

Literature, &c.

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FORT ASTOR.

A TALE OF THE BACKWOODS.

FAIR ladies, with your ermine victorines and sable boas, your ruffs of 'coon skin, and muffs of opossum! Exquisite gentlemen, with your beaver hats and vests of elk peltry! do you ever think, as ye lope in your britskas and swagger in fashionable promenades, of the toil and danger that are endured, that ye may be shielded from the wind and rendered impervious to the cold? Courage, endurance, danger, war, and voluntary exile, are suggested every time we behold hoary winter, and listen to the blustering north wind as he imperiously orders our proud and fair ones to don their robes of fur. We are wafted away to the boundless prairie and illimitable forests, whose denizens are made subservient to the use of man; and we wonder at the sacrifices made and the heroism displayed in the procurement of a fashionable luxury.

The display of any article of manufacture is suggestive of varied and discursive fancies. Skill, talent, accumulation of means, distribution of parts, social order, and advanced civilization, are the parents of mechanical eminence and artistic grandeur. But the display of a far robe leads us back to the starting point of society. Savage life, and the world of romance—hunters, warriors, and trappers, lonely forts and lonelier shanties, come before our fancy's eye like a panorama, the display of nature's unshorn garments. Let it not be supposed, however, that those engaged in the fur trade are necessarily rude and uncultured men. There is a fascination in the adventurous life they lead that often allures the student from the closet to study nature in her pristine aspect, and society in her advantages are often discarded by the scholar and gentleman for a sojourn in the wilds. The motives that led Dr Ethan Buckley to quit his home in Troy, New York State, his profession and relatives, are inexplicable, unless we take into view a certain restlessness in man, which, like the migratory principle in birds, leads him to explore scenes which have dwelt upon his imagination, unthoughtful of consequences.

Dr Buckley was a widower, and perhaps the attractions of home were less powerful than heretofore; for, when the American Fur Company fitted out an expedition to the country of Missouri, he accepted the situation of an agent, and removed with his two boys to the prairie, as cheerfully as if Fort Astor had been the capital and the unrequited wild were Columbia. The situation of the doctor was less lonely than the remoteness of his home would indicate; for the fort was the rendezvous of the hunters and trappers of the district; and the voyageurs, as he passed up the river on their hazardous journeys to the 'far west,' stopped on their way to taste of the hospitality, and hear his reports relative to the state of the country. In common conversation, 'state of the country,' means a widely different thing from what it did at Fort Astor. The temper and feelings of the Indians claimed the concern of the adventurers; and the route of former explorers and the contingencies of river and overland travelling were the principal themes of discussion. Dr Buckley was perfectly fitted for the duties he had undertaken: his temper was firm without being dogmatical; his courage was the offspring of physical activity and strength; and unbending moral energy. His position was one requiring these qualities in an eminent degree; for he had to restrain the impetuosity of the white hunters, and to conciliate the wild and haughty redmen. Without appearing to command, he claimed obedience subordinate in the company; and without assuming the superiority which the civilized conquerer always does over the savage, he gained the respect of the aborigines.

Dr Buckley, as already hinted, had two sons—Marcus his first born, and Ethan, in whom the love of both father and brother were strongly centred. Marcus was fast approaching the man's estate; at least the hunters said so, as they clubbed together in the fort and told their tales of danger past, and prophesied the future doings of the young man. But his father strongly impressed upon the youth that he was only sixteen, as he petitioned to be allowed to join the hunters upon their expeditions. Marcus was a manly lad at all events, although his years were few. No Shiennee or Pawnee in the continent had a darker eye; and his hair was as black as Wanhoea the interpreter's, although Wanhoea was the son of an Iroquois. He was tall of his age; and Mackenzie the Scotch trapper, was scarcely more cool and collected in the buffalo hunt, while Gorrigan, who in his youth was the crack leaper and runner in broad Donegal, which is to say of all Ireland, was hard pushed with the stripping in a mile's race. Seth Greenwood had taught him to shoot, and Seth Greenwood had challenged all Kentucky to bring one of his boys to beat him; and although Kentucky was many miles away, and the challenge was of course both unheard and unanswered, yet it showed Seth's faith in the boy's powers, or it may be in his own talent to instruct. Marcus resembled his father in form, features, and temper; and his father was proud of his vigour and courage; but he loved little Ethan, with his blue eyes and golden locks, and his smile that recalled his mother; and Marcus loved him too, for he was a gentle little boy, and

looked up to his brother with pride; for his years were only ten. Marcus mingled boldly amongst the Indians, as they came with their furs to exchange for the calicoes, beads, and powder of the white man, and he would sit for hours together with Wanhoea, asking questions and acquiring the Indian tongues; and little Ethan would sit beside him, too, and he would gaze eagerly in Wanhoea's face as he told of the unexplored beauties that the redman roamed amongst far far away. If an Indian entered the fort dressed in the picturesque robes of his nation, he would gaze upon him with boyish curiosity, and examine his accoutrements with wonder.

There was not a hunter of the wild for many leagues around Fort Astor but respected Dr Buckley. They knew him to be unbendingly just and brave, and as his form was stately, and his conduct unsustained by deceit, they named him White Rock. Cold and stoical though they appeared, they were quick to mark each peculiarity of form and character, and through the tribes that sojourned within a long journey of the fort, Marcus and Ethan were known as the Eagle and Antelope. Marcus was named so from his proud carriage and audacity; Ethan from his innocent curiosity.

Of all the independent dealers at the fort Winged Arrow was the most extensive. When others could swing their peltries on their shoulders, Winged Arrow's horse would bend beneath his load. He was a tall and stately Indian, and his frame was very powerful. His head was surmounted by a coronal of eagle feathers, and his long black hair floated over his broad shoulders; his face was marked with many scars, and when it was begrimed with black and yellow paint it looked almost hideous. He was cold and taciturn, and when he exchanged his furs for the commodities he required, he would mount his steed and ride proudly away. When the Indians were questioned concerning him, they shook their heads and only said he was a medicine, which is to say, he was a very mysterious person. The white hunters did not love him; perhaps because he was more successful than many at their vocation; perhaps because he manifested no affection for them. He often came to fort Astor, and Dr Buckley treated him with all the respect that an Indian brave could claim. Little Ethan would gaze upon his face, and lay his hand upon his dress and try to converse with him; but Winged Arrow never seemed to notice the boy. Winged Arrow was none of your capricious visitors of the white man's fort he came as regularly as the sun, and although the periods were distant between his visits, he seemed to know when consignments came from St. Louis as well as if he had read the invoice.

How beautiful is summer in the wilds! glowing gorgeous summer, with its gay and lovely flowers, and its richly blossomed trees! The boison roams on the prairie, and crops the luxuriant herbage; and the wolves, like cowards, as they are, hover round the buffaloes to seize upon and slay onweary travellers. The earth is dressed in bright and lovely hues that nature loves. The trees and plains are green; green bluffs raise their conical forms far in the distant sky, green banks bound the flashing rivers; little green islands are set in lakes, like emeralds in gold, and high hills tower up to heaven enrobed in the universal colour. The skies are cloudless, the sunbeams are unbroken; they dart from the day star with piercing ardour and brightness, and they scorch the beasts of the field, and man, the chief and weakling of creation. Winged Arrow was brave, and his horse was swift and strong, but his peltries were heavy and he was a great addition to their weight, so the poor steed was weary as it crossed the prairie; and when they saw Winged Arrow come ambulating along they turned away to avoid him, for his presence was shunned by each bold and hardy hunter. The poor steed had borne its red master in many a wild chase, when the boison had fallen beneath his arrow, and it had saved him from the knives of the Wolf Pawnees when alone he hunted in their grounds. But the toil and want it had undergone for some days had destroyed its strength and spirit, and it fell before the barrier of Fort Astor, the victim of that universal cruelty which Indian warriors manifest to their steeds. Winged Arrow said not a word, nor seemed to notice the loss he had sustained, but lifting his load of furs, he with difficulty carried them into the fort, and hid them before Dr Buckley. The commandment was a man of a widely different cast from the native; his hair curled round his brown expansive forehead, and his handsome shirt of deer-skin was bound round his waist by a handsome ornamented belt of wampum; his face was farrowed, his eye dark and thoughtful, yet it was kind, and you could see that feeling was no stranger to the bosom from which the flashings of his dark eye came. He received Winged Arrow with marked urbanity; and as his sons were beside him, he sought by his manner to influence them in their intercourse with the aborigines.

'Will White Rock give me a horse in exchange for my peltries?' said the Indian, teaching the pile with the point of his moccasins.

'My hunters have ridden hard in the trail of the elk and buffalo, and the steeds have been scanty for six moons on the prairie,' said Mr. Buckley, calmly; 'I am sorry that I have not a steed.'

'Winged arrow should have been merciful to his black horse,' said Ethan, boldly; 'hard riding on the burning prairie would kill the strongest steed in the settlement.'

His father looked at the boy with a displeased air, which effectually checked and abashed him; but the Indians nostrils only dilated,

and he seemed not to have noticed the remark of the forward child.

'If Winged Arrow pleases he may tarry in Fort Astor till to-morrow,' said Dr Buckley, mildly, 'and if any of my people bring a spare steed, it shall be at the service of Winged Arrow.'

During that day the red man set upon his skins as immovably as if he had been stone. He noticed no one, and when food was placed before him he pushed it away. This conduct astonished nobody, for the peculiarities of Indian character were understood in the fort. But Ethan Buckley seemed to be fascinated with this man. He forsook his accustomed sports and hung about the spot where Winged Arrow sat, as if he had been drawn thither by magic. The redskin's eye would fall upon him with the keen piercing glare of a wild beast, and then it would be turned to the sky with a haughty defiant expression.

The boy was bold, and a complete stranger to fear; yet he was gentle withal, and his spirit could be stirred only through his sympathies. Cruelty he detested; he who applied the lash to a dog or thong to a horse was regarded with no friendly eye by the boy, and Winged Arrow, who was formerly only an object of curiosity, was regarded with an indefinable dislike. The shades of the evening gathered over the forest and prairie, and they came creeping in their still progress over the fort, the yelp of the phanter and the howl of the wolf came sounding drearily from the broad meadow, and the bullfrog's croak pained the listener's ears; still Winged Arrow sat upon his skins, and still the boy was gazing on him.

Morning broke on Fort Astor, bright, smiling morn. Beauty and fragrance were fresh and balmy, for the dew was glittering on every leaf; the sunbeams were flashing from the horizon, and as they streamed into the dormitory in the fort, the hunters leaped from their couches and prepared for their accustomed excursions. Winged Arrow's steed lay at the gate of the fort, at least the remnants of it, for the wolves had cleaned its bones, and his peltries were still in the area; but the Indian himself was gone—ay, and the best canoe that ever skimmed the broad Missouri, and the fairest little boy beyond the Alleghanies, were away with the stern Indian.

Hunters do nothing precipitately; coolness in their vocation is of more importance than hardihood or temerity; and when Dr Buckley heard of the abduction of his child, he neither betrayed any emotion or exhibited any frantic demonstrations of rescue, but there was a contraction of his brow, and twitching of his lips, that told of a sad heart braced up to resolute daring. He could not forsake his duties; and those who have experienced the fervency of paternal affection, can tell how much more courage it required to confine him to the fort, than to send him in quest of his boy amongst the unknown regions of nature. 'I cannot go on thy brother's trail, Marcus,' said the sorrowing father to his oldest son; 'but I can make a sacrifice that costs me more—I can send, thee, my son. Look into my eyes, Marcus,' continued the father as he gazed wistfully in the young man's glowing face—'look at me, my boy, and read from the actions of my past life, and from my heart at this moment, the answer you shall make to me. Do you believe that I can send you on an expedition that I would not rather doubly venture myself?'

The young man spoke not, but, gazing on his father, he clasped him in his arms, and wept upon his neck.

'If you do not wish to assist in hunting up the Winged Arrow, tell me boldly, Marcus. You know that I will not force you.'

'But you would despise me if I could refuse, father,' said the youth, drawing himself and looking proudly at his parent. 'Have I not petitioned you to allow me to go with Mackenzie to the wilderness, and did you not keep me in the fort on account of my youth. I grieved father but I knew that you loved me, or you would not have cared so fondly for me. I will go more proudly in search of Ethan than ever I would have chased the game. You think that strangers alone should not adventure for what is linked strangest to your affection, father, and then to mine.'

Dr Buckley seldom gave way to strong emotions, but he felt them nevertheless. Generous sentiments expressed by his sons, delighted him more than feats of agility or physical prowess, and when Marcus had finished talking, his father could only wring his hand, and smile with pride as he gazed through his tears on his gallant boy. Shortly after this interview, three men and Marcus Buckley entered a large canoe, and after placing stores of ammunition, food, and bijouterie on board, they pushed silently from the river's bank, and paddled quickly up the mighty stream. They were stern and warlike men who accompanied Marcus, but they were as brave as experience in danger could make them. Their habiliments were strange, partaking of the fashions of white and red men, and their characters, also various, were a compound of civilised sympathies and a licentiousness of action, which their unrestrained passions and untrammelled sphere of life developed. Mackenzie was not a tall man, but his shoulders were like those of Atlas, and toil had so toughened his flesh that it was as hard as oak. His shirt was fashioned of unshaven elk-skin, and a strong belt held his knife and tomahawk. Corrigan was attired much in the fashion of his Scotch companion; but there was a profusion of fancy-work on his cap and shirt, and the belt that girt his very tall and athletic frame was handsomely ornamented and fringed with hair. Seth

Greenwood's muscular form was increased in similar garments to those of his fellow-adventurers, the only distinction being their leggings, Mackenzie having contrived to obtain a pair made of tartan, Corrigan's and Greenwood's being of green cloth. They were rough men, but they could track the redman on his path, and the wild beast to his lair, they were stout of heart, and stout too, of hand; they could fight with the savage in his own mode, and they could circumvent him in cunning. The loved Cap'n Buckley, as Seth Greenwood called him, and Marcus and Ethan too; and, although the wide continent had been picked, three braver hunters for a perilous adventure could not have been found, nor three who had such ample confidence in each other.

For many weary days and nights the hardy adventurers pushed their bark up the Missouri, and every hunter or Indian from whom they might obtain information was asked concerning little Ethan or Winged Arrow. They had sojourned in the villages of the aborigines, they had palavered with the chiefs, they had distributed trinkets and promises with the same profusion, but they could find no trace of the boy. The greenness of the summer departed, and the wind came sighing through the forest, agitating its myriad boughs and shaking the dry leaves from its sapless branches, like a herald of decay and death. Despondent and almost hopeless, the hunters and young Marcus turned their canoe in the direction of the settlements. They glided gently with the current, whispering their conjectures and fears, till on the third day of their downward progress they pushed into a creek. It was a dark overshadowed cove, whose waters were black and sluggish, and the rapidity of the outer current only preserved it from stagnation; but it was impervious to the sunbeams, and as a shelter from the rays and voyagers sought its welcome canopy. Mackenzie started when he drew his paddle from the water, for it struck upon a hollow vessel, which, on examination, they discovered to be the canoe Winged Arrow had taken from the creek at Fort Astor. After a hurried consultation, the adventurers pushed deeper into the creek, where the darkness was impenetrable, and placing the stolen canoe in its former position, and laying themselves flat in their own, they determined to wait the issue of their discovery. The night had begun to advance, and the evening breeze was moaning through the trees, while the dry leaves fell with a sharp crackling noise. Opposite to the overshadowed creek was a wooded island, and beyond the river rose a dark cone-like hill the island and cave were both in a deep shade and it was almost impossible to see any person on the isle. Suddenly Mackenzie beheld the empty canoe pass like a dark shadow from the cave, and no one seemed to guide or propel it. In a few moments he had muttered injunctions to keep silent, concerted signals, and loosened his tomahawk; then he dropped into the stream, and with the gentlest motion swam in the wake of the bark. The light vessel crossed the waters with a rapid motion, and Mackenzie was convinced that it was fastened to a tug, and drawn by some one on the lonely isle, towards whose woody shores it was quickly advancing. Fearing that the mysterious Winged Arrow might observe him, as he kept close upon the canoe, he swam gently up the river for some time, then throwing himself upon his back, he was carried by the current like a log of timber to the shores of the lonely isle. Cautiously padding with his hands, he caused his stiffened form to float with that uneasy vibratory motion given to wood by the rippling waters, and had skirted two sides of the island when the canoe shot from the shade again. This time it was paddled by two athletic men, and the hunter believed that he descried the form of a boy, with his head reclined upon the edge of the bark. In an instant he had thrown himself in a swimming position, and was rapidly following the fast fitting canoe. It landed on the opposite shore of the Missouri, and the white man beheld two Indians leap from the boat. One held a boy in his arms, while the other dragged the bark on shore and concealed it in brushwood close upon the river. The white man was brave, and as wily as any Indian of the woods; he came from a land of streams and mountains, and early habit and his present life had rendered him an adept either in river or land service; he crawled from the water like a snake, and stealthily degging the steps of the redmen, he saw them seat themselves up on the ground and kindle a fire. Its glaring light streamed through the dark vista of the woods, and illuminated the trunks of the trees in its vicinity and the figures that sat around it; two were natives and one was Ethan Buckley. Cautious as ever Scot could be, the hardy woodsman dragged himself close to the group; the moaning of the trees and the falling of dry leaves favoured his design, and he lay like a panther amongst some dark brush and heard the redman converse. Their tones were harsh and guttural, and their language the Sioux; but Mackenzie had been long among the tribes on the Missouri, and their tones were familiar to his ear; he knew Winged Arrow's voice. The companion of Winged Arrow, as seen by the glare of the light, was a wealthy chief, for his robes were beautiful and his blanket was of scarlet cloth. His name was Stonyheart, and if ever redman hated the name of Long-knife, that swarthy Indian did. He too was a 'medicine,' whose name was synonymous with dark deed and infamy with the whites, but whose valour and patriotism made him beloved by the people of his nation. Mackenzie felt his heart yearn towards the child, as Ethan sat by the fire in an pathetic manner,