

CHAPTER XXI

A STRANGE BUFFALO

For nearly three days, and riding much at night, the little voyagers had traveled over a prairie country to the southwest. When they had secured ponies they had no further thought of going up the Red River to the agencies, where people might be fighting, and themselves again be taken by the enemy.

One by one, from sheer exhaustion, the ponies had dropped out of their captured band, until there only remained the two strongest and swiftest which they had finally selected to ride. There had probably been no pursuit, because there could be none, and the travelers had seen no person, white or red, to cause them alarm.

While they were unable to point out exactly the direction in which lay their own country, they knew that they must travel south and west, and finally further west than south, and that, keeping to that general course, they must come to the Missouri River.

On the fourth day of riding, at probably more than two hundred miles from the starting point, ponies and riders were sadly in need of rest.

Their food had given out and the children had now to collect a fresh supply.

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They stopped before midday among some coteaus, where there was a long marshy lake, and a breeding ground for geese, ducks, sand-hill cranes, curlews and other birds. Many young of the land birds were just feathering out, and could not fly.

When they had watered and picketed their horses and slept for a time, the brother and sister set out to chase these young birds. It was not easy to get them, for they began running at the instant of alarm, and it was well nigh impossible to hit them with bow and arrow. Catching them was simply a matter of the swifter pair of legs or the greater endurance. Now that the children had gained rest and sleep they enjoyed the sport. A couple of ungainly young cranes gave them a hot chase across a wide stretch of corn-stalk grass. The legs of the pursuers were frequently tangled, and they fell over unseen bogs whooping with laughter and shouting encouragement to each other. The cranes had nearly escaped by running out upon a miry piece of ground and coming to a stand, when Etapa swam a bayou to a stony bank, and caused them to run into the grass again by throwing pebbles at them. The birds were finally captured and, as they were nearly half grown, fat, and heavy of breast, the young hunters had reason, as they did, to lug them to their camp in triumph. They also caught some young curlews. which

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furnished them with all the meat they could eat at one time, and this was no small quantity.

They had made a mighty march, and they knew they had no longer to fear pursuit from the men they had despoiled of horses. They had thus far scarcely given themselves time to talk, so fast they had ridden and so sore and overcome with sleep were they when they halted.

But now, full-fed, and having shed weariness, they were filled with elation and chattered like a pair of magpies. They had each an excellent riding pony, and with the Sioux love of horses, they took delight in recounting the good points of their animals. Zintkala's pony was of a creamy buckskin color, with black mane and tail, markings much admired by the plains Indians. The one Etapa rode was a "calico," spotted red and white, and both were hardy runners of undeniable wind.

The children enjoyed in advance the sensation they would create when they should ride into their Oglala town and tell how they had taken these ponies from the Hohé. In this happy perspective they quite lost sight of the significance of their own home-coming. The ponies were now all they had room for in their thoughts. They had already named the animals, Šunkaska, White Dog, and Wicarpi-kin-ša, Red Stars. They spent the balance of the afternoon in securely picketing and admiring these four-foots.

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There was a patch of dry willows near at hand, which made excellent fires with almost no smoke. There was also a knoll, or small butte, which commanded a wide reach of plain, and from its top they could scan the prairie stretches for a long distance. As there was good water and grass and plenty of game they decided to camp for two suns at this place. In this time they proposed to catch and cure enough meat to last them until they should reach home. They also wished to make girths, "catch-ons," and pack-straps for their blankets, which they had inconveniently used, folded twice, as saddles. For this purpose, and in making bridle-halters, they used the remainder of their stock of buckskins.

On the second day of their stay at this camp they had fine sport catching birds. They were now reinvigorated, and could follow the chase with both zest and endurance. Spring had come on early and warm in this region, and the young of every sort of birds were advanced in growth.

The pursuit of young cranes was especially exciting, and there were numerous families of them, scattered among the low hills. Some of these were nearly ready for flight. These were strong, swift runners, but when closely pressed, they would flap their half-feathered wings to the hindrance of their legs, and so make fun for the hunters. While the children were running

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them, too, the old cranes would fly about trumpeting crazily, and so add much to the excitement.

In chase of the cranes the voyagers found themselves at midday at a considerable distance from their camp. They had made several captures, and were returning laden when, in crossing a low ridge, at one end of the marsh lake, they saw what they supposed to be a buffalo approaching.

Etapá was first to see the humped creature shuffling along with head down, apparently much exhausted.

"Hoye, Tanke," he cried. "Look, yonder is a bull coming. I think he has come from a country where there is no water, and he is very poor and weak."

Zintkala looked at the ambling creature with interest. Her eyes were as keen and sometimes more observing than the boy's.

"Younger brother," she said, "I do not think that is a buffalo. This one coming does not appear to have horns."

"Whi, Tanké, how foolish!" exclaimed the lad. "Look what a long distance he is coming."

"It appears, however, that I can see the legs," persisted the sister, and this answer won the point of inserting doubt into the brother's mind.

"Let us sit up on this high ground and wait," said Etapá. "At any rate I am tired." They

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deposited their long-legged birds, and squatted comfortably with crossed legs. As it appeared evident that the creature approaching was a four-foot, coming to the lake for water, they had no fear in sitting to let it pass near at hand.

Before they could decide as to whether it were a buffalo or a tall and hornless elk the object of their curiosity dropped out of sight upon lower ground. But it must pass—to reach water—over the ridge upon which they sat, and so they waited, talking and watching. When the plodding creature came within sight again it was mounting the ridge near at hand. A single glance showed a brown pony with a man upon its back and lying forward with an arm grasping its neck.

A moment of wild alarm followed this discovery, but native instinct saved the voyagers from taking to their heels. If a cunning maneuver had been planned its success was already certain.

They arose with palpitating hearts and stood awaiting the man's approach. They were quickly relieved of any feeling of fear. As horse and rider drew near it was evident that the man was either sick or wounded, that his lying upon his pony's back was not a ruse, but of necessity.

He raised his head feebly, showing an emaciated face, and waved a hand in token of amity. "How, how, cola," he managed to ejaculate, as

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his animal halted, fronting the little voyagers. They looked at the stranger, pityingly, quickly forgetting their fears. He was evidently a Dakota and in great distress.

Painfully the man raised himself upon his small flat saddle. He was half naked, having on only a pair of leggins and worn moccasins for clothing. His hollow cheeks, sunken eyes and prominent ribs spoke of great suffering from wounds or illness.

"My children," said this man, "you see me about to die. I desire to be led to the tepées of your people."

The voyagers were appalled at the soldier's need, and they stood hesitating and abashed for a moment. They knew now that he had seen them from a distance, and that he had turned to them for help, supposing they could lead him to a camp of their people where there were doctors or medicine men. It is very embarrassing for an Indian, young or old, to lay bare his poverty of resources when appealed to for aid.

Etape essayed to speak, but stammered painfully. Zintkala answered the stricken man at length, speaking simply and earnestly.

"It is very bad that we have no tepée. We are trying to go back to our country whence we were taken. We are taking meat to the place where we are stopping. I will cook some for you," she said.

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"Lead ye thither," said the stranger. "I may yet go a little distance."

That they might not go before him, but follow, Zintkala pointed out the high knoll which stood above their camp. "It is there we are curing meat," she said. "The hill is very near."

"Good," said the stranger. "I wish to die at that place, and that ye shall cover my body with stones."