

THE FLIGHT OF THE KICKAPOOS

This friendly, though exceedingly cunning, tribe was one of the principle actors in a bit of war history which, for its unique combination of ludicrous and serious aspects of those troublous times, has scarcely an equal. It has never been recorded, so far as I know, and it may furnish an hour's reading to those who are at present interested in their future destiny. They have, up to this time, held out against all the wiles brought to bear to induce them to take their lands in severalty and allow their white brother to settle as next door neighbor. This tribe, once numerous, now numbers scarce three hundred and fifty people and their little reservation, skirted on the south by the fertile North Canadian Valley and on all sides completely surrounded by white settlements and is reckoned one of the finest bodies of land in the Territory. It affords magnificent timber reserves from which the wild game has never been driven out and, to those who know the Indian's love of the chase, it is not a matter of wonder that they are so reluctant to yield their title to such an ideal Indian paradise.

Not long ago, the majority of the Kickapoos, in council, surrendered to the inevitable and called for their allotments. Major Moses Neal, who was once their agent and whom they have learned to trust as a friend, is now among them allotting to them their homes in severalty. Some of them, however, are holding out stubbornly against the new order of things and recently sent a delegation to the Great Father at Washington to ask his interference. To their confiding natures it did not seem possible that the Great White Chief could not help them, as they found to be the case, so they, too, will yield at length and sell their surplus lands, since it must be so.

The Kickapoo tribe was settled near the Pottawatomies of Kansas at the outbreak of the Civil War and, like many others partaking of their simple nature, were almost frightened to death at the first clash of arms between their northern and southern white brothers. Under the influence of such feelings entertained naturally, they were easily persuaded by their medicine men that the day of doom had come for those

Note—This narrative appeared in a local newspaper called *The Light*, which was published at Rush Springs. It was published in 1892. The name of the writer was not given but there is reason to believe that the facts as related were probably given to the editor by the late John Coyle, of Rush Springs, who was living in that region at the time of the incidents thus described and who was therefore conversant with the circumstances.

who remained so near the seat of conflict and that every man, woman and child would be murdered unless saved by flight to the mountains. Here only, they thought they could find safety. So, in their dire extremity, the band chiefs were brought together with the principal chiefs in council. After several days, they decided upon the mountain fastnesses of the then untroubled Mexico. In short, they decided that there was nothing to do but run for it, and the distance to those strongholds did not seem to shake their resolution in regard to the matter. Their councils were held so secretly that even the ever watchful Indian agent knew nothing of their plans until they had been put into execution. Thus it was, on a moonlit night toward the close of the balmy May of 1861, every man, woman and child of the Kickapoo tribe gathered their effects and set off southward over the blooming plains of Kansas, taking such arms as they had, among which were a few guns.

They traveled the entire night and so swiftly that they were many miles from their reservation at dawn. A small detachment of troops was hastily equipped and started in pursuit, but the hesitation on account of the danger of leaving the post too weak to resist an outbreak of other tribes, which everywhere was threatened or suspected in that unsettled period, and the delay in attending the preparation for such an expedition, gave the crafty tribesmen who headed the Kickapoos many miles the start. The sparse settlements in Kansas and illimitable miles of the Indian Territory, through which their course lay, made it very difficult and extremely hazardous for the pursuers. The fugitives therefore had no trouble with the pursuers, for they never were overtaken.

They swept like a cyclone, southward over the plains, and so terrific was the impetus given by the fear incited in them and the madness by which they were controlled, that they became veritable demons, before whom nothing human could stand. The Comanches were met in force and were brushed out of their way as so much chaff in the winding pathway of the whirlwind. At that time, the Comanches were reckoned to be the fiercest and most warlike of all western Indians, but the terrified Kickapoos were then still more fierce, for they saw nothing but death behind them and, with the desperation

of madness and with a singleness of purpose that is so characteristic of the Indian, they pressed on toward the mountains of refuge.

It must not be understood that they spent every moment in flight, for that would not have been humanly possible and the long march to Mexico would therefore appear less marvellous. In their haste to leave the reservation, they had made no preparation in the way of food for the journey and, indeed, could have carried but little anyway. On this account, they employed scouting parties, in front as well as on the right and left, and these scouting parties were used also for the purpose of securing game as well as to prevent ambush or surprise from their enemies, for they reckoned upon having no friends in the country through which they should pass and they dreaded nothing so much as capture and return to their reservation. Determined not to be overtaken by pursuers, they were equally determined not to be caught in a trap which, if laid by soldiers, meant capture or death and, if laid by Indians, signified, to them, nothing short of extermination. They were mounted upon Indian ponies, the fleetest and most enduring of all horses. The skyline was patrolled at every mile as they advanced, thus keeping a good part of them in the saddle continually. The hardships thus endured would have overwhelmed a less hard and less determined race.

When they reached Red River, they had only accomplished about one-fourth of their long journey. Here they met new enemies and new difficulties. The Texas Rangers, then regarded as the best horsemen and the most daring fighters in the West, lay along their path throughout the entire distance across the imperial state. The Rangers had, by this time, been made aware of their presence and, not doubting but that they were on a marauding expedition, set to work at once to meet and overcome them. A large troop of the Texas Frontier Guard, as the state militia was then called, was put in motion to intercept them. The commander placed but a poor estimate upon the fighting qualities of the Kickapoos, who had hitherto been known as the friendliest tribe that had ever visited Texas. Indeed, the Kickapoos had not engaged in warfare of any character for many years. They had frequently visited the white settlements, offering in barter all classes of furs and hides in exchange for such commodi-

ties as could be secured only from the whites. When a band of white settlers, which had been formed to follow the invading Comanches or Kiowas, would come suddenly or unexpectedly upon a camp of Kickapoos, the latter would run from their camp to meet them, shouting at the top of their voices, "Kickapoos! Kickapoos!" which name came to be synonymous with "white man's friends." When the truth of their claim was substantiated, their camp was never molested and the Rangers always found something to eat and frequently some information of the common foe, for the Indians of tribes which were unfriendly to the white people were also unfriendly to the Kickapoos. So it came about that the Texas Frontier Guard started out as if to bring in the deserting band of "friendly" Kickapoos without so much as a skirmish, basing their estimate upon the Kickapoo as they had once known him instead of the Kickapoo who believed that he had the terrors of judgment day behind him.

The Kickapoos met the Rangers, one bright day in early June, on the Salt Fork of Red River. The Rangers were halted upon a comparatively level plateau and thought only of bringing the Indians to a parley, while the latter thought of nothing but moving ahead. Indeed, since shaking the reservation dust from their feet, their motto seemed to have been "onward!" It does not appear that the waiting party was nervous about taken at a disadvantage. They estimated their number to be about one-half that comprising the fighting force of the Indians and they did not fear four times their own number of such warriors on level ground. Savage mode of warfare is subject to no discipline and a battle with them is usually either a cunningly devised plan of ambush or a running fight, now charging and now running rapidly away, circling and returning again, heralded by showers of arrows or, if they have arms of other kinds, they discharge these aimlessly into the mass of their enemy. This was what the Rangers expected. While knowing that they had no defensive works of any kind, they also knew the usual tactics of the savages and therefore deemed it incredible that the latter, now formed in line, would charge right into their ranks without so much as a single halt. But this was precisely what the Kickapoos did upon that occasion, putting into the line for the charge their best mounted and best equipped warriors of the

younger blood. The Rangers waited, in confident anticipation, the charge that would come to a halt at a safe distance, out of range of the pistols and shotguns with which most of them were armed. They waited, however, for the halt that did not take place. When the impetuous braves were almost upon them, the Rangers began to prepare for a close fight, but it was too late. The irresistible human cyclone forced the Rangers into a hurly-burly race in which every man seemed bent upon saving his own scalp. The Rangers retreated by the way they had come, that is, to the eastward along the plateau, fearing ambush if they should run directly southward, as the ground in that direction was broken into deep gulches. Their decision was also no doubt influenced by their ardent desire to get out of the way of the furious savages, who were headed southward and who seemed determined to let nothing stop their progress in that direction.

The victorious Kickapoos continued to press the Rangers until the way was made clear for the women and children and old men of the tribe who, at a signal from the chiefs, took up the line of march with eagerness, while the warriors cleverly covered the rear. This, however, did not prevent them from being followed by the determined whites, who, turning as soon as the Kickapoo warriors left off pursuing, kept at their heels for a short distance until the hill country was reached, when the pursuit was abandoned.

Three or four more days brought the Kickapoos to the edge of that vast, and then unknown, Llano Estacado, where not a tree, nor a shrub nor even a mound broke the vision for miles on miles. The wind-swept sea of grass, unrelieved by water, was now before them. On the confines of this terra incognita, they deemed themselves secure against all except the red men who claimed the plains. It was here that the Kickapoos halted for the first time for rest. The grass was then at its greenest and their gaunt, thin ponies soon regained their wonted vigor. This region, at that season, fed vast herds of buffalo, grazing lazily northward. These furnished meat in abundance for the tired and hungry little band.

After allowing a few days of respite for rest and recuperation, they repacked their scanty belongings and resumed their journey. Here was Indian life to perfection. As they progressed, the plain spread out vaster and grander before them and the herds of buffalo, to the right and to the left and in front of them, looked like great shadows cast upon the sea of grass. Antelope were abundant and now the weary march was enlivened by the chase. The only inconvenience suffered was the want of water. But here, again, the endurance given as a birthright to the aborigines, stood them in good stead, for they traveled many weary miles at a time without so much

as a drop of water to relieve their intense thirst. The agonies of those hours were certainly great, but they were no doubt discounted somewhat by the Indian method of reasoning—that, so long as the hostile Indian tribes had not come into these wilds, they would be at least secure from enemies other than those given by nature.

But their hopes were elusive for, in the midst of the wilderness of sage grass, their quick eyes caught sight of a moving cloud that they knew was not the sign of a slowly moving band of buffalo. It was toward the going down of the sun which, being in their faces, dimmed their otherwise acute vision. But, as it drew on toward them, they made out a body of horsemen, traveling not directly in their faces but obliquely across their course. Hoping that they had not been discovered, they endeavored to bear off their route and get to the rear of the horsemen. This movement was at once detected by the strange party, which had descried the Kickapoos and had shaped its course so as to fall in with them, rightly reasoning that its numbers were greater and that it had nothing to fear from a conflict. Therefore changing its course to conform to the original design, the two bands were soon near enough together to enable the Kickapoos to recognize their old enemies, the loud-yelling and hard-fighting Comanches. Knowing that parley would be an idle waste of time, their bravest warriors drew up in line as if, out of idle curiosity, to gaze at the oncoming foe. At a signal, the same dashing courage that had awed and scattered the redoubtable Rangers was hurled upon the unformed horde of Comanches and soon riderless horses and horseless Comanche warriors were scattered over the plain, while those of the foe who were fortunate enough to hold their seats upon their terror-stricken ponies were scampering away, closely pursued by the victorious Kickapoos. The Comanches, thus cut into two bands, were now at the mercy of the Kickapoos, for many of their bravest warriors had fallen and many more had been disarmed in their headlong tumble into the grass by the shock of the first onslaught. The Kickapoos, returning from those who had fled, now caught these as they were trying to wriggle away like snakes through the tall, thick grass and they were given over to indiscriminate slaughter. They were disposed of without resistance, much as a nest of rats might be destroyed by a squad of boys, with nothing more to indicate a struggle than a pitiful cry of a hapless victim as he was overtaken and impaled by an arrow or burned fatally with hot lead.

The way was now clear again, where but an hour before stood the vaunting foe and nothing remained of the host of lately confident Comanches except the ponies upon which some of them had been mounted. These were driven into their car-

avan and the arms of the conquered and fallen were carefully hunted up by the women and older children. Strange as it may appear, not a scalp was taken, though they were scalp takers and had the field with nothing else to do. But the Kickapoos were not fighting for glory just then—all that they asked was the right of way to the mountains of Mexico.

Thenceforth, their progress to the Mexican border was without event worthy of record. A few small hunting parties belonging to other tribes, which roamed the Staken Plains, were met but they were too weak to stand against the heroes of "Salt Fork" and "Battle Plains," as their battle grounds have been called, the first being a conflict with white men and the next with red men of a tribe that was openly hostile, and both, in their ways, accounted among the best fighters in the West.

On the Mexican frontier, the Kickapoos met the descendants of the Aztecs, who thought there were quite as many Indians within their borders as they could take care of. This proposition was promptly met by the Kickapoos and as promptly disposed of by a little tilt at arms with the men who wore sombreros. The Kickapoos had come all this distance to reach the Sierras of Mexico and no other mountains would answer the purpose. So, at last, after incredible hardships and the overcoming of many enemies, the Kickapoos found themselves secure in the haven of refuge, where they continued to live, partially identified with the Southern or Mexican Apaches, for twelve years.

After the end of the Civil War, the United States Government tried vainly to coax the Kickapoos to return to the reservation in Kansas. After every other means had been exhausted, the Government sent a commission consisting of three mixed-blood Pottawatomies, with whose tribe the Kickapoos had always been at peace and sometimes in alliance. Two of these were Antoine Navarre and W. R. Bertrand (the name of the third is not recalled). In 1873, these three commissioners set off on their perilous mission. They were sustained however by the belief that they would find among the Kickapoos a few of their own fellow tribesmen who would protect them if necessary. After many meetings with the Kickapoo chiefs, who exacted many promises and conditions, the Kickapoos finally consented to once more turn their faces northward. They did not wish to return to their old reservation, in Kansas, however, so they were given the privilege of settling in the Indian Territory, of which they availed themselves.