Custer's Last Stand.

Crazy Horse, Who Led the Sioux at Custer's Last Fight

Mari Sandoz Writes the Biography of "The Strange Man of the Oglalas"

CRAZY HORSE: The Strange Man of the Oglalas. By Mari Sandoz. Map of the Crazy Horse Country. 428 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $3.50.

By JOHN G. NEIHARDT

MENTION Custer's last fight, on the Little Big Horn, June 25, 1876, to any group of Americans and, unless some specialist in Western history happens to be present, the only Indian name that is likely to be spoken in connection with the tragic event will be that of Sitting Bull. It is commonly believed, even by some historians of distinction, that it was he who led the Sioux in the rubbing out of Long Hair and a third of the Seventh Cavalry in the twilight of the hoof-dust on the ridge above the Greasy Grass. The loudest shouting wins the empty ear; and Sitting Bull, the wily showman, was the most highly publicized of all our Western Indians. Truly there was greatness in him; not as the white man conceives him but as holy man and seer; and he was worthy of the fine biography that Stanley Vestal has given us.

But a greater man was there that day—great as a leader of fighting men, but above all by virtue of his spiritual qualities; a "god-intoxicated" man, as we would say, a dedicated man whose life was on a plane above self-seeking; a pious man in the fine old Vergilian sense of the term.

That man was Ta-Shunka-Witko, Crazy Horse of the Oglala Sioux; and it was he who turned the incipient panic of his people into an overwhelming will to victory that day. "Come on, Lakotas, it's a good day to die—a good day to die!"

According to many Indians who knew him, Crazy Horse was about 31 years old at this the high point of his career, though some believe he was several years older; and he had but fifteen more moons to live in the deepening gloom of his disintegrating world. It was by no fluke of fortune that he had won his unique place of reverence and awe among his people—this "Strange Man of the Oglalas." His had been a rich life, nobly lived; and now, for the first time, the complete story of that life, in so far as the details of such a life can be recaptured, has been told. How admirably it has been told can be fully realized only by those who have had considerable experience in research among Indians.

Mari Sandoz was peculiarly well qualified for the difficult task that she assumed. "The home of my childhood," she reminds us, "was on the upper Niobrara River, the Running Water of the old-timers, at the edge of the region they called the Indian Country. It was close, or what seemed close in those open days, to the great Sioux reservations of South Dakota, to Fort Robinson and the Black Hills—the final places of refuge for many of the old buffalo-hunting Indians, the old traders, trappers and general frontiersmen who looked with contempt upon the coming of the barbed wire and the walking plow. Such men, with their heroic times all in the past, are often great story-tellers, and these my father, Old Jules, drew to him as a curl of smoke rising above a clump of trees would once have drawn them, or the smell of coffee boiling at sundown."

Through the tales that she heard, "like a painted strip of rawhide in a braided rope," ran the name of Crazy Horse; and one of the first ghost stories she remembers concerned the nightly walking of the chieftain's spirit on the guard-house path at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where he was killed in September, 1877.

So it was with a rich background of sympathetic insight and understanding that Mari Sandoz undertook the telling of the story after exhaustive research, not only in the printed records, which are often wrong, but among the old "long-hairs" themselves, who had lived their part in the great man's saga.

To describe the work merely as a biography is to understate its value; for it is also the story of a heroic people in the evil days that came upon them with the westering white men, from the Fifties to the death of the hero. There is a surprising wealth of homely detail with which the daily life of the people is made real for the reader; and a skillful use of characteristic figure and idiom creates the illusion that the tale is growing directly out of an Indian consciousness.

The hero first appears at the time of the Grattan Massacre at Fort Laramie in the Summer of 1854; and thereafter it is as though the reader were himself a Sioux, sharing the common life of the people and seeing the strangely gifted "light-haired" boy grow into the greatness of "our strange man" by virtue of the power of a vision, to meet his end by the treachery of white politicians who never could understand.

Here is a glorious hero tale told with beauty and power; and although it is hardly flattering to our breed, it belongs to us; for this is the story of a great American who exemplified, in the raw stuff of life with which he had to work, the fundamental virtues that we wish our sons to have in this our time of trial.

John G. Neihardt is the author of "The Song of the Indian Wars," "Black Elk Speaks," etc.

Two New Tales of Mystery

By ISAAC ANDERSON

THE PRICKING THUMB. By H. C. Branson. 310 pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. $2.

JOHN BRENT, whom we first met in "I'll Eat You Last," has a triple-murder case on his hands. The stage has been set to make it appear to have been murder and suicide, but Brent is not easily fooled. To begin with, he has known two of the victims intimately, and neither the suicide nor the suggested motive for it and the two murders appears credible to him. Little by little Brent pieces together the meager evidence available and evolves several alternate theories, none of which is supported by any evidence which would stand up in court. A final resort to trickery enables him to place the guilt where it belongs, but the author has left a few loose ends dangling. We are not told how the murders were planned or to what extent other persons were involved, as some of the characters in the book certainly were. Much of what is left unsaid can be supplied by the imagination, but most readers, we believe, like to be told all the "'orrible and disgustin' details."

DEATH AT DAKAR. By Kerry O'Neil. 272 pp. New York: Published for The Crime Club, Inc., by Doubleday, Doran & Co. $2.

Some particularly nasty Nazis supply the crime element in this story of murder and espionage in Dakar and Rio. The action shuttles back and forth between these two Atlantic ports, beginning and ending in Dakar. There is a little matter of a secret formula at stake, a secret locked in the mind of a woman of Rio de Janeiro who refuses to give it up. Patricia Cornell, an American free-lance newspaper correspondent, comes into the affair quite by accident and stays with it because she scents a big story. Her subsequent adventures are about what one would expect in a set-up of that sort, and we regret to state that they are recorded with less narrative skill than the subject-matter demands.

REMEMBER
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