

Introduction of the Author



Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa, Sioux, 1876–1938) Gertrude Simmons Bonnin was a writer and a Native American activist who also used the name Zitkala-Sa, which means red bird. Her work bridges the oral traditions of earlier colonial times and the writings of contemporary American Indians.

She was born a Yankton in the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and was the third child of Sioux born Ellen Tate. She had a white father and a traditional upbringing. Zitkala-Sa went to Quaker missionary school in Wabash, Indiana but at the end of school she wrote of herself that she was “neither a wild Indian nor a tame one” in *The Schooldays of an Indian Girl*.

When she was 19 she studied at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, and went on to teach for two years. She studied violin at the Boston Conservatory of Music.

As she grew older she became more and more estranged from her mother and the ways of the reservation and resented the way American Indians were being treated by the state, and the church. In the 1900s these feelings were made known in her articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In these articles she was not just critical. She began to build bridges between the cultures and *Old Indian Legends*, published in 1901, is a good example of this. Over time she became an activist.

She took an office job at the Standing Rock Reservation, married another Sioux employee and moved to Utah where they joined the Society of American Indians.

Zitkala-Sa was elected secretary of the Society in 1916, and the Bonnins moved to Washington D.C., where she edited *The American Indian Magazine*.

In 1926 she founded the National Council of American Indians and continued to speak out for reform. It was she that oversaw in the passage of the Indian Citizenship Bill through parliament.

Zitkala-Sa died in Washington D.C. in 1938 and is buried in Arlington Cemetery. *Old Indian Legends* is proof that she understood that political rights were pointless unless cultural identity of native Americans could be restored.

She was the first American Indian woman to write without an editor, interpreter, or ethnographer. Her essay *Why I am a Pagan* is of particular note because at the time of publishing other American Indian writers were writing about their conversions to Christianity.

The School Days of an Indian Girl

I The Land of Red Apples

There were eight in our party of bronzed children who were going East with the missionaries. Among us were three young braves, two tall girls, and we three little ones, Judéwin, Thowin, and I.

We had been very impatient to start on our journey to the Red Apple Country, which, we were told, lay a little beyond the great circular horizon of the Western prairie. Under a sky of rosy apples we dreamt of roaming as freely and happily as we had chased the cloud shadows on the Dakota plains. We had anticipated much pleasure from a ride on the iron horse, but the throngs of staring palefaces disturbed and troubled us.

On the train, fair women, with tottering babies on each arm, stopped their haste and scrutinized the children of absent mothers.

Large men, with heavy bundles in their hands, halted nearby, and riveted their glassy blue eyes upon us.

I sank deep into the corner of my seat, for I resented being watched. Directly in front of me, children who were no larger than I hung themselves upon the backs of their seats, with their bold white faces toward me. Sometimes they took their forefingers out of their mouths and pointed at my moccasined feet. Their mothers, instead of reproving such rude curiosity, looked closely at me, and attracted their children's further notice to my blanket. This embarrassed me, and kept me constantly on the verge of tears.

I sat perfectly still, with my eyes downcast, daring only now and then to shoot long glances around me. Chancing to turn to the window at my side, I was quite breathless upon seeing one familiar object. It was the telegraph pole which strode by at short paces. Very near my mother's dwelling, along the edge of a road thickly bordered with wild sunflowers, some poles like these had been planted by white men. Often I had stopped, on my way down the road, to hold my ear against the pole, and, hearing its low moaning, I used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it. Now I sat watching for each pole that glided by to be the last one.

In this way I had forgotten my uncomfortable surroundings, when I heard one of my comrades call out my name. I saw the missionary standing very near, tossing candies and gums into our midst. This amused us all, and we tried to see who could catch the most of the sweetmeats.

Though we rode several days inside of the iron horse, I do not recall a single thing about our luncheons.

It was night when we reached the school grounds. The lights from the windows of the large buildings fell upon some of the iced trees that stood beneath them. We were led toward an open door, where the

brightness of the lights within flooded out over the heads of the excited palefaces who blocked the way. My body trembled more from fear than from the snow I trod upon.

Entering the house, I stood close against the wall. The strong glaring light in the large whitewashed room dazzled my eyes. The noisy hurrying of hard shoes upon a bare wooden floor increased the whirring in my ears. My only safety seemed to be in keeping next to the wall. As I was wondering in which direction to escape from all this confusion, two warm hands grasped me firmly, and in the same moment I was tossed high in midair. A rosy-cheeked paleface woman caught me in her arms. I was both frightened and insulted by such trifling. I stared into her eyes, wishing her to let me stand on my own feet, but she jumped me up and down with increasing enthusiasm. My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud.

They misunderstood the cause of my tears, and placed me at a white table loaded with food. There our party were united again. As I did not hush my crying, one of the older ones whispered to me, "Wait until you are alone in the night."

It was very little I could swallow besides my sobs, that evening.

"Oh, I want my mother and my brother Dawée! I want to go to my aunt!" I pleaded; but the ears of the palefaces could not hear me.

From the table we were taken along an upward incline of wooden boxes, which I learned afterward to call a stairway. At the top was a quiet hall, dimly lighted. Many narrow beds were in one straight line down the entire length of the wall. In them lay sleeping brown faces, which peeped just out of the coverings. I was tucked into bed with one of the tall girls, because she talked to me in my mother tongue and seemed to soothe me.

I had arrived in the wonderful land of rosy skies, but I was not

happy, as I had thought I should be. My long travel and the bewildering sights had exhausted me. I fell asleep, heaving deep, tired sobs. My tears were left to dry themselves in streaks, because neither my aunt nor my mother was near to wipe them away.

(1900)

Notes

1. **party**: group (of people)
2. **bronzed**: made brown (skin)
3. **missionaries**: people sent out to convert others to their beliefs, especially religious beliefs
4. **iron horse**: the railroad train
5. **throng**: large groups; multitudes
6. **palefaces**: white people, usually of European origin
7. **tottering**: walking unsteadily; staggering
8. **scrutinized**: closely examined
9. **riveted**: fixed attention steadily upon
10. **hung themselves**: The children were turned around and holding onto their seats as they looked at Zitkala, who was sitting behind them.
11. **reproving**: finding fault with; rebuking
12. **moccasined feet**: feet wearing animal-skin shoes (moccasins)
13. **downcast**: looking downward
14. **gums**: *i.e.*, chewing gum
15. **sweetmeats**: candies
16. **luncheons**: lunches
17. **icicled**: covered with icicles
18. **whitewashed**: painted white
19. **whirring**: sound of something in rapidly spinning motion

20. **rosy-cheeked**: having pink cheeks, indicating good health
21. **trifling**: here, it has the connotation of bothering or annoying
22. **plaything**: toy
23. **wee**: very small

The School Days of an Indian Girl

II The Cutting of My Long Hair

The first day in the land of apples was a bitter-cold one; for the snow still covered the ground, and the trees were bare. A large bell rang for breakfast, its loud metallic voice crashing through the belfry overhead and into our sensitive ears. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave us no peace. The constant clash of harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless.

A paleface woman, with white hair, came up after us. We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room. These were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders. I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more immodestly dressed than I, in their tightly fitting clothes. While we marched in, the boys entered at an opposite door. I watched for the three young braves who came in our party. I spied them in the rear ranks, looking as uncomfortable as I felt.

A small bell was tapped, and each of the pupils drew a chair from under the table. Supposing this act meant they were to be seated, I pulled out mine and at once slipped into it from one side. But when I turned my head, I saw that I was the only one seated, and all the rest at

our table remained standing. Just as I began to rise, looking shyly around to see how chairs were to be used, a second bell was sounded. All were seated at last, and I had to crawl back into my chair again. I heard a man's voice at one end of the hall, and I looked around to see him. But all the others hung their heads over their plates. As I glanced at the long chain of tables, I caught the eyes of a paleface woman upon me. Immediately I dropped my eyes, wondering why I was so keenly watched by the strange woman. The man ceased his mutterings, and then a third bell was tapped. Every one picked up his knife and fork and began eating. I began crying instead, for by this time I was afraid to venture anything more.

But this eating by formula was not the hardest trial in that first day. Late in the morning, my friend Judéwin gave me a terrible warning. Judéwin knew a few words of English, and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!

We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judéwin said, "We have to submit, because they are strong," I rebelled.

"No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!" I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no one noticed I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes – my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes. Along the hall I passed, without knowing whither I was going. Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in it. The windows were covered with dark green curtains, which made the room very dim. Thankful that no one was there, I directed my steps toward the corner farthest from the door. On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark corner.

From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps nearby. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judéwin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. I held my breath, and watched them open closet doors and peep behind large trunks. Someone threw up the curtains, and the room was filled with sudden light. What caused them to stoop and look under the bed I do not know. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

(1900)

Notes

1. **bitter-cold:** extraordinarily cold
2. **belfry:** a tower in which a bell is kept for ringing
3. **undercurrent:** here, the sound of voices in the background
4. **bedlam:** chaos; madness
5. **shingled:** hair cut very short
6. **immodestly:** indecently; impudently

7. **braves**: male Native Americans
8. **spied**: caught sight of
9. **rear ranks**: in the rear or back of a group
10. **drew**: pulled
11. **venture**: to do something daring
12. **eating by formula**: eating meals according to a rigid plan or pattern
13. **mourners**: those who show grief for a death
14. **whither**: where
15. **peered**: looked intently at
16. **shuddering**: shivering, as if from fear
17. **peep**: a quick look or glance
18. **trunks**: large suitcases
19. **stoop**: to bend forward and down
20. **tied fast**: tied tightly or securely
21. **heard them gnaw off**: Like teeth, these scissors bite at, or gnaw, her hair.
22. **extreme indignities**: very bad offenses or mistreatment
23. **anguish**: suffering; agony; torment
24. **Not a soul**: Not a single person; No one
25. **herder**: one who herds or directs a group of animals, such as sheep, goats, or cattle, *etc.*