

KIT CARSON'S PAWNEE ROCK STORY.

PAWNEE ROCK has probably been the scene of a hundred fights, and a volume could be written in relation to it. Kit Carson, one night some years ago, when camped half-way up the rugged sides of "Old Baldy" in the Raton Range, told in his peculiarly expressive way, among other border reminiscences, the following little story, the incidents of which occurred long years ago.

The night was cold, although midsummer, and we were huddled around a little fire of pine-knots, more than eight thousand feet above the level of the sea, close to the snow limit. We had left Maxwell's early in the morning to trace a quartz lead that cropped out near the mouth of the copper mine worked by him, and night overtook us many miles from the ranch; so we concluded to remain on the mountain until daylight. We had no blankets, and of course had to sit up through the long hours; and as it was terribly cold, we made a fire, filled our pipes, and spun yarns to

keep awake. Our lunch that we had brought was all eaten about noon,—so we were supperless as well; but a swift cold mountain stream ran close to our little camp, and we took a swallow of that occasionally, which served the place of a meal.

Kit (the General, as every one called him) was in a good humor for talking, and we naturally took advantage of this to draw him out,—for usually he was the most reticent of men in relation to his own exploits. The night was pretty dark, there was no moon, and our fire of dry knots blazed up beautifully every time the two Indians, whom we had appointed to this special duty, threw a fresh armful on. The flames cast their weird and fanciful shadows on the side of the mountain, and contrasted curiously with the inky blackness all around below us, while far above could be seen the dim outline of "Old Baldy's" scarred and weather-beaten crest—crag piled upon crag, until they seemed to touch the starlit sky.

For an hour or two the conversation was confined to the probabilities of gold being found in paying quantities in the mountains and gulches of the range; and when the interest on that subject flagged, Maxwell having made a casual re-

mark in relation to some peak near by, just discernible in the darkness, and connecting the locality with some trouble he had had ten or a dozen years before with the Indians, his reminiscences opened Kit Carson's mouth, and he said he remembered one of the "worst difficults" a man ever got into; so he made a fresh corn-shuck cigarette and told us the following about Pawnee Rock, which he said had been written up years ago, and that he had a paper containing it (which he afterward gave me), and which, with what Kit related orally that night, is here presented:

"It was old Jim Gibson—poor fellow, he went under in a fight with the Utes over twenty years ago, and his bones are bleaching somewhere in the dark cañons, of the range, or on the slopes of the Spanish Peaks. He used to tell of a scrimmage he and another fellow had on the Arkansas with the Kiowas, in 1836.

"Jim and his partner, Bill something-or-other,—I disremember his name now,—had been trapping up in the Powder river country during the winter, with unusual good luck. The beaver was mighty thick in the whole Yellowstone region in them days, and Jim and Bill got an early start on their journey for the

River* that spring. You see they expected to sell their truck in Weston, Mo., which was the principal trading-point on the River then. They walked the whole distance—over fifteen hundred miles—driving three good mules before them, on which their plunder was packed, and they got along well enough until they struck the Arkansas river at Pawnee Rock. Here they met a war party of about sixty Kiowas, who treed them on the Rock. Jim and Bill were notoriously brave, and both dead shots.

“Before they reached the Rock, to which they were driven, they killed ten of the Kiowas, and had not received a scratch. They had plenty of powder and a pouchful of bullets each. They also had a couple of jack-rabbits for food in case of a siege, and the perpendicular walls of the Rock made them a natural fortification—an almost impregnable one.

“They succeeded in securely picketing their animals on the west side of the Rock, where they could protect them by their unerring rifles—but the story of the fight must be told in Jim’s own way; he was a pretty well educated fellow, and had been to college, I believe, in his younger days,—lost the gal he was going to marry, or had

*In the old days, among the plainsmen and mountaineers, whenever “the River” was alluded to it was understood to mean the Missouri.

some bad luck or other, and took to the prairies when he was about twenty. I will try to tell it as near as he did as possible:

“After the durned red cusses had treed us, they picked up their dead and packed them to their camp at the mouth of the creek a little piece off. In a few moments back they all came, mounted, with all their fixings and war-paint on. Then they commenced to circle around us, coming closer, Indian fashion, every time, till they got within easy rifle range, when they slung themselves on the fore sides of their ponies, and in that position opened on us. Their arrows fell like a hail-storm around us for a few minutes, but as good luck would have it, none of them struck. I was afraid that first of all, they would attempt to kill our mules; but I suppose they thought they had the dead wood on us, and the mules would come mighty handy for their own use after our scalps were dangling at their belts. But we were taking in all the chances. Bill kept his eyes skinned, and whenever he saw a stray leg or head he drew a bead on it, and *thug!* over tumbled its owner every time, with a yell of rage.

“Whenever they attempted to carry off their dead, that was the moment we took the advantage, and we poured it into them as soon as they

rallied for that purpose, with telling effect. We wasted no shots; we had now only about forty bullets between us, and the miserable cusses seemed thick as ever.

"The sun was nearly down by this time, and at dark they did not seem anxious to renew the fight that night, but I could see their mounted patrols at a respectable distance on every side, watching to prevent our escape. I took advantage of the darkness to go down and get a few buffalo-chips to cook our supper, for we were mighty hungry, and to change the animals to where they could get a little more grass,—though for that matter it was nearly up to a man's head all over the bottom.

"I got back to our camp on top without any trouble, when we made a little fire and cooked a rabbit. We had to go without water, and so did the animals; though we did not mind the want of it so much ourselves, we pitied the mules, which had had none since we broke camp in the morning. It was of no use to worry about it, though; the nearest water was in the spring at the Indian camp, and it would be certain death to attempt to get there.

"I was afraid the red devils would fire the prairie in the morning and endeavor to smoke

or burn us out. The grass was just in a condition to make a lively blaze, and we might escape the flames,—and we might not.

"We watched with eager eyes for the first gray streaks of dawn that would usher in another day—perhaps the last for us.

"The next morning's sun had scarcely peeped above the horizon, when, with an infernal yell, the Indians broke for the Rock, and we knew some new project had entered their heads.

"The wind was springing up pretty fresh, and nature seemed to conspire with the red devils if they really meant to burn us out,—and I had no doubt now from their movements that that was what they intended. The darned cusses kept at such a respectful distance from our rifles that it chafed us to know that we could not stop the infernal throats of some of them with our bullets; but we had to choke our rage and watch events closely.

"I took occasion during the lull in hostilities to crawl down to where the mules were and shift them to the east side of the Rock, where the wall was the highest, so that the flames and smoke might possibly pass by them without so much danger as on the exposed other side.

"I succeeded in doing this, and also in tearing

away the grass for several yards around the animals, and was just starting back when Bill called out, '— 'em, they 've fired the prairie!'

"I reached the top of the Rock in a moment, and took in at a glance what was coming. The spectacle for a short interval was indescribably grand. The sun was shining with all the powers of its rays on the huge clouds of smoke as they rolled down from the north, tinting them with a glorious crimson. I had barely time to get under shelter of a projecting point of the Rock when the wind and smoke swept down to the ground, and instantly we were enveloped in the darkness of midnight. We could not discern a single object, neither Indians, horses, the prairie, nor sun—and what a terrible wind! I have never experienced its equal in violence since. We stood breathless, and clinging to the projection of our little mass of rock did not realize that the fire was so near until we were struck in the face by the burning buffalo-chips that were carried toward us with the rapidity of the wind. I was really scared; it seemed as if we must suffocate. But we were saved miraculously. The sheet of flame passed us twenty yards away, as the wind fortunately shifted the moment the fire reached the Rock. Yet the darkness was so perfect we did not see the

flame; we only knew that we were safe, as the clear sky greeted us behind the dense cloud of smoke.

"Two of the Indians and their horses were caught in their own trap, and perished miserably. They had attempted to reach the east side of the Rock where the mules were, either to cut them loose or crawl up on us while bewildered in the smoke, if we escaped death. But they had proceeded only a few rods on their little expedition when the terrible darkness of the smoke-cloud overtook them.

"All the game on the prairie which the fire swept over was killed too. Only a few buffaloes were visible in that region before the fire, but even they were killed. The path of this horrible passage of flames, as we learned afterward, was marked all along with the crisped and blackened carcasses of wolves, coyotes, turkeys, grouse, and every variety of small birds. Indeed, it seemed as if no living thing it met had escaped its fury.

"The fire assumed such gigantic proportions and moved with such rapidity before the terrible wind, that even the Arkansas river did not check its path for a moment, and we watched it carried across as readily as if the river had not been in the way. This fearful prairie-fire traveled at the

rate of eight miles in fifteen minutes, and was probably the most violent in its features that ever visited that country. It was the most sublime picture I ever looked upon, and for a moment it made us forget our perilous position.

"My first thought, after the danger had passed, was of the poor mules. I crawled down to where they were, and found them badly singed but not seriously hurt. I thought, 'So far so good;' our mules and traps were all right, so we took courage and began to think we should get out of the nasty scrape in some way or other.

"In the meantime the Indians, with the exception of four or five left to guard the Rock so we could not escape, had gone back to their camp on the creek, and were evidently concocting some new scheme to capture or kill us.

"We waited patiently two or three hours for the development of events, snatching a little sleep by turns, until the sun was about four hours high, when the Indians commenced their infernal howling again, and we knew they had hit upon something; so we were on the alert in a moment to discover it, and smother them if possible.

"The devils this time had tied all their horses together, covered them with branches of trees that they had cut on the creek, packed all the lodge-

skins on these, and then, driving the living breastworks before them toward us, themselves followed close behind on foot. They kept moving slowly but surely in the direction of the Rock, and matters began to look serious for us once more.

"Bill put his hand in mine now, and said, 'Jim, now by — we got to fight; we hain't done nothin' yit; this means business.'

"I said, 'You're right, Bill, old fellow; but they can't get us alive. Our plan is to kill their ponies and make the cusses halt.'

"As I spoke, Bill—who was one of the best shots on the Plains—kind o' threw his eye carelessly along the bar'l of his rifle, and one of the ponies tumbled over on the blackened sod. One of the Indians ran out to cut him loose, as I expected, and I took him clean off his feet without a groan. Quicker than it takes me to tell it, we had stretched out twelve of them on the prairie, and we made it so hot for them that they got out of range, and were apparently holding a council of war.

"We kept watching the devils' movements, for we knew they would soon be up to some confounded trick. The others did not make their appearance immediately from behind their living breastworks, so we fired two shots apiece into the

horses, killing three of them and throwing the whole outfit into confusion.

"We soon stopped their little plan, and they had now only the dead bodies of the ponies we had killed, to protect them, for the others had broken loose and stampeded off to camp. It was getting pretty hot for Mr. Indian now, who was on foot and in easy range of our rifles. We cleaned out one or two more while they were gradually pulling themselves out of range, when of course we had to stop firing. The Indians started off to their camp again, and during the lull in hostilities we took an account of stock. We found we had used up all our ammunition except three or four loads, and despair seemed to hover over us once more.

"In a few moments we were surprised to see one of the warriors come out alone from camp, and tearing off a piece of his white blanket, he boldly walked toward the Rock. Coming up within hearing, he asked if we would have a talk with him. We told him yes, but did not look for any good results from it. We could not expect anything less than torture if we allowed ourselves to be taken alive, so we determined not to be caught in any trap. We knew we had done them too much damage to expect any mercy, so we prepared to die in the fight, if we must die.

"We beckoned the young buck nearer and listened to what he had to say. He said they were part of White Buffalo's band of Kiowas; that the war chief who was here with them was O-ton-son-e-var ('a herd of buffaloes'), and that he wanted us to come to the camp; that we were 'heap brave'; we should be kindly treated, and that the tribe would adopt us. They were on their way to the Sioux country north of the Platte; that they were going there to steal horses from the Sioux. They expected a fight, and wanted us to help them.

"Bill and myself knew the darned Indians too well to swallow their chaff, so we told them that we could not think of accepting their terms; that we were on our way to the Missouri,



O-TON-SON-E-VAR.

and meant to get there or die in the attempt; that we did not fear them,—the white man's God would take care of us; and that if that was all they had to talk about, he could go back and tell his party they could begin the fight again as soon as they pleased.

"He started back, and before he had reached the creek they came out and met him, had a confab, and then began the attack on us at once. We made each of our four loads tell, and then stood at bay, almost helpless and defenseless: we were at the mercy of the savages, and they understood our situation as quickly as ourselves.

"We were now thrown upon our last resource—the boy's-play of throwing stones. As long as we could find detached pieces of rock they did not dare to make an assault, and while we were still wondering what next, the white flag appeared again and demanded another talk. We knew that now we had to come to terms, and make up our minds to accept anything that savored of reason and our lives, trusting to the future to escape if they kept us as prisoners.

"'The Kiowas are not prisoners, and they know brave men,' said the Indian; 'we will not kill you, though the prairie-grass is red with the blood of our warriors that have died by your hands.

We will give you a chance for your lives, and let you prove that the Great Spirit of the white man is powerful, and can save you. Behold,' said the Indian, pointing with an arrow to a solitary cottonwood on the banks of the Arkansas, a mile or more away, 'you must go there, and one of you shall run the knife-gauntlet from that tree two hundred steps of the chief out toward the prairie. If the one who runs escapes, both are free, for the Great Spirit has willed it. O-ton-son-e-var has said it, and the words of the Kiowa are true.'

"'When must the trial take place?' said I.

"'When the sun begins to shine upon the western edge of the Rock,' replied the Indian.

"'Say to your chief we accept the challenge and will be ready,' said Bill, motioning the young warrior away. 'I am sure I can win,' said he, 'and can save both our lives. O-ton-son-e-var will keep his word—I know him.'

"'Bill,' said I, 'I shall run that race, not you;' and taking him by the hand I told him that if he saw I was going to fail, to watch his chance, and in the excitement of the moment mount one of their horses and fly toward Bent's Fort; he could escape—he was young; it made no difference with me—my life was not worth much, but he had all before him.

“No,” replied Bill, ‘my heart is set on this; I traveled the same race once before when the Apaches got me, and their knives never struck me once. I ask this favor as my life, for I have a presentiment that it is only I can win. I know



PAGER'S SON—CHIEF OF ALL
 THE APACHES.

how to get every advantage of them. So say no more.’

“The sun had scarcely gilded that portion of the dark line of the Rock that juts out boldly toward the western horizon, before all the warriors, with O-ton-son-e-var at their head, marched silently toward the tree and beckoned us to come.

“Quickly we were on the prairie beside them, when they opened a space, and we walked in their center without exchanging a word. There were only thirty left of that band of sixty proud warriors who had commenced the attack on us the day before, and I could see by the scowls with which they regarded us, and by the convulsive

clutching at their knives by the younger ones, that it was only the presence and power of O-ton-son-e-var which prevented them from taking summary vengeance upon us.

“As soon as we reached the tree, O-ton-son-e-var paced the two hundred steps, and arranged his warriors on either side, who in a moment stripped themselves to the waist, and each seizing his long scalping-knife, and bracing himself, held it high over his head, so as to strike a blow that would carry it to the hilt at once.

“The question of who should be their victim was settled immediately, for as I stepped forward to face that narrow passage of probable death, the chief signaled me back with an impulsive gesture not to be misunderstood, and pointing to Bill, told him to prepare himself for the bloody trial.

“I attempted to protest, and was urging my most earnest words, when O-ton-son-e-var said he had decided, and ‘the young man must run,’ adding that ‘even a drop of blood from any one of the knives meant death to both.’

“Each savage stood firm, with his glittering blade reflecting the rays of the evening sun, and on each hard cold face a determination to have the heart's blood of their victim.

"The case seemed almost hopeless—it was truly a race for life; and as Bill prepared himself I wished ourselves back on the Rock, with only as many good bullets as the number of red devils who stood before us, the very impersonation of all the hatred of the detestable red man.

"How well I remember the coolness and confidence of Bill! He could not have been more calm if he had been stripping for a foot-race for fun. He had perfect faith in the result, and when O-ton-son-o-var motioned to commence the fearful trial, Bill spoke to me, but I could not answer—my grief was too great.

"He stripped to his drawers, and standing there awaiting the signal, naked from the belt up, he was the picture of the noblest manhood I ever saw. He tightened his belt, and stood for a few seconds looking, with compressed lips, down the double row of savages, as they stood, face to face, gloating on their victim. It seemed like an age to me, and when the signal came I was forced by an irresistible power to look upon the scene.

"At the instant Bill darted like a flash of lightning from the foot of the tree; on rushed the devils with their gleaming blades, yelling, and crowding one another, and cutting at poor Bill with all the rage of their revengeful nature.

But he evaded all their horrible efforts—now tossing a savage here and another there, now almost creeping like a snake at their feet, then like a wildcat he would jump through the line, dashing the knives out of their hands, till at last, with a single spring, he passed almost twenty feet beyond the mark where the chief stood.

"We were saved, and when the disappointed savages were crowding around him I rushed in and threw myself in his arms. The chief motioned the impatient warriors away, and with sullen footsteps followed them.

"In a few moments we slowly retraced our way to the Rock, where, taking our mules, we pushed on in the direction of the Missouri. We camped on the bank of the Arkansas that night, only a few miles from the terrible Rock; and while we were resting around our little fire of buffalo-chips, and our animals were quietly nibbling the dried grass at our feet, we could still hear the Kiowas chanting the death-song as they buried their lost warriors under the blackened sod of the prairie."