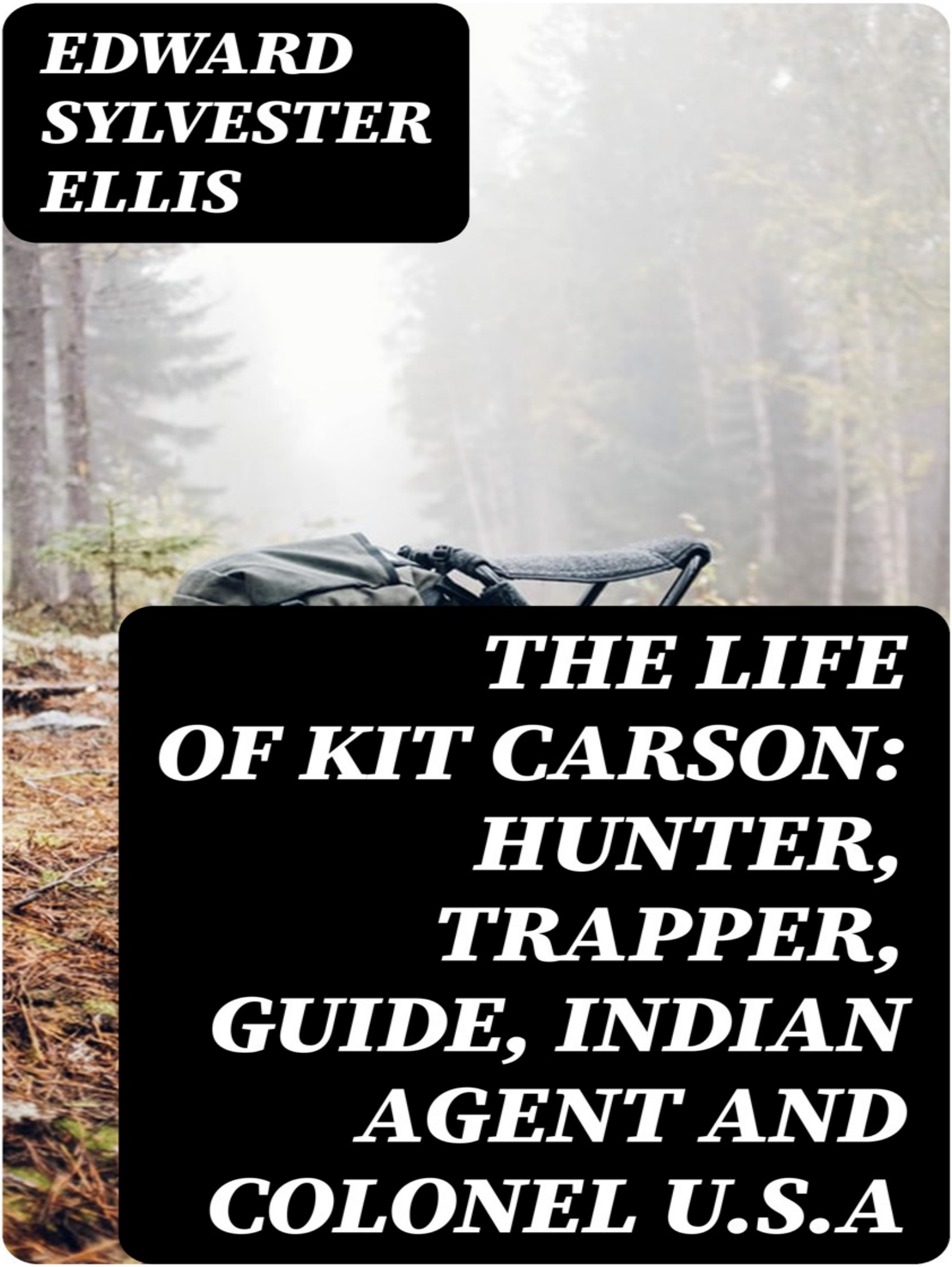
EDWARD SYLVESTER ELLIS



THE LIFE OF KIT CARSON: HUNTER, TRAPPER, GUIDE, INDIAN AGENT AND COLONEL U.S.A

Edward Sylvester Ellis

The Life of Kit Carson: Hunter, Trapper, Guide, Indian Agent and Colonel U.S.A

EAN 8596547336488

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Table of Contents

Christopher Carson, or as he was familiarly called, Kit Carson, was a man whose real worth was understood only by those with whom he was associated or who closely studied his character. He was more than hunter, trapper, guide, Indian agent and Colonel in the United States Army. He possessed in a marked degree those mental and moral qualities which would have made him prominent in whatever pursuit or profession he engaged.

His lot was cast on the extreme western frontier, where, when but a youth, he earned the respect of the tough and frequently lawless men with whom he came in contact. Integrity, bravery, loyalty to friends, marvelous quickness in making right decisions, in crisis of danger, consummate knowledge of woodcraft, a leadership as skilful as it was daring; all these were distinguishing traits in the composition of Carson and were the foundations of the broader fame which he acquired as the friend and invaluable counselor of Fremont, the Pathfinder, in his expeditions across the Rocky Mountains.

Father Kit, as he came to be known among the Indians, risked his life scores of times for those who needed, but had no special claim upon his services. The red men were quick to learn that he always spoke with a "single tongue," and that he was their unselfish friend. He went among his hostiles when no one of his race dare follow him; he averted more than one outbreak; he secured that which is impossible to secure—justice for the Indian—and his work

from the time when a mere boy he left his native Kentucky, was always well done. His memory will forever remain fragrant with those who appreciate true manhood and an unswerving devotion to the good of those among whom he lived and died.

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

Kit Carson's Youth—His Visit to New Mexico—Acts as Interpreter and in
Various Other Employments—Joins a Party of Trappers and Engages in a
Fight with Indians—Visits the Sacramento Valley.

"Kit Carson," the most famous hunter, scout and guide ever known in this country, was a native of Kentucky, the scene of the principal exploits of Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, the Wetzel brothers and other heroic pioneers whose names are identified with the history of the settlement of the West.

Christopher Carson was born in Madison county, December 24, 1809, and, while he was still an infant, his father removed to Central Missouri, which at that day was known as Upper Louisiana. It was an immense wilderness, sparsely settled and abounding with wild animals and treacherous Indians. The father of Carson, like most of the early pioneers, divided his time between cultivating the land and hunting the game in the forests. His house was made strong and was pierced with loopholes, so as to serve him in his defence against the red men that were likely to attack him and his family at any hour of the day or night. In such a school was trained the wonderful scout, hunter and guide.

No advantages in the way of a common school education were within reach of the youth situated as was Kit Carson. It is to be believed, however, that under the tutelage of his father and mother, he picked up a fair knowledge of the

rudimentary branches, for his attainments in that respect were above the majority of those with whom he was associated in after life.

While a mere stripling, Kit became known as one of the most skilful rifle shots in that section of Missouri which produced some of the finest marksmen in the world. It was inevitable that he should form a passion for the woods, in which, like the great Boone, he would have been happy to wander for days and weeks at a time.

When fifteen years old, he was apprenticed to a saddler, where he stayed two years. At the end of that time, however, the confinement had become so irksome that he could stand it no longer. He left the shop and joined a company of traders, preparing to start for Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, one of the most interesting towns in the southwest. The majority of its population are of Spanish and Mexican origin and speak Spanish. It is the centre of supplies for the surrounding country, and is often a scene of great activity. It stands on a plateau, more than a mile above the sea level, with another snow capped mountain rising a mile higher. The climate is delightful and the supply of water from the springs and mountains is of the finest quality.

Santa Fe, when first visited by the Spaniards in 1542, was a populous Indian pueblo. It has been the capital of New Mexico for nearly two hundred and fifty years. The houses of the ancient town are made of adobe, one story high, and the streets are unpaved, narrow, crooked and ill looking. The inhabitants are of a low order, scarcely entitled to be ranked above the half civilized, though of late years the infusion of

western life and rugged civilization has given an impetus and character to the place for which, through three centuries, it waited in vain.

The company to which young Kit Carson attached himself, was strongly armed and it made the perilous journey, across rivers, mountains and prairies, through a country infested with fierce Indians, without the loss of one of their number. This immunity was due to their vigilance and knowledge of the ways of the hostiles who, it may be said, were on all sides, from the beginning to the end of their journey.

After reaching Santa Fe, Carson left the party and went to Taos, a small station to the north of Santa Fe. There he stayed through the winter of 1826-27, at the home of a veteran pioneer, from whom he gained not only a valuable knowledge of the country and its people, but became familiar with the Spanish language—an attainment which proved invaluable to him in after years. In the spring, he joined a party which set out for Missouri, but before reaching its destination, another company of traders were met on their way to Santa Fe. Young Carson joined them, and some days later was back again in the quaint old capital of New Mexico.

The youth's engagement ended with his arrival in the town, but there was nothing indolent in the nature of Carson, who immediately engaged himself as teamster to a company about to start to El Paso, on the Rio Grande, near the frontier of New Mexico. He did not stay long before drifting back to Santa Fe, and finally to Taos, where he hired out as a cook during the following winter, but had not

wrought long, when a wealthy trader, learning how well Carson understood the Spanish language, engaged him as interpreter.

This duty compelled the youth to make another long journey to El Paso and Chihuahua, the latter being the capital of the province of the same name, and another of those ancient towns whose history forms one of the most interesting features of the country. It was founded in 1691 and a quarter of a century later, when the adjoining silver mines were in full operation, had a population of 70,000, though today it has scarcely a fifth of that number.

The position of interpreter was more dignified than any yet held by Carson, and it was at his command, as long as he chose to hold it; but to one of his restless nature it soon grew monotonous and he threw it up, making his way once more to Taos. The employment most congenial to Carson's nature, and the one which he had been seeking ever since he left home, was that of hunter and trapper. The scarred veterans whom he met in the frontier and frontier posts gave him many accounts of their trapping experiences among the mountains and in the gloomy fastnesses where, while they hunted the bear, deer, beaver and other animals, the wild Indian hunted them.

Carson had been in Taos a short time only when he gained the opportunity for which he was searching. A party of trappers in the employ of Kit's old friend had just come to Taos, having been driven from their trapping grounds by the Indians. The employer set about raising a party strong enough to return to the trapping grounds, chastise the hostiles and resume business. Knowing the skill and bravery

of the young Kentuckian, the gentleman made him an offer to join the party and Kit eagerly accepted it.

The Mexicans have never been particularly friendly toward their neighbors north of the Rio Grande, and at that time a very strict law was in force which forbade the issuance of any license to American citizens to trap within Mexican territory. The company which mounted their horses and rode out of Taos gave the authorities to understand that their errand was simply to chastise the red men, whereas their real purpose was to engage in trapping. With a view of misleading the officers, they took a roundabout route which delayed their arrival in the section. Nevertheless, the hunters were desirous of punishing the Indians who had taken such liberties with the small party that preceded them. On one of the tributaries of the Gila, the trappers came upon the identical band whom they attacked with such fierceness that more than a dozen were killed and the rest put to flight. The fight was a desperate one, but young as Carson was, he acquitted himself in a manner which won the warmest praise of those with him. He was unquestionably daring, skilful and sagacious, and was certain, if his life was spared, to become one of the most valuable members of the party.

Having driven the savages away, the Americans began or rather resumed their regular business of trapping. The beavers were so abundant that they met with great success. When the rodents seemed to diminish in number, the hunters shifted their quarters, pursuing their profession along the numerous streams until it was decided to divide into two parties, one of which returned to New Mexico, while

the other pushed on toward the Sacramento Valley in California. Carson accompanied the latter, entering the region at that early day when no white man dreamed of the vast wealth of gold and precious metals which so crowded her soil and river beds that the wonder is the gleaming particles had not been detected many years before; but, as the reader knows, they lay quietly at rest until that eventful day in 1848, when the secret was revealed by Captain Sutter's raceway and the frantic multitudes flocked thither from the four quarters of the earth.

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

California—Sufferings of the Hunters—The Mission of San Gabriel—The
Hudson Bay Trappers—Characteristics of Carson—He Leads the Party which
Captures an Indian Village and Secures some Criminals.

California, one of the most magnificent regions of the earth, with its amazing mineral wealth, its rich soil and "glorious climate," has its belts of sterility and desolation, where the bones of many a traveller and animal lie bleaching in the sun, just as they fell years ago, when the wretched victim sank down and perished for want of food and water.

The hunting party to which Carson was attached numbered eighteen, and they entered one of those forbidding wastes, where they suffered intensely. All their skill in the use of the rifle was of no avail, when there was no game to shoot and it was not long before they were forced to live on horse flesh to escape starvation. This, however, was not so trying as might be supposed, provided it did not last until the entire party were dismounted.

Fortunately, in their straits, they encountered a party of Mohave Indians, who sold them enough food to remove all danger. These Indians form a part of the Yuma nation of the Pima family, and now make their home on the Mohave and Colorado rivers in Arizona. They are tall, well formed, warlike and industrious cultivators of the soil. Had they chosen to attack the hunters, it would have gone ill with the

whites, but the latter showed commendable prudence which might have served as a model to the hundreds who came after them, when they gained the good will of the red men.

Extricating themselves from the dangerous stretch of country, the trappers turned westward until they reached the mission of San Gabriel, one of those extensive establishments formed by the Roman Catholic clergy a hundred years ago. There were over a score, San Diego being the oldest. Each mission had its priests, a few Spanish or Mexican soldiers, and scores, hundreds and sometimes thousands of Indian converts who received a scant support and some religious instruction.

The Mission of San Gabriel was by no means the largest in California, and yet at the time of Carson's visit it owned 70,000 head of cattle, 200 horses, 3,000 mares, hundreds of mules, oxen and sheep, while the vineyards produced 600 barrels of wine every year.

Those old sovereigns of the soil dispensed hospitality without stint to all who knocked at their gates. When the trappers caught sight of the Mission, as they rode out from the wilderness, they knew what awaited them in the way of entertainment. They were treated right royally, but remained only one day.

Not far away they reached another Mission of less extent than the former, but, without halt, they pressed steadily forward toward the Sacramento River. The character of the section changed altogether. It was exceedingly fertile and game was so abundant that they feasted to their heart's content. When fully rested, they proceeded to the San Joaquin river down which they began trapping.

While thus employed, they were surprised to discover signs of another trapping party near them. They wondered where they came from and it did not take them long to learn that their neighbors were a company of trappers belonging to the Hudson Bay Company—that enormous corporation, founded two centuries before, whose agents and employees tramp over British America, far to the northward of the frozen circle, and until a recent date hunted through Oregon.

The two parties were rivals in business, but they showed excellent sense by meeting on good terms and treating each other as friends. They trapped near each other until they came to the Sacramento once more, when they parted company. The Hudson Bay trappers started for the Columbia River, while the one to which Carson was attached went into camp where they were for the rest of the summer. With the approach of warm weather the trapping season ended and they devoted themselves to hunting and making ready for cold weather.

It will be borne in mind that Kit Carson was still a youth, not having reached his majority. He was of short, compact stature, no more than five feet, six inches tall, with light brown hair, gray eyes, large head, high forehead, broad shoulders, full chest, strong and possessing remarkable activity. Even at that early age, he had impressed the veteran hunters and trappers around him as one possessing such remarkable abilities, that, if his life was spared, he was certain to become a man of mark. If we should attempt to specify the particular excellencies in which he surpassed those around him, it would be said that while Carson was

one of the most fearless men who lived, yet he possessed splendid judgment. He seemed to know instinctively what could be accomplished by himself and friends in positions of extreme peril, and he saw on the moment precisely how to do that which often was impossible to others.

His knowledge of woodcraft and the peculiarities of the savage tribes around him was as perfect as it could be. He was a matchless hunter, and no man could handle a rifle with greater skill. The wilderness, the mountains, the Indians, the wild animals—these constituted the sphere in which nature intended Kit Carson should move and serve his fellow men as no one before or after him has done.

Added to these extraordinary qualifications, was the crowning one of all—modesty. Alas, how often transcendent merit is made repelling by overweening conceit. Kit Carson would have given his life before he would have travelled through the eastern cities, with his long hair dangling about his shoulders, his clothing bristling with pistols and knives, while he strutted on the mimic stage as a representative of the untamed civilization of the great west.

Carson was a superior hunter when a boy in Missouri, and the experience gained among the experienced hunters and trappers, soon caused him to become noted by those who had fought red men, trapped beaver and shot grizzly bears before he was born. And yet it could not have been that alone: it must have been his superior mental capacity which caused those heroes of a hundred perils to turn instinctively to him for counsel and guidance in situations of extreme peril. Among them all was no one with such masterful resources in that respect as he.

While the trappers were encamped at this place, a messenger visited them from the Mission of San Rafael, with a request that they would help chastise a party of Indians, who, after committing some outrages at the Mission, had fled to an Indian village. When a demand was made for the surrender of the refugees, the villagers not only refused to give them up, but attacked the party and drove them off. Appreciating the importance of upholding their authority, the priests sent to the trappers for assistance in bringing the guilty ones and their friends to terms.

As soon as the request was made known, Carson and eleven of his companions volunteered to help their visitors. Thus reinforced, the company from the Mission set out again for the Indian village.

Nothing can attest more strongly the skill and bravery of Kit Carson, than the fact that he was at once selected to lead the party on its dangerous errand. While he was as modest as a woman and with a voice as gentle and persuasive, he could not be ignorant of his own capacities, and he assumed charge without any pretense of unfitness.

It is easy to understand the great care required in this expedition, for the warriors in the village, having beaten off their assailants, naturally looked for their return with reinforcements, and, in order to insure success, it was necessary that the attack should be a surprise.

Having brought his men quite close to the village unperceived, Kit gave the signal and the whole company swept through the place like a cyclone. There were a few minutes of terrific fighting, during which a score of warriors were killed, and then the entire village was captured. Carson

as the leader of the assailants, demanded the surrender of the offenders against the Mission. Not daring to disobey such a summons, they were delivered up to the authorities, and Carson, seeing nothing more to do for his friends, returned with his companions to camp and resumed hunting and their preparations for cold weather.

CHAPTER III.

Table of Contents

The Trapper's Life—Indian Horse Thieves—Carson's Skilful Pursuit
and Surprise of the Savages—Arrival at Los Angeles—Trouble with the
Authorities—A Singular Escape.

The trappers being in the heart of the Indian country, with hostile on every hand, were cautious in all their movements. When one of the grizzled hunters in the depths of the wilderness fired his gun at some deer, antelope or bear, he hastily reloaded his rifle, listening meanwhile for sounds of the stealthy footprints of his enemy. He knew not when the treacherous shot would be sent from behind the rock or clump of bushes, but he had learned long before, that, when he penetrated the western wilds and followed the calling of trapper, he took his life in his hands and he was ready to "go under," whenever the fate so decreed.

The most flagrant crime on the frontier is horse stealing. He who shoots one of his fellow men has a chance of escaping punishment almost as good as that afforded in civilized communities, but if he steals a horse and is caught, his case is hopeless. It may be said that the value of the animal to the hunter or trapper is beyond all calculation, and, inasmuch as the red man is equally appreciative, Carson always warned his friends to be on the watch against the dusky thieves. Sentinels were on guard while others slept, but the very calamity against which they thus sought to protect themselves overtook them.

One dark night a number of Indians stole by the sentinels and before their presence was discovered, drove off the major part of the horses. In the morning, when the alarming truth became known, the employer of the trappers asked Carson to take twelve of the men and do his utmost to recover those that were stolen. Carson assented at once, and, in his quiet, self possessed fashion, collected his comrades who were speedily in the saddle and galloping along the trail of the thieves.

It may strike the reader that an offhand statement like the foregoing relates to a proceeding of no special difficulty or peril. A party of brave white men were pursuing a company of Indian horse thieves and the chances of escape and capture were about equal. Thus the matter presents itself to the ordinary spectator, whereas the truth was far different.

In the first place, the savages, being as well mounted as their pursuers, were sure to maintain a swift pace, so long as they believed any danger threatened. They would keep a keen watch of the back trail and would be quick to detect the approach of enemies. If pressed hard, they would act as the Apaches and Comanches do, when they find the United States troops at their heels—break up in so many small parties that it is impossible to follow them.

First of all, therefore, Carson had two achievements before him—and the accomplishment of either seemed to render the other impossible: he must travel at a faster rate than the thieves, and, at the same time keep them in ignorance of his pursuit. It is on such occasions that a man's woodcraft and knowledge of the country serve him so well.

Many a time, during the career of Kit Carson, did he outwit the red men and white criminals, not by galloping along with his eye upon their footprints, but by reasoning out with unerring skill, the destination or refuge which the criminals had in mind. Having settled that all important question, he aimed at the same point and frequently reached it first. Thus it came about that often the fugitive, while hurrying along and glancing furtively behind him, suddenly found himself face to face with his pursuer, whose acquaintance with the country enabled him to find the shorter route.

It took Carson only a few minutes to satisfy himself that the criminals were heading for the Sierra Nevada Mountains, but, inasmuch as they were following a direct course, he could only take their trail. Where there were so many animals in flight, it was impossible to hide their tracks and the thieves made no attempt to do so. They struck the horses into a sweeping gallop, which with a few interruptions they maintained until they were a hundred miles from the camp of the white men and among the fastnesses of the Sierras.

Then it was the red men made a careful survey of the trail behind them. The black penetrating eyes scanned the country with a piercing keenness which it would seem shut out all possibility of concealment. Nowhere could they detect the faint smoke climbing toward the sky from among the trees nor could they gain sight of the line of horsemen winding around the rocks in the distance. Nothing resembling a human being was visible. Surely they were warranted in believing themselves perfectly secure.

Such being their conclusion, they prepared for a great feast. Six of the stolen horses were killed and the red men became as ardent hipophagi as was the club of advanced Parisians a short time ago. The roasted meat tasted as fine to them as though it was the choicest slices from the bison or deer, and they ate and frolicked like so many children let loose for a holiday.

But in the midst of their feast was heard a series of frightful yells and whoops. The appalled Indians had scarcely time to turn their eyes when a dozen horsemen, that seemed to have risen from the very ground, thundered down upon them. Carson and his men had overtaken the thieves and they now swept down upon them with resistless fury. The fight was as short as it was fierce. The red men fell on the right and left, and those who escaped the wrath of the trappers, scattered and ran as if a hundred bomb shells were exploding around them. Every horse stolen (except the six killed for the feast) were recovered and Carson took them back to camp without the loss of a man.

The hunters stayed until early autumn, when their employer decided to go to New Mexico. The journey led for a great portion of the way through a country over which they had travelled, and which therefore was familiar to them. After halting a brief while at the Mission of San Fernando, they arrived at Los Angeles, which like the rest of the country as the reader knows, belonged to Mexico. As it was apparent that the horsemen were hunters and trappers, the authorities demanded their written license to pursue their calling in Mexican territory. Such was the law and the officials were warranted in making the demand, but it need

not be said that the party were compelled to admit they had nothing of the kind in their possession.

The authorities thereupon determined to arrest the hunters, but knowing their desperate nature, hesitated as to the safe means of doing so. They finally hit upon a rather ingenious, though unfair means of disarming the white men: they began giving them "fire water" to drink, refusing to accept pay therefor. Those who lead lives of hardship and peril are generally fond of such indulgence, and, though the trappers could not fail to understand the purpose of the Mexicans, and though they knew the disastrous consequences of giving away to temptation, they yielded and took in their mouths the enemy which stole away their brains.

The employer became alarmed and saw that something must be done at once or everything would be lost. Carson had been too wise to fall into the snare, and he turned to him.

"Take three of the soberest men," said he, "and the loose animals and camp equipage and push out of the place. I will join you as soon as I can, but you mustn't linger for me. If I fail to join you, hasten to New Mexico and make known that I and the rest of my men have been massacred."

These instructions were definite and they showed the gravity of the situation. Carson did as directed, while the employer gave his attention to the rest of the men. It was high time that he did so, for they were fast succumbing to their appetites. Despite the indignant protests and efforts of the employer they would have undoubtedly fallen victims but for an unlooked for occurrence.

One of the trappers who was so much under the influence of liquor as to become reckless, fired upon and slightly wounded a native of the place. The act threw the Mexicans into a panic of terror, and they fled from the presence of the dreaded Americans who seemed eager for any sanguinary deed.

The employer was wise enough to take advantage of the occurrence and he succeeded, after much labor, in getting his half intoxicated men together and out of the place. The horses were forced to their utmost and the same night they overtook Carson and his anxious companions. All danger from that source was ended.

CHAPTER IV.

Table of Contents

An Alarming Visit—Carson's Resources—On the Colorado and
Gila—Capturing a Herd of Horses and Mules—The Raiders—Turning the
Tables—Caching their Peltries—Return to Santa Fe—Carson Goes upon
a Second Trapping Expedition—Hunting with an Old Mountaineer—A Visit
from Crow Indians.

A week or more later, the trappers again reached the Colorado River. They had traveled at a leisurely pace and once more they went into camp, where they were familiar with the country. Men leading such lives as they, were accustomed to all kinds of surprises, but it may be doubted whether the trappers were more amazed in all their existence than when five hundred Indian warriors made their appearance and with signs of friendship overran the camp before they could be prevented or checked.

The hunters did not know what to make of the proceeding, and looked to Carson for advice. He had already discovered that the situation was one of the gravest danger. Despite the professions of friendship, Kit saw that each warrior had his weapons under his dress, where he hoped they were not noticed by the whites. Still worse, most of the hunters were absent visiting their traps, only Kit and a few of his companions being in camp. The occasion was where it