CHAPTER XII.

THE WINTER OF 1876-7.

After leaving Red Cloud, Gen. Crook marched to Fort Fetterman and organized a new column for a winter expedition against the enemy. Subsequently, with a force of ten companies of cavalry under Col. Mackenzie, eleven companies of infantry and four of artillery under Lieut. Col. R. I. Dodge, and about 200 Indian allies, some of whom were friendly Sioux enlisted at Red Cloud Agency, Gen. Crook advanced to old Fort Reno, head of Powder River, where a cantonment had been built.

Hearing that a band of Cheyenne Indians were encamped among the Big Horn Mountains to the southwest, Gen. Crook, Nov. 23d, sent Col. Mackenzie with his cavalry and the Indian allies to hunt them up. At noon, Nov. 24th, after marching some 30 miles along the base of the mountains toward the Sioux Pass, Mackenzie met five of seven Indian scouts who had been sent ahead the evening previously. These scouts reported that they had discovered the camp of the Cheyennes at a point in the mountains about 20 miles distant, and that the other two scouts had remained to watch the camp.

A night's march was decided upon and, at sunset, after a halt of three hours, the command moved forward toward the village; but owing to the roughness
of the country, it was daylight when they reached the mouth of a canyon leading to and near the village. Through this canyon the column advanced, crossing several deep ravines, and when within a mile of the camp the order to charge was given. The Indian allies, who were in front, rushed forward howling and blowing on instruments, and some of them subsequently ascended the side of the canyon and occupied a high bluff opposite to and overlooking the village.

The surprise was nearly complete; but some of the Cheyennes, whom the scouts had reported as being engaged in a war dance, sounded the alarm on a drum, and began firing on the advancing column. The inhabitants immediately deserted their lodges, taking nothing but their weapons with them, and took refuge in a net-work of very difficult ravines beyond the upper end of the village. A brisk fight for about an hour ensued, after which skirmishing was kept up until night. The village of 173 lodges and their entire contents were destroyed, about 500 ponies were captured, and the bodies of 25 Indians killed in the engagement were found. Col. Mackenzie’s loss was Lieut. J. A. McKinney and six men killed, and twenty-two men wounded.

On the 4th of Dec., Gen. Crook left Fort Reno with his whole force, and moved down Little Powder River, intending to form at its junction with Powder River a supply camp from which to operate against the Indians. Subsequently, however, he crossed over to the Belle Fourche River, and, Dec. 22d, started for Fort Fetterman where he arrived Dec. 29th. The weather during this homeward march was at times intensely cold, and the men and horses suffered considerably thereby.
While Gen. Crook was thus looking for and harassing the Indians in the Powder River country, the isolated garrison of the Tongue River cantonment, further north, were not idle. An excursion northward in search of Sitting Bull was led by Col. Miles, the post-commander, and as reports as to the location of the Indians were conflicting and their trails obscured by snow, he divided his force, and sent Lieut. Frank D. Baldwin with three companies of the 5th Infantry to the north of the Missouri, while he examined the Mussel Shell and Dry Forks country.

On the 7th of Dec., Lieut. Baldwin discovered Sitting Bull’s band, and followed the Indians to the Missouri River, where they crossed and for a short time resisted the crossing of the troops. The Indians then retreated south, but were overtaken in the Redwood country and attacked, Dec. 18th. Their camp of 122 lodges was captured and burned with its contents, and 60 mules and horses were taken. The Indians escaped, but carried off little property except what they had on their backs. Lieut. Baldwin’s command marched on this expedition over 500 miles—walking on one occasion 73 miles in 48 hours—and endured the cold of a Montana winter with great fortitude.

A very unfortunate affair occurred at the Tongue River cantonment, within a few hundred yards of the parade-ground, Dec. 16th. The following is from Col. Miles’ report thereof:

"As five Minneconjou chiefs were coming in, bearing two white flags, followed by twenty or thirty other Indians, and were passing by the Crow Indian camp, the five in advance were surrounded by twelve Crows and instantly killed. The act was an unprovoked, cowardly murder. The Crows approached them in a friendly manner, said "How," shook hands with them, and when they were within their power and partly behind a large
wood pile, killed them in a most brutal manner. Upon hearing
the first shot, both officers and men rushed out and tried to save
the Minneconjous, but could not reach them in time. The Crows
were aware of the enormity of their crime, as they saw that the
Minneconjous had a flag of truce, and they were told to come
back. They were warned the day before against committing any
act of violence against messengers or other parties coming in
for friendly purposes. They tried to hide the flag of truce and,
taking advantage of the momentary excitement, while efforts
were being made to open communication and bring back the
others, who were following, and who became alarmed and fled to
the bluffs, the guilty Crow Indians jumped upon their ponies and
fled to their agency in Montana. The only thing that can be
said in defence of the Crows is, that a false report was made by
one of the Crow women that the Sioux had fired upon her, and
that within the last few months some of their number had lost
relatives killed by the Sioux in the vicinity of the Rosebud.
These Indians have claimed to be friends of the white man for
years, have been frequently in the Government employ, and were
brought down to fight such outlaws as Sitting Bull and Crazy
Horse.

"Those killed were believed to be Bull Eagle, Tall Bull, Red
——, Red Cloth, and one other prominent chief of the Sioux
nation. I am unable to state the object of Bull Eagle's coming,
but am satisfied he came with the best of motives. I can only
judge from the following:—When he surrendered on the Yellow-
stone, after the engagement on Cedar Creek, he was the first to
respond to my demands, and, I believe, was largely instrumental
in bringing his people to accept the terms of the Government.
When I had received five of the principal chiefs as hostages, and
was about parting with him, I told him, if he had any trouble in
going in, or his people hesitated or doubted that the Govern-
ment would deal fairly and justly with them, to come back to me,
and I would tell him what to do; that if he would come back to
my command, I would be glad to see him and, so long as he
complied with the orders of the Government, he could be assured
of the friendship of its officers. I could not but regard him with
respect, as he appeared in every sense a chief, and seemed to be
doing everything in his power for the good of his people, and
endeavoring to bring them to a more peaceful condition. He
appeared to have great confidence in what I told him; I gave him five days to obtain meat; during that time he lost three favorite ponies, which were brought to this place. During my absence he came in, bringing five horses that had strayed or been stolen from some citizens in the vicinity, and requested his own. He also inquired if he could send up to the Big Horn country for the remainder of his people, and take them in on the pass I had given him. He was informed by the commanding officer, Gen. Whistler (whom he had known for years before), that he could, and was told to send for them. Whether he had met with some trouble in taking his people in to their agency, and had returned, as I had told him, for directions, or had gathered up his people, and in passing had come in to apprise me of the fact, I know not; but there is every reason to believe that the above mentioned circumstances gave rise to his motives and prompted his actions.

"The Crows were immediately disarmed, twelve of their ponies taken from them, and other considerations, together with a letter explaining the whole affair, were sent to the people and friends of those killed, as an assurance that no white man had any part in the affair, and that we had no heart for such brutal and cowardly acts.

"It illustrates clearly the ferocious, savage instincts of even the best of these wild tribes, and the impossibility of their controlling their desire for revenge when it is aroused by the sight of their worst enemies, who have whipped them for years and driven them out of this country. Such acts are expected and considered justifiable among these two tribes of Indians, and it is to be hoped that the Sioux will understand that they fell into a camp of their ancient enemies, and did not reach the encampment of this command."

In January, 1877, Col. Miles with 350 of his troops marched southerly sixty miles up the Tongue River, and on the evening of the 7th discovered a large Indian village. Skirmishing ensued, and on the next day 1000 well-armed warriors appeared in front, and a battle was fought. The battle-ground was very rough and broken, and a heavy snow storm came on during the fight. The Indians fought with desperation; but
our troops had been so admirably arranged that they succeeded in gaining a decisive victory. The following is Col. Miles’ report of the affair:

“I have the honor to report that this command fought the hostile tribes of Cheyenne and Ogallala Sioux, under Crazy Horse, in skirmishes on the 1st, 3d, and 7th of January, and in a five hours’ engagement on the 8th inst. Their camp, consisting of some 500 lodges, extended three miles along the valley of Tongue River, below Hanging Woman’s Creek. They were driven through the canyons of the Wolf or Panther Mountains, in the direction of Big Horn Mountains. Their fighting strength outnumbered mine by two or three to one, but by taking advantage of the ground we had them at a disadvantage, and their loss is known to be heavy. Our loss is three killed and eight wounded. They fought entirely dismounted, and charged on foot to within fifty yards of Captain Casey’s line, but were taken in front and flank by Captain Butler’s and Lieutenant McDonald’s companies. They were whipped at every point and driven from the field, and pursued so far as my limited supplies and worn down animals would carry my command.”

The following additional particulars are derived from a letter to the Army and Navy Journal:

“On the 5th January, Indian signs grew thicker and thicker. Miles of hastily abandoned war lodges were passed. The country became very rough. The valley of the Tongue grew narrower, the stream more tortuous, and the hills on both sides loftier and more precipitous, until the valley shrank into a prolonged and winding canyon. At short distances, jutting bluffs made narrow passes which offered points of vantage to the savage enemy. The gorges of the Wolf Mountains had been reached.

“On the 6th, the march was through a large war camp, recently and hurriedly abandoned. Unusual heat was followed by snow. In the evening there was snow and hail driven by a cruel wind, and by 5 p.m. it was pitch dark. On the evening of the 7th, the scouts captured four Cheyenne squaws, a youth, and three young children. Two hundred Indians made a dash at the scouts, shot two of their horses and made a desperate effort to take them. Casey opened a musketry fire on the Indians, and darkness supervening, they withdrew.”
"Next morning the fight was renewed shortly after daylight. The Indians charged down the valley in large force, close up to the skirmish line, but failed to make any impression. They then turned their attention to the flanks, and began to swarm on the bluffs to the right. The action then became general. The Indians were in strong force, and tried every point of the line. The hills and woods resounded with their cries and the high-pitched voices of the chiefs giving their orders.

"It is the opinion of some who have had years of experience in Indian fighting, that there has rarely, if ever, been a fight before in which the Sioux and Cheyenne showed such determination and persistency, where they were finally defeated. They had chosen their ground; and it has since been learned that they expected to make another Custer slaughter. The Cheyenne captives, in the hands of the troops, sang songs of triumph during the entire fight, in anticipation of a speedy rescue and the savage orgies of a massacre."

In a complimentary order to his troops, dated Jan. 31st, Col. Miles says:—

"Here in the home of the hostile Sioux, this command, during the past three months, has marched 1200 miles and fought three engagements—besides affairs of less importance. * * * Fortunate indeed is the officer who commands men who will improvise boats of wagon beds, fearlessly dash out into the cold and turbid waters, and amid the treacherous current and floating ice, cross and recross the great Missouri; who will defy the elements on these bleak plains in a Montana winter; and who have in every field defeated superior numbers."

The dismounting and disarming policy was kept up at the Agencies through the winter. Several bands came in and surrendered—among them that of Red Horse, who had been actively hostile. This chief thus describes the engagement on the Little Big Horn. The "brave officer" referred to is said to be Capt. T. H. French, of Reno's battalion.

"On the morning of the attack, myself and several women were out about a mile from camp gathering wild turnips. Suddenly one of the women called my attention to a cloud of dust
rising in the neighborhood of the camp. I soon discovered that troops were making an attack. We ran for the camp, and when I got there I was sent for at once to come to the council-lodge. I found many of the council men already there when I arrived. We gave directions immediately for every Indian to get his horse and arms; for the women and children to mount the horses and get out of the way, and for the young men to go and meet the troops.

"Among the troops was an officer who rode a horse with four white feet. The Indians have fought a great many tribes of people, and very brave ones, too, but they all say that this man was the bravest man they had ever met. I don't know whether this man was General Custer or not. This officer wore a large-brimmed hat and buckskin coat. He alone saved his command a number of times by turning on his horse in the retreat. In speaking of him, the Indians call him the 'man who rode the horse with four white feet.'

"After driving this party back, the Indians corralled them on top of a high hill, and held them there until they saw that the women and children were in danger of being made prisoners by another party of troops which just then made its appearance below. The word passed among the Indians like a whirlwind, and they all started to attack the new party, leaving the troops on the hill. When we attacked the other party, we swarmed down on them and drove them in confusion. No prisoners were taken. All were killed. None were left alive even for a few minutes. These troopers used very few of their cartridges. I took a gun and a couple of belts off two dead men. Out of one belt two cartridges were gone; out of the other five.

"It was with captured ammunition and arms that we fought the other body of troops. If they had all remained together they would have hurt us very badly. The party we killed made five different starts. Once we charged right in until we scattered the whole of them, fighting among them hand to hand. One band of soldiers was right in the rear of us when they charged. We fell back, and stood for one moment facing each other. Then the Indians got courage and started for them in a solid body. We went but a little distance when we spread out and encircled them. All the time I could see their officers riding in front, and hear them shouting to their men. We finished up the party right there in the ravine.
"The troops up the river made their first attack, skirmishing a little while after the fight commenced with the other troops below the village. While the latter fight was going on we posted some Indians to prevent the other command from forming a junction. As soon as we had finished the fight we all went back to massacre the troops on the hill. After skirmishing around awhile we saw the walking soldiers coming. These new troops making their appearance was the saving of the others. An Indian started to go to Red Cloud Agency that day, and when a few miles from camp discovered dust rising. He turned back and reported that a large herd of buffalo was approaching the camp, and a short time after he reported this the camp was attacked by troops."

In February, Spotted Tail, with a body-guard of 200 warriors, started out to visit his roaming brethren as a peacemaker; and through his influence, or for other reasons, all the hostile bands, it is believed, except Sitting Bull’s, have accepted the terms offered by the Government and surrendered their arms and ponies. One band of about 1000 encircled the Indian camp at Spotted Tail Agency, April 16th, and after discharging their guns in the air by way of salutation, surrendered to Gen. Crook. Roman Nose, whose village was destroyed at Slim Buttes, indicated his desire for peace in a short speech and by laying his rifle at the feet of the General. Five days later, 500 Cheyennes, with 600 ponies, came into Red Cloud Agency. Their village near Sioux Pass had been destroyed in November, and they were in a destitute and pitiable condition.

Crazy Horse and his band of 900 Indians surrendered at Red Cloud, May 5th. They appeared to be in a comfortable condition and had 2000 ponies.

At the latest date, Sitting Bull and his band were reported moving toward Canada. If they return south, Col. Miles will be prepared to give them a suitable reception.