An Indian Attack and a Murder.

[Written for the News by John Nicholson.]

Stories of frontier life in the West are exceedingly popular. This is evinced by their frequent appearance in the public journals of the country. Many of them are wholly, and others largely, drawn from the imagination of their authors. The fictional aspect of these productions is apparent on account of an absence of consistency between their several features. Utah and contiguous regions could furnish abundant materials—in the shape of stirring incidents—for many volumes of story constructed exclusively from facts, of which scarcely a note is made for the purpose of perpetuating them.

This brings to mind some of the frontier experiences of William N. Fife, who was, for several years, marshal of Ogden City. He is the possessor of a splendid physique—brawny, broad-shouldered and muscular—and is a stringer to the accusation of fear. In February, 1881, he emigrated to Cochise Co., southeastern Arizona, where he established a ranch close to the Chiricahua Mountains. He took with him part of his family, including his wife Diana, a large, fine looking woman, notable among her friends for her kindness of heart and and wholesomed hospitality.

The location of the ranch is about seventy miles from, Sonora, Old Mexico, and no very great distance from New Mexico. The region was thinly populated, and there was scarcely an inhabited spot within sight of the Fife homestead. The family were in an exposed position, and consequently in imminent danger from depredations of renegade Apache Indians, who soon began to make raids on the stock.

In February, 1882, Young John Fife, at that time little more than a lad, made a customary trip into the mountains to procure timber. He was accompanied by two hired men, both of them ex-soldiers. They entered a defile with their teams and were in the act of preparing to go to work when something startling occurred. The sound of several shots rung out in the forest, and the three woodmen soon comprehended that they were being attacked by a gang of naked Apaches, who had taken positions behind adjacent trees and opened a fusilade upon them. Then ensued a determined fight. The Fife men seized their rifles and replied in the savages with the courage common in western frontiersmen. The struggle was brief as far as related to John's companions, who were, in the early stage of the attack, both shot down and almost immediately expired.

Young Fife being left alone in such an unequal struggle, was in extreme peril. He saw that his chances of escaping a violent death were overwhelmingly against him, but he never for an instant lost self control. He made a dash for a cluster of large trees on the face of a slope and managed to make his extemporized fortification more secure by rapidly filling in some openings with smaller stones.

The Indians changed their position with a view to commanding the young man's miniature fortress, but every time one of the attacking party showed himself, crack went John's rifle, and his assailants soon learned the necessity of caution. Meanwhile they kept up an incessant fire, and John's position became, if possible, gradually worse. A bullet entered his thigh and ploughed through the flesh lengthwise, and another made an ugly wound in his wrist and, to add to the peril of his situation, he soon discovered that his ammunition was nearly exhausted.

A few more shots and he would be at the mercy of the savages. Finally his last shot was fired and he expected that the band would at once rush in and finish him in short order.

The Indians now changed their tactics. John's rifle being silent, they emerged from hiding, but they did not attempt to carry the little fort by storm. It was evident they thought that John was reserving a few shots for close quarters. Anyway they collected a large amount of brush, which they piled all around the hiding place of the young man at bay and set it on fire, expecting that he would come out and they could then easily shoot him down.

To say that John was in a hot place would be putting it mildly. He was alone in the centre of a circle of fire. The flames roared and crackled, being fanned by a rising breeze. He was lying at full length on the ground, and the fire reached his feet and burned the heel of his boot. His sensations were in unison with the terrible character of the situation. The last ray of hope seemed to have about taken flight, when the breeze stiffened and blew the smoke of the encircling fire down the canyon, suddenly he was seized with an impulse, which occurred as if an audible voice had suggested it. Acting upon it he arose, dashed through the flames and, keeping in the line of the smoke, ran down the canyon. He felt that it was a race for life, and the thought, notwithstanding his wounded thigh, gave impetus to his speed. He never stopped until he had covered a distance of three miles, when he reached a sumcier completely exhausted from loss of blood, his tremendous exertion and the tension of his feelings during the ordeal through which he had passed.

The people at the sumcier took care of the young man for the time being, and sent a messenger to his father to inform him of what had occurred.

The manner of young Fife's escape was marvelous, but it seems that the Apaches who were waiting eagerly to murder him the moment he should emerge from his hiding place, made no pursuit of him. One of the renegades of the gang afterwards told one of General Crook's Indian scouts the reason for their not doing so. They saw the lad dimly as he passed through the smoke, but were seized with fear and fell back, believing the figure to be his ghost.

It appeared from evidence which afterwards came to light that two of Apaches were killed in the attack and several others wounded.

When the elder Fife learned that his two hired men had been killed, his son wounded and his horses and harness stolen by the wild Apaches, he rode in haste to Fort Bowie. A company of cavalry was at once dispatched in pursuit of the Indians, in the hope of recovering the stolen property. Mr. Fife accompanied the troops, who followed the marauders up to the Mexican line, over which the soldiers could not pass. The savages were, however, encountered by a body of Mexican troops, and in the fight that ensued a number were killed on both sides.

A date at the Fife ranch ran along with comparative smoothness until 1884. On the 15th of September of that year Mr. Fife had occasion to go to Tombstone on business. He gave his two sons strict instructions to stay around the house during his absence. This direction was given with a view to the protection of Mrs. Fife and daughter, the latter a fine comely girl of sixteen. After his departure, however, the boys thought there would be no harm in putting in some time in cutting hay on a field only a short distance from the dwelling.

There was another male member of the establishment, a Mexican, who had been hired to cut wood in an adjacent clump of timber. On this particular day this man, an honest, faithful fellow, was engaged in that kind of labor.

Toward noon a Mexican of brutal and forbidding aspect, entered the house. He was a large man. His face was broad, cheek bones high, forehead low and abruptly sloping, while his small dull eyes were restless, nervously glancing from one object to another; just such a fellow as one would imagine capable of any crime in the calendar, including murder. Doubtless this impression was made by him upon Mrs. Fife and her daughter, the only inmates of the house at the time he entered it. Their sentiment of dread was doubtless heightened by the fact that his waist was encircled by a belt filled with cartridges and a large revolver was suspended from it.

The half-Mexican is usually suave. Even the criminal class comes within this rule. But this burly fellow was an exaggerated exception. Addressing the mistress of the establishment, he said:

"Give me a melon."

The demand was complied with. After eating a part of the article he announced that he must be supplied with dinner. This desire was also obeyed. The conversation in the meantime conducted was meagre and disunitory. The meal concluded the stranger made a remark about something outside the house and told Mrs. Fife to look through the window at it. This she did, when the villian suddenly whipped out his pistol, took deliberate aim and sent a bullet through the body of the unfortunate woman, who fell to the floor mortally wounded.

Miss Aggie, whose heart was filled with grief and anger, took in the full weight of the tragedy. She leaped toward her beloved mother, evidently without a thought of her own danger. She endeavored to raise her prostrate and bleeding form. Then it flashed into her mind that the murderer must be disposed of, and the duress of her character asserted itself. The assassin emptied his pistol three times at the heroine girl, but the weapon missed fire. She bounced into the adjoining room and with almost supernatural rapidity snatched her father's gun from its accustomed place, but could not at the moment find the cartridges. In an instant, gun in hand, she was at the door of the apartment which was the scene of the murder.

The hired man who had been chopping timber had heard the shot which struck down Mrs. Fife. Fearing something was wrong he rushed to the house and entered at the same moment that Aggie appeared in the partition doorway. The scene told its own story, as the faithful fellow leaped toward the murderer had dealt him a stunning blow with his fist, which felled him to the floor. He then threw himself upon the prostrate form of the assassin, wrenched the pistol from his grasp, and, unclasping the cartridge belt also took possession of that. When the hired man arose to his feet the murderer sprang up and ran out through the back door and reached the timber before he could be captured.

The hired man notified the two boys (John and Walter) the murder of their mother, and the scene in that household may be partially imagined, but could not be adequately described. The Mexican, who was a kind hearted man, joined in the general grief. He had become greatly attached to the family, and held its head in special esteem.

Mr. Fife transacted the business which took him to Tombstone, and while there he felt great depression of spirit. He could not rid himself of the idea that something was wrong at home. Impelled by this sentiment he started on his return in the evening, traveled the whole of the night, and arrived at the ranch during the following day—Sept. 16th. When within a quarter of a mile from the house he was met by his hired man, who showed him the bullet and pistol of the murderer. The Mexican told the tale of the tragedy between his sobs, while the tears streamed down his face.

Mr. Fife's frame was seized by a tumult of emotions which came near prostrating him. But his determination and native activity asserted their sway.

Within an incredibly brief time he notified the people in a radius of thirty miles of the scene of the murder of what had occurred. At once all that region was in a state of commotion and ranchers and miners, including all the officers and leading men of the county, were soon riding rapidly in the direction of the Fife homestead. A posse was thus organized, and the fugitive was captured at a point in the forest about nine miles from the scene of his crime. Had the pursuit been delayed but a short time longer the murderer would have escaped to the mountains and his arrest would have been difficult and doubtful.

He was taken to the place where he committed the deed. By this time nearly one hundred and fifty men had assembled. It was a large and the determined body, resolved that a complete end of the whole affair should be made of the murderer. The latter willed and boasted that his extremities met with no response. Mr. Fife, addressing him several times, said: "Why did you kill my wife?" but he made no reply. The committee had unanimously decided the culprit should die, by hanging, and that his body should remain suspended between earth and sky for three days and three nights, as an object lesson and warning to all criminals of his class.

The fatal noose was adjusted around the doomed man's neck. He was placed upon a horse and led under a large white oak tree, over a limb of which the rope was thrown. At a given signal the cord was jerked with tremendous vigor and the murderer of Mrs. Fife died without a struggle. According to the decree of the committee the body hung in midair the specified time and at the end of the third day was buried not far from the spot where he committed the dastardly crime which forfeited his own life.

The funeral of Mrs. Fife was attended by the people of the surrounding country who, on the news of her sad fate had reached. All classes sought to express, in various ways, their sympathy for the family and respect for the memory of the good woman who was assassinated in cold blood while her murderer was partaking of her hospitality, which was proverbial among all her friends and acquaintances.

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