

SHERIDAN'S ROOST.



GENERAL P. H. SHERIDAN.

LESS than a third of a century ago the western half of southern Kansas and the whole region beyond, including the historical Washita, where General Custer defeated the famous chief of the Cheyennes, Black Kettle, was the habitat of our noblest indigenous bird, the wild turkey. The dense woods bordering all

the streams were full of them, for the wild turkey makes his haunts in the timber.

Having visited that once favorite winter rendezvous of the Cheyennes and Kiowas during the early spring, and stood again on the ground where

Sheridan and Custer in their celebrated campaign of 1868-9 so effectually subdued the Indians that the Western frontier has ever since been exempt from their bloody raids, the recollection of many exciting wild-turkey hunts by the two incomparable soldiers came vividly to my mind. I remember distinctly, as if it were but a week since, how during that winter campaign of nearly thirty years ago the troops sent into the field against the allied hostile tribes subsisted for days on wild turkey—luckily for them, too, as they were almost without a ration, and would have suffered in a greater degree than they did but for the presence of great flocks of the delicious birds.

In addition to the stern necessity of securing them, shooting them under the brilliant mid-continent full moon that nowhere else shines more intensely, afforded an immense amount of sport to both officers and enlisted men, divesting their weary march through that then desolate region of its terrible monotony. General Sheridan was a crack shot, recognized as an expert in pheasant-hunting when a young lieutenant in the wilds of Oregon, long before the Civil War, and where large game roamed in immense numbers through the vast forests. Then the height of the embryo

great General's ambition was that he might attain the rank of Major before he died!

There is a large body of timber on the North Fork of the Canadian river in the Indian Territory, about sixty miles directly south of the Kansas line, known as "Sheridan's Roost"—so marked on the maps. It was there that General Sheridan with Custer bagged an almost incredible number of wild turkeys while camping on the now historic spot.

It was on the afternoon of one of the last days in the month of December, 1868, when the tired command found itself encamped very near an immense turkey roost. Both Sheridan and Custer, as soon as they had dismounted from their horses, made the fortuitous discovery and grasped the important situation: an abundance of food for the half-starved troopers and a relief to the ennui and tiresome routine of the monotonous march through the seemingly interminable sand-dunes so frequent in that region.

In order that the necessities of the command and the anticipated sport might not be thwarted by a general firing of the rank and file under the excitement natural to the average soldier, Sheridan immediately issued an order that no one—officer, enlisted man, or civilian—should leave

camp without his permission. He was well aware of the fact that if any prowling around was allowed, the now absent birds would not return to their accustomed resting-place when night came on.

The whole command was restless, anxious and impatient for hours, waiting for the seemingly tardy sun to set. At last, after two hours of suspense, the fading rays began to gild the summits of the low range of hills west of the camp. Then, just as the twilight curve reached the horizon, the General, with Custer and several other officers whom he had chosen as companions, left their camp-fire of blazing logs and sauntered slowly into the thick woods where it had been discovered early in the afternoon that the coveted birds were in the habit of congregating to roost.

Arriving at the very center of the vast sleeping-place, at the suggestion of General Custer each gentleman took a position on the ground, separated from each other some distance, to watch from their individual vantage-point until the moment should come for the birds to seek their accustomed resting-place.

They did not have to wait long. Before it had grown fairly dark, two or three flocks containing at least two hundred of the bronzed beauties came

walking stealthily down the sheltered ravines leading out into the broad bottom where the great trees stood in aggregated clumps, under whose shadows General Sheridan had first observed the unmistakable signs of a vast roost. At the head of each flock, as it unsuspectingly advanced, strutted a magnificent male bird in all the arrogance of his leadership, and on whose bronzed plumage the soft full moon which had just risen, glistened like a calcium light as its golden rays sifted through the interstices of the bare limbs of the winter-garbed forest.

When the leader had arrived at the spot where his charge had been accustomed to roost, he suddenly halted, glanced all around him for a few seconds, then seemingly satisfied that everything was right, he gave the signal—a sharp, quick, shrill whistle. At that instant every bird with one accord and a tremendous fluttering of wings, raised itself and alighted in the loftiest branches of the tallest trees.

In a few moments more, many more flocks arrived and went through exactly the same evolutions as the first two, when, having settled themselves for an undisturbed slumber, General Sheridan gave the word for the slaughter to begin. Each officer then began to shoot on his own account,

and the turkeys fell like the leaves in October. The stupid birds not killed at the first fusillade did not seem to have sense enough to get out of harm's way: they flew from tree to tree at every shot, persistently remaining in the immediate vicinity of their roost with all the characteristic idiocy of a sage-hen, which, according to my observation, has less sense than any other bird that flies.

It was soon time that all honest men whether "in camp or court" were in bed, but the two famous generals and their companions, so exciting was the rare sport, did not leave until the moon was far down the western horizon.

They then returned to the friendly fires near their tents and counted the number of birds which had fallen under the accurate aim of those engaged. It was discovered they had bagged nearly a hundred of the magnificent bronzed creatures, of which Sheridan had killed the lion's share.

From that midnight incident in the beginning of that eventful winter on the Great Plains, "Sheridan's Roost" received its name; the spot became classic, and will go down to the generations yet unborn with its suggestive title.

Although the majority of the birds stuck to the vicinity of their roost, yet continually slaugh-

tered by the unerring rifles of the officers, appearing to be too senseless to avert their doom by flying off, some, however, did go recklessly into the very camp of the troopers. The picket-line had long since been stretched, and preparations for the men's evening meal, scanty as it was to be, were fairly under way. But the cooks, expecting that some of the birds would, frightened as they evidently were by the deadly shots of the officers, fly into camp in their bewilderment, were a little slow and perfunctory, anticipating that the bill of fare, that night at least, would vary materially from the customary horse-meat and hard-tack.

Sure enough, several large flocks "rounded up" in full view of the command just as the firing commenced. It was a curious as well as a remarkable scene to watch the evident surprise and discomfiture of the birds to discover the whole ground usurped by the soldiers; they were bewildered beyond the power of description. They stood still for a few moments seemingly paralyzed, but as other flocks began to enter the camp, all in the quickest imaginable time flew into the tallest trees. At this juncture every soldier was seized with a desire to shoot, and a fusillade began right there, resulting in tumbling off the

huge limbs fifty or more of the crazed birds. Of course, the remainder were driven away from their roost, until the very air was black with the alarmed and bewildered turkeys.

As the dark night came on, not knowing where to go, and failing to seek another quiet roosting-place, back they all came, but in increased numbers, evidently determined to roost there or nowhere. The air was filled and the ground covered with wild turkeys. They were dazed at the turn affairs had taken, and great flocks ran, bewildered, right among the soldiers and wagons of the supply train. Then was a scene enacted such as perhaps was never before witnessed, nor has it since, in all probability. All the dogs in the command—and there was every breed and every size in the camp, for the average American soldier loves a dog and keeps as many as he can—joined in the pandemonium that ensued in the chase after the frightened birds, accompanied by a fusillade which in point of rapidity and volume of noise would have done credit to a corps in a general engagement.

Some casualties occurred, of course, but no lives were lost save that of a horse, under the following circumstances: One of the troopers of the Nineteenth Kansas Cavalry, who was in the act

of leading his animal to the picket-line at the height of the chase, was somewhat astonished to find that his faithful beast failed to respond to the tugging at his halter-strap as he endeavored to bring him to the stretched rope, and looking around to discover the cause, the excited trooper saw the unfortunate animal on the ground, dead, having been instantly killed by an erratic ball!

There was great feasting in the command that night. Never did turkey taste so delicious as did the magnificent birds served in every conceivable style at that late meal in camp on the classic Washita, to the half-famished soldiers of the famous Seventh Cavalry and the gallant boys of the Kansas regiment.

