

CHAPTER XXXI

THE VOYAGERS ARRIVE

The bull boat had slipped out of a gorge wherein it had whirled over rapids until the voyagers were dizzy, and was floating, between high and caving banks, well out into some bottom lands.

Etapá lay curled like a young fox upon the bottom of the craft and, within the small remaining space, upon the blanket rolls which supported the sleeper, Zintkala sat upon her knees. She did not try to propel the boat but used a light pole merely to keep it from grounding.

Wi, the sun, had sloped half way down in the west and the day was warm, quite too warm, within the river's channel, for exertion. Here and there for a little way the big skin tub would sail along quite rapidly, whirling around and around like a floating turtle shell. Again drifting as an autumn leaf drifts it floated, barely moving against the gray earth banks; and the young girl's head would droop, nodding sleepily, until it rested upon her bosom.

Then the pole would drop from her nerveless fingers and she would awake with a start to stretch a small brown hand out upon the current.

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In one of these quick catches after the pole the bull boat dipped water, drenching Etapá's face; and this so pleased Zintkala that she laughed herself awake. The boy grumbled sleepily and turned his wet cheek under an arm.

Zintkala did not land the boat to climb the steep banks, for she had done this many days until she was weary of continued disappointments. She knew that if the Oglalas were camped in this strange country they would be found very near to the river—for most small streams were dry at this season—and so there could be no danger of passing their village unawares. For days they had seen no sign of human creatures and they were drifting now almost aimlessly, their thoughts and labors confined to present needs.

Indians, or people of any sort, were farthest from the sister's mind when her bull boat bumped over a shallow rapid and ran plump upon a washout runway, where a great number of animals had recently forded the stream. At first Zintkala supposed a big herd of buffaloes had crossed the river, but she stopped the boat and her shrewd eyes detected pony tracks—unmistakably Indian ponies; a great number of them had very recently passed that way.

"Mi sun!"

The word was spoken in an undertone, but there was in the tone a thrill of startling import

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which the sleeper's ears responded to, and Etapa arose, nearly upsetting the bull boat. The boy's eyes quickly fell upon the trampled sloping banks of the washout, and he leaped to land with a sharp exclamation of elation.

"Han! han!" he said. "I think perhaps the Oglala hunters have been after the buffaloes—thus we shall very quickly find our people!"

After a moment's keen search he spoke again more guardedly.

"Hoye, Tanké!" he said. "I think indeed these may have been the Oglalas. I do not see the travois trail nor any moccasin tracks, therefore these men were hunters or a war party."

"Let us be very careful, younger brother, lest we be seen suddenly by some strange people," urged the sister, and her breath came quick with excitement and suspense. She hoped these many riders had been Oglalas, but she feared they were enemies.

The boy, despite his mounting hope, exercised an Indian's caution. He did not mount the bank upon the pony trail but reëntered the bull boat.

"Tanké," he said, "let us go on further, that we may climb out in a secret place and see if any persons are in sight."

So in keen suspense of expectation the two poled their craft along until they had passed a curve of the river's bank. Then they landed

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and scrambled up to the cover of a cluster of green willows. From out this covert they peered with caution, but could see nothing of human import save the broad dusty trail which stretched over a little rise, that formed a second bottom to the river lands.

"It appears there are no people near this place," said Etapa, after he had scanned the lower reaches, "therefore let us go forward to look at this trail."

They approached, keeping upon the untrod ground, and examined the trampled surface carefully, and this time they discovered what they had missed before—pony tracks leading back upon the trail.

"Ho! I do not think these men have gone far from their village," said Etapa. "I think their town is among those hills yonder. It appears that a war party has gone out to meet the enemy."

"Do you think these people are the Oglalas?" asked Zintkala, doubt and perplexity clouding her round face.

Before the boy had reflected sufficiently for answer a clatter of rapidly approaching hoofs fell upon their ears. A light breeze blowing from the northwest rustled the willows and the tops of nearby cottonwoods, and the startled pair could not tell from which direction the horses were approaching. A moment of inde-

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cision, as they held their breath and listened, cost them an opportunity to hide.

Two horsemen suddenly appeared upon the rise in their front. These were strange Indians in paint and war dress, armed with shields and long lances, and one with bow and quiver of arrows at his back.

To run would have been imprudent as well as useless, and the voyagers, with hearts pounding at their ribs, not knowing whether these were friends or enemies, stepped back some paces from the trail. The boy carried his buffalo gun and, under pretense of shifting the weapon from hand to hand, secretly drew its hammer back in readiness to fire. His quick eye noted that one rider, a young Indian, had neither bow nor firearm, and that the other, a large and fleshy man, had but few arrows in his quiver. He would shoot this last man if shoot he must.

The strange riders showed no surprise. They reined in their ponies at some rods distant and sat looking at the bare-legged, sun-scorched, wanderers, who must, at this time, have resembled Feejees rather than Sioux. The horsemen were evidently puzzled as to the tribal identity of the pair. They rode forward upon the trail a little further and suddenly wheeled and faced the voyagers.

"How?" said the big man, inquiringly. "How," answered Etapa, in a far-away voice. The stran-

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gers looked at each other. Something in the boy's voice or manner had decided them. The larger man rode forward, indicating by signs that he wished to examine the buffalo gun.

Etapá and Zintkala drew back quickly, and the boy shook his head in decided refusal. The big soldier suddenly poised his lance as though to attack.

Etapá uttered a fierce yell, and leveled his gun. The man quickly yanked his horse backward and dodged behind his shield. The younger spurred his horse further beyond range.

"E-e-yi! Yih!" yelled Etapa.

His shrill defiant war-cry instantly warned the wild riders that they had to deal with no ordinary Indian lad. This boy was a fighter, a tactician. He had not expended his bullet, but was saving it for a close sure shot if they should charge. The warriors looked at each other with appreciative grins. This boy's war-shout had proclaimed him a Sioux. They would, therefore, kill these two and wear notched feathers in their braids. They circled about in a quick dash to cut off retreat to the river's bank.

The man with the bow and arrows then leaped from his saddle and half concealed himself behind his pony. He fitted an arrow and drew his bow as if to shoot. The frightened Zintkala started to run, but Etapa checked her with a sharp note of warning.

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"Hoye, Tanké! Do not run!" he cried. "Keep looking at this man. Jump quickly on one side if he shoots!"

The sister faced about palpitating with fear.

"These men will surely kill us if you do not give them the gun!" she said imploringly.

But the boy stood his ground, aiming carefully at the bowman. Again the wild riders grinned appreciation of the young warrior's shrewdness. They knew his buffalo gun had no sights. They wished to draw his fire at a distance.

But Etapa began to back away. He was frightened enough, but he was all Indian, and he preferred to fight rather than yield to capture. He did not believe these two men, soldiers though they were, would rush upon the muzzle of his gun. Let the bowman shoot his arrows!

The man, as if in response to his thought, suddenly, and with a fierce yell, launched a shaft at him. The boy's leap to one side was apparently instantaneous. The shaft struck into the higher ground behind him.

"Run quickly, Tanké, and get the arrow!" shouted Etapa. Zintkala plucked courage from her bold defender and obeyed with swift feet.

The strange soldiers spoke to each other and laughed wickedly. They had begun to enjoy the prospect of fighting these quick-witted ones. Though they wot not of Tatars this pair filled the place in their barbaric minds. The bowman

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now sprang upon his horse and rode around the voyagers in a sharp circle; he threatened frequently to launch his arrows.

"Do not let him hit you, Tanké!" shouted Etapa. "If I shoot him, get his bow and arrows quickly!"

The sister understood fully, and the blood of the fighting Sioux was roused in her. She ran about in a dizzy kind of maze, leaping like a dancer. Etapa sprang from side to side, and kept his gun pointed toward the wheeling horseman. This fellow spurred his pony suddenly in a straight line and, passing within a few paces of Etapa, let fly an arrow under his horse's neck. Again he missed, and the young Sioux ran swiftly backward and secured the shaft.

The bowman gave a whoop of chagrin and surprise. Shooting at these spindle-legged dodgers was like throwing pebbles at swallows. Adroitly the young Sioux led their enemies—the young warrior followed to watch for an opening—away from the river bank lest they should discover the bull boat and so secure Etapa's bow and arrows!

The two well nigh forgot their fears in an exciting game; their powers were engaged only to outwit that rapidly circling pony rider. Again and again, like a wheeling hawk, the big soldier rode around the dodging voyagers. The man often made feints to shoot. Although the two

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leaped tirelessly to foil his aim, the suspense and uncertainty, the peril of those swift close dashes across his circuit, was like to dizzy and confuse the young brains.

As they dodged and ran backward the children kept near to the base of the little elevation which marked the river's second bottom. This prevented the rider from shooting at them, save as he aimed downward or against the rise, and as he missed one seized, or kicked and broke, the well lodged shaft. Each time the big man failed the younger gave a whoop of derision. The wheeling horseman grew bolder, his sudden attacks more difficult to avoid, and the voyagers were tiring. When they were near to despair Zintkala suddenly found her feet among stones. Instantly she stooped and caught up several heavy pebbles. As the soldier again rushed at them she flung the stones with all her might. His pony was hit upon the face and nearly pitched its rider off as it sheered suddenly to one side.

"Wašte-šte!" shouted Etapa, and he, too, shifting his gun, began to throw stones. No horse would face such a battery, and in vain the rider tried to force his animal within the circle of their effective hail of pebbles.

In his anger the fierce bowman halted and launched two shafts in a fury at the boy. Etapa was nearly transfixed. An arrow passed

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on either side and one of them was splintered on his gun stock.

The shooter reached a hand to his quiver to find that he had expended all his shafts. As Zintkala seized and broke his last whole arrow across her knee, the soldier showed his chagrin so deeply that his companion again whooped with derision; he slapped his bare thigh and gave vent to guffaws of laughter.

The voyagers ceased exertion and looked about them for some line of flight to cover.

"Tanké," said Etapa, pointing up the river, "let us go thitherward to yonder high bank. If this man attacks I will surely shoot him."

"Let us do so quickly," replied Zintkala, and they now mounted the rise, the boy turning to threaten the horseman with his gun, if they should follow.

"Mi sun!" Zintkala's voice was raised in a shout of wonder and gladness, "I think, indeed, the Oglalas are here!"

The boy wheeled and his eyes followed his sister's. Out upon the prairie, within plain view were two large camps or armies of soldiers, at rest. They were not within hailing distance, but could be seen distinctly. Some were walking about, others sat upon the ground and still others held or tended herds of horses. One series of groups was nearly opposite the other, some bow shots removed from them and further up the

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river valley. And again, beyond these, the voyagers' eyes fell upon the distant conical points of many tepées—a big village.

"Tanké!" exclaimed the boy, with sudden conviction, "those far ones are indeed the Oglalas who have been fighting these others!"

"But these will take us!" said the girl, in a voice of yearning and despair.

Etapá could not answer. His heart sank. He knew why these two, who had come to the river, were so fierce to kill him and his sister without calling upon their fellows for help. They would not seek assistance so long as they could hope for success, but when they could not, what chance was there for escape!

"Let us walk, going backward, pretending not to know anyone," said the boy, in this desperate strait. "Let us go upon the lower ground to reach the high bank."

They stepped easily down out of sight of the soldiers upon the prairie, who had probably taken no note of them as yet. The voyagers now walked quickly backward, with their faces turned toward the two horsemen, their hands filled with stones to throw if these should chase them.

The soldiers immediately unslung the bull's hide shields attached to their saddles; then they talked together earnestly for a moment. Soon the younger turned and rode along the river's

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bank, and the larger man started directly toward the nearer soldiers' camp.

"Tanké! Run!" cried Etapá, and the two turned and sped along the base of the rise, running as they had never run before. Their days of rest in the bull boat, and their fears, lent wings to their supple and much tried legs.

In a dash of three hundred yards or more the horseman who pursued along the river did not gain more than a third the distance though he urged his pony at top speed. He passed the fleet runners, apparently intending to get between them and the high bank, at which they were aiming. Suddenly he wheeled, lowered his lance, covered his body with his shield and charged directly at them. In the same instant they heard a clatter of hoofs over the rise beyond. The soldiers were charging from opposite directions to confuse and destroy them.

Neither dared turn either way to throw stones, lest a hurled lance should transfix the thrower! The runners halted instantly; with the instinct of hunted animals, they leaped aside at the point of contact. The horsemen came together in a flurry of dust to find the dodgers again escaped, and some cracking strokes upon the ribs, as the voyagers hurled their stones and ran, set their ponies prancing.

The soldiers gathered themselves and their

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weapons for a fresh attack, and now the young Sioux sped up onto the prairie. They knew they must be nearly as close to the upper war party as to the enemy, and they ran toward those whom they believed were friends.

Zintkala raised her voice in a shrill appealing cry, "Até! Até! Até!"

The enraged horsemen wheeled again and charged them recklessly. These wily and incredibly fleet young Sioux would bring disgrace upon them should their rabbit legs now permit them to escape.

For another time breathless dodging saved the voyagers, and still the gun prevented any other tactics than the cross-charging. There was a moment of delay in recovery, and again the riders swiftly circled to position. The voyagers were feeling the tremendous strain of their efforts. Frantic terror had seized upon them. It was impossible for Etapa to use his gun—if he should turn upon one rider the other would run him through. It was impossible also for the fleetier, less-encumbered Zintkala to leave his side. They had to hold together.

Again the wicked lancemen charged with shields in front and spears poised to hurl; and somehow out of the mêlée the agile ones again escaped; but a catastrophe happened—the boy's cocked gun was accidentally discharged. He gave a shrill cry of despair, and fled with both riders

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after him as quickly as they could gather themselves. Each was bent upon securing the buffalo gun for himself. They rushed together and hindered each other.

The boy dodged their lance thrusts again and again and the girl, running just ahead, continued to cry,

"Até! Até! Até!"

Suddenly a vast chorus of whoops shook the air and the lancers, with a tired quarry and in the moment of success, were startled into drawing rein. They saw before them the two big war parties, mounted in groups, watching their game, and they saw also a single horseman from the Sioux columns coming with the speed of a prongbuck. He was half way to them, in fact, a chief in plumes and war-bonnet, lying low upon a buckskin horse, which ran as the coyote runs; and they saw the children they had chased stretch their arms toward this horseman and heard their shrill cries, which rang above the clamor—

"Até! Até! Até!"

As the Sioux warrior whistled down the wind also they heard his strong voice crying its challenge.

"I am Fire Cloud of the Oglalas—fight me! fight me!"

And they understood that they must fight this famous war-chief to the death, or be stricken