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"The Sun-Dance of the Sioux" Written and Illustrated by Frederic Remington

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EDITOR

> The shout from the hill was reechoed by the thousand men in the valley; it was caught up by the spectators on the hills as the long line of warriors hurled themselves forward towards the sun-pole, the objective point of every armed and naked savage in the yelling line. As they converged towards it the slower ponies dropped out, and the weaker ones were crushed to the rear. Nearer and nearer they came, the long line becoming massed until it was but a surging crowd of plunging horses and yelling, gesticulating riders.

This was Frederic Remington's description of the opening of the Sun Dance of the Sioux, which he witnessed while visiting the Spotted Tail Indian Agency on Beaver Creek, in Nebraska.[1]

Remington was born on 4 October 1861 in Canton, New York. In the summer of 1880 he fell in love with Eva Adele Caten and asked her to marry him. However, Eva's father refused to allow them to be married. Though he liked Remington's attractive personality and healthy vigor, he believed that the young artist's future held few promising signs necessary for supporting a family. Deeply hurt, Remington journeyed west where he hoped to achieve the success that Eva's father required before approving the marriage.[2]

1. Frederic Remington, "The Sun-Dance of the Sioux," *Century* 39, no. 5 (Mar. 1890): 753-59.

2. Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 22 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 15: 496-97; Robin McKown, *Painter of the Wild West: Frederic Remington* (New York: Julian Messner, 1959), p. 54; Harold McCracken, *Frederic Remington: Artist of the Old West* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1947), pp. 31-32.

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Eventually, Remington purchased a small mule ranch near Peabody, Kansas, but in the early spring of 1884 he sold his holdings and concentrated on his painting career. Producing a series of articles for eastern magazines, he captured the West as he knew it. Often as subjects he chose events that he had witnessed during his wanderings. Once, he was fortunate enough to observe the famous Sun Dance of the Sioux before both official and public condemnation put an end to such "pagan rites." A few years later he published his reminiscences of the dance in *The Century*, complete with illustrations. The following is Remington's narrative of a portion of the event. Only occasional brackets and footnotes have been added to aid in identification.[3]

A few years ago it was the good fortune of the writer to witness, at the Spotted Tail Indian Agency, on Beaver Creek, Nebraska, the ceremony of the great sun-dance of the Sioux.[4] Perhaps eight thousand Brule Sioux were quartered at the agency at that time, and about forty miles to the west, near the head of the White River, there was another reservation of Sioux, numbering probably a thousand or fifteen hundred less. Ordinarily each tribe or reservation has its own celebration of the sun-dance; but owing to the nearness of these two agencies it was this year thought best to join forces and celebrate the savage rites with unwonted splendor and barbarity. Nearly half way between the reservations the two forks of the Chadron (or Shadron) creek form a wide plain, which was chosen as the site of the great sun-dance.

In general it is almost impossible for a white man to gain permission to view this ceremony in all its details; but I had in Spotted Tail, the chief, and in Standing Elk, the head warrior, two very warm friends, and their promise that I should behold the rites in part slowly widened and allowed me to obtain full view of the entire proceedings.

3. McCracken, *Frederic Remington*, pp. 33-38; McKown, *Painter of the Wild West*, p. 54.

4. Remington probably witnessed the 1882 Sun Dance of the Brules, in which thirty to forty men participated. *See* George E. Hyde, *A Sioux Chronicle* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 75.

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"Going to the Dance"

It was in June that the celebration was to be held, and for many days before the first ceremonies took place the children of the prairies began to assemble, not only from the two agencies most interested, but from many distant bands of Sioux to which rumors of the importance of this meeting had gone. Everywhere upon the plains were picturesque little caravans moving towards the level stretch between the branches of the Chadron—ponies dragging the lodge-poles of the tepees, with roughly constructed willow baskets hanging from the poles and filled with a confusion of pots and puppies, babies and drums, scalps and kindling-wood and rolls of jerked buffalo meat, with old hags urging on the ponies, and gay young warriors riding. Fully twenty thousand Sioux were present, the half-breeds and the "squaw-men" of the two agencies said, when the opening arrived. Probably fifteen thousand would be more correct. It was easier to believe the statement of the Indians that it was the grandest sun-dance within the memory of the oldest warriors; and as I became fully convinced of this assertion, I left no stone

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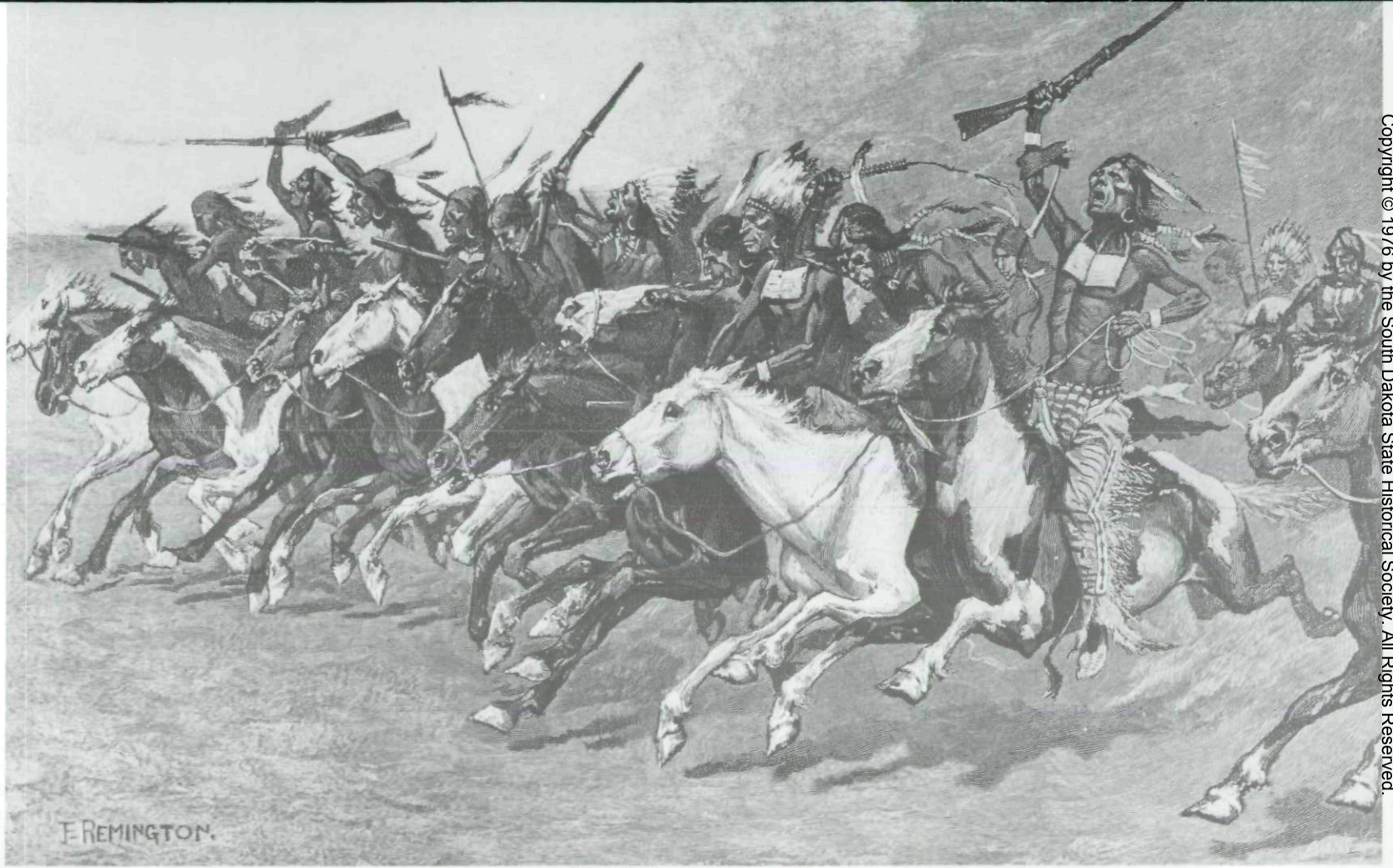
unturned that would keep me fast in the good graces of my friends, Spotted Tail and Standing Elk.

When all had assembled and the medicine-men had set the day for the beginning of the great dance dedicated to the sun, the "sun-pole" was selected. A handsome young pine or fir, forty or fifty feet high, with the straightest and most uniformly tapering trunk that could be found within a reasonable distance, was chosen. The selection is always made by some old woman, generally the oldest one in the camp, if there is any way of determining, who leads a number of maidens gaily dressed in the beautiful beaded buckskin gowns they wear on state occasions; the part of the maidens is to strip the tree of its limbs as high as is possible without felling it. Woe to the girl who claims to be a maiden, and joins the procession the old squaw forms, against whose claims any reputable warrior or squaw may publicly proclaim. Her punishment is swift and sure, and her degradation more cruel than interesting.

The selection of the tree is the only special feature of the first day's celebration. After it has been stripped of its branches nearly to the top, the brushwood and trees for a considerable distance about it are removed, and it is left standing for the ceremony of the second day.

Long before sunrise the eager participants in the next great step were preparing themselves for the ordeal; and a quarter of an hour before the sun rose above the broken hills of white clay a long line of naked young warriors, in gorgeous war-paint and feathers, with rifles, bows and arrows, and war-lances in hand, faced the east and the sun-pole, which was from five to six hundred yards away. Ordinarily this group of warriors numbers from fifty to possibly two hundred men. An interpreter near me estimated the line I beheld as from a thousand to twelve hundred strong. Not far away, on a high hill overlooking the barbaric scene, was an old warrior, a medicine-man of the tribe, I think, whose solemn duty it was to announce by a shout that could be heard by every one of the expectant throng the exact moment when the tip of the morning sun appeared above the eastern hills. Perfect quiet rested upon the line of young warriors and upon the great throng of savage spectators that blacked the green hills overlooking the arena. Suddenly the old warrior, who had been kneeling on one knee, with his extended



"The Charge on the Sun-Pole"

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palm shading his scraggy eyebrows, arose to his full height, and in a slow, dignified manner waved his blanketed arm above his head. The few warriors who were still unmounted now jumped hurriedly upon their ponies; the broken, wavering line rapidly took on a more regular appearance; and then the old man, who had gathered himself for the great effort, hurled forth a yell that could be heard to the uttermost limits of the great throng. The morning sun had sent its commands to its warriors on earth to charge.

The shout from the hill was reechoed by the thousand men in the valley; it was caught up by the spectators on the hills as the long line of warriors hurled themselves forward towards the sun-pole, the objective point of every armed and naked savage in the yelling line. As they converged towards it the slower ponies dropped out, and the weaker ones were crushed to the rear. Nearer and nearer they came, the long line becoming massed until it was but a surging crowd of plunging horses and yelling, gesticulating riders. When the leading warriors had reached a point within a hundred yards of the sun-pole, a sharp report of rifles sounded along the line, and a moment later the rushing mass was a sheet of flame, and the rattle of rifle-shots was like the rapid beat of a drum resounding among the hills. Every shot, every arrow, and every lance was directed at the pole, and bark and chips were flying from its sides like shavings from the rotary bit of a planer. When every bullet had been discharged, and every arrow and lance had been hurled, the riders crowded around the pole and shouted as only excited savages can shout.

Had it fallen in this onslaught, another pole would have been chosen and another morning devoted to this performance. Though this seldom happens, it was thought that the numerous assailants of this pole might bring it to the ground. They did not, however, although it looked like a ragged scarecrow, with chips and bark hanging from its mutilated sides.

That such a vast, tumultuous throng could escape accident in all that wild charging, firing of shots, hurling of lances and arrows, and great excitement would be bordering on a miracle, and no miracle happened. One of the great warriors was trampled upon in the charge and died that evening, and another Indian was shot. The bruises, sprains, and cuts that might have

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been spoken of in lesser affairs were here unnoticed, and nothing was heard of them.

Later in the day the sun-pole was cut down and taken to the center of a great plain between the two forks of the Chadron, about a mile away. Here a slight excavation was made, and into it the butt of the sun-pole was put, and the tree, the bushy top having now disappeared, was held upright by a number of ropes made of buffalo thongs diverging from its top. At their outer ends, probably from seventy to eighty feet away from the sun-pole, they were fastened to the tops of stakes seven or eight feet in length. These, with a large number of stakes of similar size driven in close together, formed a circular cordon around the sun-pole, and over these stakes were stretched elk-skins and buffalo-robes, canvas and blankets, and a wattling of willows and brush. Sometimes canvas, blankets, and light elk-skins are thrown over the supporting ropes to ward off in a slight way the fierce rays of the noonday sun. To one approaching by the road that led over the winding hills which hem in the broad plain between the two forks of the Chadron the affair looked not unlike a circus tent, the top of which has been ruthlessly torn away by a cyclone.

All day, from the closing of the ceremony of shooting at the sun-pole, the attention of the Indians was occupied in constructing this inclosure, where, within a day or two after its completion, they performed those barbarous rites and ceremonies of cruelty and self-torture that have placed the sun-dance of the Sioux on a level with the barbarisms of any of the far more famed devotees of Juggernaut.[5]

Early on the morning of the third or fourth day the true worship of the sun, if it can be strictly so called, was begun. So far all that that luminary had done was to signal the charge of the young warriors on the sun-pole. It now entered into the calculation of every minute, almost of every second, of the barbarous proceedings. Those who were to torture themselves, probably forty or fifty in a sun-dance of this size, were, as near as I could judge, young warriors from twenty to twenty-five

5. The followers of Vishnu, one of the principal Hindu gods, often allowed themselves to be crushed beneath the wheels of the vehicle on which his image was being drawn during religious processions.

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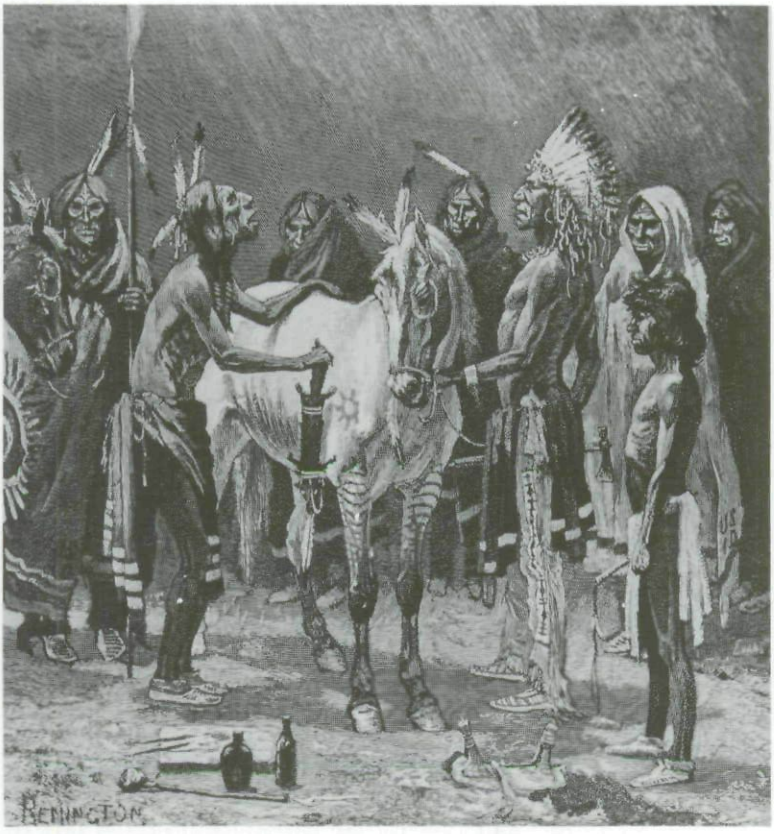

"Making Medicine-Ponies"

years of age, all of them the very finest specimens of savage manhood in the great tribe.

I was told that these fine fellows fast for a number of days before they go through the self-torture, one informant saying that before the ordeal takes place it is required of them to abstain from food for seven days and from water for two. While their condition did not indicate such abstemiousness as this, I think it is true that some fasting precedes the more barbarous ceremonies.

The third day was mostly consumed in dancing and in exercises that did not vary greatly from the dances and exercises

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usually seen at any time in large Indian villages. On this day, however, the sun-dance began. Within the arena were from six to twelve young warriors, still in war-costume of paint and feathers, standing in a row, and always facing the sun, however brightly it shone in their eyes; with fists clenched across the breast, like a foot racer in a contest of speed, they jumped up and down in measured leaps to the monotonous beating of the tom-toms and the accompanying yi-yi-yi-yis of the assembled throng. The dancers occasionally vary the proceedings with savage music or with whistles made of bone. Now and then a similar row of young maidens would appear in another part of the arena, and their soprano voices would break in pleasantly on the harsher voices of the men. The dancing continued for intervals of from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour, broken by rests of about equal length, and lasted from sunrise to sunset.

Many trifling ceremonies took place while the important ones were proceeding. Horses and ponies were brought into the arena, and the medicine-men, with incantations, dipped their hands into colored earth and besmeared the sides of the animals with it. As these animals were evidently the best war-ponies, the ceremony was doubtless a blessing or a consecration to war.

On the fourth day of the Chadron sun-dance the self-torture began, and I was told that those who were to submit themselves to the great ordeal were the same young warriors who had been dancing the day before. Those who began the dance on the fourth day took the final ordeal on the fifth, and so for four or five days the dancers of one day become the sufferers of the tortures of the next.

The row of dancers took their places promptly at sunrise, but it was not before nine or ten that the tortures began.

Then each one of the young men presented himself to a medicine-man, who took between his thumb and forefinger a fold of the loose skin of the breast, about half way between the nipple and the collar-bone, lifted it as high as possible, and then ran a very narrow-bladed but sharp knife through the skin underneath the hand. In the aperture thus made, and before the knife was withdrawn, a stronger skewer of bone, about the size of a carpenter's pencil, was inserted. Then the knife-blade was taken out, and over the projections of this skewer, backwards and forwards, alternately right and left, was thrown a

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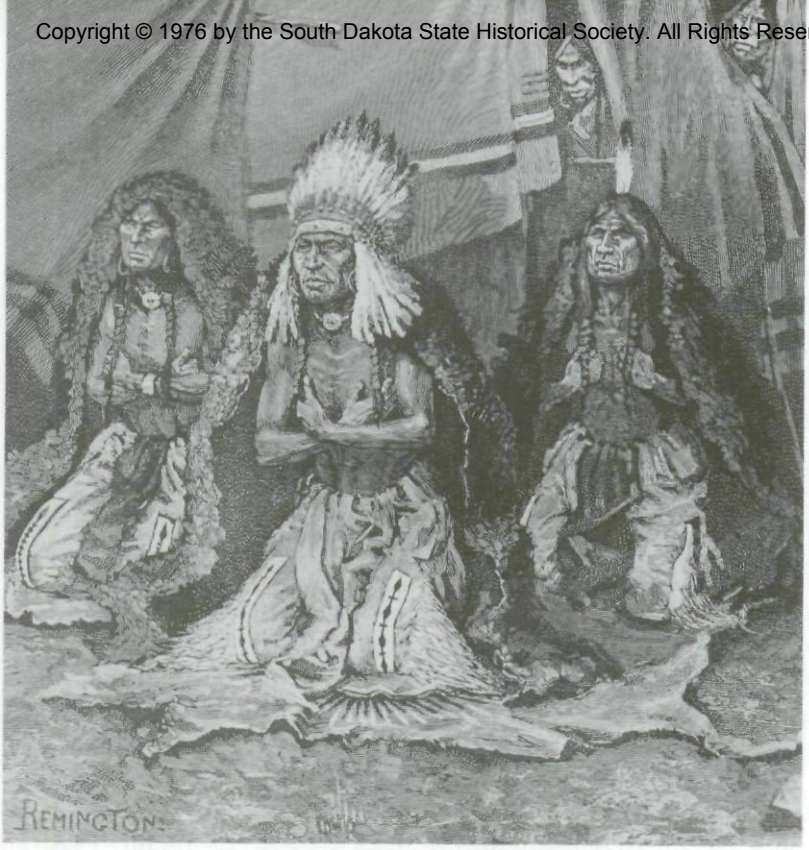

"Facing the Setting Sun"

figure-of-eight noose with a strong thong of dressed skin. This was tied to a long skin rope fastened, at its other extremity, to the top of the sun-pole in the center of the arena. Both breasts are similarly punctured, the thongs from each converging and joining the rope which hangs from the pole. The whole object of the devotee is to break loose from these fetters. To liberate himself he must tear the skewers through the skin, a horrible task that even with the most resolute may require many hours of torture. His first attempts are very easy, and seem intended to get him used to the horrible pain he must yet endure before he breaks loose from the thongs. As he increases his efforts his shouts increase, huge drops of perspiration pour down his greasy, painted skin, and every muscle stands out on his body in tortuous ridges, his swaying frame, as he throws his whole weight wildly against the fearful fetters, being convulsed with shudders. All the while the beating of the tom-toms and the wild, weird chanting of the singers near him continue. The wonderful strength and extensibility of the human skin is most forcibly and fearfully displayed in the strong struggles of the

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"Heralding the Sunrise"

quivering victims. I have seen these bloody pieces of bone stretched to such a length from the devotee that his outstretched arms in front of him would barely allow his fingers to touch them.

I know it is not pleasant to dwell long upon this cruel spectacle. Generally in two or three hours the victim is free, but there are many cases where double and even triple that time is required. Oftentimes there are half a dozen swinging wildly from the pole, running towards it and then moving backwards with the swiftness of a war-horse and the fierceness of a lion in their attempts to tear the accursed skewers from their wounded flesh. Occasionally some over-ambitious youth will erect four stakes within the arena, and fastening skewers to both breasts and to both shoulders will throw himself backwards and forwards against the four ropes that hold the skewers to the stakes.

Faintings are not uncommon even among these sturdy savages; but no forfeit, opprobrium, censure, or loss of respect in any way seems to follow. The victim is cut loose and placed on the floor of some lodge near by and left in charge of his nurses. The only attempt I saw to break loose from double

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skewers in front and behind terminated in this manner. Whether the men ever afterwards enter the cruel contest after having thus failed I do not know. It may be possible that some exceedingly ambitious warrior may enter the lists year after year to show his prowess, but I understand that it is supposed to be done but once in a lifetime. It is not obligatory, and by far the greater number grow up sensibly abstaining from such savage luxuries. When the day is almost over, and the solar deity is nearly down in the west, the self-tortured warriors file from the inclosed arena, one by one, and just outside the doors, deeply covered with handsomely painted buffalo-robes, they kneel, and with arms crossed over their bloody breasts and with bowed heads face the setting sun and rise only when it has disappeared.

Many other horrible variations have been reported to me; such as tying a saddle or a buffalo's skull to the end of the long rope fastened to the skewer and running over the prairie and through the timber, the saddle or skull bounding after the victim until he liberates himself; or, when fainting, to draw the tortured man clear of the ground by the ropes until his weight overcame the strength of the distended skin. My informants told me that no two of the ceremonies were alike, the self-torture in some form being the one common link in all. The consecration of the sun-pole, much of the dancing and singing, the double efforts of ambitious youths, and other ceremonies might be left out entirely or others substituted. I describe it only as I saw it. I will add that this sun-dance was called the greatest the Sioux had ever held; the greatest self-sacrifice of the greatest native nation within our boundaries. Within a year they had checked, at the Rosebud Hills in Montana, the largest army we had ever launched against the American Indians in a single fight; had retired successfully to the Little Big Horn [River], a few miles away, and there, a week later, had wiped [George A.] Custer's fine command from the face of the earth; had held [Major Marcus A.] Reno for two days upon a hill; had never lost a battle worthy of the name in the war which led to their subjugation; and had proved the utter worthlessness of victory to a savage race contending against civilization.[6]

6. For an account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, *see* Oliver Knight, *Following the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), pp. 184-219.

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