

## Literature, &amp;c.

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From Chambers's Edinburgh Journal.

THE TRAPPERS OF THE ROCKY  
MOUNTAINS.

A work called 'Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky mountains,' forms two parts—but very unequal parts of the Home and Colonial Library. One describes a journey through Mexico, by a route that has been little if at all traversed by Europeans; yet, owing to the sameness in the character of people, and position of the country, it is but little different from the narratives of the former travellers. Our author, however, shows that the obvious arrest of social progress in Mexico is in a great degree owing to physical causes; the fertile table-lands of the central region being cut off from easy traffic with the coast, and the entire population of 8,000,000 scattered over an area of 1,312,950 square miles, being distributed in isolated departments, distinct in interests, and insecure in intercommunication. The people, he tells us, rank decidedly low in the scale of humanity. They are treacherous, cunning, indolent and cowardly by nature, yet have that brutish indifference to death which is altogether distinct even from mere animal courage. He never observed a single commendable trait in the character of the Mexican—that is, of the male animal; for the women, singular as it may seem under the circumstances, are, for kindness of heart, and many sterling qualities, an ornament to their sex and to any nation.

The second, and by far the more valuable part, contains the passage of the Rocky Mountains, and the route thence to New York. There is much in this portion of the work which will be new to British readers, and probably useful in correcting the pleasant delusions of such writers as Cooper. Take the following scenic view to begin with:—The view from this point was wild and dismal in the extreme. Looking back, the whole country was covered with a thick carpet of snow, but eastward it was seen in patches only here and there. Before me lay the main chain of the Rocky Mountains, Pike's Peak lifting its snowy head far above the rest; and to the south-east the Spanish Peaks (Cumbres Espanolas) towered like twin giants over the plains. Beneath the mountain on which I stood was a narrow valley, through which ran a streamlet bordered with dwarf oak and pine, and looking like a thread of silver as it wound through the plain. Rugged peaks, and ridges, snow-clad, and covered with pine, and deep gorges filled with broken rocks, everywhere met the eye. To the eastward the mountains gradually smoothed away in the detached spurs and broken ground, until they met the vast prairies, which stretched far as the eye could reach, and hundreds of miles beyond—a sea of seeming barrenness, vast and dismal. A hurricane of wind was blowing at the time, and clouds of dust swept along the sandy prairies, like the smoke of a million bonfires. On the mountain top it roared and raved through the pines, filling the air with snow and broken branches, and piling it in huge drifts against the trees. The perfect solitude of this vast wilderness was almost appalling. From my position on the summit of the dividing ridge I had a bird's eye view, as it were, over the rugged and chaotic masses of the stupendous chain of the Rocky Mountains, and the vast deserts which stretched away from their eastern basis; while, on all sides of me, broken ridges, and chasms, and ravines, with masses of piled-up rocks and uprooted trees, with clouds of drifting snow flying through the air, and the hurricane's roar battling through the forest at my feet, added to the wildness of the scene, which was unrelieved by the slightest vestige of animal or human life. Not a sound either of bird or beast was heard; indeed the hoarse and stunning rattle of the wind would have drowned them, so loud it roared and raved through the trees.

Even the lowlands in such a region are not without their terrors. The black threatening clouds seemed gradually to descend until they kissed the earth, and already the distant mountains were hidden to their very bases. A hollow murmuring swept through the bottom, but but as yet not a branch was stirred by wind; and the huge cotton-woods, with their leafless limbs, loomed like a line of ghosts through the heavy gloom. Knowing but too well what was coming, I turned my animals towards the timber, which was about two miles distant. With pointed ears, and actually trembling with fright, they were as eager as myself to reach the shelter; but before we had proceeded a third of the distance, with a deafening roar the tempest broke upon us. The clouds opened and drove right in our faces a storm of freezing sleet, which froze upon us as it fell. The first squall of wind carried away my cap, and the enormous hail-stones, beating on my unprotected head and face, almost stunned me. In an instant my hunting shirt was soaked, and as instantly frozen hard and my horse was a mass of icicles. Jumping off my mule—for to ride was impossible—I tore off the saddle blanket and covered my head. The animals, blinded with the sleet, and their eyes actually coated with ice, turned their sterns to the storm, and, blown before it, made for the open prairie. All my exertions to drive them to the shelter of the timber were useless. It was impossible to face

possible to face the hurricane, which now brought with it clouds of driving snow; and perfect darkness soon set in. Still they kept on, and I determined not to leave them, following, or rather being blown, after them. My blanket, frozen stiff like a board, required all the strength of my numbed fingers to prevent it being blown away, and although it was no protection against the intense cold, I knew it would in some degree shelter me at night from the snow. In half an hour, the ground was covered on the bare prairie to the depth of two feet, and through this I floundered for a long time before the animals stopped.

The way the wind roared over the prairie that night—how the snow drove before it, covering me and the poor animals partly—and how I lay there, feeling the very blood freezing in my veins, and my bones petrifying with the icy blasts which seemed to penetrate them—how for hours I remained with my head on my knees, and the snow pressing it down like a weight of lead, expecting every instant to drop into a sleep from which I knew it was impossible I should ever awake—how every now and then the mules would groan aloud and fall down upon the snow, and then again struggle on their legs—how all night long the piercing howl of wolves was borne upon the wind, which never for an instant abated its violence during the night—I would not attempt to describe. I have passed many nights alone in the wilderness, and in a solitary camp have listened to the roarings of the wind and the howlings of the wolves, and felt the rain or snow beating upon me, with perfect unconcern, but this night threw all my former experiences into the shade, and is marked with the blackest of stones in the memoranda of my journeyings.

But we must now come to the most interesting portion of the work—a description of the Trappers of the Rocky Mountains, who, according to our author, appear to approximate more to the primitive savage, than perhaps any other class of civilised man. Their lives are spent in the remotest wilds of the mountains, and their habits and character exhibit a mixture of simplicity and ferocity, impressed upon them, one would think, by the strange phenomena of nature in the midst of which they live. Food and clothing are their only wants, and the pursuit of these is the great source of their perils and hardships, with their rifle habitually in their hands, they are constantly on their watch against danger, or engaged in the supply of provisions.

Keen observers of nature, they rival the beasts of prey in discovering the haunts and habits of game, and in their skill and cunning in capturing it. Constantly exposed to perils of all kinds, they become callous to any feeling of danger, and destroy human as well as animal life, with as little scruple, and as freely as they expose their own. Of laws human or Divine, they neither know nor care to know. Their wish is their law, and to attain it they do not scruple as to ways and means. Firm friends and bitter enemies, with them it is a word and a blow, and the blow often fist. They may have good qualities, but they are those of the animal; and people fond of giving hard names call them revengeful, bloodthirsty, drunkards (where the wherewithal is to be had), gamblers, regardless of the laws of *neum* and *teum*—in fact white Indians. However, there are exceptions, and I have met honest mountain-men. Their animal qualities, however are undeniable. Strong, active, hardy as bears, daring, expert in the use of their weapons, they are just what uncivilized white men might be supposed to be in a brute state, depending upon his instinct for the support of life. Not a hole or corner in the vast wilderness of 'far west' but has been ransacked by these hardy men. From the Mississippi to the mouth of the Colorado of the west, from the frozen regions of the north to the Gila in Mexico, the beaver hunter has set his trap in every creek and stream. All this vast country, but for the daring enterprise of these men, would be even now a *terra incognita* to geographers, as indeed a great portion still is; but there is not an acre that has not been passed and re-passed by the trappers in their perilous excursions. The mountains and streams still retain the names assigned to them by the rude hunters; and these alone are the hardy pioneers, who have paved the way for the settlement of the western country.

Trappers are of two kinds—the hired and the free: the former being merely hired for the hunt by the fur companies, while the latter is supplied with animals and traps by the company, and receives a certain price for his furs and peltries.

There is also a third trapper 'on his own hook,' more independent than either. He has animals and traps of his own, chooses his own hunting grounds, and selects his own market. From this class, which is small in number, the novelists may be supposed to select their romantic trappers, who amuse the leisure with sentiment and philosophy.

The equipment of the trapper is as follows:—On starting for a hunt, he fits himself out with the necessary equipment, either from the Indian trading forts, or from some of the petty traders, *coursers de boies*—who frequent the western country. This equipment consists usually of two or three mules or horses—one for saddle the other for packs—and six traps, which are carried in a bag of leather called a trap-sock. Ammunition, a few pounds of tobacco, dressed deer-skins for mocassins, &c., are carried in a wallet of dressed buffalo skin, called a possible sack. His possible and trap sack are generally carried on the saddle mule when hunting, the others being packed with

the furs. The costume of the trapper is a hunting shirt of dressed buckskin, ornamented with long fringes; pantaloons of the same material, and decorated with porcupine quills and long fringes down the outside of the leg. A flexible felt hat and mocassins inclose his extremities. Over his right shoulder and under his left arm hang his powder horn and bullet pouch, in which he carries his ball, flint and steel, and odds and ends of all kinds. Round the waist is a belt, in which is stuck a large butcher's knife in a sheath of buffalo skin, made fast to the belt by a chain or guard of steel; which also supports a little buck-skin case containing a whetstone. A tomahawk is also often added, and of course a long heavy rifle is part of his equipment. I had nearly forgotten the pipe holder, which hangs round his neck, and is generally a *gage d'amour*, and a triumph of squaw workmanship, in shape of heart, garnished with beads and porcupine quills.

Thus furnished with everything that is necessary, and having chosen the locality of his hunting ground, he sets out on his expedition to the mountains, sometimes alone, sometimes with several more in company, as soon as the breaking up of the ice permits. Arrived on his hunting grounds, he follows the creeks and streams, keeping a sharp look out for 'signs.' If he sees a prostrate cotton wood tree, he examines it to discover if it be the work of beavers, whether 'brown' for the purpose of food or to dam the stream. The track of the beaver on the mud or sand under the bank is also examined, and if the signs be fresh, he sets his trap in the run of the animal, hiding it under water, and attaching it by a stout chain to a picket driven in the bank or to a bush or tree. A 'float stick' is made fast to the trap, by a cord, a few feet long, which, if the animal carries away the trap, floats on the water, and points out its position. The trap is baited with the 'medicine,' an oily substance obtained from the beaver. A stick is dipped into this and planted over the trap; and the beaver attracted by the smell, and wishing a close inspection, very foolishly puts his leg into the trap and is a 'gone beaver.'

When a lodge is discovered the trap is set at the edge of the dam, at the point where the animal passes from deep to shoul water, and always under water. Early in the morning, the hunter mounts his mule and examines the traps. The captured animals are skinned, and the tails, which are a great dainty, carefully packed into camp. The skin is then stretched over a hoop or framework of osier twigs, and is allowed to dry, the flesh and fatty substance being carefully scraped (grained). When dry, it is folded into a square sheet, the fur turned inwards, and the bundle containing about ten to twenty skins, tightly pressed and corded, and is ready for transportation.

'During the hunt, regardless of Indian vicinity, the fearless trapper wanders far and near in search of 'signs.' His nerves must ever be in a state of tension, and his mind ever present at his call. His eagle eye sweeps round the country, and in an instant detects any foreign appearance. A turned leaf, a blade of grass pressed down, the uneasiness of the wild animals, the flight of birds, are all paragraphs to him written in nature's legible hand and plainest language. All the wits of the subtle savage are called into play to gain an advantage over the wily woodsman; but with the natural instinct of primitive man, the white hunter has the advantages of civilised mind; and thus provided, seldom fails to out-wit, under equal advantages, the cunning savage.'

Yet sometimes the precautions of the white hunter are vain. The Indian, observing, where he has set his traps, creeps towards them in such a way as to leave no trail, and couches patiently in the bushes till his victim comes. Then flies the arrow, and at so short a distance it rarely flies in vain. The whizz is hardly in the ear of the victim when the point is in his heart, and the exulting savage has a white scalp to carry home for the adornment of his lodge. But the balance of spoil of this kind, it must be said is greatly in favour of the trappers, whose camp-fires, at the end of the hunt, exhibit twelve black scalps for every one one their comrades have lost.

At a certain time, when the hunt is over, or they have loaded their pack-animals, the trappers proceed to the 'rendezvous,' the locality of which has been previously agreed upon, and here the traders and agents of the fur companies await them, with such assortment of goods as their hardy customers may require, including generally a fair supply of alcohol. The trappers drop in singly and in small bands bringing their packs of beaver to this mountain market, not unfrequently to the value of a thousand dollars each, the produce of one hunt. The dissipation of the rendezvous, however, soon turns the trapper's pocket inside out. The goods brought by the traders, although of the most inferior quality, are sold at enormous prices:—Coffee twenty and thirty shillings a pint-cup, which is usual measure; tobacco fetches ten and fifteen shillings a plug; alcohol, from twenty to fifty shillings a pint; gun-powder, sixteen shillings a pint-cup and all other articles at proportionably exorbitant prices.

The 'beaver' is purchased at from two to eight dollars per pound, the Hudson's Bay Company alone buying it by the pile, or 'plew'—that is the whole skin; giving a certain price for skins, whether of old beaver or 'kittens.'

The rendezvous is one continued scene of drunkenness, gambling and brawling and fighting as long as the money and credit of trappers

last. Seated Indian fashion round the fire, with a blanket spread before them groups seen with their packs of cards, playing at 'ker,' 'poker,' and 'seven up,' the mountain games. The stakes are 'beaver' which here is current coin, the fur is their horses, mules, rifles, and shirts, and packs and breeches are staked. Daring players make the rounds of the camp, challenging each other to play for the trapper's best stake—his horse, his squaw, (if he has one), and as once happened, his scalp! 'Go 'hos and beaver!' is the mountain cry, when any loss is sustained; and 'or later 'hos and beaver,' invariable final way into the insatiable pockets of the trapper. A trapper often squanders the produce of his hunt, amounting to hundreds of dollars, in a couple of hours; and supplied on credit with another equipment, leaves the rendezvous another expedition, which has the same result after time; although one tolerably successful hunt, would enable him to return to the settlements and civilized life, with a sum to purchase and stock a farm, and himself at ease and comfort the remainder of his days.

An old trapper, a French Canadian, told me that he had received fifteen thousand dollars for beaver, during a sojourn in the mountains of twenty years, every year he returned in his mind to return to Canada, and this object always converted the fur into cash, but a fortnight at the rendezvous always had him out, and at the end of twenty years had not even credit sufficient to buy a pair of power.

These annual gatherings are often the scene of bloody duels, for over their cups and no men are more quarrelsome than the mountaineers. Rifles at twenty paces, all differences; and as may be imagined, fall of one or other of the combatants, is common, or, as sometimes happens both the word 'fire.'

We have already given some specimens of our author's skill in painting from nature the following scene, though often sketchy, has rarely been treated with a freer and more touching. It is a scene far from unfamiliar to the trapper:—'A little before sunset I descended the mountain to the springs; and being tired, after taking a refreshing draught of cold water, I lay down on the rock by the side of the water and fell fast asleep. I awoke the sun had already set, but the darkness was fast gathering over the mountain, I was surprised to see a bright lightering against its sides. A glance assured that the mountain was on fire, and, as I was up, I saw at once the danger of my position. The bottom had been fired about a mile low the springs, and but a short distance where I had secured my animal. A cloud of smoke was hanging over the gorge, and presently a light air springing from the east, a mass of flame shot up from the sky and rolled fiercely up the stream, belt of dry brush on its banks catching and burning like tinder. The mountain already invaded by the devouring element, and two wings of flame spread out from the main stream, which, roaring along the mountain with the speed of a race-horse, hurried up the mountain side, extending its long line advanced. The dry pines and cedars were cracked as the flame, reaching them, up their trunks, and spread amongst them, whilst the long waving grass underneath a sea of fire. From the rapidity with which the fire advanced, I feared that it would have reached my animals, and hurried to the spot as fast as I could run. The fire itself was as yet untouched, but the rounding ridges were clothed in fire, and mules, with stretched ropes were trembling with fear. Throwing the saddle on my back and the pack on my steadiest mule, I mounted, leaving on the ground a pile of which I had not time to carry with me. The fire had already gained the prairie, and the dry grass was soon a sheet of flame; but, than all, the gap through which I had retreated was burning. Setting spurs into the mule's sides, I dashed him at the burning, and though his mane and tail were streaming, the attempt he gallantly charged through. Looking back, I saw the mules huddled together on the other side, and evidently to pass the blazing barrier. As, however, the stop would have been fatal, I dashed on before I had proceeded twenty yards, my hunting mule, singed and smoking, was on my side and the others close behind her.

On all sides I was surrounded by fire, the whole scenery was illuminated. The distant ridges being as plainly visible as noon day. The bottom was a roaring of flame, but on the other side the prairie more bare of cedar bushes, the fire was less fierce, and presented the only way of escape. To reach it however the creek had to be crossed, and the bushes on the bank were burning fiercely, which rendered it a matter; moreover, the edges were coated with the water with thick ice, which rendered it still more difficult. I succeeded in crossing the Pancho into the stream, but in attempting to climb the opposite bank, a blaze of fire burst into his face, which caused him to stop on end, and his feet flying away from him at the same moment on the ice, he fell backwards into the middle of the stream, and rose over me in the deepest water. He rose on his legs, and stood trembling with fright in the middle of the stream, which I had just groped for my rifle, which had fallen from my hands, and of course sunk to the bottom. After a search of some minutes I found it, and again mounting, made another