

Comment by the Editor

THE PATH OF GLORY

Black Hawk was free. He was no longer a captive of the white men, confined in military prisons. The sky was clear. He could breathe the fresh air of the prairie. The birds sang, children laughed, and the full kettle bubbled merrily over the fire.

But Black Hawk was not happy. He had much to think about. The sun of his life had often been obscured by clouds. Famine, disease, and bereavement had cast dark shadows upon his path. He had survived the storms of many wars when death stalked near. But after the thunder and lightning of his last battle had ceased, the sun shone dim and red as through a haze of smoke. It would never be bright again — and it was sinking low in the west.

Twice the moon grew big and round after Black Hawk returned to his family on the Iowa River. The once bold chief of the Sauks, bereft of leadership and ignored by his own tribe, resented the plight of a vanquished warrior. His tour of the great cities in the East had taught him the futility of his struggle against the white peo-

ple, but his defeat was none the less humiliating. "The path of glory is rough," he observed, "and many gloomy hours obscure it."

As he brooded over the thwarted hopes of other days, the old man yearned to vindicate his character and conduct. Having determined to explain the causes of his hostility to the settlers, he went to Rock Island and there, in October, 1833, told the story of his life, which was transcribed by J. B. Patterson from the interpretation of Antoine Le Claire.

As a revelation of Indian temperament, the narrative of the exploits and motives of Makataimeshekiakiak, "dictated by himself", is unique among the records of the red men. Most of the history of the native Americans has been written by their white successors, with unavoidable prejudice and distortion. But Black Hawk, equally biased perhaps, gave the Indian version of events as he saw them and incidentally portrayed the nature of his race. His memoir possesses the quality of an original source of information.

The autobiography of Black Hawk is a tragedy. Prompted by a pathetic desire to win the respect of the white people, the proud old Indian recited his deeds of valor, mentioned incidents to demonstrate his honor and morality, described the abuse and injustice of the settlers which had provoked

his rebellion, and praised the magnanimity of many white men whom he had known. But the ostensible purpose of gaining approval only served to accentuate the poignancy of his tragic life. Endowed only with the virtues of a wilderness savage, and guided by prejudice, ambition, and patriotism, Black Hawk fought hopelessly against insuperable odds straight through to the catastrophe of inevitable failure. Back of every act of his turbulent career appeared the hand of inexorable fate pointing toward ultimate doom.

And yet, on several occasions, the final disaster might have been averted.

J. E. B.