

1917

## Custer's Last Fight At Little Big Horn

Elbert Hubbert

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CUSTER'S LAST  
FIGHT *at* LITTLE  
BIG HORN ❧ ❧ ❧  
BY ELBERT HUBBARD



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## FOREWORD

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*T*HERE is a purpose other than its historic interest, in presenting to our readers this little narrative of Custer's last battle at Little Big Horn.

*The story carries a moral which is a living lesson at this time, when our country is demanding our most efficient service and our loyal team-work.*

*Custer failed in his mission. He failed because of his selfish greed for glory, his lust for power, and his disloyalty to the common cause. He ignored the orders of his superior officer that he might grab the honors of victory for himself—a reasonably certain method of getting what one deserves.*

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The "Custers" are not all in the army. We find a goodly number in the peaceful walks of business, jealously planning some one's undoing for their own advancement—subtle, selfish workers.

Such ambitious plotters are not often found in high places. They belong to the moving class: collectors of many written testimonials of qualifications-plus; rolling stones that gather but little substance and much discontent ☞ ☞

Elbert Hubbard tells the Custer story and its moral in his charming, forceful way. We present it herewith.

Frank B. Willard

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## CUSTER'S LAST FIGHT AT LITTLE BIG HORN

**S**HERIDAN, Wyoming, is on the "Burlington," just one hundred and twenty miles southeast of Billings.

In Sheridan, they say Billings is one hundred and twenty miles northwest of Sheridan.

The Custer Battlefield lies about half-way between Sheridan and Billings, and as your train speeds through the valley, following the windings of the Little Big Horn, the conductor comes through and courteously calls the attention of passengers to the monument that crowns the

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ridge. All along, for half a mile or more, white headstones dot the hillside, and tell their silent story of men who fought a hopeless fight and died the death, leaving but one survivor of the battle, and he an Indian, and beyond this one man there were only mutilated and mangled bodies to tell the tale.

**I**LECTURED at Sheridan, a prosperous city on the Little Big Horn. Sheridan has every appliance and convenience of a modern New England town. ¶ The people in the audience had the look of success—the well-fed, confident glow of a people who work and are making head *se se* Billings is bigger than Sheridan, but Sheridan has more culture, at least Herbert Coffeen of Sheridan says so. But Billings need not apologize. Billings is the

greatest shipping-point for wool in the world; she has banks that have a surplus double their capital, and brick blocks that pay ten per cent, owned by Billings men, who a few years ago were sheep-herders, who decline to talk Billingsgate, but who discuss Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Bernard Shaw and William Marion Reedy with insight, and appreciation.

There is no Wild West now, excepting Pawnee Bill's, and Bill, they do say, is a graduate of the Emerson School of Oratory, having also taken a course in Expression under my old friend, Professor Trueblood of Ann Arbor.

But let that pass—a thing you cannot do on the North Coast Limited.

In 1876, this whole country from Billings to Sheridan was full of hostile Indians, with a sprinkling of alleged Whites almost as bad. It is the railroads that have



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worked the miracle—the railroad is the  
civilizer, not the missionary nor the soldier.  
The song of the rail is, “Get busy! Get  
busy! Get busy!”

The Superintendent of the Burlington  
down Sheridan way is Edward Gillette,  
the surveyor who ran the line from  
Nebraska to Montana, a thousand miles,  
through sage-brush, rattlesnake claims and  
prairie-dog preserves, where no civilizing  
Whites lived, and greasy Crows and  
treacherous Sioux were supreme.  
Gillette is a Yale man—but he has over-  
come the handicap.

At Sheridan I had planned to catch the  
train north at the witching hour of four  
A. M. Just as I was about to take the  
platform, it not being nailed down, a  
telegram was handed me. Folks who hand  
telegrams to eminent literary gents about  
to appear before a large and intelligent

audience, deserve to be elocuted—unless the telegram contains good news. This telegram was from Gillette, Yale '71, reading thus, "My private car is now on the side-track at your disposal. Go to bed after your lecture and awake at Crow Agency where the car will remain while you visit the Battlefield, and then get you to Billings in ample time for your lecture there."

"Dear old Gillette, you've saved my life, and the rest of my days I'll shave with Gillette, his safety razor," I murmured, and through my mind ran visions of the private car, no visitors, just a smiling Afro-American with his Burlington Buffet—I hope you know what that means! ☞ ☞

I launched into my theme, ladled out the truth as it seemed to me, and ended with a glowing tribute to Yale, which caused a

*Our service is not ALWAYS what we would like it, but shortcomings are corrected as quickly as possible.*  
HARTFORD LUNCH CO.

sweet young thing present to murmur, looking at my hair-cut, ardently, "Yours are surely Yale locks!"

**W**HEN I awoke the next morning I looked up at a little clock at the foot of my bed and saw the dial marked seven. The car was not moving and I guessed we were on a side-track. Through the stillness came a faint odor of coffee and I thought I heard Jim breaking eggs and dropping them into a sizzling pan. It seemed a time of great peace—to awake in a quiet car, with all the bustle, roar and confusion absent, and the anticipation of breakfast!

¶ I got up and was preparing to take a cold bath, when the curtain of the window was slowly, silently and softly pushed aside, and I realized that I was supplying diversion for some one outside of the car. I felt as did the lady traveling in Malay

and was entertained at the house of a native prince, when her bath was disturbed by a family scrap as to who should have precedence at the peep-holes ☞ ☞

A slight spasm of anger came over me and I just gave the curtain a jerk and ran it up, in the firm consciousness that I had nothing to hide.

And behold! there was the painted face of an Indian, framed by the window with startling effect!

Involuntarily I jumped back, and then I saw the savage was as surprised as I. He could not jump back very well, because he was standing on the shoulders of a Carlisle graduate, as I afterward ascertained ☞ ☞

The author of "Get Out or Get in Line" and Medicine Crow just stood and stared at each other. Medicine Crow had never

*They realize that our customers are our guests, and should be treated as such. HARTFORD LUNCH CO.*

read the Good Stuff, so was not completely overawed, but I felt better when he grunted "How!" and thrust a big brown hand through the window.

Over the spiritual miles that separated us, I grasped his hand in friendship and responded "How!"

"Grub!" he said, and made the sign of being hungry.

He really was n't interested in me at all—the thing that interested him was the smell of coffee and the sizzle of ham frying in the pan. All Indians are Carlisle Indians before breakfast. (Are you all in on that?)

Outside, propped up against the Right-of-Way, were a score of bucks awaiting breakfast. An Indian eats whenever there is food—not at regular hours. He is always hungry. The big chiefs all know Gillette's car—they call it, "Heap big

teepee on wheels!" And Gillette always goes prepared. Jim, the Kaffir-American, has a bushel of biscuit in the locker and a gallon coffee-pot on the fire. The ham and eggs were for Medicine Crow, Take Wrinkles and Show the Fish, all of whom eat with avidity and fingers, ask for no napkins or finger-bowls and none ever says, "One check, please!"

After breakfast, Major Reynolds, the fine, slim, slender Indian Agent, appeared with a two-horse army wagon and we started for the Custer Battlefield, accompanied by fifty Indians as outriders, volunteers, for they have no urgent business and wish to do honor to Gillette, Yale '71, who has the teepee on wheels, bushels of biscuit and much coffee—ugh, dam!

We followed the Little Big Horn through the cottonwood trees and dense low bushes that line the stream, cross a rocky

*These blanks are also intended for helpful suggestions, or criticisms. Both are welcomed.*

**HARTFORD LUNCH CO.**

ford where the water almost floats the wagon-bed, up the bank on the other side, out over the mesa and up the hill!

The country is bare and barren save for the trees and bushes that line the stream. Here and there are gullies, dry and dusty, so deep that a man can ride a horse up them and not be seen even from the ridge-tops *so so*

The battle-ground now belongs to the Nation and is a cemetery in charge of a fine old soldier-captain who receives us with becoming dignity. We leave our horses and silently climb the steep slope. ¶ We stand on the ridge where Custer fell, his two brothers there beside him. Marble slabs mark the resting-place of the dead. The graves were hastily dug by Terry's men, right alongside of the mangled body as it lay there in the blistering sun, the flies in swarms about, and the buzzards

above, jealous of their rights. A shovel was placed under the body and it was rolled over into the hole and quickly covered, and a stake, with the name of the man penciled on it, set above, for Terry's men knew these brave fellows all by name.

¶ So there they sleep, just as they fell, usually two near together, sometimes three, and in several places one alone a quarter of a mile away, down toward the water, where with awful thirst and swollen tongue, the poor man had rushed down to his doom and been clubbed to death, before he could reach the stream that rippled and ran, and danced and shimmered, all unconscious of the tragedy that was being played to its fifth act, a half mile away; as unconscious as were the sweet cathedral chimes at Antwerp when heretics were being massacred and the chancel ran ankle-deep with the blood of



Jews, and all the time the sweet bells rang "Peace on earth, good-will to men!"

¶ "Look," said the old Captain as we stood on the ridge amid the white grave-stones, "Look, down there in the cotton-woods you see the teepees now—those are Sioux down there—come to visit the Crows, and the view before you is identical with that which Custer saw on that fateful day."

There was the winding river, gleaming through the trees, the top of the teepees, with here and there soft, curling, blue smoke from the campfires. By the aid of a field-glass we could see the children at play, the squaws at their work, now and then a red-blanketed figure sitting stolidly apart, the ponies grazing in the bottom-lands, and the inevitable Indian dogs, with their trace of wolf pedigree.

Overhead a buzzard soared and sailed,

and sailed and soared in the blue of the cloudless sky.

**I**N the spring of 1876, the Sioux on the Dakota reservations grew restless, and after various fruitless efforts to restrain them, they moved westward in a body. ¶ This periodic migration was a habit and tradition of the tribe. For hundreds of years they had visited the buffalo country on an annual hunt.

Now the buffaloes were all gone, save for a few scattered herds in the mountains. The Indians did not fully understand this, although they realized that as the Whites came in, the game went out. The Sioux were hunters and horsemen by nature—they traveled and moved about with great freedom. If restrained or interfered with they grew irritable and then hostile. ¶ Now they were full of fight. The Whites

had ruined the hunting-grounds; moreover, white soldiers had fought them if they moved to their old haunts, sacred for their use and bequeathed to them by their ancestors. In dead of winter when the snows lay deep and they were in their teepees, crouching around the scanty fire, soldiers had charged on horseback through the villages, shooting into the teepees, killing women and children.

At the head of these soldiers was a white chief whom they called Yellow Hair. He was a smashing, dashing, fearless soldier who understood the Indian ways and haunts, and then used this knowledge for their undoing.

Yellow Hair wanted to keep them in one little place all the time, and desired that they should raise corn like cowardly Crows, when what they wanted was to be free and hunt!

They feared Yellow Hair—and hated him.

¶ Custer was a man of intelligence—nervous, energetic, proud, and his honesty and sincerity were beyond dispute. He was a natural Indian fighter. He could pull his belt one hole tighter and go the whole day through without food. He could ride like the wind, or crawl in the grass, and knew how to strike, quickly and unexpectedly, as the first streak of dawn came into the East. Like Napoleon, he knew the value of time, and in fact, he had somewhat of the dash and daring, not to mention the vanity of the Corsican. His men believed in him and loved him, for he marched them to victory, and with odds of five to one had won again and again.

¶ But Custer had the defect of his qualities; and to use the Lincoln phrase, occasionally took counsel of his ambition.

¶ He had fought in the Civil War in

*Again, it is well to remember that some of those who seem the hardest to boost make our most efficient helpers.*

places where no prisoners were taken, and where there was no commissary. And this wild, free life had bred in him a habit of unrest—a chafing at discipline and all rules of modern warfare.

Results were the only things he cared for, and power was his Deity.

When the Indians grew restless in the spring of '76, Custer was called to Washington for consultation. President Grant was not satisfied with our Indian policy—he thought that in some ways the Whites were the real savages. The Indians he considered as children, not criminals.

Custer tried to tell him differently. Custer knew the bloodthirsty character of the Sioux, their treachery and cunning—he showed scars by way of proof!

The authorities at Washington needed Custer, however his view of the case did not mean theirs. Custer believed in the

mailed hand, and if given the power he declared he would settle the Indian Question in America once and forever. His confidence, assumption, and what Senator Dawes called swagger, were not to their liking. Custer was attracting too much attention—crowds followed him on Pennsylvania Avenue whenever he appeared so so

General Terry was chosen to head the expedition against the hostile Sioux, and Custer was to go as second in command.

¶ Terry was older than Custer, but Custer had seen more service on the plains.

¶ Custer demurred—threatened to resign—and wrote a note to the President asking for a personal interview and requesting a review of the situation.

President Grant refused to see Custer, and reminded him that the first duty of a soldier was obedience.

Custer left Washington, glum and sullen—grieved. But he was a soldier, and so he reported at Fort Lincoln, to serve under a man who knew less about Indian fighting than he.

The command of a thousand men embarked on six boats at Bismarck. There a banquet was held in honor of Terry and Custer. "You will hear from us by courier before July Fourth," said Custer. He was still moody and depressed, but declared his willingness to do his duty. Terry did not like his attitude and told him so. Poor Custer was stung by the reprimand. He was only a boy, thirty-seven years old, to be sure, but with the whimsical, loving, ambitious and jealous quality of the center-rush. Custer at times had his eye on the White House—why not! Had not Grant been a soldier? Women worshiped Custer, and men who knew him never

doubted his earnestness and honesty. He lacked humor. He was both sincere and serious ☞ ☞

The expedition moved on up the tortuous Missouri, tying up at night to avoid the treacherous sand-bars that lay in wait.

¶ They had reached the Yellowstone River, and were getting into the Indian Country ☞ ☞

To lighten the boats, Terry divided his force into two parts. Custer disembarked on the morning of the 25th of June, with four hundred and forty-three men, besides a dozen who looked after the pack train ☞ ☞

Scouts reported that the hostile Sioux were camped on the Little Big Horn, seventy-five miles across the country.

Terry ordered Custer to march the seventy-five miles in two days, and attack the Indians at the head of their



camp at daylight on the morning of the 27th. There was to be no parley—panic was the thing desired, and when Custer had started the savages on the run, Terry would attack them at the other end of their village, and the two fleeing mobs of savages would be driven on each other, and then they would cast down their arms and the trick would be done. To throw a cordon of soldiers around the camp and hold it would be easy.

Custer and his men rode away at about eight o'clock on the morning of the 25th. They were in high spirits—the cramped quarters on the transports made freedom doubly grateful.

They disappeared across the mesa and through the gray-brown hills, and soon only a cloud of dust marked their passage ☉ ☉

After five miles had been turned off on a

*We have made many pleasing friends through these little messages, and have received hundreds of appreciative letters.*

**HARTFORD LUNCH CO.**

walk, Custer ordered a trot, and then where the ground was level, a canter.

¶ On they went.

They pitched camp at four o'clock, having covered forty miles. Horses were unsaddled, fed, and supper was cooked and eaten ~~so so~~

But sleep was not to be—these men shall sleep no more!

The bugles sounded "Boots and Saddles."

Before sunset they were again on their way ~~so so~~

By three o'clock on the morning of the 26th, they had covered over seventy miles.

They halted for coffee. The night, waiting for the dawn, was doubly dark.

Fast-riding scouts had gone on ahead, and now reported the Indians camped just over the ridge, four miles away.

Custer divided his force into two parts.

The Indians were camped along the river

for three miles. There were about two thousand of them, and the women and children were with them.

Reno with two hundred and fifty men was ordered to swing around and attack the village from the south. Custer with one hundred and ninety-three men would watch the charge, and when the valiant Reno had started the panic and the Indians were in confusion, his force would then sweep around and charge them from the other end of the village.

This was Terry's plan of battle, only Custer was going to make the capture without Terry's help.

When Terry came up the following day, he would find the work all done and neatly, too. Results are the only things that count, and victory justifies itself.

The battle would go down on the records as Custer's triumph!

Reno took a two-mile detour, and just at peep of day, ere the sun had gilded the tops of the cottonwoods, charged, with yells and rapid firing, into the Indian village. Custer stood on the ridge, his men mounted and impatient just below on the other side.

He could distinguish Reno's soldiers as they charged into the underbrush. Their shouts and the sound of firing filled this fighter's heart.

The Indians were in confusion—he could see them by the dim morning light stampeding. They were running in brownish masses right around the front of the hill where he stood. He ordered the bugles to blow the charge.

The soldiers greeted the order with a yell—tired muscles, the sleepless night, with its seventy-five miles of hard riding, were forgotten. The battle would be fought and

won in less time than a man takes to eat his breakfast.

Down the slope swept Custer's men to meet the fleeing foe.

But now the savages had ceased to flee. They lay in the grass and fired.

Several of Custer's horses fell.

Three of his men threw up their hands, and dropped from their saddles, limp like bags of oats, and their horses ran on alone *so so*

The gully below was full of Indians, and these sent a murderous fire at Custer as he came. His horses swerved, but several ran right on and disappeared, horse and rider, in the sunken ditch, as did Napoleon's men at Waterloo.

The mad, headlong charge hesitated—the cottonwoods, the water, and the teepees were a hundred yards away.

Custer glanced back, and a mile distant

saw Reno's soldiers galloping wildly up the steep slope of the hill.

Reno's charge had failed—instead of riding straight down through the length of the village and meeting Custer, he had gotten only fifty rods, and then had been met by a steady fire from Indians who held their ground. He wedged them back, but his horses, already overridden, refused to go on, and the charging troops were simply carried out of the woods into the open, and once there they took to the hills for safety, leaving behind, dead, one-third of their force. Custer's quick glance realized the hopelessness of charging alone into a mass of Indians, who were exultant and savage in the thought of victory. Panic was not for them. They were armed with Springfield rifles, while the soldiers had only short-range carbines. The bugle ordered a retreat, and Custer's

men rode back to the top of the hill—  
with intent to join forces with Reno.  
But Reno was hopelessly cut off. Deter-  
mined Sioux filled the gully that separated  
the two little bands of brave men.  
Custer, evidently, thought that Reno had  
simply withdrawn to re-form his troop,  
and that any moment Reno would ride to  
his rescue ☞ ☞

Custer decided to hold the hill. The  
Indians were shooting at him from long  
range, occasionally killing a horse. He  
told off his fours and ordered the horses  
sent to the rear.

The fours led their horses back toward  
where they had left their pack-mules  
when they stopped for coffee at three  
o'clock ☞ ☞

But the fours had not gone half a mile  
when they were surrounded by a mob  
that just closed in on them. Every man

was killed, and the horses were galloped off by the squaws and children.

Custer now realized that he was caught in a trap. The ridge where his men lay face down was half a mile long, and not more than twenty feet across at the top. The Indians were everywhere—in the gullies, in the grass, in little scooped-out holes. The bullets whizzed above the heads of Custer's men as they lay there, flattening their bodies in the dust.

The morning sun came out, dazzling and hot ☉ ☉

It was only nine o'clock.

The men were without water and without food. The Little Big Horn danced over its rocky bed and shimmered in the golden light, only half a mile away, and there in the cool, limpid stream they had been confident they would now swim and fish, the battle over, while they proudly held



the disarmed Indians, against General Terry's coming.

But the fight had not been won and death lay between them and water. The only thing to do was to await Reno or Terry, Reno might come at any time, and Terry would arrive without fail at tomorrow's dawn—he had said so, and his word was the word of a soldier.

Custer had blundered. ¶ The fight was lost. Now it was just a question of endurance.

¶ Noon came, and the buzzards began to gather in the azure.

The sun was blistering hot—there was not a tree, nor a bush, nor a green blade of grass within reach.

The men had ceased to joke and banter. The situation was serious. Some tried to smoke, but their parching thirst was thus only aggravated—they threw their pipes away *se se*

The Indians kept up an occasional shooting. They were playing with the soldiers as a cat plays with a mouse.

The Indian is a cautious fighter—he makes no sacrifices in order to win. Now he had his prey secure.

Soon the soldiers would run out of ammunition, and then one more day, or two at least, and thirst and fatigue would reduce brave men to old women, and the squaws could rush in and pound them on the head with clubs.

The afternoon dragged along its awful length—time dwindled and dawdled.

At last the sun sank, a ball of fire in the West ☉ ☉

The moon came out.

Now and then a Sioux would creep up into shadowy view, but a shot from a soldier would send him back into hiding.

Down in the cottonwoods the squaws

made camp-fires and were holding a dance, singing their songs of victory.

Custer warned his men that sleep was death. This was their second sleepless night, and the men were feverish with fatigue. Some babbled in strange tongues, and talked with sisters and sweethearts and people who were not there—reason was tottering.

With Custer was an Indian boy, sixteen years old, "Curley the Crow." Custer now at about midnight told Curley to strip himself and crawl out among the Indians, and if possible, get out through the lines and tell Terry of their position. Several of Custer's men had tried to reach water, but none came back. ¶ Curley got through the lines—his boldness in mixing with the Indians and his red skin saving him. He took a long round and ran to tell Terry the seriousness of the situation.

Terry was advancing, but was hampered and harassed by Indians for twenty miles. They fired at him from gullies, ridges, rocks, prairie-dog mounds, and then retreated. He had to move with caution.

¶ Instead of arriving at daylight as he expected, Terry was three hours behind. The Indians surrounding Custer saw the dust from the advancing troop. ¶ They hesitated to boldly charge Custer as he lay on the hill-top, entrenched by little ditches dug in the night with knives, tin cups and bleeding fingers.

It was easy to destroy Custer, but it meant a dead Sioux for every white soldier ☹ ☹

The Indians made sham charges to draw Custer's fire, and then withdrew.

They circled closer. The squaws came up with sticks and stones and menaced wildly ☹ ☹

*If it is up to us to help Democratize the World, it is surely up to us to prevent, as far as possible, hunger and suffering in our own land.*

Custer's fire grew less and less. He was running out of ammunition.

Terry was only five miles away.

The Indians closed in like a cloud around Custer and his few survivors.

It was a hand-to-hand fight—one against a hundred.

In five minutes every man was dead, and the squaws were stripping the mangled and bleeding forms.

Already the main body of Indians was trailing across the plains toward the mountains ☉ ☉

Terry arrived, but it was too late.

An hour later Reno limped in, famished, half of his men dead or wounded, sick, undone ☉ ☉

To follow the fleeing Indians was useless—the dead soldiers must be decently buried, and the living succored. Terry himself had suffered sore.

The Indians were five thousand strong, not two. They had gathered up all of the other tribes for a hundred miles.

Now they moved north toward Canada. Terry tried to follow, but the fighters held him off with a rear guard, just like white veterans. The Indians escaped across the border.

When they came back in two years, they returned of their own accord.

**Q**USTER failed for the same reason that most men fail—he did not give an undivided and unselfish service.

He did not work for the good of all.

He clutched for honors, thirsted for applause, and lusted after medals and power.

¶ When he took counsel of his ambition and tried to win distinction and place by going 'cross-lots, he was well out on the slide to Avernus ~~so~~ ~~so~~

The men, say, in the railway service of America, who stand at the top are men who have devoted themselves to the interests of those who employed them. They were not grafters, nor shirkers, nor plotters for place, contemptuous and jealous of their superiors. They cherished no grudges, no resentments, and their one thought has ever been to serve.

Had Custer survived the battle on the Little Big Horn, he would have been court-martialed on two counts. First, for disobedience of orders in attacking the enemy before the time agreed upon. Second, for dividing his force in the face of a superior foe.

Soldiers who plot and plan for their own advancement, get tripped up by a Law that is stronger than man.

The Law of Obedience rewards the faith-

ful, and its infraction is a beckon for  
Nemesis ~~so so~~

Obey, and yet again, obey!

Would I then stamp out all personal  
ambition? No, but I would write across  
the firmament in letters of light this  
indisputable truth, proven by every  
annal of history, that the only way to  
help yourself is through loyalty to those  
who trust and employ you.

I express nothing original—the truth has  
always been known by the Sacred Few.  
And all I here do is to paraphrase these  
words uttered two thousand years ago:  
He that saveth his life shall lose it; and he  
that seeketh to be exalted shall be abased.



SO HERE THEN ENDETH THAT BIT  
HISTORY ENTITLED "CUSTER'S LA  
FIGHT AT LITTLE BIG HORN," AS WR  
TEN BY ELBERT HUBBARD AND DO  
INTO A PRINTED BOOK FOR THE HAI  
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