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THE HUNTERS' FEAST: CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE CAMP FIRE

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
A Hunting Party

On the western bank of the Mississippi, twelve miles below the *embouchure* of the Missouri, stands the large town of Saint Louis, poetically known as the “Mound City.” Although there are many other large towns throughout the Mississippi Valley, Saint Louis is the true metropolis of the “far west” – of that semi-civilised, ever-changing belt of territory known as the “Frontier.”

Saint Louis is one of those American cities in the history of which there is something of peculiar interest. It is one of the oldest of North-American settlements, having been a French trading port at an early period.

Though not so successful as their rivals the English, there was a degree of picturesqueness about French colonisation, that, in the present day, strongly claims the attention of the American poet, novelist, and historian. Their dealings with the Indian aborigines – the facile manner in which they glided into the habits of the latter – meeting them more than half-way between civilisation and savage life – the handsome nomenclature which they have scattered freely, and which still holds over the trans-Mississippian territories – the introduction of a new race (the half blood – peculiarly French) – the heroic and adventurous character of their earliest pioneers, De Salle Marquette, Father Hennepin, etcetera – their romantic explorations and melancholy fate – all these circumstances have rendered extremely interesting the early history of the French in America. Even the Quixotism of some of their attempts at colonisation cannot fail to interest us, as at Gallipolis on the Ohio, a colony composed of expatriated people of the French court; – perruquiers, coachbuilders, tailors, *modistes*, and the like. Here, in the face of hostile Indians, before an acre of ground was cleared, before the slightest provision was made for their future subsistence, the first house erected was a large log structure, to serve as the *salon du Lal*!

Besides its French origin, Saint Louis possesses many other points of interest. It has long been the *entrepôt* and *depôt* of commerce with the wild tribes of prairie-land. There the trader is supplied with his stock for the Indian market – his red and green blanket – his beads and trinkets – his rifles, and powder, and lead; and there, in return, he disposes of the spoils of the prairie collected in many a far and perilous wandering. There the emigrant rests on the way to his wilderness home; and the hunter equips himself before starting forth on some new expedition.

To the traveller, Saint Louis is a place of peculiar interest. He will hear around him the language of every nation in the civilised world. He will behold faces of every hue and variety of expression. He will meet with men of every possible calling.

All this is peculiarly true in the latter part of the summer season. Then the motley population of New Orleans fly from the annual scourge of the yellow fever, and seek safety in the cities that lie farther north. Of these, Saint Louis is a favourite “city of refuge,” – the Creole element of its population being related to that kindred race in the South, and keeping up with it this annual correspondence.

In one of these streams of migration I had found my way to Saint Louis, in the autumn of 18 – . The place was at the time filled with loungers, who seemed to have nothing else to do but kill time. Every hotel had its quota, and in every verandah and at the corners of the streets you might see small knots of well-dressed gentlemen trying to entertain each other, and laugh away the hours. Most of

them were the annual birds of passage from New Orleans, who had fled from "yellow Jack," and were sojourning here till the cold frosty winds of November should drive that intruder from the "crescent city;" but there were many other *flaneurs* as well. There were travellers from Europe: – men of wealth and rank who had left behind them the luxuries of civilised society to rough it for a season in the wild West – painters in search of the picturesque – naturalists whose love of their favourite study had drawn them from their comfortable closets to search for knowledge under circumstances of extremest difficulty – and sportsmen, who, tired of chasing small game, were on their way to the great plains to take part in the noble sport of hunting the buffalo. I was myself one of the last-named fraternity.

There is no country in the world so addicted to the *table d'hôte* as America, and that very custom soon makes idle people acquainted with each other. I was not very long in the place before I was upon terms of intimacy with a large number of these loungers, and I found several, like myself, desirous of making a hunting expedition to the prairies. This chimed in with my plans to a nicety, and I at once set about getting up the expedition. I found five others who were willing to join me.

After several *conversaziones*, with much discussion, we succeeded at length in "fixing" our plan. Each was to "equip" according to his own fancy, though it was necessary for each to provide himself with a riding horse or mule. After that, a general fund was to be "raised," to be appropriated to the purchase of a waggon and team, with tents, stores, and cooking utensils. A couple of professional hunters were to be engaged; men who knew the ground to be traversed, and who were to act as guides to the expedition.

About a week was consumed in making the necessary preparations, and at the end of that time, under the sunrise of a lovely morning, a small cavalcade was seen to issue from the back suburbs of Saint Louis, and, climbing the undulating slopes in its rear, head for the far-stretching wilderness of the prairies. It was our hunting expedition.

The cavalcade consisted of eight mounted men, and a waggon with its full team of six tough mules. These last were under the *manège* of "Jake" – a free negro, with a shining black face, a thick full mop, and a set of the best "ivories," which were almost always uncovered in a smile.

Peeping from under the tilt of the waggon might be seen another face strongly contrasting with that of Jake. This had been originally of a reddish hue, but sun-tan, and a thick sprinkling of freckles, had changed the red to golden-yellow. A shock of fiery hair surmounted this visage, which was partially concealed under a badly-battered hat. Though the face of the black expressed good-humour, it might have been called sad when brought into comparison with that of the little red man, which peeped out beside it. Upon the latter, there was an expression irresistibly comic – the expression of an actor in broad farce. One eye was continually on the wink, while the other looked knowing enough for both. A short clay-pipe, stuck jauntily between the lips, added to the comical expression of the face, which was that of Mike Lanty from Limerick. No one ever mistook the nationality of Michael.

Who were the eight cavaliers that accompanied the waggon? Six of them were gentlemen by birth and education. At least half that number were scholars. The other two laid no claim either to gentleness or scholarship – they were rude trappers – the hunters and guides of the expedition.

A word about each one of the eight, for there was not one of them without his peculiarity. First, there was an Englishman – a genuine type of his countrymen – full six feet high, well proportioned, with broad chest and shoulders, and massive limbs. Hair of a light brown, complexion florid, moustache and whiskers full and hay-coloured, but suiting well the complexion and features. The last were regular, and if not handsome, at least good humoured and noble in their expression. The owner was in reality a nobleman – a true nobleman – one of that class who, while travelling through the "States," have the good sense to carry their umbrella along, and leave their title behind them. To us he was known as Mr Thompson, and, after some time, when we had all become familiar with each other, as plain "Thompson." It was only long after, and by accident, that I became acquainted with his rank and title; some of our companions do not know it to this day, but that is of no consequence.

I mention the circumstance here to aid me in illustrating the character of our travelling companion, who was "close" and modest almost to a fault.

His costume was characteristic. A "tweed" shooting jacket, of course, with eight pockets – a vest of the same material with four – tweed browsers, and a tweed cap. In the waggon was *the hat-box*; of strong yellow leather, with straps and padlock. This was supposed to contain the dress hat; and some of the party were merry about it. But no – Mr Thompson was a more experienced traveller than his companions thought him at first. The contents of the hat-case were sundry brushes – including one for the teeth – combs, razors, and pieces of soap. The hat had been left at Saint Louis.

But the umbrella had *not*. It was then under Thompson's arm, with its full proportions of whalebone and gingham. Under that umbrella he had hunted tigers in the jungles of India – under that umbrella he had chased the lion upon the plains of Africa – under that umbrella he had pursued the ostrich and the vicuña over the pampas of South America; and now under that same hemisphere of blue gingham he was about to carry terror and destruction among the wild buffaloes of the prairies.

Besides the umbrella – strictly a weapon of defence – Mr Thompson carried another, a heavy double-barrelled gun, marked "Bishop, of Bond Street," no bad weapon with a loading of buck-shot, and with this both barrels were habitually loaded.

So much for Mr Thompson, who may pass for Number 1 of the hunting party. He was mounted on a strong bay cob, with tail cut short, and English saddle, both of which objects – the short tail and the saddle – were curiosities to all of the party except Mr Thompson and myself.

Number 2 was as unlike Number 1 as two animals of the same species could possibly be. He was a Kentuckian, full six inches taller than Thompson, or indeed than any of the party. His features were marked, prominent and irregular, and this irregularity was increased by a "cheekful" of half-chewed tobacco. His complexion was dark, almost olive, and the face quite naked, without either moustache or whisker; but long straight hair, black as an Indian's, hung down to his shoulders. In fact, there was a good deal of the Indian look about him, except in his figure. That was somewhat slouched, with arms and limbs of over-length, loosely hung about it. Both, however, though not modelled after the Apollo, were evidently full of muscle and tough strength, and looked as though their owner could return the hug of a bear with interest. There was a gravity in his look, but that was not from any gravity of spirits; it was his swarth complexion that gave him this appearance, aided, no doubt, by several lines of "ambeer" proceeding from the corners of his mouth in the direction of the chin. So far from being grave, this dark Kentuckian was as gay and buoyant as any of the party. Indeed, a light and boyish spirit is a characteristic of the Kentuckian as well as of all the natives of the Mississippi Valley – at least such has been my observation.

Our Kentuckian was costumed just as he would have been upon a cool morning riding about the "woodland" of his own plantation, for a "planter" he was. He wore a "Jeans" frock, and over that a long-tailed overcoat of the best green blanket, with side pockets and flaps. His jeans pantaloons were stuck into a pair of heavy horse-leather pegged boots, sometimes known as "nigger" boots; but over these were "wrappers" of green baize, fastened with a string above the knees. His hat was a "broad-brimmed felt," costly enough, but somewhat crushed by being sat upon and slept in. He bestrode a tall raw-boned stood that possessed many of the characteristics of the rider; and in the same proportion that the latter overtopped his companions, so did the steed out-size all the other horses of the cavalcade. Over the shoulders of the Kentuckian were suspended, by several straps, pouch, horn, and haversack, and resting upon his toe was the butt of a heavy rifle, the muzzle of which reached to a level with his shoulder.

He was a rich Kentucky planter, and known in his native state as a great deer-hunter. Some business or pleasure had brought him to Saint Louis. It was hinted that Kentucky was becoming too thickly settled for him – deer becoming scarce, and bear hardly to be found – and that his visit to Saint Louis had something to do with seeking a new "location" where these animals were still to be met with in greater plenty. The idea of buffalo-hunting was just to his liking. The expedition would carry

him through the frontier country, where he might afterwards choose his “location” – at all events the sport would repay him, and he was one of the most enthusiastic in regard to it.

He that looms up on the retrospect of my memory as Number 3 was as unlike the Kentuckian, as the latter was to Thompson. He was a disciple of Esculapius – not thin and pale, as these usually are, but fat, red, and jolly. I think he was originally a “Yankee,” though his long residence in the Western States had rubbed the Yankee out of him to a great extent. At all events he had few of their characteristics about him. He was neither staid, sober, nor, what is usually alleged as a trait of the true bred Yankee, “stingy.” On the contrary, our doctor was full of talk and joviality – generous to a fault. A fault, indeed; for, although many years in practice in various parts of the United States, and having earned large sums of money, at the date of our expedition we found him in Saint Louis almost without a dollar, and with no great stock of patients. The truth must be told; the doctor was of a restless disposition, and liked his glass too well. He was a singer too, a fine amateur singer, with a voice equal to Mario’s. That may partly account for his failure in securing a fortune. He was a favourite with all – ladies included – and so fond of good company, that he preferred the edge of the jovial board to the bed-side of a patient.

Not from any fondness for buffalo-hunting, but rather through an attachment to some of the company, had the doctor volunteered. Indeed, he was solicited by all to make one of us – partly on account of his excellent society, and partly that his professional services might be called into requisition before our return.

The doctor still preserved his professional costume of black – somewhat russet by long wear – but this was modified by a close-fitting fur cap, and wrappers of brown cloth, which he wore around his short thick legs. He was not over-well mounted – a very spare little horse was all he had, as his funds would not stretch to a better. It was quite a quiet one, however, and carried the doctor and his “medical saddle-bags” steadily enough, though not without a good deal of spurring and whipping. The doctor’s name was “Jopper” – Dr John Jopper.

A very elegant youth, with fine features, rolling black eyes, and luxuriant curled hair, was one of us. The hands were well formed and delicate; the complexion silky, and of nearly an olive tint; but the purplish-red broke through upon his cheeks, giving the earnest of health, as well as adding to the picturesque beauty of his face. The form was perfect, and full of manly expression, and the pretty sky-blue plaited pantaloons and close-fitting jacket of the same material, sat gracefully on his well-turned limbs and arms. These garments were of “cottonade,” that beautiful and durable fabric peculiar to Louisiana, and so well suited to the southern climate. A costly Panama hat cast its shadow over the wavy curls and pictured cheek of this youth, and a cloak of fine broad cloth, with velvet facings, hung loosely from his shoulders. A slight moustache and imperial lent a manlier expression to his chiselled features.

This young fellow was a Creole of Louisiana – a student of one of the Jesuit Colleges of that State – and although very unlike what would be expected from such a dashing personage, he was an ardent, even passionate, lover of nature. Though still young, he was the most accomplished botanist in his State, and had already published several discoveries in the *Flora* of the South.

Of course the expedition was to him a delightful anticipation. It would afford the finest opportunity for prosecuting his favourite study in a new field; one as yet almost unvisited by the scientific traveller. The young Creole was known as Jules Besançon.

He was not the only naturalist of the party. Another was with us; one who had already acquired a world-wide fame; whose name was as familiar to the *savans* of Europe as to his own countrymen. He was already an old man, almost venerable in his aspect, but his tread was firm, and his arm still strong enough to steady his long, heavy, double-barrelled rifle. An ample coat of dark blue covered his body; his limbs were enveloped in long buttoned leggings of drab cloth, and a cap of sable surmounted his high, broad forehead. Under this his blueish grey eye glanced with a calm but clear intelligence, and a single look from it satisfied you that you were in the presence of a superior mind. Were I to give

the name of this person, this would readily be acknowledged. For certain reasons I cannot do this. Suffice it to say, he was one of the most distinguished of modern zoologists, and to his love for the study we were indebted for his companionship upon our hunting expedition. He was known to us as Mr A – the "hunter-naturalist." There was no jealousy between him and the young Besançon. On the contrary, a similarity of tastes soon brought about a mutual friendship, and the Creole was observed to treat the other with marked deference and regard.

I may set myself down as Number 6 of the party. Let a short description of me suffice. I was then but a young fellow, educated somewhat better than common; fond of wild sports; not indifferent to a knowledge of nature; fond almost to folly of a good horse, and possessing one of the very best; not ill-looking in the face, and of middle stature; costumed in a light hunting-shirt of embroidered buckskin, with fringed cape and skirt; leggings of scarlet cloth, and cloth forage-cap, covering a flock of dark hair. Powder-flask and pouch of tasty patterns; belt around the waist, with hunting-knife and pistols – revolvers. A light rifle in one hand, and in the other a bridle-rein, which guided a steed of coal blackness; one that would have been celebrated in song by a troubadour of the olden time. A deep Spanish saddle of stamped leather; holsters with bearskin covers in front; a scarlet blanket, folded and strapped on the croup; lazo and haversack hanging from the "horn" —*voilà tout*!

There are two characters still undescribed. Characters of no mean importance were they – the "guides." They were called respectively, Isaac Bradley and Mark Redwood. A brace of trappers they were, but as different from each other in personal appearance as two men could well be. Redwood was a man of large dimensions, and apparently as strong as a buffalo, while his *confrère* was a thin, wiry, sinewy mortal, with a tough, weasel-like look and gait. The expression of Redwood's countenance was open and manly, his eyes were grey, his hair light-coloured, and huge brown whiskers covered his cheeks. Bradley, on the other hand, was dark – his eyes small, black, and piercing – his face as hairless as an Indian's, and bronzed almost to the Indian hue, with the black hair of his head closely cropped around it.

Both these men were dressed in leather from head to foot, yet they were very differently dressed. Redwood wore the usual buckskin hunting-shirt, leggings, and moccasins, but all of full proportions and well cut, while his large 'coon-skin cap, with the plume-like tail, had an imposing appearance. Bradley's garments, on the contrary, were tight-fitting and "skimped." His hunting-shirt was without cape, and adhered so closely to his body that it appeared only an outer skin of the man himself. His leggings were pinched and tight. Shirt, leggings, and moccasins were evidently of the oldest kind, and as dirty as a cobbler's apron. A close-fitting otter cap, with a Mackinaw blanket, completed the wardrobe of Isaac Bradley. He was equipped with a pouch of greasy leather hanging by an old black strap, a small buffalo-horn suspended by a thong, and a belt of buffalo-leather, in which was stuck a strong blade, with its handle of buckhorn. His rifle was of the "tallest" kind – being full six feet in height – in fact, taller than he was, and at least four fifths of the weapon consisted of barrel. The straight narrow stock was a piece of manufacture that had proceeded from the hands of the trapper himself.

Redwood's rifle was also a long one, but of more modern build and fashion, and his equipments – pouch, powder-horn and belt – were of a more tasty design and finish.

Such were our guides, Redwood and Bradley. They were no imaginary characters these. Mark Redwood was a celebrated "mountain-man" at that time, and Isaac Bradley will be recognised by many when I give him the name and title by which he was then known, – viz. "Old Ike, the wolf-killer."

Redwood rode a strong horse of the half-hunter breed, while the "wolf-killer" was mounted upon one of the scraggiest looking quadrupeds it would be possible to imagine – an old mare "mustang."

Chapter Two.
The Camp and Camp-Fire

Our route was west by south. The nearest point with which we expected to fall in with the buffalo was two hundred miles distant. We might travel three hundred without seeing one, and even much farther at the present day; but a report had reached Saint Louis that the buffalo had been seen that year upon the Osage River, west of the Ozark Hills, and towards that point we steered our course. We expected in about twenty days to fall in with the game. Fancy a cavalcade of hunters making a journey of twenty days to get upon the field! The reader will, no doubt, say we were in earnest.

At the time of which I am writing, a single day's journey from Saint Louis carried the traveller clear of civilised life. There were settlements beyond; but these were sparse and isolated – a few small towns or plantations upon the main watercourses – and the whole country between them was an uninhabited wilderness. We had no hope of being sheltered by a roof until our return to the mound city itself, but we had provided ourselves with a couple of tents, part of the freight of our waggon.

There are but few parts of the American wilderness where the traveller can depend upon wild game for a subsistence. Even the skilled hunter when stationary is sometimes put to his wits' end for "daily bread." Upon the "route" no great opportunity is found of killing game, which always requires time to approach it with caution. Although we passed through what appeared to be excellent cover for various species of wild animals, we reached our first camp without having ruffled either hair or feathers. In fact, neither bird nor quadruped had been seen, although almost every one of the party had been on the look out for game during most of the journey.

This was rather discouraging, and we reasoned that if such was to be our luck until we got into the buffalo-range we should have a very dull time of it. We were well provisioned, however, and we regretted the absence of game only on account of the sport. A large bag of biscuit, and one of flour, several pieces of "hung bacon," some dry ox-tongues, a stock of green coffee, sugar, and salt, were the principal and necessary stores. There were "luxuries," too, which each had provided according to his fancy, though not much of these, as every one of the party had had some time or other in his life a little experience in the way of "roughing it." Most of the loading of the waggon consisted of provender for our horses and mules.

We made full thirty miles on the first day. Our road was a good one. We passed over easy undulations, most of them covered with "black-jack." This is a species of dwarf oak, so called from the very dark colour of its wrinkled bark. It is almost worthless as a timber, being too small for most purposes. It is ornamental, however, forming copse-like groves upon the swells of the prairie, while its dark green foliage contrasts pleasantly with the lighter green of the grasses beneath its shade. The young botanist, Besançon, had least cause to complain. His time had been sufficiently pleasant during the day. New foliage fell under his observation – new flowers opened their corollas to his delighted gaze. He was aided in making his collections by the hunter-naturalist, who of course was tolerably well versed in this kindred science.

We encamped by the edge of a small creek of clear water. Our camp was laid out in due form, and everything arranged in the order we designed habitually to follow.

Every man unsaddled his own horse. There are no servants in prairie-land. Even Lanty's services extended not beyond the *cuisine*, and for this department he had had his training as the cook of a New Orleans trading ship. Jake had enough to do with his mules; and to have asked one of our hunter-guides to perform the task of unsaddling your horse, would have been a hazardous experiment. Menial service to a free trapper! There are no servants in prairie-land.

Our horses and mules were picketed on a piece of open ground, each having his "trail-rope," which allowed a circuit of several yards. The two tents were pitched side by side, facing the stream,

and the waggon drawn up some twenty feet in the rear. In the triangle between the waggon and the tents was kindled a large fire, upon each side of which two stakes, forked at the top, were driven into the ground. A long sapling resting in the forks traversed the blaze from side to side. This was Lanty's "crane," – the fire was his kitchen.

Let me sketch the camp more minutely, for our first camp was a type of all the others in its general features. Sometimes indeed the tents did not front the same way, when these openings were set to "oblige the wind," but they were always placed side by side in front of the waggon. They were small tents of the old-fashioned conical kind, requiring only one pole each. They were of sufficient size for our purpose, as there were only three of us to each – the guides, with Jake and Lanty, finding their lodgment under the tilt of the waggon. With their graceful shape, and snowy-white colour against the dark green foliage of the trees, they formed an agreeable contrast; and a *coup d'oeil* of the camp would have been no mean picture to the eye of an artist. The human figures may be arranged in the following manner.

Supper is getting ready, and Lanty is decidedly at this time the most important personage on the ground. He is stooping over the fire, with a small but long-handled frying-pan, in which he is parching the coffee. It is already browned, and Lanty stirs it about with an iron spoon. The crane carries the large coffee-kettle of sheet iron, full of water upon the boil; and a second frying-pan, larger than the first, is filled with sliced ham, ready to be placed upon the hot cinders.

Our English friend Thompson is seated upon a log, with the hat-box before him. It is open, and he has drawn out from it his stock of combs and brushes. He has already made his ablutions, and is now giving the finish to his toilet, by putting his hair, whiskers, moustache, teeth, and even his nails, in order. Your Englishman is the most comfortable traveller in the world.

The Kentuckian is differently engaged. He is upon his feet; in one hand gleams a knife with ivory handle and long shining blade. It is a "bowie," of that kind known as an "Arkansas toothpick." In the other hand you see an object about eight inches in length, of the form of a parallelogram, and of a dark brown colour. It is a "plug" of real "James's River tobacco." With his knife the Kentuckian cuts off a piece – a "chunk," as he terms it – which is immediately transferred to his mouth, and chewed to a pulp. This is his occupation for the moment.

The doctor, what of him? Doctor Jopper may be seen close to the water's edge. In his hand is a pewter flask, of the kind known as a "pocket pistol." That pistol is loaded with brandy, and Dr Jopper is just in the act of drawing part of the charge, which, with a slight admixture of cool creek water, is carried aloft and poured into a very droughty vessel. The effect, however, is instantly apparent in the lively twinkle of the doctor's round and prominent eyes.

Besançon is seated near the tent, and the old naturalist beside him. The former is busy with the new plants he has collected. A large portfolio-looking book rests upon his knees, and between its leaves he is depositing his stores in a scientific manner. His companion, who understands the business well, is kindly assisting him. Their conversation is interesting, but every one else is too busy with his affairs to listen to it just now.

The guides are lounging about the waggon. Old Ike fixes a new flint in his rifle, and Redwood, of a more mirthful disposition, is occasionally cracking a joke with Mike or the "darkey."

Jake is still busy with his mules, and I with my favourite steed, whose feet I have washed in the stream, and anointed with a little spare grease. I shall not always have the opportunity of being so kind to him, but he will need it the less, as his hoofs become more hardened by the journey.

Around the camp are strewed our saddles, bridles, blankets, weapons, and utensils. These will all be collected and stowed under cover before we go to rest. Such is a picture of our camp before supper.

When that meal is cooked, the scene somewhat changes.

The atmosphere, even at that season, was cool enough, and this, with Mike's announcement that the coffee was ready, brought all the party – guides as well – around the blazing pile of logs.

Each found his own platter, knife, and cup; and, helping himself from the general stock, set to eating on his own account. Of course there were no fragments, as a strict regard to economy was one of the laws of our camp.

Notwithstanding the fatigue, always incidental to a first day's march, we enjoyed this *al fresco* supper exceedingly. The novelty had much to do with our enjoyment of it, and also the fine appetites which we had acquired since our luncheon at noon halt.

When supper was over, smoking followed, for there was not one of the party who was not an inveterate burner of the "noxious weed." Some chose cigars, of which we had brought a good stock, but several were pipe-smokers. The zoologist carried a meerschaum; the guides smoked out of Indian calumets of the celebrated steatite, or red claystone. Mike had his dark-looking "dudeen," and Jake his pipe of corn "cob" and cane-joint shank.

Our English friend Thompson had a store of the finest Havannahs, which he smoked with the grace peculiar to the English cigar smoker; holding his cigar impaled upon the point of his knife-blade. Kentucky also smoked cigars, but his was half buried within his mouth, slanted obliquely towards the right cheek. Besançon preferred the paper cigarette, which he made extempore, as he required them, out of a stock of loose tobacco. This is Creole fashion – now also the *mode de Paris*.

A song from the doctor enlivened the conversation, and certainly so melodious a human voice had never echoed near the spot. One and all agreed that the grand opera had missed a capital "first tenor" in not securing the services of our companion.

The fatigue of our long ride caused us to creep into our tents at an early hour, and rolling ourselves in our blankets we went to sleep. Of course everything had been carefully gathered in lest rain might fall in the night. The trail-ropes of our animals were looked to: we did not fear their being stolen, but horses on their first few days' journey are easily "stampeded," and will sometimes stray home again. This would have been a great misfortune, but most of us were old travellers, and every caution was observed in securing against such a result. There was no guard kept, though we knew the time would come when that would be a necessary duty.

Chapter Three.
Besançon's adventure in the swamps

The prairie traveller never sleeps after daybreak. He is usually astir before that time. He has many "*chores*" to perform, unknown to the ordinary traveller who rests in the roadside inn. He has to pack up his tent and bed, cook his own breakfast, and saddle his horse. All this requires time, therefore an early start is necessary.

We were on our feet before the sun had shown his disc above the black-jacks. Lanty had the start of us, and had freshened up his fire. Already the coffee-kettle was bubbling audibly, and the great frying-pan perfumed the camp with an incense more agreeable than the odours of Araby.

The raw air of the morning had brought everybody around the fire. Thompson was pruning and cleansing his nails; the Kentuckian was cutting a fresh "chunk" from his plug of "James's River;" the doctor had just returned from the stream, where he had refreshed himself by a "nip" from his pewter flask; Besançon was packing up his portfolios; the zoologist was lighting his long pipe, and the "Captain" was looking to his favourite horse, while inhaling the fragrance of an "Havannah." The guides stood with their blankets hanging from their shoulders silent and thoughtful.

In half an hour breakfast was over, the tents and utensils were restored to the waggon, the horses were brought in and saddled, the mules "hitched up," and the expedition once more on its way.

This day we made not quite so good a journey. The roads were heavier, the country more thickly timbered, and the ground more hilly. We had several small streams to ford, and this retarded our progress. Twenty miles was the extent of our journey.

We encamped again without any of us having killed or seen game. Although we had beaten the bushes on both sides of our course, nothing bigger than the red-bird (scarlet tanager, *Pyranga rubra*), a screaming jay, or an occasional flight of finches, gratified our sight.

We reached our camp somewhat disappointed. Even old Ike and Redwood came into camp without game, alleging also that they had not met with the sign of a living quadruped.

Our second camp was also on the bank of a small stream. Shortly after our arrival on the ground, Thompson started out afoot, taking with him his gun. He had noticed a tract of marsh at no great distance off. He thought it promised well for snipe.

He had not been long gone, when two reports echoed back, and then shortly after another and another. He had found something to empty his gun at.

Presently we saw him returning with a brace and a half of birds that looked very much like large snipe. So he thought them, but that question was set at rest by the zoologist, who pronounced them at once to be the American "Curlew" of Wilson (*Numenius longirostris*). Curlew or snipe, they were soon divested of the feathery coat, and placed in Lanty's frying-pan. Excellent eating they proved, having only the fault that there was not enough of them.

These birds formed the topic of our after-supper conversation, and then it generalised to the different species of wading birds of America, and at length that singular creature, the "ibis," became the theme. This came round by Besançon remarking that a species of ibis was brought by the Indians to the markets of New Orleans, and sold there under the name of "Spanish Curlew." This was the white ibis (*Tantalus albas*), which the zoologist stated was found in plenty along the whole southern coast of the United States. There were two other species, he said, natives of the warm parts of North America, the "wood-ibis" (*Tantalus loculator*), which more nearly resembles the sacred ibis of Egypt, and the beautiful "sacred ibis" (*Tantalus ruber*), which last is rarer than the others.

Our venerable companion, who had the ornithology of America, if I may use the expression, at his fingers' ends, imparted many curious details of the habits of these rare birds. All listened with

interest to his statements – even the hunter-guides, for with all their apparent rudeness of demeanour, there was a dash of the naturalist in these fellows.

When the zoologist became silent, the young Creole took up the conversation. Talking of the ibis, he said, reminded him of an adventure he had met with while in pursuit of these birds among the swamps of his native state. He would relate it to us. Of course we were rejoiced at the proposal. We were just the audience for an "adventure," and after rolling a fresh cigarette, the botanist began his narration.

"During one of my college vacations I made a botanical excursion to the south-western part of Louisiana. Before leaving home I had promised a dear friend to bring him the skins of such rare birds as were known to frequent the swampy region I was about to traverse, but he was especially desirous I should obtain for him some specimens of the red ibis, which he intended to have 'mounted.' I gave my word that no opportunity should be lost of obtaining these birds, and I was very anxious to make good my promise.

"The southern part of the State of Louisiana is one vast labyrinth of swamps, bayous, and lagoons. The bayous are sluggish streams that glide sleepily along, sometimes running one way, and sometimes the very opposite, according to the season of the year. Many of them are outlets of the Mississippi, which begins to shed off its waters more than 300 miles from its mouth. These bayous are deep, sometimes narrow, sometimes wide, with islets in their midst. They and their contiguous swamps are the great habitat of the alligator and the fresh-water shark – the gar. Numerous species of water and wading fowl fly over them, and plunge through their dark tide. Here you may see the red flamingo, the egret, the trumpeter-swan, the blue heron, the wild goose, the crane, the snake-bird, the pelican, and the ibis; you may likewise see the osprey, and the white-headed eagle robbing him of his prey. Both swamps and bayous produce abundantly fish, reptile, and insect, and are, consequently, the favourite resort of hundreds of birds which prey upon these creatures. In some places, their waters form a complete net-work over the country, which you may traverse with a small boat in almost any direction; indeed, this is the means by which many settlements communicate with each other. As you approach southward towards the Gulf, you get clear of the timber; and within some fifty miles of the sea, there is not a tree to be seen.

"In the first day or two that I was out, I had succeeded in getting all the specimens I wanted, with the exception of the ibis. This shy creature avoided me; in fact I had only seen one or two in my excursions, and these at a great distance. I still, however, had hopes of finding them before my return to my friend.

"About the third or fourth day I set out from a small settlement on the edge of one of the larger bayous. I had no other company than my gun. I was even unattended by a dog, as my favourite spaniel had the day before been bitten by an alligator while swimming across the bayou, and I was compelled to leave him at the settlement. Of course the object of my excursion was a search after new flora, but I had become by this time very desirous of getting the rare ibis, and I was determined half to neglect my botanising for that purpose. I went of course in a boat, a light skiff, such as is commonly used by the inhabitants of these parts.

"Occasionally using the paddles, I allowed myself to float some four or live miles down the main bayou; but as the birds I was in search of did not appear, I struck into a 'branch,' and sculled myself up-stream. This carried me through a solitary region, with marshes stretching as far as the eye could see, covered with tall reeds. There was no habitation, nor aught that betokened the presence of man. It was just possible that I was the first human being who had ever found a motive for propelling a boat through the dark waters of this solitary stream.

"As I advanced, I fell in with game; and I succeeded in bagging several, both of the great wood-ibis and the white species. I also shot a fine white-headed eagle (*Falco leucocephalus*), which came soaring over my boat, unconscious of danger. But the bird which I most wanted seemed that which could not be obtained. I wanted the scarlet ibis.

"I think I had rowed some three miles up-stream, and was about to take in my oars and leave my boat to float back again, when I perceived that, a little farther up, the bayou widened. Curiosity prompted me to continue; and after pulling a few hundred strokes, I found myself at the end of an oblong lake, a mile or so in length. It was deep, dark, marshy around the shores, and full of alligators. I saw their ugly forms and long serrated backs, as they floated about in all parts of it, hungrily hunting for fish and eating one another; but all this was nothing new, for I had witnessed similar scenes during the whole of my excursion. What drew my attention most, was a small islet near the middle of the lake, upon one end of which stood a row of upright forms of a bright scarlet colour. These red creatures were the very objects I was in search of. They might be flamingoes: I could not tell at that distance. So much the better, if I could only succeed in getting a shot at them; but these creatures are even more wary than the ibis; and as the islet was low, and altogether without cover, it was not likely they would allow me to come within range: nevertheless, I was determined to make the attempt. I rowed up the lake, occasionally turning my head to see if the game had taken the alarm. The sun was hot and dazzling; and as the bright scarlet was magnified by refraction, I fancied for a long time they were flamingoes. This fancy was dissipated as I drew near. The outlines of the bills, like the blade of a sabre, convinced me they were the ibis; besides, I now saw that they were less than three feet in height, while the flamingoes stand five. There were a dozen of them in all. These were balancing themselves, as is their usual habit, on one leg, apparently asleep, or *buried in deep thought*. They were on the upper extremity of the islet, while I was approaching it from below. It was not above sixty yards across; and could I only reach the point nearest me, I knew my gun would throw shot to kill at that distance. I feared the stroke of the sculls would start them, and I pulled slowly and cautiously. Perhaps the great heat – for it was as hot a day as I can remember – had rendered them torpid or lazy. Whether or not, they sat still until the cut-water of my skiff touched the bank of the islet. I drew my gun up cautiously, took aim, and fired both barrels almost simultaneously. When the smoke cleared out of my eyes, I saw that all the birds had flown off except one, that lay stretched out by the edge of the water.

"Gun in hand, I leaped out of the boat, and ran across the islet to bag my game. This occupied but a few minutes; and I was turning to go back to the skiff, when, to my consternation, I saw it out upon the lake, and rapidly floating downward!

"In my haste I had left it unfastened, and the bayou current had carried it off. It was still but a hundred yards distant, but it might as well have been a hundred miles, for at that time I could not swim a stroke.

"My first impulse was to rush down to the lake, and after the boat. This impulse was checked on arriving at the water's edge, which I saw at a glance was fathoms in depth. Quick reflection told me that the boat was gone – irrecoverably gone!

"I did not at first comprehend the full peril of my situation; nor will you, gentlemen. I was on an islet, in a lake, only half a mile from its shores – alone, it is true, and without a boat; but what of that? Many a man had been so before, with not an idea of danger.

"These were first thoughts, natural enough; but they rapidly gave place to others of a far different character. When I gazed after my boat, now beyond recovery – when I looked around, and saw that the lake lay in the middle of an interminable swamp, the shores of which, even could I have reached them, did not seem to promise me footing – when I reflected that, being unable to swim, I could *not* reach them – that upon the islet there was neither tree, nor log, nor bush; not a stick out of which I might make a raft – I say, when I reflected upon all these things, there arose in my mind a feeling of well-defined and absolute horror.

"It is true I was only in a lake, a mile or so in width; but so far as the peril and helplessness of my situation were concerned, I might as well have been upon a rock in the middle of the Atlantic. I knew that there was no settlement within miles – miles of pathless swamp. I knew that no one could either see or hear me – no one was at all likely to come near the lake; indeed, I felt satisfied that my faithless boat was the first keel that had ever cut its waters. The very tameness of the birds wheeling

round my head was evidence of this. I felt satisfied, too, that without some one to help me, I should never go out from that lake: I must die on the islet, or drown in attempting to leave it!

"These reflections rolled rapidly over my startled soul. The facts were clear, the hypothesis definite, the sequence certain; there was no ambiguity, no supposititious hinge upon which I could hang a hope; no, not one. I could not even expect that I should be missed and sought for; there was no one to search for me. The simple *habitans* of the village I had left knew me not – I was a stranger among them: they only knew me as a stranger, and fancied me a strange individual; one who made lonely excursions, and brought home hunches of weeds, with birds, insects, and reptiles, which they had never before seen, although gathered at their own doors. My absence, besides, would be nothing new to them, even though it lasted for days: I had often been absent before, a week at a time. There was no hope of my being missed.

"I have said that these reflections came and passed quickly. In less than a minute, my affrighted soul was in full possession of them, and almost yielded itself to despair. I shouted, but rather involuntarily than with any hope that I should be heard; I shouted loudly and fiercely: my answer – the echoes of my own voice, the shriek of the osprey, and the maniac laugh of the white-headed eagle.

"I ceased to shout, threw my gun to the earth, and tottered down beside it. I can imagine the feelings of a man shut up in a gloomy prison – they are not pleasant. I have been lost upon the wild prairie – the land sea – without bush, break, or star to guide me – that was worse. There you look around; you see nothing; you hear nothing: you are alone with God, and you tremble in his presence; your senses swim; your brain reels; you are afraid of yourself; you are afraid of your own mind. Deserted by everything else, you dread lest it, too, may forsake you. There is horror in this – it is very horrible – it is hard to bear; but I have borne it all, and would bear it again twenty times over rather than endure once more the first hour I spent on that lonely islet in that lonely lake. Your prison may be dark and silent, but you feel that you are not utterly alone; beings like yourself are near, though they be your jailers. Lost on the prairie, you are alone; but you are free. In the islet, I felt that I was alone; that I was not free: in the islet I experienced the feelings of the prairie and the prison combined.

"I lay in a state of stupor – almost unconscious; how long I know not, but many hours I am certain; I knew this by the sun – it was going down when I awoke, if I may so term the recovery of my stricken senses. I was aroused by a strange circumstance: I was surrounded by dark objects of hideous shape and hue – reptiles they were. They had been before my eyes for some time, but I had not seen them. I had only a sort of dreamy consciousness of their presence; but I heard them at length: my ear was in better tune, and the strange noises they uttered reached my intellect. It sounded like the blowing of great bellows, with now and then a note harsher and louder, like the roaring of a bull. This startled me, and I looked up and bent my eyes upon the objects: they were forms of the *crocodilidae*, the giant lizards – they were alligators.

"Huge ones they were, many of them; and many were they in number – a hundred at least were crawling over the islet, before, behind, and on all sides around me. Their long gaunt jaws and channelled snouts projected forward so as almost to touch my body; and their eyes, usually leaden, seemed now to glare.

"Impelled by this new danger, I sprang to my feet, when, recognising the upright form of man, the reptiles scuttled off, and plunging hurriedly into the lake; hid their hideous bodies under the water.

"The incident in some measure revived me. I saw that I was not alone; there was company even in the crocodiles. I gradually became more myself; and began to reflect with some degree of coolness on the circumstances that surrounded me. My eyes wandered over the islet; every inch of it came under my glance; every object upon it was scrutinised – the moulted feathers of wildfowl, the pieces of mud, the fresh-water mussels (*unios*) strewed upon its beach – all were examined. Still the barren answer – no means of escape.

"The islet was but the head of a sand-bar, formed by the eddy, perhaps gathered together within the year. It was bare of herbage, with the exception of a few tufts of grass. There was neither tree nor

bush upon it: not a stick. A raft indeed! There was not wood enough to make a raft that would have floated a frog. The idea of a raft was but briefly entertained; such a thought had certainly crossed my mind, but a single glance round the islet dispelled it before it had taken shape.

"I paced my prison from end to end; from side to side I walked it over. I tried the water's depth; on all sides I sounded it, wading recklessly in; everywhere it deepened rapidly as I advanced. Three lengths of myself from the islet's edge, and I was up to the neck. The huge reptiles swam around, snorting and blowing; they were bolder in this element. I could not have waded safely ashore, even had the water been shallow. To swim it – no – even though I swam like a duck, they would have closed upon and quartered me before I could have made a dozen strokes. Horrified by their demonstrations, I hurried back upon dry ground, and paced the islet with dripping garments.

"I continued walking until night, which gathered around me dark and dismal. With night came new voices – the hideous voices of the nocturnal swamp; the qua-qua of the night-heron, the screech of the swamp-owl, the cry of the bittern, the cl-l-uk of the great water-toad, the tinkling of the bell-frog, and the chirp of the savanna-cricket – all fell upon my ear. Sounds still harsher and more, hideous were heard around me – the plashing of the alligator, and the roaring of his voice; these reminded me that I must not go to sleep. To sleep! I durst not have slept for a single instant. Even when I lay for a few minutes motionless, the dark reptiles came crawling round me – so close that I could have put forth my hand and touched them.

"At intervals, I sprang to my feet, shouted, swept my gun around, and chased them back to the water, into which they betook themselves with a sullen plunge, but with little semblance of fear. At each fresh demonstration on my part they showed less alarm, until I could no longer drive them either with shouts or threatening gestures. They only retreated a few feet, forming an irregular circle round me.

"Thus hemmed in, I became frightened in turn. I loaded my gun and fired; I killed none. They are impervious to a bullet, except in the eye, or under the forearm. It was too dark to aim at these parts; and my shots glanced harmlessly from the pyramidal scales of their bodies. The loud report, however, and the blaze frightened them, and they fled, to return again after a long interval. I was asleep when they returned; I had gone to sleep in spite of my efforts to keep awake. I was startled by the touch of something cold; and half-stilled by the strong musky odour that filled the air. I threw out my arms; my fingers rested upon an object slippery and clammy: it was one of these monsters – one of gigantic size. He had crawled close alongside me, and was preparing to make his attack; as I saw that he was bent in the form of a bow, and I knew that these creatures assume that attitude when about to strike their victim. I was just in time to spring aside, and avoid the stroke of his powerful tail, that the next moment swept the ground where I had lain. Again I fired, and he with the rest once more retreated to the lake.

"All thoughts of going to sleep were at an end. Not that I felt wakeful; on the contrary, wearied with my day's exertion – for I had had a long pull under a hot tropical sun – I could have lain down upon the earth, in the mud, anywhere, and slept in an instant. Nothing but the dread certainty of my peril kept me awake. Once again before morning, I was compelled to battle with the hideous reptiles, and chase them away with a shot from my gun.

"Morning came at length, but with it no change in my perilous position. The light only showed me my island prison, but revealed no way of escape from it. Indeed, the change could not be called for the better, for the fervid rays of an almost vertical sun poured down upon me until my skin blistered. I was already speckled by the bites of a thousand swamp-flies and mosquitoes, that all night long had preyed upon me. There was not a cloud in the heavens to shade me; and the sunbeams smote the surface of the dead bayou with a double intensity.

"Towards evening, I began to hunger; no wonder at that: I had not eaten since leaving the village settlement. To assuage thirst, I drank the water of the lake, turbid and slimy as it was. I drank it in

large quantities, for it was hot, and only moistened my palate without quenching the craving of my appetite. Of water there was enough; I had more to fear from want of food.

"What could I eat? The ibis. But how to cook it? There was nothing wherewith to make a fire – not a stick. No matter for that. Cooking is a modern invention, a luxury for pampered palates. I divested the ibis of its brilliant plumage, and ate it raw. I spoiled my specimen, but at the time there was little thought of that: there was not much of the naturalist left in me. I anathematised the hour I had ever promised to procure the bird. I wished my friend up to his neck in a swamp.

"The ibis did not weigh above three pounds, bones and all. It served me for a second meal, a breakfast; but at this *déjeuner sans fourchette* I picked the bones.

"What next? starve? No – not yet. In the battles I had had with the alligators during the second night, one of them had received a shot that proved mortal. The hideous carcass of the reptile lay dead upon the beach. I need not starve; I could eat that. Such were my reflections. I must hunger, though, before I could bring myself to touch the musky morsel.

"Two more days' fasting conquered my squeamishness. I drew out my knife, cut a steak from the alligator's tail, and ate it – not the one I had first killed, but a second; the other was now putrid, rapidly decomposing under the hot sun: its odour filled the islet.

"The stench had grown intolerable. There was not a breath of air stirring, otherwise I might have shunned it by keeping to windward. The whole atmosphere of the islet, as well as a large circle around it, was impregnated with the fearful effluvium. I could bear it no longer. With the aid of my gun, I pushed the half-decomposed carcass into the lake; perhaps the current might carry it away. It did: I had the gratification to see it float off.

"This circumstance led me into a train of reflections. Why did the body of the alligator float? It was swollen – inflated with gases. Ha!

"An idea shot suddenly through my mind – one of those brilliant ideas, the children of necessity. I thought of the floating alligator, of its intestines – what if I inflated them? Yes, yes! buoys and bladders, floats and life-preservers! that was the thought. I would open the alligators, make a buoy of their intestines, and that would bear me from the islet!

"I did not lose a moment's time; I was full of energy: hope had given me new life. My gun was loaded – a huge crocodile that swam near the shore received the shot in his eye. I dragged him on the beach; with my knife I laid open his entrails. Few they were, but enough for my purpose. A plume-quill from the wing of the ibis served me for a blow-pipe. I saw the bladder-like skin expand, until I was surrounded by objects like great sausages. Those were tied together, and fastened to my body, and then, with a plunge, I entered the waters of the lake, and floated downward. I had tied on my life-preservers in such a way that I sat in the water in an upright position, holding my gun with both hands. This I intended to have, used as a club in case I should be attacked by the alligators; but I had chosen the hot hour of noon, when these creatures lie in a half-torpid state, and to my joy I was not molested.

"Half an hour's drifting with the current carried me to the end of the lake, and I found myself at the *debouchure* of the bayou. Here, to my great delight, I saw my boat in the swamp, where it had been caught and held fast by the sedge. A few minutes more, and I had swung myself over the gunwale, and was sculling with eager strokes down the smooth waters of the bayou.

"Of course my adventure was ended, and I reached the settlement in safety, but without the object of my excursion. I was enabled, however, to procure it some days after, and had the gratification of being able to keep my promise to my friend."

Besançon's adventure had interested all of us; the old hunter-naturalist seemed delighted with it. No doubt it revived within him the memories of many a perilous incident in his own life.

It was evident that in the circle of the camp-fire there was more than one pair of lips ready to narrate some similar adventure, but the hour was late, and all agreed it would be better to go to rest. On to-morrow night, some other would take their turn; and, in fact, a regular agreement was entered into that each one of the party who had at any period of his life been the hero or participator in any hunting

adventure should narrate the same for the entertainment of the others. This would bring out a regular "round of stories by the camp-fire," and would enable us to kill the many long evenings we had to pass before coming up with the buffalo. The conditions were, that the stories should exclusively relate to birds or animals – in fact, any hunted game belonging to the *fauna* of the American Continent: furthermore, that each should contribute his *quota* of information about whatever animal should chance to be the subject of the narration – about its habits, its geographical range; in short, its general natural history, as well as the various modes of hunting it, practised in different places by different people. This, it was alleged, would render our camp conversation instructive as well as entertaining.

The idea originated with the old hunter-naturalist, who very wisely reasoned that among so many gentlemen of large hunting experience he might collect new facts for his favourite science – for to just such men, and not to the closet-dreamer, is natural history indebted for its most interesting chapters. Of course every one of us, guides and all, warmly applauded the proposal, for there was no one among us averse to receiving a little knowledge of so entertaining a character. No doubt to the naturalist himself we should be indebted for most part of it; and his mode of communicating was so pleasant, that even the rude trappers listened to him with wonder and attention. They saw that he was no "greenhorn" either in woodcraft or prairie knowledge, and that was a sufficient claim to their consideration.

There is no character less esteemed by the regular "mountain-man" than a "greenhorn," – that is, one who is new to the ways of their wilderness life.

With the design of an early start, we once more crept into our several quarters, and went to sleep.

Chapter Four.
The Passenger-Pigeons

After an early breakfast we lit our pipes and cigars, and took to the road. The sun was very bright, and in less than two hours after starting we were sweltering under a heat almost tropical. It was one of those autumn days peculiar to America, where even a high latitude seems to be no protection against the sun, and his beams fall upon one with as much fervour as they would under the line itself. The first part of our journey was through open woods of black-jack, whose stunted forms afforded no shade, but only shut off the breeze which might otherwise have fanned us.

While fording a shallow stream, the doctor's scraggy, ill-tempered horse took a fit of kicking quite frantical. For some time it seemed likely that either the doctor himself, or his saddle-bags, would be deposited in the bottom of the creek, but after a severe spell of whipping and kicking on the part of the rider, the animal moved on again. What had set it dancing? That was the question. It had the disposition to be "frisky," but usually appeared to be lacking in strength. The buzz of a horse-fly sounding in our ears explained all. It was one of those large insects – the "horse-bug," – peculiar to the Mississippi country, and usually found near watercourses. They are more terrible to horses than a fierce dog would be. I have known horses gallop away from them as if pursued by a beast of prey.

There is a belief among western people that these insects are propagated by the horses themselves; that is, that the eggs of the female are deposited upon the grass, so that the horses may swallow them; that incubation goes on within the stomach of the animal, and that the chrysalis is afterwards voided. I have met with others who believed in a still stranger theory; that the insect itself actually sought, and found, a passage into the stomach of the horse, some said by passing down his throat, others by boring a hole through his abdomen; and that in such cases the horse usually sickened, and was in danger of dying!

After the doctor's mustang had returned to proper behaviour, these odd theories became the subject of discussion. The Kentuckian believed in them – the Englishman doubted them – the hunter-naturalist could not endorse them – and Besançon ignored them entirely.

Shortly after the incident we entered the bottom lands of a considerable stream. These were heavily-timbered, and the shadow of the great forest trees afforded us a pleasant relief from the hot sun. Our guides told us we had several miles of such woods to pass through, and we were glad of the information. We noticed that most of the trees were beech, and their smooth straight trunks rose like columns around us.

The beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is one of the most beautiful of American forest trees. Unlike most of the others, its bark is smooth, without fissures, and often of a silvery hue. Large beech-trees standing by the path, or near a cross road, are often seen covered with names, initials, and dates. Even the Indian often takes advantage of the bark of a beech-tree to signalise his presence to his friends, or commemorate some savage exploit. Indeed, the beautiful column-like trunk seems to invite the knife, and many a souvenir is carved upon it by the loitering wayfarer. It does not, however, invite the axe of the settler. On the contrary, the beechen woods often remain untouched, while others fall around them – partly because these trees are not usually the indices of the richest soil, but more from the fact that clearing a piece of beech forest is no easy matter. The green logs do not burn so readily as those of the oak, the elm, the maple, or poplar, and hence the necessity of "rolling" them off the ground to be cleared – a serious thing where labour is scarce and dear.

We were riding silently along, when all at once our ears were assailed by a strange noise. It resembled the clapping of a thousand pairs of hands, followed by a whistling sound, as if a strong wind had set suddenly in among the trees. We all knew well enough what it meant, and the simultaneous cry of "pigeons," was followed by half a dozen simultaneous cracks from the guns of the party, and

several bluish birds fell to the ground. We had stumbled upon a feeding-place of the passenger-pigeon (*Columba migratoria*).

Our route was immediately abandoned, and in a few minutes we were in the thick of the flock, cracking away at them both with shot-gun and rifle. It was not so easy, however, to bring them down in any considerable numbers. In following them up we soon strayed from each other, until our party was completely scattered, and nearly two hours elapsed before we got back to the road. Our game-bag, however, made a fine show, and about forty brace were deposited in the waggon. With the anticipation of roast pigeon and "pot-pie," we rode on more cheerily to our night-camp. All along the route the pigeons were seen, and occasionally large flocks whirled over our heads under the canopy of the trees. Satiated with the sport, and not caring to waste our ammunition, we did not heed them farther.

In order to give Lanty due time for the duties of the *cuisine*, we halted a little earlier than usual. Our day's march had been a short one, but the excitement and sport of the pigeon-hunt repaid us for the loss of time. Our dinner-supper – for it was a combination of both – was the dish known in America as "pot-pie," in which the principal ingredients were the pigeons, some soft flour paste, with a few slices of bacon to give it a flavour. Properly speaking, the "pot-pie" is not a pie, but a stew. Ours was excellent, and as our appetites wore in a similar condition, a goodly quantity was used up in appeasing them.

Of course the conversation of the evening was the "wild pigeon of America," and the following facts regarding its natural history – although many of them are by no means new – may prove interesting to the reader, as they did to those who listened to the relation of them around our camp-fire.

The "passenger" is less in size than the house pigeon. In the air it looks not unlike the kite, wanting the forked or "swallow" tail. That of the pigeon is cuneiform. Its colour is best described by calling it a nearly uniform slate. In the male the colours are deeper, and the neck-feathers present the same changeable hues of green, gold, and purple-crimson, generally observed in birds of this species. It is only in the woods, and when freshly caught or killed, that these brilliant tints can be seen to perfection. They fade in captivity, and immediately after the bird has been shot. They seem to form part of its life and liberty, and disappear when it is robbed of either. I have often thrust the wild pigeon, freshly killed, into my game-bag, glittering like an opal. I have drawn it forth a few hours after of a dull leaden hue, and altogether unlike the same bird.

As with all birds of this tribe, the female is inferior to the male, both in size and plumage. The eye is less vivid. In the male it is of the most brilliant fiery orange, inclosed in a well-defined circle of red. The eye is in truth its finest feature, and never fails to strike the beholder with admiration.

The most singular fact in the natural history of the "passenger," is their countless numbers. Audubon saw a flock that contained "one billion one hundred and sixteen millions of birds!" Wilson counted, or rather computed, another flock of "two thousand two hundred and thirty millions!" These numbers seem incredible. I have no doubt of their truth. I have no doubt that they are *under* rather than *over* the numbers actually seen by both these naturalists, for both made most liberal allowances in their calculations.

Where do these immense flocks come from?

The wild pigeons breed in all parts of America. Their breeding-places are found as far north as the Hudson's Bay, and they have been seen in the southern forests of Louisiana and Texas. The nests are built upon high trees, and resemble immense rookeries. In Kentucky, one of their breeding-places was forty miles in length, by several in breadth! One hundred nests will often be found upon a single tree, and in each nest there is but one "squab." The eggs are pure white, like those of the common kind, and, like them, they breed several times during the year, but principally when food is plenty. They establish themselves in great "roosts," sometimes for years together, to which each night they return from their distant excursions – hundreds of miles, perhaps; for this is but a short fly for travellers who can pass over a mile in a single minute, and some of whom have even strayed

across the Atlantic to England! They, however, as I myself have observed, remain in the same woods where they have been feeding for several days together. I have also noticed that they prefer roosting in the low underwood, even when tall trees are close at hand. If near water, or hanging over a stream, the place is still more to their liking; and in the morning they may be seen alighting on the bank to drink, before taking to their daily occupation.

The great "roosts" and breeding-places are favourite resorts for numerous birds of prey. The small vultures (*Cathartes aura* and *Atratus*), or, as they are called in the west, "turkey buzzard," and "carrion crow," do not confine themselves to carrion alone. They are fond of live "squabs," which they drag out of their nests at pleasure. Numerous hawks and kites prey upon them; and even the great white-headed eagle (*Falco leucocephalus*) may be seen soaring above, and occasionally swooping down for a dainty morsel. On the ground beneath move enemies of a different kind, both biped and quadruped. Fowlers with their guns and long poles; farmers with waggons to carry off the dead birds; and even droves of hogs to devour them. Trees fall under the axe, and huge branches break down by the weight of the birds themselves, killing numbers in their descent. Torches are used – for it is usually a night scene, after the return of the birds from feeding, – pots of burning sulphur, and other engines of destruction. A noisy scene it is. The clapping of a million pair of wings, like the roaring of thunder; the shots; the shouts; men hoarsely calling to each other; women and children screaming their delight; the barking of dogs; the neighing of horses; the "crashes" of breaking branches; and the "chuck" of the woodman's axe, all mingled together.

When the men – saturated with slaughter, and white with ordure – have retired beyond the borders of the roost to rest themselves for the night, their ground is occupied by the prowling wolf and the fox; the racoon and the cougar; the lynx and the great black bear.

With so many enemies, one would think that the "passengers" would soon be exterminated. Not so. They are too prolific for that. Indeed, were it not for these enemies, they themselves would perish for want of food. Fancy what it takes to feed them! The flock seen by Wilson would require eighteen million bushels of grain every day! – and it, most likely, was only one of many such that at the time were traversing the vast continent of America. Upon what do they feed? it will be asked. Upon the fruits of the great forest – upon the acorns, the nuts of the beech, upon buck-wheat, and Indian corn; upon many species of berries, such as the huckleberry (*whortleberry*), the hackberry (*Celtis crassifolia*), and the fruit of the holly. In the northern regions, where these are scarce, the berries of the juniper tree (*Juniperus communis*) form the principal food. On the other hand, among the southern plantations, they devour greedily the rice, as well as the nuts of the chestnut-tree and several species of oaks. But their staple food is the beech-nut, or "mast," as it is called. Of this the pigeons are fond, and fortunately it exists in great plenty. In the forests of Western America there are vast tracts covered almost entirely with the beech-tree.

As already stated, these beechen forests of America remain almost intact, and so long as they shower down their millions of bushels of "mast," so long will the passenger-pigeons flutter in countless numbers amidst their branches.

Their migration is semi-annual; but unlike most other migratory birds, it is far from being regular. Their flight is, in fact, not a periodical migration, but a sort of nomadic existence – food being the object which keeps them in motion and directs their course. The scarcity in one part determines their movement to another. When there is more than the usual fall of snow in the northern regions, vast flocks make their appearance in the middle States, as in Ohio and Kentucky. This may in some measure account for the overcrowded "roosts" which have been occasionally seen, but which are by no means common. You may live in the west for many years without witnessing a scene such as those described by Wilson and Audubon, though once or twice every year you may see pigeons enough to astonish you.

It must not be imagined that the wild pigeons of America are so “tame” as they have been sometimes represented. That is their character only while young at the breeding-places, or at the great roosts when confused by crowding upon each other, and mystified by torch-light.

Far different are they when wandering through the open woods in search of food. It is then both difficult to approach and hard to kill them. Odd birds you may easily reach; you may see them perched upon the branches on all sides of you, and within shot-range; but the *thick* of the flock, somehow or other, always keeps from one to two hundred yards off. The sportsman cannot bring himself to fire at single birds. No. There is a tree near at hand literally black with pigeons. Its branches creak under the weight. What a fine havoc he will make if he can but get near enough! But that is the difficulty; there is no cover, and he must approach as he best can without it. He continues to advance; the birds sit silent, watching his movements. He treads lightly and with caution; he inwardly anathematises the dead leaves and twigs that make a loud rustling under his feet. The birds appear restless; several stretch out their necks as if to spring off.

At length he deems himself fairly within range, and raises his gun to take aim; but this is a signal for the shy game, and before he can draw trigger they are off to another tree!

Some stragglers still remain; and at them he levels his piece and fires. The shot is a random one; for our sportsman, having failed to “cover” the flock, has become irritated and careless, and in all such cases the pigeons fly off with the loss of a few feathers.

The gun is reloaded, and our amateur hunter, seeing the thick flock upon another tree, again endeavours to approach it, but with like success.

Chapter Five.
Hunt with a Howitzer

When the conversation about the haunts and habits of these birds began to flag, some one called for a "pigeon story." Who could tell a pigeon story? To our surprise the doctor volunteered one, and all gathered around to listen.

"Yes, gentlemen," began the doctor, "I have a pigeon adventure, which occurred to me some years ago. I was then living in Cincinnati, following my respectable calling, when I had the good fortune to set a broken leg for one Colonel P – , a wealthy planter, who lived upon the bank of the river some sixty miles from the city. I made a handsome set of if, and won the colonel's friendship for ever. Shortly after, I was invited to his house, to be present at a great pigeon-hunt which was to come off in the fall. The colonel's plantation stood among beech woods, and he had therefore an annual visitation of the pigeons, and could tell almost to a day when they would appear. The hunt he had arranged for the gratification of his numerous friends.

"As you all know, gentlemen, sixty miles in our western travel is a mere bagatelle; and tired of pills and prescriptions, I flung myself into a boat, and in a few hours arrived at the colonel's stately home. A word or two about this stately home and its proprietor.

"Colonel P – was a splendid specimen of the backwoods' gentleman – you will admit there *are* gentlemen in the backwoods." (Here the doctor glanced good-humouredly, first at our English friend Thompson, and then at the Kentuckian, both of whom answered him with a laugh.) "His house was the type of a backwoods mansion; a wooden structure, both walls and roof. No matter. It has distributed as much hospitality in its time as many a marble palace; that was one of its backwoods' characteristics. It stood, and I hope still stands, upon the north bank of the Ohio – that beautiful stream – '*La belle rivière*,' as the French colonists, and before their time the Indians, used to call it. It was in the midst of the woods, though around it were a thousand acres of 'clearing,' where you might distinguish fields of golden wheat, and groves of shining maize plants waving aloft their yellow-flower tassels. You might note, too, the broad green leaf of the Nicotian 'weed,' or the bursting pod of the snow-white cotton. In the garden you might observe the sweet potato, the common one, the refreshing tomato, the huge water-melon, cantelopes, and musk melons, with many other delicious vegetables. You could see pods of red and green pepper growing upon trailing plants; and beside them several species of peas and beans – all valuable for the colonel's *cuisine*. There was an orchard, too, of several acres in extent. It was filled with fruit-trees, the finest peaches in the world, and the finest apples – the Newton pippins. Besides, there were luscious pears and plums, and upon the espaliers, vines bearing bushels of sweet grapes. If Colonel P – lived in the woods, it cannot be said that he was surrounded by a desert.

"There were several substantial log-houses near the main building or mansion. They were the stable – and good horses there were in that stable; the cow-house, for milk cattle; the barn, to hold the wheat and maize-corn; the smoke-house, for curing bacon; a large building for the dry tobacco; a cotton-gin, with its shed of clap-boards; bins for the husk fodder, and several smaller structures. In one corner you saw a low-walled erection that reminded you of a kennel, and the rich music that from time to time issued from its apertures would convince you that it *was* a kennel. If you had peeped into it, you would have seen a dozen of as fine stag-hounds as ever lifted a trail. The colonel was somewhat partial to these pets, for he was a 'mighty hunter.' You might see a number of young colts in an adjoining lot; a pet deer, a buffalo-calf, that had been brought from the far prairies, pea-fowl, guinea-hens, turkeys, geese, ducks, and the usual proportion of common fowls. Rail-fences zigzagged off in all directions towards the edge of the woods. Huge trees, dead and divested of their leaves, stood up in the cleared fields. Turkey buzzards and carrion, crows might be seen perched upon their

grey naked limbs; upon their summit you might observe the great rough-legged falcon; and above all, cutting sharply against the blue sky, the fork-tailed kite sailing gently about."

Here the doctor's auditory interrupted him with a murmur of applause. The doctor was in fine spirits, and in a poetical mood. He continued.

"Such, gentlemen, was the sort of place I had come to visit; and I saw at a glance that I could spend a few days there pleasantly enough – even without the additional attractions of a pigeon-hunt.

"On my arrival I found the party assembled. It consisted of a score and a half of ladies and gentlemen, nearly all young people. The pigeons had not yet made their appearance, but were looked for every hour. The woods had assumed the gorgeous tints of autumn, that loveliest of seasons in the 'far west.' Already the ripe nuts and berries were scattered profusely over the earth offering their annual banquet to God's wild creatures. The 'mast' of the beech-tree, of which the wild pigeon is so fond, was showering down among the dead leaves. It was the very season at which the birds were accustomed to visit the beechen woods that girdled the colonel's plantation. They would no doubt soon appear. With this expectation everything was made ready; each of the gentlemen was provided with a fowling-piece, or rifle if he preferred it; and even some of the ladies insisted upon being armed.

"To render the sport more exciting, our host had established certain regulations. They were as follows: – The gentlemen were divided into two parties, of equal numbers. These were to go in opposite directions, the ladies upon the first day of the hunt accompanying whichever they chose. Upon all succeeding days, however, the case would be different. The ladies were to accompany that party which upon the day previous had bagged the greatest number of birds. The victorious gentlemen, moreover, were endowed with other privileges, which lasted throughout the evening; such as the choice of partners for the dinner-table and the dance.

"I need not tell you, gentlemen, that in these conditions existed powerful motives for exertion. The colonel's guests were the *élite* of western society. Most of the gentlemen were young men or bachelors; and among the ladies there were *belles*; three or four of them rich and beautiful. On my arrival I could perceive signs of incipient flirtations. Attachments had already arisen; and by many it would have been esteemed anything but pleasant to be separated in the manner prescribed. A strong *esprit du corps* was thus established; and, by the time the pigeons arrived, both parties had determined to do their utmost. In fact, I have never known so strong a feeling of rivalry to exist between two parties of amateur sportsmen.

"The pigeons at length arrived. It was a bright sunny morning, and yet the atmosphere was darkened, as the vast flock, a mile in breadth by several in length, passed across the canopy. The sound of their wings resembled a strong wind whistling among tree-tops, or through the rigging of a ship. We saw that they hovered over the woods, and settled among the tall beeches.

"The beginning of the hunt was announced, and we set forth, each party taking the direction allotted to it. With each went a number of ladies, and even some of these were armed with light fowling-pieces, determined that the party of their choice should be the victorious one. After a short ride, we found ourselves fairly 'in the woods,' and in the presence of the birds, and then the cracking commenced.

"In our party we had eight guns, exclusive of the small fowling-pieces (two of those), with which a brace of our heroines were armed, and which, truth compels me to confess, were less dangerous to the pigeons than to ourselves. Some of our guns were double-barrelled shot-guns, others were rifles. You will wonder at rifles being used in such a sport, and yet it is a fact that the gentlemen who carried rifles managed to do more execution than those who were armed with the other species. This arose from the circumstance that they were contented to aim at single birds, and, being good shots, they were almost sure to bring these down. The woods were filled with straggling pigeons. Odd birds were always within rifle range; and thus, instead of wasting their time in endeavouring to approach the great flocks, our riflemen did nothing but load and fire. In this way they soon counted their game by dozens.

"Early in the evening, the pigeons, having filled their crops with the mast, disappeared. They flew off to some distant 'roost.' This of course concluded our sport for the day. We got together and counted our numbers. We had 640 birds. We returned home full of hope; we felt certain that we had won for that day. Our antagonists had arrived before us. They showed us 736 dead pigeons. We were beaten.

"I really cannot explain the chagrin which this defeat occasioned to most of our party. They felt humiliated in the eyes of the ladies, whose company they were to lose on the morrow. To some there was extreme bitterness in the idea; for, as I have already stated, attachments had sprung up, and jealous thoughts were naturally their concomitants. It was quite tantalising, as we parted next morning, to see the galaxy of lovely women ride off with our antagonists, while we sought the woods in the opposite direction, dispirited and in silence.

"We went, however, determined to do our best, and win the ladies for the morrow. A council was held, and each imparted his advice and encouragement; and then we all set to work with shot-gun and rifle.

"On this day an incident occurred that aided our 'count' materially. As you know, gentlemen, the wild pigeons, while feeding, sometimes cover the ground so thickly that they crowd upon each other. They all advance in the same direction, those behind continually rising up and fluttering to the front, so that the surface presents a series of undulations like sea-waves. Frequently the birds alight upon each other's backs, for want of room upon the ground, and a confused mass of winged creatures is seen rolling through the woods. At such times, if the sportsman can only 'head' the flock, he is sure of a good shot. Almost every pellet tells, and dozens may be brought down at a single discharge.

"In my progress through the woods, I had got separated from my companions, when I observed an immense flock approaching me after the manner described. I saw from their plumage that they were young birds, and therefore not likely to be easily alarmed. I drew my horse (I was mounted) behind a tree, and awaited their approach. This I did more from curiosity than any other motive, as, unfortunately I carried a rifle, and could only have killed one or two at the best. The crowd came 'swirling' forward, and when they were within some ten or fifteen paces distant, I fired into their midst. To my surprise, the flock did not take flight, but continued to advance as before, until they were almost among the horse's feet. I could stand it no longer. I drove the spurs deeply, and galloped into their midst, striking right and left as they fluttered up round me. Of course they were soon off; but of those that had been trodden upon by my horse, and others I had knocked down, I counted no less than twenty-seven! Proud of my exploit, I gathered the birds into my bag, and rode in search of my companions.

"Our party on this day numbered over 800 head killed; but, to our surprise and chagrin, our antagonists had beaten us by more than a hundred!

"The gentlemen of 'ours' were wretched. The belles were monopolised by our antagonists; we were scouted, and debarred every privilege.

"It was not to be endured; something must be done. What was to be done? counselled we. If fair means will not answer, we must try the opposite. It was evident that our antagonists were better shots than we.

"The colonel, too, was one of them, and he was sure to kill every time he pulled trigger. The odds were against us; some plan must be devised; some *ruse* must be adopted, and the idea of one had been passing through my mind during the whole of that day. It was this: – I had noticed, what has been just remarked, that, although the pigeons will not allow the sportsman to come within range of a fowling-piece, yet at a distance of little over a hundred yards they neither fear man nor beast. At that distance they sit unconcerned, thousands of them upon a single tree. It struck me that a gun large enough to throw shot among them would be certain of killing hundreds at each discharge; but where was such a gun to be had? As I reflected thus, 'mountain howitzers' came into my mind. I remembered the small mountain howitzers I had seen at Covington. One of these loaded with shot

would be the very weapon. I knew there was a battery of them at the Barracks. I knew that a friend of mine commanded the battery. By steamer, should one pass, it was but a few hours to Covington. I proposed sending for a 'mountain howitzer.'

"I need hardly say that my proposal was hailed with a universal welcome on the part of my companions; and without dropping a hint to the other party, it was at once resolved that the design should be carried into execution. It was carried into execution. An 'up-river' boat chanced to pass in the nick of time. A messenger was forthwith, despatched to Covington, and before twelve o'clock upon the following day another boat on her down trip brought the howitzer, and we had it secretly landed and conveyed to a place in the woods previously agreed upon. My friend, Captain C – , had sent a 'live corporal' along with it, and we had no difficulty in its management.

"As I had anticipated, it answered our purpose as though it had been made for it. Every shot brought down a shower of dead birds, and after one discharge alone the number obtained was 123! At night our 'game-bag' counted over three thousand birds! We were sure of the ladies for the morrow.

"Before returning home to our certain triumph, however, there were some considerations. To-morrow we should have the ladies in our company; some of the fair creatures would be as good as sure to 'split' upon the howitzer. What was to be done to prevent this?

"We eight had sworn to be staunch to each other. We had taken every precaution; we had only used our 'great gun' when far off, so that its report might not reach the ears of our antagonists; but how about to-morrow? Could we trust our fair companions with a secret? Decidedly not. This was the unanimous conclusion. A new idea now came to our aid. We saw that we might dispense with the howitzer, and still manage to out-count our opponents. We would make a depository of birds in a safe place. There was a squatter's house near by: that would do. So we took the squatter into our council, and left some 1500 birds in his charge, the remainder being deemed sufficient for that day. From the 1500 thus left, we might each day take a few hundred to make up our game-bag just enough to out-number the other party. We did not send home the corporal and his howitzer. We might require him again; so we quartered him upon the squatter.

"On returning home, we found that our opponents had also made a 'big day's work of it;' but they were beaten by hundreds. The ladies were ours!

"And we kept them until the end of the hunt, to the no little mortification of the gentlemen in the 'minority:' to their surprise, as well; for most of them being crack-shots, and several of us not at all so, they could not comprehend why they were every day beaten so outrageously. We had hundreds to spare, and barrels of the birds were cured for winter use.

"Another thing quite puzzled our opponents, as well as many good people in the neighbourhood. That was the loud reports that had been heard in the woods. Some argued they were thunder, while others declared they must have proceeded from an earthquake. This last seemed the more probable, as the events I am narrating occurred but a few years after the great earthquake in the Mississippi Valley, and people's minds were prepared for such a thing.

"I need not tell you how the knowing ones enjoyed the laugh for several days, and it was not until the colonel's *reunion* was about to break up, that our secret was let out, to the no small chagrin of our opponents, but to the infinite amusement of our host himself, who, although one of the defeated party, often narrates to his friends the story of the 'Hunt with a Howitzer.'"

Chapter Six.
Killing a Cougar

Although we had made a five miles' march from the place where we had halted to shoot the pigeons, our night-camp was still within the boundaries of the flock. During the night we could hear them at intervals at no great distance off. A branch occasionally cracked, and then a fluttering of wings told of thousands dislodged or frightened by its fall. Sometimes the fluttering commenced without any apparent cause. No doubt the great-horned owl (*Strix virginiana*), the wild cat (*felis rufa*), and the raccoon, were busy among them, and the silent attacks of these were causing the repeated alarms.

Before going to rest, a torch-hunt was proposed by way of variety, but no material for making good torches could be found, and the idea was abandoned. Torches should be made of dry pine-knots, and carried in some shallow vessel. The common frying-pan, with a long handle, is best for the purpose. Link-torches, unless of the best pitch-pine (*Pinus resinosa*), do not burn with sufficient brightness to stultify the pigeons. They will flutter off before the hunter can get his long pole within reach, whereas with a very brilliant light, he may approach almost near enough to lay his hands upon them. As there were no pitch-pine-trees in the neighbourhood, nor any good torch-wood, we were forced to give up the idea of a night-hunt.

During the night strange noises were heard by several who chanced to be awake. Some said they resembled the howling of dogs, while others compared them to the screaming of angry cats. One party said they were produced by wolves; another, that the wild cats (lynxes) made them. But there was one that differed from all the rest. It was a sort of prolonged hiss, that all except Ike believed to be the snort of the black bear, lice, however, declared that it was not the bear, but the "sniff," as he termed it, of the "painter" (cougar). This was probable enough, considering the nature of the place. The cougar is well-known to frequent the great roosts of the passenger-pigeon, and is fond of the flesh of these birds.

In the morning our camp was still surrounded by the pigeons, sweeping about among the tree-trunks, and gathering the mast as they went. A few shots were fired, not from any inclination to continue the sport of killing them, but to lay in a fresh stock for the day's dinner. The surplus from yesterday's feast was thrown away, and left by the deserted camp – a banquet for the preying creatures that would soon visit the spot.

We moved on, still surrounded by masses upon the wing. A singular incident occurred as we were passing through a sort of avenue in the forest. It was a narrow aisle, on both sides walled in by the thick foliage of the beeches. We were fairly within this hall-like passage, when it suddenly darkened at the opposite end. We saw that a cloud of pigeons had entered it, flying towards us. They were around our heads before they had noticed us. Seeing our party, they suddenly attempted to diverge from their course, but there was no other open to them, except to rise upward in a vertical direction. This they did on the instant – the clatter of their wings producing a noise like the continued roar of thunder. Some had approached so near, that the men on horseback, striking with their guns, knocked several to the ground; and the Kentuckian, stretching upward his long arm, actually caught one of them on the wing. In an instant they were out of sight; but at that instant two great birds appeared before us at the opening of the forest, which were at once recognised as a brace of white-headed eagles (*Falco leucocephalus*). This accounted for the rash flight of the pigeons; for the eagles had evidently been in pursuit of them, and had driven them to seek shelter under the trees. We were desirous of emptying our guns at the great birds of prey, and there was a simultaneous spurring of horses and cocking of guns: to no purpose, however. The eagles were on the alert. They had already espied us; and, uttering their maniac screams, they wheeled suddenly, and disappeared over the tree-tops.

We had hardly recovered from this pleasant little bit of excitement, when the guide Ike, who rode in the advance, was seen suddenly to jerk up, exclaiming —

"Painter, by God! I know'd I heard a painter."

"Where? where?" was hurriedly uttered by several voices, while all pressed forward to the guide.

"Yander!" replied Ike, pointing to a thicket of young beeches. "He's tuk to the brush: ride round, fellers. Mark, boy, round! quick, damn you!"

There was a scramble of horsemen, with excited, anxious looks and gestures. Every one had his gun cocked and ready, and in a few seconds the small copse of beeches, with their golden-yellow leaves, was inclosed by a ring of hunters. Had the cougar got away, or was he still within the thicket? Several large trees grew out of its midst. Had he taken to one? The eyes of the party were turned upwards. The fierce creature was nowhere visible.

It was impossible to see into every part of the jungle from the outside, as we sat in our saddles. The game might be crouching among the grass and brambles. What was to be done? We had no dogs. How was the cougar to be started? It would be no small peril to penetrate the thicket afoot. Who was to do it?

The question was answered by Redwood, who was now seen dismounting from his horse.

"Keep your eyes about you," cried he. "I'll make the varmint show if he's thur. Look sharp, then!"

We saw Redwood enter fearlessly, leaving his horse hitched over a branch. We heard him no longer, as he proceeded with that stealthy silence known only to the Indian fighter. We listened, and waited in profound suspense. Not even the crackling of a branch broke the stillness. Full five minutes we waited, and then the sharp crack of a rifle near the centre of the copsewood relieved, us. The next moment was heard Redwood's voice crying aloud —

"Look out thur? By God! I've missed him."

Before we had time to change our attitudes another rifle cracked, and another voice was heard, crying in answer to Redwood —

"But, by God! I hain't."

"He's hyur," continued the voice; "dead as mutton. Come this a way, an' yu'll see the beauty."

Ike's voice was recognised, and we all galloped to the spot where it proceeded from. At his feet lay the body of the panther quite dead. There was a red spot running blood between the ribs, where Ike's bullet had penetrated. In trying to escape from the thicket, the cougar had halted a moment, in a crouching attitude, directly before Ike's face, and that moment was enough to give the trapper time to glance through his sights, and send the fatal bullet.

Of course the guide received the congratulations of all, and though he pretended not to regard the thing in the light of a feat, he knew well that killing a "painter" was no everyday adventure.

The skin of the animal was stripped off in a trice, and carried to the waggon. Such a trophy is rarely left in the woods.

The hunter-naturalist performed some farther operations upon the body for the purpose of examining the contents of the stomach. These consisted entirely of the half-digested remains of passenger-pigeons, an enormous quantity of which the beast had devoured during the previous night – having captured them no doubt upon the trees.

This adventure formed a pleasant theme for conversation during the rest of our journey, and of course the cougar was the subject. His habits and history were fully discussed, and the information elicited is given below.

Chapter Seven.
The Cougar

The cougar (*Felis concolor*) is the only indigenous long-tailed cat in America north of the parallel of 30 degrees. The "wild cats" so called, are lynxes with short tails; and of these there are three distinct species. But there is only one true representative of the genus Felis, and that is the animal in question.

This has received many trivial appellations. Among Anglo-American hunters, it is called the panther – in their *patois*, "painter." In most parts of South America, as well as in Mexico, it receives the grandiloquent title of "lion" (*leon*), and in the Peruvian countries is called the "puma," or "poma." The absence of stripes, such as those of the tiger – or spots, as upon the leopard – or rosettes, as upon the jaguar, have suggested the name of the naturalists, *concolor*. *Discolor* was formerly in use; but the other has been generally adopted.

There are few wild animals so regular in their colour as the cougar: very little variety has been observed among different specimens. Some naturalists speak of spotted cougars – that is, having spots that may be seen in a certain light. Upon young cubs, such markings do appear; but they are no longer visible on the full-grown animal. The cougar of mature age is of a tawny red colour, almost uniform over the whole body, though somewhat paler about the face and the parts underneath. This colour is not exactly the tawny of the lion; it is more of a reddish hue – nearer to what is termed calf-colour.

The cougar is far from being a well-shaped creature: it appears disproportioned. Its back is long and hollow; and its tail does not taper so gracefully as in some other animals of the cat kind. Its legs are short and stout; and although far from clumsy in appearance, it does not possess the graceful *tournure* of body so characteristic of some of its congeners. Though considered the representative of the lion in the New World, its resemblance to the royal beast is but slight; its colour seems to be the only title it has to such an honour. For the rest, it is much more akin to the tigers, jaguars, and true panthers. Cougars are rarely more than six feet in length, including the tail, which is usually about a third of that measurement.

The range of the animal is very extensive. It is known from Paraguay to the Great Lakes of North America. In no part of either continent is it to be seen every day, because it is for the most part not only nocturnal in its activity, but one of those fierce creatures that, fortunately, do not exist in large numbers. Like others of the genus, it is solitary in its habits, and at the approach of civilisation betakes itself to the remoter parts of the forest. Hence the cougar, although found in all of the United States, is a rare animal everywhere, and seen only at long intervals in the mountain-valleys, or in other difficult places of the forest. The appearance of a cougar is sufficient to throw any neighbourhood into an excitement similar to that which would be produced by the chase of a mad dog.

It is a splendid tree-climber. It can mount a tree with the agility of a cat; and although so large an animal, it climbs by means of its claws – not by hugging, after the manner of the bears and opossums. While climbing a tree, its claws can be heard crackling along the bark as it mounts upward. It sometimes lies "squatted" along a horizontal branch, a lower one, for the purpose of springing upon deer, or such other animals as it wishes to prey upon. The ledge of a cliff is also a favourite haunt, and such are known among the hunters as "panther-ledges." It selects such a position in the neighbourhood of some watering-place, or, if possible, one of the salt or soda springs (licks) so numerous in America. Here it is more certain that its vigil will not be a protracted one. Its prey – elk, deer, antelope, or buffalo – soon appears beneath, unconscious of the dangerous enemy that cowers over them. When fairly within reach, the cougar springs, and pouncing down upon the shoulders of the victim, buries its claws in the flesh. The terrified animal starts forward, leaps from side to side, dashes into the papaw thickets, or breasts the dense cane-brake, in hopes of brushing off its relentless rider. All in

vain! Closely clasping its neck, the cougar clings on, tearing its victim in the throat, and drinking its blood throughout the wild gallop. Faint and feeble, the ruminant at length totters and falls, and the fierce destroyer squats itself along the body, and finishes its red repast. If the cougar can overcome several animals at a time, it will kill them all, although but the twentieth part may be required to satiate its hunger. Unlike the lion in this, even in repletion it will kill. With it, destruction of life seems to be an instinct.

There is a very small animal, and apparently a very helpless one, with which the cougar occasionally quarrels, but often with ill success – this is the Canada porcupine. Whether the cougar ever succeeds in killing one of these creatures is not known, but that it attacks them is beyond question, and its own death is often the result. The quills of the Canada porcupine are slightly barbed at their extremities; and when stuck into the flesh of a living animal, this arrangement causes them to penetrate mechanically deeper and deeper as the animal moves. That the porcupine can itself discharge them to some distance, is not true, but it is true that it can cause them to be easily *detached*; and this it does when rashly seized by any of the predatory animals. The result is, that these remarkable spines become fast in the tongue, jaws, and lips of the cougar, or any other creature which may make an attack on that seemingly unprotected little animal. The fisher (*Mustela Canadensis*) is said to be the only animal that can kill the porcupine with impunity. It fights the latter by first throwing it upon its back, and then springing upon its upturned belly, where the spines are almost entirely wanting.

The cougar is called a cowardly animal: some naturalists even assert that it will not venture to attack man. This is, to say the least, a singular declaration, after the numerous well-attested instances in which men have been attacked, and even killed by cougars. There are many such in the history of early settlement in America. To say that cougars are cowardly now when found in the United States – to say they are shy of man, and will not attack him, may be true enough. Strange, if the experience of 200 years' hunting, and by such hunters too, did not bring them to that. We may safely believe, that if the lions of Africa were placed in the same circumstances, a very similar shyness and dread of the upright biped would soon exhibit itself. What all these creatures – bears, cougars, lynxes, wolves, and even alligators – are now, is no criterion of their past. Authentic history proves that their courage, at least so far as regards man, has changed altogether since they first heard the sharp detonation of the deadly rifle. Even contemporaneous history demonstrates this. In many parts of South America, both jaguar and cougar attack man, and numerous are the deadly encounters there. In Peru, on the eastern declivity of the Andes, large settlements and even villages have been abandoned solely on account of the perilous proximity of those fierce animals.

In the United States, the cougar is hunted by dog and gun. He will run from the hounds, because he knows they are backed by the unerring rifle of the hunter; but should one of the yelping pack approach too near, a single blow of the cougar's paw is sufficient to stretch him out. When closely pushed, the cougar takes to a tree, and, halting in one of its forks, humps his back, bristles his hair, looks downward with gleaming eyes, and utters a sound somewhat like the purring of a cat, though far louder. The crack of the hunter's rifle usually puts an end to these demonstrations, and the cougar drops to the ground either dead or wounded. If only the latter, a desperate fight ensues between him and the dogs, with several of whom he usually leaves a mark that distinguishes them for the rest of their lives.

The scream of the cougar is a common phrase. It is not very certain that the creature is addicted to the habit of screaming, although noises of this kind heard in the nocturnal forest have been attributed to him. Hunters, however, have certainly never heard him, and they believe that the scream talked about proceeds from one of the numerous species of owls that inhabit the deep forests of America. At short intervals, the cougar does make himself heard in a note which somewhat resembles a deep-drawn sigh, or as if one were to utter with an extremely guttural expression the syllables "Co-oa," or "Cougar." Is it from this that he derives his trivial name?

Chapter Eight.
Old Ike's Adventure

Now a panther story was the natural winding-up of this day, and it had been already hinted that old Ike had "rubbed out" several of these creatures in his time, and no doubt could tell more than one "painter" story.

"Wal, strengers," began he, "it's true thet this hyur ain't the fust painter I've comed acrosst. About fifteen yeern ago I moved to Loozyanny, an' thur I met a painter, an' a queer story it are."

"Let us have it by all means," said several of the party, drawing closer up and seating themselves to listen attentively. We all knew that a story from Ike could not be otherwise than "queer," and our curiosity was on the *qui vive*.

"Wal then," continued he, "they have floods dowd thur in Loozyanny, sich as, I guess, you've never seen the like o' in England." Here Ike addressed himself specially to our English comrade. "England ain't big enough to hev sich floods. One o' 'm ud kiver yur hul country, I hev heern said. I won't say that ar's true, as I ain't acquainted with yur jography. I know, howsomdever, they're mighty big freshets thur, as I hev sailed a skift more 'n a hundred mile acrosst one o' 'm, whur thur wan't nothin' to be seen but cypress tops peep in out o' the water. The floods, as ye know, come every year, but them ar big ones only oncest in a while.

"Wal, as I've said about fifeteen yeern ago, I located in the Red River bottom, about fifty mile or tharabout below Nacketosh, whur I built me a shanty. I hed left my wife an' two young critters in Massissippi state, intendin' to go back for 'em in the spring; so, ye see, I wur all alone by meself, exceptin' my ole mar, a Collins's axe, an' of coorse my rifle.

"I hed finished the shanty all but the chinkin' an' the buildin' o' a chimbly, when what shed come on but one o' 'm tarnation floods. It wur at night when it begun to make its appearance. I wur asleep on the floor o' the shanty, an' the first warnin' I hed o' it wur the feel o' the water soakin' through my ole blanket. I hed been a-dreamin', an' thort it wur rainin', an' then agin I thort that I wur bein' drownded in the Massissippi; but I wan't many seconds awake, till I guessed what it wur in raality; so I jumped to my feet like a started buck, an' groped my way to the door.

"A sight that wur when I got thur. I hed chirred a piece o' ground around the shanty – a kupple o' acres or better – I hed left the stumps a good three feet high: thur wan't a stump to be seen. My clearin', stumps an' all, wur under water; an' I could see it shinin' among the trees all round the shanty.

"Of coorse, my fust thoughts wur about my rifle; an I turned back into the shanty, an' laid my claws upon that quick enough.

"I next went in search o' my ole mar. She wan't hard to find; for if ever a critter made a noise, she did. She wur tied to a tree close by the shanty, an' the way she wur a-squealin' wur a caution to cats. I found her up to the belly in water, pitchin' an' flounderin' all round the tree. She hed nothin' on but the rope that she wur hitched by. Both saddle an' bridle hed been washed away: so I made the rope into a sort o' halter, an' mounted her bare-backed.

"Jest then I begun to think whur I wur agoin'. The hul country appeared to be under water: an' the nearest neighbour I hed lived acrosst the parairy ten miles off. I knew that his shanty sot on high ground, but how wur I to get thur? It wur night; I mout lose my way, an' ride chuck into the river.

"When I thort o' ibis, I concluded it mout be better to stay by my own shanty till mornin'. I could hitch the mar inside to keep her from bein' floated away; an' for meself, I could climb on the roof.

"While I wur thinkin' on this, I noticed that the water wur a-deepenin', an' it jest kim into my head, that it ud soon be deep enough to drownd my ole mar. For meself I wan't frightened. I mout a clomb a tree, an' stayed thur till the flood fell; but I shed a lost the mar, an' that critter wur too

valleyble to think o' such a sacryfize; so I made up my mind to chance crossin' the parairy. Thur wan't no time to be wasted – ne'er a minnit; so I gin the mar a kick or two in the ribs an' started.

"I found the path out to the edge of the parairy easy enough. I hed blazed it when I fust come to the place; an', as the night wur not a very dark one, I could see the blazes as I passed atween the trees. My mar knew the track as well as meself, an' swaltered through at a sharp rate, for she knew too thur wan't no time to be wasted. In five minnites we kim out on the edge o' the pairairy, an' jest as I expected, the hul thing wur kivered with water, an' lookin' like a big pond, I could see it shinin' clur acrosst to the other side o' the openin'.

"As luck ud hev it, I could jest git a glimp o' the trees on the fur side o' the parairy. Thur wur a big clump o' cypress, that I could see plain enough; I knew this wur clost to my neighbour's shanty; so I gin my critter the switch, an' struck right for it.

"As I left the timmer, the mar wur up to her hips. Of coorse, I expected a good grist o' heavy wadin'; but I hed no idee that the water wur a-gwine to git much higher; thur's whur I made my mistake.

"I hedn't got more'n a kupple o' miles out when I diskivered that the thing wur a-risin' rapidly, for I seed the mar wur a-gettin' deeper an' deeper.

"'Twan't no use turnin' back now. I ud lose the mar to a dead sartinty, if I didn't make the high ground; so I spoke to the critter to do her best, an' kep on. The poor beast didn't need any whippin' – she knew as well's I did meself thur wur danger, an' she wur a-doin' her darndest, an' no mistake. Still the water riz, an' kep a-risin', until it come clur up to her shoulder.

"I begun to git skeart in airnest. We wan't more 'n half acrosst, an' I seed if it riz much more we ud hav to swim for it. I wan't far astray about that. The minnit arter it seemed to deepen suddintly, as if thur wur a hollow in the parairy: I heerd the mar give a loud gouf, an' then go down, till I wur up to the waist. She riz agin the next minnit, but I could tell from the smooth ridin' that she wur off o' the bottom. She wur swimmin', an' no mistake.

"At fust I thort o' headin' her back to the shanty; an' I drew her round with that intent; but turn her which way I would, I found she could no longer touch bottom.

"I guess, strengers, I wur in a quandairy about then. I 'gun to think that both my own an' my mar's time wur come in airnest, for I hed no idee that the critter could iver swim to the other side, 'specially with me on her back, an' purticklarly as at that time these hyur ribs had a sight more griskin upon 'em than they hev now.

"Wal, I wur about reckinin' up. I hed got to thinkin' o' Mary an' the childer, and the old shanty in the Mississippi, an' a heap o' things that I hed left unsettled, an' that now come into my mind to trouble me. The mar wur still plungin' ahead; but I seed she wur sinkin' deeper an' deeper an' fast loosin' her strength, an' I knew she couldn't hold out much longer.

"I thort at this time that if I got off o' her back, an' tuk hold o' the tail, she mout manage a leetle hotter. So I slipped backwards over her hips, an' grupped the long hair. It did do some good, for she swum higher; but we got mighty slow through the water, an' I hed but leetle behopes we should reach land.

"I wur towed in this way about a quarter o' a mile, when I spied somethin' floatin' on the water a leetle ahead. It hed growed considerably darker; but thur wur still light enough to show me that the thing wur a log.

"An idee now entered my brain-pan, that I mout save meself by takin' to the log. The mar ud then have a better chance for herself; an' maybe, when eased o' draggin' my carcass, that wur a-keepin' her back, she mout make footin' somewhur. So I waited till she got a leetle closter; an' then, lettin' go o' her tail, I clasped the log, an' crawled on to it.

"The mar swum on, appeerintly 'ithout missin' me. I seed her disappear through the darkness; but I didn't as much as say good-bye to her, for I wur afeard that my voice mout bring her back

agin', an' she mout strike the log with her hoofs, an' whammel it about. So I lay quiet, an' let her hev her own way.

"I wan't long on the log till I seed it wur a-driftin', for thur wur a current in the water that set tol'uble sharp acrosst the parairy. I hed crawled up at one eend, an' got stride-legs; but as the log dipped considerable, I wur still over the hams in the water.

"I thort I mout be more comfortable towards the middle, an' wur about to pull the thing more under me, when all at once I seed thur wur somethin' clumped up on t'other eend o' the log.

"'Twan't very clur at the time, for it had been a-growin' cloudier ever since I left the shanty, but 'twur clur enough to show me that the thing wur a varmint: what sort, I couldn't tell. It mout be a bar, an' it mout not; but I had my suspects it wur eyther a bar or a painter.

"I wan't left long in doubt about the thing's gender. The log kep makin' circles as it drifted, an' when the varmint kim round into a different light, I caught a glimp o' its eyes. I knew them eyes to be no bar's eyes: they wur painter's eyes, an' no mistake.

"I reckin, strengers, I felt very queery jest about then. I didn't try to go any nearer the middle o' the log; but instead of that, I wriggled back until I wur right plum on the eend of it, an' could git no further.

"Thur I sot for a good long spell 'ithout movin' hand or foot. I dasen't make a motion, as I wur afeard it mout tempt the varmint to attackt me.

"I hed no weepun but my knife; I hed let go o' my rifle when I slid from the mar's back, an' it hed gone to the bottom long since. I wan't in any condition to stand a tussle with the painter nohow; so I 'wur determined to let him alone as long's he ud me.

"Wal, we drifted on for a good hour, I guess, 'ithout eyther o' us stirrin'. We sot face to face; an' now an' then the current ud set the log in a sort o' up-an'-down motion, an' then the painter an' I kep bowin' to each other like a pair o' bob-sawyers. I could see all the while that the varmint's eyes wur fixed upon mine, an' I never tuk mine from hisn; I know'd 'twur the only way to keep him still.

"I wur jest prospectin' what ud be the eendin' o' the business, when I seed we wur a-gettin' closter to the timmer: 'twan't more 'n two miles off, but 'twur all under water 'ceptin' the tops o' the trees. I wur thinkin' that when the log shed float in among the branches, I mout slip off, an' git my claws upon a tree, 'ithout sayin anythin' to my travellin' companion.

"Jest at that minnit somethin' appeared dead ahead o' the log. It wur like a island; but what could hev brought a island thur? Then I recollects that I hed seed a piece o' high ground about that part o' the parairy – a sort o' mound that hed been made by Injuns, I s'pose. This, then, that looked like a island, wur the top o' that mound, sure enough.

"The log wur a-driftin' in sich a way that I seed it must pass within twenty yards o' the mound. I detarmined then, as soon as we shed git alongside, to put out for it, an' leave the painter to continue his voyage 'ithout me.

"When I fust sighted the island I seed somethin' that; hed tuk for bushes. But thur wan't no bushes on the mound – that I knowd.

"Howsomdever, when we got a leetle closter, I diskivered that the bushes wur beests. They wur deer; for I spied a pair o' buck's horns atween me an' the sky. But thur wur a somethin' still bigger than a deer. It mout be a hoss, or it mout be an Opelousa ox, but I thort it wur a hoss.

"I wur right about that, for a horse it wur, sure enough, or raythe I shed say, a *mar*, an' that mar no other than my ole crittur!

"Arter partin' company, she hed turned with the current; an', as good luck ud hev it, hed swum in a beeline for the island, an' thur she stood lookin' as slick as if she hed been greased.

"The log hed by this got nigh enough, as I kalklated; an', with as little rumpus as possible, I slipped over the eend an' lot go my hold o' it. I wan't right spread in the water, afore I heerd a plump, an' lookin' round a bit, I seed the painter hed left the log too, an' tuk to the water.

"At fust, I thort he wur arter me; an' I drawed my knife with one hand, while I swum with the other. But the painter didn't mean fight that time. He made but poor swimmin' himself, an' appeared glad enough to get upon dry groun' 'ithout molestin' me; so we swum on side by side, an' not a word passed atween us.

"I didn't want to make a race o' it; so I let him pass me, rayther than that he should fall behind, an' get among my legs.

"Of coorse, he landed fust; an' I could hear by the stompin' o' hoofs, that his suddint appearance hed kicked up a jolly stampede among the critters upon the island. I could see both deer and mar dancing all over the groun', as if Old Nick himself hed got among 'em.

"None o' 'em, howsomdever, thort o' takin' to the water. They hed all hed enough o' that, I guess.

"I kep a leetle round, so as not to land near the painter; an' then, touchin' bottom, I climbed quietly up on the mound. I hed hardly drawed my drippin' carcass out o' the water, when I heerd a loud squeal, which I knew to be the whigher o' my ole mar; an' jest at that minnit the critter kim runnin' up, an' rubbed her nose agin my shoulder. I tuk the halter in my hand, an' sidling round a leetle, I jumped upon her back, for I still wur in fear o' the painter; an' the mar's back appeared to me the safest place about, an' that wan't very safe, eyther.

"I now looked all round to see what new company I hed got into. The day wur jest breakin', an' I could distinguish a leetle better every minnit. The top o' the mound which, wur above water wan't over half an acre in size, an' it wur as clur o' timmer as any other part o' the parairy, so that I could see every inch o' it, an' everythin' on it as big as a tumble-bug.

"I reckin, strengers, that you'll hardly believe me when I tell you the concatenation o' varmints that wur then an' thur caucused together. I could hardly believe my own eyes when I seed sich a gatherin', an' I thort I hed got aboard o' Noah's Ark. Thur wur – listen, strengers – fust my ole mar an' meself, an' I wished both o' us anywhur else, I reckin – then thur wur the painter, yur old acquaintance – then thur wur four deer, a buck an' three does. Then kim a catamount; an' arter him a black bar, a'most as big as a buffalo. Then thur wur a 'coon an' a 'possum, an' a kupple o' grey wolves, an' a swamp rabbit, an', darn the thing! a stinkin' skunk. Perhaps the last wan't the most dangerous varmint on the groun', but it sartintly wur the most disagreeableest o' the hul lot, for it smelt only as a cussed polecat kin smell.

"I've said, strengers, that I wur mightily tuk by surprise when I fust seed this curious clanjamfrey o' critters; but I kin tell you I wur still more dumbfounded when I seed thur behaveyur to one another, knowin' thur different naturs as I did. Thur wur the painter lyin' clost up to the deer – its nat'ral prey; an' thur wur the wolves too; an' thur wur the catamount standin' within three feet o' the 'possum an' the swamp rabbit; an' thur wur the bar an' the cunnin' old 'coon; an' thur they all wur, no more mindin' one another than if they hed spent all thur days together in the same penn.

"'Twur the oddest sight I ever seed, an' it remembered me o' bit o' Scripter my ole mother hed often read from a book called the Bible, or some sich name – about a lion that wur so tame he used to squat down beside a lamb, 'ithout layin' a claw upon the innocent critter.

"Wal, stranger, as I'm sayin', the hul party behaved in this very way. They all appeared down in the mouth, an' badly skeart about the water; but for all that, I hed my fears that the painter or the bar – I wan't afeard o' any o' the others – mout git over thur fright afore the flood fell; an' thurfore I kept as quiet as any one o' them during the hul time I wur in thur company, an' stayin' all the time clost by the mar. But neyther bar nor painter showed any savage sign the hul o' the next day, nor the night that follered it.

"Strengers, it ud tire you wur I to tell you all the movements that tuk place among these critters durin' that long day an' night. Ne'er a one o' 'em laid tooth or claw on the other. I wur hungry enough meself, and ud a liked to hev taken a steak from the buttocks o' one o' the deer, but I dasen't do it. I wur afeard to break the peace, which mout a led to a general shindy.

"When day broke, next mornin' arter, I seed that the flood wur afallin'; and as soon as it wur shallow enough, I led my mar quietly into the water, an' climbin' upon her back, tuk a silent leave o' my companions. The water still tuk my mar up to the flanks, so that I knew none o' the varmint could follow 'ithout swimmin', an' ne'er a one seemed inclined to try a swim.

"I struck direct for my neighbour's shanty, which I could see about three mile off, an', in a hour or so, I wur at his door. Thur I didn't stay long, but borrowin' an extra gun which he happened to hev, an' takin' him along with his own rifle, I waded my mar back to the island. We found the game not exactly as I hed left it. The fall o' the flood hed given the painter, the cat, an' the wolves courage. The swamp rabbit an' the 'possum wur clean gone – all but bits o' thur wool – an' one o' the does wur better 'n half devoured.

"My neighbour tuk one side, an' I the other, an' ridin' clost up, we surrounded the island.

"I plugged the painter at the fust shot, an' he did the same for the bar. We next layed out the wolves, an' arter that cooney, an' then we tuk our time about the deer – these last and the bar bein' the only valley'ble things on the island. The skunk we kilt last, as we didn't want the thing to stink us off the place while we wur a-skinnin' the deer.

"Arter killin' the skunk, we mounted an' left, of coorse loaded with our bar-meat an' venison.

"I got my rifle arter all. When the flood went down, I found it near the middle of the parairy, half buried in the sludge.

"I saw I hed built my shanty in the wrong place; but I soon looked out a better location, an' put up another. I hed all ready in the spring, when I went back to Massissippi, an' brought out Mary and the two young uns."

The singular adventure of old Ike illustrates a point in natural history that, as soon as the trapper had ended, became the subject of conversation. It was that singular trait in the character of predatory animals, as the cougar, when under circumstances of danger. On such occasions fear seems to influence them so much as to completely subdue their ferocity, and they will not molest other animals sharing the common danger, even when the latter are their natural and habitual prey. Nearly every one of us had observed this at some time or other; and the old naturalist, as well as the hunter-guides, related many incidents confirming the strange fact. Humboldt speaks of an instance observed by him on the Orinoco, where the fierce jaguar and some other creatures were seen quietly and peacefully floating together on the same log – all more or less frightened at their situation!

Ike's story had very much interested the doctor, who rewarded him with a "nip" from the pewter flask; and, indeed, on this occasion the flask was passed round, as the day had been one of unusual interest. The killing of a cougar is a rare adventure, even in the wildest haunts of the backwoods' country.

Chapter Nine.
The Musquash

Our next day's march was unenlivened by any particular incident. We had left behind us the heavy timber, and again travelled through the "oak openings." Not an animal was started during the whole day, and the only one seen was a muskrat that took to the water of a small creek and escaped. This occurred at the spot where we had halted for our night-camp, and after the tents were pitched, several of the party went "rat-hunting." The burrow of a family of these curious little animals was discovered in the bank, and an attempt was made to dig them out, but without success. The family proved to be "not at home."

The incident, however, brought the muskrat on the *tapis*.

The "muskrat" of the States is the musquash of the fur-traders (*Fiber sibethicus*). He is called muskrat, from his resemblance to the common rat, combined with the musky odour which he emits from glands situated near the anus. Musquash is said to be an Indian appellative – a strange coincidence, as the word, "musk" is of Arabic origin, and "musquash" would seem a compound of the French *musque*, as the early Canadian fur-traders were French, or of French descent, and fixed the nomenclature of most of the fur-bearing animals of that region. Naturalists have used the name of "Musk Beaver" on account of the many points of resemblance which this animal bears to the true beaver (*Castor fiber*). Indeed, they seem to be of the same genus, and so Linnaeus classed them; but later systematists have separated them, for the purpose, I should fancy, not of simplifying science, but of creating the impression that they themselves were very profound observers.

The teeth – those great friends of the closet naturalist, which help him to whole pages of speculation – have enabled him to separate the beaver from the musquash, although the whole history and habits of these creatures prove them to be congeners, as much as a mastiff is the congener of a greyhound – indeed, far more. So like are they in a general sense, that the Indians call them "cousins."

In form the muskrat differs but little from the beaver. It is a thick, rounded, and flat-looking animal, with blunt nose, short ears almost buried in the fur, stiff whiskers like a cat, short legs and neck, small dark eyes, and sharply-clawed feet. The hinder ones are longest, and are half-webbed. Those of the beaver are full-webbed.

There is a curious fact in connection with the tails of these two animals. Both are almost naked of hair, and covered with "scales," and both are flat. The tail of the beaver, and the uses it makes of this appendage, are things known to every one. Every one has read of its trowel-shape and use, its great breadth, thickness, and weight, and its resemblance to a cricket-bat. The tail of the muskrat is also naked, covered with scales, and compressed or flattened; but instead of being horizontally so, as with the beaver, it is the reverse; and the thin edges are in a vertical plane. The tail of the former, moreover, is not of the trowel-shape, but tapers like that of the common rat. Indeed, its resemblance to the house-rat is so great as to render it a somewhat disagreeable object to look upon.

Tail and all, the muskrat is about twenty inches in length; and its body is about half as big as that of a beaver. It possesses a strange power of contracting its body, so as to make it appear about half its natural size, and to enable it to pass through a chink that animals of much smaller dimensions could not enter.

Its colour is reddish-brown above, and light-ash underneath. There are eccentricities, however, in this respect. Specimens have been found quite black, as also mixed and pure white. The fur is a soft, thick down, resembling that of the beaver, but not quite so fine. There are long rigid hairs, red-coloured, that overtop the fur; and these are also sparely scattered over the tail.

The habits of the muskrat are singular – perhaps not less so than those of his “cousin” the beaver, when you strip the history of the latter of its many exaggerations. Indeed the former animal, in the domesticated state, exhibits much greater intelligence than the latter.

Like the beaver, it is a water animal, and is only found where water exists; never among the dry hills. Its “range” extends over the whole continent of North America, wherever “grass grows and water runs.” It is most probable it is an inhabitant of the Southern Continent, but the natural history of that country is still but half told.

Unlike the beaver, the race of the muskrat is not likely soon to become extinct. The beaver is now found in America, only in the remotest parts of the uninhabited wilderness. Although formerly an inhabitant of the Atlantic States, his presence there is now unknown; or, if occasionally met with, it is no longer in the beaver dam, with its cluster of social domes, but only as a solitary creature, a “terrier beaver,” ill-featured, shaggy in coat, and stunted in growth.

The muskrat, on the contrary, still frequents the settlements. There is hardly a creek, pond, or watercourse, without one or more families having an abode upon its banks. Part of the year the muskrat is a social animal; at other seasons it is solitary. The male differs but little from the female, though he is somewhat larger, and better furred.

In early spring commences the season of his loves. His musky odour is then strongest, and quite perceptible in the neighbourhood of his haunt. He takes a wife, to whom he is for ever after faithful; and it is believed the connection continues to exist during life. After the “honeymoon” a burrow is made in the bank of a stream or pond; usually in some solitary and secure spot by the roots of a tree, and always in such a situation that the rising of the water cannot reach the nest which is constructed within. The entrance to this burrow is frequently under water, so that it is difficult to discover it. The nest within is a bed of moss or soft grasses. In this the female brings forth five or six “cubs,” which she nourishes with great care, training them to her own habits. The male takes no part in their education; but during this period absents himself, and wanders about alone. In autumn the cubs are nearly full-grown, and able to “take care of themselves.” The “old father” now joins the family party, and all together proceed to the erection of winter quarters. They forsake the “home of their nativity,” and build a very different sort of a habitation. The favourite site for their new house, is a swamp not likely to freeze to the bottom, and if with a stream running through it, all the better. By the side of this stream, or often on a little islet in the midst, they construct a dome-shaped pile, hollow within, and very much like the house of the beaver. The materials used are grass and mud, the latter being obtained at the bottom of the swamp or stream. The entrance to this house is subterranean, and consists of one or more galleries debouching under the water. In situations where there is danger of inundation, the floor of the interior is raised higher, and frequently terraces are made to admit of a dry seat, in case the ground-floor should get flooded. Of course there is free egress and ingress at all times, to permit the animal to go after its food, which consists of plants that grow in the water close at hand.

The house being completed, and the cold weather having set in, the whole family, parents and all, enter it, and remain there during the winter, going out only at intervals for necessary purposes. In spring they desert this habitation and never return to it.

Of course they are warm enough during winter while thus housed, even in the very coldest weather. The heat of their own bodies would make them so, lying as they do, huddled together, and sometimes on top of one another, but the mud walls of their habitations are a foot or more in thickness, and neither frost nor rain can penetrate within.

Now, a curious fact has been observed in connection with the houses of these creatures. It shows how nature has adapted them to the circumstances in which they may be placed. By philosophers it is termed “instinct”; but in our opinion it is the same sort of instinct which enables Mr Hobbs to pick a “Chubb” lock. It is this: —

In southern climates – in Louisiana, for instance – the swamps and rivers do not freeze over in winter. There the muskrat does not construct such houses as that described, but is contented all the year with his burrow in the banks. He can go forth freely and seek his food at all seasons.

In the north it is different. There for months the rivers are frozen over with thick ice. The muskrat could only come out under the ice, or above it. If the latter, the entrance of his burrow would betray him, and men with their traps, and dogs, or other enemies, would easily get at him. Even if he had also a water entrance, by which he might escape upon the invasion of his burrow, he would drown for want of air. Although an amphibious animal, like the beaver and otter, he cannot live altogether under water, and must rise at intervals to take breath. The running stream in winter does not perhaps furnish him with his favourite food – the roots and stems of water-plants. These the swamp affords to his satisfaction; besides, it gives him security from the attacks of men and preying animals, as the wolverine and fisher. Moreover, his house in the swamp cannot be easily approached by the hunter – man – except when the ice becomes very thick and strong. Then, indeed, is the season of peril for the muskrat, but even then he has loopholes of escape. How cunningly this creature adapts itself to its geographical situation! In the extreme north – in the hyperborean regions of the Hudson's Bay Company – lakes, rivers, and even springs freeze up in winter. The shallow marshes become solid ice, congealed to their very bottoms. How is the muskrat to get under water there? Thus, then, he manages the matter: —

Upon deep lakes, as soon as the ice becomes strong enough to bear his weight, he makes a hole in it, and over this he constructs his dome-shaped habitation, bringing the materials up through the hole, from the bottom of the lake. The house thus formed sits prominently upon the ice. Its entrance is in the floor – the hole which has already been made – and thus is kept open during the whole season of frost, by the care and watchfulness of the inmates, and by their passing constantly out and in to seek their food – the water-plants of the lake.

This peculiar construction of the muskrat's dwelling, with its water-passage, would afford all the means of escape from its ordinary enemies – the beasts of prey – and, perhaps, against these alone nature has instructed it to provide. But with all its cunning it is, of course, outwitted by the superior ingenuity of its enemy – man.

The food of the muskrat is varied. It loves the roots of several species of *nymphae*, but its favourite is *calamus* root (*calamus* or *acorus aromaticus*). It is known to eat shell-fish, and heaps of the shells of fresh-water muscles (*unios*) are often found near its retreat. Some assert that it eats fish, but the same assertion is made with regard to the beaver. This point is by no means clearly made out; and the closet naturalists deny it, founding their opposing theory, as usual, upon the teeth. For my part, I have but little faith in the "teeth," since I have known horses, hogs, and cattle greedily devour both fish, flesh, and fowl.

The muskrat is easily tamed, and becomes familiar and docile. It is very intelligent, and will fondly caress the hand of its master. Indians and Canadian settlers often have them in their houses as pets; but there is so much of the rat in their appearance, and they emit such a disagreeable odour in the spring, as to prevent them from becoming general favourites. They are difficult to cage up, and will eat their way out of a deal box in a single night. Their flesh, although somewhat musky, is eaten by the Indians and white hunters, but these gentry eat almost everything that "lives, breathes, and moves." Many Canadians, however, are fond of the flesh.

It is not for its flesh that the muskrat is so eagerly hunted. Its fur is the important consideration. This is almost equal to the fur of the beaver in the manufacture of hats, and sells for a price that pays the Indians and white trappers for the hardships they undergo in obtaining it. It is, moreover, used in the making of boas and muffs, as it somewhat resembles the fur of the pine marten or American sable (*Mustela martes*), and on account of its cheapness is sometimes passed off for the latter. It is one of the regular articles of the Hudson's Bay Company's commerce, and thousands of muskrat skins are

annually obtained. Indeed, were it not that the animal is prolific and difficult to capture, its species would soon suffer extermination.

The mode of taking it differs from that practised in trapping the beaver. It is often caught in traps set for the latter, but such a “catch” is regarded in the light of a misfortune, as until it is taken out the trap is rendered useless for its real object. As an amusement it is sometimes hunted by dogs, as the otter is, and dug out of its burrow; but the labour of laying open its deep cave is ill repaid by the sport. The amateur sportsman frequently gets a shot at the muskrat while passing along the bank near its haunts, and almost as frequently misses his aim. The creature is too quick for him, and dives almost without making a bubble. Of course once in the pool it is seen no more.

Many tribes of Indians hunt the muskrat both for its flesh and skin. They have peculiar modes of capturing it, of one of which the hunter-naturalist gave an account. A winter which he had spent at a fort in the neighbourhood of a settlement of Ojibways gave him an opportunity of witnessing this sport in perfection.

Chapter Ten.
A Rat-Hunt

"Chingawa," began he, "a Chippeway or Ojibway Indian, better-known at the fort as 'Old Foxey,' was a noted hunter of his tribe. I had grown to be a favourite with him. My well-known passion for the chase was a sort of masonic link between us; and our friendship was farther augmented by the present of an old knife for which I had no farther use. The knife was not worth twopence of sterling money, but it made 'Old Foxey' my best friend; and all his 'hunter-craft' – the gatherings of about sixty winters – became mine.

"I had not yet been inducted into the mystery of 'rat-catching,' but the season for that 'noble' sport at length arrived, and the Indian hunter invited me to join him in a muskrat hunt.

"Taking our 'traps' on our shoulders, we set out for the place where the game was to be found. This was a chain of small lakes or ponds that ran through a marshy valley, some ten or twelve miles distant from the fort.

"The traps, or implements, consisted of an ice-chisel with a handle some five feet in length, a small pickaxe, an iron-pointed spear barbed only on one side, with a long straight shaft, and a light pole about a dozen feet in length, quite straight and supple.

"We had provided ourselves with a small stock of eatables as well as materials for kindling a fire – but no Indian is ever without these. We had also carried our blankets along with us, as we designed to make a night of it by the lakes.

"After trudging for several hours through the silent winter forests, and crossing both lakes and rivers upon the ice, we reached the great marsh. Of course, this, as well as the lakes, was frozen over with thick ice; we could have traversed it with a loaded waggon and horses without danger of breaking through.

"We soon came to some dome-shaped heaps rising above the level of the ice. They were of mud, bound together with grass and flags, and were hardened by the frost. Within each of these rounded heaps, Old Foxey knew there was at least half a dozen muskrats – perhaps three times that number – lying snug and warm and huddled together.

"Since there appeared no hole or entrance, the question was how to get at the animals inside. Simply by digging until the inside should be laid open, thought I. This of itself would be no slight labour. The roof and sides, as my companion informed me, were three feet in thickness; and the tough mud was frozen to the hardness and consistency of a fire-brick. But after getting through this shell, where should we find the inmates? Why, most likely, we should not find them at all after all this labour. So said my companion, telling me at the same time that there were subterranean, or rather subaqueous, passages, by which the muskrats would be certain to make off under the ice long before he had penetrated near them.

"I was quite puzzled to know how we should proceed. Not so Old Foxey. He well knew what he was about, and pitching his traps down by one of the 'houses,' commenced operations.

"The one he had selected stood out in the lake, some distance from its edge. It was built entirely upon the ice; and, as the hunter well knew, there was a hole in its floor by which the animals could get into the water at will. How then was he to prevent them from escaping by the hole, while we removed the covering or roof? This was what puzzled me, and I watched his movements with interest.

"Instead of digging into the house, he commenced cutting a hole in the ice with his ice-chisel about two feet from the edge of the mud. That being accomplished, he cut another, and another, until four holes were pierced forming the corners of a square, and embracing the house of the muskrat within.

"Leaving this house, he then proceeded to pierce a similar set of holes around another that also stood out on the open lake. After that he went to a third one, and this and then a fourth were prepared in a similar manner.

"He now returned to the first, this time taking care to tread lightly upon the ice and make as little stir as possible. Having arrived there, he took out from his bag a square net made of twisted deer-thongs, and not much, bigger than a blanket. This in a most ingenious manner he passed under the ice, until its four corners appeared opposite the four holes; where, drawing them through, he made all last and 'taut' by a line stretching from one corner to the other.

"His manner of passing the net under the ice I have pronounced ingenious. It was accomplished by reeving a line from hole to hole by means of the long slender pole already mentioned. The pole, inserted through one of the holes, conducted the line, and was itself conducted by means of two forked sticks that guided it, and pushed it along to the other holes. The line being attached to the comers of the net made it an easy matter to draw the latter into its position.

"All the details of this curious operation were performed with a noiseless adroitness which showed 'Old Foxey' was no novice at 'rat-catching.'

"The net being now quite taut along the lower surface of the ice, must of course completely cover the hole in the 'floor.' It followed, therefore, that if the muskrats were 'at home,' they were now 'in the trap.'

"My companion assured me that they would be found inside. The reason why he had not used the net on first cutting the holes, was to give any member of the family that had been frightened out, a chance of returning; and this he knew they would certainly do, as these creatures cannot remain very long under the water.

"He soon satisfied me of the truth of his statement. In a few minutes, by means of the ice-chisel and pickaxe, we had pierced the crust of the dome; and there, apparently half asleep, – because dazzled and blinded by the sudden influx of light – were no less than eight full-grown musquashes!

"Almost before I could count them, Old Foxey had transfixed the whole party, one after the other, with his long spear.

"We now proceeded to another of the houses, at which the holes had been cut. There my companion went through a similar series of operations; and was rewarded by a capture of six more 'rats.'

"In the third of the houses only three were found.

"On opening a fourth, a singular scene met our eyes. There was but, one muskrat alive, and that one seemed to be nearly famished to death. Its body was wasted to mere 'skin and bone;' and the animal had evidently been a long time without food. Beside it lay the naked skeletons of several small animals that I at once saw were those of the muskrat. A glance at the bottom of the nest explained all. The hole, which in the other houses had passed through the ice, and which we found quite open, in this one was frozen up. The animals had neglected keeping it open, until the ice had got too thick for them to break through; and then, impelled by the cravings of hunger, they had preyed upon each other, until only one, the strongest, survived!

"I found upon counting the skeletons that no less than eleven had tenanted this ice-bound prison.

"The Indian assured me that in seasons of very severe frost such an occurrence is not rare. At such times the ice forms so rapidly, that the animals – perhaps not having occasion to go out for some hours – find themselves frozen in; and are compelled to perish of hunger, or devour one another!

"It was now near night – for we had not reached the lake until late in the day – and my companion proposed that we should leave farther operations until the following morning. Of course I assented to the proposal, and we betook ourselves to some pine-trees that grew on a high bank near the shore, where we had determined to pass the night.

"There we kindled a roaring fire of pine-knots; but we had grown very hungry, and I soon found that of the provisions I had brought, and upon which I had already dined, there remained but a scanty

fragment for supper. This did not trouble my companion, who skinned several of the ‘rats,’ gave them a slight warming over the fire, and then ate them up with as much *goût* as if they had been partridges. I was hungry, but not hungry enough for that; so I sat watching him with some astonishment, and not without a slight feeling of disgust.

“It was a beautiful moonlight night, one of the clearest I ever remember. There was a little snow upon the ground, just enough to cover it; and up against the white sides of the hills could be traced the pyramidal outlines of the pines, with their regular gradations of dark needle-clothed branches. They rose on all sides around the lake, looking like ships with furled sails and yards square-set.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.