

THE PASSING OF THE BUFFALO



T

O the old trapper and hunter of the palmy days of '68 and '70, I dedicate this chapter. That time is now faded into the past, and so far faded, indeed, that the present generation knows not its sympathy nor its sentiment.

The buffalo—as my thoughts turn to the past, the memory of their “age” (if I may so call it) crowds upon me. I remember when the eye could not measure their numbers. I saw a herd delay a railroad train from 9 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Countless millions, divided by its leaders and captains like an immense army! How many millions there were,

none could guess. On each side of us, and as far as we could see—our vision was limited only by the extended horizon of the flat prairie—the whole vast area was black with the surging mass of affrighted animals, as they rushed onward to the south in a mad stampede.

At another time Gens. Sheridan, Custer, Sully, and myself rode through another and larger one, for three consecutive days. This was in the fall of 1868. It seems almost impossible to those who have seen them, as numerous apparently as the sands of the seashore, feeding on the illimitable natural pasturage of the Great Plains, that the buffalo should have become practically extinct. When I look back only twenty-five years and recall the fact that they swarmed in countless numbers even then as far east as Fort Harker, only 200 miles west from the Missouri river, I ask myself, "Have they all disappeared?" And yet, such is the fact. Two causes can be assigned for this great hecatomb: First, the demand for their hides, which brought about a great invasion of hunters into this region; and second, the crowds of thoughtless tourists who crossed the continent for the mere novelty and pleasure of the trip. This latter class heartlessly killed for the excitement of the new experience as they rode along in

the cars at a low rate of speed, often never touching a particle of the flesh of their victims, or possessing themselves of a single robe.

The former, numbering hundreds of old frontiersmen, all expert shots, with thousands of novices, the pioneer settlers on the public domain, day after day for years made it a lucrative business to kill for the robes alone, a market for which had suddenly sprung up all over the country.

The beginning of the end was marked by the completion of the Kansas Pacific across the Plains to the foot-hills of the Rockies in 1868, this being the western limit of the buffalo range.

In 1872 a writer in "The Buffalo Land" said:

"Probably the most cruel of all bison-shooting pastime is that of firing from the cars. During certain periods in the spring and fall, when the large herds are crossing the Kansas Pacific Railroad, the trains run for a hundred miles or more among countless thousands of the shaggy monarchs of the Plains. The bison has a strange and entirely unaccountable instinct or habit which leads it to attempt crossing in front of any moving object near it. It frequently happened, in the time of the old stages, that the driver had to rein up his horses until the herd which he had started

had crossed the road ahead of him. To accomplish this feat, if the object of their fright was moving rapidly, the animals would often run for miles.

"When the iron horse comes rushing into their solitudes, and snorting out his fierce alarms, the herds, though perhaps half a mile from his path, will lift their heads and gaze intently for a few minutes toward the object thus approaching them with a roar which causes the earth to tremble, and enveloped in a white cloud that streams further and higher than the dust of the old stage-coach ever did; and then, having determined its course, instead of fleeing back to the distant valleys, away they go, charging over the ridge across which the iron rails lie, apparently determined to cross in front of the locomotive at all hazards. The rate per mile of the passenger trains is slow upon the Plains, and hence it often happens that the cars and buffaloes will be side by side for a mile or two, the brutes abandoning the effort to cross only when their foe has emerged entirely ahead. During these races the car windows are opened, and numerous breech-loaders fling hundreds of bullets among the densely crowded and fast-flying masses. Many of the poor animals fall, and more go off to die in the ravines. The

train speeds on, and the act is repeated every few miles until Buffalo Land is passed."

Almost with prophetic eye he continued:

"Let this slaughter continue for ten years, and the bison of the American continent will become extinct. The number of valuable robes and pounds of meat which would thus be lost to us and posterity, will run too far into the millions to be easily calculated. All over the Plains, lying in disgusting masses of putrefaction along valley and hill, are strewn immense carcasses of wantonly slain buffalo. They line the Kansas Pacific road for two hundred miles."

A great herd of buffaloes on the Plains in the early days, when one could approach near enough without disturbing it to quietly watch its organization, and the apparent discipline which its leaders seemed to exact, was a very curious sight. Among the striking features of the spectacle was the apparently uniform manner in which the immense mass of shaggy animals moved; there was constancy of action indicating a degree of intelligence to be found only in the most intelligent of the brute creation. Frequently the larger herd was broken up into many smaller ones, that traveled relatively close together, each

led by an independent master. Perhaps only a few rods marked the dividing-line between them, but it was always unmistakably plain, and each moved synchronously in the direction in which all were going.

The leadership of the herd was attained only by hard struggles for the place; once reached, however, the victor was immediately recognized, and kept his authority until some new aspirant overcame him, or he became superannuated and was driven out of the herd to meet his inevitable fate, a prey to those ghouls of the desert, the gray wolves.

In the event of a stampede, every animal of the separate yet consolidated herds rushed off together, as if all had gone mad at once; for the buffalo, like the Texas steer, mule, or domestic horse, stampedes on the slightest provocation—frequently without any assignable cause. Sometimes the simplest affair will start the whole herd: a prairie-dog barking at the entrance of his burrow, a shadow of one of themselves or that of a passing cloud, is sufficient to make them run for miles as if a real and dangerous enemy were at their heels.

Stampedes were a great source of profit to the Indians of the Plains. The Comanches were particularly expert and daring in this kind of rob-

bery. They even trained their horses to run from one point to another, in expectation of the coming of the wagon trains on the trail. When a camp was made that was nearly in range, they turned their trained animals loose, which at once flew across the prairie, passing through the herd and penetrating the very corrals of their victims. All of the picketed horses and mules would endeavor to follow these decoys, and were invariably led right into the haunts of the Indians, who easily secured them. Young horses and mules were easily frightened; and in the confusion which generally ensued, great injury was frequently done to the runaways themselves.

At times when the herd was very large, the horses scattered over the prairie and were irrevocably lost; and such as did not become wild fell a prey to the wolves. That fate was very frequently the lot of stampeded horses bred in the States, they not having been trained by a prairie life to care for themselves. Instead of stopping and bravely fighting off the bloodthirsty beasts, they would run. Then the whole pack were sure to leave the bolder animals and make for the runaways, which they seldom failed to overtake and dispatch.

Like an army, a herd of buffaloes put out ve-

vettes to give the alarm in case anything beyond the ordinary occurred. These sentinels were always to be seen in groups of four, five, or even six, at some distance from the main body. When they saw something approaching that the herd should beware of or get away from, they started on the run directly for the center of the great mass of their peacefully grazing congeners. Meanwhile, the young bulls were on duty as sentinels on the edge of the main herd, watching the vedettes; the moment the latter made for the center, the former raised their heads, and in the peculiar manner of their species gazed all around and sniffed the air as if they could smell both the danger and its direction. Should there be something which their instinct told them to guard against, the leader took his position in front, the cows and calves crowded in the center, while the rest of the males gathered on the flanks and in the rear, indicating a gallantry that might be imitated at times by the *genus homo*.

Generally, buffalo went to their drinking-place but once a day, and that late in the afternoon. Then they ambled along, following each other in single file, which accounts for the many trails on the Plains, always ending at some stream or lake. They frequently traveled twenty or thirty miles

for water; so the trails leading to it were often worn to the depth of a foot or more.

That curious depression so frequently seen on the Great Plains, called a "buffalo wallow," is caused in this wise: The huge animals paw and lick the salty, alkaline earth, and when once the sod is broken the loose soil drifts away under the constant action of the wind. Then, year after year, through more pawing, licking, rolling and wallowing by the animals, the wind wafts more of the soil away, and soon there is a considerable hole in the prairie.

Many an old trapper and hunter's life has been saved by following a buffalo trail when he was suffering from thirst. The buffalo wallows usually retain a great quantity of water, and they have often saved the lives of whole companies of cavalry, both men and horses.

There was, however, a stranger and more wonderful spectacle to be seen every recurring spring during the reign of the buffalo, soon after the grass had started. There were circles trodden bare on the Plains, thousands—yes, millions—of them, which the early travelers, who did not divine their cause, called "fairy rings." From the first of April until the middle of May was the wet season; you could depend upon its recurrence

almost as certainly as on the sun and moon rising at the proper time. This was also the calving period of the buffalo, as they, unlike our domestic animals, only rutted during a single month; consequently the cows all calved during a certain time; this was the wet month, and as there were a great many gray wolves that roamed singly or in immense packs over the whole prairie region, the bulls, in their regular beats, kept guard over the cows while in the act of parturition, and drove the wolves away, walking in a ring around the females at a short distance, and thus forming the curious circles.

In every herd at each recurring season there were always ambitious young bulls that came to their majority, so to speak, and these were ever ready to test their claims for the leadership; so that it may be safely stated that a month rarely passed without a bloody battle between them for the supremacy—though, strangely enough, the struggle seldom resulted in the death of either combatant.

Perhaps there is no animal in which maternal love is more strongly developed than in the buffalo cow; she is as dangerous with a calf by her side as a she-grizzly with cubs.

The buffalo bull that has outlived his usefulness

is one of the most pitiable objects in the whole range of natural history. Old age has probably been decided in the economy of buffalo life as the unpardonable sin. Abandoned to his fate, he may be discovered in his dreary isolation, near some stream or lake, where it does not tax him too severely to find good grass; for he is now feeble, and exertion an impossibility. In this new stage of his existence he seems to have completely lost his courage. Frightened at his own shadow, or the rustling of a leaf, he is the very incarnation of nervousness and suspicion. Gregarious in his habits from birth, solitude, foreign to his whole nature, has changed him into a new creature; and his inherent terror of the most trivial things is intensified to such a degree that if a man were compelled to undergo such constant alarm, it would probably drive him insane in less than a week. Nobody ever saw one of these miserable and forlorn creatures dying a natural death, or even heard of such an occurrence. The cowardly coyote and the gray wolf had already marked him for their own; and they rarely missed their calculations.

Rising suddenly to the top of a divide with a party of friends in 1866, we saw standing below us in the valley an old buffalo bull, the very pic-

ture of despair. Surrounding him were seven gray wolves in the act of challenging him to mortal combat. The poor beast, undoubtedly realizing the hopelessness of his situation, had determined to die game. His great shaggy head, filled with burrs, was lowered to the ground as he confronted his would-be executioners; his tongue, black and parched, lolled out of his mouth, and he gave utterance at intervals to a suppressed roar.

The wolves were sitting on their haunches in a semicircle immediately in front of the tortured beast, and every time that the fear-stricken buffalo gave vent to his hoarsely modulated groan, the wolves howled in concert in most mournful cadence.

After contemplating his antagonists for a few moments, the bull made a dash at the nearest wolf, tumbling him howling over the silent prairie; but while this diversion was going on in front, the remainder of the pack started for his hind legs to hamstring him. Upon this the poor beast turned to the point of attack, only to receive a repetition of it in the same vulnerable place by the wolves, who had as quickly turned also and fastened themselves on his heels again. His hind quarters now streamed with blood, and he began to show signs of great physical weakness. He did

not dare to lie down; that would have been instantly fatal. By this time he had killed three of the wolves, or so maimed them that they were entirely out of the fight.

At this juncture the suffering animal was mercifully shot, and the wolves allowed to batten on his thin and tough carcass.

