

For all these varied swarms had gathered from three points of the compass for the purpose of pushing on to the gold discoveries of the Black Hills. They had rushed eagerly to this extremest point—and stopped. As far as the border of the great wilderness it was possible to journey individually; beyond that mysterious boundary nothing could be accomplished alone. Trained scouts and plainsmen there became necessary, and these skilled men declined to attempt the journey.

Their reasons were simple and cogent. Throughout all of the previous winter unusual snows had covered the pasturage to such a depth that much of the range stock, on which the plainsman relied to draw his heavy "schooners," had died of cold and exhaustion, while of the survivors but an insignificant remnant was fit to travel. After causing this damage, the snow had melted in four days, leaving the streams swollen, and the trails in an awful state, especially in the Bad Lands, where, in the deeper gullies, they must have been quite washed out. As an incidental climax, piled on top to make good measure, the Ogallalas were on the war path; and of all the Sioux the Ogallalas are the worst.

Nobody gave a thought to the Ogallalas. That was part of the game. But a blind man could see that those emaciated cattle couldn't stand the racket. And so Three Rivers steadily congested, and the conditions of life steadily became more exacting.

One of the many who had reached the frontier town, only to find himself checked in his desire to push ahead, was a young man of twenty-two or three. He had made a long journey, and he was correspondingly disappointed when he foresaw, as his immediate prospect, a summer's sojourn in a sun-baked, turbulent, unprofitable region. Not that he was content with a superficial proof of its necessity. He sought the preventing causes at the very sources of them: he examined the cattle carefully: he questioned closely the men who knew the trails, the fords, the Indians. When he had quite finished his patient investigations, he swore briefly and gustily, and then went on a three days' spree, from which he sobered into a quiet cigarette-smoking lounge, waiting for what might turn up. Nothing did.

The days followed one another until a month had passed,