

Chapman Arthur

Mystery Ranch



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«Public Domain»

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Mystery Ranch

CHAPTER I

There was a swift padding of moccasined feet through the hall leading to the Indian agent's office.

Ordinarily Walter Lowell would not have looked up from his desk. He recognized the footfalls of Plenty Buffalo, his chief of Indian police, but this time there was an absence of the customary leisureliness in the official's stride. The agent's eyes were questioning Plenty Buffalo before the police chief had more than entered the doorway.

The Indian, a broad-shouldered, powerfully built man in a blue uniform, stopped at the agent's desk and saluted. Lowell knew better than to ask him a question at the outset. News speeds best without urging when an Indian tells it. The clerk who acted as interpreter dropped his papers and moved nearer, listening intently as Plenty Buffalo spoke rapidly in his tribal tongue.

"A man has been murdered on the road just off the reservation," announced the interpreter.

Still the agent did not speak.

"I just found him," went on the police chief to the clerk, who interpreted rapidly. "You'd better come and look things over."

"How do you know he was murdered?" asked the agent, reaching for his desk telephone.

"He was shot."

"But couldn't he have shot himself?"

"No. He's staked down."

Lowell straightened up suddenly, a tingle of apprehension running through him. Staked down – and on the edge of the Indian reservation! Matters were being brought close home.

"Is there anything to tell who he is?"

"I didn't look around much," said Plenty Buffalo. "There's an auto in the road. That's what I saw first."

"Where is the body?"

"A few yards from the auto, on the prairie."

The agent called the sheriff's office at White Lodge, the adjoining county seat. The sheriff was out, but Lowell left the necessary information as to the location of the automobile and the body. Then he put on his hat, and, gathering up his gloves, motioned to Plenty Buffalo and the interpreter to follow him to his automobile which was standing in front of the agency office. Plenty Buffalo's pony was left at the hitching-rack, to recover from the hard run it had just been given. The wooden-handled quirt at the saddle had not been spared by the Indian.

Flooded with June sunshine the agency had never looked more attractive, from the white man's standpoint. The main street was wide, with a parkway in the center, shaded with cottonwoods. The school buildings, dormitories, dining-hall, auditorium, and several of the employees' residences faced this street. The agent's house nestled among trees and shrubbery on the most attractive corner. The sidewalks were wide, and made of cement. There was a good water system, as the faithfully irrigated lawns testified. Arc lights swung from the street intersections, and there were incandescents in every house. A sewer system had just been completed. Indian boys and girls were looking after gardens in vacant lots. There were experimental ranches surrounding the agency. In the stables and enclosures were pure-bred cattle and sheep, the nucleus of tribal flocks and herds of better standards.

In less than four years Walter Lowell had made the agency a model of its kind. He had done much to interest even the older Indians in agriculture. The school-children, owing to a more liberal

educational system, had lost the customary look of apathy. The agent's work had been commended in annual reports from Washington. The agency had been featured in newspaper and magazine articles, and yet Lowell had felt that he was far from accomplishing anything permanent. Ancient customs and superstitions had to be reckoned with. Smouldering fires occasionally broke out in most alarming fashion. Only recently there had been a serious impairment of reservation morale, owing to the spectacular rise of a young Indian named Fire Bear, who had gathered many followers, and who, with his cohorts, had proceeded to dance and "make medicine" to the exclusion of all other employment. Fire Bear's defection had set many rumors afloat. Timid settlers near the reservation had expressed fear of a general uprising, which fear had been fanned by the threats and boastings sent broadcast by some of Fire Bear's more reckless followers.

Lowell was frankly worried as he sped away from the agency with Plenty Buffalo and the interpreter. Every crime, large or small, which occurred near the reservation, and which did not carry its own solution, was laid to Indians. Here was something which pointed directly to Indian handiwork, and Lowell in imagination could hear a great outcry going up.

Plenty Buffalo gave little more information as the car swayed along the road that led off the reservation.

"He says he was off the reservation trailing Jim McFann," remarked the interpreter. "He thought Jim was going along the road to Talpers's store, but Plenty Buffalo was mistaken. He did not find Jim, but what he did find was this man who had been killed."

"Jim McFann isn't a bad fellow at heart, but this bootlegging and trailing around with Bill Talpers will get him in trouble yet," replied the agent. "He's pretty clever, or Plenty Buffalo's men would have caught him long before this."

They were approaching Talpers's store as the agent spoke. The store was a barn-like building, with a row of poplars at the north, and a big cottonwood in front. A few houses were clustered about. Bill Talpers, store-keeper and postmaster, looked out of the door as the automobile went past. Generally there were Indians sitting in front of the store, but to-day there were none. Plenty Buffalo volunteered the information that there had been a "big sing" on a distant part of the reservation which had attracted most of the residents from this neighborhood. Talpers was seen running out to his horse, which stood in front of the store.

"He'll be along pretty soon," said the agent. "He knows there's something unusual going on."

The road over which the party was traveling was sometimes called the Dollar Sign, for the reason that it wound across the reservation line like a letter S. After leaving White Lodge, which was off the reservation, any traveler on the road crossed the line and soon went through the agency. Then there was a curve which took him across the line again to Talpers's, after which a reverse curve swept back into the Indians' domain. All of which was the cause of no little trouble to the agent and the Indian police, for bootleggers found it easy to operate from White Lodge or Talpers's and drop back again across the line to safety.

Another ten miles, on the sweep of the road toward the reservation, and the automobile was sighted. The body was found, as Plenty Buffalo had described it. The man had been murdered – that much was plain enough.

"Buckshot, from a sawed-off shotgun probably," said the agent, shuddering.

Whoever had fired the shot had done his work with deadly accuracy. Part of the man's face had been carried away. He had been well along in years, as his gray hair indicated, but his frame was sturdy. He was dressed in khaki – a garb much affected by transcontinental automobile tourists. The car which he had been driving was big and expensive.

Other details were forgotten for the moment in the fact that the man had been staked to the prairie. Ropes had been attached to his hands and feet. These ropes were fastened to tent-stakes driven into the prairie.

"The man had been camping along the route," said the agent, "and whoever did this shooting probably used the victim's own tent-stakes."

This opinion was confirmed after a momentary examination of the tonneau of the car, which disclosed a tent, duffle-bag, and other camping equipment.

"Look around the prairie and see if you can find any of this man's belongings scattered about," said Lowell.

"Plenty Buffalo wants to know if you noticed all the pony tracks," said the interpreter.

"Yes," replied Lowell bitterly. "I couldn't very well help seeing them. What does Plenty Buffalo think about them?"

"They're Indian pony tracks – no doubt about that," said the interpreter, "but there is no telling just when they were made."

"I see. It might have been at the time of the murder, or afterward."

Lowell looked closely at the pony tracks, which were thick about the automobile and the body. Plainly there had been a considerable body of horsemen on the scene. Plenty Buffalo, skilled in trailing, had not hesitated to announce that the tracks were those of Indian ponies. If more evidence were needed, there were the imprints of moccasined feet in the dust.

Lowell surveyed the scene while Plenty Buffalo and the interpreter searched the prairie for more clues. The agent did not want to disturb the body nor search the automobile until the arrival of the sheriff, as the murder had happened outside of Government jurisdiction, and the local authorities were jealous of their rights. The murder had been done close to the brow of a low hill. The gently rolling prairie stretched to a creek on one side, and to interminable distance on the other. There was a carpet of green grass in both directions, dotted with clumps of sagebrush. It had rained a few days before – the last rain of many, it chanced – and there were damp spots in the road in places and the grass and the sage were fresh in color. Meadow-larks were trilling, and the whole scene was one of peace – provided the beholder could blot out the memory of the tenantless clay stretched out upon clay.

In a few minutes Sheriff Tom Redmond and a deputy arrived in an automobile from White Lodge. They were followed by Bill Talpers, in the saddle.

Redmond was a tall, square-shouldered cattleman, who still clung to the rough garb and high-heeled boots of the cowpuncher, though he seldom used any means of travel but the automobile. Western winds, heated by fiery Western suns, had burned his face to the color of saddle-leather. His eyebrows were shaggy and light-colored, and Nature's bleaching elements had reduced a straw-colored mustache to a discouraging nondescript tone.

"Looks like an Injun job, Lowell, don't it?" asked Redmond, as his sharp eyes took in the situation in darting glances.

"Isn't it a little early to come to that conclusion?" queried the agent.

"There ain't no other conclusion to come to," broke in Talpers, who had joined the group in an inspection of the scene. "Look at them pony tracks – all Injun."

Talpers was broad – almost squat of figure. His complexion was brick red. He had a thin, curling black beard and mustache. He was one of the men to whom alkali is a constant poison, and his lips were always cracked and bleeding. His voice was husky and disagreeable, his small eyes bespoke the brute in him, and yet he was not without certain qualities of leadership which seemed to appeal particularly to the Indians. His store was headquarters for the rough and idle element of the reservation. Also it was the center of considerable white trade, for it was the only store for miles in either direction, and in addition was the general post-office.

Knowing of Talpers's friendliness for the rebellious element among the Indians, Lowell looked at the trader in surprise.

"You didn't see any Indians doing this, did you, Talpers?" he asked.

The trader hastened to qualify his remark, as it would not do to have the word get out among the Indians that he had attempted to throw the blame on them.

"No – I ain't exactly sayin' that Injuns done it," said the trader, "but I ain't ever seen more signs pointin' in one direction."

"Well, don't let signs get you so far off the right trail that you can't get back again," replied the agent, turning to help Tom Redmond and his deputy in the work of establishing the identity of the slain man.

It was work that did not take long. Papers were found in the pockets indicating that the victim was Edward B. Sargent, of St. Louis. In the automobile was found clothing bearing St. Louis trademarks.

"Judging from the balance in this checkbook," said the sheriff, "he was a man who didn't have to worry about financial affairs. Probably this is only a checking account, for running expenses, but there's thirty thousand to his credit."

"He's probably some tourist on his way to the coast," observed the deputy, "and he thought he'd make a détour and see an Injun reservation. Somebody saw a good chance for a holdup, but he showed fight and got killed."

"Nobody reported such a machine as going through the agency," offered Lowell. "The car is big enough and showy enough to attract attention anywhere."

"I didn't see him go past my place," said Talpers. "And if my clerk'd seen him he'd have said somethin' about it."

"Well, he was killed sometime yesterday – that's sure," remarked the sheriff. "He might have come through early in the morning and nobody saw him, or he might have hit White Lodge and the agency and Talpers's late at night and camped here along the Dollar Sign until morning and been killed when he started on. The thing of it is that this is as far as he got, and we've got to find the ones that's responsible. This kind of a killing is jest going to make the White Lodge Chamber of Commerce get up on its hind legs and howl. There's bound to be speeches telling how, just when we've about convinced the East that we've shook off our wild Western ways, here comes a murder that's wilder'n anything that's been pulled off since the trapper days."

"Accordin' to my way of thinkin'," said Talpers, "that man wasn't tortured after he was staked down. Any one who knows anything about Injun character knows that when they pegged a victim out that way, they intended for him to furnish some amusement, such as having splinters stuck into him and bein' set afire by the squaws."

"They probably thought they seen some one coming," said the sheriff, "and shot him after they got him tied down, and then made a quick getaway."

"That man was shot before he was tied down," interposed Lowell quietly.

"What makes you think that?" Redmond said quickly.

"There are no powder marks on his face. And any one shot at such close range, by some one standing over him, would have had his head blown away."

Redmond assented, grudgingly.

"What does Plenty Buffalo think about it all?" he asked.

Lowell called the police chief and the interpreter. Plenty Buffalo declared that he was puzzled. He was not prepared to make any statement at all as yet. He might have something later on.

"Very well," said the agent, motioning to Plenty Buffalo to go on with the close investigations he had been silently carrying on. "We may get something of value from him when he has finished looking. But there's no use coaxing him to talk now."

"I s'pose not," rejoined Redmond sneeringly. "What's more, I s'pose he can't even see them Injun pony tracks around the body."

"He called my attention to them as soon as we arrived here," said Lowell. "But as far as that goes he didn't need to. Those things are as evident as the bald fact that the man has been killed."

"Well, that's about the only clue there is, as far as I can figger out," remarked the sheriff testily, "and that points straight and clean to some of your wards on the reservation."

"Count on me for any help," replied Lowell crisply. "All I'm interested in, of course, is seeing the guilty brought out into the light."

Turning away and ending a controversy, which he knew would be fruitless, Lowell made another searching personal examination of the scene. He examined the stakes, having in mind the possibility of finger-prints. But no tell-tale mark had been left behind. The stakes were too rough to admit the possibility of any finger-prints that might be microscopically detected. The road and prairie surrounding the automobile were examined, but nothing save pony tracks, numerous and indiscriminately mingled, rewarded his efforts.

"Them Injuns jest milled around this machine and the body of that hombrey," said Talpers. "There must have been twenty-five of 'em in the bunch, anyway, ain't I right, Plenty Buffalo?" added the trader, repeating his remark in the Indian's tribal tongue, in which the white man was expert.

"Heap Injun here," agreed Plenty Buffalo, not averse to showing off a large part of his limited English vocabulary.

"That trouble-maker, Fire Bear, is the only one who travels much with a gang, ain't he?" demanded Redmond.

"Yes," assented the agent. "He has had from fifty to one hundred young Indians making medicine with him on Wolf Mountain. Rest assured that Fire Bear and every one with him will have to give an account of himself."

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Redmond, pulling at his mustache. "I ain't afraid of your not shooting straight in this thing, Mr. Lowell, but you've got to admit that you've stuck up for Injuns the way no other agent has ever stuck up for 'em before, and natchelly –"

"Naturally you thought I might even cover up murder for them," added Lowell good-naturedly. "Well, get that idea out of your head. But also get it out of your head that I'm going to see any Indian or Indians railroaded for a crime that possibly he or they didn't commit."

"All right!" snapped the sheriff, instantly as belligerent and suspicious as ever. "But this thing is going to be worked out on the evidence, and right now the evidence –"

"Which is all circumstantial."

"Yes, circumstantial it may be, but it's mighty strong against some of your people over that there line, and it's going to be followed up."

Lowell shrugged his shoulders, knowing the futility of further argument with the sheriff, who was representative of the considerable element that always looked upon Indians as "red devils" and that would never admit that any good existed in race or individual.

The agent assisted in removing the body of the murdered man to the big automobile that had been standing in the road, a silent witness to the crime. Lowell drove the machine to White Lodge, at the request of the sheriff, and sent telegrams which might establish the dead man's identity beyond all doubt.

Meantime the news of the murder was not long in making its devious way about the sparsely settled countryside. Most of the population of White Lodge, and ranchers from remote districts, visited the scene. One fortunate individual, who had arrived before the body had been removed, interested various groups by stretching himself out on the prairie on the exact spot where the slain man had been found.

"Here he laid, jest like this," the actor would conclude, "right out here in the bunch grass and prickly pear, with his hands and feet tied to them tent-stakes, and pony tracks and moccasin tracks all mixed around in the dust jest as if a hull tribe had been millin' here. If a lot of Injuns don't swing for this, then there's no use of callin' this a white man's country any more."

The flames of resentment needed no fanning, as Lowell found. The agent had not concluded his work with the sheriff at White Lodge before he heard thinly veiled threats directed at all Indians

and their friends. He paid no attention to the comments, but drove back to the agency, successfully masking the grave concern he felt. In the evening, his chief clerk, Ed Rogers, found Lowell reading a magazine.

"The talk is that you'll have to get Fire Bear for this murder," said Rogers. Then the chief clerk added, bluntly: "I thought sure you'd be working on this case."

Lowell smiled at the clerk's astonishment.

"There's nothing more that requires my attention just now," he said. "If Fire Bear is wanted, we can always get him. That's one thing that simplifies all such matters, where Indians are concerned. An Indian can't lose himself in a crowd, like a white man. Furthermore, he never thinks of leaving the reservation."

Here the young agent rose and yawned.

"Anyway," he remarked, "it isn't our move right now. Until it is, I prefer to think of pleasanter things."

But the agent's thoughts were not on any of the pleasant things contained in the magazine he had flung into a corner. They were dwelling most consistently upon a pleasing journey he had enjoyed, a few days before, with a young woman whom he had taken from the agency to Mystery Ranch.

CHAPTER II

Helen Ervin's life in a private school for girls at San Francisco had been uneventful until her graduation. She had been in the school for ten years. Before that, she had vague recollections of a school that was not so well conducted. In fact, almost her entire recollection was of teachers, school chums, and women who had been hired as companions and tutors. Some one had paid much money for her upbringing – that much Helen Ervin knew. The mystery of her caretaking was known, of course, by Miss Scovill, head of the Scovill School, but it had never been disclosed. It had become such an ancient mystery that Helen told herself she had lost all interest in it. Miss Scovill was kind and motherly, and would answer any other questions. She had taken personal charge of the girl, who lived at the Scovill home during vacations as well as throughout the school year.

"Some day it will all be explained to you," Miss Scovill had said, "but for the present you are simply to learn all you can and continue to be just as nice as you have been. And meantime rest assured that somebody is vitally interested in your welfare and happiness."

The illuminating letter came a few days after graduation. The girls had all gone home and school was closed. Helen was alone in the Scovill home. Miss Scovill had gone away for a few days, on business.

The letter bore a postmark with a strange, Indian-sounding name: "White Lodge." It was in a man's handwriting – evidently a man who had written much. The signature, which was first to be glanced at by the girl, read: "From your affectionate stepfather, Willis Morgan." The letter was as follows:

No doubt you will be surprised at getting this letter from one whose existence you have not suspected. I had thought to let you remain in darkness concerning me. For years I have been pleased to pay your expenses in school – glad in the thought that you were getting the best care and education that could be purchased. But my affairs have taken a bad turn. I am, to put it vulgarly, cramped financially. Moreover, the loneliness in my heart has become fairly overmastering. I can steel myself against it no longer. I want you with me in my declining years. I cannot leave here. I have become greatly attached to this part of the country, and have no doubt that you will be, also. Sylvan scenes, with a dash of human savagery in the foreground, form the best relief for a too-extended assimilation of books. It has been like balm to me, and will prove so to you.

Briefly, I want you to come, and at once. A check to cover expenses is enclosed. Your school years are ended, and a life of quiet, amid scenes of aboriginal romance, awaits you here. Selfishly, perhaps, I appeal to your gratitude, if the prospect I have held out does not prove enticing of itself. If what I have done for you in all these years entitles me to any return, I ask you not to delay the payment. By coming now, you can wipe the slate clean of any indebtedness.

Then followed directions about reaching the ranch – the Greek Letter Ranch, the writer called it – and a final appeal to her sense of gratitude.

When Helen finished reading the letter, her heart was suffused with pity for this lonely man who had come thus strangely and unexpectedly into her life. Her good impulses had always prompted her strongly. Miss Scovill was away, so Helen left her a note of explanation, telling everything in detail. "I know, dear foster mother," wrote the girl, "that you are going to rejoice with me, now that I have found my stepfather. I'll be looking forward to the time when you can visit us at the Greek Letter Ranch."

Making ready for the journey took only a short time. In a few hours Helen was on her way, little knowing that Miss Scovill, on her return, was frantically sending out telegrams which indicated anything but a peaceful acceptance of conditions. One of these telegrams, sent to an address which Helen would not have recognized, read:

The dove has been lured to the serpent's nest. Take what action you deem best, but quickly.

Helen enjoyed her trip through California and then eastward through the Northwest country to the end of the spur which pointed toward the reservation. From the railroad's end she went to White Lodge by stage. From White Lodge she was told she had better take a private conveyance to her destination. She hired a rig of a livery-stable keeper, who said he could not possibly take her beyond the Indian agency.

"Mebbe some one there'll take you the rest of the way," said the liveryman; and, accepting his hopeful view of the situation, the girl consented to go on in such indefinite fashion.

Thus it happened that a slender, white-clad young woman, with a suitcase at her feet, stood on the agency office porch, undergoing the steady scrutiny of four or five blanketed Indian matrons when Walter Lowell came back from lunch. In a few words Helen had explained matters, and Lowell picked up her suitcase, and, after ascertaining that she had had no lunch, escorted her up the street to the dining-hall.

"We have a little lunch club of employees, and guests often sit in with us," said the agent cordially. "After you eat, and have rested up a bit, I'll see that you are driven over to the – to the Greek Letter Ranch."

As a matter of fact, Lowell had to think several times before he could get the Greek Letter Ranch placed in his mind. He had fallen into the habit – in common with others in the neighborhood – of calling it Mystery Ranch. Also Willis Morgan's name was mentioned so seldom that the agent's mental gymnastics were long sustained and almost painfully apparent before he had matters righted.

"Rogers," said Lowell to his chief clerk, on getting back to the agency office, "how many years has Willis Morgan been in this part of the country?"

"Willis Morgan," echoed Rogers, scratching his head. "Oh, I know now! You mean the 'squaw professor.' He hasn't been called Morgan since he married that squaw who died five years go. There was talk that he used to be a college professor, which is right, I guess, from the number of books he reads. But when he married an Indian folks just called him the 'squaw prof.' He's been out here twelve or fifteen years, I guess. Let's see – he got those Indian lands through his wife when Jones was agent. He must have moved off the reservation when Arbuckle was agent, just before you came on."

"Did he always use a Greek letter brand on his cattle?"

"Always. He never ran many cattle. I guess he hasn't got any at all now. But what he did have he always insisted on having branded with that pitchfork brand, as the cowpunchers call it."

"I know – it's the letter Psi."

"Well, Si, or whatever other nickname it is, even the toughest-hearted old cowmen used to kick on having to put such a big brand on critters. That big pitchfork on flanks or shoulders must have spoiled many a hide for Morgan, but he always insisted on having it slapped on."

"Have the Indians always got along with him pretty well?"

"Yes, because they're afraid of him and leave him alone. It ain't physical fear, but something deeper, like being afraid of a snake, I guess. You see he knows so damn much, he's uncanny. It's the power of mind over matter. Seems funny to think of him having the biggest Indians buffaloed, but he's done it, and he's buffaloed the white folks, too. He gave it out that he wanted to be let alone, and, by jimminy, he's been let alone! I'll bet there aren't four people in the county who have seen his face in as many years."

"Did he have any children?"

"No. His wife was a pretty little Indian woman. He just married her to show his defiance of society, I guess. Anyway, he must have killed her by inches. If he had the other Indians scared, you can imagine how he must have terrorized her. Yet I'll bet he never raised his voice above an ordinary conversational tone."

Lowell frowned as he looked out across the agency street.

"Why, what's come up about Morgan?" asked Rogers.

"Oh, not such a lot," replied the agent. "It's only that there's a girl here – his stepdaughter, it seems – and she's going to make her home with him."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the chief clerk.

"She's over at the club table now having lunch," went on Lowell. "I'm going to drive her over to the ranch. She seems to think this stepfather of hers is all kinds of a nice fellow, and I can't tell her that she'd better take her little suitcase and go right back where she came from. Besides, who knows that she may be right and we've been misjudging Morgan all these years?"

"Well, if Willis Morgan's been misjudged, then I'm really an angel all ready to sprout wings," observed the clerk. "But maybe he's braced up, or, if he hasn't, this stepdaughter has tackled the job of reforming him. If she does it, it'll be the supreme test of what woman can do along that line."

"What business have bachelors such as you and I to be talking about any reformations wrought by woman?" asked Lowell smilingly.

"Not much," agreed Rogers. "Outside of the school-teachers and other agency employees I haven't seen a dozen white women since I went to Denver three years ago. And you – why, you haven't been away from here except on one trip to Washington in the last four years."

Each man looked out of the window, absorbed in his own dreams. Lowell had forsaken an active career to take up the routine of an Indian agent's life. After leaving college he had done some newspaper work, which he abandoned because a position as land investigator for a corporation with oil interests in view had given him a chance to travel in the West. There had been a chance journey across an Indian reservation, with a sojourn at an agency. Lowell had decided that his work had been spread before him. By persistent personal effort and the use of some political influence, he secured an appointment as Indian agent. The monetary reward was small, but he had not regretted his choice. Only there were memories such as this girl brought to him – memories of college days when there were certain other girls in white dresses, and when there was music far removed from weird Indian chants, and the thud-thud of moccasins was not always in his ears...

Lowell rose hastily.

"They must be through eating over there," he said. "But I positively hate to start the trip that will land the girl at that ranch."

The agent drove his car over to the dining-hall. When Helen came out, the agency blacksmith was carrying her suitcase, and the matron, Mrs. Ryers, had her arm about the girl's waist, for friends are quickly made in the West's lonely places. School-teachers and other agency employees chorused good-bye as the automobile was driven away.

The girl was flushed with pleasure, and there were tears in her eyes.

"I don't blame you for liking to live on an Indian reservation," she said, "amid such cordial people."

"Well, it isn't so bad, though, of course, we're in a backwater here," said Lowell. "An Indian reservation gives you a queer feeling that way. The tides of civilization are racing all around, but here the progress is painfully slow."

"Tell me more about it, please," pleaded the girl. "This lovely place – surely the Indians like it."

"Some of them do, perhaps," said Lowell. "But they haven't been trained to this sort of thing. A lodge out there on the prairie, with game to be hunted and horses to be ridden – that would suit the most advanced of them better than settled life anywhere. But, of course, all that is impossible,

and the thing is to reconcile them to the inevitable things they have to face. And even reconciling white people to the inevitable is no easy job."

"No, it's harder, really, than teaching these poor Indians, I suppose," agreed the girl. "But don't you find lots to recompense you?"

Lowell stole a look at her, and then he slowed the car's pace considerably. There was no use hurrying to the ranch with such a charming companion aboard. The fresh June breeze had loosened a strand or two of her brown hair. The bright, strong sunshine merely emphasized the youthful perfection of her complexion. She had walked with a certain buoyancy of carriage which Lowell ascribed to athletics. Her eyes were brown, and rather serious of expression, but her smile was quick and natural – the sort of a smile that brings one in return, so Lowell concluded in his fragmentary process of cataloguing. Her youth was the splendid thing about her to-day. To-morrow her strong, resourceful womanhood might be still more splendid. Lowell surrendered himself completely to the enjoyment of the drive, and likewise he slowed down the car another notch.

"Of course, just getting out of school, I haven't learned so much about the inevitableness of life," said the girl, harking back to Lowell's remark concerning the Indians, "but I'm beginning to sense the responsibilities now. I've just learned that it was my stepfather who kept me in that delightful school so many years, and now it's time for repayment."

"Repayment seems to be exacted for everything in life," said Lowell automatically, though he was too much astonished at the girl's remark to tell whether his reply had been intelligible. Was it possible the "squaw professor" had been misjudged all these years, and was living a life of sacrifice in order that this girl might have every opportunity? Lowell had not recovered from the astounding idea before they reached Talpers's place. He stopped the automobile in front of the store, and the trader came out.

"Mr. Talpers, meet Miss Ervin, daughter of our neighbor, Mr. Morgan," said the agent. "Miss Ervin will probably be coming over here after her mail, and you might as well meet her now."

Talpers bobbed his head, but not enough to break the stare he had bent upon the girl, who flushed under his scrutiny. As a matter of fact, the trader had been too taken aback at the thought of a woman – and a young and pretty woman – being related to the owner of Mystery Ranch to do more than mumble a greeting. Then the vividness of the girl's beauty had slowly worked upon him, rendering his speechlessness absolute.

"I don't like Mr. Talpers as well as I do some of your Indians," said the girl, as they rolled away from the store, leaving the trader on the platform, still staring.

"Well, I don't mind confiding in you, as I've confided in Bill himself, that Mr. Talpers is something over ninety per cent undesirable. He is one of the thorns that grow expressly for the purpose of sticking in the side of Uncle Sam. He's cunning and dangerous, and constantly lowers the reservation morale, but he's over the line and I can't do a thing with him unless I get him red-handed. But he's postmaster and the only trader near here, and you'll have to know him, so I thought I'd bring out the Talpers exhibit early."

Helen laughed, and forgot her momentary displeasure as the insistent appeal of the landscape crowded everything else from her mind. The white road lay like a carelessly flung thread on the billowing plateau land. The air was crisp with the magic of the upper altitudes. Gray clumps of sagebrush stood forth like little islands in the sea of grass. A winding line of willows told where a small stream lay hidden. The shadows of late afternoon were filling distant hollows with purple. Remote mountains broke the horizon in a serrated line. Prairie flowers scented the snow-cooled breeze.

They paused on the top of a hill, where, a few days later, a tragedy was to be enacted. The agent said nothing, letting the panorama tell its own story.

"Oh, it's almost overwhelming," said Helen finally, with a sigh. "Sometimes it all seems so intimate, and personally friendly, and then those meadow-larks stop singing for a moment, and the sun brings out the bigness of everything – and you feel afraid, or at least I do."

Lowell smiled understandingly.

"It works on strong men the same way," he said. "That's why there are no Indian tramps, I guess. No Indian ever went 'on his own' in this big country. The tribes people always clung together. The white trappers came and tried life alone, but lots of them went queer as a penalty. The cowpunchers flocked together and got along all right, but many a sheep-herder who has tried it alone has had to be taken in charge by his folks. Human companionship out in all those big spaces is just as necessary as bacon, flour, and salt."

The girl sighed wistfully.

"Of course, I've had lots of companionship at school," she said. "Is there any one besides my stepfather on his ranch? There must be, I imagine."

"There's a Chinese cook, I believe – Wong," replied Lowell. "But you are going to find lots to interest you. Besides, if you will let me – "

"Yes, I'll let you drive over real often," laughed the girl, as Lowell hesitated. "I'll be delighted, and I know father will be, also."

Lowell wanted to turn the car around and head it away from the hated ranch which was now so close at hand. His heart sank, and he became silent as they dropped into the valley and approached the watercourse, near which Willis Morgan's cabin stood.

"Here's the place," he said briefly, as he turned into a travesty of a front yard and halted beside a small cabin, built of logs and containing not more than three or four rooms.

The girl looked at Lowell in surprise. Something in the grim set of his jaw told her the truth. Pride came instantly to her rescue, and in a steady voice she made some comment on the quaintness of the surroundings.

There was no welcome – not even the barking of a dog. Lowell took the suitcase from the car, and, with the girl standing at his side, knocked at the heavy pine door, which opened slowly. An Oriental face peered forth. In the background Lowell could see the shadowy figure of Willis Morgan. The man's pale face and gray hair looked blurred in the half-light of the cabin. He did not step to the door, but his voice came, cold and cutting.

"Bring in the suitcase, Wong," said Morgan. "Welcome to this humble abode, stepdaughter o' mine. I had hardly dared hope you would take such a plunge into the primitive."

The girl was trying to voice her gratitude to Lowell when Morgan's hand was thrust forth and grasped hers and fairly pulled her into the doorway. The door closed, and Lowell turned back to his automobile, with anger and pity struggling within him for adequate expression.

CHAPTER III

Walter Lowell tore the wrapper of his copy of the "White Lodge Weekly Star" when the agency mail was put on his desk a few days after the murder on the Dollar Sign road.

"I'm betting Editor Jay Travers cuts into the vitriol supply for our benefit in this issue of his household journal," remarked the agent to his chief clerk.

"He won't overlook the chance," replied Rogers. "Here's where he earns a little of the money the stockmen have been putting into his newspaper during the last few years."

"Yes, here it is: 'Crime Points to Indians. Automobile Tourist Killed Near Reservation. Staked Down, Probably by Redskins. Wave of Horror Sweeping the County – Dancing should be Stopped – Policy of Coddling Indians – White Settlers not Safe.' Oh, take it and read it in detail!" And Lowell tossed the paper to Rogers.

"And right here, where you'd look for it first thing – right at the top of the editorial column – is a regular old-fashioned English leader, calling on the Government to throw open the reservation to grazing," said Rogers.

"The London 'Times' could thunder no more strongly in proportion. The grateful cowmen should throw at least another five thousand into ye editor's coffers. But, after all, what does it matter? A dozen newspapers couldn't make the case look any blacker for the Indians. If some hot-headed white man doesn't read this and take a shot at the first Indian he meets, no great harm will be done."

The inquest over the slain man had been duly held at White Lodge. The coroner's jury found that the murder had been done "by a person or persons unknown." The telegrams which Lowell had sent had brought back the information that Edward B. Sargent was a retired inventor of mining machinery – that he was prosperous, and lived alone. His servants said he had departed in an automobile five days before. He had left no word as to his destination, but had drawn some money from the bank – sufficient to cover expenses on an extended trip. His servants said he was in the habit of taking such trips alone. Generally he went to the Rocky Mountains in his automobile every summer. He was accustomed to life in the open and generally carried a camping outfit. His description tallied with that which had been sent. He had left definite instructions with a trust company about the disposal of his fortune, and about his burial, in case of his death. Would the county authorities at White Lodge please forward remains without delay?

While the inquiry was in progress, Walter Lowell spent much of his time at White Lodge, and caught the brunt of the bitter feeling against the Indians. It seemed as if at least three out of four residents of the county had mentally tried and convicted Fire Bear and his companions.

"And if there is one out of the four that hasn't told me his opinion," said Lowell to the sheriff, "it's because he hasn't been able to get to town."

Sheriff Tom Redmond, though evidently firm in his opinion that Indians were responsible for the crime, was not as outspoken in his remarks as he had been at the scene of the murder. The county attorney, Charley Dryenforth, a young lawyer who had been much interested in the progress of the Indians, had counseled less assumption on the sheriff's part.

"Whoever did this," said the young attorney, "is going to be found, either here in this county or on the Indian reservation. It wasn't any chance job – the work of a fly-by-night tramp or yeggman. The Dollar Sign is too far off the main road to admit of that theory. It's a home job, and the truth will come out sooner or later, just as Lowell says, and the only sensible thing is to work with the agent and not against him – at least until he gives some just cause for complaint."

Like the Indian agent, the attorney had a complete understanding of the prejudices in the case. There is always pressure about any Indian reservation. White men look across the line at unfenced acres, and complain bitterly against a policy that gives so much land to so few individuals. There are constant appeals to Congressmen. New treaties, which disregard old covenants as scraps of paper, are

constantly being introduced. Leasing laws are being made and remade and fought over. The Indian agent is the local buffer between contending forces. But, used as he was to unfounded complaint and criticism, Walter Lowell was hardly prepared for the bitterness that descended upon him at White Lodge after the crime on the Dollar Sign. Men with whom he had hunted and fished, cattlemen whom he had helped on the round-up, and storekeepers whose trade he had swelled to considerable degree, attempted to engage in argument tinged with acrimony. Lowell attempted to answer a few of them at first, but saw how futile it all was, and took refuge in silence. He waited until there was nothing more for him to do at White Lodge, and then he went back to the agency to complete the job of forgetting an incredible number of small personal injuries... There was the girl at Willis Morgan's ranch. Surely she would be outside of all these wave-like circles of distrust and rancor. He intended to have gone to see her within a day or two after he had taken her over to Morgan's, but something insistent had come up at the agency, and then had come the murder. Well, he would go over right away. He took his hat and gloves and started for the automobile, when the telephone rang.

"It's Sheriff Tom Redmond," said Rogers. "He's coming over to see you about going out after Fire Bear. An indictment's been found, and he's bringing a warrant charging Fire Bear with murder."

Bill Talpers sat behind the letter cage that marked off Uncle Sam's corner of his store, and paid no attention to the waiting Indian outside who wanted a high-crowned hat, but who knew better than to ask for it.

Being postmaster had brought no end of problems to Bill. This time it was a problem that was not displeasing, though Mr. Talpers was not quite sure as yet how it should be followed out. The problem was contained in a letter which Postmaster Bill held in his hand. The letter was open, though it was not addressed to the man who had read it a dozen times and who was still considering its import.

Lovingly, Bill once more looked at the address on the envelope. It was in a feminine hand and read:

MR. EDWARD B. SARGENT.

The town that figured on the envelope was Quaking-Asp Grove, which was beyond White Lodge, on the main transcontinental highway. Slowly Bill took from the envelope a note which read:

Dear Uncle and Benefactor:

I have learned all. Do not come to the ranch for me, as you have planned. Evil impends. In fact I feel that he means to do you harm. I plead with you, do not come. It is the only way you can avert certain tragedy. I am sending this by Wong, as I am watched closely, though he pretends to be looking out only for my welfare. I can escape in some way. I am not afraid – only for you. Again I plead with you not to come. You will be going into a deathtrap.

Helen

Wong, the factotum from the Greek Letter Ranch, had brought the letter and had duly stamped it and dropped it in the box for outgoing mail, three days before the murder on the Dollar Sign road. Wong had all the appearance of a man frightened and in a hurry. Talpers sought to detain him, but the Chinese hurried back to his old white horse and climbed clumsily into the saddle.

"It's a long time sence I've seen that old white hoss with the big pitchfork brand on his shoulder," said Talpers. "You ain't ridin' up here for supplies as often as you used to, Wong. Must be gettin' all your stuff by mail-order route. Well, I ain't sore about it, so wait awhile and have a little smoke and talk."

But Wong had shaken his head and departed as rapidly in the direction of the ranch as his limited riding ability would permit.

The letter that Wong had mailed had not gone to its addressed destination. Talpers had opened it and read it, out of idle curiosity, intending to seal the flap again and remail it if it proved to be nothing out of the ordinary. But there were hints of interesting things in the letter, and Bill kept it a

day or so for re-reading. Then he kept it for another day because he had stuck it in his pocket and all but forgotten about it. Afterward came the murder, with the name of Sargent figuring, and Bill kept the letter for various reasons, one of which was that he did not know what else to do with it.

"It's too late for that feller to git it now, any ways," was Bill's comfortable philosophy. "And if I'd go and mail it now, some fool inspector might make it cost me my job as postmaster. Besides, it may come useful in my business – who knows?"

The usefulness of the letter, from Bill's standpoint, began to be apparent the day after the murder, when Helen Ervin rode up to the store on the white horse which Wong had graced. The girl rode well. She was hatless and dressed in a neat riding-suit – the conventional attire of her classmates who had gone in for riding-lessons. Her riding-clothes were the first thing she had packed, on leaving San Francisco, as the very word "ranch" had suggested delightful excursions in the saddle.

Two or three Indians sat stolidly on the porch as Helen rode up. She had learned that the old horse was not given to running away. He might roll, to rid himself of the flies, but he was not even likely to do that with the saddle on, so Helen did not trouble to tie him to the rack. She let the reins drop to the ground and walked past the Indians into the store, where Bill Talpers was watching her greedily from behind his postmaster's desk.

"You are postmaster here, Mr. Talpers, aren't you?" asked Helen, with a slight acknowledgment of the trader's greeting.

Bill admitted that Uncle Sam had so honored him.

"I'm looking for a letter that was mailed here by Wong, and should be back from Quaking-Asp Grove by this time. It had a return address on it, and I understand the person to whom it was sent did not receive it."

Talpers leaned forward mysteriously and fixed his animal-like gaze on Helen.

"I know why he didn't git it," said Bill. "He didn't git it because he was murdered."

Helen turned white, and her riding-whip ceased its tattoo on her boot. She grasped at the edge of the counter for support, and Bill smiled triumphantly. He had played a big card and won, and now he was going to let this girl know who was master.

"There ain't no use of your feelin' cut up," he went on. "If you and me jest understand each other right, there ain't no reason why any one else should know about that letter."

"You held it up and it never reached Quaking-Asp Grove!" exclaimed Helen. "You're the real murderer. I can have you put in prison for tampering with the mails."

The last shot did not make Bill blink. He had been looking for it.

"Ye-es, you might have me put in prison. I admit that," he said, stroking his sparse black beard, "but you ain't goin' to, because I'd feel in duty bound to say that I jest held up the letter in the interests of justice, and turn the hull thing over to the authorities. Old Fussbudget Tom Redmond is jest achin' to make an arrest in this case. He wants to throw the hull Injun reservation in jail, but he'd jest as soon switch to a white person, if confronted with the proper evidence. Now this here letter" – and here Bill took the missive from his pocket – "looks to me like air-tight, iron-bound, copper-riveted sort of testimony that says its own say. Tom couldn't help but act on it, and act quick."

Helen looked about despairingly. The Indians sat like statues on the porch. They had not even turned their heads to observe what was going on inside the store. The old white horse was switching and stamping and shuddering in his constant and futile battle against flies. Beyond the road was silence and prairie.

Turning toward the trader, Helen thought to start in on a plea for mercy, but one look into Talpers's face made her change her mind. Anger set her heart beating tumultuously. She snatched at the letter in the trader's hand, but Bill merely caught her wrist in his big fingers. Swinging the riding-whip with all her strength, she struck Talpers across the face again and again, but he only laughed, and finally wrenched the whip away from her and threw it out in the middle of the floor. Then he released her wrist.

"You've got lots o' spunk," said Bill, coming out from behind the counter, "but that ain't goin' to git you anywheres in pertic'ler in a case like this. You'd better set down on that stool and think things over and act more human."

Helen realized the truth of Talpers's words. Anger was not going to get her anywhere. The black events of recent hours had brought out resourcefulness which she never suspected herself of having. Fortunately Miss Scovill had been the sort to teach her something of the realities of life. The Scovill School for Girls might have had a larger fashionable patronage if it had turned out more graduates of the clinging-vine type of femininity instead of putting independence of thought and action as among the first requisites.

"That letter doesn't amount to so much as you think," said Helen; "and, anyway, suppose I swear on the stand that I never wrote it?"

"You ain't the kind to swear to a lie," replied Bill, and Helen flushed. "Besides, it's in your writin', and your name's there, and your Chinaman brought it here. You can't git around them things."

"Suppose I tell my stepfather and he comes here and takes the letter away from you?"

Talpers sneered.

"He couldn't git that letter away from me, onless we put it up as a prize in a Greek-slingin' contest. Besides, he's too ornery to help out even his own kin. Why, I ain't one tenth as bad as that stepfather of yourn. He just talked poison into the ears of that Injun wife of his until she died. I guess mebbe by your looks you didn't know he had an Injun wife, but he did. Since she died – killed by inches – he's had that Chinaman doin' the work around the ranch-house. I guess he can't make a dent on the Chinese disposition, or he'd have had Wong dead before this. If you stay there any time at all, he'll have you in an insane asylum or the grave. That's jest the nature of the beast."

Talpers was waxing eloquent, because it had come to him that his one great mission in life was to protect this fine-looking girl from the cruelty of her stepfather. An inexplicable feeling crept into his heart – the first kindly feeling he had ever known.

"It's a dum shame you didn't have any real friends like me to warn you off before you hit that ranch," went on Bill. "That young agent who drove you over ought to have told you, but all he can think of is protectin' Injuns. Now with me it's different. I like Injuns all right, but white folks comes first – especially folks that I'm interested in. Now you and me – "

Helen picked up her riding-whip.

"I can't hear any more to-day," she said.

Talpers followed her through the door and out on the porch.

"All right," he remarked propitiatingly. "This letter'll keep, but mebbe not very long."

In spite of her protests, he turned the horse around for her, and held her stirrup while she mounted. His solicitousness alarmed her more than positive enmity on his part.

"By gosh! you're some fine-lookin' girl," he said admiringly, his gaze sweeping over her neatly clad figure. "There ain't ever been a ridin'-rig like that in these parts. I sure get sick of seein' these squaws bobbin' along on their ponies. There's lots of women around here that can ride, but I never knowed before that the clothes counted so much. Now you and me – "

Helen struck the white horse with her whip. As if by accident, the lash whistled close to Bill Talpers's face, making him give back a step in surprise. As the girl rode away, Talpers looked after her, grinning.

"Some spirited girl," he remarked. "And I sure like spirit. But mebbe this letter I've got'll keep her tamed down a little. Hey, you Bear-in-the-Cloud and Red Star and Crane – you educated sons o' guns settin' around here as if you didn't know a word of English – there ain't any spirits fermentin' on tap to-day, not a drop. It's gettin' scarce and the price is goin' higher. Clear out and wait till Jim McFann comes in to-morrow. He may be able to find somethin' that'll cheer you up!"

CHAPTER IV

Sheriff Tom Redmond was a veteran of many ancient cattle trails. He had traveled as many times from Texas to the Dodge City and Abilene points of shipment as some of our travelers today have journeyed across the Atlantic – and he thought just as little about it. More than once he had made the trifling journey from the Rio Grande to Montana, before the inventive individual who supplied fences with teeth had made such excursions impossible. Sheriff Tom had seen many war-bonneted Indians looming through the dust of trail herds. Of the better side of the Indian he knew little, nor cared to learn. But at one time or another he had had trouble with Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, Ute, Pawnee, Arapahoe, Cheyenne, and Sioux. He could tell just how many steers each tribe had cost his employers, and how many horses were still charged off against Indians in general.

"I admit some small prejudice," said Sheriff Tom in the course of one of his numerous arguments with Walter Lowell. "When I see old Crane hanging around Bill Talpers's store, he looks to me jest like the cussed Comanche that rose right out of nowhere and scared me gray-headed when I was riding along all peaceful-like on the Picketwire. And that's the way it goes. Every Injun I see, big or little, resembles some redskin I had trouble with, back in early days. The only thing I can think of 'em doing is shaking buffalo robes and running off live stock – not raising steers to sell. I admit I'm behind the procession. I ain't ready yet to take my theology or my false teeth from an Injun preacher or dentist."

Lowell preferred Sheriff Tom's outspokenness to other forms of opposition and criticism which were harder to meet.

"Some day," he said to the sheriff, "you'll fall in line, but meantime if you can get rid of a pest like Bill Talpers for me, you'll do more for the Indians than they could get out of all the new leases that might be written."

"I've been working on Bill Talpers now for ten years and I ain't been able to git him to stick foot in a trap," was the sheriff's reply. "But I think he's getting to a point where he's all vain-like over the cunning he's shown, and he'll cash himself in, hoss and beaver, when he ain't expecting to."

When the sheriff arrived at the agency, with the warrant for Fire Bear in his pocket, he found a string of saddle and pack animals tied in front of the office, under charge of two of the best cowmen on the reservation, White Man Walks and Many Coups.

"I'll have your car put in with mine, Tom," said Lowell, who was dressed in cowpuncher attire, even to leather *chapearejos*. "I know you're always prepared for riding. There's a saddle horse out there for you. We've some grub and a tent and plenty of bedding, as we may be out several days and find some rough going."

"I judge it ain't going to be any moonlight excursion on the Hudson, then, bringing in this Injun," observed Redmond.

Lowell motioned to the sheriff to step into the private office.

"Affairs are a little complicated," said the agent, closing the door. "Plenty Buffalo has turned up something that makes it look as if Jim McFann may know something about the murder."

"What's Plenty Buffalo found?"

"He discovered a track made by a broken shoe in that conglomeration of hoof marks at the scene of the murder."

"Why didn't he say so at the time?"

"Because he wasn't sure that it pointed to Jim McFann. But he'd been trailing McFann for bootlegging and was pretty sure Jim was riding a horse with a broken shoe. He got hold of an Indian we can trust – an Indian who stands pretty well with McFann – and had him hunt till he found Jim."

"Where was he?"

"McFann was hiding away up in the big hills. What made him light out there no one knows. That looked bad on the face of it. Then this Indian scout of ours, when he happened in on Jim's camp, found that McFann was riding a horse with a broken shoe."

"Looks as if we ought to bring in the half-breed, don't it?"

"Wait a minute. The broken shoe isn't all. Those pieces of rope that were used to tie that man to the stakes – they were cut from a rawhide lariat."

"And Jim McFann uses that kind?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where McFann is hanging out?"

"He may have moved camp, but we can find him."

The sheriff frowned. Matters were getting more complicated than he had thought possible. From the first he had entertained only one idea concerning the murder – that Fire Bear had done the work, or that some of the reckless spirits under the rebellious youth had slain in a moment of bravado.

"Well, it may be that McFann and Fire Bear's crowd had throwed in together and was all mixed up in the killing," remarked the sheriff. "A John Doe warrant ought to be enough to get everybody we want."

"We can get anybody that's wanted," said Lowell, "but you must remember one thing – you're dealing with people who are not used to legal procedure and who may resent wholesale arrests."

"You'll take plenty of Injun police along, I suppose."

"No – I'm not even going to take Plenty Buffalo. The whole police force and all the deputies you might be able to swear in in a week couldn't bring in Fire Bear if he gave the signal to the young fellows around him. We're going alone, except for those two Indians out there, who will just look after camp affairs for us."

"I dunno but you're right," observed Redmond after a pause, during which he keenly scrutinized the young agent's face. "Anyway, I ain't going to let it be said that you've got more nerve than I have. Let the lead hoss go where he chooses – I'll follow the bell."

"Another thing," said Lowell. "You're on an Indian reservation. These Indians have been looking to me for advice and other things in the last four years. If it comes to a point where decisive action has to be taken –"

"You're the one to take it," interrupted the sheriff. "From now on it's your funeral. I don't care what methods you use, so long as I git Fire Bear, and mebbe this half-breed, behind the bars for a hearing down at White Lodge."

The men walked out of the office, and the sheriff was given his mount. The Indians swung the pack-horses into line, and the men settled themselves in their saddles as they began the long, plodding journey to the blue hills in the heart of the reservation.

The lodges of Fire Bear and his followers were placed in a circle, in a grove somber enough for Druidical sacrifice. White cliffs stretched high above the camp, with pine-trees growing at all angles from the interstices of rock. At the foot of the cliffs, and on the green slope that stretched far below to the forest of lodgepole pines, stood many conical, tent-like formations of rock. They were even whiter than the canvas tepees which were grouped in front of them. At any time of the day these formations were uncanny. In time of morning or evening shadow the effect upon the imagination was intensified. The strange outcropping was repeated nowhere else. It jutted forth, white and mysterious – a monstrous tenting-ground left over from the Stone Age. As if to deepen the effect of the weird stage setting, Nature contrived that all the winds which blew here should blow mournfully. The lighter breezes stirred vague whisperings in the pine-trees. The heavy winds wrought weird noises which echoed from the cliffs.

Lowell had looked upon the Camp of the Stone Tepees once before. There had been a chase for a cattle thief. It was thought he had hidden somewhere in the vicinity of the white semicircle,

but he had not been found there, because no man in fear of pursuit could dwell more than a night in so ghostly a place of solitude.

It had been late evening when Lowell had first seen the Camp of the Stone Tepees. He remembered the half-expectant way in which he had paused, thinking to see a white-clad priest emerge from one of the shadowy stone tents and place a human victim upon one of the sacrificial tablets in the open glade. It was early morning when Lowell looked on the scene a second time. He and the sheriff had made a daylight start, leaving the Indians to follow with the pack-horses. It was a long climb up the slopes, among the pines, from the plains below. The trail, for the greater part of the way, had followed a stream which was none too easy fording at the best, and which regularly rose several inches every afternoon owing to the daily melting of late snows in the mountain heights. It was necessary to cross and recross the stream many times. Occasionally the horses floundered over smooth rocks and were nearly carried away. All four men were wet to the waist. Redmond, with memories of countless wider and more treacherous fords crowding upon him, merely jested at each new buffeting in the stream. The Indians were concerned only lest some pack-animal should fall in midstream. Lowell, a good horseman and tireless mountaineer, counted physical discomfort as nothing when such vistas of delight were being opened up.

The giant horseshoe in the cliffs was in semi-darkness when they came in sight of it. Lowell was in the lead, and he turned his horse and motioned to the sheriff to remain hidden in the trees that skirted the glade. The voice of a solitary Indian was flung back and forth in the curve of the cliffs. His back was toward the white men. If he heard them, he made no sign. He was wrapped in a blanket, from shoulders to heels, and was in the midst of a long incantation, flung at the beetling walls with their foot fringe of stone tents. The tepees of the Indians were hardly distinguishable from those which Nature had pitched on this world-old camping-ground. No sound came from the tents of the Indians. Probably the "big medicine" of the Indian was being listened to, but those who heard made no sign.

"It's Fire Bear," said Lowell, as the voice went on and the echoes fluttered back from the cliffs.

"He's sure making big medicine," remarked the sheriff. "They've picked one grand place for a camp. By the Lord! it even sort of gave me the shivers when I first looked at it. What'll we do?"

"Wait till he gets through," cautioned Lowell. "They'd come buzzing out of those tents like hornets if we broke in now, in all probability."

The sheriff's face hardened.

"Jest the same, that sort of thing ought to be stopped – all of it," he said.

"Do you stop every fellow that mounts a soap box, or, what's more likely, stands up on a street corner in an automobile and makes a Socialist speech?"

"No – but that's different."

"Why is it? An Indian reservation is just like a little nation. It has its steady-goers, and it has its share of the shiftless, and also it has an occasional Socialist, and once in a while a rip-snorting Anarchist. Fire Bear doesn't know just what he is yet. He's made some pretty big medicine and made some prophecies that have come true and have gained him a lot of followers, but I can't see that it's up to me to stop him. Not that I have any cause to love that Indian over there in that blanket. He's been the cause of a lot of trouble. He's young and arrogant. In a big city he would be a gang-leader. The police and the courts would find him a problem – and he's just as much, or perhaps more, of a problem out here in the wilds than he would be in town."

The sheriff made no reply, but watched Fire Bear narrowly. Soon the Indian ended his incantations, and the tents of his followers began opening and blanketed figures came forth. Lowell and the sheriff stepped out into the glade and walked toward the camp. The Indians grouped themselves about Fire Bear. There was something of defiance in their attitude, but the white men walked on unconcernedly, and, without any preliminaries, Lowell told Fire Bear the object of their errand.

"You're suspected of murdering that white man on the Dollar Sign road," said Lowell. "You and these young fellows with you were around there. Now you're wanted, to go to White Lodge and tell the court just what you know about things."

Fire Bear was one of the best-educated of the younger generation of Indians. He had carried off honors at an Eastern school, both in his studies and athletics. But his haunts had been the traders' stores when he returned to the reservation. Then he became possessed of the idea that he was a medicine man. Fervor burned in his veins and fired his speech. The young fellows who had idled with him became his zealots. He began making prophecies which mysteriously worked out. He had prophesied a flood, and one came, sweeping away many lodges. When he and his followers were out of food, he had prophesied that plenty would come to them that day. It so happened that lightning that morning struck the trace chain on a load of wood that was being hauled down the mountain-side by a white leaser. The four oxen drawing the load were killed, and the white man gave the beef to the Indians, on condition that they would remove the hides for him. This had sent Fire Bear's stock soaring and had gained many recruits for his camp – even some of the older Indians joining.

Lowell had treated Fire Bear leniently – too leniently most of the white men near the reservation had considered. With the Indians' religious ceremonials had gone the usual dancing. An inspector from Washington had sent in a recommendation that the dancing be stopped at once. Lowell had received several broad hints, following the inspector's letter, but he was waiting an imperative order before stopping the dancing, because he knew that any high-handed interference just then would undo an incalculable amount of his painstaking work with the Indians. He had figured that he could work personally with Fire Bear after the young medicine man's first ardor in his new calling had somewhat cooled. Then had come the murder, with everything pointing to the implication of the young Indian, and with consequent action forced on the agent.

A threatening circle surrounded the white men in Fire Bear's camp.

"Why didn't you bring the Indian police to arrest me?" asked the young Indian leader.

"Because I thought you'd see things in their right light and come," said Lowell.

Fire Bear thought a moment.

"Well, because you did not bring the police, I will go with you," he said.

"You don't have to tell us anything that might be used against you," said the sheriff.

Fire Bear smiled bitterly.

"I've studied white man's law," he said.

Redmond rubbed his head in bewilderment. Such words, coming from a blanketed Indian, in such primitive surroundings, passed his comprehension. Yet Lowell thought, as he smiled at the sheriff's amazement, that it merely emphasized the queer jumble of old and new on every reservation.

"I'll ask you to wait for me out there in the trees," said Fire Bear.

Redmond hesitated, but the agent turned at once and walked away, and the sheriff finally followed. Fire Bear exhorted his followers a few moments, and then disappeared in his tent. Soon he came out, dressed in the "store clothes" of the ordinary Indian. He joined Redmond and the agent at the edge of the glade, and they made their way toward the creek, no one venturing to follow from the camp. At the bottom of the slope they found the Indian helpers with the horses.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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