LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JOE MEEK

BY MRS. FRANCES FULLER VICTOR

EARLY DAYS IN OREGON.

CHAPTER II.

In the little pool, where the hunter visits his traps in the morning, he is under the necessity of plunging into the water and swimming out to dive for the animal's trap, and his guns should be morning he finds and quill as I very frequently is in the act of diving for traps in the coldest exercise. In passing the care must be taken if the where the beaver is caught will spring the trap. If the stick be placed to right, the hind foot of the beaver will be caught low, his fore foot.

The manner in which the beaver make their dams, and the skill among the wonders of the creation, and should have claimed for him more esteem than he possesses, its instinctive and wonderful. It is doubtful that it knows how to fell a tree by means of an that it can plan the purpose of back dam. It is certain that it can always direction required for the The timber nearest the water is felled in all directions, that grow near the ground, gradually lean towards that on which it takes the proper direction of tation alone. The beaver proceeds to cut up the trunk into lengths of and to arrange them in the order where the dam is to be constructed, securing the work from the means of long poles. The work is commenced is low, and carried on until it has attained the height. And not only is it made of the requisite length and strength, but its shape is suited entirely to the nature of the stream in which it is built. If the water is sluggish the dam is straight; if rapid and turbulent, the latter is curved, and presents the convex front to resist the action of the water.

When the beavers have commenced a dam, its rapid increase in thickness and consequently its strength, is secured, not only by the addition of fresh materials, but by accidental circumstances, accommodating themselves to the growing necessity. At length after a labor of weeks, the water being brought to a considerable head, and dried sticks, by yearly accumulations of rubbish and earth, made to rise high in the new inside ground, and the old beaver-dams become good meadows or thickets of cotton-wood and willow.

The food on which the beaver subsists, is the bark of the young trees in its neighborhood; and when laying up a winter store, the whole community join in the labor of selecting, cutting up, and carrying the strips to the place of deposit under water. They do not, as some writers have stated, collect a large pile of wood for a day's supply of the bark and store it in their lodges for winter consumption; but carry under water with the wood the bark on it.

The lodge of a beaver is generally about six feet in diameter on the inside, and about half as high. They are rounded or somewhat conical on the outside, with very thick walls, and communication with the land by subterranean passages is below the depth at which the ice freezes in winter. Each lodge is made to accommodate several mates, who have their little regard round the walls. The Indian does in his lodge. They are very cleanly, too, and after eating, carry out the sticks that have been stripped, and either throw them in repairing their dam, or throw them into the stream below.

During the summer months the beavers abandon their lodges, and disport themselves about the streams, sometimes going on long journeys; or if not disposed to do so, they are the readiers to fight battles. About the first of August the community returns to its home, and begins preparations for the domestic cares of the long winter months.

An exception to this rule is that of certain individuals, who have no families, make no dam, and never live in lodges, but burrow in subterranean tunnels. They are always found to be males, whom the French trappers call "les parasseux," or idlers; and the American trappers, "bachelors." Several of these are sometimes found in one lodge, which the trappers facetiously denominate "bachelor's hall." They are taken with less difficulty than the more domestic beaver, the trapper is always glad to come upon their habitations.

The trapping season is usually in the spring and autumn. But should the hunters find it necessary sometimes their work in winter, they capture the beaver by breaking on the ice until an aperture is discovered, when the ice is cut away and the opening closed with a net, returning to the bank, they search for the subterranean passage, tracing its connection with the lodge, and by patient watching succeed in catching the beaver on one of its journeys between the water and land. This, however, is often resorted to when the fall trapping has been unsuccessful, or when driven by famine to take the beaver for food.

"Occasionally it happens," says Captain Bonneville, "that several members of a beaver family are trapped in succession. The survivors then become extremely shy, and can scarcely be 'brought to medicine,' to use the trappers phrase for taking bait. In such case, the trapper gives up the use of the bait, and conceals his traps in the usual paths and crossing places of the household. The beaver now being completely "up to traps," approaches them cautiously, and springs them, ingeniously, with a stick. At other times, he turns the traps bottom upwards, by the same means, and occasionally even drags them to the barrier, and conceals them in the mud. The trapper now gives up the contest of ingenuity, and shoulders his traps, marches off, admitting that he has not yet "up to beaver."

Before the camp moved from the banks of the Snake River, the lurking Blackfeet made their appearance openly. It was there that Meek had his first battle with that nation, with whom he subsequently had many a savage conflict. They attacked the camp early in the morning just as the call to turn out had sounded. But they had miscalculated their opportunity: the design having evidently been to stampede the horses and mules, at the hour and moment of their being turned loose to graze. They had been so hasty by a few minutes, so that when they charged on the camp pell-mell, firing a hundred guns at once, to frighten both horses and men, it happened that only a few of the animals had been turned out, and they had not yet got far off. The report of the charge only turned them back to camp.

In an instant's time, Fitzpatrick was mounted, and commanding the men to follow, he galloped at headlong speed round and round the camp, to drive back such of the horses as were straying, or had been frightened from their pickets. In this case, two horses were shot near him; but he escaped and the other horses were saved. The battle was to punish the thieves. They took their position, as usual with Indian fighters, in a narrow ravine, from whence the camp was forced to dislodge them, at a great disadvantage. This they did do, at last, after six hours of hard fighting, in which a few men were wounded, but none killed. The thieves skulked off through the ravine whom they found themselves defeated, and were seen no more until the camp came to the woods which cover the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

But as the camp moved eastward or rather in a northeasterly direction, through the pine forests between Pierre's Hole and the headwaters of the Missouri, it was continually harrassed by Blackfeet, and required a strong guard at night, when these marauders delighted to make an attack. The weather by this time was very cold in the mountains, and chilled the marrow of our young Virginian. The travel was hard, too, and the recruits pretty well worn out.

One cold night, Meek was put on guard on the farther side of the camp, with a veteran named Reese. But neither the veteran nor the youngster could resist the approach of "tired Nature's sweet restorer," and went to sleep at their post of duty. When, during the night, Sublette came out of his tent and gave the challenge—'All's well!' there was no reply. To quote Meek's own language, "Sublette came round the horse-pen swearing and snorting. He was powerful mad. Before he got to where Reese was, he made so much noise that he waked him; and Reese, in a loud whisper called to him, 'Down, Billy! Indians!' Sublette got down on his belly mighty quick. 'What? what?' he asked. 'They were right there when you hollered so,' said Reese.

'Where is Meek?' whispered Sublette.

'He is trying to shoot one,' answered Reese, still in a whisper.

Reese then crawled over to where I war, and told me what had been said and, informed me what to do. In a few minutes I crept cautiously over to Reese's post, when Sublette asked me how many Indians had been thar, and I told him I could not make out their number. In the morning a pair of Indian moccasins was found where Reese saw the Indians, which I had taken care to leave there; and thus our feigned cut story got us the credit of eight men having driven off our recruits—just dues for neglect of duty."

It was some time during the fall hunt in the Pine Woods, on the west side of the Rocky Mountains, that Meek had one of his earliest adventures with a bear. Two comrades, Craig and Nelson, while out trapping, left their horses, and traveling up a creek on foot, in search of beaver, they had not proceeded any great distance, before they came suddenly face to face with a red bear, so suddenly indeed, that the man made a spring for the nearest tree. Craig and Meek ascended a large pine, which chanced to be nearest, and having many limbs, was easy to climb. Nelson happened to take to one of two small trees that grew close together; and the bear, fixing upon him for a victim, undertook to climb after him. With his back against one of these small trees, and his feet against the other his bearship succeeded in reaching a point not far below Nelson's perch, when the tree, pressed with his weight, and down he went, with a shock that fairly shook the ground. But this bad luck only seemed to infuriate the beast, and up he went again, with the same result, each time almost reaching his enemy. With the second turn his was not the least discouraged; but started up the third time, only to be dashed once more to the ground when he had attained a certain height. At the third fall, however, he became thoroughly disgusted with his want of success, and turned and ran at full speed into the woods.

"Then," says Meek, "Craig began to sing, and I began to laugh; but Nelson took to swearing. 'O yes, you can laugh and sing now,' says Nelson; 'but you war split enough when the bear was around.' 'Why, Nelson,' I answered 'you wouldn't have us noisy before that distinguished guest of yours?' But Nelson damned the wild beast, and I laughed, and said he didn't seem wild a bit. That's the way we hector each other in the mountains. If a man gets into trouble he is only laughed at; 'let him keep out; let him have better luck,' is what we say."

The country traversed by Sublette in the fall of 1829, was unknown at that period, even to the far companies, they having kept either farther to the south or to the north. Few, if any, white men had passed through it since Lewis and Clarke discovered the headwaters of the Missouri and Snake Rivers, which flow from the opposite sides of the same mountain peaks. Even the toils and hardships of passing over mountains at this season of the year, did not deprive the trapper of the enjoyment of the magnificent scenery the region afforded. Splendid views, however, could not long beguile men who had yet a long journey to accomplish in cold, and surrounded by dangers, before reaching the wintering ground.

In November the camp left Missouri Lake on the east side of the mountains, and crossed over, still northeasterly, on the Gallatin fork of the Missouri River, passing over a very rough and broken country. They were, in fact, still in the midst of mountains, being equally high and rugged. A particular high mountain, being spurs of the great Rocky range, and equally high and rugged. A particularly high mountain lay between them and the main Yellowstone River. This they had just crossed, with great fatigue and difficulty, and were resting the camp and horses for a few days on the river's bank, when the Blackfeet once more attacked them in considerable numbers. Two men were killed in this fight, and the camp thrown into confusion by the suddenness of the alarm. Captain Sublette, however, got off, with most of his men, still pursued by the Indians.

Not so our Joe, who this time was not in luck, but was cut off from camp, alone and had to flee to the high mountains overlooking the Yellowstone. Here was a situation for a nineteen-years old recruit! Knowing that the Blackfeet were on the trail of the camp, it was death to proceed further in that direction. Some other route must be taken to come up with them; the country was entirely unknown to him; the cold severe; his mule, blanket and gun, his only earthly possessions. On the latter he depended for food, but game was scarce; and besides, he thought the sound of his gun would frighten himself, so alone in the wilderness swarming with stealthy foes.

Hiding his mule in a thicket, he ascended to the mountain top to take a view of the country and decide upon his course. And what a scene was that for the miserable boy, whose chance of meeting with his comrades again was small indeed! At his feet rolled the Yellowstone river, coursing away through the great plain to the eastward. To the north his eye follows the windings of the Missouri, as upon a map, but playing at hide-and-seek in amongst the mountains. Looking back, he saw the River Snake stretching its serpentine length through lava plains, far away, to its junction with the Columbia. To the north, and to the south, one white mountain rose above another as far as the eye could reach. What a mighty and magnificent world it seemed, to be alone in! Poor Joe succumbed to the influence of the thought and wept.

Having indulged in this sole remaining luxury of life, Joe picked up his resolution, and decided upon his course. To the south east lay the Crow country, a land of plenty,—as the mountain-man regards plenty,—and there he could at least live; provided the Crows permitted him to do so. Besides he had some hopes of falling in with one of the camps, by taking that course.

Descending the mountain to the hiding place of his mule, by which time it was dark night, hungry and freezing, Joe still could not light a fire, for fear of revealing his whereabouts to the Indians; nor could he remain to perish with cold. Travel he must, and travel he did, going he scarcely knew whither. Looking back upon the terrors and discomforts of that night, the veteran mountaineer yet regards it as about the most miserable one of his life. When day at length broke he had made as well as he could estimate the distance, about thirty miles. Traveling on toward the southeast, he had crossed the Yellowstone river, and still among the mountains, was obliged to abandon his mule and accountrements, retaining only one blanket and his gun. Neither the mule nor himself had broken fast in the last two days. Keeping a southerly course for twenty miles more, over a rough and elevated country, he came on the evening of the third day, upon a band of mountain sheep. With what eagerness did he hasten to kill, cook and eat! Three days of fasting was, for a novice, quite sufficient to provide him with an appetite.

Having eaten voraciously, and being quite over come with fatigue, Joe fell asleep in his blanket, and slumbered deeply until morning. When the morning came biting blasts from the north, that made motion necessary if not pleasant. Refreshed by sleep and food our traveler hastened on upon his solitary way, taking with him what sheep meat he could carry, traversing the same rough and mountains country as before. No incidents nor alarms varied the horrible and monotonous solitude of the wilderness. The very absence of anything to alarm was awful; for the bravest man is wretchedly nervous in the solitary presence of sublime Nature. Even the veteran hunter of the mountains can never entirely divest himself of this feeling of awe, when his single soul comes face to face with God's wonderful and beautiful handiwork.

At the close of the fourth day, Joe made his lonely camp in a deep defile of the mountains, where a little fire and some roasted mutton again comforted his inner and outer man, and another night's sleep still farther refreshed his frame. On the following morning, a very bleak and windy one, having breakfasted on his remaining peice of mutton, being desirous to learn something of the progess he had made, he ascended a low mountain in the neighborhood of his camp—and behold! the whole country beyond was smoking with the vapor from boiling springs, and burning with gasses, issuing from small craters, each of which was emmitting a sharp whisteling sound.

When the first surprise of this astonishing scene had passed, Joe began to admire its effect in an artistic point of view. The morning being clear, with a sharp frost, he thought himself reminded of the city of Pittsburg, as he had beheld it on a winter morning, a couple of years before. This however, related only to to the rising smoke and vapor; for the extent of the volcanic region was immense reaching far out of sight. The general face of the country was smooth and rolling, being a level plain, dotted with cone-shaped mounds. On the summits of these mounds were small craters from four to eight feet in diameter. Interspersed among these, on the level plain, were larger craters, some of them from four to six miles across. Out of these craters issued blue flames and molten brimstone.

For some minutes Joe gazed and wondered. Curious thoughts came into his head, about hell and the day of doom. With that natural tendency to reckless gayety and humorous absurdities which some temperaments are sensible of in times of great excitement, he began to soliloquise. Said he, to himself, "I have been told the sun would be blown out, and the earth burnt up. If this infernal wind keeps up, I shouldn't be surprised if the sun war blown out. If the earth is not burning up over thar, then it is that place the old Methodist preacher used to threaten me with. Any way it suits me to go and see what it's like."

On descending to the plain described, the earth was found to have a hollow sound, and seemed threatening to break through. But Joe found the warmth of the place most delightful, after the freezing cold of the mountains, and remarked to himself again, that "if it war hell, it war a more agreeable climate than he had been in for some time."

He had thought the country entirely desolate, as not a living creature had been seen in the vicinity; but while he stood gazing about him in curious amazement, he was startled by the report of two guns, followed by the Indian yell. While making rapid preparations for defense and flight, if either or both should be necessary, a familiar voice greeted him with the exclamation, "It is old Joe!" When the adjective "old" is applied to one of Meek's age at that time, it is generally understood to be a term of endearment. "My feelings you may imagine," says the "old Uncle Joe" of the present time, in recalling the adventure.

Being joined by these two associates, who had been looking for him, our traveler, no longer simply a raw recruit, but a hero of wonderful adventures, as well as the rest of the men, proceeded with them to camp, which they overtook the third day, attempting to cross the high mountains between the Yellowstone and the Bighorn Rivers. If Meek had seen hard times in the mountains alone, he did not find them much improved in camp. The snow was so deep that the men had to keep in advance, and break the road for the animals; and to make their condition still more trying, there were no provisions in camp, or any prospect of plenty, for men or animals, until they should reach the buffalo country beyond the mountains.

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