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## BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

The age old struggle between civilization and the savage broke out afresh on the western plains in the year 1867. The White Man's Destiny that for two hundred years had been creeping westward from the Atlantic coast like a mighty juggernaut, was now lumbering across the plains that stretch in undulating altitudes from the Missouri river to the Rocky Mountains—as it had crept, a thousand years before, across the plains and valleys of Europe.

No banner emblazoning the motto, "To the Survival of the Fittest" was flouted from the juggernaut, but it was the spirit of the White Man's Destiny—it was ingrained in each individual white soul. Grimly, determinedly and mercilessly, although piously, the juggernaut moved on crushing under its wheels every ancient right and privilege of the savage nomads whose untutored minds could not comprehend the "benevolent assimilation" that was graciously intended.

From the Dakotas on the north, to the Arkansas River on the south, these Plains Indians once owned the lands westward to the granite ribbed Rockies; even further where ancient craters had spewed their lavas over other domains; where mountain snows fed streams of rushing waters, that, collecting into grand channels, wound their ways down across those plains to the sea, laving the parched earth, giving succor and refreshment to all living things.

Now these are gone. Little by little the White Man has prevailed upon the savage to give, give, give. Empires in exchange for baubles. Alluring promises made to children—promises never understood and seldom ever kept. It is a dangerous thing to take advantage of children by alluring promises. Some day the children will understand.

Now, the Plains Indians understood that their lands were gone. The Whites were settling upon them. The buf-

falo, the beaver, the deer and the antelope would go with the White Man's coming. White Man's civilization and wild game are not compatible elements.

Brooding over the wrongs done him—over the loss of an empire where once he was lord and master—reduced to accepting terms where each succeeding treaty crowds him into smaller areas and upon reservations where his noble qualities wither, and shrivel, and die for want of scope and action; deprived of game and the chase; deprived of liberty and freedom of movement, that most precious gift of savage and civilized alike—

All these things were bad enough, but to see the Whites with puling broods squatting on their erst-owned lands; building cabins and dugouts, breaking up the sod, and driving off the game, while the red man, reduced to poverty and under surveillance, must rot out his life on the reservation, his activities confined to begging bacon and blankets—these things would have made him savage had not Nature already shaped him so. It was only natural that his savage soul rebelled—that he sought to be revenged in the most savage way.

So it was, in that year 1867, the Plains Indians went on the warpath—sporadically, fitfully, surreptitiously, but nevertheless on the warpath. With savage cunning and duplicity some of them hung about the agencies making professions of friendship, and begging for annuities and rifles. Some of the old men who had witnessed the ever progressing juggernaut, who had learned from wise men long since dead the futility of opposing its oncoming, counselled against war. It is young men who make war—and it was young men on the warpath now.

With the first depredations committed, the Government sent General Hancock to protect the frontier—Hancock the Superb, who had faced Lee's veterans in a hundred unnamed skirmishes greater than any Indian battle of history. With him went Custer who had won his spurs and a major general's commission before he was twenty-five years of age; who next to Sheridan was the greatest cavalry officer produced on the Northern side during the then recent war.

The battle ground was an empire where the best horsemen in the world, mounted on the best horses in the world,

moved like phantoms across the billowy plains, swooping down on a frontier settlement to wreak brutal vengeance and to satisfy savage lust; to disappear like the mirage; to laugh at superior numbers; to play hide and seek with the lumbering cavalry horses.

All through the latter part of that year 1867 the Indians took a terrible toll from the Whites. Blackened ruins marked the spots where once stood frontier homes—sable memorials of holocausts and tragedies that brought pallor to cheeks of the bravest pioneers. Scalps dangled from tepee poles, proud trophies of exultant savages—revolting testimonials of fiends incarnate. Pale faced women of that hated civilization far away in Indian villages slaved for savages, and captive children were dragged back to the era of history's dawn.

Up and down, here and there, the best cavalry in America followed trails in vain. They rushed to the call for help, only to find that the savages had been there; had slaughtered and burned—and gone. Up the Platte, down the Republican, south on the Smoky Hill, and down on the Arkansas it was all the same. Custer, the fiery, dashing cavalier coursed the prairies, his efforts equalling the sanguinary campaigns in the Shenandoah. Only a few skirmishes resulted—Indian blood is elusive.

But Custer is learning. He seeks every opportunity to meet Indians. He talks to them—studies them. Makes friends of them when he can. He too, loves the great open spaces. The spirit of savage ancestors flames anew in his breast as he senses the "Call of the Wild." He loves the chase—whether buffalo or savage be the quarry. Although suspended from active service for some alleged violation of military rules, the close of the year found Custer the ablest Indian fighter on the plains.

Ninety-five enlisted men and five officers killed; fifty-eight citizens murdered; twenty soldiers wounded, women and children carried into captivity; hundreds of homes burned and hundreds of livestock stolen—these constituted the toll taken by the Indians that year. This is of those recorded. No one will ever know the number of those who are still among the missing.

The Indians were slow in moving out on the warpath in the spring and summer of 1868. There was another war

in progress and the Indians became the recipients of unsolicited allies. It was a war between the Interior Department and the military branch of Government. Indian agents, traders, and those who profited by Indian trade, started a drive against General Hancock, charging that he had precipitated the Indian depredations by his bungling attitude towards them.

The Indians hung around the agencies. They wanted arms and ammunition, for they could not go out against the white men with bows and arrows. They did not say so—leave it to the Indian to play a shrewd and cunning game.

Owing to the depredations committed by them the previous summer and fall, the War Department demanded that no more arms or ammunition be issued the Indians. The agents protested, charging that it was the withholding of arms that had angered the savages and provoked them to commit depredations. Traders and profiteers added their protests to withholding arms and annuities.

Peace commissioners appeared on the scene. Long pow wows were held, and the "Orators of the Plains" made long winded speeches. One chieftain dwelt long and eloquently upon the wrongs done the Indians. He defied and boasted, and threatened. Another one assured the commissioners and agents that his people realized it was useless to rebel. They had learned that the white man's ways were good, and would accept them—only they needed rifles to kill the buffalo. Their young men were hot headed and were peeved because they had not received their rifles; but they would listen to the counsel of the chieftains. Give them their annuities and arms, and all would be well.

Interior department officials whose bosoms were overflowing with the milk of human kindness listened to these unsophisticated children of the plains. They also listened to the side speeches of traders, agents who worked with traders, and to profiteers, who were staging the play. They became convinced that General Hancock and the War Department had blundered—that they did not understand these good-hearted people.

Eastern newspapers seized upon the issue and roundly denounced General Hancock, whose civil war laurels were yet fresh upon his brow; denounced the War Department,

and loudly asserted that if the Indian question were left to the Interior Department and Indian agents there would be no war. "There are two classes of people who are always eager to get up an Indian war—the army and our frontiersmen," a prominent New York paper said.

They might have asked the owners of hundreds of burned and ruined homes on the frontier, how much they wanted war. They might have asked the women, who, outraged in body and spirit, slaved for Indian masters in villages far away, how much they and their families had wanted war. But these were not interviewed.

Those in charge of the administration of government are as susceptible to vibrant public sentiment, especially when that sentiment is magnified by editorial amplifiers, as a seismograph is to earth tremors. The military arm of the Government was rebuked. Its Indian program passed into the shadow.

It was nearing the middle summer season when definite understanding was had. Then the arms and ammunition were delivered. In a letter dated August 10, 1868, Indian Agent E. W. Wynkoop writes Thomas Murphy, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, that he has just delivered rifles and ammunition to the Cheyennes. "They were delighted at receiving the goods," he says, and adds, "They have now left for their hunting grounds and I am perfectly satisfied that there will be no more trouble with them this season." Arapahoes received arms August 1st.

Within twenty-four hours after receiving arms and ammunition, warriors from these very tribes, with the arms delivered them as above related, were on their way towards the Saline and Solomon rivers in Kansas where they murdered men, ravished women, burned homes, stole live stock, and carried women and children into captivity.

The cupidity of commerce and the cunning of savagery had made common cause. Again the smouldering ruins of frontier homes; festering bodies of brave pioneers; wrecks of womanhood ravished, and mangled forms of little children—these were the price.

Now Kansas 'roused from her short respite since the war—Kansas that fought off invaders who would plant slavery on her soil—Kansas that was settled by a race of fighting people who were still virile and bellicose when the

rights of Kansans were trodden upon. Kansas has a way of making herself heard. A regiment was raised to protect her frontier. If the Government was more interested in agents and traders than in the men and women who were extending the limits of civilization, Kansas would protect them.

The Indian agents and Interior Department went into disfavor. The military was given authority to act. General Phil Sheridan was placed in charge of the military department which embraced the territory involved. There would be no temporizing now. Sheridan, who had fought such men as Stuart and Early and the veterans of Jackson and Lee.

One of the first things he did was to call for Custer—who had been court martialed and suspended—and asked that he be restored to command. It was Custer who had been Sheridan's most trusted lieutenant in the Shenandoah; who had led the charge a hundred times—who had never failed him—who was always on the front; who was on the front at Appomatox when Lee sent his first note with a flag of truce to Grant, which Custer received and delivered.

These two soldiers of action met and discussed the situation. They decided on a winter campaign. No use of chasing elusive phantoms over this empire of plains. Custer had had his fill of that the year before. You can't play "pussy wants a corner" in a forty acre field. When the Indian pony is poor and thin; when he is weak from want of nourishing food; when the warrior is hibernating along the banks of Southern streams—then is the time to strike with vengeance.

Was it cruel? Surely it was. Did not a great master of battle say "War is hell?" Those bringing on war must not brush these things aside lightly. This same "Master of Battle" was the guiding spirit in the War Department, and after reviewing the details of a recent Indian massacre he wrote, "We must act with vindictive earnestness, even to their extermination, men, women and children. Nothing else will reach the root of the case."

What other argument could be made to savages who practiced murder and rapine—extermination of all the white race they were able to lay hands on? For the year 1868, from the time arms were delivered the Indians up to the time Sheridan and Custer decided on a winter campaign the

toll taken by the Indians was 154 killed, sixteen wounded, four women and twenty-four children carried into captivity. In addition 958 homes had been burned, sacked and plundered. Nearly all of these depredations were committed against the frontier settlements of Kansas.

It was to be war of extermination. Savages know no other kind. Such a war only would bring them to their senses. With all our cant and hypocrisy the old Mosaic law, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," is still the controlling rule of human action. The more highly civilized we are, the more eyes and teeth we demand for retribution. No matter the grievance nurtured in savage breasts, no matter how just the cause of that grievance, murder, rape, pillage and captivity committed against innocent men and women wholly without protection is without justification of any kind.

So the generals in charge of military operations against the Indians contended—and so they planned their operations.

Winter set in earlier than usual in that year of 1868. Early frosts turned the grass into inert, substanceless provender. Warriors could no longer follow the war path with no feed for ponies. They must get to the southland and establish winter quarters. This they did, setting up their villages on the banks of the Washita, in the then Indian Territory. It is Oklahoma now, where the town of Cheyenne is situated. Here the allied tribes of the plains, the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches, Kiowas and Plains Apaches pitched their tents. Here the hundreds of warriors would idle away the winter months, boasting of adventures and recounting the deeds committed against the Whites.

In the northwestern part of the state of Oklahoma two streams of the plains coming together form the North Fork of the Canadian River. Beaver Creek far up on the plains, flows in an easterly direction until past the hundredth degree of longitude when it turns southward. Wolf Creek, south of the Beaver, rises in the Texas Panhandle and flowing in a northeasterly direction, connects with the latter stream at the exact geographical location of latitude 36 degrees, 30 minutes; longitude, 99 degrees 30 minutes.

At the confluence there is a wide level valley, which as one looks up streams, widens out into a V shape. Here was

chosen the site to be used as base of supplies for Indian winter campaign. It was named Camp Supply. Since the advent of statehood, Oklahoma has established an asylum for the insane upon this beautiful and historic spot.

General Custer reached Camp Supply November 19, 1868, and proceeded at once to make ready for the march farther south into the Indian country. General Sully who was in command of that district, and under whose command Custer was, accompanied the expedition to Camp Supply. He brought, in addition to Custer's Seventh Cavalry, some companies of foot for the protection of the wagon train which numbered four hundred.

Two days after reaching Camp Supply General Sheridan produced a stir by riding into camp with a small escort. If there had been any doubt about a winter campaign, such doubts were now put to rest. General Sully was relieved of command, and Sheridan took the direction of the campaign into his own hands. There was a long conference between Custer and his chief. Together they went over all the maps at their command. The result was that twenty-four hours after he arrived in camp Sheridan issued orders to Custer to move with the Seventh Cavalry further south into the Indian country, to locate the winter quarters of the hostiles, and administer such punishment as was in his power to do.

For several weeks Custer had been preparing for the campaign now to begin. He had organized a company of forty sharpshooters, with full complement of officers. He had taken into the service some of the most noted and able scouts of the plains, prominent among whom were California Joe and Jack Corbin. He also had with great care selected a dozen or more Indian scouts among whom were Little Beaver and Hard Rope. The former was chief of the Osages. This tribe was the sworn enemy of the hostile Indians. Hard Rope was the wise man of the Osage tribe. All of these Indians were experts on the trail.

Simultaneously with the orders to march on the following morning, a blizzard set in. All night the snow filled the air. It was whirled over the prairies and swept into drifts behind every object that broke the force of the wind. The heavy stand of grass held it fast. Nature was doing her best to make it a winter campaign.

Reveille sounded on that morning of November 23, while yet it was dark, and the blizzard still raging. A foot or more of snow covered the ground. Shivering troopers groomed their horses while standing up to their knees in snow. Horses, turning tail to the wind, shivered in unison with the troopers. Man and beast partook of breakfast that morning with little degree of comfort. "The General" sounded. Tents came down. Wagons were packed and made ready for the march. "Boots and Saddles" rang out on the snow laden air. Each trooper seized his saddle and busied himself making ready his mount.

The fastenings to Custer's tent are undone. With quick bouyant strides he stalks up to the orderly who is holding his horse. That animal, already saddled, is nervously pawing the snow. The General is wearing his campaigning suit of buckskin, completely hidden now by a military greatcoat, its large cape falling gracefully from his broad shoulders. His feet and legs are encased in a pair of handsome military boots. On his head is the familiar wide brimmed hat. His curling yellow hair which is never trimmed when campaigning, has not yet grown down to his shoulders since his recall to service. His sparkling blue eyes and face are lit up with keen joy, as those of a small boy greeting the first snow of the season.

Standing there by the horse's head for a moment as he casts his eyes around on the snowy field, he looks more like a cavalier stepped out of the Sixteenth Century, than a grim warrior starting on a hazardous campaign in a raging blizzard.

Vaulting into the saddle, he turns his horse towards Sheridan's headquarters and gallops over the intervening quarter mile, horse and rider exulting in the exhilaration that comes from scattering the feathery flakes underfoot. Sheridan who has heard the bugle calls and preparations, is awake. As Custer dismounts in front of his tent he cries out, "What do you think of this storm?"

"Just what we want," is the cheerful reply. "We can move and the Indians cannot. If this snow remains on the ground one week, I promise to bring you satisfactory evidence that we have met the enemy."

With earnest injunction to keep him informed if any-

thing important should occur, he bids his cavalier goodbye, and Custer, mounting, gallops through the storm to where his command awaits his orders. The column forms, the band in front. Custer was fond of display but there was an object in both pomp and display. Music and pomp and display take the minds of soldiers off of their difficulties. When "Advance" sounded, to the stirring notes of the "The Girl I Left Behind Me," the command moved out into the storm with all the appearance of dress parade.

Stirring tunes and pomp do not take all the trials and difficulties out of a march through a Plain's blizzard. Moving in a southwesterly direction the column ascended the divide that separates the valleys of Wolf and Beaver creeks. No one but the Indian guides had been there before—no others knew the landmarks that would guide them in this Indian country. The blinding snow obliterated every object a hundred feet away. A mile from camp the guides stopped, and huddling together awaited the approach of Custer.

Riding up the commander asked why they were not moving forward. The Osages explained that, while they knew every landmark from there to Texas, they could not attempt to guide the army when the storm prevented them from seeing any of the landmarks, and the driving snow made them lose the sense of direction. They counseled turning back until the storm abated.

Custer turn around and go back to camp! He laughed at these creatures of the Plains—at storms and blizzards. He had recourse to something that never lost sense of direction. Well had he studied the map, and he had chosen a point on Wolf creek where he would camp that evening. It was due southwest. Placing himself in front of Indian guides and scouts of the Plains, holding a pocket compass in his hand, he directed the march—a halting, stumbling, fatiguing march through deep snow under foot and blinding snow overhead.

Indian guides marveled at "Long Hair" that day. Nothing so thoroughly commands the respect of the Indian as such performances as Custer was now enacting. They were convinced that he was a "Big Chief." Even California Joe, that unique character of the Plains who knew no fear, and

doubted all "West P'inters," formed an admiration for the "Gin'ral" that day that lasted through life.

"Air ye a ambulance man, ur a hoss man?" he said to Custer when that officer asked him to enter his services as a scout.

On being told that Custer preferred a horse if he was going out to catch Indians, the scout's eyes lighted up, and he exclaimed, "Ye've hit the nail squar on the head. I've ben with 'em on the Plains whar they started out ater the Injuns on wheels, jes as they go to a town fun'ral in the States, an' they stood 'bout as many chances ov ketchin' Injuns as a six-mule team wud ov ketchin' a pack ov theivin' ki-o-tees, jes as much."

It was a trying ordeal, marching through the blizzard that day, but every Indian guide, every scout, and every trooper realized that the man out in front leading the way knew what he was doing. The fate of an army is largely in the hands of one man—and when that man boldly meets and overcomes all obstacles, he becomes an inspiration to every man in the army.

That afternoon at two thirty o'clock, the advance marched down into the valley of Wolf Creek—a wooded and protected spot. Had Custer been there before, he would have chosen it for this expedition. Soon every trooper was digging brush and wood from beneath the snowdrifts. Soon blazing fires gave out comforting warmth to men and horses. By the time the wagon train reached the camp, the snow was cleared away. Tents were pitched, and cooks hastily prepared hot coffee and dinner.

Early the following morning the march was resumed. The storm had passed. The sun was shining, but there was two feet of snow on the ground. Buffalo, and deer, and antelope had drifted with the storm from the uplands until they reached the protection of the hills and timber of Wolf Creek. Here they huddled together in banks of snow, little inclined to move out at the approach of the army.

Scouts, and guides, and officers turned hunters. They dashed through snowbanks, they plunged into ravines and holes concealed by blankets of snow where man, horse and buffalo performed marvelous feats in seeing who could get out first; feats that brought shouts of laughter from hun-

dreds who were watching the wild show. But they killed an abundance of game which was butchered and packed away in the wagons.

On the third day the Indian guides led the little army out of the valley of Wolf Creek, turning due south. Slowly they crept up the divide that separates Wolf Creek from the Canadian. Reaching the crest, they could see far away and across the broad valley of the Canadian, the Antelope Hills. Rising from the level plains to a height of three hundred feet. they are guiding landmarks for Indians and Whites. That night camp was made on a small tributary of the Canadian about a mile from that river.

While the army was on its march from Fort Dodge to Camp Supply a fresh trail, made by a band of warriors, was crossed near the Beaver. Custer greatly desired to follow the back trail with a view to discovering the winter quarters of the hostiles, but General Sully, then in command, would not hear to it.

As he stood near the banks of the Canadian, which runs through a desolation of sand, it occurred to Custer that some traces of the crossing made by that band of warriors might be discovered—or even better, they might have been forced by the storm to return, in which event they would leave a trail in the deep snow that would fairly shout the fact in detail and lead them to the winter quarters.

He immediately called the Indian guides and scouts. Little Beaver and Hard Rope said the usual place of crossing was further up the river, twelve or fifteen miles distant. It was the opinion of both Indian and White scouts that the hostile band whose trail they had seen would be driven back, and that no doubt they were now pushing towards their villages.

With that prompt decision that marked all his military acts, Custer directed Major Elliott, second in command, to move up the north bank of the river with three squadrons, looking for traces of the former crossing or new and recent trails. In the event that he discovered a trail he was to cross the river and follow as rapidly as possible, sending Custer word and details, as to the number and character of the Indians. Part of the Indian guides and scouts were detailed to accompany Major Elliott.

Promptly at daylight the scouting party moved out and along the bank of the river as directed. At the same time the main command began preparations for crossing.

There was high water in the Canadian river that morning. It is a treacherous, villainous river, full of quicksands and holes. The bed is a wide waste of fine sand. Normally a small stream of water winds and twists through this waste while the winds drift the sands in ever moving windrows where the water does not flow. As the waters rise, these sands are saturated, cohesion is broken up, and they become the treacherous quicksand. Woe to man or beast that rests feet upon them. As a horse's feet sink in the quick yielding surface, the impact drives the water out of the sands, at the same time washing them around the feet, where a packing and "setting" takes place. He tries to pull one, then another out of its vice-like grip. He struggles, flounders—and falls. Unless he has man's help he will never rise.

When there is plenty of water over these sands, they are likely to pack and remain firm enough to permit passage over them. But with a volume of water there is force, and the loose sands are scooped out and piled up—holes and sandbars. A horse may be walking along in water above his knees when suddenly he steps off into a hole—and goes out of sight. It is a treacherous and villainous river—and good crossings have always been rare.

Since daylight California Joe has been beating up and down the banks seeking a crossing. He is a picturesque character in the scene on the bank of the Canadian that winter morning, as he races here and there on his favorite mule—for Joe rides a mule. His long black hair falls in tangled mass over his broad shoulders. His heavy brown beard is fanned over his breast by the morning breeze. He is wearing a military coat and a wide brimmed, black sombrero, and a pair of heavy high top boots. In his mouth is a short stemmed pipe from which he is drawing and emitting miniature clouds of smoke. He is typical of the trapper-scout-frontiersman of the Plains.\*

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There have been various descriptions of the personal appearance of California Joe. He has been described by men who had been his associates. He has been pictured as having flaming red hair and beard, and eyes of blue, and again with hair as black as night and eyes to match. I have accepted the description given by General Custer, whose accuracy in such matters is dependable, and tallies with that of men who described him to me, when, as a boy I lived where California Joe once scouted the plains.

After many trials a place is found where it is thought the wagons can be got over. The cavalry can cross anywhere. It took three hours to get the train across that morning. Time and again the wheels sank into the quicksands where the felloes were gripped and held as though in a vice. Teams were doubled—and doubled again. They were “snaked” across by sheer force of mule power.

In the meantime Custer forded and rode up the divide to the Antelope Hills that rise like battlements from the level plains. He climbed to the top of the highest one, and viewed the country. Of this view he wrote: “On the left is to be seen the red bed of the Canadian, whose tortuous windings, coming from the southwest, direct their course for a while northwards, and finally disappear in a distant easterly direction. The horizon is but an immense circle of snowy whiteness. Here and there a few acclivities arise above the plains, divided by rows of stunted trees, indicating a ravine, or more frequently a humble brook such as that on whose banks we camped the night previous to crossing the Canadian. It never occurred to any of us, when folding our tents that bleak winter morning, that there were those among our number who had bid a last and final farewell to the friendly shelter of their canvass-covered homes; that for some of us, some who could but be sadly spared, the last reveille had sounded, and that when sleep again closed their eyes it would be that sleep from which there is no awakening.”

As Custer lingered on this lookout, he saw a horseman in the distance approaching from the direction taken by Major Elliott. Through his field glasses he made out the familiar face and form of Jack Corbin, the scout. Hastening down from the lookout, he waited almost breathlessly for the messenger. Corbin explained that after travelling up the Canadian about twelve miles they came upon a trail not twenty-four hours old. It was that of a war party numbering over a hundred. Major Elliott crossed over, and was now following the trail southward.

Custer asked the scout if he could overtake Elliott if given a fresh horse. Corbin said he could, and without delay he made ready to return. Word was sent to Elliott to follow the trail with all possible speed. If its course changed, he was to send word to Custer, who in the meantime would

follow rapidly southward in hopes he would intersect the trail and overtake Elliott. If by eight o'clock he was not up with the scouting party, Elliott was to wait for him.

The bugle summoned officers to Custer's side. They had been interested spectators of the meeting of General and Scout, and were eager to know what had taken place. Briefly, Custer told them what he had learned, and as briefly issued his orders to them.

They would move at once. Each trooper to take one hundred rounds of ammunition, a supply of coffee and hard-tack, and forage for his horse. The wagon train would be left with an escort to follow as it could, tents and blankets to be left with the train.

Taking his watch from his pocket and announcing the time, Custer said, "Twenty minutes from now the advance will be sounded. Be ready to march."

Rush was made for wagons where ammunition boxes were hastily opened, troopers helping themselves. Mess chests gave up supplies of bread and coffee. During the few minutes left after making such preparations, the men began pulling on extra clothing, for it was bitter freezing weather out on the plains, now that they were covered with snow.

While this was going on, an officer approached General Custer, disappointment and anxiety pictured in every feature of his face. Duties of officer of the day had fallen to his lot, which meant that he must remain behind in charge of the wagon train.

"Is it your intention to leave me behind with the train?" he asked.

Custer regretted that his command would be deprived of the services of such a splendid officer, but he could not substitute another without doing an injustice.

"While I greatly desire that you command your squadron, I am powerless to have it so unless some other officer will volunteer to exchange places with you," was the reply to the importunings of the officer.

Dejected and disappointed he turned away. Brother officers offered supplications, but to no avail. Presently he returned to Custer with the information that an officer who had been stricken with snow blindness volunteered to ex-

change places. Great was his joy when Custer readily consented to the exchange.

This young and brilliant officer was Louis McLane Hamilton, grandson of Alexander Hamilton. Fortune offered him two chances that day at the foot of the Antelope Hills—one for life and happiness, the other for death within the scope of a day. Fate directed him in the path of duty and a glorious death.

The bugle sounds the "Advance" and, out from the shadows of the Hills, they start due south through the deep snow. It is yet two hours of noon. The horses in advance breaking the snow, are soon wearied. They drop back and others take their places. Hour after hour they press forward. It is mid-afternoon and still no sight of Elliott or the trail. Scouts far out on the right and left scan carefully the whitened surface for a glimpse of any sign—like hounds on the scent. The sun sinks close to the horizon. Commander and officers become anxious—not to say worried. They had hoped to find the trail or overtake Elliott before darkness closed in.

A shout of triumph falls on their ears and causes all to stop. Far out on the side a scout has found the trail. Osage guides leap across the prairies, officers spur their horses forward. There in the deep snow the hostile warriors had written their record.

"More than a hundred," the Osages say, and they had passed that very place in the early part of that day. Elliott was on the trail. Although they can see for miles ahead, he is not in sight. Without loss of time the column swings into the trail and moves rapidly forward. In the distance can be seen a fringe of trees. It is the valley of the Washita, but they do not know it.

Custer sends some well mounted troops and scouts ahead at a gallop to overtake Elliott who is to wait until the main command comes up. They reach the valley of the Washita after dark. The trail leads down its timbered stretches mile after mile. It is nine o'clock when they overtake Elliott who has selected a camp on a little stream that has cut a deep channel. Under its banks the troopers build fires and make coffee. The horses are unsaddled and given their feed of oats. Thus an hour is consumed.

Consulting Little Beaver and Hard Rope, Custer is told that the villages are not far away—such is the opinion of the Indians. Little Beaver thinks they should wait until morning. When questioned for a reason, he is unable to give any, so Custer attributes it to the natural reluctance of all Indians to attack an unseen foe.

By ten o'clock they are ready to move down the valley. No bugle notes sound the march now. The Scouts counsel great caution. Far in advance two Osage guides glide along with panther-like tread feeling the way. They are followed distant some two or three hundred yards by Custer with California Joe, Corbin, and other white and Indian Scouts. A quarter of a mile in the rear the cavalry follow.

Orders are given for none to speak above a whisper. The trooper must do without his pipe, that greatest of comforts, for no one is permitted to light a match. Thus silently, but for the sound of horses' feet in the snow, they move forward mile after mile.

The Osages in the lead suddenly become transfixed—like pointers on stand. One of them slowly turns his head, nostrils dilated and sniffs the air.

"What is the matter?" Custer asks in undertone as he comes up to them.

"Me don't know. Me smell fire," the Osage replies.

The other scouts gather round. They scent the night air whose currents, clear and frosty, float above the snow sheeted ground. They fail to detect the slightest odor of fire. Surely the Osage is mistaken.

Custer respects the almost supernatural senses of the Indian on trail, so he directs the two scouts to proceed as before, but with great caution.

Another half mile is covered, the advance scouts gliding along like great felines stealing upon their prey. Then they stop again—and crouch down in the snow. Hurrying forward Custer asks the cause of the stop.

Pointing to the embers of a dying fire under the trees some seventy-five yards distant, he who scented it a half mile back says, "Me told you so."

Only those who have hunted big game—cold, hungry, and with nerves stretched taut—know the peculiar sensa-

tion that comes when the very thing they are looking for suddenly looms up before them.

None but Indians built that fire—hostile Indians. Were they asleep around those smouldering embers? Or had their sharp ears heard the distant tramp of horses crunching snow under foot? Were they now behind trees, where, covered by shade, they waited the opportune moment to attack? These questions ran rapidly through the mind of the commander.

If already discovered, there was nothing to be gained by withdrawing now. Custer called for volunteers to approach the fire and feel the enemy out—if any were there. All present offered their services. Led by Little Beaver and Hard Rope they formed a circling movement towards the timber, fingers lightly pressing triggers. A few minutes of suspense followed, and then the scouts were seen about the fire.

Pony tracks in the snow told the story, to those who read that language, of herd boys who had built the fire while grazing the ponies that fed on the grass pawed out from under the snow, and from the bark and tender twigs of trees.

All feel sure they are close to the village now. Custer takes his place with the two advance Osage scouts, and the march is continued. The Indians creep up every hill, and peering carefully over the crests examine every space ahead. They have not gone far when one of the scouts, who has for several minutes been cautiously peering over a hill, comes running down to where Custer is sitting on his horse.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Heaps Injuns down there,” was the reply, and the scout points down the valley.

Hastily dismounting, Custer climbs to the crest of the hill. They crouch down close to the ground, for the moon is shining now, and objects show almost as plainly on the snow sheeted ground as in daytime. The Osage points to the valley where the Washita, fringed with heavy timber growth, winds its tortuous way along. Custer looks into the shadows and discerns something that might be a herd of buffalo.

“Why do you think there are Indians down there?” he asks.

“Me hear dog bark,” was the reply.

Looking and listening, Custer is rewarded after some minutes by the barking of a dog. Then he hears the tinkling

of a bell, such as are belted to the necks of horses and cattle. He is turning away when he distinctly hears the cry of a child in the distance.

He is satisfied now—the village is situated in the valley just over the hill, hidden by the trees.

Custer is not a savage. He is a soldier and his orders are to administer retribution for the crimes that have been committed against innocent men and women—and children. The culprits are now in his hand, sleeping while he disposes his forces around their village—the only time in years of warfare when the Indians are to be the victims of their own cruel methods.

And yet, as Custer hears the cry of the little child his soldier heart is touched. In speaking of this, he afterwards said: "Savages though they were, and justly outlawed by the number and atrocity of their recent murders and depredations on the helpless settlers of the frontier, I could but regret that in a war such as we were forced to engage in, the mode and circumstances of battle would possibly prevent discrimination."

Leaving the Osages to keep a sharp lookout, Custer returned to the party of scouts in the rear, and dispatched an orderly to halt the cavalry, with strict word enjoining silence, and directing every officer to ride forward.

Custer informed his officers of the proximity of the village and bidding them lay off their sabres that no clanking sound might arouse any quick-eared sentinel, he led them to the crest of the hill where, in whispers he directed their attention to the location of the village and the landmarks surrounding. When every officer had fixed in his mind the location and approaches, they silently retired.

The commander already had determined his plan of battle. His army consisted of approximately 800 cavalry and a few scouts. These he divided into four detachments. Major Elliott, who discovered the trail and has been in pursuit since early morning, with troops G. H. and M. will move to the left, coming upon the village from the opposite side. Colonel Thompson with B and F troops will move to the right and by a circling moment connect with Elliott in the rear of the camp. Colonel Myers with troops E and I will move to the

right to fill the gap between Thompson and the forces to be led from the point of discovery by Custer.

The sharpshooters under Colonel Cook, and troops A, C, D, and K, with Indian guides and scouts in two columns, one under Captain Hamilton, the other under Colonel West, will march over the hill directly in front of their present position.

It was now after midnight. The attack would be made at dawn. All detachments were to get in position as soon as possible and wait the signal for attack. So it was, standing in the biting cold, talking in whispers, officers received their instructions for battle, that wintry night.

Without delay Elliott moves out—to carry into execution the last orders he will ever receive on this earth. The other officers hasten to secure their positions. Silently, cautiously, they steal across the snow clad hills and through stretches of timber, until at last they creep into place where they must shiver in the cold other hours waiting for daylight—and the signal of attack.

For hours the detachment under Custer's immediate command waited for the morning light. Men, half frozen sat on their horses. Others laid down on the snow and slept, holding bridle reins in their hands. Officers sat in groups, where, pulling their capes over their heads, they discussed the various aspects of their position in reference to the coming battle. Now that his men were disposed for the attack, Custer wrapped himself in his great coat, and lying down on the snow slept soundly for an hour. When he awoke, it was still two good hours until daylight.

He visits the groups of officers, speaking cheering words to all. He joins a group of scouts where California Joe is commenting on the probable outcome. The situation is new to these men of the plains. They never had engaged in a venture like this. The very audacity in surrounding an Indian village under cover of darkness—to turn the element of surprise and ambush against their long standing enemies appeals to their venturesome spirits, but the uncertainties attending an engagement where the numbers of the enemy are unknown raises a question of doubt as to the results.

Custer asks them what they think of the chances for a fight.

"Fight!" says California Joe. "I haint nary doubt 'bout

that part ov the business. What I've ben tryin' to git through my topknot all night is whether we'll run agin more'n we bargained fur."

"Then you don't think the Indians will run away, Joe?" Custer asks.

"Run away! How'n creation kin they run away when we'll hev 'em clean surrounded afore daylight?"

"Well, suppose we succeed in surrounding the village, do you think we will be able to hold our own against them?"

"That's the very pint that's ben botherin' me ever since we planted ourselves down hyar," Joe replies, "an' the only conclusion I kin come at is that its purty apt to be one thing or t'other; ef we pump these Injuns at daylight, we're either goin' to make a spoon ur spile a horn, an' that's my candid judgment, shore. One thing's certain, ef them Injuns don't hyar us tel we open on 'em at daylight, they'll be the most powerful 'stonished redskins that's ben in these parts lately—they will shore. An ef we git the bulge on 'em, an keep puttin' it to 'em sortta lively like, we'll sweep the platter clean—thar wont be nary trick left for em. As the deal stan's now, we hold the keerds an' are holdin' over 'em: They've got to straddle our blind ur throw up their hands. Howsomever, thar's a mighty sight in the draw."

So the quaint old frontiersman ran on, his rich plains dialect brim full of homely metaphor and sound sense. He was convinced that there would be a fight, and that they would overwhelmingly defeat the Indians or the Indians would defeat them—it would not be a drawn battle.

The moon sank behind the western hills some time before daylight, leaving the little army enshrouded in utter darkness. It was then that the morning star, its astral brilliance and splendor, magnified by the clear atmosphere, appeared suddenly on the eastern horizon. For a few minutes it was mistaken for a signal, and fears were entertained that they had been discovered.

With the first faint signs of approaching day Custer awoke the officers who had dropped off to sleep. Whispering orders are given, and the troops are prepared to move. Silently and cautiously they approach the crest of the hill, Colonel West's squadron on the right, Captain Hamilton's on the left. Colonel Cook's sharpshooters are on foot in advance

of Hamilton's squadron. Custer is at the side of Captain Hamilton. Immediately behind them is the band, ready at the signal from Custer to strike up the music.

They reach the crest and start down the slope straight for the Indian village. A herd of ponies at the edge of the timber see the approaching cavalcade and move nervously about. If the Indians hear sounds of tramping feet they probably attribute it to their own ponies.

The level portion of the valley is reached, and they enter the timber. Through the openings in the trees, they see the lodges, smoke lazily ascending from the openings in the tops. Still there is no sign of life. Custer wonders if it is possible that his movements have been observed—and the Indians escaped.

The advance is within easy rifle range—the white lodges are plainly visible.

A shot rings sharp and clear from the farther side of the village.

Custer signals the leader of the band. The rollicking strains of "Garry Owen" break upon the valley's solitude, and echo upon the surrounding hills. Cheers from the opposite side of the valley answer to the music—and Custer knows that Elliott and Myers and Thompson are in place.

Buglers sound the charge—the troops dash into the village as warriors rush from the lodges, rifles in hand. They spring behind trees and fall down behind logs. Some leap into the Washita, where knee deep in its icy waters they use the banks for breastworks and pour a deadly fire into the troopers. Cheering of soldiers is answered by defiant war whoops of savages, fighting now for their own homes and families. No braver men ever lived—or died.

Both sides are suffering losses. The brave Hamilton, riding at the head of his column and by the side of Custer is saying to his command, "Now, men, keep cool! Fire low, and not too rapidly."

Scarcely are the words uttered when he falls from his saddle, dead.

Black Kettle, head chief of the village was one of the first Indians to fall. Little Rock, second chief was killed while trying to escape with some women and children who he was trying to conduct to a place of safety down the river.

Colonel Barnitz received a wound through the body. He thought it was mortal. Custer, seeing him carried from the field galloped to his side. The officer's face had that pallor that is the forerunner of death. He gave a last message for his family, to be delivered by Custer. But Colonel Barnitz lived to die a natural death at a ripe old age.

The village was in Custer's possession soon after the charge, but the warriors were not. They still fought desperately from whatever defense they could find. It would be a barren victory without destroying the fighting force of the Indians. The sharpshooters were doing splendid work now. From behind trees and stumps they were fighting the Indians in Indian fashion.

Most of the non-combatants had remained in the lodges, but some of the squaws attempted to break through the cordon of troops and escape down the river. Custer did not know that village after village, and hundreds of warriors were just below him, the nearest being about two miles—but the squaws knew.

One old squaw led a white child—one of those unfortunates captured in the summer raids. Seeing troopers in front, she turned to the right. Confronted with the same obstacles in that direction, she veered off towards the river, only to meet other troopers. She hesitated a moment, looking in every direction to see if any avenue was open. Evidently convinced that escape was impossible, with fiendish malignity, determined that the victors should not triumph over the recapture of the child, she quickly drew a knife from beneath her blanket and plunged it through the little waif's heart.

A trooper attempted to prevent the tragedy, but he was too late. He did not soon enough discern the old fiend's intent. But he meted out swift and avenging justice. The bloody savage swayed a moment, lurched, and fell beside her victim. The child was never identified.

It was ten o'clock, and still warriors so well concealed that they were able to protect themselves from the deadly fire of the sharpshooters, kept up the fight.

About this time Custer's attention was called to a party of warriors on a hill about a mile distant. At first he thought it was some from the village that had escaped, and having

caught and mounted ponies, were watching the battle. Other matters engaging his attention he gave it no other thought at the time.

California Joe, having gone through the charge, and now satisfied that they had "made a spoon" instead of "spilin' a horn," occupied himself with rounding up the ponies and seeing what was going on about the outskirts of the village. He brought in one herd of three hundred ponies which he found on the edge of the village, and impressed into service two or three squaws in charge of the herd. Altogether he had collected and was holding nine hundred head. War ponies are the most highly prized property of the Indians.

When Custer again looked out on the surrounding hills, he saw that the Indians there were greatly increased in numbers. Examining them through his field glasses, he was surprised to see that they were mounted warriors in full costume, war bonnets and regalia, armed, and floating their lance pennants. Constant accession to their numbers could be seen arriving from the opposite direction. Here was cause for alarm.

Sending for his interpreter, Custer went with him to the lodge where the squaws were collected. Choosing the wife of one of the principal chiefs he began questioning her. His surprise was almost equal to that of the Indians when he had charged the village, upon learning from this woman that he was in the winter quarters of all of the hostile Indian tribes—the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches, Kiowas and Plains Apaches—that down the Washita, for a distance of ten miles, their villages were located.

There were several thousand warriors in these villages, and Custer suddenly realized that they were sure to attack in force. It was now well towards noon. The Indians no doubt had been assembling their forces since early morning,

Fortunately for Custer his forces had triumphed over the warriors of the village. Every brave that remained on the ground had been killed. Hastily collecting and re-forming his command, he posted them in readiness for the attack which he felt sure would come.

The Indians were disposing their forces, much as Custer had done during the night. He was now to be the defender of the village he had so recently captured. Already in more

than one direction could be seen bodies of warriors that outnumbered his command.

Just at this time great good fortune attended the little army. Quartermaster Major Bell arrived with several thousand rounds of ammunition. By greatly exerting the efforts of himself and teams he had pressed forward on the trail. Evading the Indians who were intently watching Custer's actions, he managed to get into the villiage. Within a few minutes after his arrival, the Indians attacked from the direction he had entered.

The attack soon became general. Custer was now entirely surrounded. However, the Indians did not fight with any confidence. With overwhelming numbers, they were wary and cautious. No doubt the disaster that had overtaken Black Kettle's village discouraged them. Another thing that made them cautious was the uncertainty of the size and numbers of Custer's forces. These were concealed by the timber, and no doubt the destruction of the village and the loss of all the warriors convinced the savages that their adversaries were much more numerous than they really were.

Their attacks consisted chiefly of feints and challenges designed to draw their enemies away from the village. Custer was not to be deceived. He held his forces close within the timber screen. Gradually the attack weakened, and with forces four or five to one, the hostile allies reassembled their warriors on the surrounding hills.

With courage that mounted high when difficulties multiplied; endowed with a genius for meeting exigencies of war, Custer was now undaunted by the overwhelming numbers that surrounded him. He hesitated not a moment as the perils of his position became apparent. He knew from the manner of attack that the Indians were demoralized by the blow he had delivered in the early morning hours. Now was the time to add another.

Detailing two hundred and fifty troopers for the work, the village lodges were torn down and piled in heaps. The torch was applied. From the ampitheater of surrounding hills the warrior hosts witnessed the flames devour their homes.

How often in fiendish glee had they set fire to the lonely settler's cabin on the far frontier, the dead bodies of the

owner's cremated within. No armed hosts protected those victims, or superior forces viewed the holocaust.

As the flames leaped hot and high from the tepee poles, so, hot and high, leaped the wrath of the savages. Excited, enraged, frenzied, they charged from every quarter. For the first time that day they fought with courage and determination. They were met by a withering fire from the sheltered positions of the troops. Having advantage of inside lines, Custer could support any squadron without loss of time, and deliver telling blows to the enemy. In this way, meeting and repelling every attack, hurling back every charge with heavy loss to the enemy, he drove them back until, disheartened, the Indians abandoned the field. They withdrew again to the hills, where they remained in full force.

With this breathing spell, Custer took an inventory of his losses. Captain Hamilton was killed. Major Elliott was missing, and as he had not been seen since early morning, it was altogether likely that he, too, had been killed, and nineteen enlisted men were missing, among whom was the sergeant-major. Colonels Barnitz and Tom Custer were wounded, the former desperately so. Eleven enlisted men were wounded.

Among the latter was a buglar boy who was struck by an arrow just above the eye. During the battle he was suddenly confronted by a warrior whose only weapon was a bow and arrow. The arrow, which was steel pointed struck the skull and followed the boney contour around to the ear. With great difficulty the surgeon cut off the shaft of the arrow and pulled the steel head out. It left a large and ugly wound.

Custer came across the boy while the blood was running down and covering his face—a gruesome sight. The lad was sitting on a bundle of robes near where the surgeon was dressing the wounds of the injured men.

“Did you see the Indian who wounded you?” the General asked.

Reaching down into a capacious pocket the boy brought up an Indian scalp.

“If anybody thinks I didn't see him, take a look at that,” was his reply .

He shot his assailant with a pistol, and adopting the savagery of the Indians had removed the scalp lock.

Napoleon at Moscow was hundreds of miles from his base of supplies. Without food or shelter for his army, he was surrounded by the deadliest of foes to man—snow, ice, and freezing temperature. All his animate enemies needed do was to prevent food and shelter reaching him, close in upon and harrass him. The deadly elements did the work of destruction.

Custer was not hundreds of miles from his base of supplies, but he was five or six days away, surrounded by snow and ice—by freezing temperature—and by overwhelming forces. He was without food or shelter. Before entering battle in the morning, he had ordered the troopers to remove their overcoats which were piled on the snow. Although they were left in protection of a small guard, the Indians had captured the clothing when they surrounded the village.

His wagon train was somewhere on the trail slowly dragging it way towards certain capture and sure death to the eighty troopers in escort. Such a calamity, even if he could extricate his little army, would nullify the victory he had just won.

He had killed over a hunderd warriors, and held sixty women and children captive. He had destroyed a village containing valuable supplies, and held nine hundred ponies in hand.

If he remained in his present position another day, his wagon train was sure to be captured with loss of all the men escorting the train. He could not feed and shelter his men without the supplies contained in the wagons. His position was critical.

“He who hesitates is lost,” is an old adage. Custer did not hesitate. The situation called for boldness, fearlessness, and swift action. He was a bold and fearless officer.

The nine hundred ponies were the most valuable property belonging to the Indians. Their loss would be a telling blow to them. It would cripple them on the warpath.

Directing the squaws to select as many ponies from the herd as would be necessary to transport the captives, the remaining eight hundred or more were doomed to slaughter. From their ampitheater the warriors looked down upon an-

other tragedy as they witness the firing squad's bloody work.

It was an hour of sundown. Forming his forces in column, the band in front, the captives, mounted, in rear of the advance troops and well guarded; with colors flying and the band playing a lively air the little army moved with all the pomp and display of conquering heroes—down the valley towards the other villages.

The warriors on the hills had watched the preparations in silence. For a few minutes they gazed at the moving forces. Then it dawned on them that another attack was contemplated—another attack on their homes intended.

There was great commotion on the hills that evening as the gay colors of the warriors were lighted up by the lingering rays of the setting sun—as Custer marched down the valley in the shadows.

Chieftains who had boasted of the scalps they had taken—of the homes they had burned—Satanta, Lone Wolf, Left Hand, Yellow Bear, Little Robe—rode furiously from point to point, consulting, directing. Excited warriors galloped away towards the villages—towards their women and children. Without attempting to oppose the march, without firing a shot, the embattled hosts melted away and, like the waters of the Washita, flowed swiftly down the valley.

Down the valley Custer marched, past deserted villages until deep darkness covered his every movement. Then, suddenly facing about he rapidly retraced his steps. By ten o'clock his little army was on the battlefield they had so recently left. He did not halt. He pushed rapidly on—past the spot where they stood shivering in the bitter cold waiting for daylight and the attack—on past the spot where the smouldering fire was discovered—on, still on. Weary horses that had known no rest for many hours dragged their heavy feet along the trail; weary troopers who had known no rest for eight and forty hours, sat their weary mounts, insensible now to the biting cold.

And Custer, in whose hands was the keeping of all, still at the front, urged the weary army on; he felt no weariness, and his eyes never drooped for sleep. He was dragging his little army out of the jaws of death.

By two o'clock he deemed it safe to halt for rest; but Colonel West must push forward with a squadron until he meets the wagon train—to hold it until the army arrives. Huge fires were built, and soldiers and captives gathered round to get relief from the cold. Horses and men welcomed the rest from the weary trail.

Promptly at daylight the march was resumed. There were no signs of pursuit. To the great joy of the commander, they came in sight of the wagon train by ten o'clock. Without pausing, teams were ordered hitched to the wagons, and all pressed forward. Not then, even, could the troops partake of food. By two o'clock they reached the place where the trail left the Washita river, and turned north towards the Antelope Hills. Here Custer ordered the army into camp.

While the troops were preparing hot coffee and roasting great chunks of the game that had been slaughtered on Wolf Creek, Custer sat down and wrote his report of the battle. As darkness came on that night, California Joe and Jack Corbin started across the snowy waste to carry the report to Camp Supply—to give Sheridan word of the great victory that had been won as Custer had promised.

Two days later the little army marched down the divide that separates Wolf and Beaver creeks—the divide that overlooks Camp Supply. The band was playing "Garry Owen" while Osage Indians dressed and painted in fantastic colors, chanted their war songs, interspersed with the shrill whoops of triumphant warriors. Following, rode the white scouts led by California Joe and Jack Corbin. Behind these came the captives under guard, all mounted on Indian ponies. Then came the troops formed in column of platoons.

Thus the conquering heroes marched before their chief, General Sheridan. As the officers rode by giving him the military salute with sabres, he returned their courtesy by lifting his cap.

Neither Sheridan nor Custer realized the far reaching effects of this battle of the Washita at the time. The Indians learned that the avenging hand of the whites could reach them in their most secluded places; that the weapons they had used against the whites so often could be turned against them; that there were "Big Chiefs" in the army of the whites who had the cunning of the Indians—and who were not

afraid. "Long Hair" was ever after held in fear and hatred by them, but he was ever respected.

Never again did all of the Southern tribes of the allied Plains Indians go on the warpath against the whites. However, the campaign of Sheridan and Custer had just begun—and that is another story.

—*Paul Nesbitt.*