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File 19

TABBA BONE

by

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"Tabba bone! That means "white man," the little squaw turned solemnly to the captain standing before her, <sup>with</sup> his skin as brown as any Indian's. "But you'll have to raise your sleeve above your elbow to prove that you are white."

Sacajawea's husband was guide of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, but it was to her the men turned when they wanted information, especially now that they were approaching the country of her own tribe, the Shoshones.

"I know my people well," she went on. "They've never looked upon white men before, and when they see you coming, they will believe you are a tribe of enemy Indians on the war path. So call out 'Tabba bone' to them, and spread your blanket this way."

She took a blanket by two corners and shook it as if to spread it for a seat of friendship.

The Shoshones had reason to believe every unknown man approaching them was an enemy, Meriwether Lewis thought. He had heard from Sacajawea herself of how the neighboring tribes preyed upon them. She had been captured five years ago at this very spot by the Minatarees, and taken far from her home to be sold into slavery. Now at last, as the wife of a guide, she was returning to her own country. Captain Lewis tried to see some sign of joy in her expression, but her face was the same as it had been when he first saw her, no smile and no frown.

"Tabba bone," he repeated the words. Everything now depended upon their making friends with the Shoshones. They had come far since the day William Clark had joined him in St. Louis, and with their small band of men they had started out to cross a continent that had never been crossed before. They had climbed the highest mountain and they had reached the source of the Missouri river. But the worst of the journey was still before them.

"If the Shoshones are friendly, we'll reach the end of our journey by winter," Lewis said.

The Shoshones had large herds of horses, so the squaw had said. It would be easy to barter for enough of them to carry their load <sup>when</sup> ~~now that~~ they could no longer go by boat up the river. And there would be guides to show them the way over forest and desert, till they came to the sea.

William Clark led the main party by the slow winding route of the river, but Lewis, impatient to get on, went by land with three of his men for company.

"Tabba bone," he <sup>had used these</sup>  
He ~~used~~ the words many times.

"Tabba bone," he called to a young warrior mounted on a horse without a saddle, and armed with a bow and arrow.

The warrior took one look at the men approaching and rode off as fast as he could to warn his tribe.

"Tabba bone," Captain Lewis called again to an old woman and a little girl.

The two Indians tried to run away but when they saw they could not, they sat on the ground with bowed heads, expecting <sup>surely</sup> to be killed. They could scarcely believe their eyes when they were given gifts instead.

"Tabba bone," Lewis called again when sixty armed warriors came riding full speed to meet them.

These men must be made to understand that he came in friendship. He put down his gun and spread his blanket as the little squaw had taught him. Then he raised the sleeve of his deerskin coat to

show the white of his skin.that had not been exposed to the sun. The men talked among themselves and the wonder in their eyes was not easy to hide. The chief, braver than the rest, got down from his horse and came forth to greet the Captain.

"Ah hi-e," he said.

Captain Lewis knew this meant, "I am much pleased."

Now all the warriors came up and greeted him, putting their hands on his shoulder and rubbing their cheeks against his. But he saw from their glances that they were still not sure whether to trust him or not.

He and his companions gave blue beads and red paint and pew-ter mirrors to the sixty warriors. The Indians were like children with new toys. They held the beads in their hands, smeared the red paint on their faces and looked at themselves in the mirrors, laughing and talking together. Then they glanced suspiciously toward the four white men. Was it a trick? they eyes asked each other. Did the white men come as friends or enemies? Every move Captain Lewis and his men made was watched. Now the women and children came to stare at them from a safe distance, ready to run and hide at the least sign of treachery. They were white, it was true, but who knows, they might have come only to lead the enemy to their camp.

"My companions, tabba bone, are coming up the river to join me," and I will need horses to meet them and bring our supplies," he made known his wants by signs.

Oh yes, there were plenty of horses, the chief stretched out his arms to show the herds grazing around them. But still he hesitated.

Captain Lewis and his companions started out to meet the Captain Clark and the main party, and the Indians followed reluctantly. Surely this was a trap, they eyes said, and their arrows were ready to fly. Meriwether Lewis rode beside them, deep in thought. What could he do to make the men trust him? He exchanged his hat for the chief's headdress. That was better. Then he showed signs of the approach of white men. Suppose Captain Clark was delayed and did not reach the spot where they were to meet? Suppose the Minnatarees did show up by chance, on a war party.

A young Indian warrior who had ridden ahead, came galloping up and shouting, and his comrades gathered around him, talking in excited voices. Had he brought good news or bad? ~~But~~ Like Sacajawea, their faces showed no smiles or frowns. There was only talk which the white men could not understand. Then there was a noise of approaching footsteps before them. Brown moccasined feet stepped cautiously.

"Sacajawea!" Meriwether Lewis called out in relief.  
*Captain Clark and the main party had arrived.*

The little squaw began dancing about happily with an expression of joy such as he had never seen, shining in her eyes. She sucked her fingers to show that these were her own people.

"I need you to talk to the chief for me, Sacajawea," the Captain said. "I cannot make him understand we have come as friends in peace. *Say to him I want horses and guides to go on our journey to the sea.*"

The chief sat on a white buffalo robe in the shade of a willow arbor, and in his hair were ornaments of shells. Sacajawea bowed her head as she was brought before him. The chief spoke and she looked up.

"Elder brother!" she gave a little cry and ran toward him, throwing her blanket over his shoulder and hers. Tears came to her eyes and she laughed and cried at the same time. What a change had

who had <sup>seldom</sup> ~~ever~~ smiled or frowned before.

come over this solemn young wife of the guide, And what a change, too, had come over the chief. But it lasted only a minute, then once more they hid their feelings behind faces that wore no expression. Sacajawea sat down and the chief began to speak.

"He says," Sacajawea interpreted his words in English, "that you may have all the horses you need, and there will be men to go with you all the way to the great sea."