

ON THE VERDUGA.

These were lively times on the Verduga. The soldiers had out on their own. There on their conveyance, half naked, on his many arms, armed and equipped for war, and even and imperious as Bismarck. The Verduga just moved his trail, his camp, also he might have passed for a painted statue. Herndon sat on a horse club of oak, holding the "long roll" with the fragments of a broken ramrod, and laughingly ordered us to fall into line. But we had no trifling matter before us.

Early that morning we had started our ponies through the chrysalis of the Verduga, clambered up the western bank, and after exploring one of the loveliest valleys that ever charmed the eye of man, had each selected a prolific tract of land, and determined to settle there for life. The forenoon had been passed in cutting logs for our cabins. But the jealous Osages had resented our summary proceedings, and had dispatched a peremptory summons to return across the river, or pay the penalty of non-compliance with our lives.

"Won't you be just kind enough to ride out to that there mound there?" said Ben, the black mounted Missourian, to the vermilion-faced savage, who partially understood English; "I want to talk this thing over a little." And he pointed to a spot about thirty yards distant, as though he expected his request to be immediately obeyed. Wielding his charger gracefully, the Indian acceded without a word.

Our whole civil and military force had been mastered for the occasion. There were six of us; we were all young and vigorous, every man had "seen service," and that of the roughest kind. We held an impromptu council of war.

"What do you think we'd better do, boys?" said Ben, nonchalantly.

A silence ensued; each waited for the other to speak first. At last, Texian ventured to express an opinion. What his true name was I never learned. From "Texan," the frontier lingo had metamorphosed his title into "Texian," and by that anomalous sobriquet we knew, respected and called him.

"I'm for fight boys," said he. "This here land can't be beat nowhere; it's a Number One. And they've got any better right to it than we have, and besides that, they ain't give us a decent invitation to leave. It wouldn't look well for us to travel off on these terms. And, with a grating oath, he swore he'd die in his tracks before he got out of the way of a set of greasy Osages. He shot 'em, anyhow, every chance he got. Three seasons preceding, the Comanches had scalped his father on the "old Texan line," and branded his sister with a war club. We expected him to talk in just this style.

"You just settle this matter for yourselves, boys, whatever it is to be," interposed the Missourian, yawning, as though nothing more than an everyday dilemma—a mere deal in poker—was to be decided.

I thought it prudent to dodge the responsibility, and follow his example.

"It's all very well to talk about fighting it out," said Colton; "and it's likely that we've got as much sand in our craws as any of 'em, but what can six of us do against three or four hundred? I don't like the way they talk myself; but the game is all in their own hands and they know it. I had all the fighting I wanted in the war shooting you Texas fellows, and I don't want any more of it. I can help it. We might throw our logs together and hold our own till morning, but it would turn out an ugly scrape before we got through with it. We haven't a drop of water, and we would soon run out of provisions, and they'd dance over our bones in forty-eight hours. It's the rest of you want to fight, why fight it is, but I think we'd better go a little slow."

He was a young, blue-eyed, flaxen haired Missourian, and the border ruffians gave him credit for being "as cool as a wedge, and sharper than steel."

"I'll tell you what I'm for," said "Indiana." We generally went by the name of our native state. "We're all old vets in the military business, and we want to use a little strategy with these rascals. They've insulted us, and for one, I don't feel like falling back without burning powder. But it's just as Minnesota says. We can't fight 'em all at any purpose. But we may beat 'em after all. Now, I move that we'll pick our man, and they'll pick theirs, and let the two shoot it out. If their man wins, we'll evacuate; if ours wins, we'll stay."

This novel proposition suited every one. Herndon assented it by suggesting that we should cast lots for the champion, and that the fight should take place with rifles at twenty paces.

Ben arose, and motioned importantly to the envoy. That duly personage rode up, received our reply with stolid decorum, and was out of sight in a minute.

"We better load up in the meantime, boys," remarked Indiana; "for if it don't suit 'em, they'll be after us in short order."

The idea was voted "not bad," and we not only charged our rifles and revolvers, but hung our logs together in such a manner as to form a very efficient defense, if required. Herndon then kindled a fire, procured water, and commenced cooking dinner. In about twenty minutes the envoy returned. Our proposition had met with great favor, he briefly informed us, but would not be accepted unless the distance was shortened to ten paces. He also stated that the contest would be expected to continue until one of the principals was killed, and that knives and tomahawks must be allowed to be used after the discharge of the rifles.

"That's pretty close quarters, boys," commented Ben. "I got a slug once on

just such a time table. But I guess it's all right, though. They know they can't shoot with us. Let's give the poor devils a chance."

To this we all assented. For the tomahawk provision we cared nothing; we knew the first shot would settle the matter one way or the other. The messenger then went on to say that the warriors of the tribe would be assembled to meet us in one hour, at the crest of a lofty eminence, which he pointed out to us, about half a mile distant—we to be practically on hand; and he galloped off again.

Next came the task of casting lots for the post of peril. We began to realize that blood was to be shed. It was a solemn moment, for no one could predict the result of the encounter. Indiana tore up one of his mother's letters, and plainly writing each man's name upon one of the slips placed them all in a hat together. Texian was then blindfolded and deputed to draw for us; whoever's name was on the slip he picked out was to be our champion. He drew his own. "It's all right, boys," said he, when the result was ascertained. "You couldn't please me better." Farther than this he said nothing.

Then ensued a long and awkward silence, for we all had our mingling. When our dinner was ready, we dispatched it quickly, smoked a few moments without conversation, and then reluctantly mounted our ponies.

On arriving at the designated battleground we found several hundred Osages waiting us, all armed and painted, and most of them entirely naked, with the exception of breech cloths. Two lanes were stuck in the turf about ten paces apart—these indicated the positions of the combatants. We were received with neither friendship nor hostile demonstrations. As soon as we dismounted, Texian, rifle in hand, walked calmly forward to the nearest lane and halted. In a few moments a tall young brave stepped out of the crowd and stalked proudly up to the other. I was appointed to give the necessary signals. In order to disturb the accuracy of the aim as little as possible, I was ordered to stand half way between them, and two paces back from the line of fire. There was no danger of being hit by such marksmen as they were. In my right hand I held a stone, from the point of which dangled a red fannel streamer; when I raised it they were to aim, and when I lowered it they were to fire.

And then we waited for Red Cloud, the chief of the tribe. It was an impressive scene. Texian leaned his shaggy chin upon his hands, on the muzzle of his long rifle, and with a gleam of malicious triumph glared fiercely across at his foe. He was reckless of his own life, and felt sure of his prey, for his aim was death. The young Indian seemed to read his thought, but standing erect with a graceful and careless indifference, gazed dreamily off to the southward, where the long blade lines of timber were lost in the misty beauty of the horizon. His eyes soon softened with a tinge of pensiveness. Was he thinking of the happy hunting ground? The other four members of our party stood in a cluster a little to the left of Texian, and narrowly watched all that transpired, for the American savage is proverbially treacherous.

Presently Red Cloud emerged from a rude lodge near by, and clad in a long robe of fur, moved with a stately presence to the front line of his people. With a dignified wave of his hand, he signified his pleasure that the tragedy should begin. Each principal recalled his rifle, and nodded to me. I raised the lance, and they stately took aim. I lowered the lance quickly, and two sharp reports followed. The young warrior sprang wildly in the air, flung his weapon fully twenty feet away, and dropped dead at his post. The bullet had crashed through his brain. Texian thudded the butt of his rifle on the ground, and gave vent to a hoarse, mocking and half derisive cry of triumph and revenge; then he trotted to steady himself with his weapon, but staggered helplessly backward. Herndon and Indiana ran up and caught him in their arms. His red shirt rapidly deepened in hue, and a dreadful alarm seized us. Still he laughed hoarsely, and tried to point to the motionless corpse of his adversary. We hurriedly gathered around him, and tenderly as children laid him down upon the soft green grass. Tearing open his shirt, we found a bright scarlet spot on the left breast, close to his heart. None of us were versed in surgery; we could not state in scientific terms just what particular veins and ligaments had been severed, but we knew by the location of the wound, and by his parched lips and pallid countenance, that death was upon him.

"It's all day with me, boys," he faintly said, for he was growing much weaker every moment; "but I've paid 'em handsomely for it. Give my rifle to Colton—I always liked him."

We bent over the poor fellow with words of sympathy for his pain and praise for his valor, and our enemies might have shot us all down without our knowing it. But it was of no use. His breath quickly came and went. "Water," at length he groaned. We had none and there was not a brook within half a mile. An Indian girl comprehended our want, ran to the lodge and in a moment returned with a skinful. We placed the cooling fluid to his burning lips, and he took a long draught, but it choked him and he vomited up a handful of bright, crimson blood. We had seen too many men perish not too know by this that the lead had penetrated his vitals. He was bleeding internally. As soon as he could clear his throat to speak, he said feebly, and almost breathlessly:

"Don't try to revenge me, boys. Honor bright. They have done the fair thing with you, and you act the man with them. You're to cross the river, and I'll—Don't forget the Texian." The last of the words were rendered almost unintelligible by the blood that gurgled up into his throat. A film seemed to gather over

his eyes.

"Where are my friends? Don't leave me to die alone, boys," he moaned with a great effort, clutching blindly at us.

"We're with you to the last, old friend," answered Colton, grasping his right hand. I caught the other. We may have been a faint hearted lot, but there was not an unadmitted eye among us. Soon he groaned almost insensibly, a shudder passed over him, and he was dead.

Even the stony hearted barbarians seemed touched by the disastrous incidents of this sanguinary affair. Few of them could speak even broken English, but such as could advanced toward us, and by the act of signs endeavored to inform us that their champions had expected to die, and they urged that it would be fitting to entomb two such brave men together. We received their strongly chivalrous proposal with magnanimity equal to their own. With spears and tomahawks, the combatants in the rich furs of the chiefs, we laid them to rest side by side—friend and foe alike interred. Then heaping a great pile of stones above them, to baffle the efforts of prowling wolves, we fired a volley in the air, and with sighing hearts departed. And there they slumber still. One died for his friends, and the other died for the honor of his tribe. The wistful summer winds sigh a sad requiem above the spot of their long repose; the wild flowers blossom in vernal profusion around, and the showers of heaven impartially descend upon the soft verdure that caresses it.—Chambers' Journal.

R. R. R.

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