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## A LATE SUBSCRIPTION

*Morris Edward Opler*

I HAD BEEN living among his people for several months, studying their customs, when the Jicarilla Apache Indian called José came to visit me. I saw him walking up the long path which led from the pitted road to the little house where I was staying, and I cursed the cold of the northern New Mexican morning and my numb fingers as I fumbled with my clothes. It would not do to reveal my slovenly white ways to an Indian who taught his children to be up before daybreak. I hoped that he would stop for a drink at the spring, but even as I had this comforting thought I knew that no Indian drank there since a dead snake had been found in it weeks before. And then he was politely clearing his throat at my door and I was greeting him with as much cheerfulness as I could muster.

I had seen José before in general gatherings, but this was my first opportunity to observe him closely. I knew him to be the son of an important religious practitioner of the tribe and therefore an acquaintance an anthropologist might well cultivate. He was quite tall, but his stocky build and inclination to fleshiness tended to obscure this. His hair was cropped short, distinguishing him from the older, more conservative men who still prized their braids. His face was full, unlined, and placid. He seemed young until he talked, but his speech—low-toned, deliberate—suggested a man of maturity and experience. Later I learned that he was middle-aged and had grown-up children.

We spoke of many things—the taking of sheep to winter range, the new agency official, the lot of someone who had gone mad because he had not respected restrictions placed upon him at a curing rite. The subject changed again, and I somehow sensed that he was talking now about what really mattered.

He had gone to the local mission school and could read and write English fairly well, he explained. Therefore he had been called to the camp of Old Juan, the aged chief, and had been asked to interpret an

important paper which the tribal leader had in his possession. He could read most of that paper, but he could not quite understand its meaning because he did not recognize one important word which occurred several times.

The problem seemed a simple one, but when I asked for the word, it sounded like nothing that I had ever heard before. We altered the accent, transposed syllables, and added and subtracted prefixes—no acceptable form emerged. After several vain attempts to spell the word, José had to admit that he could no longer “catch” it. He was embarrassed and unhappy, so I brought the interview to a close by promising to explain the meaning of the word if he would copy it from the document and bring a correctly written version to me.

Days passed and the rigors and discoveries of research had almost crowded the ordeal of the elusive word from my mind. With an Indian friend, I was unraveling the intricacies of the kinship system, when José appeared again. He seemed unwilling to discuss his errand before this fellow tribesman, so I dismissed kinship problems for the day. It was less of a sacrifice than I should want to admit; the taking of genealogies is incredibly dull business.

José's request was broader this time. He had looked the paper over once more. The word of which he had told me was the hardest one, but even if it were correctly defined, he might not be able to interpret the whole paper, for there were other hard ones too. He had suggested to Old Juan that I might be willing to come to his camp and there, in the presence of tribal notables, read the whole paper. To this plan I readily agreed; it was pleasant to be able to help these friends who were sharing their knowledge with me. Besides, my curiosity was definitely whetted now, not only by the challenging word, but by the character of the document to which such importance was attached. We set a day and an approximate hour for my appearance at the patriarch's camp.

A few days later I followed a horse path past a prairie-dog town, past some shades and cook shacks, past a scantily-clothed Indian child who ran screaming to its mother at the sight of me, straight to a knot of men who were grouped around the doorway of a tent. José was there, and it was not hard to identify Old Juan. He was an aged man, with the gaunt slightness of one whose last years are being lived at the expense of his frame. He was the only person present whose hair was totally white. His face was long for an Apache's, and across it a life journey of ninety years had worn a thousand trails. Yet in his movements he was still

lithe and quick, and he was plainly in command. The group had been waiting for me. No doubt they had been there for hours, discussing the paper and its import and the reliability of the white men who had come to stay among them.

We entered the tent without formalities. I sat back of the fireplace with Juan, José, and another man of middle age. The paper which had brought me there was nowhere in evidence. There was a respectful silence until Juan began to talk. His remarks were addressed to me, through José, his interpreter. "Tell him," he said, "that I shall have to explain something first. For many years I have been chief of these people. For a time we had peace; then trouble with the Americans started. Many on both sides were killed. More settlers and soldiers were coming. The soldiers 'made deer' of our people; we had no place where we could lay our heads in safety.

"But then a white man sent a message that he was coming to make peace with me. Many tricks were played to kill and capture us in those days; nevertheless I met him. He meant it. He gave me large pieces of tobacco and told me to give some to each of the leading men. He told me that as long as I kept my warriors peaceful and they did not steal stock and kill settlers, I would be paid fifty dollars each month. Everybody knows that I kept my word; I rode to all parts of our country and I talked to all the leading men. But I was paid for only one month and then no more money came. Still I kept my word and thought that the money would come some time.

"Now I am old and we live a different life. But we want to keep our chieftainship and our ways. I am passing on my work to a younger man. He is sitting here beside you. I have told him what I was taught for leading my people and what I have learned in my life. Also I want him to have what was promised to the chief of these people by the government. Perhaps he can get the fifty dollars a month." He paused significantly and looked at me searchingly. Then he went on.

"I have a paper which I have kept for many years. I believe it tells about the fifty dollars that the government promised. I am going to turn it over to our new chief. But I want you to read it first and to tell him what to do about it."

A murmur of assent and satisfaction arose from his circle of listeners, and I anxiously wondered how to cope with a situation which might very well require more legal knowledge than I possessed. The old man reached into a pouch of hide and solemnly drew forth his prize.

And then it was before me and in my hands, a thin scroll of paper which I began mechanically and with misgivings to unroll.

Even before I read a word of it I knew its essential nature. Its color was pink, much faded, but still a disagreeable pink. This was not the hue of a sedate government declaration; it was the complexion of cheap advertising. And then I looked and saw the word which José and I had struggled to identify. All the clues, all José's imperfect attempts at vocalization fitted now. The word was certainly *subscriptions*.

I studied the large type, the imperfect print, the over-enthusiastic message. A paper for the Indian and devoted to his interests was about to be launched. A cash prize of \$50 was offered to the person who obtained the largest number of subscriptions by a given date. The contest had closed and the prize presumably had been awarded some forty years before. By what queer juxtaposition of events had this bit of paper come to represent in the mind of Old Juan the word of a government official?

A wave of great sadness swept over me—sadness for them who had ceded land and entered into innumerable agreements and understandings with the whites and who had but a worthless pink dodger to show for it. My earlier fears seemed puny now: much more than a lawyer's skill was required. Would they believe me or would they take me for one more white man who sought to deceive and cheat them? How could I tell them the truth and yet ease the disappointment that must follow? How could I dismiss false hopes and still safeguard the dignity of the old chief, the chief-elect, and the younger men who had pored over the paper? The circle of eyes was on me, persistent, questioning, hopeful. I groped for words—words that would convince, reassure, heal. The voice, when it came, sounded thin and distant: "My grandfather, my uncles, my brothers. . . ."