

LAHOMA

The Story of a Little "Mountain Country" Girl Who Wanted to Become "Civilized"

BY JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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CHAPTER XVI.
Mine Enemy.

SKULKING along wooded gullies by day, creeping down into the cove at night, Willock had unconsciously reverted to the habits of thought and action belonging to the time of his outlawry.

He heard of Red Kimball's death with bitter disappointment. He had hoped to encounter his former chief, to grapple with him, to hurl him, perhaps, from the precipice. If in his fall, Kimball, with arms wound about his waist, had dragged him down to the same death, what matter? Though his enemy was now no more, the Sheriff held the warrant for his arrest—as if the dead man could still strike a mortal blow. The Sheriff might be overcome—he was but a man. That piece of paper calling for his arrest—an arrest that would mean, at best, years in the penitentiary—had belittled the whole state of Texas.

To Willock's feverish imagination the warrant became personified; a mysterious force, not to be destroyed by material means; it was not only paper, but spirit. And it had come from him and Lahoma, it had shut him off from the possibility of a honorable old age. The cove was no longer home but a hiding place.

He did not question the justice of this verdict to his earlier life. No doubt deeds of long ago, never punished, demanded a sacrifice. He hated the agents of this justice not so much because they threatened his liberty, his life, as because they stepped in between himself and Lahoma.

Would Gladware testify, now that Red Kimball, who had bought his testimony with the death of the Indian, no longer lived to exact payment? Willock felt sure he would. In the first place, Gladware had placed himself on record as a witness, hence could hardly retreat; in the second place, he would doubtless be anxious to rid himself of the danger of ever meeting Willock, whom his conscience must have caused him to hate with the hatred of the man who wrongs his benefactor.

Willock transferred all his rage against the dead enemy to the living. He reminded himself how Gladware had caused the death of Red Feather, not in the heat of fury or in blind terror, but in cold-blooded bargaining. He meditated on Gladware's attitude toward Lahoma; he thought nothing good of him, he magnified the evil. That scene at the grave of his wife—and Red Feather's account of how he had dug up the body for a mere pin of pearl and onyx. . . . Ought such a creature to live to condemn him, to bring sorrow on the stepdaughter he had barely refused to acknowledge?

a hill brought it into view, the windows not yet aglow. Nearer at hand was the boat-house, seemingly deserted. But as Willock now grown wary, crept forward among the post-oaks and blacklocks, well screened from observation by chinkapin masses of gray interlocked network, he discovered two figures near the platform edging the lake. Neither was the one he sought; but from their being there—they were Edgerton Compton and Annabel—he knew Gladware could not be far away.

"No," Annabel was saying decisively, and yet with an accent of regret, "No, Edgerton, I can't."
"But our last boat ride," he urged. "Don't refuse me the last ride—a ride to think about all my life. I'm going away to-morrow at noon, as I promised. But early in the morning!"
"I have promised him," she said with lingering sadness in her voice. "So I must go with him. He has already engaged the boatman. He'll be here at 7, waiting for me. So you see—"
"Annabel, I shall be here at 7, also!" he exclaimed impetuously.

"But why? I must go with him, Edgerton. You see that."
"Then I shall row alone."
"Why would you add to my unhappiness?" she pleaded.

"I shall be here at 7," he returned grimly; "while you and he take your morning boat ride, I shall row alone."
She turned from him with a sigh, and he followed her dejectedly up the path toward the clubhouse.

At break of dawn Willock crept into the boat-house like a shadow, barefooted, bareheaded—the clubhouse was not yet awake. He looked about the barn-like room for a hiding place. Walls, floor, ceiling were bare. Near the door opening on the lake was a rustic bench, impossible as a refuge. Only in one corner, where empty boxes and a disused skiff formed a barricade, could he hope for concealment. He glided thither, and on the floor between the dusty wall of broad boards and the jumbled partition he found a man stretched on his back.

At first, he thought he had surprised a sleeper, but as the figure did not move, he decided it must be a corpse. He would have fled but for his need of this corner. He bent down—the man was bound hand and foot. In the mouth, a gag was fastened. Neck and ankles were tied to spikes in the wall.

Willock swiftly surveyed the lake and the sloping hill leading down from the clubhouse. Nobody was near. As he stared at the landscape, the front door of the clubhouse opened. He darted back to the corner.
"Fardner," he said, "I got to ask your hospitality for a spell, and if you move so as to attract attention, I got to fix you better. I didn't do this here, pardner, but you shore give like some of my handiwork in days past and gone. I'll show this corner with you for while, and if you don't give me to set you free. That's fair, I promise. Just lay still and comfortable, and we'll see what's coming."
Presently there were footsteps in the path, and to Willock's intense disappointment, Gladware and Annabel came in together. They were in the midst of a conversation and at the first few words he found it related to Lahoma. The boatman who had promised to bring the skiff for them had no intention of doing the rowing—had not yet come. They sat down on the rustic bench, their voices distinctly audible in all parts of the small building.

"Her closest living relative," Gladware said, "is a great-aunt, living in Boston. As soon as I found out who she was—I'd always supposed her living among Indians, and that it would be impossible to find her—but as soon as I learned the truth, without saying anything to her, I wrote to her great-aunt. I've never been in a position to take care of Lahoma—I felt that I ought to place her with her own family. I got an answer—about what you would expect. They'd give her a home—I told them what a respectable girl she is—fairly creditable appearance—intelligent enough. . . . But they couldn't stand those people she lives with—criminals, you know, Annabel, highwaymen—murderers! Imagine, Brick Willock in a Boston drawing room. . . . But you couldn't."
"No," Annabel agreed. "Poor Lahoma! And I know she'd never give him up."
"That's it—she's immovable. She'd insist on taking him along. But he belongs to another age—a different country. He couldn't understand. He thinks when you've anything against a man, the proper move is to kill 'im. He's just like an Indian—a wild beast. Wouldn't know what we meant if we talked about civilization. His religion is the knife. Well—you see; if he were out of the way, Lahoma would have her chance."
"But couldn't he be arrested?"
"That's my only hope. If he were hanged, or locked up for a certain number of years, Lahoma'd go East. But as long as he's at large, she'll

PLAYING 'POSSUM

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By Robert Minor



wait for him to turn up. She'll stay right there in the cove till she dies of old age, if he's free to visit her at odd moments. It's her idea of fidelity, and it's true that he did take her in when she needed somebody. There's a move on foot now to arrest him for an old crime—a murder. I witnessed the deed—I'll testify if called on. Lahoma will hate me for that—but it'll be the greatest favor I could possibly do her. She knows I mean to appear against him, and she thinks me a brute. But if I can convict Willock, it'll place Lahoma in a family of wealth and refinement!"

He broke off with, "Wonder why that old deaf boatman doesn't come!" He walked impatiently to the head of the steps and stared out over the lake. "Somebody out there now," he exclaimed. "Oh, it's Edgerton, rowing about!"

He returned to the bench, but did not sit down. "Annabel," he said abruptly, "you promised me to name the day this morning."
"Yes," she responded very faintly. "And I am sure, dear," he added in a deep resonant voice, "that in time you will come to care for me as I care for you now—you, the only woman I have ever loved. I understand about Edgerton, but you see, you couldn't marry him—in fact, he couldn't marry anybody for years; he has nothing. And these earlier attachments that we think the biggest things in our lives—well, they just dwindle, Annabel; they dwindle as we get the true perspective. I know your happiness depends upon me, and it rejoices me to know it. I can give you all you want—all you can dream of—and I'm man-of-the-world enough to understand that happiness depends just on that—getting what you want."
Annabel started up abruptly. "I think I heard the boat scraping outside."
"Yes, he's there. Come, dear, and before the ride is ended you must name the day!"
"Don't!" she exclaimed sharply.

the handcuffs—that would indeed mark a new era in his life. "A wild Indian wouldn't do that," he mused, "nor a wild beast. I guess I understand, after all. And if that's the way to make Lahoma happy. . . ."
No wonder he felt queer; but his light-heartedness did not rise, as a matter of fact, entirely from subconscious storm-threatenings. There was something about that boatman—now, when he tilted up his head slightly, and the hat fell to conceal—was it possible?
"Lord!" whispered Willock; "it's Red Feather!"

And Gladware, with eyes only for Annabel, sliding nothing beyond her but a long gray coat, a big straw hat and two rowing arms—did not suspect the truth!
In a flash, Willock comprehended all. The Indian had dropped the pin in Kimball's path, and Kimball, finding it, had carried it to Gladware as if Red Feather were dead. The Indian had led his braves against the stage coach—Kimball had fallen under his knife. Yonder man in the corner, bound and gagged, was doubtless the old deaf boatman engaged by Gladware. Red Feather had taken his place that he might row Gladware far out on the lake. . . .
But Annabel was in the boat. If the Indian. . . .

Far away toward the east, Edgerton Compton was rowing, not near enough to intervene in case the Indian attempted violence, but better able than himself to lend assistance if the boat were overturned. Willock could, in truth, do nothing, except about a warning, and this he forebore lest it hasten the impending catastrophe. He remained, therefore, half-hidden, crouching at the doorway, his eyes glued to the rapidly gliding boat, with its three figures clear-cut against the first faint sunlight.

CHAPTER XVII. Gladware's Possessions.

RED FEATHER'S mind was not constituted to entertain more than one leading thought at a time. Ever since the desertion and death of his daughter revenge had been his dominant passion.

Gladware's presence in the boat this morning had been made possible only by the interposition of Lahoma; but for the Indian's deep-seated affection for her, whom he regarded as a child, the man now smiling into Annabel's face would long ago have found his final resting-place. It was due to the Indian's singleness of thought that Lahoma's plan had struck him as good. Gladware, stripped of all his possessions, sinking as a beggar from door to door, no roof, no bed, but sky and earth—that is what Red Feather had meant.

But the plan had failed because Gladware did not believe death was the other alternative.
As Red Feather skimmed the water with long sweeps of his oars, never looking back, the voices of his passengers came to his ears without meaning. He was thinking of the last few days and how this morning's ride was their fitting sequel. The early sunbeams were full on him as he tilted back his head, but they showed no emotion on his face, hard-set and fully red in the clear radiance.

Crouching near the summer house at Gladware's place, he had overheard Red Kimball boast to bring Gladware the pearl and onyx pin. Then had shot through his darkened mind the suspicion that Gladware meant to escape the one condition on which his life was to be spared. With simple cunning he had left the pin where the outlaw must find it; his own death would be taken for granted—what then?
What then? This ride in the boat. Gladware had made his choice; he had clung to his possessions—and now death held the oars. He was scarcely past middle age. He might have lived so long, he who so loved to live! But no, he had chosen to be rich—and to die.

When Red Feather brought his mind back to the present, Gladware was describing to Annabel a ranch in California for which he had traded the house near Independence. He would take her far away; he would build a house there and thus rooms so; terraces here; marble pillars. . . .
"Beautiful one," the Indian beard Gladware say, speaking in an altered tone, "all that is in the future—but see what I have brought you; this is for to-day. It's yours, dear—let me see it around your neck with the sun full upon it!"
Red Feather turned his head, curiously.

Gladware held outstretched a magnificent diamond necklace which shot forth dazzling rays as it swung from his eager fingers.
Annabel uttered a smothered cry of delight as the iridescence filled her eyes. She looked across the water toward the pagoda-shaped clubhouse where her mother stood, faintly defined as a speck of white against the green wall shingles of the piazza. It seemed that it needed this glance to steady her nerves. Edgerton was forgotten. She reached out her hand. And then, perplexed at the necklace being suddenly withdrawn, she looked up. She caught a glimpse of Gladware's face, and her blood turned cold.

That face was frozen in horror. At the turning of the boatman's head, he had instantly recognized under the huge-brimmed hat, the face of his enemy as if brought back from the grave.
There was a moment's tense silence, filled with mystery for her, with indescribable agony for him, with simple waiting for the Indian. Annabel turned to discover the cause of Gladware's terror, but she saw no malice, no threat, in the boatman's eyes.
Gladware ceased breathing, then his form quivered with a sudden inrush of breath as of a man emerging from diving. His eyes rolled in his head

as he turned about scanning the shore, glaring at Edgerton's distant boat. Why had he come unsummoned? How could he have put faith in Red Kimball's assurance? He tortured his brain for some gleam of hope.
"This is all I have!" he shrieked, as if the Indian's feet were already upon his neck. "This is all I have!" He flung the necklace into the water. "It was a lie about all my property—I've got nothing, Annabel! I sold the last bit to get you the necklace, but I shouldn't have done that. Now it's gone. I have nothing!"

The Indian rose slowly. The oars slipped down and floated away in the flashing stream of the sun's rays.
Annabel, realizing that the Indian, despite his impressive countenance, threatened some horrible catastrophe, started up with a scream. Edgerton had already turned toward them; alarmed at the sound of Gladware's terror. He bent to the oars, comprehending only that Annabel was in danger.

"Edgerton!" she shrieked blindly. "Edgerton! Edgerton!"
Gladware crouched at her feet, crying beseechingly, "I swear I have nothing! I sold everything—gave it away—left it—nothing in all the world! I'm willing to beg, starve—I don't want to own anything—I only want to live—to live. . . . My God! to live. . . ."
Red Feather did not utter a word. But with the stealthy lightness and litheness of a panther, he stepped over the seat and moved toward Gladware. Then Gladware, pushed to the last extremity, despairing of the interposition of some miraculous chance, was forced back upon himself. With the vision of an inherent coward he saw all chances against him; but with the desperation of a maddened soul, he threw himself upon the defensive.

Red Feather had not expected to see him offer resistance. This show of clenched teeth and doubled fists suddenly enraged him, and the old lust of vengeance flamed from his eyes. Hat and disguising coat were cast aside. For a moment his form, rigid and erect, gleamed like a statue of copper set in sterner relentless lines, and the single crimson feather in his raven locks matched, in gold, the silver brightness of his upraised blade.

The next moment his form shot forward, his arm gripped Gladware about the neck, despite furious resistance, and both men fell into the water.
The violent shock given to the boat sent Annabel to her knees. Clutching the side she gazed with horrified eyes at the water in her wake. The men had disappeared, but in the glowing white path cut across the lake by the sun appeared a dull red streak that thinned away to faint purple and dim pink. She watched the sinister discoloration with fascinated eyes. What was taking place beneath the smooth tide? Or was it all over? Had Red Feather found a rock to which he could cling while he drowned himself with his victim? Or had their bodies been caught in the tangled branches of a submerged forest tree? It was one of the mysteries of the Ozarks never to be solved.
She was still kneeling, still staring with frightened eyes, still wondering

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when Edgerton Compton rowed up beside her.
"He said he had nothing," she stammered, as he helped her to rise. "How true it is!" Edgerton gently lifted her to his skiff, then stepped in beside her. He, too, was watching the water for the possible emergence of a ghastly face.
Annabel began trembling as with the ague. "Edgerton! . . . He said it was all a lie—about his property—and so it was. Everything is a lie except this!"
She clung to him.

CHAPTER XVIII. Just a Habit.

WHEN Bill Atkins with an air of impenetrable mystery invited Wilfred Compton to a ride that might keep him from his bride several days the young man guessed that Willock had been found.
In the mountains they found Brick Willock; and Brick declared his intention of giving himself up. Nor could Atkins dissuade him. He told them the story, also, of his trip to Ozark Lake.
"If you were on my farm near Oklahama City," Wilfred suggested, "and Lahoma and I lived in the city, you could often see her. Up there nobody's molest you, nobody's know you. That's what I've been planning. You could look after the farm and Bill could go back and forth. As soon as the news comes that Red Feather killed Gladware I'll be taken for granted that he killed Red Kimball and attacked the stage. You'll be cleared of all that and nobody will want you arrested."
"When Red Kimball's band give themselves to the law that does nothing to them there might be a man, one of 'em, that never come in out of the rain. I ain't saying I am that man, for I stands by the records and the proofs and the showings of man and man, technical and arbitrary. But in due time, the Governor of Texas he says that that man—whosoever he may be—was no longer to be accused on the grounds that he done his operating in No Man's Land and his residing in the State of Texas. And he said that there man would be held responsible for all the deeds done by Red Kimball's band. That word has been handed down. Now, whether I'm that man, or just thought to be that man, makes little difference. I'm a fugitive on the face of the earth without an ark of safety—referring to my cove. That's me."
"Now look at Lahoma. She has folks, not meaning you, Wilfred, but woman ain't nothing without family, out in the world. If you're going to be a great man some day, if you don't miss my guess, a great man in Oklahoma government and laws. Lahoma's going to be proud of you. You'll take a hand in politics; you'll be elected to something high. If I lived near at hand I'd all time be hiding, and hating her—convinced as something that ing hurt your reputation if found out, and that would kill me because I couldn't breathe under such a load, I'd away from her, well—I'm too old, now, to live without Lahoma. She's—she's just a habit of mine."
"So you puts me in jail. They does what they likes with me, hangs me or gives me time, but the point as I see it is this: I'll be disposed of, I'll be given a rank, you may say, and classified. Lahoma won't be hampered. She's young; young people takes things hard, but they don't take 'em long. In due time them Boston kind folks will be inviting her and will be visiting her, and you'll be in Congress, like enough—if you wasn't a Western man, I'd say you might be President. And everybody will honor you and feast you—and as to Brick Willock, he'll simply be forgot."

"Which is eminent and proper, Wilfred. I belongs to the past—I'm a kind of wild creature such as has to die out when civilization rolls high; and she's rolling high in these parts, and it's for me and Bill to join the Indians and buffaloes, and fade away. Trappers is out of date, so is highwayman, I judge."
"I don't know as I makes myself clear or well put, but if you'll catch up the ponies I guess your sheriff can handle my meaning."
Without much difficulty Wilfred effected another compromise. They waited till night before leaving the retreat. The reason accepted for this delay was that in the daytime the deputies would stop them and Willock wanted to give himself up to the chief in command. When it was dark they slipped down the gully whose matted trees, though stripped of leaves, offered additional shelter. In the cove they saw the light streaming from the window of the dugout—that famous window that had given Lahoma her first outlook upon learning. As the beams caught his eye a sigh heaved the great bulk of the former master of the cove, but he said nothing.

In oppressive silence they skirted Turtle Hill and emerged from the horseshoe bend, finding in a sheltered nook the three ponies that Wilfred had provided at nightfall. He had hoped to the last that Willock could be prevailed on to alter his decision, and even while riding away toward Mangum he argued and coaxed. But it was in vain, and as they elated up to the hotel veranda Willock was searching the crowd for a glimpse of the sheriff.

The street was unusually full for that time of night; some topic of engaging interest seemed to engage all minds until Willock's figure was recognized; then, indeed, he held the centre of attention. Men gathered eagerly, curiously, but without the hostility they would have displayed had not a message regarding Red Feather reached the town.
Brick was still an outlaw, to be sure, but whatever crimes he had committed were unknown, hence unable to react upon the imagination. The surviving friend of Red Kimball, giving up his efforts against Willock on the liberation of Bill, had left the country, harmless without his leader. Conversation which had been local and excited, eager calls from street corners that had punctuated the many-tongued argument and expectation, dimmed to silence. There was a forward movement of the men, not a rush, but a vibratory swell of the human tide, pushing toward the steps of the hotel. The two riders hunched aside—Lahoma and Willock had jumped upon the unpaired steed of the veranda and Wilfred had sprung lightly to his side.

"I'll just keep on my horse," muttered Bill, resting one leg stiffly over the pommel. "I can't get up as I used to, and I expect to stay with you, Brick, to the fall door."
Willock did not turn his shaggy head to answer. He had seen the Sheriff at the other end of the street and he made straight for him, not even condescending to a grin when the other, mistaking his intention, whipped out his revolver.
"Put it up, pard," Brick said gruffly. "When you come to me in the cove a few years ago I give you a warm welcome, but now I ain't a-coming to you, I'm a-coming to the law. Where's that warrent?"
The crowd that had been listening to the sheriff's discourse before the arrival of the highwayman scattered at sight of the drawn weapon—all except Lahoma.
"Brick!" she cried, "oh, Brick, Brick!"
There was something in her voice he could not understand, but he dared not turn to examine her face; he could not trust himself if he once looked at her.

"Get out your warrent," he cried savagely, "and get it out quick if you want me!" His great bear leaved with the conflict of powerful muscles.
"I'm sorry to see you, old man," Missoo declared. "We know Red Feather done what we was charging up against you. But I guess there's no other way open to me. I'll thrust his hairy hand into his bosom and draw forth the fatal paper."
"Read it!" ordered Lahoma.
Missoo read. "Well, you see, I'm guess as sheriff of Greer County I make shift to get through with it. I'll be a-coming to you, Brick, without movement save for that leaving of his bosom, taking him with a single stroke on the face of compromise before he can get his superstitious awe for the legal instrument."
"That's all," Missoo said, and he pronounced. "You'll have to come with me, Willock."
"Hold on!" came voices from the crowd. During the reading they had been reminded of the subject which a short time ago had enraged all minds.
"It's no good," cried Lahoma triumphantly. She took it from Missoo's last fingers and deliberately tore it from top to bottom.
"I guess I'm a-getting old, sure enough," said Bill. "This is beyond me."
Wilfred looked at Lahoma questioning. Brick, stupefied by violence done that sacred instrument of civilization, stood rooted to the spot.
Missoo was grinning now. "You see," he explained, "word come today that the Supreme Court has at last turned its back on the case of Dog Fork in new Red River, and Red River is only the North Fork of the River—and that means that Greer County don't belong to Texas, and never did belong to her, but is a part of Oklahoma."
"And you'll never have an Oklahama writ served on you," cried Lahoma. "Not while I'm living! And you'll go with us to our farm and live with us, you and Bill and—"
Lahoma had expected to be very calm and logical, for she knew she never did have the advantage of her side. But when she saw the change in Brick's eyes she forgot her rights; she forgot that watching her; she forgot even Wilfred, and with a spring she was in Brick's arms, clinging for joy.

"Boys," exclaimed Missoo, "what do you say? Let's give three cheers for Lahoma."
Wilfred's voice cut across the howl, proud and happy: "That's Lahoma of Oklahama."
The crowd instantly caught her meaning; a shout rose, shrill, tumultuous, broken with laughter. She had reminded them of the subject which a short time ago had enraged all minds.
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