ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

THE WILD MAN OF THE WEST: A TALE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

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Ballantyne R.

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Содержание

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Chapter One

In which the Reader is introduced to a Mad Hero, a Reckless Lover, and a Runaway Husband—Backwoods Juvenile Training described—The Principles of Fighting fully discussed, and some valuable Hints thrown out

March Marston was mad! The exact state of madness to which March had attained at the age when we take up his personal history—namely, sixteen—is uncertain, for the people of the backwoods settlement in which he dwelt differed in their opinions on that point.

The clergyman, who was a Wesleyan, said he was as wild as a young buffalo bull; but the manner in which he said so led his hearers to conclude that he did not think such a state of ungovernable madness to be a hopeless condition, by any means. The doctor said he was as mad as a hatter; but this was an indefinite remark, worthy of a doctor who had never obtained a diploma, and required explanation, inasmuch as it was impossible to know *how* mad he considered a hatter to be. Some of the trappers who came to the settlement for powder and lead, said he was as mad as a grisly bear with a whooping-cough—a remark which, if true, might tend to throw light on the diseases to which the grisly bear is liable, but which failed to indicate to any one, except perhaps trappers, the extent of young Marston's madness. The carpenter and the blacksmith of the place—who were fast friends and had a pitched battle only once a month, or twice at most—agreed in saying that he was as mad as a wild-cat. In short, every one asserted stoutly that the boy was mad, with the exception of the women of the settlement, who thought him a fine, bold, handsome fellow; and his own mother, who thought him a paragon of perfection, and who held the opinion (privately) that, in the wide range of the habitable globe there was not another like him—and she was not far wrong!

Now, the whole and sole reason why March Marston was thus deemed a madman, was that he displayed an insane tendency, at all times and in all manners, to break his own neck, or to make away with himself in some similarly violent and uncomfortable manner.

There was not a fence in the whole countryside that March had not bolted over at full gallop, or ridden crash through if he could not go over it. There was not a tree within a circuit of four miles from the top of which he had not fallen. There was not a pond or pool in the neighbourhood into which he had not soused at some period of his stormy juvenile career, and there was not a big boy whom he had not fought and thrashed—or been thrashed by—scores of times.

But for all this March had not a single enemy. He did his companions many a kind turn; never an unkind one. He fought for love, not for hatred. He loved a dog—if any one kicked it, he fought him. He loved a little boy—if any one was cruel to that little boy, he fought him. He loved fair play—if any one was guilty of foul play, he fought him. When he was guilty of foul play himself (as was sometimes the case, for who is perfect?) he felt inclined to jump out of his own body and turn about and thrash himself! And he would have done so often, had it been practicable. Yes, there is no doubt whatever about it March Marston was mad—as mad, after a fashion, as any creature, human or otherwise, you choose to name.

Young Marston's mother was a handsome, stout, blue-eyed, flaxen-haired woman, of a little over thirty-five summers. She was an English emigrant, and had, seventeen years before the time

we write of settled at Pine Point, on the banks of the Yellowstone River, along with her brother, the blacksmith above referred to. At that time she was the sweetest maiden in all the village, and now she was the handsomest matron. Indeed, the bloom of her youth remained on her cheeks so little impaired that she was often mistaken by strangers for March Marston's elder sister. The men of the place called her pretty widow Marston; but she was not a widow—at least, they had as little ground for saying that she was as they had for asserting that her son was mad. Mrs Marston was peculiarly circumstanced, but she was not a widow.

The peculiar circumstances connected with her history are soon told. Immediately after the arrival of the blacksmith and his pretty sister at Pine Point settlement, a tall stout young stripling —a trapper—about a year older than herself, fell deeply in love with Mary West—that being Mrs Marston's maiden name. The young trapper's case was desperate. He sank at once so deep into the profundities of love, that no deep-sea lead, however ingeniously contrived, could reach him.

Although just emerging from boyhood, Louis the trapper was already a tall, strong, handsome man, and Mary felt flattered by his attentions. But when, a month afterwards, he boldly offered her his hand and fortune (which latter consisted of a trapper's costume and a western rifle), she was taken aback and flatly refused him. Louis was hare-brained and passionate. He told her he would give her one day and a night to think of it. At the end of that time he came back and was again refused, for Mary West had no notion of being taken by storm in that fashion. But she trembled and grew pale on observing the storm of angry passion that gleamed from the young trapper's eyes and caused his broad chest to heave violently. He did not speak. He did not even look at Mary—had he done so, years of sorrow and suffering might have been spared them both. He stood for one moment with his eyes fixed upon the ground—then he turned, sprang through the doorway, vaulted on his horse, and went off from her cottage door as an arrow leaps from a bow. The fences and ditches that lay in his way were no impediment. His powerful steed carried him over all and into the forest beyond, where he was quickly lost to view. Mary tried to resume her household occupations with a sigh. She did not believe he was gone. But he was!

At first Mary was nettled; then she grew sad; as weeks passed away she became nettled again, and at this juncture another suitor appeared in the shape of a young immigrant farmer, whose good looks and insinuating address soothed her irritation at the strange abrupt conduct of her lover. She began to think that she must have been mistaken in supposing that she cared for the wild trapper—and, in order to prove the correctness of her supposition, she married Obadiah Marston, the farmer.

Alas! poor Mary discovered her error too late. Marston turned out a profligate drunkard. At first he did not come out in his true colours. A son was born, and he insisted on calling him March, for no other reason than that he was born in the month so named. Mary was obliged to consent, and at last came to congratulate herself that the child had been born in March, and not in April or October, or any other month equally unsuitable for a Christian name. After the first year, Obadiah Marston treated his wife badly, then brutally, and at last he received a sound drubbing from his brother-in-law, the blacksmith, for having beaten poor Mary with a stick. This brought things to a climax. Marston vowed he would forsake his wife, and never set eyes on her again; and he kept his vow. He embarked one day in a boat that was going down to the Missouri with a cargo of furs, and his poor wife never saw him again. Thus was Mary West forsaken, first by her lover and then by her husband.

It was long before she recovered from the blow; but time gradually reconciled her to her lot, and she devoted herself thenceforth to the training of her little boy. As years rolled on, Mrs Marston recovered her spirits and her looks; but, although many a fine young fellow sought her heart and hand, assuring her that she was a widow—that she *must* be a widow, that no man in his senses could remain so long away from such a wife unless he were dead—she turned a deaf ear to them all.

March Marston's infancy was spent in yelling and kicking, with the exception of those preternaturally calm periods when he was employed in eating and sleeping. As he grew older the kicking and yelling decreased, the eating increased, and the sleeping continued pretty much the same.

Then came a period when he began to learn his A, B, C. Mrs Marston had been well educated for her station in life. She had read much, and had brought a number of books to the backwoods settlement; so she gave her boy a pretty good education—as education went in those days—and certainly a much better one than was given to boys in such out-of-the-way regions. She taught him to read and write, and carried him on in arithmetic as far as compound division, where she stuck, having reached the extreme limits of her own tether.

Contemporaneously with the cessation of squalling and kicking, and the acquirement of the A, B, C, there arose in little March's bosom unutterable love for his mother; or, rather, the love that had always dwelt there began to well up powerfully, and to overflow in copious streams of obedience and considerate attention. About the same time the roving, reckless "madness," as it was styled, began to develop itself. And, strange to say, Mrs Marston did not check that! She was a large-minded, a liberal-minded woman, that semi-widow. She watched her son closely, but very few of his deeds were regarded by her in the light of faults. Tumbling off trees was not. Falling into ditches and horse ponds was not. Fighting was, to some extent; and on this point alone did mother and son seem to entertain any difference of opinion, if we may style that difference of opinion where the son fell into silent and extreme perplexity after a short, and on his part humble, discussion on the subject.

"Why, mother," said March in surprise (having attained the mature age of eight when he said it), "if a grisly bear was to 'tack me, you'd let me defend myself, wouldn't you?"

Mrs Marston smiled to see the rotund little object of two-feet-ten standing before the fire with its legs apart and its arms crossed, putting such a question, and replied—

"Certainly, my boy."

"And when Tom Blake offered to hit Susy Jefferson, wasn't I right to fight him for that?"

"Yes, my boy, I think it right to fight in defence of the weak and helpless."

The object of two-feet-ten began to swell and his eyes to brighten at the unexpected success of this catechising of its mother, and went on to say—

"Well, mother, why do you blame me for fightin', then, if it's right?"

"Because fighting is not always right, my boy. You had a fight with Bill Summers, hadn't you, yesterday?"

"Yes, mother."

Two-feet-ten said this in a hesitating tone, and shrank into its ordinary proportions as it continued—

"But I didn't lick him, mother, he licked *me*. But I'll try again, mother—indeed I will, and I'll be sure to lick him next time."

"I don't want you to try again," rejoined Mrs Marston; "and you must not try again without a good reason. Why did you fight him yesterday?"

"Because he told a lie," said the object promptly, swelling out again, and looking big under the impression that the goodness of its reason could not be questioned. It was, therefore, with a look of baffled surprise that it collapsed again on being told that that was not a sufficient reason for engaging in warfare, and that it was wrong to take the law into its own hands, or to put in its word or its little fist, where it had no right to interfere—and a great deal more to that effect.

"But, March, my boy," said Mrs Marston, drawing the object towards her and patting its round little fair head, "what makes you so fond of fighting?"

"I ain't fond o' fighting, mother, but I can't help it."

"Can't help it! Do you ever try?"

"I—I—no, I don't think that I do. But I feel so funny when I see Bill Summers cheatin' at play. I feel all over red-hot—like—oh! you've seen the big pot boilin' over? Well, I just feel like that. An' w'en it boils over, you know, mother, it must be took off the fire, else it kicks up *sich* a row! But there's nobody to take me off the fire when I'm boilin' over, an' there's no fire to take me off—so you see I *can't* help it. Can I?"

As the object concluded these precociously philosophical remarks, it looked up in its mother's face with an earnest inquiring gaze. The mother looked down at it with an equally earnest look—though there was a twinkle in each eye and a small dimple in each cheek that indicated a struggle with gravity—and said—

"I could stop the big pot from boiling-over without taking it off the fire."

"How?" inquired Two-feet-ten eagerly.

"By letting it boil over till it put the fire out."

The object opened its eyes very wide, and pursed its mouth very tight; then it relaxed, grinned a little with an air of uncertainty, and was about to laugh, but checked itself, and, with a look of perplexity, said—

"Eh?"

"Ay, my boy," resumed the mother, "just you try the boiling-over plan next time. When you feel inclined to fight, and know, or *think*, that you shouldn't, just stand quite still, and look hard at the ground—mind, don't look at the boy you want to fight with, but at the ground—and begin to count one, two, three, four, and so on, and I'm quite sure that when you've counted fifty the fire will be out. Now, will you try, my son?"

"Mother," replied Two-feet-ten earnestly (and becoming at least two feet eleven while he spoke), "I'll try!"

This ended the conversation at that time, and we beg leave to apologise to our reader for having given it in such full detail, but we think it necessary to the forming of a just appreciation of our hero and his mother, as it shows one phase of their characters better than could have been accomplished by a laboured description.

Before March Marston had attained to the age of sixteen he had read aloud to his mother—not once, but several times—the "Vicar of Wakefield," "Robinson Crusoe," the "Pilgrim's Progress," and "Tales of a Grandfather," "Aesop's Fables," and a variety of tales and stories and histories of lesser note—all of which he stored up in a good memory, and gave forth in piecemeal to his unlettered companions as opportunity offered. Better than all this, he had many and many a time read his Bible through, and was familiar with all its leading heroes and histories and anecdotes.

Thus, it will be seen that March Marston was quite a learned youth for a backwoodsman, besides being a hero and a "madman."

Chapter Two

The Great Prairie—A Wild Chase—A Remarkable Accident and an Extraordinary Charger, all of which terminate in a Crash—Bounce talks Philosophy and tells of terrible Things—Our Hero determines to beard the Wild Man of the West in his own Den

The rising sun lifted his head above the horizon of the great western prairie, gilding the upper edges of those swelling undulations that bear so strong a resemblance to solidified billows as to have acquired the name of prairie waves.

On the sunny side of these waves the flowerets of the plains were already basking in full enjoyment of the new day; on the summits only the tips of their petals were turned to gold. On the other side of those waves, and down in the hollows, everything was clothed in deep shadow, as if the still undissipated shades of night were lingering there, unwilling or unable to depart from so beautiful a scene. This mingling of strong lights and deep shadows had the effect of rendering more apparent the tremendous magnitude of those vast solitudes.

There were no trees within the circuit of vision, but there were a few scattered bushes, so low and insignificant in appearance as to be quite unobvious to the eye, except when close to the feet of the spectator. Near to a clump of these bushes there stood two horses motionless, as if chiselled in stone, and with their heads drooping low, as if sound asleep. Directly under the noses of these horses lay two men, each wrapped in a blanket, with his head pillowed on his saddle, and his rifle close at his side. Both were also sound asleep.

About a mile distant from the spot on which those sleepers rested, there grew another small bush, and under its sheltering boughs, in the snuggest conceivable hole, nestled a grouse, or prairie hen, also sound asleep, with its head lost in feathers, and its whole rotund aspect conveying the idea of extreme comfort and good living. Now, we do not draw the reader's attention to that bird because of its rarity, but because of the fact that it was unwittingly instrumental in influencing the fortunes of the two sleepers above referred to.

The sun in his upward march overtopped a prairie wave, and his rays, darting onward, struck the bosom of the prairie hen, and awoke it. Looking up quickly with one eye, it seemed to find the glare too strong, winked at the sun, and turned the other eye. With this it winked also, then got up, flapped its wings, ruffled its feathers, and, after a pause, sprang into the air with that violent *whirr–r* which is so gladdening, yet so startling, to the ear of a sportsman. It was instantly joined by the other members of the covey to which it belonged, and the united flock went sweeping past the sleeping hunters, causing their horses to awake with a snort, and themselves to spring to their feet with the alacrity of men who were accustomed to repose in the midst of alarms, and with a grunt of surprise.

"Prairie-hens," muttered the elder of the two—a big, burly backwoodsman—as he turned towards his companion with a quiet smile. "It was very thoughtful on 'em to rouse us, lad, considerin' the work that lies before us."

"I wish, with all my heart, they didn't rise quite so early," replied the younger man, also a stout backwoodsman, who was none other than our hero March Marston himself; "I don't approve of risin' until one wakes in the course of nature; d'ye see, Bounce?"

"I *hear*; but we can't always git things to go 'xactly as we approves of," replied Bounce, stooping down to arrange the embers of the previous night's fire.

Bounce's proper name was Bob Ounce. He styled himself, and wrote himself (for he could write to the extent of scrawling his own name in angularly irregular large text), "B. Ounce." His comrades called him "Bounce."

"You see, March," continued Bounce in a quiet way, thrusting his rugged countenance close to the embers occasionally, and blowing up the spark which he had kindled by means of flint, steel, and tinder—"you see, this is a cur'ous wurld; it takes a feelosopher to onderstand it c'rectly, and even he don't make much o't at the best. But I've always noticed that w'en the time for wakin' up's come, we've got to wake up whether we like it or no; d'ye see, lad?"

"I'd see better if you didn't blow the ashes into my eyes in that way," answered March, laughing at the depth of his companion's philosophical remark. "But I say, old chap," (March had no occasion to call him "old chap," for Bounce was barely forty), "what if we don't fall in with a herd?"

"Then we shall have to go home without meat that's all," replied Bounce, filling and lighting his pipe.

"But I promised my mother a buffalo-hump in less than three days, and the first day and night are gone."

"You'd no right to promise your mother a hump," returned the plain-spoken and matter-of-fact hunter. "Nobody shud never go to promise wot they can't perform. I've lived, off an' on, nigh forty years now, and I've obsarved them wot promises most always does least; so if you'll take the advice of an oldish hunter, you'll give it up, lad, at once."

"Humph!" ejaculated March, "I suppose you began your *obsarvations* before you were a year old—eh, Bounce?"

"I began 'em afore I was a day old. The first thing I did in this life was to utter an 'orrible roar, and I obsarved that immediately I got a drink; so I roared agin, an' got another. Leastwise I've bin told that I did, an' if it wasn't obsarvation as caused me for to roar w'en I wanted a drink, wot wos it?"

Instead of replying, March started up, and shading his eyes with his right hand, gazed intently towards the horizon.

"Wot now, lad?" said Bounce, rising quickly. "Ha! buffaloes!"

In half a minute the cords by which the two horses were fastened to pegs driven into the plain, were coiled up; in another half-minute the saddle-girths were buckled; in half a second more the men were mounted and tearing over the prairie like the wind.

"Ha, lad," remarked Bounce with one of his quiet smiles—for he was a pre-eminently quiet man—"but for them there prairie-hens we'd ha' slept this chance away."

The buffaloes, or, more correctly speaking, the bisons which young Marston's sharp eye had discovered, were still so far-distant that they appeared like crows or little black specks against the sky. In order to approach them as near as possible without attracting their attention, it was necessary that the two horsemen should make a wide circuit, so as to get well to leeward, lest the wind should carry the scent of them to the herd. Their horses, being fleet, strong, and fresh, soon carried them to the proper direction, when they wheeled to the right, and galloped straight down upon their quarry, without any further attempt at concealment. The formation of the ground favoured their approach, so that they were within a mile of the herd before being discovered.

At first the huge, hairy creatures gazed at the hunters in stupid surprise; then they turned and fled. They appeared, at the outset, to run slowly and with difficulty, and the plain seemed to thunder with their heavy tread, for there could not have been fewer than a thousand animals in the herd. But as the horsemen drew near they increased their speed and put the steeds, fleet and strong though they were, to their mettle.

On approaching the buffaloes the horsemen separated, each fixing his attention on a particularly fat young cow and pressing towards it. Bounce was successful in coming up with the one he had selected, and put a ball through its heart at the first shot. Not so Marston. Misfortune awaited him. Having come close up with the animal he meant to shoot, he cocked his rifle and held it in readiness

across the pommel of his saddle, at the same time urging his horse nearer, in order to make a sure shot. When the horse had run up so close that its head was in line with the buffalo's flank, he pointed his rifle at its shoulder. At that precise moment the horse, whose attention was entirely engrossed with the buffalo, put its left forefoot into a badger's hole. The consequence of such an accident is, usually, a tremendous flight through the air on the part of the rider, while his steed rolls upon the plain; but on the present occasion a still more surprising result followed. March Marston not only performed the aerial flight, but he alighted with considerable violence on the back of the affrighted buffalo. Falling on his face in a sprawling manner, he chanced to grasp the hairy mane of the creature with both hands, and, with a violent half-involuntary effort, succeeded in seating himself astride its back.

The whole thing was done so instantaneously that he had scarce time to realise what had happened to him ere he felt himself sweeping comfortably over the prairie on this novel and hitherto unridden steed! A spirit of wild, ungovernable glee instantly arose within him. Seizing the handle of the heavy hunting-whip, which still hung from his right wrist by a leather thong, he flourished it in the air, and brought it down on his charger's flank with a crack like a pistol-shot, causing the animal to wriggle its tail, toss its ponderous head, and kick up its heels, in a way that wellnigh unseated him.

The moment Bounce beheld this curious apparition, he uttered a short laugh, or grunt, and, turning his horse abruptly, soon ranged up alongside.

"Hallo, March!" he exclaimed, "are you mad, boy?"

"Just about it," cried Marston, giving the buffalo another cut with the whip, as he looked round with sparkling eyes and a broad grin at the hunter.

"Come, now, that won't do," said Bounce gravely. "I'm 'sponsible to your mother for you. Git off now, or I'll poke ye over."

"Git off!" shouted the youth, "how can I?"

"Well, keep your right leg a bit to one side, an' I'll stop yer horse for ye," said Bounce, coolly cocking his rifle.

"Hold hard, old fellow!" cried Marston, in some alarm; "you'll smash my thigh-bone if you try. Stay, I'll do the thing myself."

Saying this, Marston drew his long hunting-knife, and plunged it into the buffalo's side.

"Lower down, lad—lower down. Ye can't reach the life there."

March bent forward, and plunged his knife into the animal's side again—up to the hilt; but it still kept on its headlong course, although the blood flowed in streams upon the plain. The remainder of the buffaloes had diverged right and left, leaving this singular group alone.

"Mind your eye," said Bounce quickly, "she's a-goin' to fall."

Unfortunately Marston had not time given him to mind either his eye or his neck. The wounded buffalo stumbled, and fell to the ground with a sudden and heavy plunge, sending its wild rider once again on an aerial journey, which terminated in his coming down on the plain so violently that he was rendered insensible.

On recovering consciousness, he found himself lying on his back, in what seemed to be a beautiful forest, through which a stream flowed with a gentle, silvery sound. The bank opposite rose considerably higher than the spot on which he lay, and he could observe, through his half-closed eyelids, that its green slope was gemmed with beautiful flowers, and gilded with patches of sunlight that struggled through the branches overhead.

Young Marston's first impression was that he must be dreaming, and that he had got into one of the fairytale regions about which he had so often read to his mother. A shadow seemed to pass over his eyes as he thought this, and, looking up, he beheld the rugged face of Bounce gazing at him with an expression of considerable interest and anxiety.

"I say, Bounce, this is jolly!"

"Is it?" replied the hunter with a "humph!"

"If ye try to lift yer head, I guess you'll change yer opinion."

Marston did try to raise his head, and did change his opinion. His neck felt as if it were a complication of iron hinges, which had become exceedingly rusty, and stood much in need of oil.

"Oh dear!" groaned Marston, letting his head fall back on the saddle from which he had raised it.

"Ah, I thought so!" remarked Bounce.

"And is that all the sympathy you have got to give me, you old savage?" said the youth testily.

"By no means," replied the other, patting his head; "here's a drop o' water as'll do ye good, lad, and after you've drunk it, I'll rub ye down."

"Thank'ee for the water," said Marston with a deep sigh, as he lay back, after drinking with difficulty; "as to the rubbin' down, I'll ask for that when I want it. But tell me, Bounce, what has happened to me?—oh! I remember now—the buffalo cow and that famous gallop. Ha! ha! ha!—ho—o!"

Marston's laugh terminated in an abrupt groan as the rusty hinges again clamoured for oil.

"You'll have to keep quiet, boy, for a few hours, and take a sleep if you can. I'll roast a bit o' meat and rub ye down with fat after you've eat as much of it as ye can. There's nothing like beef for a sick man's inside, an' fat for his outside—that's the feelosophy o' the whole matter. You've a'most bin bu'sted wi' that there fall; but you'll be alright to-morrow. An' you've killed yer buffalo, lad, so yer mother 'll get the hump after all. Only keep yer mind easy, an' I guess human nature 'll do the rest."

Having delivered himself of these sentiments in a quietly oracular manner, Bounce again patted March on the head, as if he had been a large baby or a favourite dog, and, rising up, proceeded to kindle a small fire, and to light his pipe.

Bounce smoked a tomahawk, which is a small iron hatchet used by most of the Indians of North America as a battle-axe. There is an iron pipe bowl on the top of the weapon, and the handle, which is hollow, answers the purpose of a pipe stem.

The hunter continued to smoke, and Marston continued to gaze at him till he fell asleep. When he awoke, Bounce was still smoking his tomahawk in the self-same attitude. The youth might have concluded that he had been asleep only a few minutes and that his friend had never moved; but he was of an observant nature, and noticed that there was a savoury, well-cooked buffalo-steak near the fire, and that a strong odour of marrow-bones tickled his nostrils—also, that the sun no longer rested on the green bank opposite. Hence, he concluded that he must have slept a considerable time, and that the tomahawk had been filled and emptied more than once.

"Well, lad," said Bounce, looking round, "had a comf'rable nap?"

"How did you know I was awake?" said March. "You weren't looking at me, and I didn't move."

"P'r'aps not, lad; but you winked."

"'Cause ye couldn't wink if ye wos asleep, an' I heerd ye breathe diff'rent from afore, so I know'd ye wos awake; an' I knows that a man always winks w'en he comes awake, d'ye see? That's wot I calls the feelosophy of obsarvation."

"Very good," replied Marston, "and, that bein' the case, I should like much to try a little of the 'feelosophy' of supper."

"Right, lad, here you are; there's nothin' like it," rejoined Bounce, handing a pewter plate of juicy steak and marrow-bones to his young companion.

Marston attained a sitting posture with much difficulty and pain; but when he had eaten the steak and the marrow-bones he felt much better; and when he had swallowed a cup of hot tea (for they carried a small quantity of tea and sugar with them, by way of luxury), he felt immensely better; and when he finally lay down for the night he felt perfectly well—always excepting a sensation of general batteredness about the back, and a feeling of rusty-hinges-wanting-oiliness in the region of the neck.

"Now, Bounce," said he, as he lay down and pulled his blanket over his shoulder, "are the horses hobbled and the rifles loaded, and my mother's hump out o' the way of wolves?"

"All right, lad."

"Then, Bounce, you go ahead and tell me a story till I'm off asleep. Don't stop tellin' till I'm safe off. Pull my nose to make sure; and if I don't say 'hallo!' to that, I'm all right—in the land of Nod."

March Marston smiled as he said this, and Bounce grinned by way of reply.

"Wot'll I tell ye about, boy?"

"I don't mind what—Indians, grislies, buffaloes, trappers—it's all one to me; only begin quick and go ahead strong."

"Well, I ain't great at story-tellin'! P'r'aps it would be more to the p'int if I was to tell ye about what I heer'd tell of on my last trip to the Mountains. Did I ever tell ye about the feller as the trappers that goes to the far North calls the 'Wild Man o' the West'?"

"No; what was he?" said Marston, yawning and closing his eyes.

"I dun know 'xactly wot he *was*. I'm not overly sure that I even know wot he *is*, but I know wot the trappers says of him; an' if only the half o't's true, he's a shiner, he is."

Having said this much, Bounce filled his tomahawk, lighted it, puffed a large cloud from it, and looked through the smoke at his companion.

March, whose curiosity was aroused, partly by the novelty of the "Wild Man's" title, and partly by the lugubrious solemnity of Bounce, said—

"Go on, old boy."

"Ha! it's easy to say, 'go on;' but if you know'd the 'orrible things as is said about the Wild Man o' the Mountains, p'r'aps you'd say, 'Go off.' It 'll make yer blood froze."

"Never mind."

"An' yer hair git up on end."

"Don't care."

"An' yer two eyes start out o' yer head."

"All right."

Bounce, who was deeply superstitious, looked at his young friend with severe gravity for at least two minutes. Marston, who was not quite so superstitious, looked at his comrade for exactly the same length of time, and winked with one eye at the end of it.

"They says," resumed Bounce in a deep tone, "the Wild Man o' the West *eats men*!"

"Don't he eat women?" inquired March sleepily.

"Yes, an' childers too. An' wot's wuss, he eats 'em raw, an' they say he once swallered one—a little one—alive, without chewin' or chokin'!" ("Horrible!" murmured March.) "He's a dead shot, too; he carries a double-barrelled rifle twenty foot long that takes a small cannon-ball. I forgot to tell ye he's a giant—some o' the trappers calls him the 'giant o' the hills,' and they say he's 'bout thirty feet high—some says forty. But there's no gittin' at the truth in this here wurld."

Bounce paused here, but, as his companion made no observation, he went on in a half-soliloquising fashion, looking earnestly all the time into the heart of the fire, as if he were addressing his remarks to a salamander.

"Ay, he's a crack shot, as I wos sayin'. One day he fell in with a grisly bar, an' the brute rushed at him; so he up rifle an' puts a ball up each nose,"—("I didn't know a grisly had two noses," murmured March,)—"an' loaded agin', an' afore it comed up he put a ball in each eye; then he drew his knife an' split it right down the middle from nose to tail at one stroke, an' cut it across with another stroke; an', puttin' one quarter on his head, he took another quarter under each arm, an' the fourth quarter in his mouth, and so walked home to his cave in the mountains—'bout one hundred and fifty miles off, where he roasted an' ate the whole bar at one sittin'—bones, hair, an' all!"

This flight was too strong for March. He burst into a fit of laughter, which called the rusty hinges into violent action and produced a groan. The laugh and the groan together banished drowsiness, so he turned on his back, and said—

"Bounce, do you really believe all that?"

Thus pointedly questioned on what he felt to be a delicate point, Bounce drew a great number of whiffs from the tomahawk ere he ventured to reply. At length he said—

"Well, to say truth, an' takin' a feelosophical view o' the p'int—I *don't*. But I b'lieve *some* of it. I do b'lieve there's some 'xtraord'nary critter in them there mountains—for I've lived nigh forty years, off and on, in these parts, an' I've always obsarved that in this wurld w'enever ye find *anythin'* ye've always got *somethin'*. Nobody never got hold o' somethin' an' found afterwards that it wos nothin'. So I b'lieve there's somethin' in this wild man—how much I dun know."

Bounce followed up this remark with a minute account of the reputed deeds of this mysterious creature, all of which were more or less marvellous; and at length succeeded in interesting his young companion so deeply, as to fill him with a good deal of his own belief in at least a wild *something* that dwelt in the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

After a great deal of talk, and prolonged discussion, Bounce concluded with the assertion that "he'd give his best rifle, an' that was his only one, to see this wild man."

To which Marston replied—

"I'll tell you what it is, Bounce, I *will* see this wild man, if it's in the power of bones and muscles to carry me within eyeshot of him. Now, see if I don't."

Bounce nodded his head and looked sagacious, as he said—

"D'ye know, lad, I don't mind if I go along with ye. It's true, I'm not tired of them parts hereabouts—and if I wos to live till I couldn't see, I don't think as ever I'd git tired o' the spot where my father larned me to shoot an' my mother dandled me on her knee; but I've got a fancy to see a little more o' the wurld—'specially the far-off parts o' the Rocky Mountains, w'ere I've never bin yit; so I do b'lieve if ye wos to try an' persuade me very hard I'd consent to go along with ye."

"Will you, though?" cried March eagerly (again, to his cost, forgetting the rusty hinges).

"Ay, that will I, boy," replied the hunter; "an' now I think on it, there's four as jolly trappers in Pine Point settlement at this here moment as ever floored a grisly or fought an Injun. They're the real sort of metal. None o' yer tearin', swearin', murderin' chaps, as thinks the more they curse the bolder they are, an' the more Injuns they kill the cliverer they are; but steady quiet fellers, as don't speak much, but *does* a powerful quantity; boys that know a deer from a Blackfoot Injun, I guess; that goes to the mountains to trap and comes back to sell their skins, an' w'en they've sold 'em, goes right off agin, an' niver drinks."

"I know who you mean, I think; at least I know one of them," observed March.

"No ye don't, do ye? Who?"

"Waller, the Yankee."

"That's one," said Bounce, nodding; "Big Waller, we calls him."

"I'm not sure that I can guess the others. Surely Tim Slater isn't one?"

"No!" said Bounce, with an emphasis of tone and a peculiar twist of the point of his nose that went far to stamp the individual named with a character the reverse of noble. "Try agin."

"I can't guess."

"One's a French Canadian," said Bounce; "a little chap, with a red nose an' a pair o' coal-black eyes, but as bold as a lion."

"I know him," interrupted March; "Gibault Noir—Black Gibault, as they sometimes call him. Am I right?"

"Right, lad; that's two. Then there's Hawkswing, the Injun whose wife and family were all murdered by a man of his own tribe, and who left his people after that an' tuck to trappin' with the whites; that's three. An' there's Redhand, the old trapper that's bin off and on between this place and the Rocky Mountains for nigh fifty years, I believe."

"Oh, I know him well. He must be made of iron, I think, to go through what he does at his time of life. I wonder what his right name is?"

"Nobody knows that, lad. You know, as well as I do, that he wos called Redhand by the Injuns in consekence o' the lot o' grislies he's killed in his day; but nobody never could git at his real name. P'r'aps it's not worth gittin' at. Now, them four 'll be startin' in a week or two for the mountains, an' wot's to hinder us a-jinin' of them?"

To his own question Bounce, after a pause, replied with deliberate emphasis, "Nothin' wotsomdiver;" and his young companion heartily echoed the sentiment.

Exactly thirty-six hours after the satisfactory formation of the above resolution, March Marston galloped furiously towards the door of his mother's cottage, reined up, leaped to the ground, seized the buffalo-hump that hung at his saddle-bow, and entered with a good deal of that impetuosity that had gone far to procure for him the title of madman. Flinging the bloody mass of meat on the floor he sat down on a chair, and said—

"There, mother!"

"Well, you *are* a clever fellow," said Mrs Marston, drying her hands (for she had been washing dishes), and giving her son a hearty kiss on the forehead.

"Clever or not clever, mother, I'm off to the Rocky Mountains in two days."

Mrs Marston was neither dismayed nor surprised. She was used to that sort of thing, and didn't mind it.

"What to do there, my boy?"

"To see the Wild Man o' the West."

"The what?"

"The Wild Man o' the West, mother."

It is needless to try our reader's patience with the long conversation that followed. March had resolved to preach a discourse with the "Wild Man o' the West" for his text, and he preached so eloquently that his mother (who was by no means a timid woman) at length not only agreed to let him go, but commended him for his resolution. The only restraint she laid upon her son had reference to his behaviour towards the Wild Man, if he should happen to meet with him.

"You may look at him, March (Mrs Marston spoke of him as if he were a caged wild beast!) and you may speak to him, but you *must not* fight with him, except in self-defence. If he lets *you* alone, you must let *him* alone. Promise me that, boy."

"I promise, mother."

Not long after this promise was made, a light bark canoe was launched upon the river, and into it stepped our hero, with his friend Bounce, and Big Waller, Black Gibault, Hawkswing, and Redhand, the trappers. A cheer rang from the end of the little wharf at Pine Point, as the frail craft shot out into the stream. The wild woods echoed back the cheer, which mingled with the lusty answering shout of the trappers as they waved their caps to the friends they left behind them. Then, dipping their paddles with strong rapid strokes, they headed the canoe towards the Rocky Mountains, and soon disappeared up one of those numerous tributary streams that constitute the head waters of the Missouri river.

Chapter Three

The Beauties of the Wilderness—Portages—Philosophy of Settling Down —An Enormous Footprint—Supper procured, and a Bear-hunt in prospect

After paddling, and hauling, and lifting, and tearing, and wading, and toiling, and struggling, for three weeks, our hero and his friends found themselves deep in the heart of the unknown wilderness —unknown, at least, to the civilised world, though not altogether unknown to the trappers and the Red Indians of the Far West.

There is something inexpressibly romantic and captivating in the idea of traversing those wild regions of this beautiful world of ours which have never been visited by human beings, with the exception of a few wandering savages who dwell therein.

So thought and felt young Marston one splendid afternoon, as he toiled up to the summit of a grassy mound with a heavy pack on his shoulders. Throwing down the pack, he seated himself upon it, wiped his heated brow with the sleeve of his hunting-shirt, and gazed with delight upon the noble landscape that lay spread out before him.

"Ha! *that's* the sort o' thing—that's it!"—he exclaimed, nodding his head, as if the rich and picturesque arrangement of wood and water had been got up expressly for his benefit, and he were pleased to signify his entire approval of it.

"That's just it," he continued after a short contemplative pause, "just what I expected to find. Ain't I glad? eh?"

March certainly looked as if he was; but, being at that moment alone, no one replied to his question or shared his enjoyment. After another pause he resumed his audible meditations.

"Now, did ever any one see sich a place as this in all the wide 'arth? That's what I want to know. Never! Just look at it now. There's miles an' miles o' woods an' plains, an' lakes, an' rivers, wherever I choose to look—all round me. And there are deer, too, lots of 'em, lookin' quite tame, and no wonder, for I suppose the fut of man never rested here before, except, maybe, the fut of a redskin now an' again. And there's poplars, an' oaks, an' willows, as thick as they can grow."

March might have added that there were also elm, and sycamore, and ash, and hickory, and walnut, and cotton-wood trees in abundance, with numerous aspen groves, in the midst of which were lakelets margined with reeds and harebells, and red willows, and wild roses, and chokeberries, and prickly pears, and red and white currants. He might, we say, have added all this, and a great deal more, with perfect truth; but he didn't, for his knowledge of the names of such things was limited, so he confined himself, like a wise youth, to the enumeration of those things that he happened to be acquainted with.

"And," continued March, starting up and addressing his remark to a hollow in the ground a few yards off, "there's grisly bars here, too, for there's the futmark of one, as sure as I'm a white man!"

Most people would have been inclined to differ with March in regard to his being a white man, for he was as brown as constant exposure in hot weather could make him; but he referred to his blood rather than to his skin, which was that of white parents.

The footprint which he had discovered was, indeed, that of a grisly bear, and he examined it with more than usual interest, for, although many of those ferocious denizens of the western woods had been already seen, and a few shot by the trappers on their voyage to this point, none had been seen so large as the monster whose footprint now attracted Marston's attention. The print was eleven inches long, exclusive of the claws, and seven inches broad.

While March was busily engaged in examining it, Black Gibault came panting up the hill with a huge pack on his back.

"Ho! March, me garçon, vat you be find là?" cried the Canadian, throwing down his pack and advancing. "A bar, Gibault; Caleb himself. A regular big un, too. Just look here."

"Ah! oui, vraiment; dat am be one extinishin' vopper, sure 'nuff. Mais, him's gone pass long ago, so you better come avay an' finish de portage."

"Not I, lad," cried March gaily, as he flung himself upon the grassy mound; "I'm goin' to admire this splendid country till I'm tired of it, and leave you and the other fellows to do the work."

"Oh! ver' goot," cried Gibault, sitting down beside our hero, and proceeding to fill his pipe, "I will 'mire de countray, too. Ha! it be unmarkibly beautiful—specially when beholded troo one cloud of tabacca smoke."

"Alas! Gibault, we'll have to move off sooner than we expected, for there it comes."

The two friends leaped up simultaneously, and, seizing their packs, hurried down the mound, entered the thick bushes, and vanished.

The object whose sudden appearance had occasioned this abrupt departure would, in truth, have been somewhat singular, not to say alarming, in aspect, to those who did not know its nature. At a distance it looked like one of those horrible antediluvian monsters one reads of, with a lank body, about thirty feet long. It was reddish-yellow in colour, and came on at a slow, crawling pace, its back appearing occasionally above the underwood. Presently its outline became more defined, and it turned out to be a canoe instead of an antediluvian monster, with Big Waller and Bounce acting the part of legs to it. Old Redhand the trapper and Hawkswing the Indian walked alongside, ready to relieve their comrades when they should grow tired—for a large canoe is a heavy load for two men —or to assist them in unusually bad places, or to support them and prevent accidents, should they chance to stumble.

"Have a care now, lad, at the last step," said Redhand, who walked a little in advance.

"Yer help would be better than yer advice, old feller," replied Bounce, as he stepped upon the ridge or mound which Marston and his companion had just quitted. "Lend a hand; we'll take a spell here. I do believe my shoulder's out o' joint. There, gently—that's it."

"Wall, I guess this *is* Eden," cried Big Waller, gazing around him with unfeigned delight. "Leastwise, if it ain't, it must be the very nixt location to them there diggins of old Father Adam. Ain't it splendiferous?"

Big Waller was an out-and-out Yankee trapper. It is a mistake to suppose that all Yankees "guess" and "calculate," and talk through their nose. There are many who don't, as well as many who do; but certain it is that Big Waller possessed all of these peculiarities in an alarming degree. Moreover, he was characteristically thin and tall and sallow. Nevertheless, he was a hearty, good-natured fellow, not given to boasting so much as most of his class, but much more given to the performance of daring deeds. In addition to his other qualities, the stout Yankee had a loud, thundering, melodious voice, which he was fond of using, and tremendous activity of body, which he was fond of exhibiting.

He was quite a contrast, in all respects, to his Indian companion, Hawkswing, who, although about as tall, was not nearly so massive or powerful. Like most North American Indians, he was grave and taciturn in disposition; in other respects there was nothing striking about him. He was clad, like his comrades, in a trapper's hunting-shirt and leggings; but he scorned to use a cap of any kind, conceiving that his thick, straight, black hair was a sufficient covering, as undoubtedly it was. He was as courageous as most men; a fair average shot, and, when occasion required, as lithe and agile as a panther; but he was not a hero—few savages are. He possessed one good quality, however, beyond his kinsmen—he preferred mercy to revenge, and did not gloat over the idea of tearing the scalps off his enemies, and fringing his coat and leggings therewith.

"'Tis a sweet spot," said Redhand to his comrades, who stood or reclined in various attitudes around him. "Such a place as I've often thought of casting anchor in for life."

"An' why don't ye, then?" inquired Waller. "If I was thinkin' o' locating down anywhar', I guess I'd jine ye, old man. But I'm too fond o' rovin' for that yet. I calc'late it'll be some years afore I come to that pint. Why don't ye build a log hut, and enjoy yerself?"

"'Cause I've not just come to that point either," replied the old man with a smile.

Redhand had passed his best days many years before. His form was spare, and his silvery locks were thin; but his figure was still tall and straight as a poplar, and the fire of youth still lingered in his dark-blue eye. The most striking and attractive point about Redhand was the extreme kindliness that beamed in his countenance. A long life in the wilderness had wrinkled it; but every wrinkle tended, somehow, to bring out the great characteristic of the man. Even his frown had something kindly in it. The prevailing aspect was that of calm serenity. Redhand spoke little, but he was an attentive listener, and, although he never laughed loudly, he laughed often and heartily, in his own way, at the sallies of his younger comrades. In youth he must have been a strikingly handsome man. Even in old age he was a strong one.

"I'll tell ye what's my opinion now, boys, in regard to settlin' down," said Bounce, who, having filled and lighted his pipe, now found himself in a position to state his views comfortably. "Ye see, settlin' down may, in a gin'ral way, be said to be nonsense. In pint o' fact, there ain't no sich a thing as settlin' down. When a feller sits down, why, in a short bit, he's bound to rise up agin, and when he goes to bed, he means for to get up next mornin'." (Here Bounce paused, drew several whiffs, and rammed down the tobacco in his pipe with the end of his little finger.) "Then, when a feller locates in a place, he's sure for to be movin' about, more or less, as long as he's got a leg to stand on. Now, what I say is, that when a man comes to talk o' settlin' down, he's losin' heart for a wanderin' life among all the beautiful things o' creation; an' when a man loses heart for the beautiful things o' creation, he'll soon settle down for good and all. He's in a bad way, he is, and oughtn't to encourage hisself in sich feelin's. I b'lieve that to be the feelosophy o' the whole affair, and I don't b'lieve that nobody o' common edication—I don't mean school edication, but backwoods edication—would go for to think otherwise. Wot say you, Waller?"

"Sartinly not," replied the individual thus appealed to.

Big Waller had a deep reverence for the supposed wisdom of his friend Bounce. He listened to his lucubrations with earnest attention at all times, and, when he understood them, usually assented to all his friend said. When Bounce became too profound for him, as was not infrequently the case, he contented himself with nodding his head, as though to say, "I'm with you in heart, lad, though not quite clear in my mind; but it's all right, I'm quite sartin."

"Well, then," resumed Bounce, turning to Redhand, "what do *you* think o' them sentiments, old man?"

Redhand, who had been paying no attention whatever to these sentiments, but, during the delivery of them, had been gazing wistfully out upon the wide expanse of country before him, laid his hand on Bounce's shoulder, and said in a low, earnest tone—

"It's a grand country! D'ye see the little clear spot yonder, on the river bank, with the aspen grove behind it, an' the run of prairie on the right, an' the little lake not a gun-shot off on the left? That's the spot I've sometimes thought of locatin' on when my gun begins to feel too heavy. There'll be cities there some day. Bricks and mortar and stone 'll change its face—an' cornfields, an'– but not in our day, lad, not in our day. The redskins and the bears 'll hold it as long as we're above ground. Yes, I'd like to settle down there."

"Come, come, Redhand," said Bounce, "this sort o' thing 'll never do. Why, you're as hale and hearty as the best on us. Wot on 'arth makes you talk of settlin' down in that there fashion?"

"Ha!" exclaimed Waller energetically, "I guess if ye goes on in that style ye'll turn into a riglar hiplecondrik—ain't that the word, Bounce? I heer'd the minister say as it was the wust kind o' the blues. What's *your* opinion o' settlin' down, Hawkswing?"

To this question the Indian gravely replied in his own language (with which the trappers were well acquainted), that, not having the remotest idea of what they were talking about, he entertained no opinion in regard to it whatever.

"Well, wotiver others may hold," remarked Bounce emphatically, "I'm strong agin' settlin' down nowhar'."

"So am I, out an' out," said Waller.

"Dat be plain to the naked eye," observed Gibault, coming up at the moment. "Surement you have settle down here for ever. Do you s'pose, mes garçons, dat de canoe will carry *hisself* over de portage? Voilà! vat is dat?"

Gibault pointed to the footprint of the grisly bear, as he spoke.

"It's a bar," remarked Bounce quietly.

"Caleb," added Waller, giving the name frequently applied to the grisly bear by western hunters. "I calc'late it's nothin' new to see Caleb's fut in the mud."

"Mais, it be new to see hims fut so big, you oogly Yankee," cried Gibault, putting Waller's cap over his eyes, and running into the bush to avoid the consequences.

At that moment a deer emerged from the bushes, about fifty yards from the spot on which the trappers rested, and, plunging into the river, made for the opposite bank.

"There's our supper," said Bounce, quietly lifting his rifle in a leisurely way, and taking aim without rising from the spot on which he sat or removing the pipe from his lips.

The sharp crack was followed by a convulsive heave on the part of the deer, which fell over on its side and floated downstream.

Big Waller gave utterance to a roar of satisfaction, and, flinging his pipe from him, bounded down the bank towards a point of rock, where he knew, from the set of the current, the deer would be certain to be stranded. Gibault, forgetting his recent piece of impertinence, darted towards the same place, and both men reached it at the same instant. Big Waller immediately lifted his little friend in his huge arms, and tossed him into the centre of a thick soft bush, out of which he scrambled in time to see his comrade catch the deer by the horns, as it floated past, and drag it on shore.

"Hoh! I vill pay you off von time," cried Gibault, laughing, and shaking his fist at Waller. Then, seizing the last bale of goods that had not been carried across the portage, he ran away with it nimbly up the bank of the stream.

Big Waller placed the deer on his shoulders with some difficulty, and followed in the same direction.

On reaching the other end of the portage, they found the canoe reloaded and in the water, and their comrades evincing symptoms of impatience.

"Come on, lads, come on," cried March, who seemed to be the most impatient of them all. "We've seen Caleb! He's up the river, on this side. Get in! He's sich a banger, oh!"

Before the sentence was well finished, all the men were in their places except Black Gibault, who remained on the bank to shove off the canoe.

"Now, lad, get in," said Redhand, whose usually quiet eye appeared to gleam at the near prospect of a combat with the fierce and much-dreaded monster of the Far West.

"All right, mes garçons," replied Gibault; "hand me mine gun; I vill valk on the bank, an' see vich vay hims go—so, adieu!"

With a powerful push, he sent the light craft into the stream, and, turning on his heel, entered the woods.

The others at once commenced paddling up the river with energetic strokes.

"He's a wild feller that," remarked Bounce, after they had proceeded some distance and reached a part of the stream where the current was less powerful. "I'd bet my rifle he's git the first shot at Caleb; I only hope he'll not fall in with him till we git ashore, else it may go hard with him."

"So it may," said Waller; "if it goes as hard wi' Gibault as it did wi' my old comrade, Bob Swan, it'll be no fun, I guess."

"What happened to him?" asked March, who was ever open-eared for stories.

"Oh, it was nothing very curious, but I guess it was 'onconvanient,' as them coons from Ireland says. Bob Swan went—he did—away right off alone, all by hisself, to shoot a grisly with a old musket as wasn't fit to fire powder, not to speak o' ball. He was sich a desprit feller, Bob Swan was, that he cut after it without takin' time to see wot wos in the gun. I follered him as fast as I could, hollerin' for him to stop and see if he wos loaded; but I calc'late he was past stoppin'. Wall, he comes up wi' the bar suddently, and the bar looks at him, and he looks at it. Then he runs up, claps the gun to his shoulder, and pulls the trigger; but it wos a rusty old lock, an' no fire came. There was fire come from the bar's eyes, though, I *do* guess! It ran at him, an' he ran away. Of course Caleb soon came up, an' Bob primed as he ran an' wheeled about, stuck the muzzle of the old musket right into Caleb's mouth, and fired. He swallered the whole charge, that bar did, as if it had been a glass o' grog, and didn't he cough some? Oh no! an' he roared, too, jist like this—"

Big Waller, in the excitement of his narrative, was about to give a vocal illustration, when Bounce suddenly extinguished him by clapping his hand on his mouth.

"Hist! you wild buffalo," he said, "you'll frighten off all the bars within ten miles of us, if you raise your horrable trumpet!"

"I do believe, I forgot," said the Yankee with a low chuckle, when his mouth was released.

"Well, but what happened to Bob Swan?" inquired March eagerly.

"Wot happened? I guess the bar cotched him by the leg, an' smashed it in three places, before you could wink, but, by good luck, I come up at that moment, an' put a ball right through Caleb's brains. Bob got better, but he never got the right use o' his leg after that. An' we found that he'd fired a charge o' small shot down that bar's throat—he had!"

"Hallo! look! is yon Caleb?" inquired March in a hoarse whisper, as he pointed with his paddle to a distant point up the river, where a dark object was seen moving on the bank.

"That's him," said Bounce. "Now then, do your best, an' we'll land on the point just below him."

"That's sooner said than done," remarked Redhand quietly, "for there's another portage between us and Caleb."

As the old man spoke, the canoe passed round a low point which had hitherto shut out the view of the bed of the river from the travellers, and the vision of a white, though not a high, waterfall burst upon their sight, at the same moment that the gushing sound of water broke upon their ears. At any other time the beauty of the scene would have drawn forth warm, though perhaps quaint and pithy, remarks of admiration. Wood and water were seen picturesquely mingled and diversified in endless variety. Little islands studded the surface of the river, which was so broad and calm at that place as to wear the appearance of a small lake. At the upper end of this lake it narrowed abruptly, and here occurred the fall, which glittered in the sun's bright rays like a cascade of molten silver. The divers trees and shrubs, both on the islets and on the mainland, presented in some places the rich cultivated appearance of the plantations on a well-tended domain; but, in other places, the fallen timber, the rank tangled vegetation, and the beautiful wild flowers showed that man's hand had not yet destroyed the wild beauty of the virgin wilderness. The sky above was bright and blue, with a few thin feathery clouds resting motionless upon its vast concave, and the air was so still that even the tremulous aspen leaves were but slightly agitated, while the rest of the forest's drapery hung perfectly motionless.

Complete silence would have reigned but for the mellow sound of the distant fall and the sweet, plaintive cries of innumerable wildfowl that flew hither and thither, or revelled in the security of their sedgy homes. Flocks of wild geese passed in constant succession overhead, in the form of acute

angles, giving a few trumpet notes now and then, as if to advertise their passage to the far north to the dwellers in the world below. Bustling teal rose in groups of dozens or half-dozens as the red canoe broke upon their astonished gaze, and sent them, with whistling wings, up or down the river. A solitary northern diver put up his long neck here and there to gaze for an instant inquisitively, and then sank, as if for ever, into the calm water, to reappear long after in some totally new and unexpected quarter. A napping duck or two, being wellnigh run over by the canoe, took wing with a tremendous splutter and a perfectly idiotical compound of a quack and a roar, while numerous flocks of plover, which had evidently meant to lie still among the sedges and hide while the canoe passed, sprang into the air at the unwonted hullabaloo, and made off, with diverse shriek and whistle, as fast as their wings could carry them. Besides these noisy denizens of the wilderness, there were seen, in various places, cranes, and crows, and magpies, and black terns, and turkey-buzzards, all of which were more or less garrulous in expressing surprise at the unexpected appearance of the trappers in their wild domain. And, just as the canoe drew near to the place at the foot of the fall where they meant to land and make the portage, a little cabri, or prong-horned antelope, leaped out of the woods, intending, doubtless, to drink, caught sight of the intruders, gave one short glance of unutterable amazement, and then rebounded into the bush like an electrified indiarubber ball.

"Now, then," said Bounce as he leaped ashore, and held the canoe steady while his comrades landed, "jist be cool, an' no hurry; make the portage, launch the canoe atop o' the fall, sot off agin, an' then—hurrah for that there grisly bar!"

Chapter Four

Gibault has an Adventure, and discovers a very strange Creature in the Woods—A most tremendous Bear-Hunt particularly described

Meanwhile Black Gibault, having followed the course of the river for some distance on foot, struck into the woods, sought for and found the track of the bear, and, looking carefully to the priming of his gun, and knocking the edge of the flint to sharpen it, pushed forward in pursuit with the ardour of a reckless man.

Gibault Noir was a goose! But he was an amiable goose; therefore men forgave his follies. Had Gibault not been a goose he never would have set off alone in pursuit of a grisly bear when he had comrades who might have accompanied him. Every one knows—at least, if every one does not know, every one who reads these pages may know henceforth—that the grisly bear of the western prairies and Rocky Mountains is one of the most desperate and most dreaded animals on the face of the earth; not dreaded merely by the weak and the timorous, but dreaded also by the bravest Indians and the boldest trappers. Of course we do not mean to say that by these latter the grisly bear is dreaded with anything like cowardly terror; but it is regarded with that degree of wholesome anxiety and extreme caution with which men usually regard an excessively dangerous and powerful enemy.

Unlike other bears, the grisly bear scorns to fly from before the face of man. His ferocity, when wounded, is terrible, and his tenacity of life is such that, however many mortal wounds one may give him, he will retain life and strength long enough to kill his assailant before he himself dies, unless he is shot dead at once by a ball being planted in his heart or brain, both of which are difficult to reach.

He has a grumpy sort of magnanimity of his own, however, and will usually let men alone if men will let him alone. But men are not prone to let anything alone; hence encounters are frequent; wounds, on both sides, are numerous; and death, on one or other side, is almost certain.

Old trappers are not fond of attacking Caleb single-handed, but young hot-blooded fellows, who have got their names to make, are less cautious, and sometimes even court the combat, as was the case in the present instance with reckless Gibault Noir.

For half an hour, Gibault went over the ground at a sort of half-walk, half-trot, stopping occasionally to examine the prints of the bear more narrowly when they passed across hard ground that did not take a good impression. At length he came to a deep gully or creek, where the bushes were so dense that he could not see far through them in any direction. Here he halted, re-examined his priming, and, peering cautiously through the underwood, advanced with much greater deliberation and care than heretofore.

In descending the gully, Gibault stumbled once or twice, and made one or two crashing bursts through bushes that would have proved quite impervious to most men. After much toil he reached the bottom, and, standing there, up to the ankles in a small rivulet, gazed upward at the bank he had now to ascend.

“Vraiment, it be uncommonly difficile,” said he, addressing himself to the task, while the perspiration began to roll down his forehead.

At last he reached the top of the bank on the other side, and, after panting for some time, began to look for the bear’s footprints; but these could not now be found. In his scramble through the gully he had lost them, and the ground on the side he had just reached was so hard and rocky that it seemed to him doubtful whether it was capable of receiving any visible impression from a bear’s paw. It was just possible, too, that the animal had found the descent of the gully as difficult as he himself had; in which case it was highly probable that it had used the course of the rivulet as a pathway.

For a moment, the little Canadian meditated a second descent into the gully for the purpose of settling this point, but, having not yet quite ceased to pant from his recent exertions, he thought better of it, and determined to make a further examination of the ground where he was. After doing so for a quarter of an hour, his exertions were rewarded by the discovery of what appeared to be a track. It was not very distinct, but it was sufficiently so to induce him to follow it up with renewed ardour.

Presently he came upon a spot where the ground was not so thickly covered with underwood, and where, in some places, it was so soft as to show an exact print of the foot of the animal he was following up. Here he received a great disappointment, and an equally great surprise—a disappointment on finding that the track he followed was *not* that of a bear, and a surprise on discovering that it *was* that of a man!

On first making this discovery, Gibault stopped short, laid his gun on the ground, stooped down, planted a hand on each knee, opened his eyes to their utmost, pursed his lips to the tightest, and stared at the footprint, the very embodiment of astonishment. After a few seconds he gave vent to a low whistle, and said "Ho!" Exactly ten seconds after that, he said "Ha!" and, raising his right hand, scratched the point of his nose, which, being too red naturally, was not improved by the operation.

None of these acts and exclamations, either collectively or singly, seemed to afford him any enlightenment, for he began to shake his head slowly from side to side, as if he had come to the conclusion that the whole affair was utterly beyond his limited comprehension; then he started up, shouldered his gun, and followed the track of the man with as much ardour as he had formerly pursued that of the bear.

Perseverance is almost invariably rewarded. This would seem to be one of those laws of nature which fail to operate only on very rare and peculiar occasions. Gibault had not advanced more than a hundred yards when he came suddenly upon the man whose feet had made the tracks he had been following.

"The Vild-Man-of-de-Vest! certainement!" muttered Black Gibault slowly, as he gazed at the creature before him, and quietly cocked his rifle to be ready for any emergency.

Certainly the man upon whom our trapper had stumbled thus suddenly might have been styled the wild man of any region—west, north, east, or south,—with perfect propriety. On his legs were a pair of dark grey fustian trousers, which had seen so much service that, from the knee downwards, they were torn into shreds. His feet were covered by a pair of moccasins. Instead of the usual hunting-shirt he wore one of the yellow deerskin coats of a Blackfoot chief, which was richly embroidered with beads and quilt work, and fringed with scalp-locks. On his head he wore a felt hat, with a broad rim and a tall conical crown, somewhat resembling a Spanish sombrero, and beside him, on the bough of a tree, hung a long blue Spanish cloak. The countenance of this extraordinary man was handsome and youthful, but wild and somewhat haggard, as if from much recent suffering. His eye was black and piercing, his nose aquiline, and his forehead broad, but his mouth was effeminate, his chin small and beardless, his neck long, his shoulders narrow and sloping, and his black hair hung in long straight locks over his shoulders. A short sword, somewhat resembling that of the ancient Roman, lay on the sward beside him, and near to it a huge cavalry pistol of the olden time, with a brass barrel and a bell mouth—a species of miniature blunderbuss. Its fellow was stuck in his belt, beneath the chief's coat, as could be observed from the appearance of the butt protruding from the opening in the breast thereof.

This personage was seated on a grassy knoll so absorbed in some curious kind of occupation that he was totally unobservant of the presence of Gibault until he had approached to within thirty yards of him. Although his occupation was a mystery to the trapper, to one a little more conversant with the usages of civilised life, the open book on the knee, the easy flow of the pencil, and the occasional use of a piece of indiarubber, would have been sufficient evidence that the young man was sketching the view before him.

"Ahem!" coughed Gibault.

The stranger scattered book, pencil, and indiarubber to the winds (or to the atmosphere, for there happened to be no wind at the time), and started up. In doing so, he showed that he was at least a tall, if not a stout fellow. Seizing a pistol with one hand and his sword with the other, he presented both at Gibault, and yelled, rather than shouted, "Stay! halt! stop now, my man; drop the butt of your gun, else I'll—I'll blow out your brains."

Although somewhat startled by this unusual mode of salutation, the trapper had sense and quickness enough to perceive that the artist was in anything but a warlike state of mind, and that his violent demonstration was the result of having been startled; so, pulling off his cap with that native politeness which is one of the characteristics of the French Canadian, he advanced, and said—

"Bon jour, monsieur. I ver' moch sorray dat I be give you von fright. Pardon, sair; how you do?"

"Thank you—thank you, good fellow," replied the artist, laying down his weapons and grasping Gibault's proffered hand with a sigh of evident relief, "I am well, excellently well. You did, indeed, startle me by your sudden appearance; but no harm is done, and where none was intended no apology is necessary. You are a Frenchman, I think?"

"Non, sair; not 'xactly. I be French Canadian. Mine fadder was be von Canadian; mine moder was a Frenchvoman; I be leetle of both."

"And you have cause to be proud of your country, my man," returned the artist, collecting his scattered drawing materials and quietly sitting down to continue his sketch, "a splendid country and a noble people. Sit down, my good friend, if you can spare time, while I put a few finishing touches to this sketch."

"Mais," said Gibault, rubbing his nose in great perplexity at the coolness of this eccentric wanderer; "mais, monsieur, I hab *not* time; I be follerin' de tracks of von monstracious grisly bar—"

"What! a grisly bear?" cried the artist, looking up with sudden animation.

"Oui, monsieur. We have see him not long 'go, an' hopes to kill him soon."

The artist's dark eye sparkled with animation as he hastily shut up his sketch-book and thrust it, with his drawing materials, into a small pocket inside the breast of his coat.

"A grisly bear!" he repeated. "Ha! lead on, good fellow, I will follow."

Thus urged, Gibault, without further loss of time, led the way to the banks of the river, followed closely by his new friend, who stalked behind him with long ostrich-like strides. The semi-theatrical air of the artist made a deep impression on the trapper. Had Gibault known what a theatrical air was, he might have been immensely tickled; but, being what he was—an unsophisticated son of the wilderness—he knew nothing about such airs, and therefore regarded his companion in the light of a superior order of being, or a madman; he was not quite sure which.

In a few minutes they emerged from the bushes and came out upon the bank of the river, which at that part was high and precipitous, with few trees, but a considerable quantity of underwood on the slopes.

"Are you sure, friend, that a bear has been seen by you?" inquired the artist.

"Oui; most positavly sure, sair. Ha! an' here be him's fut encore. I have lose him in de vood. Now, monsieur, have your pistol ready."

"Lead on," returned the artist. "I have longed much for this day. To shoot an individual of this ferocious class has been my ambition— Ho! friend, look here. Yonder object seems like a canoe. Whence comes it, think you? This region, I know, is not very safe. There are Indians who do not love the whites in—"

"No fear, monsieur," interrupted Gibault, "dat be mine comerades—Good mans an' true every von. Dey come to land here, I see."

A low growl in the bushes a little distance ahead of them put an abrupt termination to the conversation. Gibault threw forward the muzzle of his gun, and glanced at his comrade. The glance did not tend to comfort him. The artist was pale as death. This, and an occasional twitch of the lip, were clear and unmistakable signs to the backwoodsman that fear had taken possession of his friend,

and that he was not to be counted on in the moment of danger. Yet there was a stern knitting of the eyebrows, and a firm pressure of the lips, that seemed to indicate better qualities, and perplexed him not a little.

"P'r'aps, monsieur," suggested Gibault hesitatingly, "you had better vait for de canoe."

"Lead on!" said the artist, cocking both pistols, and pointing with one of them to the place whence the growl had issued.

Gibault elevated his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders characteristically, and, uttering the single word "bien!" walked quickly forward.

A few steps brought him to an open space, in the midst of which the grisly bear was discovered. It was seated on its haunches, looking sulkily about, as if it had a suspicion that enemies were tracking it. Creeping with the utmost caution on his hands and knees, Gibault got to within forty yards of the monster, whose aspect at that moment was enough to try the courage of most men. There was a wicked glare in his little eye, as he swayed his huge body from side to side, that indicated but too clearly the savage nature of his disposition. Even Gibault felt a little uneasy, and began to think himself a fool for having ventured on such an expedition alone. His state of mind was not improved by the sound of the artist's teeth chattering in his head like castanets.

Taking a very long and deliberate aim at the bear's heart, he pulled the trigger, but the faithless lock of his old flint-gun missed fire. Without a sign of annoyance or agitation, the trapper recocked the gun, again pulled the trigger, and with the same result. Three times this occurred, and at each click of the lock the bear cocked his ears inquiringly. The third time, he rose and sauntered slowly towards the spot where the men lay concealed.

"Stay," whispered the artist, as Gibault was once more about to try his piece, after rubbing the edge of his flint with his thumb-nail; "stay, I will fire."

So saying, he suddenly pointed a pistol straight at the advancing monster and fired. A tremendous roar followed the report. Gibault leaped up, exclaiming angrily, "Vat foolishness! a pistol! hah! ve must run." He turned at once to do so.

"Stay!" cried the artist, who no longer trembled, though his countenance was still ashy pale, "I have another pistol."

"Does you vish to *die*?" yelled the trapper, seizing his comrade by the collar.

Whether it was the yell of the man, or the reiterated roar of the advancing bear, or both combined, that had an effect on the artist, we cannot tell, but certain it is that he sprang up and darted after Gibault with astonishing rapidity. Being long-legged and uncommonly supple he soon passed him; but, fast though they both ran, the bear ran faster, and, having been badly cut up about the face by the slugs with which the pistol had been charged, his spirit was roused to the utmost pitch of ferocity.

Now, while this was going on in the bush, the other trappers were quietly fastening the line of their canoe to a shrub that held it floating in a pool of still water near the shore. No sooner did the pistol-shot ring upon their ears than every man seized his gun, hastily examined the priming, and scrambled up the bank, which at that spot was very steep.

Having gained the top, they paused for an instant to gaze intently at the bank of the river above them, in order to ascertain the exact spot to which they ought to hurry.

"I see no smoke," said March Marston in a tone of deep anxiety.

"Gibault's gun didn't use for to bark in that sort o' voice," observed Bounce.

"I do b'lieve that bar's got 'im," cried Big Waller, bounding forward.

He had not taken a second bound when the artist, flying at full speed about three hundred yards up the river, burst upon the astonished vision of the party. His sombrero had blown off, his long hair streamed straight behind him, so did the scalp-locks on his coat, and so did his long cloak which was fastened to his neck by a clasp, and which, in his present panting and rushing condition, wellnigh strangled him.

Before the wonder-stricken trappers had time to remark on this singular apparition, or to form any opinion in regard to it, poor Gibault came tearing round the point like a maniac, with the bear close upon his heels. This was enough. The backwoodsmen no longer showed any signs of surprise or hesitancy. A grisly bear was a familiar object—a comrade in imminent danger was equally so. They sprang forward to meet the fugitives.

By this time the cloak had so retarded and strangled the poor artist that he had fallen a pace or two behind Gibault, and it seemed almost certain that he would fall a victim to the furious bear before the trappers could kill it, for they could not venture to fire at it while the fugitives almost screened it from their view. As they drew near to each other the trappers almost instinctively divided into two parties. Redhand and Hawkswing went a little to the right; Bounce, Waller, and our hero, diverged to the left, so as to let the flying men pass between them, and thus attack the bear on both sides at once.

Gibault attempted to cheer as he darted through the friendly line, but he could only give forth a gasp. At that moment an unexpected incident contributed to the deliverance of the artist. The bear was within a yard of him as he came up; just then the clasp of his cloak gave way, and the huge garment instantly enveloped the head of the bear and a considerable portion of its body. It tripped, rolled over, and, in attempting to free itself, tore the cloak to shreds.

At the same instant a volley was fired by the trappers, and three balls pierced its body. None of them, however, seemed to have hit a mortal part, for the infuriated animal instantly rose and glared from side to side in disappointed malice, while the trappers who had fired were reloading, each behind a bush, with perfect coolness, but with the utmost celerity.

While the bear was on the ground, the fugitives had each sprung into the bush, and found a place of concealment. Redhand on the one side, and Bounce on the other, had reserved their fire; the wisdom of this was now shown. The bear made a rush at the bushes on one side, and instantly received a shot from the other. It turned at once to rush on the concealed enemy there, but, before it had made a stride in that direction, another ball was lodged in it from the opposite side. The vacillations thus produced gave the other trappers time to reload, and, before it had made up its mind which to attack, another volley was fired, and three balls took effect, Redhand and Bounce still reserving their fire as at the first.

The impotent fury of the creature was now awful to behold. It was mortally wounded; there could be no doubt as to that, for the trappers were all pretty good shots and knew where to fire, but they had not succeeded yet in reaching the seat of life. One ball had broken the bear's shoulder, and the blood flowed from its wounds, while churned blood and foam dropped from its jaws.

Before another volley could be fired it made a furious rush at the three men who had kept away to the left, namely, Big Waller, Bounce, and March. There was no help for it; not having completed their loading, they had to drop their guns and run. We have already said that these three had diverged towards the river. It now proved to be unfortunate that they had done so, for the bank at that place jutted out into the stream in such a way that it was impossible for them to avoid leaping into the river. The bank overhung the stream and was fully twenty feet high. Big Waller, who reached it first, hesitated to take the leap. Bounce, who came next, rushed violently against him, and the two went over together, fell into the water with a tremendous splash, and sank. March come up the instant after, and sprang far out at once with a bold, unhesitating spring. The bear was so close upon the youth that for one moment they were both in the air at the same time, but the former had not gone off with a spring, he merely tumbled over, half involuntarily, so that when they struck the water there was at least a yard between them. But this was not a long space. The superior swimming powers of the bear over the man would have diminished the distance to nothing in a minute or so. Even as it was, the bear was within six inches of March's heels when Hawkswing and Redhand gained the edge of the bank.

Redhand was armed with a rifle—an old and trusty weapon that had been the means of saving his own life and the lives of comrades in many a doubtful encounter with beast and with man. Kneeling down, he took a rapid aim and fired. The bullet sped true. It entered the back of the bear's head, and

the lifeless carcass floated down the stream. The three men, instantly observing the effect of the shot, turned round, and, swimming towards their late enemy, laid hold of him, and dragged and pushed him with some difficulty towards the shore.

Meanwhile Black Gibault, who had issued from his hiding-place and had witnessed Redhand's successful shot, began to caper and dance and shout in the exuberance of his glee. Most men are apt to suffer when they give way to extravagant action of any kind. Gibault forgot that he was on the edge of an overhanging bank. The concussion with which he came to the ground after the performance of a peculiarly complicated pirouette broke off the edge of the bank, and he was precipitated headlong into the river, just a yard or so from the spot where his comrades were engaged in landing the bear.

A loud laugh greeted his sudden and unexpected descent. Scrambling on shore, and laying hold of the bear's tail, he exclaimed—

"Hah! mes garçons, heave avay. I have come down for to give you leetle help. Splenderous hear! Pull avay!"

The bear was then dragged out of the water and stretched upon the green sward, where for some time the trappers stood round it in a picturesque group, commenting upon its size and appearance, and remarking upon the various incidents of the chase.

As the exact dimensions of this particular bear were taken and noted down on the spot, we will give them here for the benefit of inquiring minds. It weighed, as nearly as could be guessed by men who were practised in estimating weights, 600 pounds. On its hind legs it stood 8 feet 7 inches. Round the chest it measured 5 feet 10 inches; round the neck 3 feet 11 inches. The circumference of the thickest part of the fore leg was 2 feet, and the length of each of its claws was 4 and a quarter inches. It was whitey-brown in colour, and a shaggier, fiercer, uglier monster could not well be imagined.

"But, I say," cried Bounce, looking round suddenly, "wot's come o' yon 'xtraor'nary feller as—"

Bounce paused abruptly, for at that moment his eye fell on the "'xtraor'nary feller" in question. He was seated quietly on a large stone, not many yards distant, with book on knee and pencil in hand, making a rapid sketch of the party and the surrounding scene!

"Wot is he?" inquired Bounce of Gibault in a whisper.

"I calc'late," observed Waller in a low voice, at the same time touching his forehead and looking mysterious; "I calc'late, he's noncombobble-fusticated."

"Perhaps," said Redhand with a quiet laugh.

"Whatever he is, it's bad manners to stand starin' at him," said Redhand, "so you'd better go and pick up yer guns and things, while Bounce and I skin this feller and cut off his claws."

The party separated at once, and the artist, who seemed a little disappointed at being thus checked in his work, no sooner observed the flaying process begin than he turned over the leaf of his book, and began a new sketch.

Not many minutes were required for the skinning of the bear. When it was done, it, along with all the scattered things, was placed in the canoe, and then Redhand, approaching the artist, touched his cap and said—

"You have shared our hunt to-day, sir; mayhap you'll not object to share our camp and our supper."

"Most willingly, my good friend," replied the artist, rising and holding out his hand, which the trapper shook heartily. "You seem to be trappers."

"We are, sir, at your service. It's gettin' late and we've a good bit to go yet, before we come to the place where we mean to camp, so you'd better come at once."

"Certainly; by all means; let us embark without delay," replied the artist, pocketing his sketch-book.

"Pardon me, sir," said Redhand, with some hesitation, "are you alone?"

"I am," replied the other sadly; then, as if a sudden thought had struck him—"I had two pistols and a cloak once."

"We've picked 'em up, sir. They're in the canoe now. At least the pistols are, an' what's left o' the cloak."

"Ha! 'twas an old and cherished friend! Are you ready?"

"All ready, sir."

So saying, the old man led the way to the canoe and embarked with his strange companion. Then, pushing out into the stream just as the shades of night began to descend upon the wilderness, the trappers paddled swiftly away, wondering in their hearts who and what the stranger could be, and talking occasionally in subdued tones of the chief incidents of the exciting combat through which they had so recently passed.

Chapter Five

Fiery Remarks and Cogitations—Round the Camp Fire—The Artist gives an Account of Himself—Value of a Sketch-Book—Discoveries and Dark Threats—The Bear's-Claw Collar

There is no doubt whatever that a western trapper knows how to make a fire. That is an axiomatic certainty. He also knows how to enjoy it. He is thoroughly conversant with it in all its phases, and with all the phenomena connected with it, from the bright little spark that flies from his flint and steel, and nestles on his piece of tinder, to the great rolling flame that leaps up among the branches of the forest trees, roaring lustily as it goes out upon the night air, like a mighty spirit set free from some diminutive prison house, rejoicing in being once more permitted to reassume its original grand dimensions.

Yes, a western trapper has a grand, massive notion of a fire, and his actions are all in keeping with that notion. Almost everything is small at the fountain. A mighty river usually begins in a bubbling spring or a tiny rivulet. So the trapper's initial acts are delicate. He handles the tinder gently, and guards it from damp. He fosters the spark, when caught, and blows upon it softly, and wraps it up in dry grass, and watches it intently as a mother might watch the life-spark of her new-born babe. But when once the flame has caught, and the bundle of little dry twigs has been placed above it, and the pile of broken sticks has been superadded, the trapper's character is changed. He grasps the ponderous hatchet, and, Homerically speaking—

> "Now toils the hero: trees on trees o'erthrown,
> Fall crackling round him, and the forests groan."

These, "lopp'd and lighten'd of their branchy load," he assaults singly. Heaving the huge axe with lusty sweeping blows, he brings it down. Great wedgy splinters fly and strew the plain like autumn leaves. Then, with massive logs, full six feet long, he feeds the hungry fire until it leaps and roars in might, and glows full red and hot and huge enough to roast him a bison bull for supper, an he should feel so disposed.

Descending now from the abstract to the concrete, we would remark that, whether the reader does or does not admit the general proposition, that western trappers are pre-eminently up to fire (not to mention smoke or snuff), he cannot deny the fact that Big Waller, the Yankee trapper, was peculiarly gifted in that way. On the evening of the day on which occurred the memorable encounter with the grisly bear, as related in the last chapter, that stalwart individual heaved his ponderous axe and felled the trees around him in a way that would have paled the ineffectual fires of Ulysses himself, and would probably have induced that hero not only to cease cutting trees, but to commence cutting his stick thenceforth from the field of competition! March Marston meanwhile kindled the spark and nursed the infant flame. The others busied themselves in the various occupations of the camp. Some cut down pine-branches, and strewed them a foot deep in front of the fire, and trod them down until a soft elastic couch was formed on which to spread their blankets. Others cut steaks of venison and portions of the grisly bear, and set them up on the end of sticks before the fire to roast, and others made fast and secured the canoe and her lading.

The artist, seating himself beside the fire, just near enough to profit by the light, but far enough away to obtain a general view of everything and everybody, proceeded with enthusiasm to sketch the whole affair, collectively and in detail. He devoted his chief attention, however, to Big Waller. He

"caught" that gigantic Yankee in every conceivable action and attitude. He photographed him, we might almost say, with his legs apart, the hatchet high above his head, and every muscle tense and rigid, preliminary to a sweeping blow. He "took" him with a monstrous pile of logs on his brawny shoulder; he portrayed him resting for a moment in the midst of his toil; he even attempted to delineate him tumbling over one of the logs, and hurling a shoulder-load upon the ground; but he failed utterly in the last attempt, being quite destitute of comical perception, and he did not finally conclude until Gibault went forward and informed him that supper was ready. Then he shut up his book, and, taking his place beside the trappers, began supper.

"This is comfortable—this is pleasant!" remarked the artist, as he sat down before the warm blaze, and applied himself with infinite relish to the venison steak placed before him by Bounce. "You live well here, it would seem."

This latter remark was addressed to Hawkswing, who sat close beside him; but that imperturbable worthy shook his head gravely.

"He don't understand ye," interposed Bounce, "knows, nothin' but his own mother tongue. We *do* live pretty middlin' so so hereabouts when we ain't starvin', w'ich it isn't for me to deny is sometimes the case, d'ye see."

Bounce stopped his own talk at this point by stuffing his mouth so full of meat that no word, not even a word of one syllable, could have forced itself out, had it tried ever so much. A long silence now ensued, during which the clack of seven pairs of active jaws was the only sound that broke upon the ear. It might have been observed, however, that all eyes were fixed more or less wonderingly on the stranger. Big Waller in particular looked him, figuratively speaking, through and through. He did not remove his eyes off him for an instant, but devoured his food with somewhat the expression of a dog that expects his bone to be snatched from him.

"Try a duck," said March Marston to the artist, observing that he had finished his steak.

"Thank you," answered the artist, accepting the proffered bird, which happened to be a teal, and beginning to carve it with a pen-knife. He had no fork, but used the fingers of his left hand instead.

Silence again ensued.

"Try another," said March again.

The artist hesitated.

"You'd better; it's a fat un."

"N–no. No!" said the artist, shutting up his knife with an air of decision. "No, thank you, I always advocate moderation, and it would ill become me to set an example of glut—ah, of the reverse."

"Wal, stranger," said Waller, who, having finished eating, wiped his mouth with a tuft of grass, and began to fill his pipe. "You *do* come out in the way o' moderation rather powerful. Why a teal duck an' a ven'son steak is barely enough to stop a feller dyin' right off. I guess a down-east baby o' six months old 'ud swab up that an' axe for more."

"Nevertheless it is quite enough for me," replied the artist, leaning down on his elbow. "I could, indeed, eat more; but I hold that man should always rise from table capable of eating more, if required."

Here was a proposition that it had not entered into the minds of the trappers, even in their most transcendental efforts of abstruse meditation, to think of! They gazed at each other in amazement.

"Wot! not eat yer fill w'en ye git the chance," exclaimed Bounce.

"No, certainly not."

"I say, stranger, when did you feed last?" inquired Big Waller.

"Why do you ask?" said the artist, looking quickly up.

"'Cause I wants to know."

The artist smiled. "My last meal was eaten yesterday morning."

"Ha! I was sure ob dat," cried Gibault; "your face look like as if you be full ob starvation."

"An' *wot* did ye eat last?" inquired Bounce, laying down his pipe and looking at their guest with much interest not unmingled with pity.

"I breakfasted on a little bird about the size of a hen's egg. I know not what it is named, but it was excellently flavoured. I relished it much."

On hearing this, Gibault pressed his hand on his stomach, as if the mere thought of such a delicately minute breakfast caused him pain in that region.

"I say, stranger," broke in Waller, in a tone of voice that seemed to imply that he was determined to be at the bottom of this mystery, and would stand it no longer—"wot's your name?"

"Theodore Bertram," replied the artist without hesitation.

"Where do you come from?"

"From England."

"Where air you a-goin' to?"

"To the Rocky Mountains."

"Wot for to do there?"

"You are inquisitive, friend," said Bertram, smiling; "but I have no reason for concealing my object in travelling here—it is to sketch, and shoot, and take notes, and witness the works of the Almighty in the wilderness. I hold it to be an object worthy the ambition of a great man to act the part of pioneer to the missionary and the merchant in nature's wildest and most inaccessible regions; and although I pretend not to greatness, I endeavour, humbly, to do what I can."

"No one can do more than that," said Redhand, regarding the young enthusiast with interest. "But surely you have not travelled to this out-o'-the-way place without a guide?"

Bertram pointed to the stars.

"These are my guides," said he; "the man who can read the heavens needs no guide."

"But that book ain't always readable," said Redhand; "when clouds are flying what do you do then?"

"Fur-traders in the far north have taught me how to ascertain the north by the bark on the trees; besides this I have a bosom friend who always points the way." So saying he pulled a small compass from an inner pocket and held it up.

"Good," rejoined Redhand; "but a compass is not food, neither will it kill game. Have you nought but them pistols?"

"I have none other arms now but these, save this good sword. They will serve to defend me in the hour of need, I trust; though now that I have seen the grisly bear I should doubt my chance of success were I to cope with him alone. I should imagine that monster to be worse even than the Wild Man of the West himself."

"The Wild Man o' the West!" echoed March Marston eagerly; "have you seen *him*?"

"Nay, verily; but I have heard of him," replied the artist, smiling, "and a strangely ferocious creature he must be, if all that's said of him be correct. But, to say truth, I believe the stories told of him are idle tales. Indeed, I do not believe there is such a man at all!"

March Marston's countenance fell. No Wild Man of the West at all! The bare possibility of such a crushing blow to all his romantic hopes and dreams caused his heart to sink. Bertram observed the change in his countenance, and, quickly divining the cause, added, "But I am of a sceptical turn of mind, and do not easily believe unless I see. There is one thing I have observed, however, which is in favour of his existence."

"What's that?" inquired March, brightening up. "That the nearer one comes to his reputed dwelling-place, this wild man assumes smaller and more natural proportions. I first heard of him in the Red River Prairies, where he is held to be a giant who devours men as well as brutes. As I came nearer to the Missouri, I found that the people there do not believe him to be either a cannibal or a giant, but assert that he is an enormously tall and powerful man, exceedingly fierce, and the sworn enemy of the whole human race; a species of Cain, whose hand is against every man, and every man's

hand against him. The last white man I met—about two weeks ago—told me he had been with a tribe of Indians, some of whom had seen him, and they said that he was indeed awfully wild, but that he was not cruel—on the contrary, he had been known to have performed one or two kind deeds to some who had fallen into his power."

"Most extonishin'!" exclaimed Gibault, who sat open-mouthed and open-eyed listening to this account of the Wild Man of the West.

For some time the party round the camp fire sat smoking in silence, ruminating on what had been said. Then Big Waller broke the silence with one of his abrupt questions—

"But, I say, stranger, *how* did you come here?"

Bertram looked up without speaking. Then, settling himself comfortably in a reclining position, with his back against a tree, he said—

"I will relieve your curiosity. Listen: I am, as I have said, an Englishman. My father and mother are dead. I have no brothers or sisters, and but few relations. Possessing, as I do, a small independence, I am not obliged to work for my living. I have therefore come to the conclusion that it is my duty to work for my fellow-men. Of course, I do not mean to deny that every man who works for his living, works also for his fellow-men. What I mean is, that I hold myself bound to apply myself to such works as other men have not leisure to undertake, and the profit of which will go direct to mankind without constituting my livelihood on its passage. To open up the unknown wilderness has ever been my ambition. For that purpose I have come to these wild regions. My enthusiasm on quitting my native land was unbounded. But—"

Here Bertram paused and gazed dreamily at the glowing embers of the camp fire with an expression that led the trappers to infer that experience had somewhat moderated his enthusiasm. After a few minutes he resumed:—

"I have done wrong to make this venture alone. On reaching Canada I succeeded, through the kindness of the governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, in obtaining a passage in one of the company's canoes through that series of rivers and lakes by which the fur-traders penetrate into the regions of the far north. Arrived at Red River Settlement, I pushed forward on horseback over the plains with a small party of horsemen to the head waters of the Saskatchewan. Here I succeeded in engaging a party of twelve men, composed of half-breeds and Indians, and set out on a journey of exploration over the prairies towards the Rocky Mountains. Circumstances led me to modify my plans. We diverged towards the south, and finally came to within a few days' journey of the region in which we now are. We were suddenly surprised one night by a war-party of Blackfoot Indians. My men had grown careless. They neglected to keep strict watch, and before we were aware that danger threatened us, all our horses were carried off.

"This was a terrible calamity. My men declared that it was impossible to advance without horses, and refused to accompany me any farther. I remonstrated in vain; then, filled with indignation at their cowardice, I left them and pursued my journey alone. Since then I have seen only one man, a trapper, who was travelling south to the settlements. He offered to take me with him, but I declined. I felt that no great or good work could ever be accomplished by the man who turns back at the first disaster; so he left me. I have suffered somewhat. I am, unfortunately, a bad shot, and, although game is everywhere abundant, I cannot kill it. I have subsisted hitherto on small birds; but my powder and lead are almost expended. Had I not fallen in with you, I know not what I should have done."

To this narrative the trappers listened with respectful attention, for, despite the feelings of pity, almost bordering on contempt, with which they regarded the stranger's weapons and his knowledge, or rather ignorance, of woodcraft, they could not help reverencing the simple-minded enthusiasm in a good cause that had conducted the artist so deep into a savage land in which he was evidently unfitted, either by nature or training, to travel.

"But I say, stranger," said Big Waller, "wot *do* ye mean by openin' up the country? It ain't a oyster, that ye can open it up with a big knife I guess."

"There, friend, you are wrong. This country does, indeed, resemble an oyster; and I hope, by the aid of the mighty levers of knowledge and enterprise, to open it up. I mean to take notes and sketches, and, if spared, return to my native land, and publish the result of my observations. I do not, indeed, expect that the public will buy my work; but I shall publish a large edition at my own cost, and present copies to all the influential men in the kingdom."

The trappers opened their eyes wider than ever at this.

"What! Make a book?" cried Redhand.

"Even so."

"Will it have pictures?" eagerly asked March, who regarded the artist with rapidly increasing veneration.

"Ay, it will be profusely illustrated."

"Wot! pictures o' grisly bears?" inquired Bounce.

"Of course."

"An' men?" cried Big Waller.

"And men also, if I fall in with them."

"Then here's one, I guess," cried the bold Yankee, combing out his matted locks hastily with his fingers, and sitting up in what he conceived to be a proper position. "Here you are, sir. I'm your man; fix me off slick. Only think! Big Waller in a book—a *raal* book!"

He chuckled immensely at the bright prospect of immortality that had suddenly opened up to him.

"I have drawn you already, friend," said Bertram.

"Draw'd me already?"

"Ay, there you are," he replied, handing his sketch-book to the trapper, who gazed at his own portrait with unmitigated satisfaction. Turning over the leaf, he came unexpectedly on the likeness of Gibault, which, being a truthful representation, was almost a caricature. Big Waller burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter at this. He rolled over on his back and yelled with delight. His yell being quite in keeping with his body, the din was so tremendous that Bounce roared—

"Stop yer noise, ye buffalo!"

But Waller didn't hear him; so March Marston effected the desired object by stuffing the corner of a blanket into his mouth and smothering his face in its folds.

Bertram's sketch-book was now examined, and for nearly an hour proved a source of the most intense interest and amusement to these unsophisticated trappers. In those days few, very few men of education had succeeded in penetrating far into the western wilderness; and although the trappers there knew what books and pictures meant, they had seen but few of them in the course of their lives, and none of those few had any reference to the wild country in which their lives were spent.

It may be imagined, then, with what delight and excitement they now, for the first time, beheld scenes of their own beloved woods and prairies, as well as their own rough forms, vividly sketched by a master-hand. One of the most interesting points in the inspection of the sketch-book was, that old Redhand recognised almost every one of the landscapes as spots with which he was well acquainted; and as Bertram had sketched most diligently as he travelled along, Redhand told him that by the aid of that book, without compass or anything else, he could trace his route backward, step by step, to the Saskatchewan river. Moreover, he described to the artist accurately many scenes which were near to those he had sketched, and gradually fell to talking about adventures and rencontres he had had in many of them, so that at last it became evident there would be no proposal to go to rest that night at all unless some wise one of the party should remind the others that another day's toil lay before them in the course of a few hours.

At length they took up their pipes, which had been forgotten in the excitement, and refilled them with the intention of having a last quiet whiff before lying down.

"Ho!" exclaimed Redhand, who still continued to turn over the pages of the book, "here's a face I know. Where saw ye that Indian?"

"I cannot easily tell where it was we met him; but I remember well that it was just a day's ride from the spot where our horses were stolen."

"Were there others with him?"

"No, he was alone."

"Ha! at least he said so, I fancy."

"Yes, he did; and I had no reason to doubt him."

"You're not used to the ways o' the redskin, sir," replied Redhand, looking meditatively at the fire. "Did he chance to mention his name?"

"Oh yes, he called himself Big Snake, at least one of my men translated it so."

A significant smile overspread the old trapper's face as he replied—

"I thought as much. A greater thief and villain does not disgrace the prairies. He's the man that took yer horses; sich a fellow as that never goes about alone; he's always got a tail following him as black as himself. But I'll see if we can't pay the rascal off in his own coin."

"How so?" inquired Bertram. "He must be far from this spot."

"Not so far as you think. I know his haunts, and could take you to them in a few days overland; but it'll take longer by the river, and we can't quit our canoe just now."

"But, good friend," said Bertram quietly, "I cannot presume on your hospitality so far as to expect you to carry me along with you for the purpose of redressing my wrongs."

"Make your mind easy on that pint," returned Redhand; "we'll talk of it in the mornin'."

While the old trapper and the artist were conversing, Bounce had busied himself in stringing the claws of the grisly bear on a strip of deerskin, for the purpose of making a collar. A necklace of this description is very highly prized among Indians, especially when the claws are large.

While it was being made, Gibault sighed so deeply once or twice, that March suggested he must be in love.

"So I is," sighed Gibault.

"That's interesting," remarked March; "who with?"

"Ay, that's it," said Bounce; "out with her name, lad. No one ought never to be ashamed o' bein' in love. It's a glorious state o' mind an' body as a feller should gratilate hisself on havin'. Who be ye in love wi', lad?"

"Vid dat necklace," replied Gibault, sighing again heavily.

"Oh! if that's all, ye don't need to look so blue, for it's yer own by rights," said Bounce. "I'm jist doin' it up for ye."

"Non; it cannot be mine," returned Gibault.

"How so?" inquired Waller, "ye 'arned it, didn't ye? Drew first blood I calc'late."

"Non, I not draw de fuss blood. Mais, I vill hab chance again no doubt. Monsieur Bertram he drew fuss blood."

"Ho, he!" cried Waller in surprise. "You didn't tell us that before. Come, I'm glad on't."

"What!" exclaimed Bertram, "the necklace mine? there must be some mistake. I certainly fired my pistol at the bear, but it seemed to have had no effect whatever."

"Gibault," said Bounce emphatically, "did you fire *at all*?"

"Non, pour certain, cause de gun he not go off."

"Then," continued Bounce, handing the much-coveted necklace to Bertram, "the thing b'longs to you, sir, for that bar comed up wounded, an' as he couldn't ha' wounded hisself, *you* must ha' done it—there."

The young man positively refused for some time to accept of the necklace, saying, that as Gibault had tracked and discovered the bear, it certainly belonged to him; but Gibault as positively affirmed that he would not disgrace himself by wearing what belonged rightfully to another man;

and as the other trappers confirmed what their comrade said, Bertram was at last fain to accept of a trophy which, to say truth, he was in his heart most anxious to possess.

At the close of this amicable dispute, each man rolled himself in his blanket and lay down to sleep with his feet to the fire. Being in a part of the country where there were very few Indians, and these few on pretty good terms with the white trappers, no watch was set. Bertram lay down with his tattered cloak around him, and, taking a little book from his pocket, read it, or appeared to read it, till he fell asleep—on observing which, March Marston crept noiselessly to his side, and, lying gently down beside him, covered him with a portion of his own blanket. Ere long the camp was buried in repose.

Chapter Six

The Dangers of the Wilderness—An Unexpected Catastrophe, which necessitates a Change of Plans—A Descent upon Robbers proposed and agreed to

There are few passages in Holy Writ more frequently brought to remembrance by the incidents of everyday life than this—"Ye know not what a day or an hour may bring forth." The uncertainty of sublunary things is proverbial, whether in the city or in the wilderness, whether among the luxuriously nurtured sons and daughters of civilisation, or among the toil-worn wanderers in the midst of savage life. To each and all there is, or may be, sunshine to-day and cloud to-morrow; gladness to-day sadness to-morrow. There is no such thing as perpetual felicity in the world of matter. A nearer approach to it may perhaps be made in the world of mind; but, like perpetual motion, it is not to be absolutely attained to in this world of ours. Those who fancy that it is to be found in the wilderness are hereby warned, by one who has dwelt in savage lands, that its habitation is not there.

March Marston thought it was. On the morning after the night whose close we have described, he awoke refreshed, invigorated, and buoyant with a feeling of youthful strength and health. Starting up, he met the glorious sun face to face, as it rose above the edge of a distant blue hill, and the meeting almost blinded him. There was a saffron hue over the eastern landscape that caused it to appear like the plains of Paradise. Lakelets in the prairies glittered in the midst of verdant foliage; ponds in the hollows lay, as yet unillumined, like blots of ink; streams and rivulets gleamed as they flowed round wooded knolls, or sparkled silvery white as they leaped over rocky obstructions. The noble river, on the banks of which the camp had been made, flowed with a calm sweep through the richly varied country—refreshing to look upon and pleasant to hear, as it murmured on its way to join the "Father of waters." The soft roar of a far-distant cataract was heard mingling with the cries of innumerable water fowl that had risen an hour before to enjoy the first breathings of the young day. To March Marston's ear it seemed as though all Nature, animate and inanimate, were rejoicing in the beneficence of its Creator.

The youth's reverie was suddenly broken by the approach of Theodore Bertram.

"Good morrow, friend," said the latter, grasping March's hand and shaking it heartily. "You are early astir. Oh, what a scene! What heavenly colours! What a glorious expanse of beauty!"

The artist's hand moved involuntarily to the pouch in which he was won't to carry his sketch-book, but he did not draw it forth; his soul was too deeply absorbed in admiration to permit of his doing aught but gaze in silence.

"This repays my toils," he resumed, soliloquising rather than speaking to March. "'Twere worth a journey such as I have taken, twice repeated, to witness such a scene as this."

"Ay, ain't it grand?" said March, delighted to find such congenial enthusiasm in the young painter.

Bertram turned his eyes on his companion, and, in doing so, observed the wild rose at his side.

"Ah! sweet rose," he said, stooping eagerly down to smell it.

"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

"He was no poet who wrote that, anyhow," observed March with a look of disdain.

"You are wrong, friend. He was a good poet and true."

"Do you mean to tell me that the sweetness o' that rose is *wasted* here?"

"Nay, I do not say that. The poet did not mean to imply that its sweetness is utterly wasted, but to assert the fact that, as far as civilised man is concerned, it is so."

"'Civilised man,'" echoed March, turning up his nose (a difficult feat, by the way, for his nose by nature turned down). "An' pray what's 'civilised man' that he should think everything's wasted that don't go in at his own eyes, or up his own nose, or down his own throat? eh?"

Bertram laughed slightly (he never laughed heartily). "You are a severe critic, friend."

"I don't know, and I don't care, what sort o' cricket I am; but this I do know, that roses are as little wasted here as in your country—mayhap not so much. Why, I tell ye I've seen the *bars* smell 'em."

"Indeed."

"Ay, an' eat 'em too!"

"That was not taking a poetical view of them," suggested Bertram.

"Perhaps not, but it was uncommonly practical," returned March, laughing.

The conversation was abruptly terminated at this point by a flock of wild ducks, which, ignorant of the presence of the two youths, swept close past their heads with a startling *whirr*. The artist leaped backwards, and March, partly in the exuberant glee of his heart and partly to relieve his own startled feelings, gave utterance to a hideous yell.

"Hi! hallo!" roared Big Waller, starting up and replying to the yell with compound interest. "Wot's to do? Bars or savages—which? Oh! *savages* I see," he added, rubbing his eyes, as he observed March laughing at him. "Ha! lad, d'ye know there's a sort o' critter in other diggins o' this here world as they calls a hi-eeno, or somethin' o' that sort, as can *laugh*, it can; so you're not the only beast as can do it, d'ye see!"

The camp was now thoroughly roused, and the trappers set about making preparations for a start; but little was said. It is generally the case at early morning—at least among healthy men who have work to do before breakfast in the wilderness—that tongues are disinclined to move. After the first somewhat outrageous and rather unusual burst, no one spoke again, while they carried their goods down to the water's edge, except in a short grumpy way when an order or a remark was needful. In about ten minutes after the utterance of Big Waller's roar, they were in their places in the little red canoe, paddling blithely up the river.

Bertram's place in the canoe was the centre. He was placed there as a passenger, but, not being by any means of a lazy disposition, he relieved all the men by turns, and thus did a good share of the work during the day.

Towards evening the travellers came to a cataract, which effectually barred their further progress, and rendered a portage necessary. Just above the cataract there was a short stretch of comparatively smooth water, in which, however, the current was very strong. Immediately above that there was a rapid of considerable length and strength, which boiled furiously among the rocks, and seemed to be impassable to a canoe. After close inspection of it, however, Redhand and Bounce, who were tacitly recognised as joint leaders of the party, agreed that the canoe could easily enough be hauled up by means of a line. To make a long portage, and so avoid the whole obstruction, was desirable; but the precipitous nature of the banks at that place rendered the carrying of the canoe and goods a work not only of severe labour, but of considerable danger.

The mode of proceeding having been settled, all hands went to work without delay. The goods were carried to the top of the fall, which was about fifteen feet high, then the canoe was shouldered by Waller and Bounce, and soon it floated in a calm eddy near the head of the cataract. Having replaced the cargo, a strong line or rope was fastened to the bows, and Redhand and Bounce proceeded to take their places in the canoe, in order to guide it through the rapid, while the others were engaged in hauling on the track-line.

"Stay," cried March Marston as Bounce was stepping in, "let me go in the canoe, Bounce. You know well enough that I can manage it; besides, you're a heavy buffalo, and more able to track than I."

"Nay, lad," replied Bounce, shaking his head, "you'll only run the risk o' gettin' a wet skin—mayhap somethin' worse."

"Now, that's too bad. D'ye think nobody can manage a canoe but yourself? Come, Redhand, do let me go."

"It's not safe, boy. The rapid looks bad, and you're not much used to the bow-paddle."

"Tut, nonsense," exclaimed March, pushing Bounce aside and stepping into the canoe. "Now hold on."

Before the men on the bank of the river were well aware of what the reckless youth was about, he shoved the bow of the canoe off. The instant it passed the still water of the eddy and caught the powerful stream, the light bark darted like an arrow from the bank, and Redhand was obliged to use his paddle with the utmost dexterity, while the men on shore had to haul on the line with all their might, to prevent it being swept over the brink of the fall. In a second, however, the danger was past, and, putting their strength to the track-line, they dragged the canoe slowly but steadily upstream, while Redhand and March guided it past rocks and dangerous eddies. Seeing that the youth used his paddle dexterously, Bounce, after a little thought, resolved to let him encounter the more dangerous rapid above. Redhand silently came to the same conclusion, though he felt uneasy and blamed himself for allowing the ardour of the boy to get the better of him.

"March is a bold fellow," observed Bertram, who walked immediately behind Bounce, hauling on the line like the rest.

"Bold he is, sir," replied Bounce; "an' if ye'd seed him, as I did not many weeks agone, a-ridin' on the back of a buffalo bull, ye'd mayhap say he was more nor that."

"Hah! he is mad!" cried Gibault, who, although the last in the line of tracksmen, was sharp-eared, and overheard the conversation.

"Don't talk, Gibault," interposed Big Waller, "you need all the wind in your little carcass, I guess, to enable ye to steam ahead."

"Oui, mon dear ami, you is right—I do ver' much require all mine steam—mine spirits—for to push such a heavy, useless hulk as you before me."

"Here's a steep bit, lads; mind your eye, Hawkswing," said Bounce, as the Indian who led the party began to ascend a steep part of the bank, where the footing was not secure, owing to the loose gravelly nature of the soil.

As they advanced, the path along the bank became narrower, and the cliff itself so precipitous that it seemed as if a jerk on the line would drag the men off and send them rolling down into the flood below, in the midst of which the canoe was buffeting its way through the hissing foam.

Bertram, who was unused to such a position of comparative danger, and whose head was not capable of standing the sight of a precipice descending from his very feet into a roaring stream, began to feel giddy, and would have given the world to return; but he felt ashamed to confess his weakness, and endeavoured, by gazing earnestly into the bank at his side, to steady himself, hoping that the nature of the track would improve as they advanced. Instead of this being the case, it became worse at every step, and the trackers were at length obliged to proceed cautiously along a ledge of rock that barely afforded them foothold. Bertram now felt an almost irresistible desire to turn his head to the left and glance at the river below; yet he knew that if he should do so, he would become utterly unable to advance another yard. While engaged in this struggle it suddenly occurred to him that it was impossible now to turn, no matter how nervous he should become, as the path was too narrow to permit one of the party to pass another! He became deadly pale, and his heart sank at the thought. Little did the hardy trappers think, as they plodded silently along, that such an agonising conflict was going on in the breast of one of their number! A slight groan escaped him in spite of his utmost efforts to restrain himself. Bounce looked back in surprise.

"Hey! wot's to do, sir?"

"No matter; lead on—I will follow," said Bertram sternly between his clenched teeth.

"Hallo! up there," shouted Redhand, who was at that moment, along with March, exerting his utmost strength in order to keep the canoe off a rock over which the water was bursting in volumes of thick foam; "haul away! haul away! we're just about up."

The shout attracted Bertram's attention; he turned his eyes involuntarily towards the river. Instantly his brain swam round; he staggered, and would have fallen over the bank, had not Big Waller, who was close behind, observed his situation and caught him by the collar. In doing so he was compelled to let go his hold of the line. The additional strain thus suddenly cast upon Gibault wrenched the line from his grasp with a degree of violence that wellnigh hurled him into the river. Bounce and Hawkswing held on for one moment, but the canoe, having been eased off a little, caught a sweep of the rapid, and went out with a dart that the united strength of the whole party could not have checked. The two men had to let go to save themselves, and in a shorter time than it takes to relate, the canoe went down the river towards the fall, dancing like a cork on the heaving spray, while the old man and the youth stood up in the bow and stern wielding their paddles, now on one side, now on the other, with ceaseless rapidity in their efforts to avoid being dashed to pieces on the rocks.

The sight of this catastrophe, superadded to his already agonised feelings, caused the unhappy artist to swoon. Gibault, on seeing the line let go, turned instantly, and sprang like a deer along the track they had been following; intending to render what assistance he could to his comrades at the foot of the rapid. The others could not follow, because of Big Waller and the artist, who obstructed the path. Seeing this, the powerful Yankee seized Bertram round the waist, and, heaving him on his shoulder as one would swing a child, followed in Gibault's footsteps as fast as he could run.

The distance to the spot whence they had commenced to track the canoe was not great, but before they reached it the frail craft had been shattered against a rock, and was now hurrying, along with the scattered cargo and the two men, towards the fall, to pass over which involved certain destruction.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.