

FREMONT AND THE MODOCS.

I.

THOUGH one of the smallest tribes with which our people have come in conflict, none have exhibited a more determined hostility or displayed greater courage than the Modoc Indians, and few have cost the Government more in blood and treasure to subdue. They were but a small tribe when first discovered by the whites, less than 200 warriors, and occupied a comparatively limited section of country, much of it barren and worthless. In that inhospitable region lie the graves of emigrants, volunteers and soldiers by the score, while the bones of old men, helpless women and tender babes lay for years in their tule marshes, and found no burial save that vouchsafed by the hand of pitying Nature.

The Modoc, or, as properly pronounced, Mo-a-dok, Indians were an offshoot from the Muk-a-luk, or Klamath Lake, tribe, inhabiting the country to the north and east of Lake Klamath, and took their name from Mo-a-dok-us, the chief under whom they seceded from the parent tribe. They were, to a degree, a tribe of Ishmaelites, living by the plunder of their neighbors on every side, and finding a secure retreat from their wrath in the marshes of Tule Lake or the rocky and mysterious caverns of the Lava Beds.

The region dominated by them was circumscribed, embracing a small strip of country along the Oregon and California line. The east and south shores of Klamath Lake, the Butte Creek country to the south of it, the sterile Lava Beds to the south of Tule, or Wright, Lake, and Lost River on the north, were their country, though the general headquarters were at Tule Lake. Upon the little islands among the tules they built their wickiups, where they retired in times of danger, the caves of the Lava Beds forming their last retreat when driven from their island homes.

Such were the Modocs when first visited by the white man—a band of hardy and unscrupulous marauders, courageous and daring, living chiefly by plunder, and occupying a country apparently designed by Nature for the home of such a band of savage buccaneers. Among them were many renegades from other tribes, and the whole tribe was, in fact, but the descendants of a number of independent Indians who had gathered about Mo-a-dok-us and his little band of Muk-a-luks. Formed like the Romans, they adopted the Roman plan of procuring wives, beginning thus their habit of stealing squaws from their neighbors, which was never completely abandoned even after they came under the control of the whites.

In the spring of 1846 Lieutenant John C. Fremont entered California on his third exploring expedition to the West and his second trip across the continent. His party consisted of about sixty men, many of them old and tried mountaineers, and all of them hardy and daring men picked by their commander for the arduous service expected of them. After exchanging international compliments with General Castro, which at one time appeared certain to result in blows, Fremont started north to visit the Columbia. The regular Hudson's Bay Company

trail passed up the Sacramento, along the western base of Mount Shasta, through Shasta Valley, and thus across Klamath River and Siskiyou Mountain to Rogue River Valley. This was many miles to the west of the Modoc country, while the route of trapping parties who crossed from Snake River to the Sacramento, by the way of Pit River, passed to the eastward. It thus happened that while they knew of the white man and his dealings with surrounding tribes, it is more than probable that Fremont was at the head of the first party of whites to pass through the country of the Modocs and partake of their bloody hospitalities.

Fremont's party turned off the regular trail to Oregon, at the mouth of Pit River, and followed up that stream, which was then called the east fork of the Sacramento. He proceeded by the way of Clear and Tule lakes to the west bank of Klamath Lake, just above the Oregon line, where he went into camp for a few days. On the 9th of May Samuel Neal and M. Sigler rode into camp with the intelligence that a United States officer was on their trail with important dispatches, which he had crossed the continent to deliver into Fremont's own hand. This was not all; the messengers had only escaped from the hands of savages by the fleetness of their animals, and they feared the officer and his companion would not be so fortunate unless they received immediate aid. Away dashed Fremont to the rescue—four trappers, five friendly Indians and the two messengers riding at his side. Back across the California line they rode, round and along the southern shore of the lake, until, at sundown, sixty miles from the camp of the morning, they met Lieutenant Gillespie and brave old Peter Lassen, unconscious of the danger from which they had been rescued.

That meeting was an important one to California and to America. The messenger of the Government informed Fremont that war had been declared with Mexico. The instructions he then imparted have remained hidden in the Pathfinder's breast to the present day, and can only be inferred from the conduct of that dashing officer, who returned at once to California, inaugurated the Bear Flag War (carried on by his counsel and inspired by him), and organized the California Battalion, which played so prominent a part in the conquest of California.

Late into the night those young officers, on whose shoulders such weighty responsibilities had been thrown, sat by the smoldering embers and counseled about their future course. Around them lay their companions, wrapped in profound slumber, their weary limbs stretched upon the ground. Fatigue and the excitement of the news had made their leader incautious. He forgot that he was in a country where the natives had shown signs of hostility; that he had ridden sixty miles that day because of such hostility. Filled with the great projects of the future, his limbs weary with fatigue, he, too, lay down by the fire and closed his heavy eyes in sleep. In that silent camp lay the sleeping forms of Richard Owens, Lucien Maxwell, Kit Carson, Alex. Godey, Steppenfeldt, Basil Lajeunesse, Denne, Crane, and others of those hardy mountaineers who had trapped the whole Western