MAYNE REID

THE HUNTERS' FEAST: CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE CAMP FIRE


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Table of Contents

"The Hunters' Feast"
Chapter One.
Chapter Two.
Chapter Three.
Chapter Four.
Chapter Five.
Chapter Six.
Chapter Seven.
Chapter Eight.
Chapter Nine.
Chapter Ten.
Chapter Eleven.
Chapter Twelve.
Chapter Thirteen.
Chapter Fourteen.
Chapter Fifteen.
Chapter Sixteen.
Chapter Seventeen.
Chapter Eighteen.
Chapter Nineteen.
Chapter Twenty.
Chapter Twenty One.
Chapter Twenty Two.
Chapter Twenty Three.
Chapter Twenty Four.
Chapter Twenty Five.

Chapter Twenty Six.
Chapter Twenty Seven.
Chapter Twenty Eight.
Chapter Twenty Nine.
Chapter Thirty.
Chapter Thirty One.
Chapter Thirty Two.
Chapter Thirty Three.
Chapter Thirty Four.
Chapter Thirty Five.
Chapter Thirty Six.
Chapter Thirty Seven.
Chapter Thirty Eight.
Chapter Thirty Nine.

"The Hunters' Feast"

Table of Contents

Chapter One.

Table of Contents

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.

Table of Contents

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.

Table of Contents

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