

CHAPTER IX.

THE BEN WRIGHT MASSACRE.

This so-called massacre has been the source of endless controversy, and during the progress of the Modoc war afforded Eastern sentimentalists grounds for shedding crocodile tears in profusion. They found in this story ample grounds for justification of the foul butchery of General Canby and the Peace Commission. According to their view, these "poor persecuted people" were merely paying the white man back in his own coin, and a lot more such rot.

According to this story, Ben Wright had proposed a treaty and while the Indians were feasting, all unconscious of intended harm, were set upon and ninety of their warriors murdered in cold blood. Captain Jack's father, they said, was among the victims, and it was to avenge this wrong that Canby and the Peace Commission were murdered under a flag of truce. The story was without other foundation than the bloody battle fought by Ben Wright and his Yreka volunteers with the Modoc tribe during the fall of 1852. I will here give the true story as detailed to me by Frank Riddle, one of Ben Wright's men, and which I believe is absolutely true.

In the fall of 1852 Ben Wright raised a company of thirty-six men around Yreka and went out to guard the immigrants through the country of the Modocs. The company arrived in time and safely escorted all trains past the danger point. The lesson taught the year before by Captain Miller had instilled into the savage heart a wholesome fear

of the white man's rifle and revolver. They dared not attack the ever-watchful white men openly, but determined to effect by strategy what they dared not attempt in the open field. Accordingly they sent a messenger to Wright proposing a treaty. The messenger, among other things, told Wright that they held two captive white girls, which they wished to surrender as an evidence of good faith. Ben Wright was anxious to rescue the girls and readily consented to a treaty, and promised to kill a beef and have a feast. The Indians in considerable numbers came to the camp, headed by the chief. Wright was then camped on the peninsula, a place admirably adapted to guard against surprise. A feast was had and all went well. The white girls were to be surrendered three days later at the mouth of Lost river, to which place the white men moved, followed by the Indians. The latter were very friendly and exerted themselves to win the confidence of the white men. Three days passed but no white girls showed up. The chief assured Wright that they were coming, that they were a long way off and would be on hand two days later. In the meantime the watchful white men observed that the numbers of the Indians had more than doubled and more and more were coming with each succeeding day. They became suspicious and their suspicions ripened into a certainty that treachery was meditated. At the expiration of the two days Ben Wright informed his men of his plans. He was satisfied that the girls would never be surrendered, but that the Indians, now outnumbering them five to one, intended a massacre. Accordingly he told his men to quietly make ready; that he was going to the chief and if he refused to surrender the girls he would kill him then and there. He warned his men to pay no attention to him, that he would

make his way out as best he could; that they must open fire at the instant his pistol rang out; that they were in a desperate situation and must resort to desperate measures or all would be butchered then and there.

The morning was cool, Riddle said, and Ben Wright covered himself with a blanket, his head passing through a hole in the middle, as was the custom of the time, the blanket answering the place of an overcoat. Underneath the blanket he carried a revolver in each hand. He went directly to the chief and demanded that he make his promises good. The chief told him plainly, insolently, that he would not do so, and never intended to do so; that he had men enough to kill the white men and that they were now in his power. But the wily old chief little dreamed of the desperate valor of the man before him, for no sooner had the chief's defy passed his lips than Ben Wright shot him dead. Then firing right and left as he ran, he made his escape out of the Indian camp. Meanwhile, as the first shot rang out from Wright's pistol his men opened a deadly fire with their rifles. For an instant, Riddle said, the savages formed a line and sent a shower of arrows over their heads, but they aimed too high and only one or two were slightly wounded. Dropping their rifles, Wright's men charged, revolvers in hand. This was too much for savage valor and what were left fled in terror. It was now no longer a battle. The savages were searched out from among the sage brush and shot like rabbits. Long poles were taken from the wickiups and those taking refuge in the river were poked out and shot as they struggled in the water. To avoid the bullets the Indians would dive and swim beneath the water, but watching the bubbles rise as they swam, the men shot them when they came up for air.