

# JACK LONDON

THE ACORN-PLANTER /  
A CALIFORNIA FOREST  
PLAY (1916)

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**The Acorn-Planter**

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The Acorn-Planter / A California Forest Play (1916):*

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## The Acorn-Planter / A California Forest Play (1916)

### ARGUMENT

In the morning of the world, while his tribe makes its camp for the night in a grove, Red Cloud, the first man of men, and the first man of the Nishinam, save in war, sings of the duty of life, which duty is to make life more abundant. The Shaman, or medicine man, sings of foreboding and prophecy. The War Chief, who commands in war, sings that war is the only way to life. This Red Cloud denies, affirming that the way of life is the way of the acorn-planter, and that whoso slays one man slays the planter of many acorns. Red Cloud wins the Shaman and the people to his contention.

After the passage of thousands of years, again in the grove appear the Nishinam. In Red Cloud, the War Chief, the Shaman, and the Dew-Woman are repeated the eternal figures

of the philosopher, the soldier, the priest, and the woman—types ever realizing themselves afresh in the social adventures of man. Red Cloud recognizes the wrecked explorers as planters and life-makers, and is for treating them with kindness. But the War Chief and the idea of war are dominant. The Shaman joins with the war party, and is privy to the massacre of the explorers.

A hundred years pass, when, on their seasonal migration, the Nishinam camp for the night in the grove. They still live, and the war formula for life seems vindicated, despite the imminence of the superior life-makers, the whites, who are flooding into California from north, south, east, and west—the English, the Americans, the Spaniards, and the Russians. The massacre by the white men follows, and Red Cloud, dying, recognizes the white men as brother acorn-planters, the possessors of the superior life-formula of which he had always been a protagonist.

In the Epilogue, or Apotheosis, occur the celebration of the death of war and the triumph of the acorn-planters.

# PROLOGUE

*Time. In the morning of the world.*

*Scene. A forest hillside where great trees stand with wide spaces between. A stream flows from a spring that bursts out of the hillside. It is a place of lush ferns and brakes, also, of thickets of such shrubs as inhabit a redwood forest floor. At the left, in the open level space at the foot of the hillside, extending out of sight among the trees, is visible a portion of a Nishinam Indian camp. It is a temporary camp for the night. Small cooking fires smoulder. Standing about are wither-woven baskets for the carrying of supplies and dunnage. Spears and bows and quivers of arrows lie about. Boys drag in dry branches for firewood. Young women fill gourds with water from the stream and proceed about their camp tasks. A number of older women are pounding acorns in stone mortars with stone pestles. An old man and a Shaman, or priest, look expectantly up the hillside. All wear moccasins and are skin-clad, primitive, in their garmenting. Neither iron nor woven cloth occurs in the weapons and gear.*

# ACT I

**Shaman** (*Looking up hillside.*) Red Cloud is late.

**Old Man** (*After inspection of hillside.*) He has chased the deer far. He is patient.

In the chase he is patient like an old man.

**Shaman** His feet are as fleet as the deer's.

**Old Man** (*Nodding.*) And he is more patient than the deer.

**Shaman** (*Assertively, as if inculcating a lesson.*) He is a mighty chief.

**Old Man** (*Nodding.*) His father was a mighty chief. He is like to his father.

**Shaman** (*More assertively.*) He is his father. It is so spoken. He is his father's father. He is the first man, the first Red Cloud, ever born, and born again, to chiefship of his people.

**Old Man** It is so spoken.

**Shaman** His father was the Coyote. His mother was the Moon. And he was the first man.

**Old Man** (*Repeating.*) His father was the Coyote.  
His mother was  
the Moon. And he was the first man.

**Shaman** He planted the first acorns, and he is very wise.

**Old Man** (*Repeating.*) He planted the first acorns,  
and he is very  
wise.

*(Cries from the women and a turning of faces. Red Cloud appears among his hunters descending the hillside. All carry spears, and bows and arrows. Some carry rabbits and other small game. Several carry deer)*

#### PLAINT OF THE NISHINAM

Red Cloud, the meat-bringer!  
Red Cloud, the acorn-planter!  
Red Cloud, first man of the Nishinam!  
Thy people hunger.  
Far have they fared.

Hard has the way been.  
Day long they sought,  
High in the mountains,  
Deep in the pools,  
Wide 'mong the grasses,  
In the bushes, and tree-tops,  
Under the earth and flat stones.  
Few are the acorns,  
Past is the time for berries,  
Fled are the fishes, the prawns and the grasshoppers,  
Blown far are the grass-seeds,  
Flown far are the young birds,  
Old are the roots and withered.  
Built are the fires for the meat.  
Laid are the boughs for sleep,  
Yet thy people cannot sleep.  
Red Cloud, thy people hunger.

**Red Cloud**    *(Still descending.)*    Good hunting! Good hunting!

**Hunters**    Good hunting! Good hunting!

*(Completing the descent, Red Cloud motions to the meat-bearers. They throw down their burdens before the women, who greedily inspect the spoils.)*

MEAT SONG OF THE NISHINAM

Meat that is good to eat,  
Tender for old teeth,  
Gristle for young teeth,  
Big deer and fat deer,  
Lean meat and fat meat,  
Haunch-meat and knuckle-bone,  
Liver and heart.  
Food for the old men,  
Life for all men,  
For women and babes.  
Easement of hunger-pangs,  
Sorrow destroying,  
Laughter provoking,  
Joy invoking,  
In the smell of its smoking  
And its sweet in the mouth.

*(The younger women take charge of the meat,  
and the older women resume their acorn-pounding.)*

*(Red Cloud approaches the acorn-pounders  
and watches them with pleasure.*

*All group about him, the Shaman to the  
fore, and hang upon his every action, his  
every utterance.)*

**Red Cloud**    The heart of the acorn is good?

**First Old Woman**    *(Nodding.)*    It is good food.

**Red Cloud**    When you have pounded and winnowed and

washed away the bitter.

**Second Old Woman** As thou taught'st us, Red Cloud,  
when the  
world was very young and thou wast the first man.

**Red Cloud** It is a fat food. It makes life, and life is good.

**Shaman** It was thou, Red Cloud, gathering the acorns  
and teaching the storing, who gavest life to the  
Nishinam in the lean years aforetime, when the  
tribes not of the Nishinam passed like the dew  
of the morning.

*(He nods a signal to the Old Man.)*

**Old Man** In the famine in the old time,  
When the old man was a young man,  
When the heavens ceased from raining,  
When the grasslands parched and withered,  
When the fishes left the river,  
And the wild meat died of sickness,  
In the tribes that knew not acorns,  
All their women went dry-breasted,  
All their younglings chewed the deer-hides,  
All their old men sighed and perished,  
And the young men died beside them,  
Till they died by tribe and totem,  
And o'er all was death upon them.  
Yet the Nishinam unvanquished,

Did not perish by the famine.  
Oh, the acorns Red Cloud gave them!  
Oh, the acorns Red Cloud taught them  
How to store in willow baskets  
'Gainst the time and need of famine!

**Shaman** (*Who, throughout the Old Man's recital, has nodded approbation, turning to Red Cloud.*)

Sing to thy people, Red Cloud, the song of life which is the song of the acorn.

**Red Cloud** (*Making ready to begin*) And which is the song of woman, O Shaman.

**Shaman** (*Hushing the people to listen, solemnly*) He sings with his father's lips, and with the lips of his father's fathers to the beginning of time and men.

#### SONG OF THE FIRST MAN

**Red Cloud** I am Red Cloud,  
The first man of the Nishinam.  
My father was the Coyote.  
My mother was the Moon.  
The Coyote danced with the stars,  
And wedded the Moon on a mid-summer night  
The Coyote is very wise,  
The Moon is very old,

Mine is his wisdom,  
Mine is her age.  
I am the first man.  
I am the life-maker and the father of life.  
I am the fire-bringer.  
The Nishinam were the first men,  
And they were without fire,  
And knew the bite of the frost of bitter nights.  
The panther stole the fire from the East,  
The fox stole the fire from the panther,  
The ground squirrel stole the fire from the fox,  
And I, Red Cloud, stole the fire from the ground squirrel.  
I, Red Cloud, stole the fire for the Nishinam,  
And hid it in the heart of the wood.  
To this day is the fire there in the heart of the wood.  
I am the Acorn-Planter.  
I brought down the acorns from heaven.  
I planted the short acorns in the valley.  
I planted the long acorns in the valley.  
I planted the black-oak acorns that sprout, that sprout!  
I planted the *sho-kum* and all the roots of the ground.  
I planted the oat and the barley, the beaver-tail grass-nut,  
The tar-weed and crow-foot, rock lettuce and ground  
lettuce,  
And I taught the virtue of clover in the season of blossom,  
The yellow-flowered clover, ball-rolled in its yellow dust.  
I taught the cooking in baskets by hot stones from the fire,  
Took the bite from the buckeye and soap-root  
By ground-roasting and washing in the sweetness of water,

And of the manzanita the berry I made into flour,  
Taught the way of its cooking with hot stones in sand pools,  
And the way of its eating with the knobbed tail of the deer.  
Taught I likewise the gathering and storing,  
The parching and pounding  
Of the seeds from the grasses and grass-roots;  
And taught I the planting of seeds in the Nishinam home-  
camps,  
In the Nishinam hills and their valleys,  
In the due times and seasons,  
To sprout in the spring rains and grow ripe in the sun.

**Shaman** Hail, Red Cloud, the first man!

**The People** Hail, Red Cloud, the first man!

**Shaman** Who showedst us the way of our feet in the  
world!

**The People** Who showedst us the way of our feet in  
the world!

**Shaman** Who showedst us the way of our food in the  
world!

**The People** Who showedst us the way of our food in  
the world!

**Shaman** Who showedst us the way of our hearts in

the world!

**The People** Who showedst us the way of our hearts  
in the world!

**Shaman** Who gavest us the law of family!

**The People** Who gavest us the law of family!

**Shaman** The law of tribe!

**The People** The law of tribe!

**Shaman** The law of totem!

**The People** The law of totem!

**Shaman** And madest us strong in the world among men!

**The People** And madest us strong in the world among  
men!

**Red Cloud** Life is good, O Shaman, and I have sung but  
half its song. Acorns are good. So is woman  
good. Strength is good. Beauty is good. So is  
kindness good. Yet are all these things without  
power except for woman. And by these things  
woman makes strong men, and strong men make  
for life, ever for more life.

**War Chief**    (*With gesture of interruption that causes remonstrance from the Shaman but which Red Cloud acknowledges.*)

I care not for beauty. I desire strength in battle and wind in the chase that I may kill my enemy and run down my meat.

**Red Cloud**    Well spoken, O War Chief. By voices in council we learn our minds, and that, too, is strength. Also, is it kindness. For kindness and strength and beauty are one. The eagle in the high blue of the sky is beautiful. The salmon leaping the white water in the sunlight is beautiful. The young man fastest of foot in the race is beautiful. And because they fly well, and leap well, and run well, are they beautiful. Beauty must beget beauty. The ring-tail cat begets the ring-tail cat, the dove the dove. Never does the dove beget the ring-tail cat. Hearts must be kind. The little turtle is not kind. That is why it is the little turtle. It lays its eggs in the sun-warm sand and forgets its young forever. And the little turtle is forever the Kittle turtle. But we are not little turtles, because we are kind. We do not leave our young to the sun in the sand. Our women keep our young warm under their hearts, and, after, they keep them warm with deer-skin and campfire.

Because we are kind we are men and not little turtles, and that is why we eat the little turtle that is not strong because it is not kind.

**War Chief** (*Gesturing to be heard.*) The Modoc come against us in their strength.

Often the Modoc come against us. We cannot be kind to the Modoc.

**Red Cloud** That will come after. Kindness grows. First must we be kind to our own. After, long after, all men will be kind to all men, and all men will be very strong. The strength of the Nishinam is not the strength of its strongest fighter. It is the strength of all the Nishinam added together that makes the Nishinam strong. We talk, you and I, War Chief and First Man, because we are kind one to the other, and thus we add together our wisdom, and all the Nishinam are stronger because we have talked.

*(A voice is heard singing. Red Cloud holds up his hand for silence.)*

MATING SONG

**Dew-Woman** In the morning by the river,  
In the evening at the fire,  
In the night when all lay sleeping,  
Torn was I with life's desire.

There were stirrings 'neath my heart-beats  
Of the dreams that came to me;  
In my ears were whispers, voices,  
Of the children yet to be.

**Red Cloud**    *(As Red Cloud sings, Dew-Woman  
steals from behind a tree and approaches  
him.)*

In the morning by the river  
Saw I first my maid of dew,  
Daughter of the dew and dawnlight,  
Of the dawn and honey-dew.  
She was laughter, she was sunlight,  
Woman, maid, and mate, and wife;  
She was sparkle, she was gladness,  
She was all the song of life.

**Dew-Woman**    In the night I built my fire,  
Fire that maidens foster when  
In the ripe of mating season  
Each builds for her man of men.

**Red Cloud**    In the night I sought her, proved her,  
Found her ease, content, and rest,  
After day of toil and struggle  
Man's reward on woman's breast.

**Dew-Woman**    Came to me my mate and lover;  
Kind the hands he laid on me;

Woody me gently as a man may,  
Father of the race to be.

**Red Cloud** Soft her arms about me bound me,  
First man of the Nishinam,  
Arms as soft as dew and dawnlight,

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