

MEDICINE BLUFF.



LITTLE BEAVER.

UNKNOWN, perhaps, to the reader, in the very heart of the Wichita range, in the Indian Territory, there is an immense hill, which, by triangulation effected during the winter campaign of 1868-69 by the engineer officer attached to General Sheridan's headquarters, is three hundred and ten feet high.

At its base there is a clear, running river, or properly a creek—for it is only about seventy feet wide. The shape which the stream assumes at the immediate foot of the mountain is that of a crescent, forming quite a large pool or basin.

Under the shadow which the great mass of disrupted rock throws over the water at certain

hours, the pool looks as black as ink. The moment the water emerges into the sunlight again, it sparkles and scintillates until it is painful for the eyes to rest upon its rapidly flowing ripple. That the great elevation of this detached portion of the range was caused by some extraordinary convulsion, which moved it from its normal position, is apparent, and curiosity is excited to assign a reason for the limited area of the upheaval.

The stream which flows so picturesquely at the base of the isolated mountain is called by the Indians Medicine Bluff Creek; the hill above it, Medicine Bluff. From the time when the memory of the various tribes "runneth not to the contrary," Medicine Bluff has been a prominent and sacred spot in the traditions and legitimate history of the many nations of savages, but especially in that of the Comanches and Wichitas. It was a sort of "Our Lady of Lourdes" place, where the sick were cured in the most miraculous manner after they had been given up by the celebrated doctors of the tribe. If the party afflicted had never seriously grieved the Great Spirit, the cure was as sudden as marvelous; if the sick, who were carried to the top of the bluff by their friends, had at any time offended the Great

Spirit, they died at once, the wolves devoured their flesh, and their bones were transported to the "Land of Terrors." Sometimes, when the individual taken up to invoke the aid of the Indian god had lived an exemplary life, instead of being cured of his fleshly ills he or she was translated, like Elisha of old, to the happy hunting-grounds.

The Comanches declared that at night the Great Spirit frequently rested on the top of the mountain, and when that occurred the whole region to the verge of the horizon was lighted up with a strange glow, resembling that emanating from an immense prairie fire reflected upon the clouds. The Indians also claimed that no dew or rain ever fell upon the extreme summit of the bluff, where the sick were to lie and wait for the manifestation of the Manitou; nor did the wind blow there—so that it was a calm spot, comprising all the essentials to a speedy recovery.

One among the many traditions connected with the charming but weird place was told by an aged warrior of the Comanches one evening, around the camp-fire, in 1868, after white-winged Peace had spread her wings once more over the prairies, and we were pulling vigorously at our "brier-woods" filled with fragrant "Lone Jack." The

old fellow, wrinkled and black with the smoke of the tepee in which he had lived for nearly eighty years, and now wrapped in that of his stone pipe, which he sucked as industriously as an infant, told this story:

There was once, ages before the white man had invaded the country of the Indian, a very old warrior, who, sick and despondent, went to the top of Medicine Bluff to be cured. He for many years had ceased to hunt the buffalo, lived with the women of the tribe, and settled himself down to a peaceful calm, awaiting the time when he should be called to join his fathers. One day he struggled to the top of the bluff in the hope that he might die and be carried bodily to the happy hunting-grounds, as he knew from the traditions of his tribe others had been before him.

He had been absent from his lodge and the village for three nights. During all that time the frightened people down below, who had been diligently watching, observed a great blaze on the top of the mountain, as if it were a signal-fire to warn them of some impending danger to the tribe.

On the third morning a young warrior was seen descending the trail from the heights of the bluff, drawing near to the village. When he entered its

streets he looked about him in evident surprise. He approached the chief's lodge and sat down by the fire.

The warriors of the tribe gazed at him with awe and that curiosity which a stranger ever evokes. No one seemed to recognize him. All remained silent, waiting for him to speak. Lighting his pipe with a coal, he took a pull at it himself, Indian fashion, then passed it around the circle. The warriors noticed that his pipe-stem was decorated with the feathers of the gray eagle, denoting him to be a great warrior, one who had captured a large number of scalps, so they regarded him with still greater wonder. After every one in the circle around the chief's fire had taken a whiff, the stranger commenced his story:

"After I arrived at the top of the Medicine Bluff, I looked off at the vast expanse which surrounded me. I saw the village of my people; I could hear the dogs bark and the children laugh; I could hear my own family mourning, as if some one had been taken from them; I saw the buffalo covering the prairie, and the cunning wolf lying in wait to pounce upon his prey. When I again looked all around me, and beheld the young warriors in their pride and strength, I asked myself: 'Why do I live any longer? My

fires have gone out. I must follow my fathers. The world is beautiful to the young, but to the old it has no pleasure. I will go there!

"With this upon my mind, I continued: 'Far away toward the setting sun are the hunting-grounds of my people.' Then I gathered all my strength and leaped from the giddy height before me. I knew no more of the woes of this life. I was caught up in mid-air and suddenly transported to a country where game was countless; where there was no wind, no rain, no sickness; where all the great chiefs of the Comanches who had ever died were assembled; where they were all young again, and chased the buffalo and feasted as when on earth. There was no darkness. The people were continually happy. Beautiful birds sang on the trees. The war-whoop was never more heard."

The old chief had been rejuvenated, and now came back to his people with all his youthful vigor, to live again with his own tribe. The story of the strange warrior captivated the Indians.

He at once became an oracle and great medicine-man in his tribe; his power to cure the sick was wonderful, and his counsel was implicitly obeyed ever afterward.

Medicine Bluff has of course lost much of its prestige among the Indians, for the reason that since the extinction of the buffalo and other large game the tribes have been scattered, being generally pretty closely confined to the reservations, with the children taught in schools, and the superstitions, or at least many of them, having passed gradually out of the remembrance of the new generation, known only to the few old warriors left.

The savage, like the white man, in his disappointments and miseries sometimes resorts to suicide as a cure-all for and end-all of life's burdens. Among the powerful Comanches Medicine Bluff was, for an unknown period, one of their famous places, like the Vendome Column in Paris, from which to terminate an unsatisfactory and miserable existence. The bluff was also a rendezvous for the young warriors, who were to go for the first time in battle with the tried soldiers of the tribe, to propitiate the Great Spirit.

The sun in that nation, as in the old tribe of Natchez, symbolized their god. For three consecutive mornings the youthful aspirant for military honors was obliged to go to the highest point of the great hill, where, armed with his buffalo

hide, and alone, he was with the utmost reverence to present the front of his shield to the early morning sun as its rays gilded the rocky crags of the mountain, assuming the attitude of a warrior in the heat of battle, on guard against his enemy's spear and shower of arrows. This ceremony on the part of the novice, if reverently performed, gave his shield invulnerable power.

A story told to many of us during the campaign referred to, by one of the oldest of the Comanches, the oldest Indian I have ever seen—"Little Beaver," of the Osages—is very interesting, showing to what an art the despised savage of thirty years ago reduced story-telling. The dried-up old warrior prefaced his tale by stating that he was so aged "that he was brother of the highest peak of the Wichita Mountains," at the foot of which we were camped on a cold December night in 1868. Here is the story:

So many years ago that it seemed like a dream even to the narrator, the Comanches were the greatest tribe on earth. Their warriors were as numerous as a herd of buffalo on the Arkansas in the fall. They were more cunning than the coyote. Their herd of ponies contained so many animals—all fine and fat—that no man could

count them in a year. All the other Indians of the plains and mountains feared and trembled at the name of Comanche.

In the tribe, as is ever the case, there were two warriors who excelled all the others in their prowess. One was young, and the other middle-aged. They were very jealous of each other, each constantly attempting some deed of daring at which, it was hoped, the rival would balk. One fall, when the Indian summer made the air redolent with the sweet perfume of thousands of flowers and the mountains were bathed in the amber mist of that delicious season, all the great warriors were returning from one of their most famous victories.

They camped under the shadow of Medicine Bluff late one afternoon, where the young brave, who was quietly smoking his pipe as he hovered over the little camp-fire on which he was broiling a piece of antelope steak, happened to fix his gaze on the highest point of the bluff, and in that position continued for several minutes wrapped in a most profound study, while all the rest of the band stopped whatever they were doing and gazed at him as intently.

Suddenly he rose to his full height and cast a defiant look upon the warriors scattered around

on the grass, who, excited at his strange manner, sprang up to learn what he meant. Presently he turned his face toward the sun, which was about two hours high, and broke out with this boast:

"No warrior equals me! I am the greatest of all the Comanches! I resemble that mountain!" pointing with his spear to the highest peak of Medicine Bluff. "My actions are as far above yours as that mountain is above the stream at its foot! Is there a warrior here who dare follow me?"

Then he shook his spear and brandished his shield in defiance of any and all. His rival was all the time swelling with rage and pride. He knew the boast was intended for him alone, although he was the elder of the two. He approached the braggart with all the dignity of the savage that he was, and, striking himself on the bosom several times, exclaimed:

"So! You are the greatest warrior of the Comanches? You are the buffalo that leads the herd? I am the old bull to be driven away by the cowardly coyote and die, leaving my bones to whiten? You ask me to follow you? Never! I never follow! I will go with you!"

The remainder of the band gathered around the two celebrated warriors. They wondered what

new deed of daring they were going to attempt, as the rivals arrayed themselves in their best buckskin dress and mounted their favorite ponies. With shields held in a defying position, their faces painted, and their bonnets of war-eagle feathers flowing in the breeze, they rode away without another word.

They forded the stream. The younger now started up the difficult trail which led to the sacred summit of the Medicine Bluff, where, stopping his affrighted steed, he pointed to the fearful precipice a few rods off, and exclaimed:

"You have followed me here; follow me farther."

Then shouting the war-whoop, which made the echoes of the mountain awaken, and thumping



the flanks of his animal vigorously, he darted toward the awful brink. His rival instantly raised his pony on his hind legs, and with a whoop more piercing followed the young man, who, when he had reached the edge of the precipice, failed in courage and pulled his pony violently back on his haunches. The elder saw his chance. With an awful yell of defiance and triumph, he forced his horse to make the terrible leap in mid-air.

All the warriors on the grassy bottom below watched with eager interest what was going on above them. They heard the whoop of the aged warrior as he jumped into the awful abyss. They saw him sit as calmly as if in his "lodge" as he descended, seated as upright on his pony as if his animal were walking the prairie, and, above all, they heard his clear voice as it rung out in the clouds: "Greatest of all the Comanches!"

Sadly they wended their way to the foot of the bluff, where both horse and brave rider lay a mangled mass on the rocks, the old warrior with a smile on his wrinkled face of unmistakable triumph.

The boasting rival became a wanderer among the tribes. His name was accursed of all Indians.

The very dogs of the camps snapped at him as he passed. At last, overcome with remorse at his cowardice and treachery, he killed himself. One day he was found dead on the grave of his rival at the foot of the bluff. His body was eaten by the coyotes; his shield and spear, by which he had been identified, were lying on the ground at his feet.