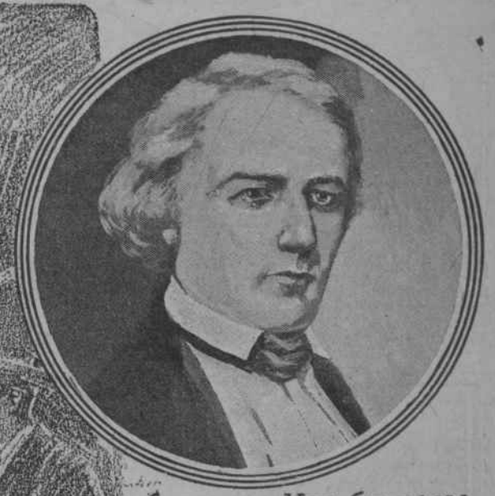
THE STORY OF KNIFE FIGHTING

How Bowie, Houston, Crockett and Carson Carved Their Names in History

"DAVY" CROCKETT.



COLONEL KIT CARSON.
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He grasped his knife and leaped among them like an enraged tiger.

GENERAL SAM HOUSTON.

WHILE every creed has its apostle and almost every theory some celebrated advocate, it rarely occurs that a cult reaches the hoary age where a century or so does not count before becoming identified with an individual.

Knife fighting has been in vogue since the Stone Age, and even then primitive man fashioned a long, slender piece of flint into the bladelike specimens now on exhibition in the museums of the world. The dirk, dagger and poniard are recorded in the earliest written history. The Italian stiletto, the Spanish cuchillo and misericorde of the Middle Ages are favorite weapons with the historical novelist, and only occasionally do the panang of Borneo, the kris of the Malayan country and the kookirie of the East Indian Goorkhus, the yataghan of the Afghanistan mountaineer, the fan dagger of the Chinese, with the harakiri dagger of the Shogun Japanese days find their way into print, and then usually in an impossible way of use or ornament.

Knives of wood, bone, ivory, stone, copper and shell are well known to collectors, and the knife will follow the club as a close second to the first weapon of man. Like the Holy Bible and the cross, it was used to add importance and a sort of sanctity to an oath. The oath of vengeance is still in many countries sworn on a dagger—in some lands the handle and guard form a perfect cross, as did the hilt of the Crusader's sword. The Chinese, with that peculiar application to the practical use of everything for which the Mongolian has ever been noted, used knife money, which consisted of a razor blade shaped coin, current throughout the Celestial Empire before the Christian era.

The scalping knife of the American Indian was the first weapon of the knife variety to become celebrated in connection with this continent, and the ghastly trophy it was used to secure was the cause. The knife was used by all Indian fighters of early history when the uncertainty of the flintlock firearm made the knife even more important than when more perfect powder burning weapons came into use. Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Davie Crockett and "Sam" Houston all depended upon the knife for close work, but it remained for Colonel James Bowie to inaugurate the era of the fighting knife which is still in use and bears his name. Colonel Bowie may be called the apostle of the knife and the originator of its renaissance, and the storm born Republic of Texas the scene of its greatest employment.

Houston, Travis, Crockett and Bowie formed a little band of heroes as worthy of place in song and story as any who died under shield before the walls of Troy. The least known and yet in many respects the greatest of them all was Bowie, famous only by reason of the world renowned knife called by his name. Born in Burke county, Ga., in 1790, he travelled with his father to Louisana, where he located in 1802, he having acquired a large tract of land, one of the many grants by the French Crown. He became wealthy and important, owned more than one hundred slaves and grew large crops of cotton, corn and tobacco. He sent his son James to a private school at Natchez, Miss., and afterward to the Jesuit College, then located at New Orleans.

Bowie and His Deeds.

James Bowie in 1827 was challenged to a duel with Norris Wright. The pocket pistols of that day were uncertain. It was long before the percussion cap had been brought into common use, and the flintlock arm was the only firearm known. It was liable to miss fire just when it ought not to. Bowie determined to rely upon a knife he had caused to be made for just such a contingency. He had taken a 14-inch long file, such as was then used to sharpen crosscut saws and the upright saws used for turning out planks from logs. He had the file marks carefully ground off the file and the smooth piece of steel skilfully re-reduced by the grindstone until it was about the thickness and weight he desired. Then he took it to a Spaniard in New Orleans known as "Pedro, the skilled cutler," a man who had learned his art in Toledo, where the finest sword blades in all Spain were forged. He tempered and finished the knife and fitted it with a crosspiece and haft. When it was done James Bowie had a weapon "fit to fight for a man's life with," as he said to Governor Wells. It was beautifully balanced, and the artist had hollow ground it like a razor, with a double edge for three or four inches from the point.

The knife was fitted with a wooden scabbard covered with leather and was sharp enough to shave the hair off the back of one's hand. This was the original bowie knife, though it was somewhat modified subsequently in shape. Bowie while a student in New Orleans had studied other things besides the humanities, as the dead languages of Greece and Rome were then called. By accident he found in his fencing master a man who could not only use the sword but was a master in the use of the cuchillo, the Spanish fighting knife, a weapon not unlike the bowie knife. Our young student entered enthusiastically into the training and science of old Spain in that nation's once national weapon. And so he was much better equipped for the deadly fight that was so near at hand.

Natchez Island, where the fight was to be, was midway between the Louisiana and Mississippi shores of the great Father of Waters. Therefore it was a favorite meeting place for gentlemen who had to adjust affairs that might have a fatal ending, as the authorities of neither State could interfere. "I stayed all night with James Bowie," said a friend of his who died more than twenty years ago, in his ninetieth year. "On the night before the fight was to take place I never saw a man sleep more soundly than he did or eat a better breakfast next morning. It was understood that each of the principals should have but one friend, and certainly not more than two, on the ground. But Mr. Wright had five or six present. The fight began with pistols. One of Bowie's missed fire, while both of Wright's bullets took effect upon his antagonist.

Dual to Death.

Thinking that he had Bowie at his mercy, Norris Wright sprang upon him. In a moment Bowie had drawn his deadly knife, and though two or three of Wright's friends were shooting at him, and hitting him, too, Bowie made one awful slash at Wright's neck. The keen steel bit into the very neck bone and Norris Wright was dead before he touched the ground.

Seriously wounded himself, it was for some time a very doubtful question whether or not he would ever get well. But youth, a temperate life and an excellent constitution finally brought him around, and in a year from that time he killed General Crain with the same knife he had used in his first encounter.

"The knife doesn't miss fire," he said to an intimate friend, Mr. Bynum, of the parish of Rapides; "the pistol does." This, of course, was long before the invention of the revolver.

James Bowie was engaged in the purchase and contest of claims for great tracts of land that had been grants made by the French Crown. When Louisiana was ceded to the United States and finally became a State there was a good deal of trouble on this account over some of the titles to land along the Red River and its tributaries. A man often had to fight for his plantation, as frequently he would not give it up to somebody with an old French or Spanish grant. It was in these contests that James Bowie did the most of his killing. He had sixteen lives on his hands from the use of that one knife. After much consideration he had made a knife that has been a model and pattern for all the real bowie knives that ever had the sanction of their originator.

In 1835 Colonel Bowie sold his Louisiana property and went to Texas. The Lone Star State was in the throes of a bloody revolution. The gallant resistance of the Texans so exasperated General Santa Ana, who was the chief in command of the Mexican forces, that he swore he would take no more prisoners. When Bowie arrived in Texas and offered his services to the young Republic he was at once made a colonel of riflemen in the army of Texas.

In January, 1836, Colonel Bowie was ordered to San Antonio de Bexar to assist in holding that place against Santa Ana's coming forces. The siege ran along until March, when San Antonio, trusting in the pledged word of honor of Santa Ana, with a starved out garrison surrendered. Travis, Crockett and Bowie were murdered in cold blood, a stain on General Santa Ana's memory that time can never blot out. Colonel Bowie was badly wounded three times and was in a room of the main work of the Alamo. He opposed the surrender as long as possible.

He was lying on his bed when he heard the triumphant Mexicans coming in. It was the first hint he had of the surrender. He knew his life was ended. He could, however, move about a little. The instant the Mexicans came into the room they began shooting at him. He grasped his knife and leaped among them like an enraged tiger, and when the firing ended six of his enemies had crossed the Styx with James Bowie and had gone with him to the shades.

"Big Jim" Carlton was one of the noted knife fighters of the Sage Brush State. Mark Twain, in "Roughing It," and Dan De Quille, in "The Big Bonanza," tell stories of "Big Jim's" great prowess. He stood off six Mormons near the Mountain Meadow flat and killed two of them, receiving two frightful wounds, from which he suffered until his last hours. "Big Jim" carried a white handle sixteen inch blade bowie knife, and made it respected over the entire Pacific Slope. He was lucky enough to die in bed after a short illness and was buried in Laurel Hill Cemetery, in San Francisco.

Buffalo Bill is a real character in the history of the Great West. He as scout and guide fought many battles, and in several instances the knife decided the day. While scouting with Colonel Merritt's command Buffalo Bill discovered a large body of Cheyennes evidently headed for Sitting Bull's camp of hostiles. Colonel Merritt at once concealed his troops and with his scouts kept careful watch of the Indians. Presently a number of warriors were seen to leave the main body and ride in the opposite direction. This puzzled the Colonel for a few moments until with his strong field glasses he saw two mounted soldiers approaching at a distance, evidently bearing despatches, and the object of the Indians was to capture these men. Not wishing to uncover his ambuscade, and determined to save the men from capture, he gave Buffalo Bill fifteen men, with whom the scout made a detour and took his station behind a hill awaiting the Colonel's orders, Bill's object being to cut off the scouting party from the main body of Indians and at the same time rescue the two despatch bearers. When the messengers had arrived within about five hundred yards of the command, with the Cheyennes about two hundred yards in their rear, Colonel Merritt shouted:—"Go it, now, Cody, and be quick about it; they are going to charge the couriers."

Bill and his picked men broke from their concealment and charged the Indians, killing three of them and driving them back some distance, but gaining courage by the rapid approach of their main body the Indians turned on the scouts and a lively fight ensued. During a lull in the fighting a highly ornamented chief, with great bravado, rode out in front of his party and sang out in the Cheyenne tongue:—"I know, Pa-he-haska, if you want to fight come and fight me."

His challenge was immediately accepted and Bill then advanced at full speed. Bill raised his Winchester and fired, killing the Indian's pony, and at the same time was violently thrown from his own horse, which had stepped into a hole. They were now about twenty-five yards apart. Two shots rang out. The Indian's bullet passed harmlessly by, but the scout's bullet struck the chief, they closed i nwith their knives and in a few seconds Cody had finished him and taken his scalp and war bonnet.

Both soldiers and Indians now charged, and the Indians were driven back to the Red Cloud Agency, where it was learned that the chief Bill had killed was Yellow Hand, a son of Cut Nose and a leading war chief of the Cheyennes.

At another time while "hunting meat"—killing buffaloes for the Kansas Pacific Railway construction gang—a party of hostile Indians chased Cody to within half a mile of a company of soldiers who were stationed at the end of the railway track to protect the workmen. Seeing the soldiers the Indians beat a hasty retreat, when Captain Nolan, of the Tenth Cavalry, determined to pursue them. Cody was given a fresh horse, and the party, overtaking the redskins, killed eight of them. One savage, mounted on a powerful bay horse, turned suddenly on Buffalo Bill and with raised battle axe tried to cleave the scout's skull, but Bill caught the blow on his huge knife, and the next moment drove the blade to the hilt in the breast of the warrior.

Sam Brown's Knife.

Sam Brown was one of the worst of Nevada's many bad men who depended mainly on the bowie knife. In an old report of the United States Geological Survey upon the Comstock Mining and Miners, Elliott Lord thus narrates two typical incidents in Sam Brown's career:—

"The most prominent figure of the crew (the desperadoes of Virginia City) was a burly ruffian known as Sam Brown, who had killed thirteen men in Texas and California, as was reported, before his arrival at Virginia City. The terror and aversion which this man inspired recall the nursery tales of the days of ogres and their victims. In the summer of 1859 an agent of the leading Western Express Company called at a station which Brown was then keeping on the Humboldt River and desired something to eat. Brown pointed to a hanging strip of bacon and the traveller requested the loan of a knife to cut off a slice. With an odd smile Brown pulled out an immense sheath knife, but immediately thrust it back into his boot, remarking that he had killed five men with that knife and was superstitious about lending it to cut bacon. The visitor was equally scrupulous and left the cabin without the meat.

"One of Brown's first exploits in the new mining district was a murder, which illustrates vividly the character of the man and the camp. A weak, underwitted barroom lounger, whose feeble discretion was lost in liquor, staggered up to Brown one day in a saloon and made some remark which the latter considered offensive. Without a word the giant wound his muscular arms about his victim, and, holding him as easily as a cat does a mouse, drove a sheath knife twice into his quivering body, turning it 'Maltese fashion' in his vitals. Then he flung the bleeding sufferer on the floor, and when a few minutes later a party took up the man still breathing faintly from the red pool behind the bar Brown was seen sleeping as calmly as a child on a billiard table in the room. Sam Brown's last day was in perfect keeping with the rest of his violent career. He had become offended at a ranchman of Carson Valley named Van Sickle and went to his house in Carson City to kill him. Van Sickle was not at home when Sam drove into the yard to carry out his purpose, and the desperado, forcing his way into the house, searched it from roof to cellar for his intended victim, throwing things about and terrifying the women. Upon leaving the house he encountered the officers of the law on the street and kept up a running fight with them as he rode out of town. A Sheriff's posse was organized and started in pursuit, determined this time to kill or capture Sam Brown.

"Van Sickle, on learning of the visit to his house, did not join the posse, but rightly conjecturing that Sam would make for a certain out of the way ranch used by outlaws for the concealment of stolen horses, rode alone to this place by a short byway and, finding no one there, put his horse in the stable and waited for the desperado's coming. Sam soon appeared, riding up to the stable. Van Sickle met him at the door with a shotgun loaded with slugs and buckshot and instantly emptied both barrels into him. The ruffian dropped dead from his horse, but Van Sickle took no chance with Sam Brown and proceeded to empty every chamber of his revolver into him to make sure of his work. "Served him right," was the verdict of the Coroner's jury."

Throwing the Knife

One of the pleasures of a hotel clerk's life in Sacramento in the early days shows how the Mexican can use a knife. It is thus related by a New York man to-day:—"One dark and rainy night in March I was sitting alone in the office some time between one and two o'clock when a couple of Mexicans entered the hotel and came up to the desk. 'We want beds,' said one of them, 'and would like you to take care of our money.' With this they proceeded to count out nearly a thousand dollars in gold coin. 'You must have been lucky,' said I, taking it for grant that they had been fortunate in gambling. 'Yes' answered one, 'we broke a monte bank and got away with $960.' I turned open the safe before counting the money after them, and just as I was about to swing back the iron door I heard a sharp, whizzing sound, and then something struck me a tremendous blow in the back. I instantly raised up and whirled about to face the Mexicans, and as I did so a large knife fell from my back to the floor. I thought for a second I had been fatally wounded, and, determined to revenge myself upon my assassins, I quickly drew my pistol and fired at the men, who had been unable to open the gate and were thus outside of the railing. My first shot broke the arm of one of the gamblers and he gave a cry of pain. The other man attempted to grasp some of the gold, but I fired again so quickly that he turned and fled. A third shot hit this Mexican in the side just as he reached the door, but both of them managed to escape and run off up the street. Their yells and my shots brought twenty patrons down stairs in all stages of undress, but each man had a gun, pistol or bowie knife, and the rascals were quickly pursued by most of the miners. Owing to the darkness and the start they had, both men got away, but they left their gold coin behind them. This was given to me by the owner of the hotel for defending the property, and thus I made a handsome little stake in a single night, for the Mexicans never put in an appearance to claim the gold.

"My escape was owing to a fortunate incident. I had been getting round shouldered, and my friends had poked so much fun at me about it that I got a blacksmith to make some steel shoulder braces, which were covered with buckskin. These steel braces were made strong enough to fit Samson, but their being so heavy saved my life, for the point of the knife when thrown by the Mexicans had struck one of these and thus failed to penetrate my body, as it otherwise would have. Throwing a knife was a favorite pastime with Mexicans, and some became so expert that they could hit a silver dollar at a distance of ten or twelve feet. I suppose they thought the knife would so certainly end my life that I would make no outcry to alarm the people of the hotel, and, as I had unlocked the safe, they could rob it at their leisure. It was a close call, but I came out of it unharmed."

The early Californian gloried in a good bowie knife, and many were beautifully wrought and elegantly mounted. The chief requirement was that the blade should be so tempered as to be able to be driven through three silver dollars at a stroke without dulling the point or turning the edge. The poisoned, wavy bladed Malay kris is the most deadly of all knives, but it is the weapon of a cowardly assassin. The native impales a fowl or a rat with the blade of this weapon and leaves the carcass to rot on the soft, porous iron. This leaves a poison of the most dangerous kind. The Burmese dar is a heavy bladed knife carried over the shoulder when travelling to hack a path through the vines of jungle. The Scotch "skein dun" is worn in the guard. The heavy, long bladed "yatagan" of Northern India is stuck in the girdle, as are the richly wrought, elaborately inlaid fighting knives of Persia and Circassia. A fairly complete collection would contain fully two thousand different varieties and would represent an investment of many thousand dollars. The best collections are in the government museums of Europe, the one in the Tower of London being the most complete.

Poisons in Our Daily Food.

A SURPRISING variety of the most powerful vegetable poisons, such as morphine, strychnine, digitalis and nicotine, are closely allied to ptomaines. There are many of these ptomaine products which act as poisons, and they were originally known as cadaveric alkaloids, because they were first discovered to be produced by the decomposition of animal substances. Afterward they were found to be the resultants of animal activity during life, and the two classes of ptomaines would be better termed the animal alkaloids in order to include both those which arise from putrifying processes and those which are the result of physiological action.

Many of the more ordinary distresses of life, such as headaches and the feelings of fatigue, as well as more serious nervous troubles, are often due to the failure of the ordinary excretory processes to eliminate these toxic products of vitality. The relation of the bacteria to the animal alkaloids, or ptomaines, is that they act on the complex albumen molecule, which is the common ancestor of alkaloids whether animal or vegetable, and split it up into several less complex molecules, among which are the ptomaines. This is the process of putrifcation, and the kind of ptomaine formed depends on the particular kind of bacterium, the nature of the material acted on and the conditions, such as temperature and so on, under which the putrifaction proceeds.

In a record of thirteen cases the material acted upon was as follows:—Pig's meat in some form in nine cases, butchers' meat (kind not stated) in two, veal in one and beef in one. Fish and cheese may also be attacked, but crabs, lobsters and mussels are the most exposed, the source of infection being the bacteria introduced through the medium of polluted water, a few months in the open sea removing the poisonous properties. Of course, other poisons than ptomaines are produced in foods of all kinds by the agency of bacteria.

It has not yet been decided why some kinds of food may be eaten with impunity in an advanced state of decomposition, game, for instance, while pork so slightly tainted that it cannot be detected will cause poisoning.

There is another and a curious danger from the production of ptomaines in the human body. There have been cases where death has been pronounced to be caused by wilful administration of vegetable alkaloids which toxicologists would now put down as ptomaine poisoning cases; and innocent persons have possibly already suffered and may in the future, though medical witnesses are much more alive to the danger of mistake than they were before the study of bacteriology had advanced to the point it has now reached.

The difficulty consists in the fact that there are no chemical reactions by which the ptomaines as a class may be distinguished from the vegetable alkaloids. As ptomaines are present to a greater or less extent, probably, in every organ which is submitted to the toxicologist for examination, it is clear that the most serious mistakes might be made if chemists were not on their guard against too great confidence in declaring ptomaine compounds to be of the poisonous vegetable alkaloids. The latter must have been deliberately administered with food or drink as a vehicle, the former might have been administered either as food taken in the ordinary course, the food itself being the poison and not merely the vehicle, or they might be found in the body after death as the result of the body's own poison producing capacity during life, or they might have arisen in the process of putrefaction after death.

Chemistry alone cannot say which is the solution, and further proof would have to be sought in specific symptoms which could only be produced by some particular known poison, and in the general circumstances in which the death took place. More innocent persons have been killed from undoubted ptomaine poisoning than are likely to hang because ptomaines have been mistaken for vegetable alkaloids.

Once.

I was ambitious once—dreamed of fame
Got by the soldier's weapon and a name
Chisselled into marble by a genius who
Would of the fame of one make fame for two

But I have seen enough of world success
To slight the greater and to seek the less,
To step aside and let the other man
Shoulder the world and pack it if he can.

LEE FAIRCHILD.

William Reitz, of Duesseldorf, Germany, has lost the sight of an eye from injuries caused by a grain of rice which was thrown into it on the day he was married.