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THE SHEEP
EATERS

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William Alonzo Allen

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CHAPTER I

AN EXTINCT MOUNTAIN TRIBE

The Sheep Eaters were a tribe of Indians that became extinct about fifty years ago, and what remaining history there is of this tribe is inscribed upon granite walls of rock in Wyoming and Montana, and in a few defiles and canyons, together with a few arrows and tepees remaining near Black Canyon, whose stream empties into the Big Horn River. Bald Mountain still holds the great shrine wheel, where the twenty-eight tribes came semi-annually to worship the sun, and in the most inaccessible places may still be found the remains of a happy people. Small in stature and living among the clouds, this proud race lived a happy life far removed from all other Indians.

The Shoshones seem to be a branch of the Sheep Eaters who afterwards intermarried with the Mountain Crows, a tall race of people who gave to the Shoshones a taller and better physique. From what can be gleaned, the Sheep Eater women were most beautiful, but resembled the Alaskan Indians in their shortness of stature.

These people drew their name from their principal article of food, Mountain Sheep, although, when winter set in, elk and deer were often killed when coming down before a driving snow storm.

Their home life was simple. They lived in the grassy parks of the mountains which abounded in springs of fresh water, and were surrounded by evergreens and quaking aspens and sheltered by granite walls rising from fifty to a thousand feet high. Their tepees were different from those of all other tribes, and were not covered with rawhide but thatched with quaking aspen bark, and covered with a gum and glue made from sheep's hoofs. Another variety were covered with pitch pine gum.

In this manner lived the twenty-eight tribes of Sheep Eaters, carving their history on granite walls, building their homes permanently among the snowy peaks where they held communion with the sun, and worshipping at their altar on Bald Mountain, which seems likely to remain until the Sheep Eaters are awakened by Gabriel's trumpet on the morning of the resurrection.

Never having been taught differently, they believed in gods, chief of which was the sun, and consecrated their lives to them; and their eternal happiness will be complete in the great Happy Region where all is bright and warm. The great wheel, or shrine, of this people is eighty feet across the face, and has twenty-eight spokes, representing the twenty-eight tribes of their race. At the center or hub there is a house of stone, where Red Eagle held

the position of chief or leader of all the tribes. Facing the north-east was the house of the god of plenty, and on the south-east faced the house of the goddess of beauty; and due west was the beautifully built granite cave dedicated to the sun god, and from this position the services were supposed to be directed by him. Standing along the twenty-eight spokes were the worshippers, chanting their songs of praise to the heavens, while their sun dial on earth was a true copy of the sun.

A short time ago I learned that among the Mountain Crows there lived an old woman, who was the very last of her tribe, and who was so old she seemed like a spirit from another world. She had outlived her people and had wandered away from her home on the mountains into the valleys, living on berries and wild fruit as she wandered. She alone could read the painted rocks and tell their meaning, and could relate the past glories of the tribe and the methods of the arrow makers, who transformed the obsidian into the finished arrows ready to kill the mountain ram.

I was very anxious to see this creature, who had outlived her race and her usefulness, and so one day I saddled my horse, Billie, put on my cartridge belt, took my rifle in my hand, and set out for the mountains where I knew a small band of Mountain Crows were hunting buffalo on Wind River.

After a long ride I passed Bovay Creek and struck the Buffalo Trail, which led directly toward the mountains. It soon headed toward the south and I crossed a mountain stream and headed toward the Big Horn Canyon. I had gone about two miles when

I discovered something to my right sitting on the remains of a mountain cedar, and in a moment I was on the scene. I pulled up my horse and dismounted and discovered that I had found the object of my search, the Sheep Eater squaw.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD SQUAW'S TALE

Passing the Big Horn Canyon, where the rushing waters were beaten into spray, and where granite walls were shining like great sapphires reflected in the sun's bright rays, I wondered how many centuries it took to chisel that mighty water way fifty-two miles through this tortuous mountain. Perpendicular walls of fully 2000 feet are standing sentinels above this silvery water which goes roaring and foaming through the narrow abyss.

The golden eagle closes its wings and falls through space like a rocket from some unknown world, uttering a scream that resounds like a crash of lightning. The Big Horn, proudly perched on yonder crag, bids defiance to all living creatures. For fifteen miles this box canyon has cut through the backbone of the mountains and holds the clear waters as in the palm of one's hand. At the mouth of the canyon, where the waters flow calm as a summer lake, as though tired from their terrible journey, the rounded boulders, the white sands and quartz that have passed through, are resting, peaceful as the wild rose which waves to and fro in the spring zephyrs.

In the sand lies a dead cedar. Torn from the mountain top and crashing down the canyon, it was carried by the rushing waters out on to the beach and deposited in the sand. Sitting on a branch

of this cedar is an old woman. Her white locks hang crisp and short on her bony shoulders; her face is covered with a semi-parchment, brown as the forest leaves, and drawn tight over her high cheek bones; her eyes are small and sunken in her head, but the fire has not yet gone out. An old elk skin robe, tattered and torn, is thrown across her shoulders, with its few porcupine quills still hanging by the sinew threads where they were placed a century ago. The last of her race! Yes, long ago her people have become extinct, passed away leaving her to die. But alas, death does not claim her, and she wanders alone until picked up by the mountain Absarokees.

I sat down by her side and asked her by sign talk: "Are you a Sioux?" She shook her head. "Are you a Blackfoot?" Again she shook her head, and the effort seemed to tire her. I made many signs of the different tribes, but in the Crow sign she said "No" to them all. Her form seemed to be of rawhide, and on her fingers were still a few old rings made from the horn of the bighorn ram.

I gave her some of my lunch, as I ate, and she munched it with a set of old teeth worn to the gums. She ate in silence until all was gone; then I told her I was a medicine man, and asked her how old she was. She held up ten stubs of fingers, all of which had been partly cut off while mourning for dead relatives, then took them down until she had counted one hundred and fifteen years. Her eyes brightened, and she fronted away to the main range to a towering crag of granite, facing the north, where Bull Elk Canyon empties into the Big Horn. She held her withered

arm high above her head and said in sign language:

"My people lived among the clouds. We were the Sheep Eaters who have passed away, but on those walls are the paint rocks, where our traditions are written on their face, chiseled with obsidian arrow heads. Our people were not warriors. We worshipped the sun, and the sun is bright and so were our people. Our men were good and our women were like the sun. The Great Spirit has stamped our impressions on the rocks by His lightnings; there are many of our people who were outlined on those smooth walls years ago; then our people painted their figures, or traced them with beautiful colored stones, and the pale face calls them "painted rocks." Our people never came down into the valleys, but always lived among the clouds, eating the mountain sheep and the goats, and sometimes the elk when they came high on the mountains. Our tepees were made of the cedar, thatched with grey moss and cemented with the gum from the pines, carpeted with the mountain sheep-skins, soft as down. Our garments were made from the skins of the gazelle, and ornamented with eagle feathers and ermine and otter skins.

"We chanted our songs to the sun, and the Great Spirit was pleased. He gave us much sheep and meat and berries and pure water, and snow to keep the flies away. The water was never muddy. We had no dogs nor horses. We did not go far from our homes, but were happy in our mountain abode. Then came the Sioux, who killed the elk and buffalo in the valleys. They had swarms of dogs and horses, and ran the game until it left the

valleys and went far away. Their people were always at war and stealing horses, which was very wrong in the sight of our people, who never stole anything. Our men were fearless and brave, and could bring down all kinds of game with their bows and arrows, and were contented; but the Sioux were not contented with fighting their enemies, but came to our mountain home and began to try to ascend the trail. Our chief met them on the steep precipice and ordered them to stop where they were, but they murmured and made signs of battle. Our people had great masses of rock as large as houses, where they could let them loose down the trail and crush the Sioux into the earth as they were all down in a deep canyon.

"The Sioux stopped and began a war council, and began to paint and get ready for battle. Our chief got the great rocks ready, and then sent a runner to tell the Sioux that our people never went into the valleys nor killed the buffalo, and that we wished to be apart from all other people. After a long council the Sioux fired a volley of arrows at our runner, and wounded him in the thigh. He came to the chief greatly alarmed at the dreaded Sioux as they were many.

"The ponies in the valley below were strange looking creatures to us; we had never seen them before. The dogs were howling and the valley rang with the wild warwhoop. The time had come for action, and the Sheep Eaters assembled at the narrow trail, headed by their chieftain, Red Eagle, with his bow six feet long, made from the mountain ram's horn, and bound with glue and

sinew from the sheep's neck. Great excitement prevailed. The squaws and children had hidden among the rocks with all their robes and earthly possessions. The wild and savage Sioux knew no fear and were pressing up the narrow trail with war paint and feathers, their grim visages scowling in the sunlight as they came.

"Red Eagle, with that bravery known only to his tribe, waited until they had reached the most dangerous precipice. Then with a great lever that had been prepared years before, he loosened the great rock from its moorings, and with one crash it sped down the canyon like a cyclone, tearing the trees from their roots, and starting the rocks, until the canyon became one great earthquake. The screams of the terrified Indians, the howling of dogs and the neighing of horses were heard in one awful roar. The battle was over. The canyon was a mass of blood, and death was abroad in the valley. Not a living thing was to be seen.

"Red Eagle took a horn made of red cedar, and gave one long quivering blast which echoed and reechoed through the alps and was carried across the glaciers to every part of the mountain. Then the women and children came back and once more took shelter in their comfortable homes."

I arose and gave the old crone the balance of my lunch, and told her I was going to see that mountain some day and see their houses, but she held up her hand and said, "Away up mountain long time ago, maybe so, no tepee now."

And I went and left her sitting alone on the old tree, waiting for the Great Spirit to come take her to her tribe, over on the

happy hunting ground, where scenes of warfare and savage Sioux would never molest them again. As I left her alone on the bank of the Big Horn I could not help feeling a pang of pity for the wild woman of the Rockies, whose life had been spent among the canyons, and on the streams whose waters had chiseled great passages through those granite walls centuries ago. She who was once a belle in her tribe and had lived to see the extermination of her people, and now wandered alone wishing to die and pass beyond. The earth was not to her as it had been in her youth.

I shall never forget the spell that came over me as she raised her palsied arm and showed me where she had lived a hundred years ago. Something seemed to tell me she was speaking the truth and my trip to that mountain became a living passion from that day.

CHAPTER III

THE GOLD SEEKER IN THE MOUNTAINS

On the apex of Medicine Mountain, whose rugged cliffs hold communion with the fleeting clouds, and where the winds sing dismal songs among the cedar boughs, there the forked lightnings at intervals light up the panorama and a thousand beautiful springs and waterfalls sparkle like myriads of diamonds. The mountain ash and the golden leaves of the mountain quaking asp cast their shadows to make perfect this great wonderland, whose colors are more splendid than the rainbow or the golden setting of the western sun.

Among such scenery one could live away from the gilded vices and the artificial lives of the crowded cities, and it was close to the god of nature these people lived and carved their history on the mountains and rocks, worshipped the sun because it was warm and bright, and because it lighted the narrow trail through the defiles of the mountains, across the streams and through the cool green forests, along the rugged cliffs where the horny hoofs of the elk, deer, and mountain sheep had blazed a trail so narrow and so steep that none but the Sheep Eaters dare travel its rugged heights.

Along these trails could be seen at the four seasons of the year,

all of the Sheep Eaters, wending their way to the sacred shrine, the great wheel, with its gates and its gods of plenty and light. Here on an elevated spur a thousand feet above the Porcupine Basin, standing out to the east, is a great look-out, where the great sun dial with its twenty-eight spokes representing the twenty-eight tribes of the Sheep Eaters, overlooking the great Grey Bull country, the Ten Sleep Mountains and the Teton Peaks sweeping down toward the Big Horn Canyon. There the Grey Bull and Wind River and Sage Creek are sweeping through Big Horn Canyon, with its chiseled walls, more than a third of a mile in height, and its serpentine trail fifty-two miles into the Big Horn River, and thence into the Yellowstone and Missouri and on to the ocean.

Here nature's god had spread with lavish hand the richest and the greatest blessings to the Sheep Eaters. The buffalo down in the valleys, the antelope on the plains, the gazelle along the streams, and the elk, black-tail and big horn on the mountains, the mountain grouse, and the streams filled with trout, camas root for bread, cherries, raspberries, and strawberries, made a Garden of Eden for these people until a thousand years had passed, and the tribes increased to twenty-eight before the onward march of the Sioux across and beyond the Mississippi and Missouri brought them into the Sheep Eaters' country.

Around the base of these mountains were many alluring deposits of gold, and small gold camps had started at Fire Springs, Bear Creek and on the east and west forks of the

historical Little Big Horn, all in or near the beautiful Porcupine Basin. But the alluring grains of the precious metal could not be found in paying quantities and the miners had quietly packed their plunder and "hiked the trail" to more plentiful paying "diggings."

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