

# BOOKS AND THINGS

By LEWIS GANNETT

**WARPATH AND COUNCIL FIRE.** By Stanley Vestal. Random House. 338 pages. \$3.50.

THE southern Cheyennes boasted, in the recent war, that not a man of their tribe was ever drafted; they all volunteered. The Sioux, too, regarded conscription as an insult; they were proud to fight.

## The Wars for the Plains

The Cheyenne and the Sioux used to fight against the United States. Three times in our history, Stanley Vestal says, an American military force has been utterly wiped out by its enemies, and every time those enemies were Sioux. (As an Oklahoman, obviously, he regards the men of the Alamo as alien Texans.) His new book, a sort of distillation of forty years study, is his story of the forty-year war in which the Plains Indians were reduced to impotence, 1851-'91.



Sitting Bull

"All we ask is to be let alone," Sitting Bull said in his maiden speech in 1857. "If the Grandfather [in Washington] can control his young men, we shall have peace." But three years before the great 1851 peace conference at Laramie, with which Mr. Vestal opens his story, gold had been discovered in California; all through the period of the Indian wars white settlers were pouring into the old Indian hunting grounds. No government in Washington could control the frontiersmen, or even the settlers; and no Indian chief could speak with authority for all the tribesmen. "Treaties" were futile; a manifest destiny was at work. The Indians did not understand white men's laws, and white men paid little attention to them.

Even Mr. Vestal, who is sometimes given to lordly pronouncements, does not attempt to draw up a balance-sheet of responsibilities; he is content to point out that there was more to be said for the whites than Eastern "humanitarians" (a cuss word in the Vestal vocabulary) admitted, and that the civilians of the Indian Bureau, as well as the Army, made mistakes. Occasionally he, a professor, assumes a tough-hombre attitude, and remarks: "So long as the redskin ran free on the Plains, it was clear that there would be no end to the raiding." That is true; the Indians had the curious illusion that the Plains were their country.

The Plains Indians, as Mr. Vestal says, killed five soldiers for every warrior they lost, and probably killed fewer women and children than did the white troops. They won a lot of battles. Their trouble was that they were content to win battles; they did not think in terms of winning a war.

The old Mountain Men understood Indian fighting and getting along with Indians; but neither the regular soldiers nor the missionary-minded Indian agents trusted the Mountain Men. Kit Carson, a man of General Stilwell's pattern, was honest enough to say on occasion—so the half-breed son of one of his colleagues told Mr. Vestal—"the Injuns licked us." The soldiers seldom admitted that; and the missionaries were sometimes shocked by their charges. Once they brought Red Cloud and a group of Sioux East to plead his cause, all expenses paid; they were upset when they found on Red Cloud's expense account the cost of a riotous night in a brothel.

## The Irony of It

It takes some knowledge of geography, and of Indian tribes, to make a clear pattern of the whole story Mr. Vestal tells, but the record is full of stirring incidents. There is the story of what we might call a kamikazi, a cripple from birth, known among his fellow-Sioux as The-Man-Who-Never-Walked. In 1864, when General Sully went out to avenge the Minnesota raids, this old man asked his fellows to put him in a drag behind a cream-colored horse. Unarmed, he directed his horse into the white army, the while singing his death song, and proudly died a brave man's death. There is the terrible story of the Sand Creek massacre, when Major Anthony's men overran a Cheyenne camp, occupied for the most part by women and children and a few friends, who raised the American flag and stood by it as they died. "Of course we took no prisoners," Major Anthony reported. His men also scalped.

There is the story of Custer's great victory on the Washita, where he claimed killing 103 warriors, sixteen women and several children, and, of course, Custer's Last Stand. And of the deaths of the leaders in that battle—Crazy Horse, shot while an American prisoner, and Sitting Bull, dragged from bed and killed naked. The Indians who surrendered and tried to be friends seemed always to lose out. So did those who fought on. Long before the last battle, at Wounded Knee in 1891, the buffalo were gone. Without a commissary, the Indians' cause was hopeless.

It is a grim and terrible story that Mr. Vestal tells. Sometimes the drama breaks through; sometimes Mr. Vestal's rather professional style obscures it. But the supreme irony is his initial comment on the Cheyennes and Sioux who would not wait to be conscripted. After all this history they were still eager to fight for their country.