

Chapter XXV Return Journey Continued

...The third day of our journey rose brilliantly clear, like the two preceding ones, and we shaped our course more to the north than we had hitherto done, in the direction of Big-foot Lake, now known by the somewhat hackneyed appellation, Lake of Geneva.

Our journey this day was without mishaps or disasters of any kind. The air was balmy; the foliage of the forests fresh and fragrant, the little brooks clear and sparkling-- everything in nature spoke the praises of the beneficent Creator.

It is in scenes like this, far removed from the bustle, the strife, and the sin of civilized life, that we most fully realize the presence of the great Author of the Universe. Here can the mind most fully adore his majesty and goodness, for here only is the command obeyed, "Let all the earth keep silence before Him!"

It cannot escape observation that the deepest and most solemn devotion is in the hearts of those who, shut out from the worship of God in temples made with hands, are led to commune with him amid the boundless magnificence that his own power has framed.

This day was not wholly without incident. As we stopped for our noon-tide refreshment, and dismounting threw ourselves on the fresh herbage just at the verge of a pleasant thicket, we were startled by a tender bleating near us, and presently, breaking its way through the low branches, there came upon us a sweet little dappled fawn, evidently in search of its mother. It did not seem in the least frightened at the sight of us. As poor Selkirk might have been parodied, It was so unacquainted with man; Its tameness was charming to us. But the vociferous delight of the children soon drove it bounding again into the woods, and all hopes of catching it for a pet were at once at an end.

We had travelled well this day, and were beginning to feel somewhat fatigued, when, just before sunset; we came upon a ridge, overlooking one of the loveliest little dells imaginable. It was an oak opening, and browsing under the shade of the tall trees which were scattered around were the cattle and horses of the soldiers, who had got thus far on their journey. Two or three white tents were pitched in the bottom of the valley, beside a clear stream. The camp-fires were already lighted, and the men, singly or in groups, were busied in their various preparations for their own comfort, or that of their animals.

Lieutenant Foster came forward with great delight to welcome our arrival, and accepted without hesitation an invitation to join our mess again, as long as we should be together.

We soon found a pleasant encamping-ground, far enough removed from the other party to secure us against all inconvenience, and our supper having received the addition of a kettle of fine fresh milk, kindly brought us by Mrs. Gardiner, the hospital matron, who with her little covered cart formed no unimportant feature in the military group, we partook of our evening meal with much hilarity and enjoyment.

If people are ever companionable, it is when thrown together under circumstances like the present. There has always been sufficient incident through the day to furnish themes for discourse, and subjects of merriment, as long as the company feel disposed for conversation, which is, truth to tell, not an unconscionable length of time after their supper is over.

The poor Lieutenant looked grave enough when we set out in advance of him the next morning. None of his party were acquainted with the road; but, after giving him directions both general and particular, Mr. Kinzie promised to blaze a tree, or set up a chip for a guide, at every place which appeared more than usually doubtful.

We now found ourselves in a much more diversified country than any we had hitherto travelled. Gently swelling hills, lovely valleys, and bright sparkling streams were the features of the landscape. But there was little animate life. Now and then a shout from the leader of the party (for, according to custom, we travelled Indian file) would call

our attention to a herd of deer "loping," as the Westerners say, through the forest; or an additional spur would be given to the horses on the appearance of some small dark object, far distant on the trail before us. But the game invariably contrived to disappear before we could reach it, and it was out of the question to leave the beaten track for a regular hunt.

Soon after mid-day, we descended a long, sloping knoll, and by a sudden turn came full in view of the beautiful sheet of water denominated Gros-pied by the French, Maunk-suck by the natives, and by ourselves Big-foot, from the chief whose village overlooked its waters. Bold, swelling hills jutted forward into the clear blue expanse, or retreated slightly to afford a green, level nook, as a resting-place for the dwelling of man. On the nearer shore stretched a bright, gravelly beach, across which coursed here and there a pure, sparkling rivulet to join the larger sheet of water.

On a rising ground at the foot of one of the bold bluffs in the middle distance, a collection of neat wigwams formed, with their surrounding gardens, no unpleasant feature in the picture.

A shout of delight burst involuntarily from the whole party, as this charming landscape met our view. "It was like the Hudson, only less bold--no, it was like the lake of the Forest Cantons, in the picture of the Chapel of William Tell! What could be imagined more enchanting? Oh I if our friends at the East could but enjoy it with us!"

We paused long to admire, and then spurred on, skirting the head of the lake, and were soon ascending the broad platform on which stood the village of Maunk-suck, or Big-foot.

The inhabitants, who had witnessed our approach from a distance, were all assembled in front of their wigwams to greet us, if friends--if otherwise, whatever the occasion should demand. It was the first time such a spectacle had ever presented itself to their wondering eyes. Their salutations were not less cordial than we expected. "Shaw-nee-aw-kee" and his mother, who was known throughout the tribe by the touching appellation "Our friend's wife," were welcomed most kindly, and an animated conversation commenced, which I could understand only so far as it was conveyed by gestures; so I amused myself by taking a minute survey of all that met my view.

The chief was a large, raw-boned, ugly Indian, with a countenance bloated by intemperance, and with a sinister, unpleasant expression. He had a gay-colored handkerchief upon his head, and was otherwise attired in his best, in compliment to the strangers.

It was to this chief that Chambly, or, as he is now called, Shaw-bee-nay, Billy Caldwell, and Robinson were dispatched, by Dr. Wolcott, their Agent, during the Winnebago war, in 1821, to use their earnest endeavors to prevent this chief and his band from joining the hostile Indians. With some difficulty they succeeded, and were thus the means, doubtless, of saving the lives of all the settlers who lived exposed upon the frontier.

Among the various groups of his people, there was none attracted my attention so forcibly as a young man of handsome face, and a figure that was striking even where all were fine and symmetrical. He too had a gay handkerchief on his head, a shirt of the brightest lemon-colored calico, an abundance of silver ornaments, and, what gave his dress a most fanciful appearance, one legging of blue and the other of bright scarlet. I was not ignorant that this peculiar feature in his toilet indicated a heart suffering from the tender passion. The flute, which he carried in his hand, added confirmation to the fact, while the joyous, animated expression of his countenance showed with equal plainness that he was not a despairing lover.

I could have imagined him to have recently returned from the chase, laden with booty, with which he had, as is the custom, entered the lodge of the fair one, and thrown his burden at the feet of her parents, with an indifferent, superb sort of air, as much as to say, "Here is some meat--it is a mere trifle, but it will show you what you might expect with me for a son-in-law." I could not doubt that the damsel had stepped forward and gathered it up, in token that she accepted the offering, and the donor along with it. There was nothing in the appearance or manner of any of the maidens by whom we were

surrounded, to denote which was the happy fair, neither, although I peered anxiously into all their countenances, could I there detect any blush of consciousness; so I was obliged to content myself with selecting the youngest and prettiest of the group, and go on weaving my romance to my own satisfaction.

The village stood encircled by an amphitheatre of hills, so precipitous, and with gorges so steep and narrow, that it seemed almost impossible to scale them, even on horseback; how, then, could we hope to accomplish the ascent of the four-wheeled carriage? This was the point now under discussion between my husband and the Potawatomies. There was no alternative but to make the effort, selecting the pass that the inhabitants pointed out as the most practicable. Petaille went first, and I followed on my favorite Jerry. It was such a scramble as is not often taken,--almost perpendicularly, through what seemed the dry bed of a torrent, now filled with loose stones, and scarcely affording one secure foothold from the bottom to the summit! I clung fast to the mane, literally at times clasping Jerry around his neck, and, amid the encouraging shouts and cheers of those below, we at length arrived safely, though nearly breathless, on the pinnacle, and sat looking down, to view the success of the next party.

The horses had been taken from the carriage, the luggage it contained being placed upon the shoulders of some of the young Indians, to be toted up the steep. Ropes were now attached to its sides, and a regular bevy of our red friends, headed by our two Frenchmen, placed to man them. Two or three more took their places in the rear, to hold the vehicle and keep it from slipping backwards--then the labor commenced. Such a pulling! Such a shouting! Such a clapping of hands by the spectators of both sexes! Such a stentorian word of command or encouragement from the bourgeois! Now and then there would be a slight halt, a wavering, as if carriage and men were about to tumble backwards into the plain below; but no--they would recover themselves, and after incredible efforts they too safely gained the table-land above. In process of time all were landed there, and, having remunerated our friends to their satisfaction, the goods and chattels were collected, the wagon repacked, and we set off for our encampment at Turtle Creek.

The exertions and excitement of our laborious ascent, together with the increasing heat of the sun, made this afternoon's ride more uncomfortable than anything we had previously felt. We were truly rejoiced when the whoop of our guide, and the sight of a few scattered lodges, gave notice that we had reached our encamping-ground. We chose a beautiful sequestered spot by the side of a clear, sparkling stream, and, having dismounted and seen that our horses were made comfortable, my husband, after giving his directions to his men, led me to a retired spot where I could lay aside my hat and mask and bathe my flushed face and aching head in the cool, refreshing waters. Never had I felt anything so grateful, so delicious. I sat down, and leaned my head against one of the tall, overshadowing trees, and was almost dreaming, when summoned to partake of our evening meal.

The Indians had brought us, as a present, some fine brook trout, which our Frenchmen had prepared in the most tempting fashion, and before the bright moon rose and we were ready for our rest, all headache and fatigue had alike disappeared.

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One of the most charming features of this mode of travelling is the joyous, vocal life of the forest at early dawn, when all the feathered tribe come forth to pay their cheerful salutations to the opening day.

The rapid, chattering flourish of the bob-o'-link, the soft whistle of the thrush, the tender coo of the wood-dove, the deep, warbling bass of the grouse, the drumming of the partridge, the melodious trill of the lark, the gay carol of the robin, the friendly, familiar call of the duck and the teal, resound from tree and knoll and lowland, prompting the expressive exclamation of the simple half-breed, "Voilà la forêt qui parle!"[1]

It seems as if man must involuntarily raise his voice, to take part in the general chorus--the mating song of praise. Birds and flowers, and the soft balmy airs of morning!

Must it not have been in a scene like this that Milton's Adam poured out his beautiful hymn of adoration, "These are thy glorious works, Parent of Good"?

[1] How the woods talk!