ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

OVER THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS: WANDERING WILL IN THE LAND OF THE REDSKIN

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Содержание

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Preface

Note: Plan of this Miscellany.

There is a vast amount of interesting information, on almost all subjects, which many people, especially the young, cannot attain to because of the expense, and, in some instances, the rarity of the books in which it is contained.

To place some of this information, in an attractive form, within the reach of those who cannot afford to purchase expensive books, is the principal object of this Miscellany.

Truth is stranger than fiction, but fiction is a valuable assistant in the development of truth. Both, therefore, shall be used in these volumes. Care will be taken to insure, as far as is possible, that the *facts* stated shall be true, and that the *impressions* given shall be truthful.

As all classes, in every age, have proved that tales and stories, are the most popular style of literature, each volume of the

series (with, perhaps, one or two exceptions) will contain a complete tale, the heroes and actors in which, together with the combination of circumstances in which they move, shall be more or less fictitious.

In writing these volumes, the author has earnestly endeavoured to keep in view the glory of God and the good of man.

Chapter One

Describes Home-Coming, and shows that Matters whispered in the Drawing-Room are sometimes loudly proclaimed Below-Stairs

It was late on a winter evening when our hero, William Osten, arrived in England, in company with his two friends and former messmates, Bunco and Larry O'Hale.

When a youth returns to his native land, after a long absence which commenced with his running away to sea, he may perhaps experience some anxieties on nearing the old home; but our hero was not thus troubled, because, his father having died during his absence, and his mother having always been tender-hearted and forgiving, he felt sure of a warm reception.

Our hero was so anxious to see his mother, that he resolved to travel by the night-coach to his native town of B—, leaving his companions to follow by the mail in the morning. Railways, although in use throughout the country, had not at that time cut their way to the town of B—. Travellers who undertook to visit that part of the land did so with feelings somewhat akin to those of discoverers about to set out on a distant voyage. They laid in a stock of provisions for the journey, and provided great supply

of wraps for all weathers. When Will Osten reached the coach-office, he found that all the inside places were taken.

"You'll have to go aloft, sir," said the coachman, a stout and somewhat facetiously inclined individual, who, observing something of the sailor in Will's costume and gait, suited his language to his supposed character; "there's only one berth left vacant, on the fogs'l 'longside o' myself."

"Well, I'll take it," said Will.

Five minutes afterwards the guard shouted "all right," and they set off.

"Do you happen to know many of the people in the town of B—?" said Will to the coachman, as they emerged from the suburbs and dashed out upon a long tract of moorland.

"Know many of 'em, sir," said the man, tipping the off-leader on the flank by way of keeping his hand in; "I should 'ope I does; it's two year, this very day, since I came to this 'ere part o' the country, and I've got married in B— to a 'ooman as knows everythink and everybody, so, of course, I knows everythink and everybody, too."

"Then you have heard of a Mrs Osten, no doubt, a widow lady?" said Will.

"Wot, the widder o' that grumpy old gen'lman as died last year, leavin', they say, a big estate in furrin parts?"

Will felt a tendency to seize the man by the throat, and tumble him off his box into the road, but on second thoughts he restrained himself and said—

"She is the widow of a gentleman with whom I was intimately acquainted. I did not know anything about his having estates abroad."

"I axe your pardon, sir," said the man, a little abashed by Will's grave manner; "didn't know they wos friends of yours. No offence, I 'ope. The old lady is raither low since her husband's death—for it wos somewhat sudden—an' they do say she's never got over the runnin' away of her only son—at least so my wife says, an' she ought to know, for she's bin intimate with the family for many years, an' knows the ooman as nussed the boy—"

"What, Maryann?" exclaimed Will.

"The same. You seems to know 'em all, sir."

"Yes, I know them well. Is Maryann still with my—with Mrs Osten?"

"Yes, sir, she is, an' wot's more, she aint likely to quit in a 'urry. W'y, sir, that 'ooman 'as 'ad no fewer than six hoffers of marriage, an' 'as refused 'em all for love of the old lady. My wife, she says to me the other night, when she wos a-washin' of the baby in the big bread can—you see, sir, the washin' tub's gone and sprung a leak, an' so we're redoosed to the bread can—Well, as I wos a-sayin', my wife says to me—'Richards,' says she, 'it's my belief that Marryhann will never marry, for her 'art an' soul is set upon Mrs Osten, an' she's got a strange feelin' of sartinty that Master Will, as she calls the runaway boy, will come back to comfort 'is mother an' look arter the furrin estates. No, Richards, mark my words, Maryhann will never marry.'"

"'It may be so, Jemimar,' says I,—Did you speak, sir?" said the coachman, turning sharp round on hearing Will utter an exclamation of surprise.

"Is your wife's name Jemima?"

"Yes, it is; d'you 'appen to know her, too?"

"Well, I think I do, if she is the same person who used to attend upon Mrs Osten—a tall and—thin—and and—somewhat—"

"Stiff sort of woman—hout with it, sir, you'll not 'urt my feelins. I didn't marry Jemimar for her beauty, no, nor yet for her money nor her youth, for she aint young, sir—older than myself a long way. I took her for her *worth*, sir, her sterlin' qualities. *You* know, sir, as well as I do, that it aint the fattest an' youngest 'osses as is the best. Jemimar is a trump, sir, without any nonsense about her. Her capacity for fryin' 'am, sir, an' bilin' potatoes is marvellous, an' the way she do dress up the baby (we've only got one, sir) is the hadmiration of the neighbour'ood."

"You said something just now about the deceased Mr Osten's estate. Can you tell me how he came by it?"

"No, sir, I can't. That's the only thing that my wife 'as failed to fathom. There's somethink mysterious about it, I think, for Missis Hosten she won't speak to Marryhann on the subjec', an' all she knows about it is that the lawyer says there's an estate somewheres in furrin parts as needs lookin' arter. The lawyer didn't say that to Maryhann, sir, of course, but she's got a 'abit of hairin' 'er ears at key'oles an' over'ears things now an' then."

Further conversation on this point was here stopped by the

arrival of the coach at the end of a stage, and when the journey was resumed with fresh horses, Will felt inclined to sleep. He therefore buttoned up his coat tight to the chin, fixed his hat well down on his brows, and put himself into one of those numerous attitudes of torture with which "outsides" were wont to beguile the weary hours of night in coaching days. When the sun rose next morning, Will was still in that state of semi-somnolence which causes the expression of the countenance to become idiotic and the eyes owlish. At last the chimneys of his native town became visible, and in a short time he found himself standing before the well-remembered house tapping at the old door, whose panels—especially near the foot—still bore the deep marks of his own juvenile toes.

It is not necessary to drag the reader through the affecting scene of meeting between mother and son. Two days after his arrival we find them both seated at tea in the old drawing-room drinking out of the old mug, with the name "William" emblazoned on it, in which, in days gone by, he was wont to dip his infantine lips and nose. Not that he had selected this vessel of his own free will, but his mother, who was a romantic old lady, insisted on his using it, in order to bring back to her more vividly the days of his childhood, and Will, in the fulness of his heart, said he would be glad to drink tea out of the coal-scuttle if that would give her pleasure. The good lady even sent to the lumber-room for the old arm-chair of his babyhood, but as neither ingenuity nor perseverance could enable him to squeeze

his stout person into that, he was fain to content himself with an ordinary chair.

"Now, dear mother," said Will, commencing the fifth slice of toast, under pressure (having eaten the fourth with difficulty), "you have not yet told me about this wonderful estate which everybody seems to know of except myself."

"Ah! darling Will," sighed Mrs Osten, "I have avoided the subject as long as possible, for I know it is to be the cause of our being separated again. But there is no help for it, because I promised your dear father when he was dying that I would tell you his wishes in regard to it, and that I would not attempt to dissuade you from doing your duty. Well, you remember uncle Edward, I suppose?"

"His name—yes," said Will, "but I never knew anything else about him. I had nothing to remember or to forget, except, indeed, that he got the name of being a wild scapegrace, something like myself!"

"Like yourself, darling," exclaimed the old lady, with a look of indignation—"no indeed! Have not you repented and come back, like a good prodigal son; and didn't the dear beautiful letter that you wrote from that awful island—what's its name—where you were all but eaten alive—"

"The coral island," suggested Will.

"Yes, the coral island—didn't that dear letter give more delight to your beloved father than any letter he ever received in his life, and more than made up to him for your running away, and

cheered him to his last hour, whereas uncle Edward was wicked to the last—at least so it is said, but I don't know, and it's not right to speak ill of the dead. Well, as I was going to say, uncle Edward died in some outlandish place in North America, I never can remember the name, but it's in the papers, so you'll see it—somewhere on the other side of the something mountains—I forget—"

"Rocky, perhaps."

"Yes, that's it, the Rocky Mountains, and I wish they were not so rocky, for your sake, darling, for you've got to go there and take possession (or serve yourself heir to, or something of that sort) of the property. Not that it's large, so they say (I wish with all my heart it did not exist at all), but they tell me there is gold on it, though whether it is lying on the fields or down in holes I'm sure I don't know, and oh dear, I don't care, for it entails your going away again, my darling boy."

Here the poor old lady broke down, and, throwing her arms round Will's neck—regardless of the fact that in so doing she upset and broke one of her best china tea-cups—wept upon his bosom.

Such was the manner of the announcement of the news in the drawing-room.

In the kitchen the same subject was being discussed by a select party, consisting of Maryann, Mr Richards the coachman, his spouse Jemima—formerly Scrubbins—the baby Richards—who has already been referred to as being reduced in the matter of

his ablutions to a bread can—and Larry O'Hale with his faithful Indian friend Bunco.

"To think," said Maryann, with a quiet laugh, as she handed a cup of tea to Bunco—"to think that I should ever come for to sit at tea with a live red Indian from Ameriky—not that he's red either, for I'm sure that hany one with eyes in their 'ead could see that he's only brown."

"Ah, my dear, that's 'cause he's changed colour," said Larry, pushing in his cup for more tea. "He wasn't always like that. Sure, when I first know'd Bunco he was scarlet—pure scarlet, only he took a fancy one day, when he was in a wild mood, to run his canoe over the falls of Niagara for a wager, an', faix, when he came up out o' the wather after it he was turned brown, an's bin that same ever since."

"Gammon," exclaimed Maryann.

"Sure ye don't misdoubt me word, Maryann," said Larry reproachfully; "isn't it true, Bunco?"

"Yoos a norribable liar, Larry," answered Bunco with a broad grin.

Richards the coachman, who had been for some minutes too busy with the buttered toast and bacon to do more than listen and chuckle, here burst into a loud guffaw and choked himself partially. Jemima and Maryann also laughed, whereupon the baby, not to be outdone, broke suddenly into a tremendous crow, and waved its fat arms so furiously that it overturned a tea-cup and sent the contents into Bunco's lap. This created a momentary

confusion, and when calm was restored, Mrs Richards asked Maryann "if hanythink noo 'ad turned up in regard to the estate?" which she seemed to know so much about, but in regard to which she was, apparently, so unwilling to be communicative.

"Not so, Jemimar," said Maryann, with a look of offended dignity, "*unwillin'* to speak I am not, though *unable* I may be—at least I was so until yesterday, but I *have* come to know a little more about it since Master Will came 'ome while I chanced to be near—"

Maryann hesitated a moment, and Richards, through a mouthful of toast, muttered "the keyhole."

"Did you speak, sir?" said Maryann, bridling.

"No, oh! no, not by no means," replied Richards, "only the crust o' this 'ere toast is rayther 'ard, and I'm apt to growl w'en that's so."

"If the crust is 'ard, Mr Richards, your teeth is 'arder, so you ought to scrunch 'em without growling."

"Brayvo, my dear," exclaimed Larry, coming to the rescue; "you're more nor match for him, so be marciful, like a good sowl, an' let's hear about this estate, for it seems to me, from what I've heard, it must be somewhere in the neighbourhood of Bunco's native place."

Maryann, darting a look of mingled defiance and triumph at Richards, who became more than ever devoted to the toast and bacon, proceeded—

"Well, as I was a-sayin', I 'eard Mrs Osten say to Master Will

that his uncle Edward—as was a scape somethin' or other—had died an' left a small estate behind the Rocky Mountains in Ameriky or Afriky, I aint sure which."

"Ameriky, my dear," observed Larry.

"An' she said as 'ow they 'ad discovered gold on it, which could be picked up in 'andfuls, an' it was somewhere near a place called Kally somethin'—"

"Calliforny?" cried Larry.

"Yes, that was it."

"I towld ye that, Bunco!" exclaimed the Irishman, becoming excited; "go on, dear."

"Well, it seems there's some difficulties in the matter, wich I'm sure don't surprise *me*, for I never 'eard of things as 'ad to do with estates and law as didn't create difficulties, and I'm thankful as I've got nothin' to do with none of such things. Well, the end of it all is that, w'en master was dyin', he made missis swear as she'd urge Master Will to go to see after things hisself, an' missis, poor dear, she would rather let the estate and all the gold go, if she could only keep the dear boy at 'ome, but she's faithful to her promise, an' advises him to go—the sooner the better—because that would let him come back to her all the quicker. Master Will, he vowed at first that he would never more leave her, and I b'lieve he was in earnest, but when she spoke of his father's wish, he gave in an' said he would go, if she thought it his dooty so for to do."

"Hooray!" shouted Larry, jumping up at this point, and performing a species of war-dance for a few moments, and then

sitting down and demanding another supply of tea. “Didn’t I tell ye, Bunco, that the order would soon be up anchor an’ away again! It’s Wanderin’ Will he’s been named, an’ Wanderin’ Will he’ll remain, that’s as plain as the nose on me face.”

“No doubt the nose on your face is very plain—the plainest I ever did see,” said Maryann sharply,—“but you’re quite wrong about Master Will, for he’s very anxious to get married, I can tell you, an’ wants to settle down at ’ome, like a sensible man, though it does grieve my ’eart to think of the creetur as has took him in in furrin parts.”

“Get married!” exclaimed Larry, Jemima, and Richards in the same breath.

“Yes, get married,” replied Maryann, very full of the importance of her keyhole discoveries, and not willing to make them known too readily.

“How did you come to know that, Maryhann?” asked Jemima; “are you sure of it?”

“How I came for to know it,” replied the other, “is nobody’s business (she paused a moment and looked sternly at Richards, but that sensible man continued to gaze steadfastly at his plate and to ‘scrunch’ crusts with grave abstraction), and, as to its bein’ true, all I can say is I had it from his own lips. Master Will has no objection to my knowing what he tells his mother—as no more he shouldn’t, for Jemimar, you can bear me witness that I’ve been a second mother to him, an’ used to love him as if he were my own—though he *was* a aggrawatin’ hinfant, an’ used to bump

his 'ead, an' skin his knees, an' tear his clothes, an' wet his feet, in a way that often distracted me, though I did my very best to prevent it; but nothink's of any use tryin' of w'en you can't do it; as my 'usband, as was in the mutton-pie line, said to the doctor the night afore he died—my 'eart used to be quite broke about him, so it did; but that's all past an' gone—well, as I was a-sayin', Master Will he told his mother as 'ow there was a young lady (so he called her) as 'ad won his 'art, an' she was a cannibal as lived on a coal island in the Paphysic Ocean. Then he told her some stories about the coal island as made my blood run cold, and said his Flora behaved like a heroine in the midst of it all."

At this point Larry and Bunco exchanged meaning glances, and the former gave vent to a soft whistle, which he accompanied with a wink.

"I'm sure," continued Maryann, "it's past my comprehension; for instead of being dreadfully shocked, as I had expected, Mrs Osten threw her arms round Master Will's neck and blessed him and the cannibal, too, and said she hoped to be spared to see 'em united, though she wouldn't like them to remain on the coal island in the Paphysic. I do assure you, Jemimar," continued Maryann, putting the corner of her apron to her eyes, "it quite gave me a turn, and I was nearly took bad w'en I 'eard it. Master Will, he made his mother promise to keep it to herself, as, he said, not a soul in the world knew of it but him and her—"

Mr Richards coughed at this point, and appeared to be engaged in a severe conflict with an untractable crust, which

caused Maryann to stop suddenly and look at him. But Larry again came to the rescue by saying—

"Why, Maryann, my dear, ye've bin an' mistook a good deal of what you've heard, intirely. This Flora Westwood is no cannibal, but wan o' the purtiest bit craturs I iver had the good luck to set eyes on; as white as a lily, wid cheeks like the rose, not to spake of a smile an' a timper of an angel. She's a parson's daughter, too, an' lives on a coral island in the Pacific Ocean, where the people is cannibals, no doubt, as I've good raison to know, for they ait up a lot o' me shipmates, and it was by good luck they didn't ait up myself and Master Will too—though I do belaive they'd have found me so tough that I'd have blunted their teeth an' soured on their stummicks, bad luck to them. But it's surprised that I am to hear about this. Ah, then, Master Will, but ye're a sly dog—more cunnin' than I took ye for. Ye threw dust in the eyes of Larry O'Hale, anyhow."

Poor Maryann appeared much relieved by this explanation, although she felt it to be consistent with her dignity that she should throw considerable doubt on Larry's statement, cross-question him pretty severely, and allow herself to be convinced only after the accumulation of an amount of evidence that could not be resisted.

"Well, now, that accounts for the way in which his mother received the news," said Maryann.

"It is a strange story," remarked Jemima.

"Uncommon," observed Richards.

Bunco said nothing, but he grinned from ear to ear.

At that moment, as if it were aware of the climax at which the party had arrived, the baby, without a single note of warning, set up a hideous howl, in the midst of which the bell rang, and Maryann rose to answer it.

"Master Will wants to speak to you, Mr Hale, and to Mr Bunco, too," she said on returning.

"Come along, *Mister* Bunco," said Larry, "that'll be the order to trip our anchors."

"My friends," said Will Osten, when the two were seated on the corners of their respective chairs in the drawing-room, "I sent for you to say that circumstances have occurred which render it necessary that I should visit California. Do you feel inclined to join me in this trip, or do you prefer to remain in England?"

"I'm yer man," said Larry.

"So's me," added Bunco.

"I thought so," said Will, smiling; "we have been comrades together too long to part yet. But I must start without delay, and mean to go by the plains and across the Rocky Mountains. Are you ready to set off on short notice?"

"In half an hour av ye plaze, sur," said Larry.

Bunco grinned and nodded his head.

"The end of the week will do," said Will, laughing; "so be off and make your preparations for a long and rough trip."

In pursuance of this plan, Will Osten and his two staunch followers, soon after the date of the above conversation, crossed

the Atlantic, traversed the great Lakes of Canada to the centre of North America, purchased, at the town of Saint Pauls, horses, guns, provisions, powder, shot, etcetera, for a long journey, and found themselves, one beautiful summer evening, galloping gaily over those wide prairies that roll beyond the last of the backwood settlements, away into the wild recesses of the Western Wilderness.

Chapter Two

Describes a Burst over the Western Prairie, and introduces a New Character, also a Hunt, and a Great Feast

Wandering Will and his companions laid the reins on the necks of their half-tamed horses and galloped wildly away over the western prairie. Perhaps it was the feeling of absolute freedom from human restraints that excited them to the galloping and shouting condition of maniacs; perhaps it was the idea of sweeping over unbounded space in these interminable plains, or the influence of the fresh air around, the sunny blue sky overhead, and the flower-speckled sward underfoot—perhaps it was all these put together, but, whatever the cause, our three travellers commenced their journey at a pace that would have rendered them incapable of further progress in a few hours had they kept it up. Their state of mind was aptly expressed, at the end of one of these wild flights, by Larry, who exclaimed, as he reined in—

"Ah, then, it's flyin' I'll be in a minit. Sure av I only had a pair o' wings no bigger than a sparrow's, I cud do it aisy."

"Yoo's a goose, Larry," observed Bunco.

"Faix if I was it's mesilf as would fly away an' lave you to waller on the dirty earth ye belongs to," retorted the other.

"Dirty earth!" echoed Will Osten, gazing round on the plains of bright green grass that waved in the soft air with something like the gentle heavings of the sea. "Come, let's have another!"

They stretched out again at full gallop and swept away like the wind itself.

"Hooroo!" shouted Larry O'Hale, wildly throwing out both arms and rising in his stirrups; "look here, Bunco, I'm goin' to fly, boy!"

Larry didn't mean to do so, but he *did* fly! His horse put its foot in a badger-hole at that moment and fell. The rider, flying over its head, alighted on his back, and remained in that position quite motionless, while his alarmed comrades reined up hastily and dismounted.

"Not hurt, I hope," said Will, anxiously.

"Och! ha! gintly, doctor, take me up tinderly," gasped the poor man as they raised him to the perpendicular position, in which he stood for nearly a minute making very wry faces and slowly moving his shoulders and limbs to ascertain whether any bones were fractured.

"I do belave I'm all right," he said at length with a sigh of relief; "have a care, Bunco, kape yer paws off, but take a squint at the nape o' me neck an' see if me back-bone is stickin' up through me shirt-collar."

"Me no can see him," said the sympathetic Bunco.

"That's a blissin' anyhow. I only wish ye cud *feel* him, Bunco. Doctor, dear, did ye iver see stars in the day-time?"

"No, never."

"Then ye'd better make a scientific note of it in yer book, for I see 'em at this good minit dancin' about like will-o'-the-wisps in a bog of Ould Ireland. There, help me on to the back o' the baste—bad luck to the badgers, say I."

Thus muttering to himself and his comrades, half exasperated by the stunning effects of his fall, yet rather thankful to find that no real damage was done, Larry remounted, and all three continued their journey with not much less enjoyment, but with abated energy.

Thus much for the beginning. Availing ourselves of an author's privilege to annihilate time and space at pleasure, we change the scene. The three travellers are still riding over the same prairie, but at the distance of a hundred miles or so from the spot where the accident above described took place.

It was evening. The sun was gradually sinking in the west —far beyond that "far west" to which they had penetrated. The wanderers looked travel-stained, and appeared somewhat fatigued, while their horses advanced with slow steps and drooping heads. Two pack-horses, which had been procured by them with an additional supply of necessaries at a solitary fort belonging to the fur-traders of that region, were driven by Larry, whose voice and action seemed to indicate that he and they were actuated by different sentiments and desires.

"Of all the lazy bastes," he exclaimed, giving one of the horses a tremendous cut over the flank that startled it into temporary life, "I iver did see—but, och! what's the use—there's niver a dhrop o' wather in this wilderness. We may as well lie down an' die at wance."

"Hush, Larry," said Will Osten, "don't talk lightly of dying."

"Lightly is it? Well, now, there's nothin' light about me from the sole o' me fut to the top o' the tallest hair on me head, an' the heaviest part about me is the heart, which feels like lead intirely. But cheer up, Larry, yer owld grandmother always said ye was born to be hanged, so of coorse ye can't be starved—that's a comfort, anyhow!"

"What think you, Bunco," said Will Osten, turning to his dark-skinned companion, "shall we encamp on this arid part of the plain and go waterless as well as supperless to rest, or shall we push on? I fear the horses will break down if we try to force them much further."

"Water not be far-off," said Bunco curtly.

"Very well, we shall hold on."

In silence they continued to advance until the sun was descending towards the horizon, when there suddenly appeared, on the brow of an eminence, the figure of a solitary horseman. Sharply defined as he was against the bright sky, this horseman appeared to be of supernaturally huge proportions—insomuch that the three travellers pulled up by tacit consent, and glanced inquiringly at each other.

"It's a ghost *at last*!" muttered the superstitious Irishman, whose expression of countenance showed that he was not by any means in a jesting humour.

"Ghost or not, we must be prepared to meet him," said Will, loosening a large hunting-knife in its sheath and examining the priming of his rifle.

The strange horseman had evidently observed the party, for he presently descended the rising ground and rode slowly towards them. In doing so he passed out of the strong light, and consequently assumed more ordinary proportions, but still when he drew near, it was evident that he was a man of immense size. He rode a black steed of the largest and most powerful description; was clad in the leathern hunting-shirt, belt, leggings, moccasins, etcetera, peculiar to the western hunter, and carried a short rifle in the hollow of his right arm.

"Good-evening, strangers," he said, in a tone that savoured of the Yankee, but with an easy manner and good-humoured gravity that seemed to indicate English extraction. "Goin' far?"

"To California," said Will, smiling at the abrupt commencement of the conversation.

"H'm, a longish bit. Come far?"

"From England."

"H'm, a longish bit, too. Lost and starvin', I see."

"Not exactly, but pretty nearly so," said Will. "I had entertained the belief, presumptuous if you will, that I could find my way in any part of the wilderness by means of a sextant and

pocket compass, and, to say truth, I don't feel quite sure that I should have failed, but before I had a sufficient opportunity of testing my powers, one of our baggage horses rolled down the bank of a creek and broke my sextant. In trying to save him I rolled down along with him and smashed my compass, so I have resigned the position of guide in favour of my friend here, who, being a native, seems to possess a mysterious power in the matter of finding his way."

"From the other side of the mountains?" asked the strange horseman, glancing at Bunco.

"Yoo's right," said Bunco, with a grin.

There was a slight touch of humour in the grave stern countenance of the stranger as he replied in a language which was quite unintelligible to Will and Larry, but which appeared to create wonderful sensations in the breast of Bunco, who for some minutes continued to talk with much volubility and eagerness.

"You appear to be old friends?" said Will, inquiringly, to the stranger.

"Not 'xactly," he replied, "but I've trapped on the west side o' the mountains, and the Redskin is excited a bit at meetin' with a man who knows his nation and his name. I've heard of him before. He was thought a brave warrior by his tribe, but it is so long since he disappeared from the face o' the 'arth that they've given him up for dead. His wife was alive last fall. I saw her myself, and she has steadily refused to marry any of the young braves—at least she had refused so to do up to the time I left; but

there's no calc'latin' what these Redskins will do. However, I've comforted this one wi' the news."

"With your leave, Mister Trapper," said Larry, breaking in impatiently at this point, "may I suggest that when you're quite done talkin' we should continue our sarch for grub an' wather, for at present our stummicks is empty an' our mouths is dry!"

"Have you no food?" asked the trapper.

"None," answered Will; "we finished our last scrap of meat yesterday morning, and have been hoping and expecting to fall in with buffalo ever since, for the signs around show that they cannot be far distant."

"You are right; I am even now followin' their trail, for, like yourselves, I'm well-nigh starvin'. Not had a bite for three days."

"Ye don't look like it!" said Larry, gazing at the man in some surprise.

"Perhaps not, nevertheless it's a fact, so we'll push on an' try to find 'em before sundown."

Saying this, the stalwart trapper gave the rein to his stead and galloped away over the plains, followed as close as possible by the wearied travellers.

The pace was hard on the horses, but there was need for haste, because the sun was close on the horizon, and as far as the eye could reach no buffalo were to be seen. Ere long the character of the prairie changed, the arid ground gave place to more fertile land, here and there clumps of willows and even a few small trees appeared, while, in the far distance, a line of low bushes

ran across the country.

"Water dere," said Bunco.

"The Redskin's right," observed the trapper, slackening his speed a little; "'tis his natur' to know the signs o' the wilderness. Does his hawk-eye see nothing more?"

"Bufflo!" exclaimed Bunco, as he drew up and gazed intently at a particular spot in the wilderness.

"Ay, lad, it is buffalo an' no mistake. I know'd I should find 'em there," said the trapper, with a quiet chuckle, as he examined the priming of his rifle. "Now, friends, we'll have to approach them quietly. You'd better catch up the halters o' your pack-horses, Mister Irishman—"

"Larry O'Hale at your sarvice, Mister Trapper."

"Benjamin Hicks at yours, Mister O'Hale, but I'm better known as Big Ben! And now," he continued, "keep well in rear, all of you, an' follow me down in the bottom there, between the ridges. Don't out o' cooriosity go exposin' yourselves to the buffalo. In the meantime keep quiet, and let your mouths water at the thought o' fat steaks and marrow-bones."

Benjamin Hicks galloped along the bottom of the hollow for a considerable distance; then, dismounting, hobbled his horse by tying its two fore feet together with a piece of rope. Thus hampered, it could hop about in an awkward fashion and feed, while its master advanced on foot. With rapid strides he proceeded some distance further along the bottom, and then ascended the ridge in a stooping position. On nearing the summit

he crept on hands and knees, and, on gaining it, he sank like a phantom into the grass and disappeared.

The party who followed him stopped on reaching the spot where the horse had been left, and for some time waited in excited and silent expectation, listening for the report of the hunter's rifle. Despite the caution given them, however, they could not long refrain from attempting to see what was going on. After waiting a few minutes, Will Osten hobbled his horse and crept up the side of the ridge, which might be more correctly described as an undulating prairie-wave. Bunco and Larry followed his example. When they all lay flat among the grass on the summit and raised their heads cautiously, the sight that met their eyes sent a thrill of delight to their hearts.

It was still the boundless prairie, indeed, but its uniform flatness was broken by innumerable knolls and hillocks, of varied extent, which looked like islands in a green sea. Some were covered with clusters of white pines, others with low bushes. Rich grass waved gently in the evening breeze, giving to the whole scene an air of quiet motion. Not far distant flowed the little stream already referred to, and as this reflected the gorgeous golden clouds that were lit up by the setting sun, it appeared like a stream of liquid fire meandering over the plains, while, far, far away on the hazy and glowing horizon—so far that it seemed as if a whole world lay between—a soft blue line was faintly visible. It might have been mistaken for the distant sea, or a long low cloud of azure blue, but Will Osten knew that, however unlike

to them it might appear, this was in reality the first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains! The pleasantest sight of all, however, was a group of ten or a dozen buffalo, which grazed, in all the lazy ease of fancied security, at the side of a knoll not more than three hundred yards distant. As our travellers lay, with bated breath and beating hearts, gazing at these animals, dreaming of feasting on fat things, and waiting for a shot, they became aware of a low murmuring sound somewhat resembling distant thunder, but softer and more continuous. On scanning the plains more intently they perceived that here and there were other scattered groups of buffalo, more or less concealed by knolls, while in the extreme distance a black line, which they had at first mistaken for bushes, proved to be an immense herd of living creatures, whose pawings and bellowings reached them like a faint murmur.

Suddenly the animals close to them sprang into the air as if they had received an electric shock. At the same instant a white cloudlet of smoke rose above the grass, and a few seconds later the sharp crack of the trapper's rifle broke on their ears. The huge ungainly brutes bounded away, leaving one of their number behind. He writhed violently, and then lay gently down. A moment of suspense followed, for he might rise again and run beyond pursuit, as buffalo often do under a deadly wound! But no! he curled his tail, gasped once or twice, and rolled over on his side.

Knives were out in a moment, and the whole party rushed like wolves upon the prey. First, they rolled the animal upon his

brisket, slit his hide along the spine, peeled it down one side, and cut off a piece large enough to form a wrapper for the meat. Next the flesh on each side of the spine was pared off, and the tongue cut out. The axe was then applied to his ribs—the heart, the fat, the tender loins and other parts were taken out; then the great marrow-bones were cut from his legs, and the whole being wrapped in the green hide, was slung on a pole, and carried by Will Osten and the trapper to the nearest suitable camping ground. This was on the edge of a grove of white pine by the side of the clear rivulet under the shade of a woody hill. Here, before darkness had completely set in, Will and his new friend kindled a great fire and prepared supper, while Larry and Bunco went off to fetch and tether the horses.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.