

White Hand

A Tale of the Early Settlers of Louisiana.

BY AUSTIN C. BURDICK

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

And now the work went on slowly but surely. No man was sent to every tribe, and all were solemnly pledged. The day was fixed upon which the fatal blow was to be struck; and that there should be no mistake, a bundle of sticks was prepared for each village, corresponding in number to the days that must elapse before the fatal stroke. These bundles were placed in their respective temples, and each day the chief was to go in and take one stick away. And when they were all gone—the day that saw the last stick removed—the avengers were to strike.

From the shores of the Mexican gulf to the Yaxoo, and from the waters of the Tombechee to the Sabine, every warrior was armed for the occasion, and eagerly waiting the coming of the fatal moment. The whites were watched at every step, and each red man had his victim marked. Slowly, one by one, as each bundle was rolled over, those fatal sticks were removed, and Chopart only waited patiently for his rich prize.

One of the wives of the Great Sun was called "Bras Plaque," or Pricked Arm, from the many strange devices which she had made upon her arms. Pricked Arm loved the French, and she failed not to serve them on every occasion when she could. She saw these secret meetings of the warriors, and her suspicions were aroused. She knew of the demand that had been made for the village of the White Apple, and she knew that these meetings of the council were touching that matter. She noticed the fierce looks of the men, their angry gestures, and their vengeful glances towards the French fort, and she feared that some calamity was to befall her white friends.

Pricked Arm made up her mind to save the French if possible, not only at Natchez, but at all other points; and to this end she must not only put Chopart on his guard, but she must cause the Natchez to give a premature alarm, and thus the whites in other sections would take warning, for she dared not attempt to convey intelligence to other stations for fear of being detected by her own people. Her first movement was to make her way to the temple, but she could not gain access there, no woman ever being allowed within the sacred building. Two nights in succession she stalked about the place, but the warriors within, who watched the holy fire, were too vigilant for her. In this extremity she thought of White Hand, and late one night she went to him and called him out.

"White Hand," she said, when they had reached the very tree under which the Great Sun had once before spoken with the youth, "have you the courage of a warrior?"

"I have the courage of a man," he replied, in astonishment.

"Then can you keep an oath?"

"If it may be kept with honor."

"The oath which I require may, but I will not ask it of you, for your own safety will hold you. Know, then, that there is a plot on foot for the massacre of the entire extermination of every white man, woman and child in the country. And mark me—this plot is deep and well founded, and it moves on to its consummation as surely as the now absent sun moves on towards the morning."

"All—every one?" uttered White Hand, in alarm.

"Yes. Every tribe has the signal, and every one fatal day is set. It is to be on the day when our people pay their tribute of corn. Every white man is marked, and unless something be done to thwart the red men, the terrible blow must fall."

Louis clasped his hands, for his father had said the same to him, and his sister and his friend St. Denis.

"Can there be no stop to this?" he asked.

"Yes—I will have courage."

"Then put me to it."

"Listen. I can warn the people at Natchez, but that will not save the others. In the temple there are a bundle of eypress sticks. They are hung by two thongs of beakskin back of the altar. In that bundle there are as many sticks as there are days between now and the fatal blow; could we remove seven of those sticks, the Natchez would make a premature attack. The people at the fort would be prepared. In other places down the river, and on the great salt lake, the red men will mistrust nothing, and while they wait eagerly for the passing of the next seven days, the alarm can be spread. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," returned White Hand.

"And will you do it?"

"Geod. But let it be soon."

By different paths the two returned to the village. Pricked Arm retiring to her own dwelling, while the youth spent some time in walking thoughtfully about the great square. When he at length entered his own dwelling he found his wife weeping, but he did not join her. He spent some time in walking up and down the place, and his face betrayed the deep anxiety that moved within him. He had marked the stern, angry looks of the stout warriors, and he had noticed their frequent councils, but he did not dream that such a dreadful plan had occupied their thoughts. He fancied they were at most, only planning some means for self-defense. But now the truth was apparent. His father was in danger—all his countrymen were in danger. Thus he was walking up and down the apartment, when his wife awoke and looked for him.

"White Hand," she said, sitting up in the bed, "why walk you thus when the night is waning?"

"I was thinking of my home, Coqualla."

"The princess arose and approached her husband."

"And thou art sad," she murmured, looking up into his face.

"Yes, Coqualla—very sad. I would go into the temple and pray."

"Then why go you not in?"

"Because I cannot gain admittance there. I am not a warrior, and none but warriors are admitted there."

"But thou art by marriage a Little Sun of the Natchez, and as such, thou canst demand admission there, and none shall dare refuse thee. Take thy offering of walnut wood and go. Say to the guardians there, 'I come as a Sun of the Natchez, and I would pray to the Great Spirit. Accept my offering, and open to me the way.' They will not dare refuse thee."

As Coqualla spoke she went to the fireplace, and from the wood there piled up she selected ten sticks of walnut, from which she removed the bark. It was a religious law, given by the first Great Sun, that only walnut wood should be used for the sacred fire of the temple, and that the bark must be carefully removed before it was carried in. White Hand took the wood in his arm and went to the temple, and when he reached the door, he demanded admission as a Little Sun of the Natchez, and after some questions he was admitted. He carried his offering to the altar, and one of the priests placed some of it upon the fire.

After White Hand had deposited his offering, his next movement was to step towards the back part of the temple and kneel down. The warrior-priest whose turn it was now to watch, stood still, and looked upon the youth for awhile, and then turned his attention to his staff. Still kneeling, White Hand looked about him, and close to him, against the wall, he saw the bundle of cypress sticks. Seven of the watchers slept, and only one was awake. Slowly the youth worked his way to the wall, still on his knees. The

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