CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE BIG RIVER

Their first greeting at daylight made them laugh with delight. On the river's bank a bird of yellow breast sat upon a tall, dry willow top and sang, Kola ni Lakota! Kola ni Lakota! (Friend, you are a Dakota). And they interpreted its familiar accent in the plural sense. The bird was taśiyaknonpa, the meadow lark, which Dakotas did not kill because of its reiterated claim to kinship.

Zintkala and Etapa cried out joyously that they were indeed Dakotas, and the bird flew away apparently well content. That morning they also saw other old friends—śungila, the swift and crooked-bill, the squalling prairie curlew. They ate of the cooked venison and did not build a fire, although Etapa secured tinder from the woods.

For another day the swift, full-fed stream carried them out into the plains country. There was danger in this daylight canoeing, for, at any moment, they might shoot into view of a hostile camp or village. This peril had not impressed them until they knew that they had been launched into the level country where timber is not to be found save along the streams. They

could only guard against surprise by keenly scanning every reach and bend of the river in their front. They felt at ease, however, when, as frequently happened, there were deer, elk or antelope feeding upon the bluff slopes. In the unscared attitude of these four-foots they read the sign, "No hunters near."

For the rest the canoe needed only steering and much of the way it ran, for speed, as the elk trots. Low bluffs continued along the river, and often enough for fresh surprises they were banked in red roses and the atmosphere between them was laden with a delicious fragrance. Thus the voyagers sped joyously homeward, going so fast and so far that it seemed to them the river must keep on until they should reach their own Oglala town.

But at midday they came to the end of this waterway, so far, at least, as it ran to the westward. Their canoe, at a sweeping turn, was discharged quite suddenly upon a wider and discolored current which ran to the north almost as the crow flies. Much disappointed that canoeing should so soon have ended, they crossed to the west bank of this large river and climbed its low bluff to find a beaten road at the top and a trader's post, with out-buildings, in full view a mile or two to the northward.

Immediately they knew this river for the Mini Luta, or Red River of the North; for down this

stream and past the very fort which they now saw the Assiniboins had carried them to captivity. They had arrived at a country hostile to Dakotas, but they were well out of a strange and trackless wilderness. They looked at each other joyously. In the language of seamen, they now had "plain sailing." They had only to follow up this river to its lake head to reach Sioux territory.

They returned to the canoe and for a little time Etapa paddled up the stream just to see what progress he could make.

"Tanké," he said, "I think we should now go nights in the canoe."

But a half-hour's slow progress disposed of this plan, and the two, packing their bundles, trudged along the river's bank. They dared not go upon the level prairie for fear of being discovered by people from the fort.

Their wisdom was justified at evening. They were lying at rest among some bushes when their ears caught a familiar sound, a snatch of the song of Canadian boatmen:

"*Printemps . . . petits grands . . . Lon lon laridon daine*"—these last words sung by several voices in unison.

The two looked at each other, their white teeth gleaming in grins of approval. They liked that rollicking boat song, which they had often heard on the Missouri and at Traverse

des Sioux. Although they did not know the meaning of the words, either could have repeated the lines:

Touts les printemps,
Tant petits que grands,
Lon lon laridon daine,
Lon lon laridon daine.

The song and its resonant chorus came nearer, and presently the creak of oar-locks admonished the voyagers to lie low in cover. They did not dare to risk discovery in peeping at the strangers; for there might be Hohé (Assiniboins) in that large boat, and these would shoot or capture young Sioux with little regard to the jolly boatmen. So the bateau slipped by, and its thrilling chorus ceased to charm the hiders.

The voyagers dared not build a fire that evening, but ate their cooked venison and betook themselves to their blankets. They lay in a low thicket of hazel bush.

They had not yet fallen asleep when they heard hoof-beats upon the bluff. They sat up with hearts in their mouths and peered cautiously up at the hill's black rim outlined sharply against a starlit sky. The figure of a horseman, halted, loomed upon the crest. He sat as if waiting for some one, and presently they heard again the distant muffled thud, thud of hoofs.

After a bit the second pony rider halted and the man upon the bluff lifted his voice and

shouted at the loiterer. "Coo'e'e!" he called. "Hokśida! Cohan, cohan!"

Zintkala and Etapa understood these words, yet they were not as they should have been spoken in their own dialect. Their shrewd ears detected, too, that the man said "hello" and "boy" differently from the Assiniboins, but that he said "come on" just the same. This man was evidently a Dakota, but not of the Assiniboin tribe. Perhaps he was a friend who would gladly assist them to go homeward. He might even lend a pony. Yet they dared not call out to him, and the man and his boy rode on and passed beyond hearing.

They were much puzzled to know what they should have done, and they talked, speaking in low tones, for a long time about this. They were no little depressed at the thought of having let a friend go by; for they knew that there were northern Sioux who were friendly with both the Hohé and their own people. Yet they did not see how they could wisely have attracted this man's attention.

For a long time they did not sleep. It was very warm. The mosquitoes attacked them, and they covered their faces with green leaves. Thus lying, they listened to the night murmur of the river, the hoots of owls, the booming of the night-jar, the pop-plop of the diving beaver, and the whizzing of a myriad of June-bugs.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PONY STEALERS

The morning was very still and clear. After eating of their venison the little voyagers debated for some time as to whether they should now travel by day. The river thoroughfare seemed a dangerous route. On the other hand the prairie as far as the eye could reach was level as the extended palm. Plainly it would not do, day or night, to walk on the plain, at least until they should get far beyond the traffic of the trading-posts.

Zintkala favored travel by day along the river, where there seemed always willows, bushes or trees for hiding. True there might be villages or tepées along the streams, but the sister argued that they could discover approach to these best by the sun's light, and so avoid them. In the night, she said, if one were not very careful, one might suddenly come upon people where there were dogs to alarm, and how could escape be made in such a narrow valley?

Etapa was for night-going, and he held out for a long time, saying they could walk upon the prairie in darkness, keeping close to the bluff, so that they might hide at once if they should hear anyone coming.

The sister's earnest persuasion prevailed finally, and they took up the burden of a cautious and difficult march. For most of the way the river ran through a coulée which was like a deep, rough canal cut in the prairie. Occasionally this rather narrow pass widened to give room for a belt of timber or a loop of willow-fringed meadow.

Everywhere the voyagers followed closely the stream's bush-grown bank. They were not fearful lest anyone should make suspicious discovery of their trail, for this waterway was a highroad of Indian and half-breed travel. Once that forenoon they lay in hiding while a caravan of two-wheeled wooden carts creaked and groaned over the prairie road. They did not see the *metis* who drove these carts, but they heard plainly their voices and the cracking of their whips as they urged the slow oxen forward. They were glad that the train was passing down the river instead of up.

They lay a long time hidden in the bushes lest they might be seen by stragglers. The need for caution in their travel had become very apparent, and their progress was tediously slow. They peered from hidden covers across every opening, and into every bluff coulée.

They stole across such openings, stooping low, keeping to the tall grass where possible, and often imitating the movements of animals.

They flitted from cover to cover among the bushes and tree trunks, treading noiselessly.

It was near noon and they were just entering a wood, having approached the river bank after a detour and by way of a dry run, when they heard a splash in the current below. They turned their faces to see a man, an Indian, wading near the edge of the water. This man's back was toward them, and he held a spear poised in one hand. Like startled partridges the two sank to the grass and squatted motionless until the wader had passed beyond hearing.

Then they looked at each other with uneasy inquiry. They were plainly between the fisher and his tepée or village, and it appeared equally perilous to go up or down the narrow valley.

They were yet undecided what to do, and sat listening intently when they heard the tinkle-tinkle of pony bells upon a bluff. A number of animals were soon sighted, several bow-shots distant, coming over its crest and descending the bush-grown scarp of the coulée. Also behind the ponies several black heads appeared above the bush, dusky dots upon a shield of green, and the voyagers saw that some young Indians were driving the little herd.

The village was thus plainly located at a point up the stream within the coulée and near at hand. Their own position was one of immediate peril. At any instant a straggler from the camp might

chance upon them. They could not of course wade the river; they dared not go forward, and the man with the spear might at any instant mount the bank below.

They chose the safest line of retreat. Entering the woods in front they turned to the right and walked leisurely to the foot of the river bluff. They moved slowly, that they might not rustle the bushes, and carelessly, so that if seen at a distance they might be mistaken for children of the village or camp.

The coulée scarp was grown thickly to small bush. Making sure they had not been seen, they crawled cautiously upward until they reached a point near the crest. Here they took refuge under a low hedge of wild grape vines and where they could peer safely down upon the valley. A long stretch of the river could be seen fringed with trees and hemmed, in the distance, by converging lines of bluffs and—almost under their eyes—beyond the grove they had entered were four conical tepées pitched upon the open flat and close to the stream. Beyond the lodges a herd of ten or a dozen ponies were grazing lazily.

The children who had brought these animals down from the prairie had caught two of the runaways and were tethering them at a bow-shot from the camp. Some women were apparently cleaning fish upon the river's bank. Near to

them were several upturned canoes. Three men were lying upon the grass, and one of them was making gestures as though telling a story.

It was startling now to see how nearly they had come to running plump upon these people. Evidently their camp had been newly made, else there would have been more sign about to give warning. Zintkala was now convinced of the wisdom of night travel along this river.

For a time the voyagers dared not talk lest someone might be near at hand. At length, however, after they had scanned all the reaches below and noted that a breeze had begun to rustle the bushes and trees, so that no sound, not even of pony bells, came up from the tepées, they spoke together in undertones.

"Older sister," said Etapa, "it appears that these people are very slothful. I think that they are good-for-nothing agency Indians. I would not be afraid to steal all their ponies, and I think that we should take horses of them to-night."

Zintkala's eyes snapped approval. These people were certainly a silly folk, or they would not allow strangers to approach so near to their tepées unnoted. The spirit of daring seized upon the girl and she spoke in eager tones.

"Let us do so, younger brother," she said. "I will assist you to drive away their ponies. We shall arrive at home afterward very quickly."

Thereafter they talked, planning with enthu-

siasm a night campaign against the sleepy camp. After a time they saw two persons, a man and a woman, plodding along the river's bank directly below. These were returning leisurely to camp, and the woman bent under a back-load of large fish which she had strung upon a willow hoop. The man bore a spear upon his shoulder with a single small fish dangling from the point.

The Sioux children marveled that they had escaped discovery. Naturally they took credit to themselves for the shrewd caution of their march along the river. From the appearance of their tepées and the fact that they traveled both by canoe and travois the voyagers judged these Indians to be Hohé, Assiniboins of the river, and not of the dry plains. They were of the sort who dwelt about the trading posts and agencies, and perhaps some were of mixed blood. But they were toka (the enemy), and, therefore, it would be highly honorable to take their horses from them.

So the young Sioux plotted deeply. They noted every movement of the Hohé camp. Before nightfall they had counted the inmates of the tepées, the number of dogs—there were three—and of ponies and colts. They traced in plan every foot of their approach to the pasture ground from a detour of the prairie to descent of a bush-grown spur of the coulée and a wary retrograde along the river's edge.

They had still a store of hard cooked, stale venison, enough to last three or four days at a pinch, and they could ride, ride, ride until hunger should compel a halt. They ate but sparingly that day and awaited with impatience the slow setting of the sun.

Yet it was a long time after the stars appeared before they stirred from cover. They were rather stiff and weary from long lying under the low vines when they finally ascended to the prairie.

Upon the level ground they sat long enough to tie their blankets and all the articles they were to carry in tight rolls. Etapa included bow, quiver of arrows and tomahawk in his bundle. These light packs they secured on their backs by buckskin strings and thongs.

Thus equipped they walked around to a spur of bluff which was perhaps a mile below the Assiniboin camp. Here they stopped for a time. They sat upon a bare spot where they could study all the darkened spaces of the coulée and thus fix upon lines of escape should discovery follow their undertaking.

The night was quite dark, with only starshine to light the depths of the river gulch, and when the two had reached the stream, under the shelter of its fringe of bush and trees, they had little fear of making advance toward the pony herd.

Though they walked with extreme caution their hearts beat high with expectancy.

When, in the growing dusk, they had last seen the Hohé ponies they were scattered upon a narrow strip of bottom at a considerable distance from the tepées. Some three or four of the leaders were tethered to long picket ropes. Unless some untoward thing should happen to arouse the camp it would seem a matter of no difficulty to lead these ponies away.

From tree to tree and bush to bush, carefully they approached the herd ground. At last as they knew by a certain thick cluster of young trees, which stood near the river's edge, they should have come opposite the tethered ponies. Close scrutiny of the level land disclosed only one animal. This pony was grazing but a little way out from the trees. And the occasional tinkle of bells, which for some minutes they had been noting and trying to locate, now sounded far down toward the camp, even below it perhaps!

This was very discouraging, for those belled ponies had been tethered right there, opposite the trees. Certainly it would not be wise to go to or to pass the camp after the horses. They held a whispered consultation. It seemed best to take this one horse, which they could do with safety, and go with it. They had buckskin enough for a halter, and they could both ride

the animal without overburdening. Perhaps the Hohé would not chase a great way for just one pony. They might even think it gone astray, and, where there were so many tracks, be led to search at random up and down the stream.

So they quietly walked out from the trees toward this animal, which they supposed to be picketed; for doubtless the unruly bell ponies had pulled their pins. They were much surprised when the lone horse kept stepping away in their front and feeding on toward the camp. The animal was loose. They yet hoped to catch it, going one on either side and approaching carelessly. But the pony still slipped away, feeding toward the Hohé camp, as though drawn by a magnet.

Presently, as they made a wide circuit to get around the wary one, another pony appeared, a small one lying down. This one arose and came toward the larger, and then both slipped past the children and melted into the darkness.

The large timber below the tepées now showed tall and black, and from where they stood nothing could be seen within its shadows. The tinkle-tankle of bells now sounded very close. It was evident that those old run-abouts were picketed between their position and the camp. They listened intently. There was nothing to be heard save the murmur of the stream, the rustle

of tree foliage, the jingle of the bells, and the stamping of the mosquito-bitten ponies. The horses were certainly near at hand, and so were the Hohé tepées. The campers and the dogs were evidently sleeping.

A spirit of covetous daring had come upon the young Sioux. They simply could not go away and leave all these ponies to graze undisturbed. They came near together and Etapa signified by gesture that they should go on, cut loose the picketed horses, mount and drive away the herd. Zintkala put aside all thought of peril and agreed to the plan.

They now walked forward, going around the ponies as they came to them. They went on until they had passed all the horses as nearly as they could reckon.

Suddenly a dog began to bark, and immediately all the curs they had seen came out and set up the familiar ki-yi-yap of the Indian wolf-dog. Instead of running away the young Sioux seated themselves upon the grass and began to busy themselves as if cleaning fish or skinning game. As the curs continued to yelp they stretched themselves in the bottom grass as though disposed to sleep. The grass was tall enough to cover their bodies. The cowardly dogs did not run at them, but continued to bark and howl around the tepées.

Presently a man came out and spoke to the

dogs. This was a trying moment. Had the curs yelped with increased excitement and run at the hiders, like good watch dogs, discovery and capture must have inevitably followed. But they were Indian dogs, and the Dakota boy and girl knew their ways. When the man came out these dogs expected to be kicked or whipped and, while still yelping and howling, exerted themselves only to keep out of harm's way. In the end the Indian ran at them throwing sticks and shouting angrily until the pack had scurried into the woods.

In the midst of this excitement Zintkala and Etapa crawled away and approached the nearest tethered pony. The stolid animal, having seen them all the time, payed them no attention. Etapa cut its picket rope and the two crawled slowly on to the length of the string. There they sat in the grass for a long time, letting the ponies get used to their presence, and waiting for the people and dogs to fall asleep again.

They waited till a faint light above a western bluff warned them that the moon was rising. Then they led their captive gently forward to where the second pony was picketed. At the same time they gradually moved the loose ponies before them. They wished to leave no chance of pursuit behind.

Adroitly, almost inch by inch, the little bunch of Hohé ponies faded away from their picket

grounds. Before the cunning "rustlers" had passed the point of descent a misshapen moon, which perhaps the mice had gnawed, was looking over the river bluff and into the coulée.

Suddenly an incautious voice was heard in the rear, the voice of a man, who had heard the fading tinkle of bells, and who supposed the ponies had pulled their picket pins and were wandering off.

"Sohe-e! Sohe-e! Ksōōk-ksōōk!" the man called in a remonstrant resonant voice, which filled all the coulée behind.

They did not wait to look back, but mounted their lead animals and whirling their rope ends dashed upon the herd in their front. The cracking strokes, the sharp "huh-huh-huh!" of their urging quickly set the small bunch of ponies off at a gallop. Once they got going it was easy to make them go faster. In a minute or two they had swept around a point of bluff, up a coulée descent, and out upon the illimitable prairie.

CHAPTER XX

THE GRIEF OF FIRE CLOUD AND CRANE'S CRY

The same grass-growing moon, which saw the little voyagers launched upon the prairie country, brought the first news of their capture to Fire Cloud's village of Oglalas.

As the warm days had come on and the grass was making good feed, Fire Cloud had said to his wife, Pehan-ho-win or Crane's Cry, "After a little time now we shall pack the travois and go to your relatives at the Missouri River. There we shall visit until the buffalo killing. I shall send for our children, and they shall remain with us during two moons."

Then Crane's Cry was glad. The heart of the mother sang within her. Two little sloe-eyed girls also were delighted. Although it seemed to them a great age since older sister and brother had been taken from home, the little ones ran off to some sand hills to chatter their joy and to play at "drag-the-travois" on a trail to the muddy river.

And the happy Sioux mother immediately set to work to prepare for meeting her children. She had many things to do. She had wished to make clothing for her absent ones and not that