind that night was like a flame
To sear whatever naked flesh it kissed.
The dry snow powder coiled and struck and hissed
Among the lodges. Haloes mocked the moon.
The boldest tale was given over soon
For kinder evenings; and the dogs were still
Before the prowling foe no pack might kill,
The subtle fang that feared not any fang.
But ever nearer, nearer, shod hoofs rang
To southward, unsuspected in the town.
Three cavalry battalions, flowing down
The rugged canyon bed of Otter Creek
With Reynolds, clattered out across the bleak
High prairie, eerie in the fitful light,
Where ghostly squadrons howled along the night,
Their stinging sabers gleaming in the wind.
All night they sought the village that had sinned
Yet slept the sleep of virtue, unafraid.
The Bear swung round; the stars began to fade;
The low moon stared. Then, floating in the puffs
Of wind-whipped snow, the Powder River bluffs
Gloomed yonder, and the scouts came back to tell
Of many sleeping lodges.

Now it fell
That when the bluffs were paling with the glow
Of dawn, and still the tepee tops below
Stood smokeless in the stupor of a dream,
A Sioux boy, strolling down the frozen stream
To find his ponies, wondered at the sound
Of many hoofs upon the frozen ground,
The swishing of the brush. He paused to think.
The herd, no doubt, was coming for a drink;
He’d have to chop a hole. And while he stood,
The spell of dawn upon him, from the wood—
How queer!—they issued marching four by four
As though enchanted, breasts and muzzles hoar
With frozen breath! Were all the ponies dead,
And these their taller spirits?

—Then he fled,
The frightened trees and bushes flowing dim,
The blanching bluff tops flinging back at him
His many-echoed yell. A frowsy squaw
Thrust up a lodge flap, blinked about her—saw
What ailed her boy, and fell to screaming shrill.
The startled wolf-dogs, eager for a kill,
Rushed yelping from the lodges. Snapping sharp,
As ’twere a short string parting in a harp,
A frosty rifle sounded. Tepees spilled
A half clad rabble, and the valley filled
With uproar, spurt ing into jets of pain;
For now there swept a gust of killing rain
From where the plunging horses in a cloud
Of powder smoke bore down upon the crowd
To set it scrambling wildly for the breaks.
The waddling grandmas lost their precious aches
In terror for the young they dragged and drove;
Hysteric mothers staggered as they strove
To pack the creepers and the toddlers too;
And grandpas, not forgetting they were Sioux,
Made shift to do a little with the bows,
While stubbornly the young men after those
Retreated fighting through the lead-swept town
And up the sounding steeps.

There, looking down
Along the track of terror splotched with red
And dotted with the wounded and the dead,
They saw the blue-coats rage among their roofs,
Their homes flung down and given to the hoofs
Of desecrating wrath. And while they gazed
In helpless grief and fury, torches blazed
And tepees kindled. Casks of powder, stored
Against a doubtful future, belched and roared.
The hurtled lodge poles showered in the gloom,
And rawhide tops, like glutted bats of doom,
Sailed tumbling in the dusk of that despair.

Not long the routed warriors cowered there
Among the rocks and gullies of the steep.
The weakness of a panic-broken sleep
Wore off. Their babies whimpered in the frost. 
Their herd was captured. Everything seemed lost 
But life alone. It made them strong to die. 
The death-song, stabbed with many a battle cry, 
Blew down the flat—a blizzard of a sound— 
And all the rocks and draws and brush around 
Spat smoke and arrows in a closing ring. 
There fell a sudden end of plundering. 
Abruptly as they came the raiders fled, 
And certain of their wounded, men have said, 
Were left to learn what hells are made of wrath. 

Now, gleaning in that strewn tornado path 
Their dead and dying, came the mourning folk 
To find a heap for home, a stinking smoke 
For plenty. Senseless to the whirling snow, 
About the bitter honey of their woe 
They swarmed and moaned. What evil had 
they done? 
Dear eyes, forever empty of the sun, 
Stared up at them. These little faces, old 
With pain, and pinched with more than winter 
cold— 
Why should they never seek the breast again? 
A keening such as wakes the wolf in men 
Outwailed the wind. Yet many a thrifty wife, 
Long used to serve the urgencies of life 
That make death seem a laggard’s impudence, 
Descended in a rage of commonsense 
Upon the wreck, collecting what would do 
To fend the cold. 

Now while the village grew, 
A miracle of patches, jerry-built, 
The young men, hot upon the trail of guilt 
With Crazy Horse, found many a huddled stray 
Forlorn along the thousand-footed way 
The stolen herd had gone. And all day long
Their fury warmed them and their hearts were strong
To meet with any death a man might die;
For still they heard the wounded children cry,
The mourning of the women for the dead.
Nor did they deem that any hero led
The raiders. Surely nothing but the greed
Of terror could devour at such a speed
That pony-laming wallow, drift on drift.

The blue dusk mingled with the driven sift,
And still it seemed the trail of headlong flight
Was making for the wilderness of night
And safety. Then, a little way below
The mouth of Lodge Pole Creek, a dancing glow
Went up the bluff. Some few crept close to see,
And what they saw was listless misery
That crouched and shivered in a smudge of sage.
How well they cooled their baby-killing rage,
Those tentless men without a bite to eat!
And many, rubbing snow upon their feet,
Made faces that were better to behold
Than how their shaking horses took the cold
With tight-tailed rumps against the bitter flaw.
Beyond the camp and scattered up the draw
The hungry ponies pawed the frozen ground,
And there was no one anywhere around
To guard them. White-man medicine was weak.

Now all the young men, hearing, burned to wreak
Their hate upon the foe. A wiser will
Restrained them. “Wait a better time to kill,”
Said Crazy Horse. “Our lives are few to give
And theirs are many. Can our people live
Without the herd? We must not die today.
The time will come when I will lead the way
Where many die.”
Like hungry wolves that prowl
The melancholy marches of the owl
Where cows and calves are grazing unafraid,
The pony stalkers went. A stallion neighed,
Ears pricked to question what the dusk might bring;
Then all the others fell to whinnying
And yonder in the camp the soldiers heard.
Some rose to point where many shadows, blurred
With driven snow and twilight, topped a rise
And vanished in the smother. Jeering cries
Came struggling back and perished in the bruit
Of charging wind. No bugles of pursuit
Aroused the camp. Night howled along the slough.
THE SUN DANCE

Now wheresoever thawing breezes blew
And green began to prickle in the brown,
There went the tale of Crazy Horse’s town
To swell a mood already growing there.
For something more than Spring was in the air,
And, mightier than any maiden’s eyes,
The Lilith-lure of Perilous Emprise
Was setting all the young men’s blood astir.
How fair the more than woman face of her
Whose smile has gulped how many a daring prow!
What cities burn for jewels on her brow;
Upon her lips what vintages are red!
Her lovers are the tallest of the dead
Forever. When the streams of Troas rolled
So many heroes seaward, she was old;
Yet she is young forever to the young.

'Twas now the murmur of the man-flood, flung
Upon the Hills, grew ominously loud.
The whole white world seemed lifted in a cloud
To sweep the prairie with a monstrous rain.
Slay one, and there were fifty to be slain!
Give fifty to the flame for torturing,
Then count the marching multitude of Spring
Green blade by blade!

Still wilder rumors grew;
They told of soldiers massed against the Sioux
And waiting till the grass was good, to fall
On Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull and Gall
That all the country might be safe for theft,
And nothing of a warrior race be left
But whining beggars in a feeding pen.
Alas, the rights of men—of other men—
That centenary season of the Free!
No doubt the situation wanted tea
To make it clear! But long before the green
Had topped the hills, the agencies grew lean
Of youth and courage. Did a watch dog bark
Midway between the owl and meadowlark?—
Then other lads with bow and shield and lance
Were making for the Region of Romance
Where Sitting Bull’s weird medicine was strong
And Crazy Horse’s name was like a song
A happy warrior sings before he dies,
And Gall’s a wind of many battle cries
That flings a thousand ponies on the doomed.

So where the Powder and the Rosebud boomed,
Men met as water of the melting snows.
The North Cheyennes and North Arapahoes,
Become one people in a common cause
With Brulés, Minneconjou, Hunkpapas,
Sans Arcs and Ogalalas, came to throng
The valleys; and the villages were long
With camp on camp. Nor was there any bluff,
In all the country, that was tall enough
To number half the ponies at a look.
Here young June came with many tales of Crook,
The Gray Fox, marching up the Bozeman Road.
How long a dust above his horsemen flowed!
How long a dust his walking soldiers made!
What screaming thunder when the pack-mules brayed
And all the six-mule wagon teams replied!
The popping of the whips on sweaty hide,
How like a battle when the foe is bold!
And from the North still other tales were told
By those who heard the steamboats wheeze and groan
With stuff of war along the Yellowstone
To feed the camps already waiting there.
Awaiting what? The might of Yellow Hair
Now coming from the Heart’s mouth! Rumor guessed
How many Snakes were riding from the West
To join the Whites against their ancient foes;
How many Rees, how many of the Crows
Remembered to be jealous of the Sioux.
Look north, look south—the cloud of trouble grew.
Look east, look west—the whole horizon frowned.
But it was better to be ringed around
With enemies, to battle and to fail,
Than be a beggar chief like Spotted Tail,
However fattened by a hated hand.

Now when the full moon flooded all the land
Before the laughter of the owls began,
They turned to One who, mightier than Man,
Could help them most—the Spirit in the sun;
For whatsoever wonder-work is done
Upon the needy earth, he does it all.
For him the whole world sickens in the fall
When streams cease singing and the skies go gray
And trees and bushes weep their leaves away
In hopeless hushes empty of the bird,
And all day long and all night long are heard
The high geese wailing after their desire.
But, even so, his saving gift of fire
Is given unto miserable men
Until they see him face to face again
And all his magic happen, none knows how.
It was the time when he is strongest now;
And so a holy man whose heart was good
Went forth to find the sacred cottonwood
Beloved of the Spirit. Straight and high,
A thing of worship yearning for the sky,
It flourished, sunning in a lonely draw;
And there none heard the holy man nor saw
What rites were done, save only one who knows
From whence the new moon comes and whither
goes
The old, and what the stars do all day long.
Thereafter came the people with a song,
The men, the boys, the mothers and the maids,
All posy-crowns and blossom-woven braids,
As though a blooming meadow came to see.
And fruitful women danced about the tree
To make the Spirit glad; for, having known
The laughter of the children of their own,
Some goodness of the earth, the giving one,
Was in them and was pleasing to the Sun,
The prairie-loving nourisher of seed.

A warrior who had done the bravest deed
Yet dared that year by any of the Sioux
Now struck the trunk as one who counts a coup
Upon a dreaded foe; and prairie gifts
He gave among the poor, for nothing lifts
The heart like giving. Let the coward save—
Big hoard and little heart; but still the brave
Have more with nothing! Singing virgins came
Whose eyes had never learned to droop with shame,
Nor was there any present, man or youth,
Could say them aught of ill and say the truth,
For sweet as water in a snow-born brook
Where many birches come and lean to look
Along a mountain gorge, their spirits were.
And each one took the ax they gave to her
And smote the tree with many a lusty stroke;
And with a groan the sleeper in it 'woke
And far hills heard the falling shout of him.
Still rang the axes, cleaving twig and limb
Along the tapered beauty of the bole,  
Till, naked to the light, the sacred pole  
Lay waiting for the bearers.

They who bore  
Were chieftains, and their fathers were before,  
And all of them had fasted, as they should;  
Yet none dared touch the consecrated wood  
With naked fingers, out of pious fear.  
And once for every season of the year  
They paused along the way, remembering  
With thanks alike the autumn and the spring,  
The winter and the summer.

Then it fell  
That many warriors, lifting up a yell  
That set their ponies plunging, thundered down  
Across the center of the circled town  
Where presently the holy tree should stand;  
For whosoever first of all the band  
Could strike the sacred spot with bow or spear  
Might gallop deep among the dead that year  
Yet be of those whom busy Death forgot.  
And sweaty battle raged about the spot  
Where screaming ponies, rearing to the thrust  
Of screaming ponies, clashed amid the dust,  
And riders wrestled in the hoof-made gloam.

So, having safely brought the sun-tree home,  
The people feasted as for victory.

And on the second day they dressed the tree  
And planted it with sacred songs and vows,  
And round it reared a wall of woven boughs  
That opened to the mystic source of day.  
And with the next dawn mothers came to lay  
Their babies down before the holy one,  
Each coveting a hero for a son
Or sturdy daughters fit to nurse the bold.
Then when the fourth dawn came the war drums rolled;
And from their lodges, lean and rendered pure
With meatless days, those vowing to endure
The death-in-torture to be born again,
Came naked there before the holy men
Who painted them with consecrated paint.
And if a knee seemed loosened, it was faint
With fast and weary vigil, not with dread;
For lo! the multitudinary dead
Pressed round to see if heroes such as they
Still walked the earth despite the smaller day
When 'twas not half so easy to be brave.
Now, prone beneath the pole, as in a grave,
Without a wince each vower took the blade
In chest or back, and through the wound it made
Endured the passing of the rawhide thong,
Swung from the pole's top; raised a battle song
To daunt his anguish; staggered to his feet
And, leaning, capered to the war drum's beat
A dizzy rigadoon with Agony.

So all day long the spirit-haunted tree
Bore bloody fruitage, groaning to the strain,
For with the dropping of the ripe-in-pain,
Upon the stem the green-in-courage grew.
And seldom had there fallen on the Sioux
So great a wind of ghostly might as then.
Boys tripped it, bleeding, with the tortured men.
The mothers, daughters, sisters, sweethearts, wives
Of those who suffered, gashed their flesh with knives
To share a little of the loved one's pang;
And all day long the sunning valley rang
With songs of courage; and the mother sod
Received the red libation; and the god
Gave power to his people.