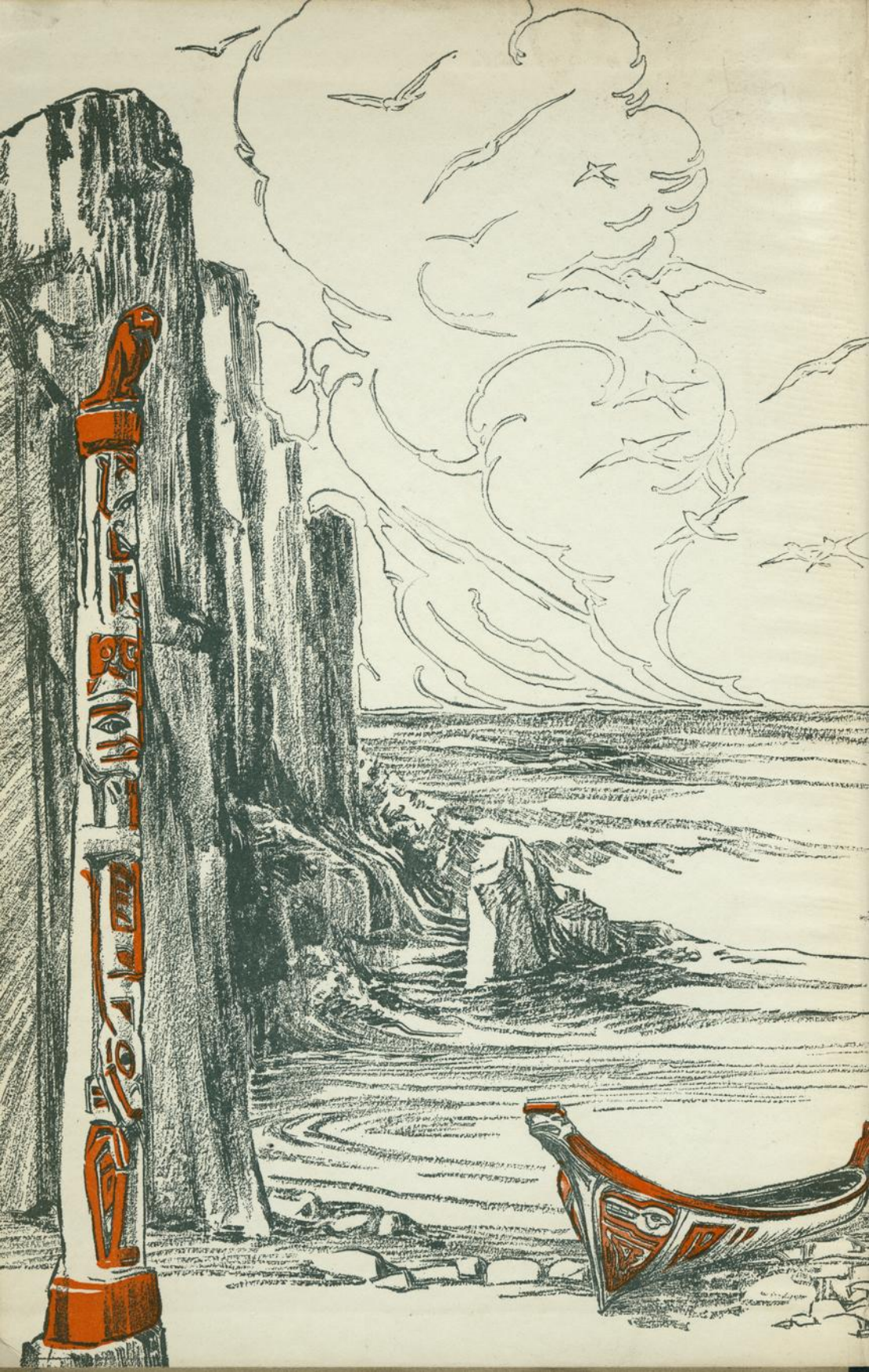
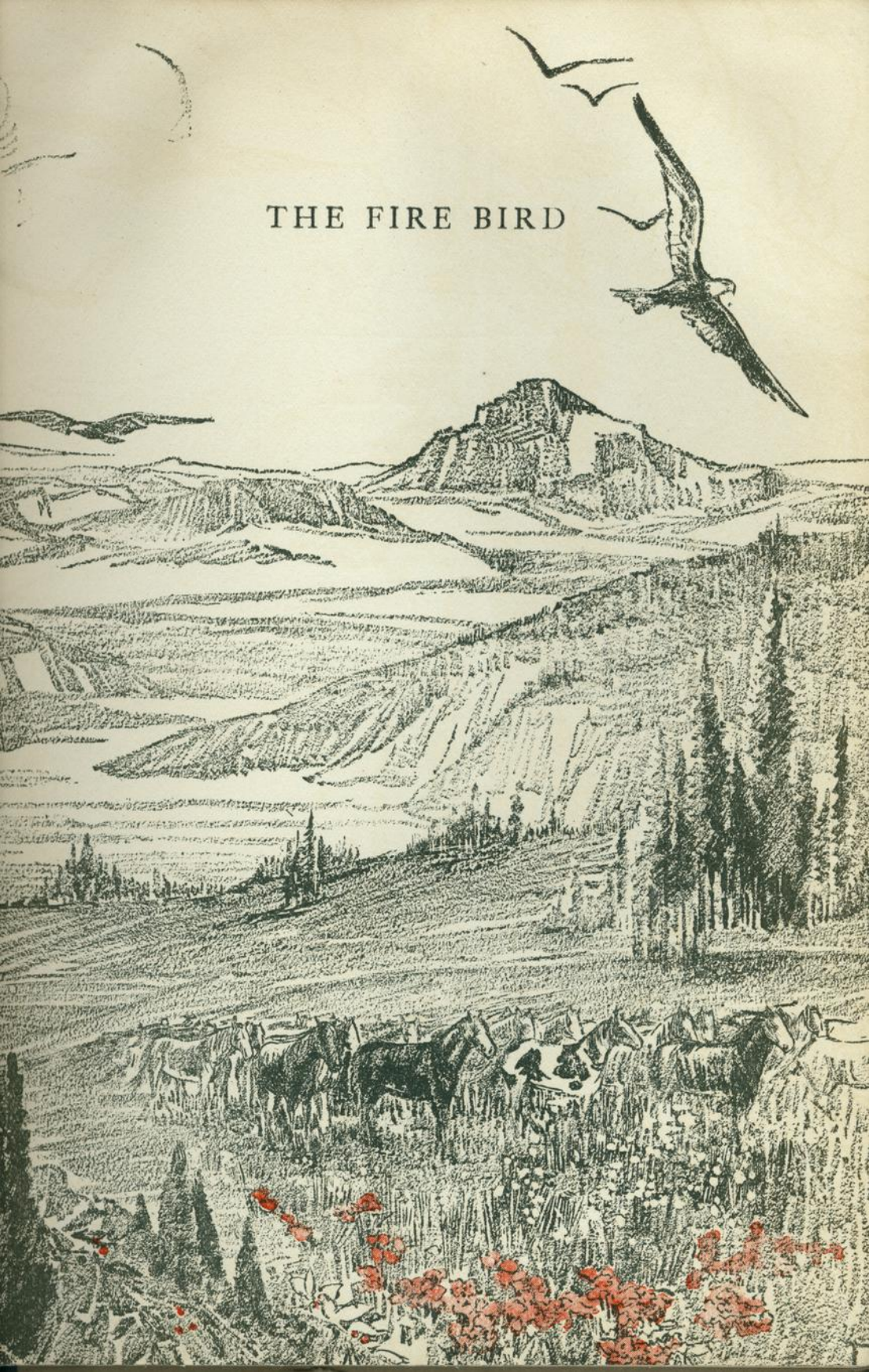
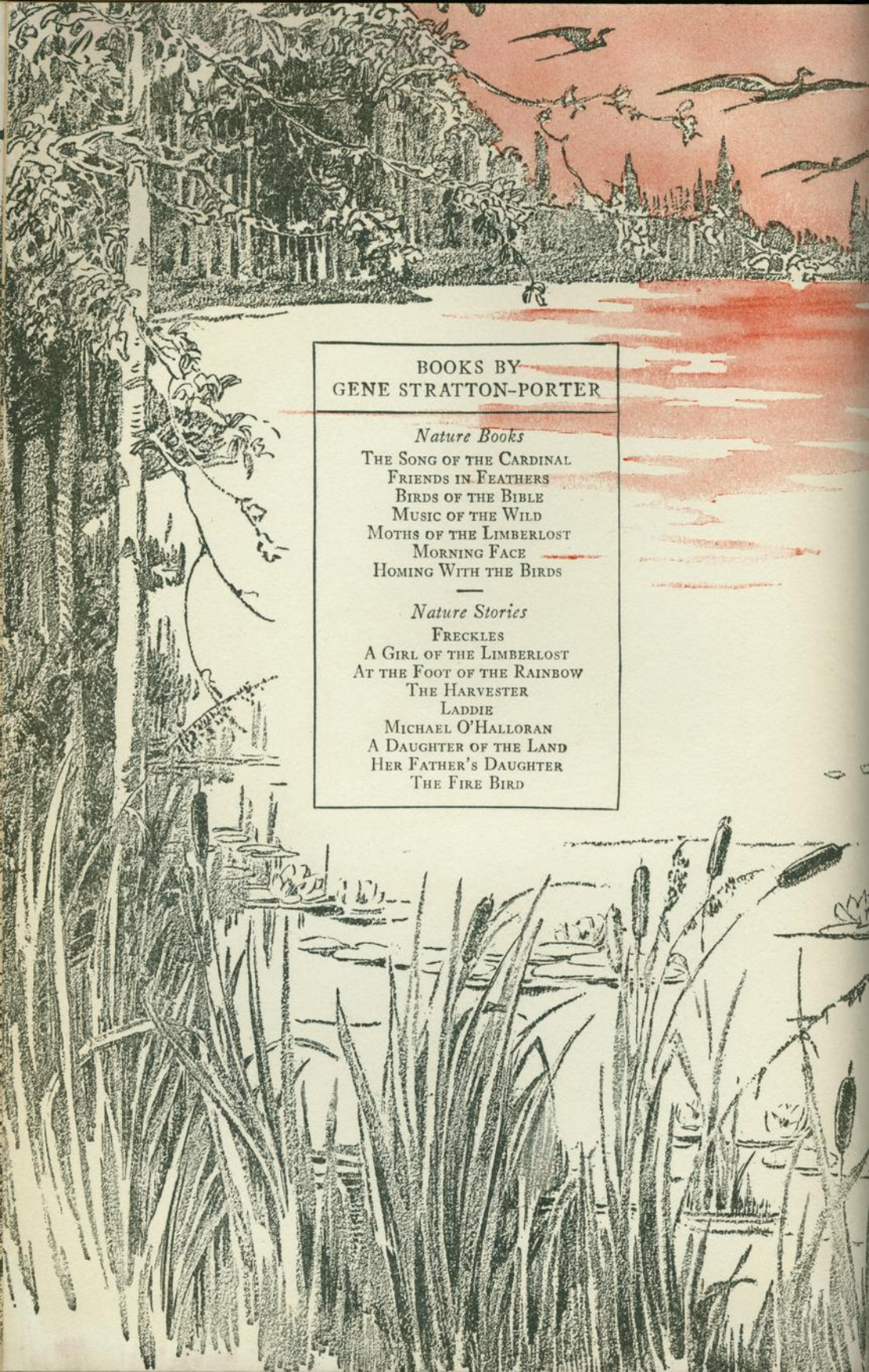
THE FIRE BIRD

GENE
STRATTON-PORTER



THE FIRE BIRD





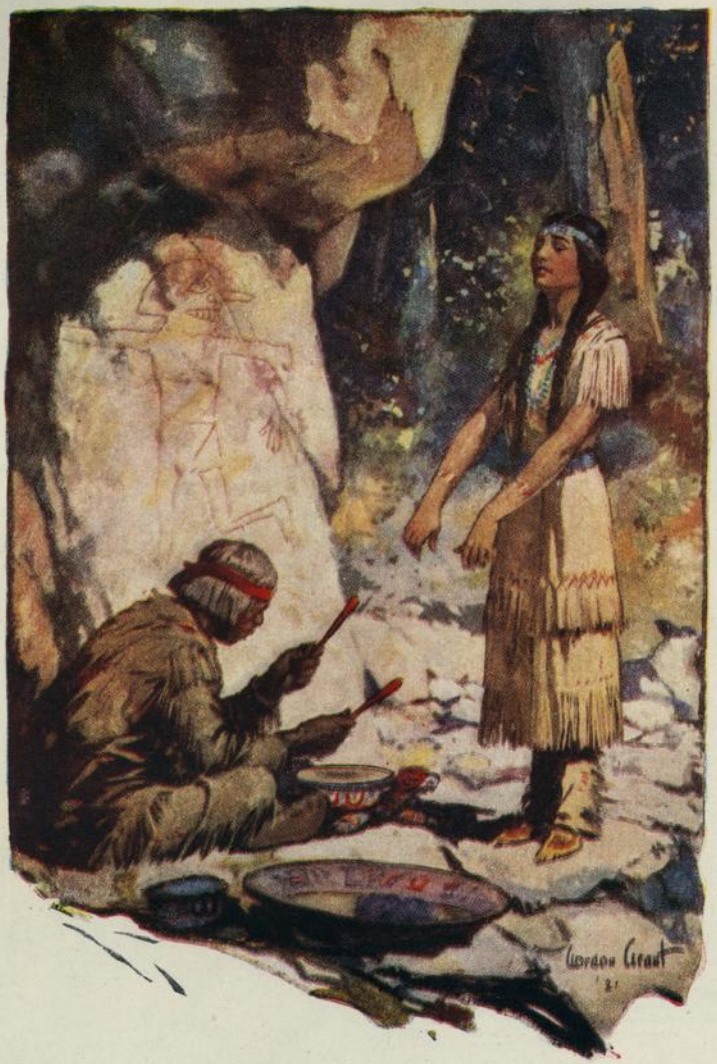
BOOKS BY GENE STRATTON-PORTER

Nature Books

The Song of the Cardinal
Friends in Feathers
Birds of the Bible
Music of the Wild
Moths of the Limberlost
Morning Face
Homing With the Birds

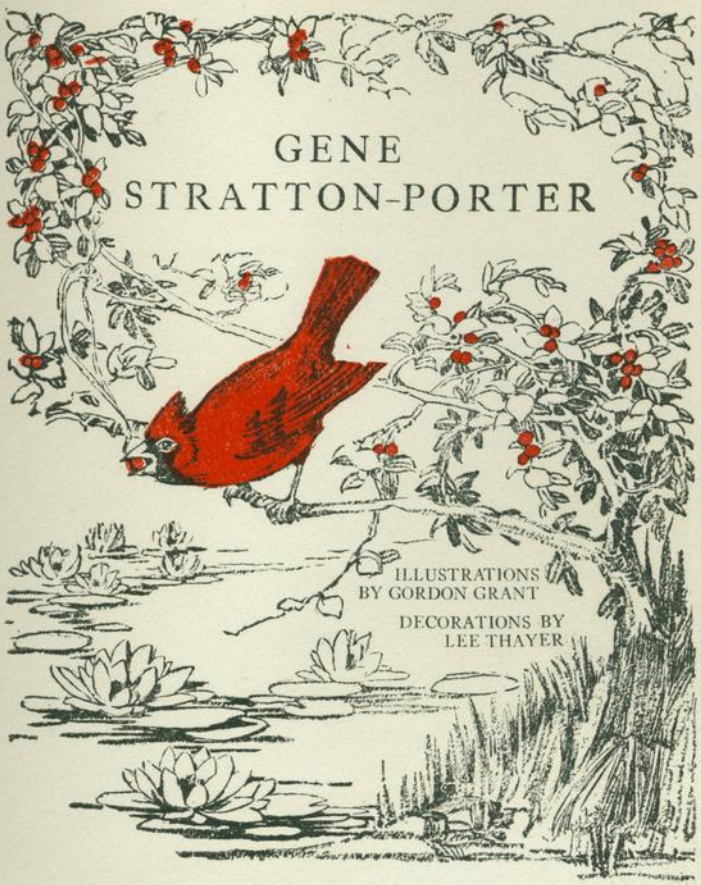
Nature Stories

Freckles
A Girl of the Limberlost
At the Foot of the Rainbow
The Harvester
Laddie
Michael O'Halloran
A Daughter of the Land
Her Father's Daughter
The Fire Bird



"Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Make for me a new, a sure medicine
That will ease my scorched heart
Of the fire of a flaming red bird
And take from my tortured hands
Their burden of moon white lilies."

THE FIRE BIRD



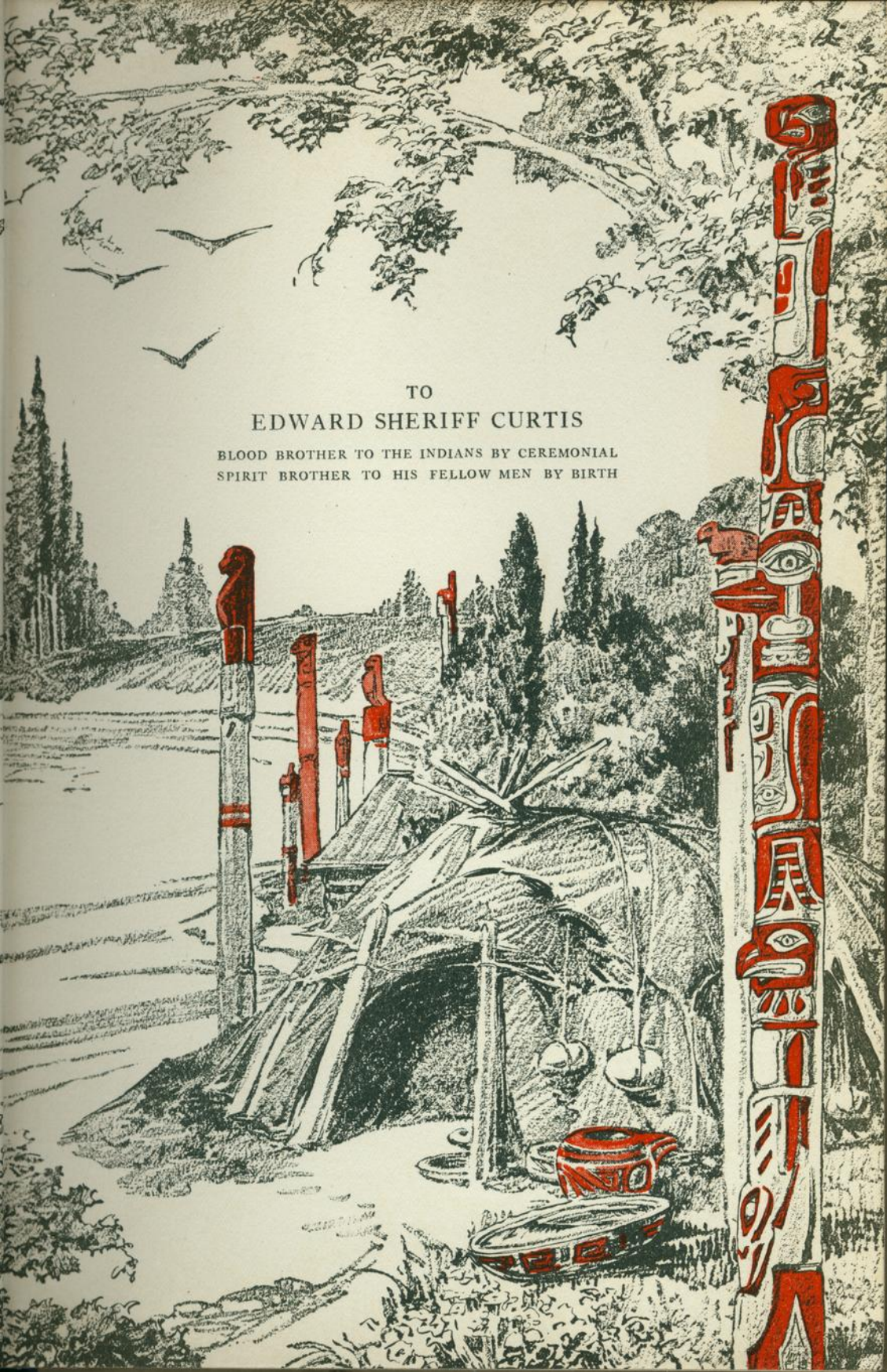
GARDEN CITY, N. Y., AND TORONTO
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1922

COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY
GENE STRATTON-PORTER

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, INCLUDING THAT OF TRANSLATION
INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGES, INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES
AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

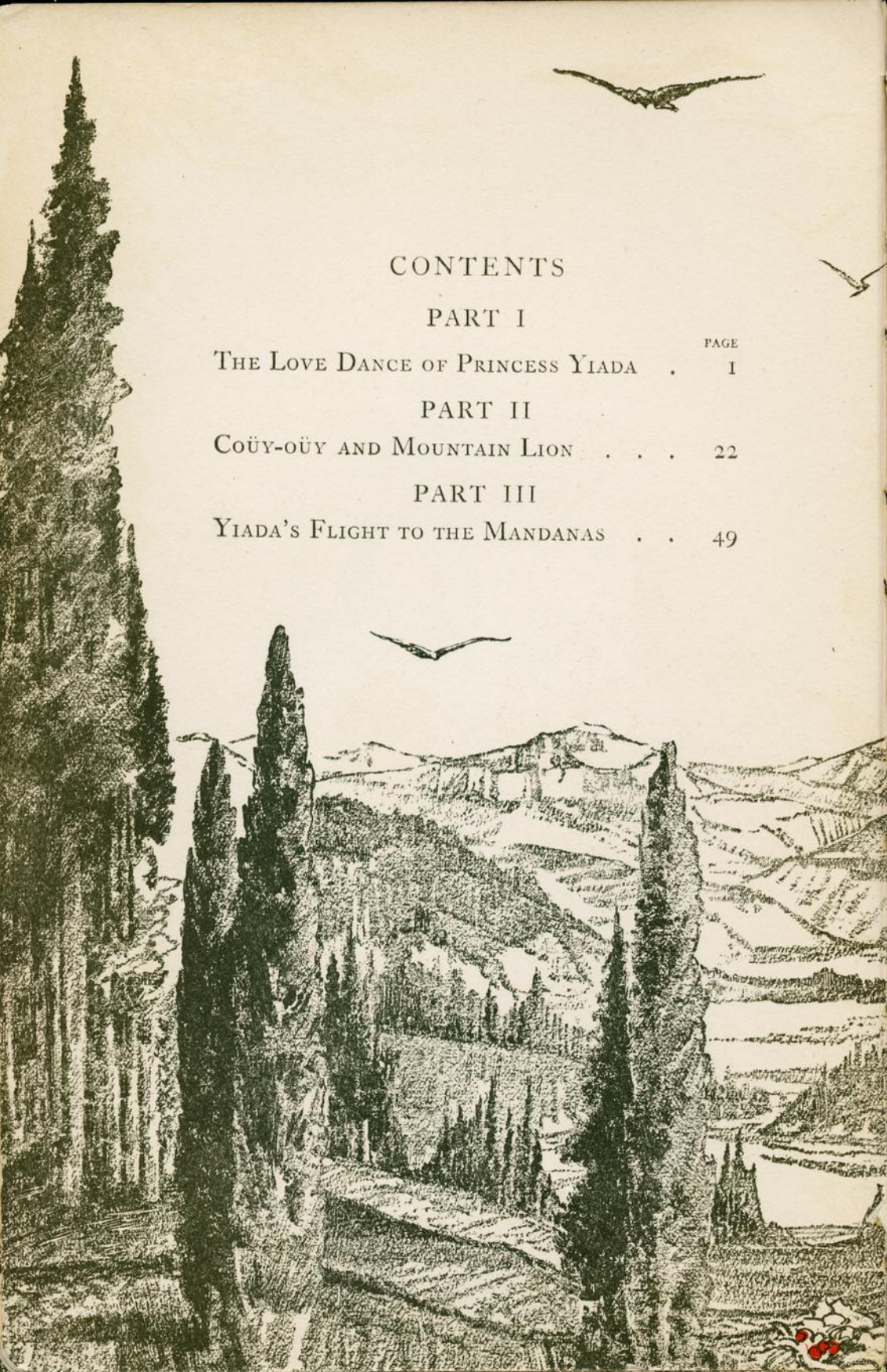
First Edition



TO

EDWARD SHERIFF CURTIS

BLOOD BROTHER TO THE INDIANS BY CEREMONIAL
SPIRIT BROTHER TO HIS FELLOW MEN BY BIRTH



CONTENTS

PART I

PAGE

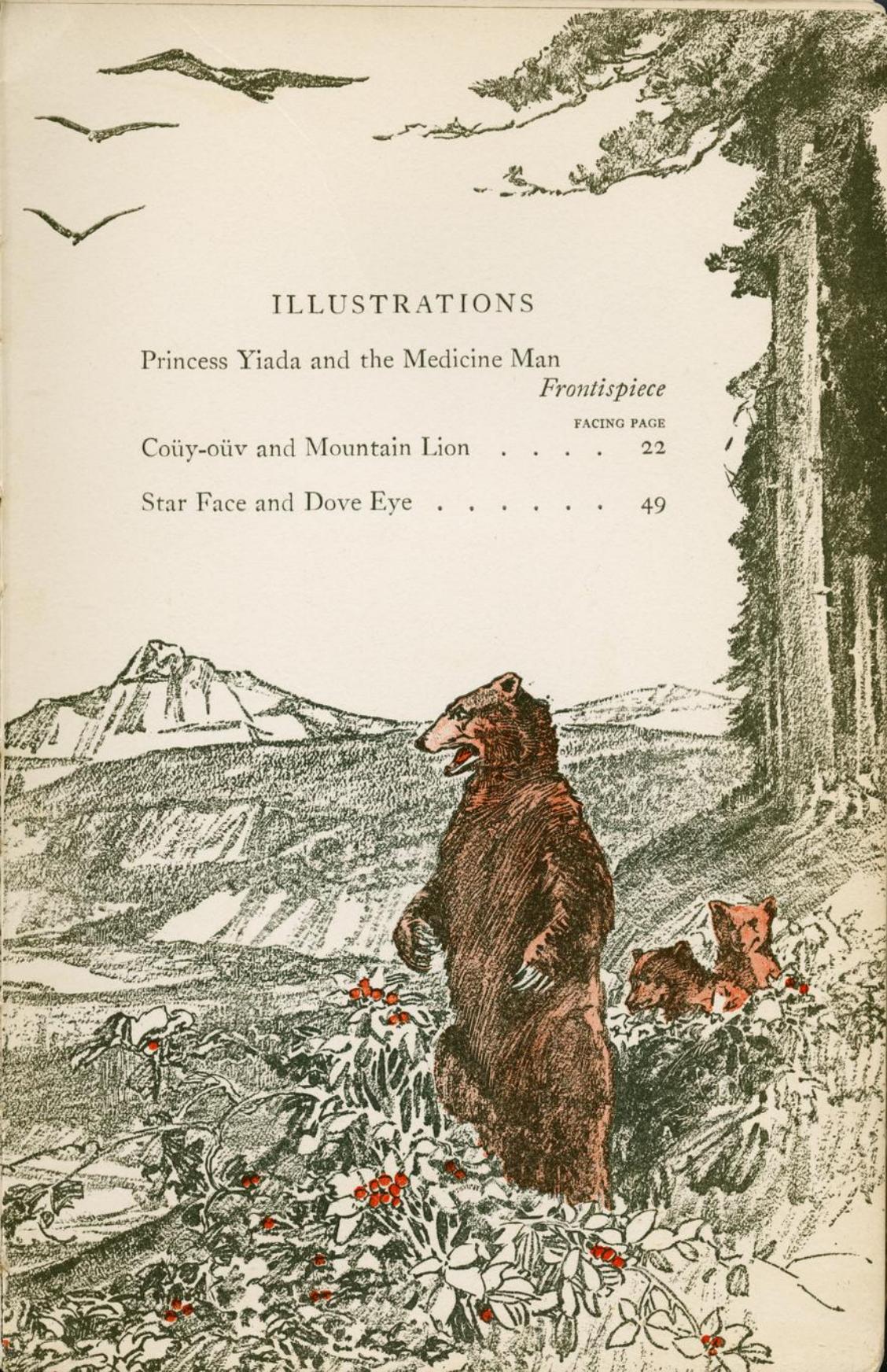
The Love Dance of Princess Yiada . 1

PART II

Coüy-oüy and Mountain Lion . . . 22

PART III

Yiada's Flight to the Mandanas . . 49



ILLUSTRATIONS

Princess Yiada and the Medicine Man *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

Coüy-oüv and Mountain Lion 22

Star Face and Dove Eye 49

THE FIRE BIRD

PART I

THE LOVE DANCE OF YIADA

Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Make for me High Magic.
I, Yiada, daughter of White Wolf,
Mighty Chief of the Canawacs,
Mate of Star Face, Brave of the Mandanas,
I of your blood, I have said it!

From the roots of the white toluache lilies
Make me a strong medicine
That will drown my scorching spirit-fire
And empty my hands of their fulness.
Beat your sacred turtle drums
Loud and threateningly.
Drive back to the fear peopled forest
Of the far and dread Shadow Land
The flaming ghost of the fire bird
And the white flower of the still water.

Heal me of the dread head-sickness
Like the midsummer madness
Of foaming-mouthed quiota.

I, Yiada, proud daughter of the fierce Canawacs,
I, mate of the Brave, Star Face,
Chief of a forest of wigwams,
With ponies like the sands of the sea, have said it.
Hear me, for the healing of my sickened spirit!

Where the triumphant blue sea water,
Sky-gold all day in the slanting sunlight,
Silver-white in the uncertain moonlight,
Teases the pale sands of the craggy beaches,
Lay the lodge of my Father, White Wolf,
The savage hunter of beast and enemy,
First at the kill, Chief of great wealth,
Next in power to the high Sachem,
Chief of all Chiefs.

Many were the strong sons
Who sprang from White Wolf's loins—
I Yiada, his one daughter, pride of Falcon Eye,
His daring chieftainess, from the far Mandanas.

Tall our wigwams of deer and bear and elk skins,
Stout our warm lodges of cedar and pine tree,
Many our robes of beaver and buffalo and marten,

Heavy our necklaces with cunningly carved beads,
Polished elk teeth and eagle talons,
Shining black obsidian and precious blue shell;
Our war ponies flocking like birds fleeing winter.

Always for me, the one daughter,
The warm spot by the storm fire,
The floating sweet fat from the cooking kettles,
The first crusty brown cake
From the smoking red baking stones,
The clear flowing gold sweet
From the tall nests of the wood bees;
The soft sun coloured robe of down fine doeskin
Embroidered with broad bands of white beads,
Luring beads of green, and blue, and yellow,
The red stained singing quills of the porcupine,
And downy snow white under feathers
From the breast of the white swan.

I, first in the picking of the juicy berries
The fruits of earth and bush,
Most skilful in the weaving
Of the bright story baskets,
Swiftest at embroidering robes of doeskin
For chieftain or little fatling;
Leader in the ceremonial dances
Of the young women of our tribe,
In the great Assembly Lodge of our people.

I, of slim body, willow smooth, oak strong,
With thick long hair of crow-back blackness,
And keen far eyes like the high eagle
Of the top crag of the cloud country
Spying in the gold hunting grounds of the sun.

Many the gaily dressed young Braves
Who nightly crept close our lodges
And made soft eyes and sang wooing songs,
When the moon of full womanhood shone on me.
But always, when she braided ornaments
In my hair, for dancing,
And oiled me for high ceremonials,
In my ear Falcon Eye, my Mother, whispered:
"Keep your body for Mountain Lion,
Son of the High Sachem,
Chief of Chiefs when his Father makes his journey
To the far country of the Great Spirit."

Mountain Lion was the tallest,
The strongest of our young men,
The fastest rider, the most skilful dancer,
The surest hunter among us,
The spy who never failed,
The warrior who always returned in triumph.

Like the young trees of the sea shore
He was slim and straight.

Like the water rolling up the white sands
He was ever tireless.
Like the shining of the spirit sun
He lighted all the day with gold magic;
Like the kindly silver moon
He peopled all the night with friendly shadows.
The heart of every maiden was wingéd
In the wild breast of her,
If he but looked where her footsteps led her.

Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Make for me a new, a sure medicine
That will ease my scorched heart
Of the fire of a flaming red bird
And take from my tortured hands
Their burden of moon white lilies.

In the cool night of the fat, bloody moon of harvest
When the tribal storehouses were full heaped
With dried fish and bear, buffalo and deer meat,
With little mountains of maize for winter;
When the cakes and candles of yellow tallow
Were moulded past numbering,
When the wide-mouthed seed baskets
Were high heaped with richness,
And many deep nut baskets were overflowing,
When the dried berries from far thickets
Made little sun painted hills—

Then all of the tribe of our hunting grounds
Bathed their hard worked bodies,
Oiled their smooth skins, painted their happy faces
And put on the wealth of their richest robes
For the Great Dance of Thanksgiving.

When the robins made love chase that season,
In the secret ceremonial of the wise old women
My Maiden's Hour had been celebrated.

Always had my proud, savage Mother
Taken me alone to the forest,
And there, beating hands and chanting,
She had carefully taught me
The Wonder Dance of the Maidens' Hour
Of the Mandanas, her people.

It was a dance of moonlight and moon madness,
Of sign love talk, of eyes asking great gifts,
Of swift feet stamping like the roebuck
And singing bead and shell trinket music,
So that all the night was softly lighted
With strange visions flower sweet.

On the day of the Thanksgiving Ceremonial
When my Mother oiled me to leaf fine smoothness,
And hung me heavy with bracelets of bone beads
And a necklace of precious carved blue shell,

As her skilled hands of love flew,
In my ear she made Canawac talk:

"To-night, before the Great Sachem
On his high throne of prideful authority,
With the son who follows him in Council,
Sitting beside his knee,
When thou leadest the Thanksgiving Dance
At the head of the young women
Thou shalt wave all of them back to their places,
And alone, before the assembled Chieftains,
Thou shalt dance the Mating Dance
Of the rich and powerful Mandanas,
Ever keeping thine eye of glad submission,
Fast on the eye of Mountain Lion.

"If the soft light in his eye strike fire for thee,
Then shalt thou forget all others
And dance out thy heart for him alone
And bow low as the young cedar before him,
And as the serpent charm him.
If he arise and stand facing thee
And dance love manifest before thee,
Then is the hour come for thy union with him.

"Then shall I fly to set up thy wigwam
Of down-fine doeskin, bleached with love,
That many suns I have worked on in hiding for thee,

And gladly in the sand before it
Thou shalt set thy lighted candle,
Thy tall proud candle of gold bear tallow;
And if he come to thee with soft words
With words of wooing magic,
Then shalt thou bury thy candle flame
In the yielding sands before him.

"Then art thou our Chieftainess in seasons to come,
And high shall thy sure heart beat
With pride of love and power,
And swift shall thy red blood run in leaping streams
With the flood-high tide of mighty Chieftains.

"Braves shall thy many straight sons be,
Great Chiefs who shall rule other far nations;
And sweet shall thy tall strong women be
As the red honey-flower that grows in the forest,
And swift shall their hearts be
As the heart of the frightened fawn
That leaps with feathered feet before the hunter."

Medicine Man, make me a sure medicine,
A strong medicine, new to our people,
That shall ease my weary eyes
Of a red bird and a white lily.

When the Harvest Ceremonial Dance
Was cried through all the village,

When night crept, silent as the bat's wing,
From the blanketed heart of the forest,
When the great Assembly Lodge
Was lighted and filled with happy faces,
When the old chiefs and the wise men
Had spoken thanksgivings for fat harvest,
And the time was come for all the tribe to rejoice,
First came the dance of the little stumbling children;
The little fat bellied round faced serious children,
With shining black hair and wonder eyes,
And flower red cheeks and mouths,
And stout breath like short gusts of North Wind.

When, worn out with swift dances,
They rolled in their soft blankets,
Came the shy youths' dance,
And the uncertain growing maidens'
All bravely tinkling little necklaces
Of squirrel and rabbit teeth, and bright rare shells.

Then danced the carefully trained young women,
Grown and ripe for the Harvest of love.
In their lead I did as my Mother had told me.

Straight I stood before the Great Sachem
And the son of the pride of his heart.
High I lifted my head like a proud pine tree,
And softly I shook my bracelets of beads

And rattled my necklace of blue shell,
And rustled the porcupine fringes
Of my fine robe of yellow,
In music like the little secret whispering
Among the dry grass under passing feet.

I spoke as I had always been taught by my Mother:
"Great Chief, grant that I dance before thee
The Woman's Love Dance of the brave Mandanas,
A dance that I have learned
From the swift feet of my Mother."

Searchingly, the Great Sachem looked at his son
And his son looked at me with understanding
And made a swift sign to his Father;
So raising his hands of authority,
The Great Sachem cried aloud:
"Yiada, daughter of Chief White Wolf,
Will dance the Woman's Dance of the Mandanas,
Let all others be seated. I have said it!"

Alone, with the blood of heart red on lip and cheek
And with the pride of my asking heart
Beating like wings on my light feet,
With my Mother keeping time for me,
As she did in the secret forest,
Slowly I stepped into the great dance
Of the Mandanas, of the peace lands;

The strongest love medicine
Ever measured by the feet of wild women.

As I danced, even as my Mother had long told me
I kept my eyes ever spying
Deep into the eyes of Mountain Lion.
When the dance grew to its swiftest wildest note,
When my proud head of certainty
And my willing arms were high lifted,
And the beads and obsidian and blue shell
Tinkled soft singing, like falling rain,
Mountain Lion sprang to his feet
And came down in the firelight before me.

With no knowledge of the dance of the Mandanas,
And no teaching of step or of posture,
He fell into the strange measures
That my Mother had taught me;
With eyes upon eyes and heart near to heart,
Facing in the wide fire flaming circle
Where envious faces kept watch upon us,
We danced the wonder dance
Of the hour of full womanhood.

Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Healer of the hearts of the Mandanas,
There, facing the chiefs and maidens
Of a thousand lodges of our tribe,

With the Great Sachem keenly watching
On his high throne of great power,
Darest say that was not my hour
My rightful moon of exultation?

When I looked, near the close of the dance,
Toward my Mother for guidance
She gave me the swift happy sign of birds flying;
So I caught that joyful sign
And I gave it to the waiting maidens.
Like homing swallows they swept around me;
The young Braves came stamping,
Like roebucks before the does of Spring,
Then all of us changed the dance
To the love measures of the Canawacs.

When the chattering maidens
Went back to their waiting mothers,
I stood there tall and straight and proud
Fresh as the wing of the eagle,
From the highest peak of dawn
Eye to eye, face to face with Mountain Lion.
His eyes burned deep into my eyes
With a look of quivering power.
Medicine Man, darest thou say
That was not the great understanding?

So when all of the others
Went on with the Dance of Thanksgiving,

Soft as the veiling mists
From the dim breast of evening meadows
I slipped from the Council House
And I flew to our lodge.

With hands of high satisfaction
My Mother set my wigwam beside her lodge.
I lighted my tall happy candle of bear fat;
I opened my doorway wide to the friendly moon;
Deep in the sands I set my love light to burning.
And there I waited—long and long I waited,
In burning eagerness of heart
Tremblingly listening with each breath
For the sure step of Mountain Lion.

Then, Medicine Man,
With black angered sign talk
And fierce eyes of leaping fire,
Came my storm driven Mother.
As she came toward me,
Like a killing wind uprooting the cedars,
Arose high clamour from the Council Lodge.

She caught up my hopeful waiting candle,
My living love token to Mountain Lion, my man,
She buried its flame deep in the white sands,
In rage she thrust it from her,
She snatched shut the welcoming doors

Before the eyes of anguish of my Mother
Of my willing doeskin wigwam,
And in the harsh low voiced Canawac tongue
She cried to me in choking anger:

"Woe is upon us! Strangers have reached us.
Comes a great Chief from tribes of the far North,
From the camps of the powerful Killimacs,
From the home fires of the Ice God;
And with him on a snow white pony
Rides his beautiful raven haired daughter,
A tall proud Princess of a great warlike nation.

"This night Mountain Lion will not come to thee:
His father has sent him to serve the rich strangers.
Get thee back to thy place in the Council Lodge
Before the venom tipped finger pointers miss thee,
For there will be great feasting and much talk,
The rejoicing will last for many suns and moons.
It was the wrong time for thy dance of allurement
Thy maiden proffer of prideful loving,
But I, thy Mother, taught thee thy undoing,
I, thy Mother, gave to thee the sign."

Then, Medicine Man,
As fierce a storm as ever tore the forest,
As ever pitched the sea high in wild fury,
Broke in my heart, leaping to flee its lodging place.
I lifted my head high, and proudly and silently

I stepped into the moontide,
But I trembled and shook with all-over sickness,
My blood ran hot angry gushes,
And I, who had never known pain
In any part of my strong body,
Now felt its rending arrows
Tearing my heart in sick torture,
As I crept through the restless whispering forest
Where the wise old yellow leaves
Talked over my shame with each other
And every mocking finger of night
Pointed in derision at my wounded side.

I crept back to the Council Lodge
Still as a panther fending for her cubs,
I slipped in unseen by any,
And took up my place among the young women.
On the high throne of power
Beside our Great Sachem, Storm Wind,
Sat a tall Chief trailing rich robes
Of white fox, sealskin, and white bear.
A proud Chief of savage face,
Weighted with a heavy necklace of eagles' claws,
Many elk teeth, and lion talons,
Hanging across his broad shoulders.

Standing still and straight before them,
First, I saw the stranger woman.

I heard the deep voice of her father,
Toned to soft talk, as among peace councils,
When he told the Great Sachem and Chieftains
And all the watching Canawacs:

"This is my daughter, a Princess of seven tribes,
She who can run with the foot of the hare,
Who can dance as the gold birch leaves,
When spring comes stealing from the Southland;
Who can guide the swift canoes surely
And ride the wild ponies on the chase,
Whose fingers are skilful in basket weaving,
In beading, and braiding, and polishing ornaments.
She comes with me to make the friendship
Of a people of her mother's blood;
And her name is a name held sacred
Among all the tribes at peace with us.
Like music there fell from his smooth tongue
A name well known to council wise Canawacs,
'Coüy-oüy'—a breath of sweetness—
He spoke it like the easy tongue of a lazy brook
Softly singing among the small stones of its bed.

Then every Canawac remembered the dark days
When the Great Spirit became justly angered,
And in the height of his deep wrath
Against the treachery of all tribes
Drew up the waters of destruction

Until they covered the earth's face,
Leaving upon the tallest tree
Only one Chief and his mate,
And one pair of every bird and climbing beast,
On the top of the highest mountain
Of all the earth known to man.

When the water had come up to the top branches
Until only their heads were above it,
And had stood still for three weary suns,
Then slowly it drew back, and left the earth barren,
So there was no fire to cook food
For the hungry Sachem and his mate,
Nor to warm the water soaked camping grounds.

Then the Sachem sent a beaver messenger
Far down to the underworld
To borrow only one coal
From the campfires of the dark spirits;
But the beaver was not able to bring it
For burning his mouth cruelly.

Then he sent the fierce mountain lion,
Searching all over the earth for campfires,
But there was no fire to be found,
For the water had been everywhere.

Then he sent a little gray bird to the spirit world
To bring from the campfires of the unseen country

One living coal with which to make a fire
For the cooking kettles and light-signals,
And to warm the lodges of all the tribes
That would follow him in suns to come.

So the dauntless little gray bird
Slowly winged across the far spaces.
Three suns arose and set, and at the red evening
When the third sun plunged its face in the sea,
With all of its plumage burned a flame-tongue red,
With a beak of red like hot coals
And its face blackened with fire,
Came the brave panting bird
With a living coal held fast in its mouth,
A coal snatched from the high altars
Of the far country of the spirits.

And so the fire gift was brought back to earth
To warm the hearts and the wigwams
Of every nation, for all seasons to come.

The bird was sent from a stranger tribe
Far to the south of our hunting grounds,
Where the hot suns shine and the grass withers;
But travellers journeying northward to see us,
Had told our grandfathers about it,
Had shown us the bird of bloody red beak
And face still blackened with fire,

Singing gaily in our summer forests,
Singing even in the ice of winter.

Often when we chanted songs of thanksgiving
To the Great Spirit, for rich gifts,
When we thanked him for the buffalo and beaver,
For the deer meat and fish and corn for winter,
Then our tribes made a ceremonial of glad rejoicing
For the bird that brought back
The great wonder gift of fire.

Its sacred name fell on our ears
Like the peace of the Great Spirit,
Fell soft as flying snowflakes
When first squaw winter comes,
Soft as the hunting wing of the thieving owl,
Sweet as the breath of flowers in the nesting moon,
From the lips of the Great Chief: "Coüy-oüy."

Before him, her shining head bowed,
Our people watched her in silent wonder.
She was tall, taller than any of our women,
Tall and slender like the singing wind reeds
That grow around the magic pool
Of the white spirit lily of the still water,
Far back in the valley pastures.

She moved like the night hawk
Slowly sweeping across the moon sky.

From the proud lift of her head
And the eagle look of her dark eye
From the red flower flame of her soft lips
And the sureness of her being,
I could see that the heart of her
Was like a wiry little war pony
Swiftly racing up the steep trail of her breast
With the hunt blood of the soft chase
Fevering its questing nostrils.

No woman among our people,
Had seen the beauty of her robe,
For she stood in flower white, flower fine doeskin,
Bleached and tanned like winter snowdrift,
Like the shining water flower face of far lakes,
Like the wide wing of a homing white swan,
Like the silver rays of the big cold hunting moon.

All around her feet fell soft knotted fringes
Cut deep as the height of the first upstanding
Of papooses ready to walk.
And her belt and her neck were deeply embroidered
With a thousand green stained quills
From the backs of many porcupines,
While her long heavy necklace
Was got from traders crossing far seas,
For it lay soft dull jade like the green wave meadow
In the deepest bay of the leaf tinted big sea water.

Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
When one looked upon her searchingly,
As I looked long upon her,
That night of fat harvest thanksgiving,
Slowly one saw creeping from her bare arms,
From her firm high breasts,
Over the dark gleaming bowed head
And sure slender shoulders of her,
A faint waving cloud like fine blue mist
That could have been none other
Than the secret power of the Great Spirit,
Stealing from her breast to wrap around her
So that any evil spirit magic
Might not be strong to work against her.

I could see that she was softer
Than our hard working women,
Though she had learned from the bee
To be busy and useful,
Though she had learned from the hunted fawn
To travel far journeys in daring wingéd leaps.

PART II

COÜY-OÜY AND MOUNTAIN LION

Medicine Man, it were not enough,
Ha! it were not enough
That the stranger bore the song name
Of the fire bird our tribe worshipped;
For on her breast, sheltered with one slim hand,
With flaming wings outspread,
And panting saw-edged beak like fire,
Lay a brother of the spirit bird,
Flame red, blood red, feathers like wounds—
Dead coal black of face;
A wild thing, sheltered and unafraid.

In her language and with wave smooth sign talk
She told the Great Sachem and our Chiefs
That she had found it in the forest
Wounded from the missed kill of the night bird
Or bare escaped from the eager claws
Of the hunger driven wildcat.

"Before the approving eyes of the watching Canawacs
Never had there been a sight so fair to see,
As when, clinging trustingly to her firm finger,
The broken bird fed from her hand of pity."

Even as she told how she had found it,
She folded its wings against its full breast
And set it upright on her steady finger.
Medicine Man, it moved not, it fluttered not,
Though one bleeding wing hung broken.

Where it had lain between her round breasts
Its red sign stained the front of her white robe,
The mark of her soft heart of pity.

Medicine Man, the face of the Great Sachem
Changed slowly as he watched our visitor;
He looked with understanding upon her,
He marvelled at the quiet bird.
The heart of my Father, the White Wolf,
Grew tender as he studied her.

My own heart lay strange in my tormented breast
Until swiftly she turned her face from the women
Ever the grinders of the meal in our jars,
Ever the curers of the deer meat, and salmon,
The fillers and the guardians of the storehouses;
And stretching her hand toward Mountain Lion,
By strange words and by pretty sign talk
She asked of him like coaxing birds:
"Coarse meal and water. Coüy-oüy is hungry."

As a sudden wind bends a tall birch low,
Willing my man sprang to obey her bidding.

Before the approving eyes of the watching Canawacs
Never had there been a sight so fair to see,
As when, clinging trustingly to her firm finger,
The broken bird fed from her hand of pity.

I could see the deep look, the inner trouble,
The battle in the heart of Mountain Lion,
When she held the bird toward him
That it should drink, as do the wounded,
From the polished mussel shell he had brought.

He looked, not at the broken bird, as we did,
But far into the eyes of Coüy-oüy,
The Princess of the Killimacs.
Medicine Man, was it not a Brave's hour,
Was it not a Warrior's hour,
That hour in which I stood unflinching
And saw her take him from me?
I, whose heart had possessed him
Since we shot the play arrows of childhood,
And together chased the painted wings
Through the flower fields of the Canawacs.

Then came Prairie Flower,
Mate of the Great Sachem,
To lead away the mighty strangers.
For many suns and as many moons
We feasted and danced gaily.

Was I not brave to wear fine robes,
Nightly to chant boastful songs?
My breast was torn and bleeding
As the broken wing of the fire bird,
Yet many searing times
At the command of the Great Sachem
Was I made to smile in the Council Lodge,
And to dance the Love Dance of the Mandanas;
That dance that I had learned in secret
From the flying feet of my Mother,
Learned only for Mountain Lion,
For the great ceremonial of love giving.

Medicine Man, Hear me!
Not again did the eyes of Mountain Lion
Travel across the Council Lodge
To seek my eyes in understanding.
Coüy-oüy had taken his eyes;
On her face she proudly kept them,
For he saw nought but the blue mist around her,
The gleam of her hair, the red bow of her lips.
He heard nought but the luring music
Of her echo sweet voice,
And the happy song of her quilled robe
As she hourly passed among our people;
While always clinging to her breast or shoulder
Proud and fearless as in freedom,
Rode the sacred wounded bird of blood redness.

Her father homed in wigwams
Near the lodge of the Great Sachem,
Rode his hunting pony on the far chase beside him,
Sat on high in the councils of our Chieftains.

When the dancing and feasting were over
It was known through the voices of the criers
That for many moons our visitors
Would home beside our campfires,
Learning of our wisdom from us,
Teaching, where their customs differed.

The Great Sachem was swift to order,
The rarest fish from sea or river,
The juiciest of the small birds
From the snares of the children,
The tenderest fawn flesh
From the arrows of the hunters,
To be brought for the cooking kettles
Of the strangers who trusted us.

Every day I watched the slow sun,
And at night I danced with the maidens,
But no sleep came to my eyes,
No hunger came to my body.
My Mother tempted me with bits as sweet
As the Sachem had commanded for Coü-oüy,
But my parched throat refused them in scorn,

My dry tongue found no savour in juicy fatness,
My hot hands could not place the beads evenly.

Then it was that my Mother came to my wigwam,
And closing the doorway she stood before me,
And long and long she looked far into my heart.
Deep in her eyes there gathered the black fury,
And a storm like the wildest storm
That ever twisted the cedars in wrath,
Raged in her rocking breasts
And her lightning flashing eyes.

Fiercely in the silent Canawac motion tongue,
Her look burning into my living spirit,
She made the sign of the quick kill;
And turning she slipped like a vision
From my wigwam of torture.
As she crept into the mouth of darkness,
O Medicine Man,
I knew that she had but made the outward sign
For the savage inward purpose
Long hardening in my deepest heart.

The next sun, when our mothers sent the maidens
With their baskets to the Fall nut gathering,
I kept ever close beside Coüy-oüy, my enemy,
And in my breast there flamed fierce anger,
That she had robbed my heart.

Always at the door of her wigwam,
Rocking in the sunshine of each dawning,
Hung a yellow osier basket woven like a ball,
With its ribs placed wide enough apart
To give the gifts of light and air,
Close enough to prison a flame red bird.

And there, healed of his wounds,
But forever broken for flight,
On a twig shaped and placed by Mountain Lion,
Coüy-oüy, the flame feathered voyager of air,
Sang a song filled with tears and wailing,
The cry of a broken bird heart
Pleading for wings and a mate.

The Great Spirit heard his notes of sorrow,
But I hardened my heart against the sacred bird;
For his golden cage had been cunningly wrought
By hands of such great strength that naked
They had slain the mountain lion
And taken its yellow skin for a ceremonial robe,
Its fierce name for the sign of a great deed.

Now I saw in dazed wonder
That Mountain Lion had grown papoose hearted.
He was not leading the hunters in the forest;
He was not at the head of the fishermen
Spearing and netting as of old.

He had proved his manhood in deadly combat;
He had won his name by the fiercest fight
Ever known among any of our warriors;
But now he chose to lie in his wigwam and dream,
And I knew what he dreamed, O Medicine Man!

So with soft words and pretty sign talk
I led his evil spirit to the bright late flower;
I showed her the little flitting creatures.
And when I helped her fill her basket
With sweet nuts that were greatly desired,
My ear, quick for every sound of menace,
Marked the thing the softer one did not hear.

By a slender beckoning blue flower,
I measured the distance,
And skilfully I led the other nut pickers
Far away from the spot of danger.
Then I dared her to race in turn with me
To leap the long leap across the nut bushes,
To land at the mark of the sky flower,
A fair thing to shelter death.

I set down my heaped basket of furry nuts,
I gathered my robe to my knees and raced swiftly,
I made the leap to which I challenged her,
Before her and all of the wondering maidens.

She followed my footsteps like a rift of white light.
She rose high in the air over the sweet nut bushes,
But she had not my strength, not my purpose.
My leap carried me far over the danger;
But as I turned quickly to watch her
I saw her touch earth in smiling confidence,
At the mark of the waving sky flower.

When she tore away, her eyes wide in danger,
Dragging her robe from the clinging thicket,
With greedy eyed, death hungry heart
I watched her proud face.

The Great Spirit had not pitied me,
If the curved death serpent had struck at her,
His awful fangs had missed her soft body.
O Medicine Man, make me magic for the fire bird,
Ease my spirit of the snaring water flower.

Many suns I waited in hunger and spirit searching;
Far and alone I wandered over the meadows,
Beside the white sand shore of the sea water.

One day I lost from my necklace
A carved piece of rare blue shell,
A beautiful heaven tinted shell, a treasure,
Got from traders from the Islands of the seas
Far to the south of us—across vast waters;

A big shell so precious among us that only one
Cost us the weaving of fifty blankets;
The greatest wealth known to our people.

Slipping unseen from all the others,
I went alone through a trail of deep forest
To the back of a far secret cavern I knew,
Where lay hidden my precious blue shell,
And I cut one small piece from it,
For the mending of my necklace.
When I came back to the sun, O Medicine Man,
And through the forest followed my trail,
I heard the rushing thunder footsteps
And the death growl of Black Bear.

I looked, and I saw at the welcoming cavern mouth,
Hurrying in from the forest, the bloody killer,
Mother black bear, gaunt and hard chased,
With far hanging tongue and foam dripping jaws;
And behind her, panting and whimpering,
Her pair of travel worn hungry little children.

Some far tribe had driven her from her home,
And with her crying small ones following
She was seeking shelter in my treasure lodge.

I watched her turn and forbid her children to enter;
Alone, bravely to the inner recesses she went.

Her nose must have told her of my recent body,
But she could lead her sleepy cubs no farther,
For the death weariness was upon all of them.

So she came back to the cave's homing mouth,
Drove her panting cubs to the farthest wall,
And making fierce boastful war talk,
There she claimed the homing rights of the wild.

I went back to where our women were working
And I began the Brave's task of drilling my shell.
Coüy-oüy came and lay beside me, watching.
Her tribes had no knowledge
Of such rare precious ornaments.
She greatly desired to possess one
For her most precious bracelet.

When we were alone, as I worked
I told her how to find my cavern
And where the shell was hidden on a high ledge.

Her heart knew no fear;
Her eyes shone with gladness
When I told her my great secret of blue treasure
And that, if she would go alone,
She might take for herself one piece.
The one I was drilling so carefully I must use
For the mending of my rarest necklace.

When I thought of the dripping jaws
Of the killer, ravenous, tormented to frenzy,
And looked at the smoothness of her body,
I relented; I knew mercy.
It was in my softened heart
To say that the hunters must go with her;
But before my lips of compassion
Could speak the words my heart said,
With the joy light shining on her face,
She told me in happy confidence:
"I will take but one small piece
To ornament my richest bracelet,
And I will polish it smooth even as you do,
And Mountain Lion shall carve it for me."

O Medicine Man, look in mercy upon me!
Darest say she drove not her own stake,
Lighted her torture fire with fearless hands?

Darest say she knew not that Mountain Lion
Would now make her our Chieftainess?
Darest say the buzzing of a swarm of maidens
Had not told her many suns past
That Mountain Lion was my man,
That he had danced the Mating Dance
Of the Mandanas with me,
Before the assembly in the Council House
On the night of her coming among us?

All that night my eyes surrounded her wigwam.
With first dawn ray she came slipping forth
And darted down the veiled trail
That led through the deep forest.

Well had I marked the path
That ran to the cave's mouth.
When she had gone I closed the slender opening
Through which I had unceasingly watched
The moon's long journey for her,
And for the first time in many pitiless suns
I fell into the deep visionless sleep
Of the body tired past endurance.

It was near evening when my Mother wakened me.
She told me, her eyes burning deep into mine,
How hunters in the forest had found Coüy-oüy
Fleeing like a doe before the furious black kille.

When she fell, her utmost strength exhausted,
Over her raged the foaming black death.
Her beautiful breast and arms
Were forever shorn of their smoothness,
But she lived, and her hateful face of allurement
Her trouble-maker face, was untouched.

I knew what my Mother knew
When she turned from my doorway.

Medicine Man, the killer had not struck
To the depth where life tented.
She had not sent my enemy to the Great Spirit.
She had only moved to compassion
The heart in the breast of Mountain Lion,
So that alone in his canoe he speared the rare fish,
Alone on the mountains he sought the tender bird,
Even the bright flower, the red leaf,
To lay at her doorway—love's offering.

Well I knew that when she was healed
He would stand tall and straight before her,
And in his fierce pleading eyes
She would find the great understanding.
Then, Medicine Man, despair settled in my heart;
I shrivelled like the ungathered wild plum,
I burned with a fierce, hot inward fire.

The day came when Coüy-oüy stood forth
Whitely robed in shining wonder,
Untouched in her courage and her beauty
Save that she hid her arms with deep fringes.

In bitterness of spirit I turned from her,
I followed the long lonely trail
Through the fringed blue flower meadows.
I lay beside the small still waters of the flat lands,
And I talked to my sister, the tall blue Heron

While she hunted food among the water flowers;
And I told the wise old Heron
For the easement of my torture,
I told her, O Medicine Man,
This same tale I tell you.

And then, Medicine Man,
The Heron gave me a sure sign.

She stalked to where a great white flower
Was resting in serene beauty,
Like a sheaf of fallen moons upon the water,
And from beneath the safety of its shelter
She picked out my little frog brother so easily.

She tossed him clear and high in the air,
And head first he shot down her long red gullet.
Then she looked at me questioningly
And awaited my understanding.

So I slipped from my robe of doeskin,
And fighting my way through the black muck,
And the snares of the entangling round leaves,
I gathered the white flower riding like a spirit canoe
That had sheltered fatness for my sister Heron.

Clean and white as storm foam I washed it,
Carefully on the home trail I carried it,

Like a living thing to my wigwam I took it,
And I put it in a cooking kettle
Overflowing cold water from mountain torrent,
Then I waited for the spirit to make me a sure sign.

That night, when Coüy-oüy's shadow touched me,
Like a star fallen from on high was her beauty.
Her eyes rested for the first time
On the white flower of the still waters.
On her knees she made a little medicine over it;
In her throat she chanted a hushed song
Of exultation and worship,
Over the wonder beauty of the white flower
That she had never known
In the far, cold land of the Killimacs.

On her face there was a veiling breath mist
Like the softest ray from the lovers' moon;
All around her wrapped the blue light blanket
That seemed to steal from her body
Creeping through her white robe.

Then, Medicine Man, I told her this fair tale:
That I loved a young Brave
Son of the mighty Eagle Feather,
The Chief of a high mountain tribe far north of us,
And that when he saw me in the deep forest
Holding up high the fair water flower

The lure of its white magic
Would make in his cold heart
That strong medicine I needed,
To bring him face to face with me
In that great understanding
Which is followed by union, among our tribes.

O Medicine Man, I told her by word
And by convincing sign talk
That if her heart ran soft as gold sweetness
At the coming of any of our young Braves,
And her roving eyes flew to them
Searching for loving understanding,
Until she feared they would betray her,
And the tongue of her heart pled for them,
And her willing hands thought sweet sign talk—
If she would hold aloft the white flower,
That she had gathered from the water,
Deep in the thickness of the forest
Where none but her Brave could see it,
It would surely make for her the great magic
That would draw him straight to the flame
Of the candle she set before her wigwam.

Long and long and long again
She watched the white flower.
All her heart melted at its gold heart sweetness;
And then she looked deep into my eyes,

To spirit depths she searched me carefully,
But pride would not let me quail before her.

She knew she had barely missed
The peril of the death snake:
She had sent hunters to bring its rattles for her.
She knew she had faced the red death
By the black killer of the treasure cave;
Yet was my spirit so strong over her doubting
That once again in the chill of early morning
She set her proud feet confidently
On the forest trail I pictured for her.

She knew not how the white flower
Of the still water lifted to the sun,
She knew not the wind reeds and flute rushes.

I told her the path her feet must follow alone,
That when she saw a white flower
Like a rocking canoe cradled by soft wind,
Riding on the breast of the blue water,
She should leave her robe in the deep forest,
She should run like the chased antelope,
And leap from the sand shore
To the resting place of the flower.
She should snatch it in her hand, hold it high,
And swim back to the red beach of dawning.

But Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
I sent her not on the meadow path
Where the war ponies fattened.
I sent her not to the still black water
Of the singing reeds and rushes,
Where the charmed spirit flowers
With sun hearts and snow faces
Spread in flocks like feeding gulls
Over the breast of the dark waters.

Medicine Man, I sent her straight to that one spot
On the sands of the great sea water in the deep bay,
In the sheltered cove of the soundless depths
Where every Canawac knew there crouched waiting
The hungry Monster of the lazy sucking sands.

Again I watched all the moon time
And in the gold red morning
She slipped from her wigwam
And entered the ancient forest.
Soft as flame ascending, swift as night bird flying,
I circled past her among my familiar tree brothers.
Long before her coming to the bay of torture,
I dropped the snaring white flower,
Fresh and lovely, a convincing decoy,
Far into the heart of the pitiless death pool
Where the eager mouths of the swallowing sands
Embrace and draw, quietly, but so surely

That no strength of arm can lift,
No power of spirit can save their victim.

Behind the rocks I hid and waited;
In anguish I prayed to the Great Spirit
That the luring white flower of wonder
Might rest on the gently heaving water
Until the time of the coming of my enemy.

As I waited with my eyes ever watching, watching
The wave cradled flower white as swan feathers,
Through the air shot the slim scarred form
Of Coüy-oüy, my hated enemy.

Her slender feet touched the water
And went down softly as a diving bird,
Her reaching hand caught the white flower surely.

She lifted her face to the face of the morning;
The beauty that shone upon her
Was like the beauty of the Great Spirit
When he had first the vision of the flower world
And the wonder of flower magic was sent to him.

Coüy-oüy held the water flower in high triumph;
She gazed at it, she laughed to it, she kissed it,
She laid it against her glad face like a papoose,
And chanted to it throaty words of lullaby.

Then with the other hand and with her quick feet
She began swimming to reach the certain shore.

When her light feet would not lift to the surface
And her strong stroke would not move her body,
Slowly the dawn light faded from her face
And a look like the look of a little hurt papoose
Came over her in slow wonder—
A look of surprise, of doubt
That her strength could be unavailing.

Then she struggled like an arrow stricken sea bird,
For the sure sands grip their captive cruelly.

Then gray terrors came sweeping upon her,
And her face was white, white as the white flower
That she held at arm's length above her.

Her black oiled braids floated out on the water,
While a cry, a shrill cry, a high screaming cry,
The voice of a wounded mountain lion,
Rang from her lips in quivering terror.

I knew who had carefully taught her
To use that cry in time of trouble:
I knew that for my Brave she was calling.
And I knew, too, how the wood and the water
Carried sound far distances to wild ears.

I wondered if Mountain Lion were on the water
Or if he were hunting the wide forest
Or if he were drilling ornaments of blue shell
Or weaving the sacred, singing fire bird
A new wigwam of gold osiers.

Only once she screamed that awful wild cry,
Then her struggles were the final battle.
Already her face of anguish was even
With the treacherous water hiding death,
Already her slender body was forever encased.

One arm slowly beat the fair bay helplessly;
But even as the gray terror closed in upon her,
The stealthy catlike death of the waves
And the little famished mouths of sand,
The slow mealy strangling sands,
She bravely held aloft the white flower.

And then, Medicine Man, I cared not if he came,
The Mountain Lion, my faithless man!
The utmost reach of his strength could not save her,
He might go down to bottomless depths with her;
He might strive and bear me down to her.
Come was my just and rightful hour of triumph!

I arose and went forth on the white shore
I smiled like a mother upon her,

Then I pointed my finger, I laughed in scorn,
I made bad sign talk at her,
I danced the Braves' triumph dance, with song,
I cried to her in the exultation of victory:
"He will not come again to you,
The faithless Mountain Lion, my man,
He who danced the sacred Mating Dance
Of the Mandanas with me in the Council Lodge,
He who read into my eyes the great understanding
Even upon the night of your coming among us.
Go thou back to the evil spirits who sent thee!"

Until the last wave overran her eyes,
The slim thing of bone hardness,
Of arrow straightness, and sureness,
Of bird swiftness, would not look once upon me,
Would not plead with me for mercy
Nor sign for help at my hands.
When she saw me she suddenly ceased to struggle,
And with her eyes fixed upon the white flower,
The fallen moon that rides the still black water,
She went to bottomless depths silently;
Slowly, slowly, Medicine Man, she sank,
Until the flower again rested
On the breast of the unconscious water.

Then I went into the forest on her trail,
I hunted her precious robe of snow white doeskin,

I rolled a heavy stone in its rich bead work:
I carried it back swiftly,
And upon the face of the white flower
Slowly sinking beneath the water I threw it.

Then I knelt in cunning like the fox,
And swiftly working my way backward,
With my steady, careful fingers
I sifted the sands over our footsteps,
Until I came to the feather grass
And the dry leaves of the deep forest.

Like the hunted I ran to the safety of my wigwam,
I buried myself in my soft robes of satisfaction,
My heart laughed in victory,
The sleep I had lost for many mocking moons
While my brain thought snares,
Now settled heavy, like sickness upon me.

Even as I slept in deep stupor,
There came dreams and yet again dreams,
But they were not familiar dreams
Of the low humming rattler
Nor the foaming mouth of the knife footed killer.
I dreamed that over my heart flamed and scorched
And burned Coüy-oüy, the little sacred red bird;
While my hands could not braid
And put the gay ornaments in my hair,

Could not put on my robe,
Could not tie my moccasins,
Could not lift food to my hungry mouth,
Because they were full of the white flowers
From the land of the still water.

When the alarum cries sounded
And the ponies' feet thundered,
When the hunting dogs raged
And shrill clamour arose in the camp,
My Mother shook me,
And long she looked deep into my eyes
And I looked into her eyes;
And then in the silent talk of our tribe
I made the swift going down sign
Of the Monster sands of the far bay.

There was no triumph on her face
When she slowly turned from me,
And fear was born in my heart
Because I clearly saw its awful image
When it sprang into life in the deeps of her eyes.

When the scouts and hunters were gathering,
When the visiting Chief was threatening,
And all of our Chiefs were in secret council,
While the women were wailing the death cry,

There came to my lodge in that hour,
The footsteps I had always awaited.
So I passed through my doorway
And in the revealing sunlight
I stood before Mountain Lion,
Terrible to face in his deep rage.

With dazed hand I drew sleep from my eyes;
I met his gaze stupidly with smiling face;
When he saw this he was forced to doubt
The thing he had come expecting to see.
When he tried to look far into my eyes for a sign
He saw only stupid Old Man Sleep sitting there
Mocking the tortured heart in his breast.

Then he caught me fiercely by the shoulders,
He drew me close to him,
He forced my eyes to meet his,
And low and hoarse he cried to me in torture:
"She jumped to the mark of the sky flower,
And the snake with death in its mouth was there;
The mark was the mark you set for her, Yiada.

"She went to the far, lonely cave
Of the chased and hungry black death,
And the rare shell that she sought
Was a part of your treasure, Yiada.

"Again she is missing, evil spirits know how long,
What torture death have you sent her seeking now—
Coüy-oüy, my brave fire bird, my woman?"

O Medicine Man, if he had not said soft words,
I might have told him as he held me before him.
I might have braved the storm of his wrath
And made my journey to the Great Spirit
In that menacing breath.
When I saw that she lived in my place
In the secret tent of his heart
I laughed at him and I cried tauntingly:
"She is chasing painted wings
In the pasture meadows of the valley.
She is at the still pool hunting the water flower:
She would use its white magic
To snare your wild heart,
Even as she used the red magic of the fire bird.
Go and seek her, O mighty hunter!
Go and seek—until you find her!"

"Like the wings of a snow white sea swallow
Writing mating signs on the blue sky of Heaven
Flashed his quick hands of entreaty,
In the little love sign talk he taught her."

PART III

YIADA'S FLIGHT TO THE MANDANAS

When the hunters had raced from our village
Toward the land of ice,
Toward the land of hot suns,
Toward the land of dawn,
And where the sun dives in the sea,
In the conflicting cross winds
Between the paths of their going,
On their stoutest ponies
Rode the young women and the squaws
Who could be spared with safety
From the watch of the campfires
And the care of the little happy children.

Foremost among these I rode on my fastest pony,
But to my Mother I made a secret sign
To remain in waiting by her campfire
And yet the swifter sign of the quick return.

Because I was first in the fish drying
The berry picking of earth and mountain,

The gathering of seeds of all kinds
And the work of the women,
The other maidens went where I sent them.
Then swiftly I made a wide circle
And slipped back to the lodge of my Mother,
And leaving my pony in the tented forest
I crept to the door of my Father,
Unseen by any of the watchers.

There I lay in hiding
While my Mother worked silently.
She rolled a bundle of my finest robes,
My moccasins, my best bow and full quiver,
Big strips of smoked venison,
Dried fish and bear and deer meat,
Nuts and tallow cake and dried berries,
And the last little sweet meal cake
That her hands would ever make me.

When Old Man Moon made soft talk
In his canoe among the clouds,
From the back of the lodge of my Father I crept
After I had stood long and again long
Before my Mother, racked in fierce anguish,
And made her many signs of the great crossing,
For we knew that never again should I see her.

We made long straight talk between us
That when the others returned from the search

I should be missing, as was Coüy-oüy,
So that a new search would be made for my body.
Then should she cry the death wail
Through the length of all our village for me;
And make high prayer to the Great Spirit
For my safe crossing to the Happy Lands.

Thus her lodge and wigwams
And my Father and brothers
Would be saved from all suspicion of treachery,
And to the mourning of the Great Chief
Who visited our campfires in confidence,
Would be added the wailing of our tribe for Yiada.

I rode my Father's swiftest remaining pony,
I turned my face between the sun's rising
And the hot suns of the South.
I slipped through the forest and on, and on,
Each moon on, and again on,
Fast and far as the pony could run, I journeyed
In the direction where my Mother had told me
Lay the encampment of her people, the Mandanas.

When the tired pony could travel no farther
I let him feed and rest and drink;
And then again I rode, moon after moon,
Until he grew lean as deep snow gray wolf.
When I had eaten the last crumb of meal cake,

And there was nothing left in my bundle,
But tough strings of deer meat,
I came one sun-rising to signs of the Mandanas.

Then, O Medicine Man,
I slipped from the pony and bathed carefully,
I oiled my body, braided my hair with ornaments
And I put on a snow white robe
Whose bleaching had been taught my Mother
By Coüy-oüy as a secret art.
I stripped the beads and the obsidian
From my heaviest necklace for ceremonials
And wore only the sky water blue
Of the precious blue shell.

When I looked into the shining water
Above the white sands of the lake bed,
I saw in my face great beauty like high magic,
Wrought by the fear painter, the hunger moon,
The far stealthy journey, the anxious heart—
Beauty even greater than the beauty of Coüy-oüy.

And so, O Medicine Man,
At fire lighting I rode into the village.
The spies and the couriers raced before me,
Crying the wonder of my coming,
The fierce, snarling dogs yapped after me,
The frightened children ran from me,

Angered squaws with harsh voices
Cried threatening, forbidding words at me.

When I came to the door of the Council House
At the head of the long village of fatness,
I slipped from my pony, and leading him after me
I walked to the feet of the Great Chief
Sitting in solemn state on his throne;
I gave him the deeps of my troubled spirit.

My eyes slowly unfolded to his eyes
The tale of the robbed heart,
Of the tortured sleep, of the lone moon trail,
Of a fugitive from the arrows of an enemy.

With Mandan speech and by the sign language
I told him that I was of his blood,
Of his tribe through my Mother;
Seeking refuge with her people,
And I told him, O Medicine Man,
These things of woe, I now tell you.

Beside him came the Great Chiefs and wise men,
Around him the warriors, the spies and hunters;
While back of the chiefs, dim in the firelight,
Again and again I felt the eye of a mighty hunter,
A young Brave, with the broad shoulders
The round face of compassion,

And the softer eye of the Mandanas
Of the lands where peace homed securely.

Little of my story had I told the Chieftain,
As straight and fearless I faced him,
Before I knew in my heart that over his head
I was speaking to the stirred heart of his son.
I was asking of him rest and meat, and tribe rights,
Even as Coüy-oüy had asked meal and water
Of Mountain Lion, instead of our women,
For the broken fire bird that rested on her breast.

As I asked I knew the answer in his heart;
For I was tall and I was seasoned,
And I was tortured beyond bearing,
And I was beautiful with a living spirit beauty
Far above that of the Mandan women around me.

When they learned that my Mother
Was of their tribe in her youth,
That I had fled as the hunted for cave rights,
They held counsel, and they set me a tall wigwam;
They gave me the rich food of a welcome guest,
And they led me to my wrinkled, gray grandfather.

The great council of Chiefs and Medicine Men,
The wise men and all of the young Braves
Made Mandan sign talk to hold me securely,

As if born of their tribe and village,
Even if Mountain Lion suspected treachery
And rode in war paint against them for vengeance.

Then was my body lazy with rich comfort
But my spirit was gray ashes
Burned out by the flames of the fire bird
Nesting in the heart of my breast.
I was all over sick for my Mother,
For my brothers and my Father, who loved me,
For the clear sky, the heavy clouds,
And the taunting water of the restless sea,
For the fat grass, the flower valleys
And the tall mountains, with head-bands of snow,
For the night fires of village and Council Lodge,
And the little honey cakes of my Mother;
While I dared not even remember
The face of Mountain Lion's agony,
As I tortured him in derision,
And he turned from me in hot anger.

As the sign was in the deep eyes of Star Face,
Son of the Great Chief, the night of my coming,
So it was in the suns that followed.
Well I knew that in the day
When he saw candle lighting in my eyes
His willing feet would dance before me
The hated Love Dance of the Mandanas.

He was a broad Brave, a fierce Brave, a warrior.
He would sit at the council in the seat of his father
When he had made his last journey
To the far Spirit Lands of final peace.
His earth-lodge would be warm
With the skins of beaver, mink and otter;
While the white dress of a great Princess
From the bleached and softened doeskin,
Beaded with the sign of the Chief's mate,
Would cover my sick heart with the robe of pride.

So hard I worked, O Medicine Man,
From the lifting to the setting of every sun,
So long I danced at night in the Assembly Lodge,
That when I walked to my wigwam
Sleep came swift and deep upon me.

Sometimes I lay visionless,
My body worn to stone heaviness;
Sometimes the flaming bird burned my breast
To gray ashes, like dead campfires,
And the white lilies overflowed my unwilling hands
Until I fought to keep from choking among them,
Even as Coüy-oüy was smothered
By the little yielding wave hidden sands.

When I had worked that season
Until the troubling mating moon

Sailed like a polished pearl canoe in the Spring sky,
When the hurrying blood of the trees
Ran fast in the red and yellow osiers,
When the birches, givers of large gifts,
Put out their little talking leaves of gold,
When strange birds made love chase in the forest
And the fish leaped high from the shallow water
As the yellow spawn they planted and quickened,
There came a night of quivering moon magic
When, after all the others had assembled,
Star Face entered the Council Lodge,
His head lifted to face the star country,
And the great wealth of his riches
Rode flauntingly from head-band to moccasins.

He had scoured his skin to fatling softness,
He had oiled his body to birch bark smoothness,
His braided hair was filled with eagle feathers,
With quill feathers of white swan
And wing pinions of wild turkey.

He was robed in the soft gray skins of the otter;
On his feet were beaded moccasins of deerskin;
In his hand was a broad fan of the wing feathers
Of the proud and contented white swan,
Round his neck lay heavy shining ornaments
Made from the teeth and the cutting claws
Of many black and brown bear,

Of fierce mountain lion and wildcat,
And the big teeth of the elk and moose,
Carved copper and cunningly pierced bone beads,
From obsidian and little singing shells.

The dance of the maidens was beginning
When he entered in high pride.
He came through the long Lodge
And stood with compelling eye before me,
And before his Father on the throne,
And his Mother, his brothers and sisters,
The whole council of Chiefs and wise men
And all the assembled people of his tribe.

Slowly he began the Mating Dance
Of the Mandana who would prevail,
While his eyes like coals from the campfire
Seared my body to action—
The eyes of black bear when he is facing the hunter,
The fierce eyes of the starving panther
When the hunger moon is shining,
The scouting eyes of the eagle of high spaces,
Seeking a mate in the far country of the stars.

When he had danced the dance of allurement
To the last stamped out measure,
Straightway I walked to the feet
Of his powerful Father, on his throne,

And in the speech of the Mandanas I said to him:
"Great Chief, thou hast seen the dance
Of thy mighty son, Star Face.
If I dance the ancient Mating Dance
Of the unconquered Mandanas
This night before thee, for Star Face,
Even as he has danced before thee, for me,
Great and powerful Chief, am I of thy people?"

The Great Chief looked into my eyes and said:
"Thou art of mine, even as Star Face is my son;
With our last arrow, with our last battle axe,
With the stoutest blood of our hearts
Will our Braves defend thee forever."

The next sun, the young women
Set me a tall prideful wigwam apart.
They bathed and oiled my heart sick body;
They beaded and feathered fine robes
For the mating ceremonials of a rich Brave.

In another tent all of the young men
Were busy preparing Star Face for our union.

Down the long wide trail
Of the swarming, bee like village
The painted criers on swift horses
Were announcing the marriage of Yiada,

Daughter of the far and friendly Canawacs,
And Star Face, the son of the Head Chief
Of the boastful Mandanas—the proud ones!

So, with the full Mandan ceremonial,
I gave my tortured body to Star Face.

There was no heart left in me, O Medicine Man,
And that Star Face might not miss it,
When he looked in my eyes in tenderness,
I gave to him such willing and sure service
As no other Chief of the Mandanas had ever known.

Soft were the skins that bedded his wigwams,
Warm his earth-lodge against the sting of winter,
Sweet was the crisp squaw bread
That bubbled in his fat kettles,
Gold was the mountain of tallow
Stacked in his storehouse for winter,
High heaped were the nuts of tree and bush
Gathered and husked against the Ice Chief,
Rich were the berries dried with sunshine,
Boiled back to tenderness, honey sweetened.

And, Medicine Man,
No other Brave served his mate as Star Face.
High and boastful was his pride
When I gave him a straight little chieftain,

And great to pain was my joy
When I oiled the little fatling:
For the fire ever burning in my heart
Had not scorched his small body,
The fulness of my hands had set no mark upon him.

He was a young chieftain of spirit magic
Who in suns before his coming to my lodge,
Had ridden on the backs of milk white fawns
Over the floating thistle seed trail
That we saw nightly in the country of the stars,
Who had played with baby beavers
In their village at the creek's mouth,
Who had hunted canyon ways,
Stout heart with bear and panther,
Who had sailed over tall mountains with the eagle,
Who had hung in the eye of the sun
With the silver winged falcon,
Who had fished angry waters with the crafty mink,
Who had raced among the white birches
With the soft eyed does of Spring,
And slept deep with his tall blue heron brothers
In their rough nests among the wailing cedars.

Every sun I watched him,
Every moon my fear-filled hand was on him.
Ever his gay cradle was light in my eye
Its tinkling shells sweet music in my ears.

When he could walk with strength
I led him to the meadows, to the forest,
And I taught him—thou knowest,
O Medicine Man, thou knowest well,
How carefully I taught him
Our every custom and tradition;
And how Star Face trained him with the bow,
To fish the rough waters, to ride the wild ponies,
And how he taught him all the laws and customs
For young Braves who would be warriors.

Thou knowest how all of the tribe shouted
When first he sat his pony alone,
And rode it through the village at its racing speed.
And then, O Medicine Man, thou knowest the day
When first he strayed far from me
With the little curious feet of childhood,
And now, now, I hear the wild shrieks of terror
When the snake that has death in its mouth
Struck its pitiless fangs into his tender flesh.

When his little blanket wrapped body,
Looking so long and straight, and lonely,
Was carried to the far, haunted death village
All the forest echoed wild cries of mourning
From a thousand wigwams of desolation
And earth-lodges that loved him.

My stiff lips made no sound,
My robbed hands lay death's captive,
For my eyes saw again the nut thicket,
And the thing the sky flower sheltered,
My ears again heard the soft buzzing menace.
Well I knew that Coüy-oüy
Had escaped the watchful Great Spirit,
That she had come back to earth
To strike me through the death snake,
That hers were the fangs of poison
Buried deep in my little fatling.

Thou knowest, Medicine Man,
How another little chief came to me,
And how again, with all the wild magic
All the wisdom of our tribe,
All the strength in our power
And the cunning of our hearts of love,
The great Star Face, and I, his strong mate,
Strove over the life of our son.

Thou knowest how he shouted
When to us there came a little sister.
And then the black day, that dread day
Thou knowest well as any,
When tall and straight he entered the forest alone
To strive for the first vision from the Great Spirit.

Without food and without sleep
I knelt silent in my lonely wigwam;
With one hand ever easing my burning breast
With the other I fought back
The slowly rising tide of the white flowers,
The luring spirit flowers of destruction
That home on the still lake waters.
I needed not the chilling death cry
That came to my ears three suns later:
I knew surely that my little chieftain
Would not come back to me from the forest.

He still breathed when the hunters
Brought before me his stout body
Ripped deep by the cruel knives of the killer.

The black death, man's height and buffalo heavy,
Lay dead in the far uptorn pitying forest
Where they had battled for their lives.
It had been the greatest fight
That youth had ever waged in our tribe.

All night the anxious Medicine Men
Made their strongest Medicine for him;
But the green sickness was eating his slender body.
In the morning, O Medicine Man,
Coüy-oüy again danced her triumph dance,
Again scored victory over me,

When our unavailing death wail
Beat against the copper face of heaven
For my little chieftain, my brave little warrior.

Because of her pointing finger no cry would I utter.
Silently in my tortured wigwam
I writhed in the flame of the fire bird
And choked with the rising sick sweetness
Of the hated water flower of the pasture lands.

But ever I held in a tight grasp
The clutching hand of little fat face,
And my ears ached with her shrill wail
For the long journey of her brother;
For she had ridden his racing pony
Before him on the saddle on far trails,
And gathered gay flowers in the valleys
On the coloured faces of high hills,
And brought me the little juicy birds
From the snares of cunning set in the valleys,
And chased the war painted wings
Where the hunting ponies pastured.
Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Darest say I had not killing torture?

When the burning of the fire bird was past bearing,
When the stifling cloud of the white flowers
Sickened my body to leanness,

I arose and began skin dressing and fish drying
And seed grinding and weaving blankets.

All of the squaws and the young women
Pointed taunting mischievous fingers
When, silent, I passed among them.
They said: "She is possessed of a devil;
Evil spirits drive her with secret arrows,
It is with strength stolen from the Spirits
That she works every sun at the fish drying,
The meat curing, the seed gathering
And the making of tents not needed.

But ever, when far grown I carried little Dove Eye,
Little cooing bird, on my aching shoulders,
Ever I pressed her against my burning heart:
I would not trust her to the stoutest cradle.
Tightly I held her that from my fear strong hands
She might not be pushed out by the white flowers.

When her stumbling little feet of uncertainty
Carried her to the willing knees of Star Face,
Like the first dawn of Spring long awaited
Came the light to his hungry eyes,
Like the soft talking brook water
Came the sweet words in his throat;
Like the wings of a snow white sea swallow
Writing mating signs on the blue sky of heaven

Flashed his quick hands of entreaty,
In the little love sign talk he taught her.
Many suns he sat grinding small beads of bone
Every little rare white shell he found,
And polishing squirrel and otter teeth
For the necklace she wore so proudly.

Never did I leave my hands free of her
Unless the hands of Star Face were upon her.
When he made signs of soft pale-faces
I made signs of the passing of spirits,
So he saw that my hands ever upon her
Were only that I might hold her back
From the land of the great Unseen;
For only these three, Medicine Man,
Only these three little people,
The Great Spirit sent to my lodge,
From the far land of cradle filling.

Always when we came near still or running water
I held her with the hug of black bear.
Before she might chase the little fishes,
Even in the shallow inshore water of the bays,
Or hunt the clinging mussel for food,
Or bathe with the small people,
I went before her every step
And always my feet were feeling, searching,
For any sign of the sands of treachery.

In my heart I said: "They shall not have her,
The ravenous Monster mouths,
They shall not have her, the pitiless death sands!"

Thou knowest, Medicine Man,
The season of the great pow-wow
When I was needed at the fires roasting deer meat,
When I was needed to set the forest of wigwams
For seven tribes, seeking our welcome,
When I was needed to make swift preparation,
To use all the store of my knowledge,
For the coming of a cloud of peoples
From far countries to our village,
To teach us of their experience
And to learn of our wisdom from us,
Thou knowest that day, Medicine Man—
The greatest day of the life of our nation.

I held little Dove Eye tight
Then set her on the pony of Star Face before him
That she might ride to meet the friendly people.
Thou knowest how she danced to him,
And beat her little hands in triumph,
How she snatched at the sunbeams
And fluttered her fingers to me,
Like the flying painted wings
Honey gathering over the valley pastures;
How she made me the sign of birds far flying,

When she rode away at the head of our Braves,
On the proud pony of Star Face.

Thou knowest how again and again, harshly,
I made the sign of full cradling arms,
Of tight holding, of unsleeping spying,
To Star Face as he left me.

All day the fire bird burned my heart
All day I heard his prison song;
I stopped work at the smoking baking stones,
To push back the hated water flowers
Like fulling wool from the wild sheep's back.
Ever I pleadingly prayed the Great Spirit
To have her in his safe keeping.

And thou knowest how the mighty Chiefs
Rode with bowed, sorrowing heads before me.
Thou knowest how Star Face, my man,
Stood stricken and mourning at our doorway,
His empty hands turned down in sign of torture.

Thou knowest the tale the old wise man made
Of how her glad voice chanted with the birds
And her little hands clamoured and begged,
When they passed the white flowered still pool,
The magic ornament of the valley breast,

Where first she saw the flowers of dawn growing.
Thou knowest how she whimpered,
How she reached pleading hungry hands,
How she fought to be put down to pick them.

On his pony, Star-Face left her with the Braves,
While he made the welcome sign talk to the visitors,
While he spoke the brothers' friendly greeting,
While he smoked the contented peace pipe
That warmed the hearts of our visitors.
Thou knowest how she turned his war pony
And flew back over the trail, wind driven.
Thou knowest how the frightened hunters
Rode at racing speed to catch her,
And how they saw only one little hand
Not yet swallowed by the sand mouths
The living sign of coming mourning,
Tightly clutching the white flower of destruction
With its lying heart of the gold of happiness.

And thou knowest how three of our young Braves
Went down in the fierce sand mouths,
Fighting with full man strength to save her,
Until the mighty Chief, her grandfather, cried:
"It is enough. The Great Spirit has spoken.
He has taken her back to the land of short shadows.
We cannot have her. I have said it!"

Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Is there no magic in the toluache lily?
Is there no medicine in thy heaped storehouse,
Fat with all the harvest of field and forest,
That will quench the flaming fire bird,
That will ease its coal hot scorching?

Medicine Man, O Medicine Man,
Is there no magic granted by the Great Spirit
That will take from my tortured hands
This curse of snowy sweetness?
Call Coüy-oüy and ask if she has finished.
Tell her she has taken my all, my last little fatling,
Ask her, O Medicine Man, ask her in mercy
To send you High Magic from the Spirits,
That will empty my hands of the white flower,
That will ease from my sickened heart
The gnawing flame of the Fire Bird.

The names of the tribes used in "The Fire Bird" are fictitious. The country described begins in the land of the Salish tribes of Alaska, runs south to the lowest extent of British Columbia, and east to the vicinity north of North Dakota. All tribes and country described are Alaskan or Canadian.

THE END