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Article Summary: Platt and a trail agent accompanied a group of Pawnee Indians going to the Republican River Valley for their summer buffalo hunt in 1873. Brule and Oglala Sioux attacked and decimated the Pawnee. Platt's dramatic report is one of only two eyewitness accounts of the Pawnee disaster.

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\*The illustrations and captions reproduced here accompanied Platte's article when it was originally published in *The Cosmopolitan*, January 1888.

# LESTER BEACH PLATT'S ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF MASSACRE CANYON

*Edited by R. Eli Paul*

## INTRODUCTION

The summer of 1873 proved eventful for Lester Beach Platt. He journeyed west to the Pawnee reservation of Nebraska to visit his uncle and aunt. Lester Ward and Elvira Gaston Platt lived just off the reservation boundary at their Platte County trading post. Members of the Pawnee tribe regularly came to barter with the elder Platt, nicknamed Keatscotoose. What colorful sights young Platt must have beheld in that frontier setting! This was a far cry from the life he had left for the summer, that of a divinity student at Yale University. As a western tourist, he made the most of his opportunities to witness genuine Indian life on the frontier.

Lester Beach Platt was born August 30, 1852, in New Haven, Connecticut, to Landra Beach and Harriet Hemmenway Platt. The family later moved to Baltimore, Maryland. Lester Beach entered Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, in 1867, where he later completed his Bachelor of Arts degree. He entered Yale in 1872 and later received a Bachelor of Divinity degree. In 1877 he was ordained to the ministry and began his service with the Congregational Church at Falls Church, Virginia. In the years to follow Platt served as minister for churches in Owosso and Flint, Michigan, and Upper Montclair, New Jersey. In 1893 he moved to Washington, D.C., left the ministry, and entered private business. Here he lived until his death on November 1, 1915, after a long illness. Platt was buried in Greenmount Cemetery, Baltimore.<sup>1</sup>

During his Nebraska sojourn, Platt asked agent William Burgess for permission to accompany the Pawnee on their summer buffalo hunt to the Republican River valley. Placed in charge was trail agent John William Williamson, himself but one year older than Lester. Together they comprised the sum total of the white men to accompany a contingent of over 300 Pawnee men, women and children. During the course of the hunt the Pawnee found buffalo along the Republican; on August 5, 1873, near present-day Trenton, Nebraska, the Brule and Oglala Sioux found the Pawnee. The resultant fight and

subsequent Pawnee disaster came to be known as the Battle of Massacre Canyon.<sup>2</sup>

The following account was written by Lester Beach Platt and published in an 1888 issue of the magazine, *The Cosmopolitan*. It is a rather romantic version of the events, tempered no doubt by the passage of 15 years and by the genteel constraints of a popular, national journal. John Williamson, likewise, wrote his reminiscences of the battle. Together they comprise the only known accounts written by eyewitnesses.<sup>3</sup>

### A BATTLE WITH THE SIOUX

Late in the afternoon of a July day, our hunting party of three hundred Pawnee Indians and two white men, crossed the Loup Fork in scattering bands, and followed the trail westward to the Platte River, in southwestern Nebraska. It was more than three hundred miles to the buffalo grounds, and we journeyed on day after day in Indian file, along divides, through canons, and across rivers.

I confess to a little fear of the Indians at first, for they were as "unspoiled by civilization" as any upon the prairies. That first night especially, lying out there under the stars with those wild fellows on every side of me, I was too excited to sleep much. And when at length, overcome with drowsiness, I fell into a light slumber, and was awakened by an Indian stepping over me stealthily as a cat, there was no more sleep for me that night.

My friend Williamson, a Swede, the only other white man of the party, who went with the Pawnees as a deputy of the government, to prevent trespassing and conflict between the settlers and the Indians, was scarcely less wakeful during the lonely hours of that first night. He woke up once with a start, struck something from his face, and looked wildly around.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Oh, it's nothing but a toad!" said he.

"I thought it was one o' them Injuns."

We got bravely over our fears by the second or third night, however, and never slept more soundly and securely than during that six weeks' hunt with wild Indians for bedfellows. In fact, we never had our suspicions aroused in the least by their conduct.

Only once was I at all afraid of any of them; and then it was my own fault. It was one night when I came back to the camp near midnight, and very dark. Just as I reached the first row of tents an Indian sprang out right in front of me with a long knife in his hand. "Te-lu-ra-he-la?" (where are you going?) said he.<sup>4</sup> But before I could answer he recognized me, put up his knife, and held out his hand to me. "Oh, it's

you, is it?" he said; "I thought it was a white man prowling around to steal horses."

One day Williamson forgot his purse, leaving it on the blanket in front of the chief's lodge, where he had been lying. We were away from the camp until evening, and the Pawnees were going and coming from the lodge all day; but when we returned, there lay the lost purse just as it had fallen from his pocket, wide open, with a roll of bills in plain sight. No one had touched it.

I take pleasure in recording these instances because we hear so much on the other side to show the treachery and dishonesty of the Indian. But I have no theory to maintain, and would not urge any one to try to experiment on the next Indian he happens to meet. I am simply recording facts.

It was three weeks before we came in sight of our first buffalo. We left the Platte Valley one morning at daylight without breakfast, for the Indians never eat until they have finished the day's march. We rode all day until the middle of the afternoon over a scorched-up prairie, under a broiling sun. I was so exhausted that I fell asleep on my horse, to the great amusement of an old Pawnee riding near me, who startled me with a grunt, every time I nodded. "Uhg! Keats-ko-toose, heap o' lazy!" Keats-ko-toose was the name they gave me. It is their name for the Platte River, and finding that my name was the same as that of the river, they transferred it to me. My full name was "Keats-ko-toose Kit-tabutsk" or "Little Platte."

We had just pitched our camp and got our coffee over when scouts came in with exciting news of a herd of buffalo just over the next divide.

We stuffed our cheeks full of hard bread, washed it down with a cup of coffee, and hastily mounted. In a few moments all were ready. A chief galloped to the front holding a long spear, the shaft covered with white swan's feathers and the point bristling with the plumes of the gray eagle. This was the standard. No one was permitted to ride ahead of it, until the signal of attack was given by dropping it, so that all might have an equal chance.<sup>5</sup>

And now we are off at a swinging pace, passing the lodges of the beaver down by the creek, now galloping through the prairie dog town with a clang of hoofs that frightened the little fellows out of their holes. They put out their heads, gave a sharp, saucy bark, and down they went again, head first, their little tails twitching nervously behind. Up the steep face of the bluff we went full gallop, and over and away for the buffalo. We were riding along the divide between the two canons, when suddenly the Indians in advance reined up short, wheeled about, and went skulking down into the canon.

The buffalo are in sight!

Down we went, all of us, into the canon, leaping back and forth across



*"It was a stirring scene." (All illustrations and captions are identical to those accompanying the article in The Cosmopolitan of January 1888.)*

the winding stream as we followed its course, stealing cautiously upon the buffalo.

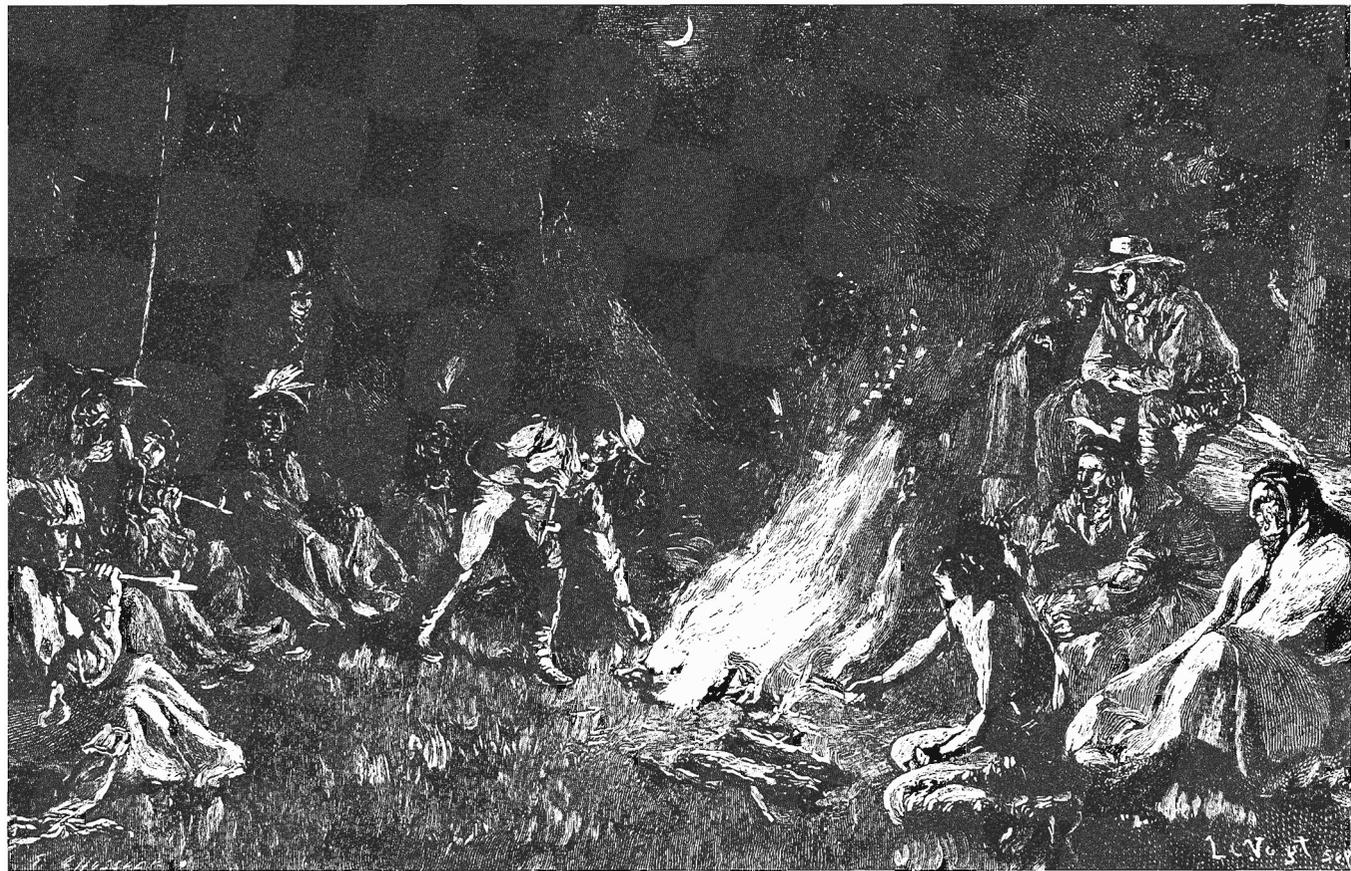
Now the chief, who has been riding ahead along the edge of the divide and peering over occasionally at the quietly grazing herd, motions a halt. The Pawnees throw themselves instantly from their saddles to rest their horses for the final rush. They string their bows, straighten arrows to the eye, examine pistols, and mount again. The chief rides slowly in advance, holding aloft the feathered spear. The eager hunters press close behind, some fairly abreast of him, watching impatiently for the spear to fall. They reach the top of the hill, and just below are the buffalo cropping unwarily the rich grass of the valley.

The animals have not seen us yet, and until they do there must be no haste, the spear will not fall. But now one and another of the herd catching the tramp of our horses' hoofs as we bear down with quickening pace upon them, throws up his shaggy head, shakes his mane, and snorts a warning. Instantly the chief drops the spear, the Pawnees send up a deafening yell, throw themselves forward on their horses, and dash helter-skelter down the slope. It was a stirring scene, those savage sons of nature, their red blankets thrown back, their bright fringed leggings and shining bronzed skin, and the tufts of eagle's feathers streaming in the wind behind; and the buffalo too, the old patriarchs of the herd stamping their forehoofs together and shaking their manes defiantly at us. But the yells of the Indians and cracking of pistols and twanging of bow-strings with their stinging shafts were too much for them.

And now the chase begins. The buffalo strains with might and main his lumbering gait to reach the nearest canon, where he knows that, in the rough scrambling over its broken surface, he can outstrip the horse. And the horse? It required all one's skill in horsemanship to hold him in when he first caught sight of the buffalo. Nothing will hold him now. I simply dropped the reins on his neck, and held on by the mane, and let him go. It was another John Gilpin's ride for me.<sup>6</sup> I bumped the whole length of that animal from ears to tail and back again. A sudden lurch sent me up on his neck, and I slid back again somehow on to his haunches and took a fresh start. He leaped a ditch and all but left me in the middle of it. And, next I knew, he was plunging down the steep side of a canon. I threw my arms around his neck and hung on. One leap more and I found myself riding neck and neck with a big buffalo bull stretching away for his life.

I pulled my pistol nervously and fired. The ball only stung him. He turned on me bellowing with fury. My horse, surprised with the sudden onset, stood straight up on his hind legs. On came the enraged buffalo head down, throwing the dust behind. And there that fool of a horse stood. I couldn't budge him.

The Pawnees nearby shouted at me, and I shouted at the horse and



*"Lighting the peace pipe."*

struck the spurs into him. And when I had about given up all hope, and was wondering where I would come down if I went up on the sharp ends of those horns, the brute gave a sudden leap that almost snapped my head off, and the buffalo went by with a rush, almost grazing the flank with his horn. That was the nearest I ever came to a live buffalo, and I thought it was near enough.

I saw an old Indian, over sixty years of age apparently, following a buffalo that was just able to drag himself along with three arrows in his side. The old man's quiver was empty, and he was impatient to finish him. He slid cautiously from his pony and stealing up behind the buffalo, sprang forward, snatching one of the arrows from his side and sending it quick as a flash into his heart.

We had a feast that night over the spoils of the chase, two hundred and fifty buffalo. One was sacrificed to the Great Spirit. The chief gave me the honor of lighting the peace-pipe with a coal from the campfire. I passed it to him. He took a whiff, blew the smoke up at the stars, saying, "Great Spirit, thou art our Father." He took another to the right, another to the left, saying, "Look down on us on the earth, thy children." And now the speech-making so dear to the heart of the Indian began. We all made speeches, and all applauded, and all lay down happily in our blankets and slept and dreamed of herds of buffalo. And some of us felt their hoofs galloping over our stomach that night. It was the first meat we had tasted in three weeks, and we ate as though we never expected any more. But I must not weary the reader before my story is begun.

On the morning of the fifth of August we broke camp on the Republican River, forded the stream, and climbed the opposite bluff. We struck the divide and were jaunting along leisurely, when, to our surprise, a small herd of buffalo, about fifty in number, came running toward us. And behind them in the distance, indistinctly visible, was a black mass of moving objects that looked like a large herd. We did not know then that they were Sioux, the deadly enemies of the Pawnees, lying forward on the necks of their ponies with blankets drawn over their heads to resemble buffalo. None suspected the ruse at the time, and a number of us, young men mostly, gave chase to the straggling herd. A buffalo that had broken away from his companions ran by me, and I started in pursuit. He led me a lively chase over into the nearest canon. A pool of water was there shut in on three sides by nearly perpendicular banks about ten feet high. The thirsty fellow ran in there to drink. I rode up immediately in front of him, sprang from my pony, and held my pistol down at him. He pawed at the bank and threw up his horns, while his little black eyes shot fire under his matted hair. I knew well enough he could not reach me, but I couldn't help thinking, "what if he should?" And the thought didn't help my aim any. I held my Remington within five feet of him and fired and — didn't hit him. I

steadied my shaking hand on my arm, and fired again barrel after barrel fairly into him until my pistol was empty. But there the huge beast stood and looked at me. He gathered up all his remaining strength and made a desperate lunge toward me, but threw himself against the bank and fell rolling into the water. He struggled to his feet again and stood as before looking at me. I looked at him. It was getting embarrassing for both of us, when a bow twanged savagely behind me, an arrow flew by with a whiz, and trembled in his shoulder up to the feather. Down he went on his knees, a stream of blood gushed from his nostrils, a splash in the water as he tumbled over on his side, and the Pawnee who shot the arrow ran past me and leaped upon him with his knife.

I cut off a lock of his hair as a trophy of victory, and had just mounted again to ride away, leaving the buffalo for the Indian, when suddenly he dropped his knife, sprang back from the carcass, and stood motionless as a statue, with head bent to the ground listening.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He bent closer to the ground, and made no answer. Just then a yell went up from the bluffs above us, the terrible warning cry of the Pawnee.

"What is it?" I asked again. "Sioux?"

He nodded his head. "Yes, Sioux."

In another moment over the edge of the canon came the Pawnee women and children, running for their lives, and shouting "Chararat! Chararat!" (Sioux).

They poured down into the canon from all sides, helter-skelter, perfectly wild with fear. The Sioux were coming behind them, they said, and appealed to Williamson, the deputy of the Government, who came up just then, to save them. It seemed a forlorn hope to throw one's self in the way of these bloodthirsty savages, with their clutches already upon their most hated enemies, and attempt to restrain them in the name of the Government. But it was his duty, and my duty as a friend to go with him.

We rode back together to the top of the bluff, and looked off over the prairie. It was black with them. A party of fifteen or twenty were riding at full gallop in advance of the main body. We rode forward to meet them. They came on until we were fairly in range and then fired at us. But they were riding at full speed, the balls whizzed by over our heads or struck the ground under our horses' feet. We reined up immediately, and, having a handkerchief, moderately white, I waved it as a flag of truce. But they only answered with another volley, and we barely escaped by lying close to our horses and turning tail at full gallop. They pursued us back to the canon.<sup>7</sup> It was filled now with terror-stricken beings packed densely together, women crying and hugging their children, old men bowing their gray heads and singing their wild death-



*"He bent close to the ground."*

song, young boys with arrows strung in their little bows, looking defiantly back at the Sioux, and the warriors, not more than fifty altogether, determined to make a stand, but without any hope.

On came the Sioux, eight hundred of them, as we afterward learned. They crowded the edge of the canon and fired down at us. At the first fire the women started to run. Several braves rushed out in front, caught the foremost horses by the bridle, and held them. They knew it was certain death to run. But at the next volley there was no holding them. The horses reared and struck out with their fore hoofs, they broke through the line of warriors, forced them back against the sides of the canon, and away they went in a mad rout down the ravine.

There is more reason in a flying herd of buffalo or a stampede of wild horses than in human beings with death close after them. I found myself pushed one side into a pocket of the ravine with two or three men.

The Sioux kept pouring in their fire with deadly effect, and now it was every man for himself, and small chance for anybody. As yet the firing had all come from one side of the canon, and it occurred to me that the best chance of escape would be to climb the opposite side and strike across the prairie away from the main body of the fugitives. I reached the summit in safety, though presenting a conspicuous mark to the enemy, which they were not slow to take advantage of, and was just congratulating myself on a narrow escape, when right before me rose six Sioux Indians in war paint and feathers.

It was too late to retreat; they were only a few rods distant, and I knew if I turned to run they would certainly shoot me. There was no help for it; I was a prisoner. As soon as they saw that I was a white man and alone they lowered their rifles, and one of them, who was dressed from head to foot in white swan's feathers, rode out in front holding his rifle behind him in one hand. As he approached me he offered his right hand, and I shook it. I told him I was glad to see him. Then they all gathered around and shook hands. I held a very pleasant reception there for a moment, until one fellow got behind and snatched my pistol from the belt – and that wasn't so pleasant, especially when he leveled it straight at my head and laid his finger on the trigger. However, there was one consolation. I knew that it wasn't loaded, for I had shot every barrel of it away, and had had no chance to reload. But before he could pull the trigger the man in swan feathers, who seemed to be the chief, arrested his arm, and speaking sharply to him turned away from the group, beckoning me to follow. I followed him a little one side; addressing to me a few earnest words, whose meaning I could only guess from his looks and gesture, he motioned me to hurry off toward the river.<sup>8</sup>

I started slowly at first, not daring to look back, though the temptation was great. I had no confidence in those fellows behind me, but

understood the Indian nature well enough not to betray my fears. But I couldn't help wondering how a bullet would feel crashing through my back. I began to appreciate a deplorable lack in my physical make-up — just one more eye in the back of my head to keep watch of them. I walked my horse until I thought myself out of range of their rifles, and then — *put in*. Throwing a quick glance over my shoulder, I saw a Sioux coming after me, the same fellow, I imagined, who wanted to kill me — a young Indian in a hurry to get his first scalp probably. He had a rifle; I, a knife only, such as they use to cut meat and shave off a scalp and pick their teeth with. There were nearly sixty rods between us; and our horses, straining now to their utmost, were stretching out with flying hoofs, throwing the dust in a cloud. Half a mile of eager suspense, such as I never want to endure again, and a hasty glance behind showed me I was gaining on him; not much, but something. I took fresh courage, struck my horse with the spur once more, and threw myself forward to escape a possible shot.

But imagine my feelings when I was brought to a sudden halt by the sharp edge of a canon, breaking squarely off with a ledge several feet below, and then a steep slide to the bottom! My horse balked on the edge, but there was no help for it; there was that fellow sharp after me. A prick of the spur, and he reared up on his hind legs; another, and with my arms thrown around his neck he leaped and stumbled, righted himself and leaped again, and finally, in some indescribable way, we reached the bed of the canon. I looked back for the Indian; he was not in sight.

I rode on down the canon looking out all the time for that Indian, until, thinking myself fairly out of his reach, I reined up to breathe my faithful horse and pat him for the brave run and leap he had made to save his rider. I was just thinking what a fine story that would make to tell to my grandchildren some day, when I looked up, and there on the divide some distance away stood a party of Indians on foot holding their horses. I got out of sight quickly behind a bend in the canon, rode on a little farther, and then stole up the bluff to reconnoiter. There was none in sight, and so I made a straight cut for the river, a mile away. But I had hardly left the canon when I heard a yell that seemed to lift my hat on the ends of my hair, and saw three Indians urging their ponies at full speed to head me off from the river.

I began to think my grandchildren were going to lose that story after all. But I did my best to save it for them. I spurred my poor horse again; but he was all fagged out, and went loping along like an old sheep. It was no fair race at all. I stopped altogether, and as they rode up on either side I thought it was all over with me, when one of them spoke to me in the Pawnee language, and I looked up to find myself in the company of friends. They told me that they had been out hunting buffalo, and seen the Sioux in the distance, heard the firing, and were looking for the

Pawnees. We started back together toward the scene of the battle, happening here and there upon a few scattered fugitives until our number swelled to fifteen or twenty.

When we reached the place of the battle, the last Sioux was making off with the last scalp. Farther on we saw two Pawnees fighting with three Sioux. They made a dash at each other on horseback, firing and dodging. But the big medicine man who was with us raised the war-whoop, and the Sioux seeing us near at hand fired again and ran. We rode on down the canon toward the Republican, picking up one old woman who had fallen from her horse and broken both wrists. Then we forded the stream and followed the trail of the Pawnees that had escaped.

As soon as we were safe from all pursuit, the Indians began to wail and lament over the loss of friends. They cried like children, the big tears streaming down their savage faces, then yelled and gnashed their teeth in fury, shaking their fists and tomahawks back in the direction of the Sioux.

One Indian rode up to me, extending his hand, while his eyes filled with tears. "Keats-ko-toose," said he, "squaw, papoose dead." We had gone about eight miles up the river, when we came in sight of a group of tents on the opposite side. I asked who they were, and was told "white soldiers."<sup>9</sup> How they came to be there I did not stop to inquire, but started to ford the river. It was a wide stream, but shallow, with dangerous quicksands. A group of soldiers on the opposite bank seeing me coming motioned for me to keep up the stream a little higher, and when I approached within hearing distance one of them shouted:

"Is your name Platt?"

"Yes."

"Bully for you! You ain't killed, then?"

They all shook hands with me cordially, and asked me with rough soldierly kindness if I was all right.

"Yes," I said; "but I'm afraid my friend Williamson is killed. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"What sort of a looking chap was he?"

"A tall fellow, with long, yellow hair."

"Why, that's the very fellow that went by here about an hour ago and said you were killed, and he would be back tonight for the body."

They led me to the captain's tent, where I sat down and told my story.

At the request of two of the Pawnee chiefs, who were in the camp, they agreed to go back with me as a guide to the battle ground, and bring off the wounded if there were any yet alive. We took thirty soldiers, leaving ten to guard the camp, and started. I went some distance ahead with a couple of scouts, in order not to mislead them, for the prairie, as everyone knows, is like the ocean, one wave just like

another, and it was no easy matter to find the place again. In my eagerness I was getting in advance of the scouts, not thinking of any danger, when one of them called to me:

"Platt, you had better fall back a little. Hold on a minute!"

I waited for them to come up, and asked what the trouble was.

"Oh, nothing," they said; "only there are Sioux probably all around us, and it would be just like them to pick you off and jerk your scalp before the rest of us could come up. They know you, and they never let a man go more than once."

"Know me! They won't know me!" said I.

"They won't, eh? That's all you know about an Injun. They'd know you twenty years from now on the t'other side of the world. They'd know you by that hat, if nothing else."

It was a dilapidated old white hat, with arrow holes through the top for ventilation, which I have sacredly preserved among the archives of the family. The soldiers all wore similar hats, but minus the black band, and so I tore it off to resemble theirs, and we rode on.

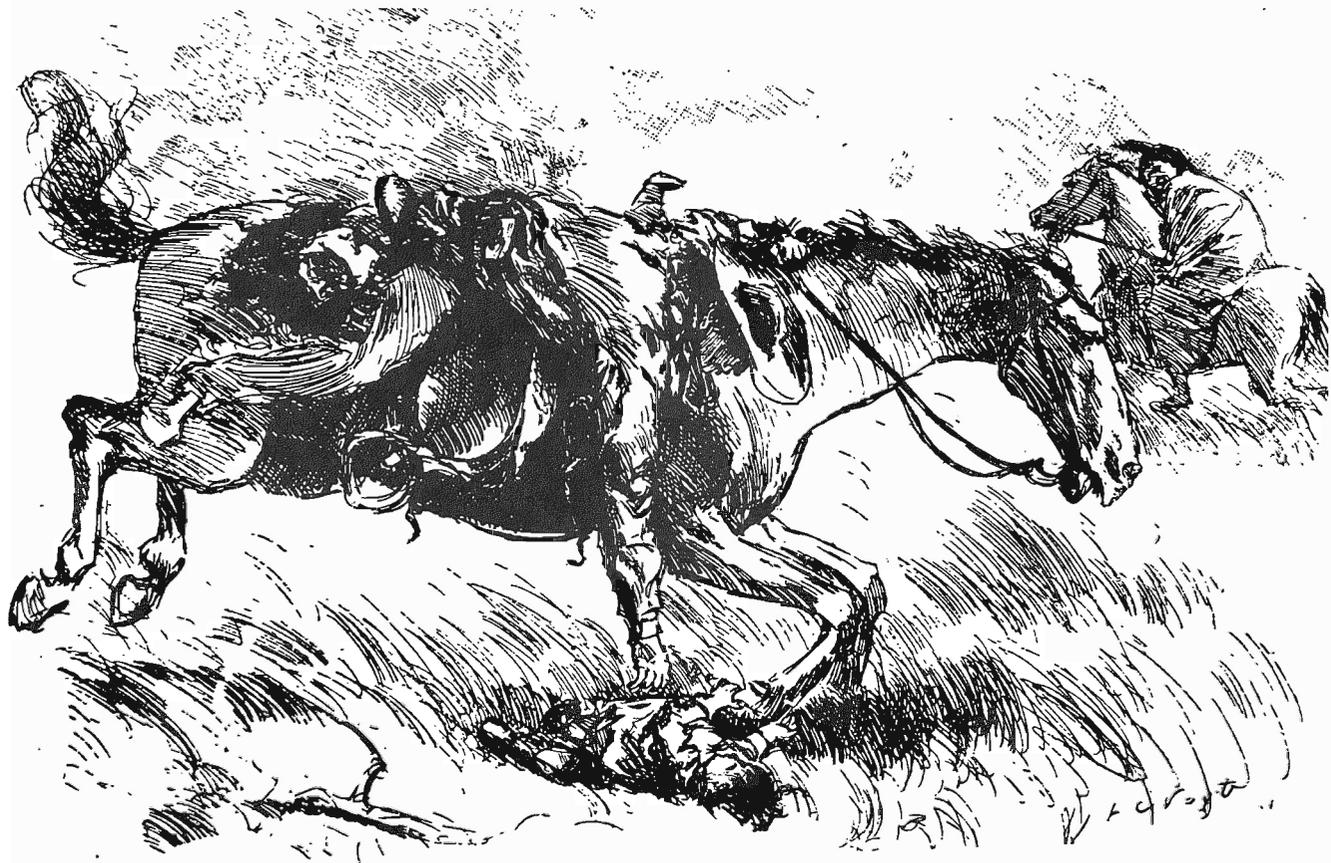
The first body we came upon was that of a woman, with a bloody knife tightly clenched in her right hand. She had been scalped. The surgeon took hold of her shoulders and I of her feet. We carried her down into the canon and laid her under a log. We had no tools to dig a grave. In a pocket of the canon the bodies of six men were piled up like fire logs and a flame kindled under them. We put our feet to the pile and pushed them over. They turned up blackened and charred faces and limbs crisped to the bone. We turned away from the sickening sight, and as we rode on up the canon, it was fairly lined on both sides with dead bodies. I counted over seventy, of whom about fifty were women, twelve children, and the rest men. Most of the men, it will be remembered, were away on the hunt. The whole number of killed was about one hundred.<sup>10</sup>

"How in the name of God," said a soldier to me, "did you ever get out of this place alive?"

But the saddest sight of all was the body of a little baby not over a year old lying in its mother's shawl. Williamson told me afterward that he saw it drop from its mother's arms in the rapid flight. She hadn't time to recover it. Williamson was going at full speed behind her, and the Sioux in hot pursuit. He reached down his hand to catch it up as he rode, but only touched it with the tips of his fingers.<sup>11</sup> And there the little thing lay in its blood, with the top of its head hacked off and carried away as a trophy! Lieutenant Lawton (Lawson) brushed a tear roughly from his face as he said:

"Well, I've been through a good many fights, but I never saw anything like that on the battle-field."

We came to a pool of water. A woman was sitting beside it with an arrow in her back. She motioned us to draw it out. It was driven in



*"Trying to rescue the little victim."*

almost to the feather. The surgeon planted his knee on her shoulder and pulled. She uttered a pitiful cry as the shaft came out, but without the head. The rim of the pool was crowded with bodies, lying partly in the water, with their heads on the bank, and the bottom of it was covered with the upturned faces of the dead. A young girl of about ten years was lying nearby. She had been scalped, but the surgeon said her skull was not fractured and she might possibly recover. We lifted her gently and placed her beside the old woman, asking her to look after the girl until we should return, when we would take them both back to the camp. We rode on to the head of the canon, where the fight began and where my buffalo lay in a pool of blood not all his own. Not desiring to return through the canon, the captain sent the scouts to bring the woman and girl, and gave the "Forward march!" along the divide back to camp.

When the scouts returned that night they told me that the woman had refused to be carried away. She said she must die soon and wanted to be left alone. They would have taken the girl, but found that she was dead. Her skull was now fractured, they said, though they insisted it was not before, and asserted that the old woman must have killed her.<sup>12</sup>

I did not then believe it possible; but learned afterward that the Pawnees have a superstitious dread of living scalped persons. They reason that when the scalp is gone they ought to be dead. They call such poor unfortunates "*kitche-hoo-rooks*" (ghosts), and they never allow them in their villages thereafter. Some, I was told, had been buried alive by their friends with their own consent.<sup>13</sup> I suppose, therefore, that this woman had pitied the fate of the young girl lying unconscious beside her, and with the hilt of her knife had managed to deepen the wound on her head and kill her. It was terrible to think of leaving the poor old woman there to die, even though she were a murderess.

But what a night that was riding back to camp in the storm! It was so dark that we could scarcely see each other riding two abreast except when the lightning tore open the black clouds and tipped the rifles of the soldiers with fire. It flashed over the battlefield, lighting up the six charred faces turned to heaven, the pool full of dead staring up through the water with fixed, glassy eyes, and the baby nestled in its mother's shawl. It seemed as though a righteous God had caught sight of them in that moment, for the thunder broke fearfully against the bluffs and roared like the wrathful voice of Heaven through the canon. And then the rain fell as if it might have been the tears of the angels. It fell on the faces of the dead, spattered in the bloody pool, gently on the little cheeks of the babe, washing off the blood and leaving a smile there. Many times we lost our way, halted and waited for a flash of lightning. But the storm swept over and left the stars shining brightly, while in the

near distance the fires of the camp blazed cheerily. "Halt!" said the captain. "Break ranks!" and the soldiers went gladly to their tents.

The captain, lieutenant and I were sitting about the fire, drying our clothes from the soaking rain, and talking over the incidents of the battle.

"What a horrible superstition that is," said the captain, "that would make that dying old woman deliberately murder the girl we left with her! You have been with the Indians some time; did you ever hear anything like it?"

"No."

I had not then, but afterward I was told this story about the Pawnee *kitchee-hoo-rooks*. And now, while the kettle is singing over the campfire, I will tell you, as it was told to me, a true Indian ghost story.

In the Pawnee village, in a lodge of the Kit-ka-ha's (Kitkahahki), was a young bride of remarkable beauty. One day a band of Sioux rode down from the bluffs and surprised the women at work in the corn field, killed some, and scalping this young woman without killing her, mounted their ponies and galloped off, with the Pawnees in hot pursuit.

She lay unconscious. They thought she was dead. But one blustering night, when the wind came sweeping down through the canons, blowing the smoke back into the lodges and scattering the fires, there came with it from the corn field the wailing voice of a woman. The warrior seated on his blanket by the fire bent his feathered head to the wind, listening. "Ugh! Wagh!" said the old men and squaws, lifting their heads from their pallets of matted rushes, and staring out through the opening of the lodge into the night.

Next day a Pawnee boy came running from the cornfield out of breath, and pointing back as he ran, cried in a terrified voice, "*Kitchee-hoo-rooks!*" The young men mounted quickly, and rode into the corn, shouting and firing their pistols to keep up their courage and frighten off the ghost, and crying, "Away! Away! *Kitchee-hoo-rooks!* why do you trouble us? Away!"

The young woman, for it was she, heard them, and went skulking off like a hunted thing to her hiding-place by the river. The voices of her pursuers came nearer. With throbbing bosom pressed close to the ground, she lay listening and trembling. She heard the cry, "*Kitchee-hoo-rooks!*" as they passed by, until the sound of that fearful name died away in the distance. Yes, she was a *Kitchee-hoo-rooks!* She buried her face in the grass and wept. The willows wept above her, dropping their big rain tears into the river, and the wind moaned in the branches of the cottonwoods. When she lifted her face again a meadowlark lighted in the grass beside her, bending down a red prairie rose with his speckled breast and singing, as the Pawnee says, "*Ka-chee kau-kee kud-a-doo*" (Indeed, I'm not afraid). She rose up with new courage. "I am not a

*Kitchee-hoo-rooks*, and if I go to my husband and tell him I am his own living bride, he will not drive me away like a dog. I will go!" said she.

That night, when the fires were burning low in the lodges, and the village was hushed in slumber, she crept to the edge of the corn and stopped. She bent her head to the ground, listening. She went on over the meadow to the village. She passed swiftly from lodge to lodge in the shadows, until she reached her own. Stopping a moment for breath and courage, she gently pushed aside the deer-skin hanging and stole in. She crept softly to the side of her sleeping husband and bent over him. "Esa-ka-ra!" she whispered. He opened his eyes and started up with a cry. She laid her hand upon his mouth.

"Don't, Esakara; they will kill me! I'm your wife, don't you know me?"

"You are not my wife!" he cried, leaping from his bed with excessive fright and pushing her away. "You are a *kitchee-hoo-rooks*!"

He pushed her to the entrance of the lodge and out into the night.

Back to the cornfield and the willows by the river she went. Again her wild Indian wail was heard in the lodges at night when the wind blew from the river. At length the winter came on, and the Pawnees went out on their buffalo hunt. Three hundred miles they followed the trail through the snow, and often in those bleak winter nights that same cry came to them over the prairie, mingled with the howl of the wolves. And sometimes they caught a glimpse of her in the distance, plodding after in the snow, hoping to live in sight of her people if not among them. The Pawnees returned from their winter's hunt, but she never came back, and they never saw nor heard the *kitchee-hoo-rooks* any more.

Is it any wonder, I thought when I heard this story, that that old dying squaw with the arrow in her back should have reached out her feeble hand and struck to death with the sharp edge of a stone the young girl who had lost her scalp? Was it murder? Was it not mercy?

But there is a long night's ride before us through the enemy's country.

There were three Pawnees in the camp. One was a gray-headed Indian, a kind, fatherly old man. He used to call me "*Tiki*" (my son), and I responded by calling him "*Ahtens*" (father). I first noticed him sitting in front of his tent one evening watching the sunset, with a little girl on his knee, and a bright, pretty little thing she was. I wondered to see so much affection in an Indian. He extended his hand to me that night after the battle, and told me with trembling voice, "Tiki, my little girl is killed!" Fighting Bear was the other Indian, a brawny, massive fellow, and a chief.<sup>14</sup> We mounted our tired horses and started off slowly together for an all night's ride, hoping to overtake the main body of the escaping Pawnees.

And what a memorable night that was!

The moon was shining behind a thin film of clouds, shedding a ghostly light over everything; the trees along the river course, the tents of the soldiers, the white bluffs sprinkled with shadows from the boulders and clay-pinnacles, and the fog caught in the tops of the cottonwoods. The shadows of our horses slanting along the grass looked like the cavalry of the ghostly army of Man-soul, and the long shadow of the Indian striding behind, like the soul of a chief marching along the path of the stars to the happy hunting grounds.

It is only fair to say that I did not think of these comparisons at that time. My mind was in no condition to indulge in poetic fancies. My only thought was that it was a most unpromising night for a poor fellow who owned a scalp and wanted badly to keep it.

And when the trail bent in under the brow of the bluffs, I strained my eyes to see a Sioux skulking in the shadows. And when it led back to the wooded river bank, I was sure that every stump was an Indian. Once a plover started up from his nest in the grass right under my horse's feet, flapped his big wings and screamed. Good heavens, what a scream! It set my teeth together like a vice, my heart gave a jump and stuck, and a cold shiver went through me as if my veins were filled with ice water.

My imagination was never roused to such a fever heat as it was that night. And for several nights after my dreams ran in this fashion: I dreamed that I was the sole survivor of an Indian battle, which was like a dog fight that I once heard of where each "chewed the other up," and the result was the mathematical formula, one into one goes once and no remainder.

But here was a mistake in one figure and I was left alone on the battlefield. I thought I had better run. I hardly knew why, for there was nobody to run from. But I thought I had better, and so started. I plunged into a creek about ten feet wide and swam; the creek grew to a river, the river broadened into an ocean, and I kept on swimming. I swam half way across the Atlantic until I was so tired that I could not keep my head above water, and so I didn't. I let my feet down and waded the rest of the way, while all the time three of those dead and gone Indians shot arrows at me from the shore, but never hit me. But before morning I had settled down to a quiet, industrious life, and was keeping Adam's cash accounts for him in the Garden of Eden.

We were riding along in Indian file. Fighting Bear first, Ahtens second, I third, while the Skeedee walked behind.<sup>15</sup> Suddenly Fighting Bear reined up and spoke low to Ahtens. Ahtens turned to me.

"Tiki," said he, "*Cha-hick-sta-ka*" (white men).

"Where?" I asked.

"House!" said Ahtens.

Then I remembered. It was a dug-out in the side of the bluff, the



*"The old Indian and his daughter."*



*"I pointed to the sun just rising."*

same place where Williamson and I had come two days previous, and found two white men sitting just outside the door with rifles lying across their knees full cocked, and two shotguns leaning against the house. They had waited for us to approach, and then said:

"Hello! white men, eh? We thought you were Sioux. We're all ready, you see, to give you a warm reception."

It was the same house and the trail went close by the door. It seemed that the Indians wanted me to go ahead and speak to them, fearing they might mistake us for Sioux and fire on us. It was so dark that I could just discern the dim outline of the house. I rode up cautiously, stopped, and listened.

"Halloo!" I said.

There was no answer. I called louder.

"Halloo!! We're friends!"

But still no answer. I was close to the house now, and a chill of horror went shivering through me as the thought struck me that perhaps I was calling to dead men. And I crept away without daring to open the door, glancing over my shoulder and half expecting to see the red tongues of Sioux rifles flash out between the cracks of the logs. We passed the house and followed the trail along the creek.

Thirty miles through such a country, on such a night! Tired? Oh, how I envied the Bear chief! He stretched himself at full length on his horse and slept, with one eye open. Hungry? The Indian who walked behind had two biscuits. He slipped one quietly into my hand and said nothing. Thirsty? Fighting Bear disappeared in the darkness and soon I heard him calling, "*Keatescatoose!*" (Here is water). I found him kneeling beside a puddle of dirty rainwater, waiting for my hat to bail it up. And how delicious it was! Red-faced Jupiter at the table of the gods, picking his teeth with a thunderbolt, never drank such rich wine from the hand of Hebe, as we bailed up from that slimy, snaky, toady mud-puddle with the lizards paddling through it. I brought a hatful of the rich beverage to Ahtens and the Skeedee, and we jogged on refreshed and invigorated.

And now another adventure befell us. We turned an angle in the bluffs, and directly before us stood two emigrant wagons, hauled back into the shadow of the hill, with the horses staked between. I was not anxious to ride ahead this time and give the salute of friendship. My previous experience was too fresh in my mind. But the Indians waited and seemed to expect it, and so with quaking heart but bold demeanor I rode up as near as I thought advisable and shouted:

"Hallo!"

"Hallo yourself!" came defiantly from within the wagon, and an oath on the end of it that snapped like the cracker on the end of a whip.

"Who are you?"

"We're Pawnees," I answered.

There was an ominous silence of half a minute, during which I heard one fellow whispering to the other:

"Pretty derved good English for a Pawnee!"

Then one of them stuck his head out under the back curtain of the wagon, and tried to get a good view of me by the uncertain moonlight.

"Have you seen any Pawnees go by here tonight?" I ventured to ask.

"Wall, yes, stranger," said he. "I hain't saw nor heerd nothin' else all night long. You chaps must a got powerful cut up."

"Which way did they go?" I asked.

He told us to go on to the top of the next hill, and we would see their campfires about three miles down the river.

He then drew his bristly head slowly under cover, and we rode on to the hilltop. There we saw the faint gleam of their fires just dying out, and beyond them a still fainter streak of daylight in the sky. Instantly my companions halted, dismounted, wound the lariats round their arms, lay down, and had hardly touched the ground before they were all sound asleep. It was an unexpected turn of affairs entirely. I waited a few moments still on horseback, and then dismounted and took the nearest man by the shoulder and shook him — without avail. I rolled him over and rolled him back again, but a sleepy grunt was all that I could get out of him. But I could not sleep, and so I stood and watched over them like the guardian angel in the pictures. But after a few minutes of waiting I tried another fellow. It was Ahtens this time. I shook him by the shoulder, and he waked up. I pointed to the sun just rising. He spoke to Fighting Bear and all three rose up, mounted their horses, and went on.

We came to the border of the camp just as the Pawnees were making ready for the day's flight. They saw us coming, and greeted us with a loud wail. Some came out to meet us and shake us by the hand.

"We thought you were killed," they said.

All that day we traversed the country in flight, with frequent alarms, from what is now Red Willow to the present town of Arapahoe. Next day we carried the wounded in a lumber wagon, jolting over the roadless prairie in a burning August day, to the nearest station on the Union Pacific at Plum Creek. That night we brought in straw and scattered it on the floor of the bar-room at the hotel, for the wounded to sleep on.<sup>16</sup> I had just money enough left to pay for a supper, and when I had eaten it, lay on the bare floor with my saddle for a pillow. But I slept so soundly and delightfully that, upon waking late in the morning, I looked about me to find the Indians all gone and the straw cleared away. And I would not have waked even then, if I had not lain in front of the bar, and a fellow coming in to get a drink stumbled over me. The Pawnees were all outside waiting for the train to take them on to the reservation.<sup>17</sup>

I saddled my horse and started off alone without breakfast. Ten cents was the extent of my capital, and I thought I would hoard it for an emergency. The hotel-keeper noticed me starting off, and called to me.

"I say, young fellow, don't you want any breakfast?"

I smiled very faintly and answered, "No, I guess not."

"Well, I reckon you'd better, young man. You won't get nothin' inside o' ten mile o' this place."

I drew forth my ten-cent piece and held it out to him.

"That's my pile," I said, "I'll take ten cents' worth."

"Oh, hang the money! Put it in your pocket, young fellow, for seed, and come in and get a good breakfast."

There was no resisting his hearty invitation, seconded by the entreaties of the inner man. I went in and breakfasted royally, and when I mounted my horse again, my good host handed me a lunch done up in a newspaper, saying, in his rough, kind way:

"You'd better take that along with you, young fellow, you might need it."

I did need it. After riding all that day in the sweltering heat, eating my lunch and getting hungry again, I tried to sell my horse - cheap too; I only asked twenty dollars for him, but nobody wanted to buy. Why it was I could not think until I ventured to sell him to an Irishman working on the railroad. His friend whispered to him:

"Jimmie, do ye mind, that chap has got the look of a horse-thief."

I tried to sell him to an old farmer driving along in a two-seated vehicle, with his daughter on the back seat.

"Twenty dollars? That's almighty cheap," said he, "and I suppose it's all right, but I never like to buy hosses on the road that way. Somebody's likely to come along in a few days and claim 'em, you see, and it makes it embarrassin'."

I saw, and was just turning away with a kind of doubtful impression that maybe *I was* a horse-thief after all and didn't know it, when the old gentleman's daughter lifted her veil modestly, and blushing prettily, said, in a hesitating voice:

"I hope, sir, that you won't think that father - thinks - you are a - a horse-thief."

"Oh, no, of course not," said the old farmer. And I left them feeling somewhat better.

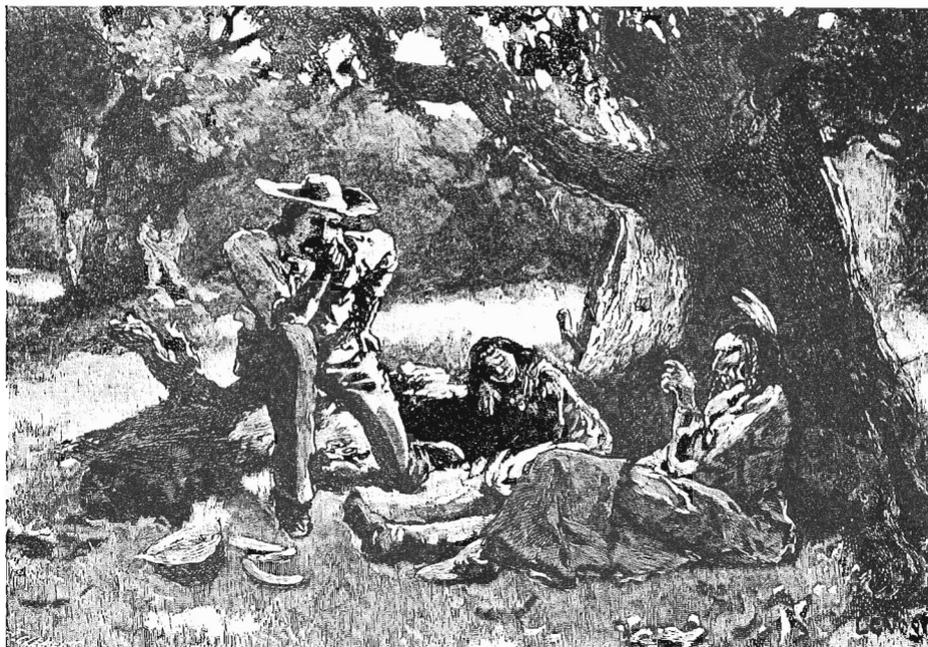
That evening I rode into Kearney. And now I must either sell my horse or go supperless to bed on the open prairie. I accosted the first man I met.

"Want to buy a horse?"

"What'll you take for him?"

"Twenty dollars; no, you can have him for fifteen."

"No, I don't want him."



*"Last meeting with Ahtens."*

He looked at me questioningly, and seeming to think that I was only a fool and not a knave, said:

"You jes' go round to the grocery; there's a lot 'o chaps hangin' round there, and maybe you can strike a trade; but see here! Don't you take a cent less than thirty for him."

I rode to the grocery, and in less than ten minutes was without a horse, but finding my way to the best hotel with three ten-dollar bills in my pocket and visions of luxury in my head.<sup>18</sup> It was a week before I reached the reservation. I arrived in time, however, to take up the weekly paper and read the full account of my sad and horrible death.<sup>19</sup>

About two weeks afterward a message came from Fort McPherson that the Government had compelled the Sioux to give up the Pawnee captives, and they were now at the fort.<sup>20</sup> Ahtens was one of a delegation of Pawnees to go after them. A few days after, I saw him coming down the road leading by the hand his little girl whom he had mourned as lost. The old Indian was so happy he could not wait until he got to me.

"Tiki!" he shouted, "Tiki! here's my little girl!"

She was covered with Sioux ornaments.

"A Sioux woman put them on me," she said, "and tried to keep me when the white soldiers came to get me."

I thought we ought to celebrate, and so I bought a watermelon. We sat down under the shade of a tree, the old Indian, his little girl, and myself.

"Ahtens," said I, after a while, "I am going home in a few days. It is a long way from here — five suns on the cars."

"Will you come back again?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid not," I said.

He looked at me a moment, thoughtfully.

"I'm going to Washington some time," said he, "to see the Great Father; and when I get there I'll ask him, 'Where is Keats-ko-toose?' and then he will tell me, and I'll go and see you."

I tried to tell him where I lived, but he said:

"No, I can't remember; I'll ask the Great Father when I get there. I shall see you again some time."

But he never has. We parted forever, I going East, and he returning to his friends.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Biographical information on Lester Beach Platt comes from the *Obituary Record of Yale Graduates, 1915-1916* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1916), 230-31, and the *Washington Post*, November 2, 1915.

<sup>2</sup>The best analysis of the events leading to and resulting from the encounter is "The Battle of Massacre Canyon," by Paul D. Riley, *Nebraska History*, 54 (Summer 1973), 221-50. Riley did not know of the existence of the Platt account until three years after his article was published. Letter of Paul D. Riley to Martha Blaine, November 16, 1976, Paul D. Riley Collection, MS949, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln.

<sup>3</sup>Platt's article, "A Fight with the Sioux," appeared in the January issue of *The Cosmopolitan*, 4 (1888), 341-55. It was reprinted in the *Omaha Daily Herald*, January 22, 1888. Both publications guaranteed the article a wide readership in Nebraska.

John W. Williamson is the source of several similar versions of that day's events. He reported to William Burgess upon his arrival at the agency. John W. Williamson to William Burgess, Genoa, Nebraska, August 12, 1873, "Indian Office Documents on Sioux-Pawnee Battle," *Nebraska History*, 16 (July-September, 1935), 148-50. Archeologist Elmer E. Blackman of the Nebraska State Historical Society interviewed Williamson at Genoa in February 1902. E. E. Blackman, "Report of Department of Archeology," Robert Furnas, editor, *Annual Report of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture for 1902* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1902), 299. The result was "The Last Hunt of the Pawnees," an unpublished manuscript found in the Blackman Collection, MS25, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln. Another version "as told by J. W. Williamson" appears in Thomas R. Armstrong's *My First and Last Buffalo Hunt* (Privately printed, 1918), 33-42. Yet a later version, penned by Williamson himself, was *The Battle of Massacre Canyon: The Unfortunate Ending of the Last Buffalo Hunt of the Pawnees* (Trenton, Nebraska: Republican Leader, 1922).

Gathered together by Garland James Blaine and Martha Royce Blaine are the surviving oral histories of the Pawnee participants. Although not first person *written* accounts, they nevertheless comprise a most interesting and valuable account of the battle by eyewitnesses. Blaine and Blaine, "Pa-Re-Su A-Ri-Ra-Ke: The Hunters That Were Massacred," *Nebraska History*, 58 (Fall 1977), 342-58.

<sup>4</sup>Upon comparison of Platt's occasional use of the Pawnee lexicon to the standard works, he is, at times, phonetically close. Douglas R. Parks, *A Grammar of Pawnee* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976); Douglas R. Parks, editor, "Caddoan Texts," *International Journal of American Linguistics Native American Texts Series*, 2 (The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 1-129; Gene Weltfish, "Caddoan Texts: Pawnee, South Band Dialect," *Publications of the American Ethnological Society*, 17 (1937).

<sup>5</sup>Rituals carried out immediately before charging a buffalo herd are detailed in Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe: The Way of Life of the Pawnee* (New York: Ballantine, 1971), 241. Williamson also mentioned the individual Pawnee at the head of the advancing hunters. Williamson, *The Battle of Massacre Canyon*, 7.

<sup>6</sup>John Gilpin's ride appears in a humorous poem by William Cowper, 18th century English poet, entitled *The Diverting History of John Gilpin, Showing How He Went Further than He Intended and Came Safe Home Again*.

<sup>7</sup>Williamson's August 12 report essentially agrees with this. Williamson, "Indian Office Documents," 149. However, Williamson later wrote that it was Ralph Weeks, a mixed blood interpreter, not Platt, who accompanied him as he rode toward the oncoming Sioux "waving a handkerchief as a token of peace." Williamson, *The Battle of Massacre Canyon*, 11. Weeks supposedly told the same thing to frontiersman Luther North. Robert Bruce, *The Fighting Norths and Pawnee Scouts* (New York: Privately printed, 1932), 38.

Although Williamson acknowledges Platt's article, other discrepancies exist between their accounts. None is more serious than Williamson's later impeachment that Platt did not witness the battle. Armstrong, *My First and Last Buffalo Hunt*, 41. To add to the confusion, the Pawnees remembered Williamson as having run away before the fighting! Blaine and Blaine, "Pa-Re-Su A-Ri-Ra-Ke," 356.

<sup>8</sup>Family tradition holds that more occurred than that alluded to by Platt. "(We) have heard that they took Lester and whipped him and sent him away without any clothes on. I have not seen him and do not know how much of the report to believe." Letter of Lizzie Whaley Lehman, a cousin living in Columbus, Nebraska, to her mother, Mrs. Charlotte Ricketts, Percival, Iowa, August 12, 1873. This and other family historical details were graciously provided to me by Jean Schobert, Nebraska City.

The only other account which mentions anything similar to the above is the *Omaha Daily Herald*, August 15, 1873. According to its source it was Williamson who was caught and stripped!

<sup>9</sup>This group of soldiers was Company B, 3rd United States Cavalry, commanded by Captain Charles Meinhold, accompanied by Lieutenant Joseph Lawson, Acting Assistant Surgeon David Powell, and scout Leon Pallardie. Paul D. Riley, "Dr. David Franklin Powell and Fort McPherson," *Nebraska History*, 51 (Summer 1970), 162.

<sup>10</sup>For other estimates of the Pawnee fatalities, see A. C. Shallenberger, "The Last Pawnee-Sioux Indian Battle and Buffalo Hunt," *Nebraska History*, 16 (July-September 1935), 141.

<sup>11</sup>Williamson also described his unsuccessful attempt to rescue the Pawnee child. Williamson, *The Battle of Massacre Canyon*, 11-12.

<sup>12</sup>Surgeon Powell treated the two wounded Pawnee and mentioned the child's death in his account of viewing the battlefield. Riley, "Dr. David Franklin Powell and Fort McPherson," 163.

<sup>13</sup>This dread of a person who survived scalping, the *kicahuruksu*, is highlighted in a collection of narratives by Douglas R. Parks, "An Historical Character Mythologized: The Scalped Man in Arikara and Pawnee Folklore," *Plains Indian Studies: A Collection of Essays in Honor of John C. Ewers and Waldo R. Wedel* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 47-58.

The person who probably told Lester of the burial alive of a scalped person was his aunt, Elvira Platt. She rescued such a victim, a woman, and nursed her back to health. Alfred Sorenson, "The Adventures of Major Frank North, the 'White Chief' of the Paw-

nees," 56-57, typescript in the Frank North Collection, MS448, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln.

<sup>14</sup>Fighting Bear was one of the principal chiefs leading the summer hunt. During the battle he fought a tomahawk duel with a Sioux chief. Fighting Bear won. Riley, "The Battle of Massacre Canyon," 236; Williamson, *The Battle of Massacre Canyon*, 8-9. The identity of "Ahtens" is unknown.

<sup>15</sup>If, as Platt says previously, two of the Pawnee chiefs were in the camp, then the "Skeedee" may be Ter-ra-re-cox, Skidi chief. Riley, "The Battle of Massacre Canyon," 236.

<sup>16</sup>The town of Plum Creek, present-day Lexington in Dawson County, was platted in 1873. The first hotel was built that year by T. Martin. A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2 volumes (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), 620.

<sup>17</sup>Members of the Pawnee tribe routinely received free passes on Union Pacific trains. This was in appreciation for the sterling service of the Pawnee Scouts in protecting the Union Pacific while it was being built across Nebraska. The railroad's only stipulation was that the Pawnee ride on top of the freight cars. George E. Hyde, *The Pawnee Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 307; Autobiography of John William Williamson, 20-21, Williamson Collection, MS2710, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln.

<sup>18</sup>Kearney's best hotel in 1873 was probably the Harrold House, built the previous year. Gene E. Hamaker, "Kearney Junction, 1872: Business and Businessman, Part II," Gene E. Hamaker, editor, *Tales of Buffalo County*, 2 (Kearney: Buffalo County Historical Society, 1983), 140.

<sup>19</sup>No premature obituary for Platt exists in surviving Columbus newspapers.

<sup>20</sup>Eleven Pawnee women and children were recovered from the Sioux. "Report of William Burgess to Barclay White, September 20, 1873," *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1873* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1874), 194.