

LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JOE MEEK

BY MRS. FRANCES FULLER VICTOR

EARLY DAYS IN OREGON.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Joseph L. Meek was a native of Washington Co., Va. Born in the early part of the present century, and brought up on a plantation where the utmost liberty was accorded the "young man" preferring outdoor sports with the youthful bondsmen of his father, to study with the hard-headed school-master who furnished him the alphabet on a paddle, possessing an exhaustless fund of wagging humor, united to a spirit of adventure and remarkable personal strength, he unwittingly furnished himself the very material of which the heroes of the wilderness were made. Virginia, "the mother of the Presidents," has furnished many such men, who, in the early days of the new population, Western States, became the hardy frontiersmen, or the fearless Indian fighters who were the bone and sinew of the land.

When young Joe was about sixteen years of age, he was sent to the monotonous plantation life, and jumping into the wagon of a neighbor who was going to Louisville, Ky., started out in life for himself. He "reckoned they did not grieve him at home," at which conclusion others beside Joe naturally arrive on hearing of his heedless disposition, and utter contempt for the ordinary and useful employments to which other men apply themselves. This truly Virginian and ebullient contempt for "honest labor" has continued to disgust him throughout his eventful career, even while performing the most arduous duties of the life he had chosen.

Joe probably believed that should his father grieve for him his step-mother would be able to console him; this step-mother, though a pious and good woman, not being one of the lady's favorites as might easily be conjectured. It was such thoughts as these that kept up his resolution to seek the far west. In the autumn of 1828 he arrived in St. Louis, and the following spring he fell in with Mr. Wm. Sublette, of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, who was making his annual visit to that frontier town to purchase merchandise for the Indian country, and pick up recruits for the fur-hunting service. To this experienced leader he offered himself.

"How old are you?" asked Sublette.

"A little past eighteen."

"And you want to go to the Rocky Mountains?"

"Yes."

"You don't know what you are talking about, boy. You'll be killed before you get half way there."

"If I do, I reckon I can die," said Joe with a flash on his full dark eyes, and throwing back his shoulders to show their breadth.

"Come," exclaimed the trader, eyeing the youthful candidate with admiration, and perhaps a touch of pity also; "that is the game spirit. I think you'll do after all. Only be prudent, and keep your wits about you."

"Where else should they be?" laughed Joe, as he marched off, feeling an inch or two taller than before.

Then commenced the business of preparing for the journey—making acquaintance with the other recruits—enjoying the novelty of owning an outfit, being initiated into the mysteries of camp duty by the few old hunters who were to accompany the expedition, and learning something of their swagger and disregard of civilized observances.

On the 17th of March, 1829, the company, numbering about sixty men, left St. Louis, and proceeded on horse and mules, with pack horses for the goods, up through the state of Missouri. Camp-life commenced at the start; and this being the season of the year when the weather is most disagreeable, its romance rapidly melted away with the snow and sleet which varied the sharp spring wind and the frequent cold rains. The recruits, woe through all the little mishaps incident to the business and to their inexperience, such as involuntary collisions over their mules' bloody noses, bruised, dusty faces,

thence up the North Fork to the Sweet water, and thence across in a still northerly direction to the head of Wind river.

The manner of camp travel is now so well known through the writings of Irving, and still more from the great numbers which have crossed the plains since Astoria and Bonneville were written, that it would be superfluous here to enter upon a particular description of a train on that journey. A strict half military discipline had to be maintained, regular duties assigned to each person, precautions taken against the loss of animals either by straying or Indian stampeding, etc. Some of the men were appointed as camp-keepers, who had all these things to look after besides standing guard. A few were selected as hunters, and these are free to come and go, as their calling required. None but the most experienced were chosen for hunters, on a march; therefore our recruit could not aspire to that dignity yet.

The first adventure the company met with worthy of mention after leaving independence, was in crossing the country between the Arkansas and the Platte. Here the camp was surprised one morning by a band of Indians a thousand strong that came sweeping down upon them in such warlike style that even Captain Sublette was fain to believe it his last battle. Upon the open prairie there is no such thing as flight, nor any cover under which to conceal a party for even a few moments. It is always fight or die, if the assailants are in the humor for war.

Happily on this occasion the band proved to be more peaceably disposed than their appearance indicated, being the warriors of several tribes—the Sioux, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Cheyennes, who had been holding a council to consider probably what mischief they could do to some other tribes. The spectacle they presented as they came at full speed on horseback, armed, painted, brandishing their weapons and yelling in their native Indian style, was one which might well strike with a palsy the stoutest heart and arm. What were a band of sixty men against a thousand armed warriors in full fighting trim, with spears, shields, bows, battle axes and not a few guns?

But it is the rule of the mountain-men to fight—and that there is a chance for life until the breath is out of the body; therefore Captain Sublette had his little force draw up in a line of battle. On came the savages, whooping and swinging their weapons above their heads. Sublette turned to his men.

"When you hear my shot, then fire." Still they came on, until within about fifty paces of the line of waiting men. Sublette turned his head, and saw his command with their guns all up to their faces ready to fire, then raised his own gun. Just at this moment the principal chief sprang off his horse laid his weapon on the ground, making signs of peace. Then followed a talk, and after the giving of a considerable present, Sublette was allowed to depart. This he did with all dispatch, the company putting as much distance as possible between themselves and their visitors before making their next camp. Considering the warlike character of these tribes and their superior numbers, it was as narrow an escape on the part of the company as it was an exceptional freak of generosity on the part of the savages to allow it. But Indians have all a great respect for a man who shows no fear; and it was most probably the warlike movement of Captain Sublette and his party which inspired a willingness on the part of the chief to accept a present when he had the power to have taken the whole train. Besides, according to Indian logic, the present cost him nothing, and it might cost him many warriors to capture the train. Had there been the least wavering on Sublette's part, or fear in the countenances of his men, the end of the affair would have been different. This adventure was a grand initiation of the raw recruits, giving them both an insight into savage modes of attack, and an opportunity to test their own nerve.

The company proceeded without accident, and arrived, about the first of July, at the rendezvous, which was appointed for this year on the Popo Agie, one of the streams which form the headwaters of Big Horn river.

Now indeed, young Joe had an opportunity of seeing something of the life upon which he had entered. As customary when the traveling partner arrived at rendezvous with the year's merchandise, there was a meeting of all the partners, if they were within reach of the appointed place. On this occasion Smith was absent on his tour through California and Western Oregon. Jackson, the resident partner, and the commander for the previous year, was not yet in; and Sublette had just arrived with the goods from St. Louis.

All the different hunting and trapping parties and Indian allies were gathered together, so that the camp contained several hundred men, with their riding and pack-horses. Nor were Indian women and children wanting to give variety and an appearance of domesticity to the scene.

The summer rendezvous was always chosen in some valley where there was grass for the animals, and game for the camp. The plains along the Popo Agie, besides furnishing these necessary bounties were bordered by picturesque mountain ranges, whose naked bluffs of red sand stone glowed in the morning and evening sun with a mellowness of coloring charming to the eye of the Virginia recruit. The waving grass of the plain, variegated with wild flowers; the clear summer heavens flecked with white clouds that threw soft shadows in passing; the grazing animals scattered about the meadows; the lodges of the Bushways, around which clustered the camp in a motley garb and brilliant coloring; gay laughter, and the murmur of soft Indian voices, all made up a most spirited and enchanting picture, in which the eye of an artist could not fail to delight.

But as the goods were opened the scene grew livelier. All were eager to purchase, most of the trappers to the full amount of their year's wages, and some of them, generally free trappers went in debt to the company to a considerable amount, after spending the value of a year's labor, privation, and danger, at the rate of several hundred dollars in a single day.

The difference between a hired and a free trapper was greatly in favor of the latter. The hired trapper was regularly indentured, and bound not only to hunt and trap for his employers, but also to perform any duties required of him in camp. The Bushway, or the trader, or the partner, (leader of the detachment,) had him under his command, to make him take charge of, load and unload the horses, stand guard, cook, hunt fowl, or, in short, do any and every duty. In return for his tedious service he received an outfit of traps, arms and ammunition, horses, and whatever his service required. Besides his outfit he received no more than three or four hundred dollars a year as wages.

There was also a class of free trappers, who were furnished with their outfit by the company they trapped for, and who were obliged to agree to a certain stipulated price before the hunt commenced. But the genuine free trapper regarded himself as greatly the superior of either of the foregoing classes. He had his own horses and accoutrements, arms and ammunition. He took what route he thought fit, hunted and trapped when and where he chose; traded with the Indians; sold his furs to whoever offered most for them; dressed haughtily, and generally had an Indian wife and half-breed children. They prided themselves on their hardihood and courage; even on their recklessness and profligacy. Each claimed to own the best horse; to have had the wildest adventures; to have made the most narrow escapes; to have killed the greatest number of bears and Indians; to be the greatest favorite with the Indian belles, the greatest consumer of alcohol, and to have the most money to spend; i. e. the largest credit on the books of the company. If his leaders did not believe him, he was ready to run a race with him, to beat him at "old sledge," or to fight, if fighting was preferred,—ready to prove what he affirmed in any manner the company pleased.

If the free trapper had a wife, she moved with the camp to which he attached himself, being furnished with a fine horse, expatriated in the gayest and costliest manner. Her dress was of the finest goods the market afforded, and was suit-

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