

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BUFFALO GHOST WOMEN

Whether the Pawnees failed to find the trail of the fleet runners, or whether they became fearful lest an Oglala camp was hidden near at hand, cannot be known. Very likely they discovered the body of the dead hunter and were incredulous that either of the young Sioux they had seen should have killed him. At any rate the little voyagers saw no more of them. Night came to them in hiding and found them refreshed with alternate "sleeps" had during the afternoon.

Under cover of darkness they descended to the river bottom, and traveled swiftly all night up the Smoky. They followed an ancient buffalo and Indian trail, which was also the route their people had taken in moving from their village. They ran upon this deeply rutted road all night, and morning found them many leagues from the big cañon and near to the sources of the Smoky River.

When daylight came they found cover in a bush grown coulée at the head of which they could command a good view of the river valley and of the upland plains for many miles. At this camp their native religious instincts stirred

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them deeply. They were in doubt as to whether they ought not to dance a sacred dance to the Waniyan Tanka; but they did not know that this would be acceptable to the Great Spirit. So they slept but little, and spent the day, somewhat apart, in prayer and fasting. They were very grateful to all the good spirits for their deliverance from the Pawnees, and they prayed very earnestly that they might be guided by a spirit-hand in following the Oglalas, and that they might safely arrive among their people.

They well understood the dangers of plunging into an unknown country, even upon a fresh and well worn trail, for who could tell how soon the Oglalas might become separated into small bands and so scattered, in the chase of vast herds, that all traces of their march should disappear. Worse still many war parties of enemies might be on the watch to cut off any stragglers who should seek to overtake them. This had frequently happened on their marches. Again the Oglalas might make a great circuit, returning to their own country from another direction, and so the voyagers be compelled to travel on foot until the snows of winter should overtake them. Truly the brother and sister had need to pray for guidance.

On the following night the trail led them away from the river and across the more level plains. They no longer had the plainly marked and

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often deeply rutted buffalo paths to follow, but the Oglalas who had moved were more than a thousand strong and their herds of horses, and their numerous travois drags, had worn a broad smooth trail upon the prairies. This beaten roadway made good walking for the bare feet, else they could not have traveled at night on account of the cactus spears.

Wimimi, the full moon, also gave assistance. Her yellow light made weird shadow pictures upon the rough ground, and ghost people flitted hither and thither, giving one a sinking at the stomach now and then. Even so her light was better than darkness. The grass trail of the Oglalas could be seen for many steps ahead. Upon this gray fading ribbon of road the voyagers trudged until they sank, at a water course, from sheer exhaustion.

They slept until nearly midday, when they set forward again, feeling that they were now clear of danger from the Pawnees, who would not be likely to follow upon the trail of a great number of Oglalas. For several days they now traveled over a rolling plain, cut with numerous small dry runs and timber-fringed creeks.

For three days the trail led them steadily to the north, and they passed, at no great distance, the Sacred Ground of the pine clad hills where there were wonderful streams of boiling water—the springs of Mini-skanskan. The eyes of the

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voyagers were often turned upon that mysterious, silent country, where no tribes inhabited, no hunters intruded, and which was sacred to those good spirits who were able to control the thunder people and prevent them from doing damage. In that silent country the earth was red and the rocks were of many colors and very beautiful, and there were such flowers of brilliant hues as could nowhere else be found. There, too, were many wonderful birds and animals, whom no one hunted, and who lived at peace with each other. There igmu hanska (the cougar) and mato osansan (the grizzly) ate only berries and sweet herbs and did not kill for meat.

It was not a good country for hunters, but it was very beautiful and mysterious.

The voyagers passed beyond this country, going down a wide, flat river valley. On this flat valley one day they saw some marvelous ghost people, who frightened them very much at first. The earth appeared that day to be covered with a dense, low cloud, which lay very close upon the ground, and all standing things seemed to be oddly distorted and misshapen. The young Dakotas had seen these effects of the medicine of strange and freakish spirits before, and they knew that no one, who did not foolishly follow some beckoning ghost into danger, was ever harmed by these queer people.

But on this occasion, at midday, there sud-

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denly loomed out of the flat low fog some strange and monstrosly distorted figures, giant ghosts who stood against the sky and assumed such threatening proportions that it seemed they might, if they should choose, drive off or devour all creatures on the earth.

Zintkala saw these mysterious and fearful ones first, and cried out in alarm. "O brother," she quavered, "do look—do look! We are surely lost!"

She pointed directly toward the river, which ran, at quite a distance, upon their right but which had been swallowed in the cloud. Etaga turned and indeed beheld a strange sight. Out of that low wavering mist, which obscured the earth, shifting colossal figures were reaching toward the sky. Some very tall shadow people seemed to be lifting others upon their heads or shoulders, and these climbing ones were trying to touch the cloud spaces.

The boy dropped his bow and gun and gazed in awed amazement. It did not occur to either of the children to run, for only very silly persons would expect to escape if these giant people should choose to come after them. So the two stood trembling, astonished, and scared. While they stared, the immensely tall ghosts moved in a very mysterious manner. They shifted positions, grew larger or smaller, and their misty bodies moved to and fro in a peculiar fashion.

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As the frightened boy watched, with open mouth, a sudden conviction, born of recollection, seized upon him.

"Ho, older sister," he announced, "these are indeed the buffalo women of whom my grandfather has told me. I do not think that they intend to harm anyone. They appear to be dancing the grass dance."

"Is it indeed so?" asked Zintkala, with a great burden lifting from her palpitating heart. "I think truly, younger brother, now you have spoken of it, that those very large ones are surely dancing. Heretofore I have seen no people like them anywhere."

"It does not appear that they come toward us," assured the boy, "therefore they certainly are those people whom I have mentioned."

"It seems that they already have eaten the trees which we saw in that place," suggested the sister, yet feeling much uneasiness.

"I think also that they have eaten them," assented the boy, "but these people usually avoid coming near to Indians. They flee away and take the buffaloes with them."

"Younger brother, there is a hill on this other side; therefore let us hasten thither to watch these buffalo women dance their dance," urged Zintkala.

Here and there upon the flat valley arose lone knobs or small buttes, affording excellent view

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points from which to overlook a great scope of country.

"We will indeed go to that hill," said Etapa. They picked up their effects and walked rather hurriedly toward the butte. As they looked behind now and then their lingering fears began to fade. The huge bobbing ghosts were at least not following. When they finally reached the top of the lone hill a fresh surprise awaited them. The mysterious tall people had vanished, and in their places stood a thin fringe of cottonwoods, their tops showing quite clearly above the shimmering fog of radiation. These were the trees they had supposed the buffalo women had eaten.

The little voyagers were much amazed and mystified. They wished to look further into this strange business and to talk about it, and so they seated themselves cross-legged upon the knob.

"Whither do you think those people have gone, brother?" asked Zintkala, her round face filled with wonder.

"It is very warm," suggested Etapa, "and perhaps the buffalo women are swimming in the river."

This seemed not unlikely, and so the two, all eyes, sat for a while in silence, expecting to see those colossal ghosts arise from their bathing. After a sufficient time, however, they were

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forced to conclude that the buffalo women had vanished as mysteriously as they had appeared.

"They have seen us and thus have gone to give warning to their grandchildren, the buffaloes," asserted Etapa with conviction.

"Nakaeś, younger brother, it may indeed be as you say," admitted Zintkala. "Nevertheless I see other people yonder who, it appears, are very strange also."

She was looking down the valley in the direction they had been traveling, and Etapa's eyes, following hers, alighted upon some queer figures. A number of misty creatures, whose legs seemed to have been cut off near to their bodies, were moving across the clouded land. These ghost animals were very large in appearance, but their necks were no more than the size of one's finger, and their heads were far removed from their bodies. Some of them had queerly elongated horns, but all—and there were a dozen or more—were ambling toward distant hills in a curiously familiar fashion.

"Ho, I know those people!" said Etapa, after careful study of the legless figures. "They are the ghost antelope. Heretofore I have seen these, and they are very harmless, wishing indeed to meet no one."

"Younger brother, do you not think we may have come into the Sacred Country?" asked Zint-

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kala with anxiety. "Therefore these strange ones may wish us to go away very quickly."

"It may indeed be that you speak truly," said the boy, struck with the thought. "Nevertheless those large ones whom we saw yonder were certainly the buffalo ghost women, and I have not heard that these live in the black pine country."

"Do tell me about the buffalo women," urged Zintkala. "Hitherto I have heard nothing of these people."

"My grandfather only knows about them," said Etapa. "He only of all the Oglalas has seen these buffalo women, who are indeed grandmothers of the different tribes of buffaloes."

"My grandfather saw these people many winters ago, when he was a young man. The Oglalas were living in a distant country, and beyond their village, there was a very big wide river where the buffaloes crossed, going two ways. The Oglalas took a great many robes and much meat each year, for the buffaloes had always come to that country during the dead grass moons. Nevertheless one year pté stayed away; only three old bulls came to that country. When the Oglalas went out to hunt they found only these old bulls."

"They came to the river and the hunters went away in two parties, some going up and some going down the large river. My grandfather

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was of those who went up the river. These traveled very far in search of the buffaloes. They did not find them. They only found very mysterious paths. These trails were such as to make the Oglalas marvel indeed. A cloud lay on the earth, and the trails of the buffaloes went through this cloud. Their feet did not touch the ground. This was very mysterious. The Oglala hunters could not understand this matter.

"'Come,' said they, 'let us go homeward lest an evil befall some of our party.' They were afraid to stay in that country, for they said, 'In the night what is to prevent these spirit buffaloes from running off our ponies? Then surely the *Susuni* (Shoshonies) will come and take us!'

"But my grandfather would not go back. He said, 'Ho, ye Dakotas, I have seen these things before, and no harm came. Do as you will, but I will go on to find the buffaloes.'

"So my grandfather went on to find the buffaloes. Having a great medicine he did not fear to go on. He went a long way up the large river. He was going, thus traveling upon the flat land, and again a cloud descended upon the earth, lying very low and resting on the grass."

"My grandfather indeed saw very strange things. He saw trees dancing. They were dancing in the midst of the cloud. Doubtless they prayed to this cloud that they might not be cut off from the earth. Also a ghost elk ap-

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peared, walking in this cloud. My grandfather prayed very earnestly to this large bull's ghost. He desired to know where the buffaloes were.

"Very soon thereafter he saw the buffaloes. There were many of them on some high hills. My grandfather's horse was tired, nevertheless he rode swiftly after the buffaloes, desiring greatly to secure some meat.

"The buffaloes ran down off the hills. They were going in the cloud, which was lying on the grass. Then my grandfather saw very mysterious things. The buffaloes were running in this cloud and some very tall women appeared driving them off in a hurry. These women were taller than the trees, and my grandfather knew that they were the buffalo ghost women. They were truly the buffaloes' grandmothers. They wished to keep the hunters from shooting their grandchildren, therefore they chased them swiftly out of that country. They caused a cloud to cover their grandchildren, so that the buffaloes disappeared. My grandfather did not see them again. That winter the Oglalas suffered greatly for lack of meat."

"Truly those people are very mysterious," murmured Zintkala.

She felt no little relief, however, in the assurance that the buffalo women only desired to protect their grandchildren, and were not likely to chase and devour two small Dakotas.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BUFFALOES—A VOYAGE BY BULL BOAT

The trail of the Oglalas led through a land of plenty. Elk, deer and antelope were seen in large numbers every day. Of marmots, bush rabbits and sage hens there was never lack in the warm seasons. On this trail the little voyagers were never in want of meat.

After leaving the flat valley they crossed a high rough country and came to a stream which ran beside a low range of mountains. Among the coulées of the foot hills they now found plums ripening in great abundance. Here for a number of days—probably during the last weeks of August—they lingered, feasting continuously. It now appeared that, as the buffalo killing season had approached, the Oglalas would, if indeed they were coming back that way, soon return upon their trail. If they were to return by some other route it would be impossible for people on foot to overtake them.

The voyagers did not reason this out together, but it was the unspoken thought in their minds. To tell the truth each was fearful of further advance into an unknown country upon an aging trail. So they spoke together quite often about the return of their people, saying that they must