

THE WAR-TRAIL!

CHAPTER LXX.—(CONTINUED.)

Under other circumstances, I might have stayed to regard such a scene, though not to admire it. On that interminable waste, there was naught to be admired, nor even sublimity; but no spectacle however sublime, however beautiful, could have won from me a thought at that moment.

The trackers had already ridden far out, and were advancing, half concealed by the cloud of black "stoor" flung up from the heels of their horses. For some distance they moved straight on without looking for the tracks of the steed. Before meeting the fire, they had gone beyond the edge of the chaparral; after a while, I observed them moving more slowly, with their eyes upon the ground as if looking for the trail. I had doubts of their being able either to find or follow it now. The shallow hoof-prints would be filled with the debris of the burnt herbage—surely they could no longer be traced?

By myself, they could not, nor by a common man; but it seemed that to the eyes of those keen hunters, the trail was as conspicuous as ever. I saw that after searching a few seconds, they had taken it up, and were once more moving along, guided by the tracks. Some slight hollows I could perceive, distributed here and there over the ground, and scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding level. Certainly, without having been told where they were, I should not have known where they were, I should not have known them to be the tracks of a horse.

It proved a wide prairie, and we seemed to be crossing its central part. The fire had spread far.

At one place, nearly midway, where the trail was faint, and difficult to make out, we stopped for a short while to give the trackers time. A momentary curiosity induced me to gaze around. Awful was the scene—awful without sublimity. Even the thorny chaparral no longer relieved the eye; the outline of its low shrubbery had sunk below the horizon, and on all sides stretched the charred plain up to the rim of the leaden canopy, black—black—illimitable. Had I been alone, I might easily have yielded to the fancy, that the world was dead.

Gazing over this vast opacity, I for a moment forgot my companions, and fell into a sort of lethargic stupor. I fancied that I, too, was dead or dreaming—I fancied that I was in hell—the Averons of the ancients. In my youth, I had the misfortune to be well schooled in classic lore, to the neglect of studies that are useful; and often in life have the poetical absurdities of Greek and Latin mythology intruded themselves upon my spirit—both asleep and awake. I fancied, therefore, that some well-meaning Aeschylus had introduced me to the regions below and that black plain before me was some landscape in the Kingdom of Pluto. Reflection—had I been capable of that—would have convinced me of my error. No part of that monarch's dominions can be so thinly peopled.

I was summoned to reason again by the voices of my followers. The lost trail had been found, and they were moving on.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE TALK OF THE TRACKERS.

I SPURRED after, and soon overtook them. Regardless of the dust, I rode close in the rear of the trackers, and listened to what they were saying.

These "men of the mountains"—as they prided to call themselves—were peculiar. While engaged in a duty, such as the present, they would scarce disclose their thoughts, even to me; much less were they communicative with the rest of my following, whom they were accustomed to regard as "greenhorns"—their favorite appellation for all men who have not made the tour of the grand prairies. Notwithstanding that Standfield and Black were backwoodsmen and hunters by profession, Quackenbush a splendid shot, Le Blanc a regular "royager," and the others more or less skilled in woodcraft, all were greenhorns in the opinion of the trappers. To be otherwise, a man must have starved upon a "sage prairie"—"run" buffalo by the Yellowstone or Platte—fought "Injun," and shot Indian—have well-nigh lost scalp or ears—spent a winter in Pierre's Hole upon Green River—or camped amid the snows of the Rocky Mountains? Some one of all these feats must needs have been performed ere the "greenhorn" can matriculate and take rank as a "mountain man."

I of all my party was the only one who, in the eyes of Rube and Garey, was not a greenhorn, and even I—gentleman amateur that I was—was hardly up either in their confidence or their "craft." It is indeed true—with all classic accomplishments, with my fine words, my fine horse, and my fine clothes—so long as we were within the limits of prairie-land, I acknowledged these men as my superiors. They were my guides, my instructors, my masters.

Since overtaking them on the trail, I had not asked them to give any opinion. I dreaded a direct answer—for I had noticed something like a despairing look in the eyes of both.

As I followed them over the black plain, however, I thought that their faces brightened a little, and appeared

heels, and eagerly caught up every word that was passing between them. Rube was speaking when I first drew near.

"Wagh! I don't b'lieve it, Bill; 'tain't possible no-how-so-ever. The paraira wur sot afire—must 'a been; thur's no other ways for it. It couldn't 'a tuk to bleezin' o' itself—eh?"

"Sartinly not; I agree wif you, Rube."

"Wal—thur wur a fellar as I met onces at Bent's Fort on the Arkinsaw—a odd sort o' critter he wur, an' no mistake; he us't to go pokin' about, gatherin' weeds an' all sorta o' green garbitch, an' spreading them out atween sheets of paper—whet he called buttoneyesin—jest like the ur Dutch doctor as wur rubbed out, when we went into the Navagh country, t'other side o' the Grand."

"I remembers him."

"Wal, this hyur fellar I tell 'ee about, he us't to talk mighty big o' this, thet, and t'other; an' he palavered a heap 'bout a thing thet, ef I don't disremember, wur called spataynyus kumbush-shun."

"I've heard o' 't; that are name."

"Wal, the button eyesser, he sayed that a paraira mout take afire o' itself, 'thout anybody whatomdixer hevins sot it. Now, thet ur's what this child don't b'lieve, nobow. In coorse, I knows thet lightnin' sometimes may sot a paraira a bleezin', but lightnin' is a natral fire o' itself; and it's only rezounible to expect that the dry grass wud catch from it like punk; but I shed like to know how fire kud kindle by itself—thet's whet I shed like to know."

"I don't believe it can," rejoined Garey.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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