

A THEORY AS TO GEN. CUSTER'S DEATH.

DID HE COMMIT SUICIDE?



GEN. GEORGE A. CUSTER.

LITTLE is known of the origin of scalp-taking, and that, vague and indefinite: nearly every tribe has some wild, weird legend to account for the custom, but these traditions vary widely as to the cause. That "raising the hair" of an enemy is of great antiquity, there is no doubt, as in the Bible it is related how the soldiers tore the skin from the heads of their whipped foes. All, or at least

all Indian tribes with which I am acquainted, scalp their enemies killed in battle.

With the Indian there appears to be some close affiliation between the departed spirit and his hair. I have questioned many a blood-begrimed warrior why he should want a dead man's hair,

and invariably there have been assigned a number of reasons, three of which are most prominent: First, it is an evidence to his people that he has triumphed over an enemy; second, the scalps are employed very prominently in the incantations of the "medicine lodge"—a part of their religious rites; third, the savage believes there is a wonderfully inherent power in the scalp of an enemy. All the excellent qualities of the victim go with his hair the moment it is wrenched from his head. If it be that of a renowned warrior, so much the more are they anxious to procure his scalp, for the fortunate possessor then inherits all the bravery and prowess of its original owner.

I have known of but one instance in all my experience among the Indians, where a white man taken prisoner in battle escaped death. It was a great many years ago; the party, a dear friend, still living, was a grand old mountaineer,—but the homeliest man on earth, probably. He was red-faced, wrinkled, and pockmarked, with a mouth as large and full of teeth as a gorilla's, and there was no more hair on any part of his head than there is on the head of a cane. He was captured in a prolonged fight and taken to the village of the tribe where the principal chief resided. The latter gave one look at the prisoner,

shook his head, and said he was "bad medicine"; that if he was not the "evil spirit" himself, he was closely allied to him. He then ordered his subordinates to furnish him with a pony, loaded him with provisions, provided him with a rifle, and told him to go to his people. This incident, which is a fact, shows that you cannot account for the occasional vagaries of the North-American savage.

The Indians of the Plains and Rocky Mountains would rather, for the reason last above stated, take one scalp of a famous scout or army officer who has successfully chastised them, like Custer, Sully, and Crook, than a dozen of those of ordinary white men.

Twenty-six years ago next November I was camping on the high "divide" between the Arkansas river and the Beaver, with a party of Government Indian scouts, members of three friendly tribes,—Osages, Pawnees, and Kaws,—employed by order of Gen. Sheridan in his winter campaign against the hostile Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Kiowas. It was a terribly gusty day, one of those so characteristic of our Plains region at certain times of the year. As with closely wrapped blankets we huddled around our little fire of buffalo-chips, the dust and ashes would

rise in miniature whirlwinds and go dancing over the prairies until they exhausted themselves.

I asked a venerable chief of the Osages who was present, "Little River," nearly eighty years old, what those fitful spirals indicated, in order to draw from his savage mind his ideas of the forces of nature. He replied: "They are the spirits of some southern Indians, killed and scalped up north, going back to the lodges of their people."



LITTLE RIVER.

I thought that if he had substituted the word "matter" for "spirit"—for everywhere we tread upon the dust of a lost civilization—probably he would have been nearer the truth than in the statement of one of the superstitions of his race.

Among the many myths of the American savage, the disposition of the soul after its separation from the body, and its close connection with its scalp, vary according to the religion of the tribe. With some, the "journey to the happy hunting-

grounds" begins immediately; with others, the spirit remains near the grave. Again, if an Indian dies away from the lodges of his people, the spirit returns at once to them, where it hovers, as if reluctant to leave. Among the "upper-river tribes" it is believed that before the spirit finally departs from those who have died of wounds received in battle, "it floats toward a great cliff overhanging the Missouri, and carves upon the wall of rock a picture showing the manner of death." It is believed by most Plains tribes that the soul attaches itself to the scalp; that the soul of a person scalped does not suffer from the wounds inflicted on the body, but that the converse is the case where the scalp is not torn off.

There are many instances on record where men have been scalped and yet survived the terrible ordeal, but in every case the scalper supposed his victim dead, the latter taking good care that the foeman should not be disabused of the supposed fact.

One who kills himself in battle, accidentally or purposely, has positively no hereafter; he is irrevocably lost. Those who are struck by lightning, or die by any other apparently direct operation of the "Manitou" (the Great Spirit), are hurriedly buried where they fall, without any cer-

emony, and no mound or other mark is erected over them. If after a battle there are found corpses not scalped or their bodies not mutilated, it is certain that those persons came to death by their own hand, for it is part of the religion of an Indian not to scalp or mutilate the body of an enemy who commits suicide. His superstition in regard to persons dying by suicide or by lightning is as religiously observed as any other of his myths.

Knowing this deep-rooted superstition as well as I do, I have been led to believe—though the statement may provoke discussion among those who know nothing of the Indian character—that the death of the lamented Gen. Custer in that awfully unequal battle of the "Little Big Horn" was not according to the accepted theory at that time, viz.: that he was killed by the Indian chief "Rain-in-the-face." The tale (which I regard as an idle fiction so far as the facts are concerned) as it has been told a thousand times and copied in the newspapers of the world, is, that one day the General's brother Tom, at one of the military posts where the regiment to which he was attached, the famous Seventh Cavalry (commanded by the General), was stationed, had a dispute with Rain-in-the-face, and struck him. The sav-

ago was furious with rage, but suppressed it, and mounting his pony rode off sullenly to his lodge.

Years after the death of Gen. Custer, Rain-in-the-face, who unquestionably participated in the battle of the Rosebud (as the action is sometimes called), is said to have related that he killed Gen. Custer, thus avenging himself for the indignity put upon himself by the General's brother Tom, so long before. In all probability the story was made out of "whole cloth" by a certain New York newspaper correspondent, in whose journal it first appeared. I knew him well, and his reputation for unexaggerated truth was far from being as orthodox as he of the cherry-tree fame. Because it had a plausibility about it, and was highly sensational, the statement was accepted by the general public, or those who were not familiar with the methods of the North-American savage. No doubt Rain-in-the-face did, as would all Indians, treasure up such a grievance as that of having been insulted by a blow from a white man; but the circumstances of the battle of the Little Big Horn in all its horrors, so far as it is possible to know them, preclude the possibility of Sitting Bull permitting a subordinate chief, as was Rain-in-the-face, to arrogate to himself the right of revenge in the case of such a noted "white war-

rior" as Custer. If by any probability Rain-in-the-face did kill Custer, he certainly would have scalped him and mutilated his body. Custer was



not scalped, nor was his person at all abused; and the reason generally given for this immunity from the common custom of savage warfare is, that the Indians had such a profound admiration for his wonderful bravery that they spared the great

“white warrior” that humiliation. This is the weakest point of the whole argument—for the greater the man in the savages’ estimation, the more eager would they be to secure his scalp.

My own theory is—and the fact that Custer was not scalped or mutilated is not the only confirmation of it—that the General killed himself to escape the horrible torture that awaited him should he be captured alive. His capture was what Sitting Bull had undoubtedly determined upon, the moment he saw the tide of battle unmistakably turning in his favor.

Custer was known to all the Plains tribes; he had given them ample cause to remember him, and these savages would never have allowed an opportunity to capture him alive to be defeated by permitting some aggrieved chief to kill him in order to gratify a personal revenge—the game was too big. The Indians called Custer the “Crawling Panther,” because he usually fell upon them with his troopers as stealthily as does that animal upon its prey.

To those unacquainted with the methods of the American savage of the Great Plains, the statement that suicide would be infinitely preferable to the chances for life after having been captured by the Indians, may seem overdrawn, and wicked

to be thought of. But if they had seen, as I have, the remains of men, women and innocent babes horribly mutilated, burnt, butchered, and hacked to pieces, they too, if they knew such a fate awaited them beyond the possibility of a doubt if captured alive, would unhesitatingly court death by their own hands, suddenly and immediately, rather than wait for the other, a few hours or days more remote, perhaps, but certain, and horrible in its prolonged agony.

I know that it was commonly understood, if not actually agreed to among the officers at frontier posts, that each one should reserve the last bullet in his revolver for himself in the event of a horrible contingency. I have known of many officers in the long-ago of my early service among the Indians, who, whenever they went on an expedition against the hostile tribes, invariably had concealed about their persons, easily accessible, a small capsule of prussic acid or some equally potent and swift messenger of death, to be used in case of a possible contingency.

Custer, it will be remembered, was shot through the head, and it was a curious coincidence that two or three of his subordinates whose bodies were found near his had been shot in precisely the same manner.

In view of all these facts, there can be small doubt that these officers carried out the plan of death determined upon, the moment they recognized the hopelessness of their situation.

That the story of Rain-in-the-face, if he ever told it, is not at all likely to be the truth, may be inferred from the fact that the average Indian, as I know him, when discoursing of his own prowess is the most unconscionable liar, and the truth is not in him. Of course if Rain-in-the-face could prevail upon a newspaper correspondent to flatter him in regard to the part he took in a battle in which a great white warrior was defeated, he would rather lie to that correspondent than not; and that is just what Rain-in-the-face did in this instance—provided, always, that the correspondent did not invent the whole tale.

The truth of how Custer came to his death can never absolutely be known, for out of that awfully unequal conflict there came but one miserable Crow Indian and Col. Keogh's celebrated horse "Comanche," alive. From the fact that the great soldier was not scalped, the theory I have suggested is certainly more plausible, and will be accepted by all who are familiar with the customs of the Indians, than that story which has made the rounds of the newspapers a dozen times.