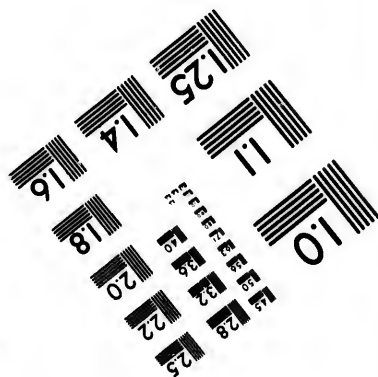
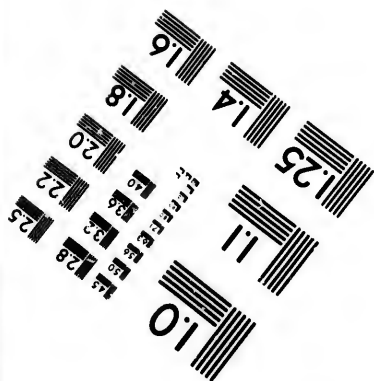
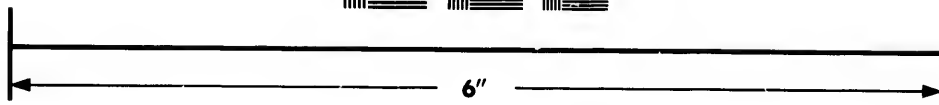
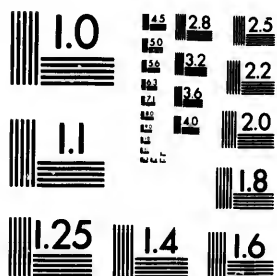


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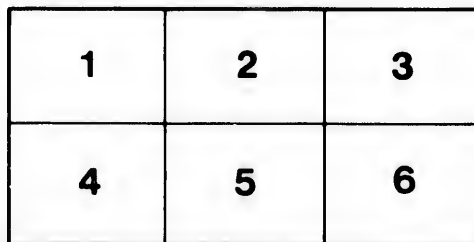
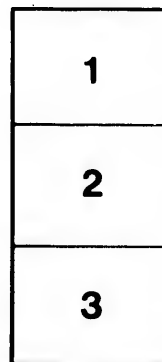
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Romance of the Fur Trade.

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ROMANCE OF THE FUR TRADE: THE MOUNTAIN MEN.

THE few survivors of the Red men who once ranged the territories of the Union from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Florida have been relegated to the reserves; but the mountain men, who were their inveterate enemies, are a vanished race. Those dare-devils, who feared neither God nor man, nor grizzlies, nevertheless did good work in their day and generation. They were the scouts who pushed ahead into the enemy's country, preceding the Western woodsmen and New England farmers, the hardy pioneers of advancing civilisation. Purveyors of the fur marts, it was their fortunate lot to combine business with recreation. They hunted and trapped for a livelihood, and fought for the sheer fun of it, as an Irishman at a wake, as much as in self-defence. Devoted to a life of perilous adventure, never daunted by the terrible privations on which they reckoned, they could indulge their somewhat eccentric tastes to the full. After all, they only carried to an extreme the passion which tempts delicately nurtured English sportsmen to stalk the *Ovis poli* of the Pamirs or to go tiger-shooting in the pestilential jungles of the Terai. If these men had gone westward from the settlements, not one in a hundred ever returned, and few of them ever slept in the rudest of cemeteries. Probably nineteen in twenty came to violent ends: their bones were left to bleach in the mountains,

or their scalps were hung in triumph to an Indian tent-pole. They took their revenge in full, and though they were but scattered handfuls compared to the hordes of the Indian braves, the balance stood on the credit-side of their account. On the whole, they rather preferred "raising hair" to trapping beaver, though the one meant profit and the other was mere pleasure. It was the pleasure that came of the spirit of rough chivalry and the rare conviction of a duty fulfilled. For the one redeeming quality of these reckless mountaineers, beyond the indomitable pluck which was their common characteristic, was the strong bond of brotherhood. If a man were known to have deserted a comrade, he was doomed to indelible disgrace. It was understood, of course, that in a surprise and a *saave qui peut*, it was a case for the moment of each man for himself. They rallied afterwards to take their revenge. For besides the immemorial quarrel between the white man and the red, every trapper had sundry personal blood-feuds on his hands. Poor Bill or Rube had gone under in such and such circumstances. Wall! so many of the red skunks were bound to be rubbed out. The battered stock of the veteran's rifle was scored with notches, each indicating a death.

The Red Indians were not a pious race and practised few of the Christian virtues, but at

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least they had a religion of a sort. They believed in the Great Spirit: they sought to propitiate malignant powers and the destructive forces of the elements. The trapper, as a rule, was absolutely irreligious and godless. The wildest storm that ever broke only suggested to him the necessity of kindling the camp-fire in some shelter where it was possible to keep it in, and the propriety of arranging his buffalo robe so that the water would easily run off. It is safe to say that before the New Englanders and the Kentucky or Ohio housewives plodded out into the prairies behind sluggish ox-teams, no Bible had ever been seen beyond the Mississippi; and a missionary would have made easier impression on a Jew or Chinnee than on those children of the wilderness, absorbed in their devotion to materialism. But though careless or unconscious of celestial influences, they were not unsusceptible to the tender passion. They were always marrying in mountain fashion and getting divorced. Sometimes the squaws would be swapped for dollars. The confirmed celibates were very few. Many of the mountaineers had had as many wives as any Mormon elder; but they took the ladies in succession in place of simultaneously. Sometimes these fleeting unions had a dash of romance in them, as when an inflammable mountain boy was fired by the charms of some olive-complexioned beauty at a fandango, when he had been raiding down in New Mexico. More often, in the Wild West, as in Belgravia, practical con-

siderations suggested the match, and the Indian squaw was a serviceable drudge who cooked the deer-meat and mended the moccasins. Apropos to broided moccasins, some of the trappers were dandies in their way. They must have carried razors, for they were clean-shaven; but the long hair that fell in luxuriance over their shoulders was carefully anointed with bear's-grease and buffalomarow. No wonder those flowing love-locks were tempting trophies for the Indians. Their ordinary wear was buckskin, and leggings often fringed with scalps; but when off duty and returning from a successful trip, they got themselves up in the height of sporting finery. There was the cap of foxskin or beaverpelt, with the tail dangling behind the ear; the embroidered shirt of softly dressed deerskin; the fantastically fringed leggings and the ornamented moccasins. But unless they had a rare run of luck with the cards, the gay gala suit was sure soon to change owners. For all, without exception, were inveterate gamblers, and their idea of a happy holiday was to get quickly rid of their gains at poker or euchre. The camps and posts, where they mustered after the hunts, were infested by traders, who grew bloated as spiders, while their customers remained lean. No mountain man ever laid on flesh or went out of condition by indulging in a prolonged period of good living. Needless to say, they all drank deep; yet they appreciated coffee even more than whisky, and coffee, powder, and villanous

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spirits changed hands through the trading at exorbitant prices. Between gambling and other dissipation they were speedily cleaned out, and had either to engage themselves anew to some trading company or borrow an outfit for the next free expedition on usurious terms. Yet, on second thoughts, considering the risks they ran, no terms could well be deemed excessive. So far as we remember, the only member of the fraternity who retired to die peaceably with a competence was the celebrated Kit Carson. For Bent, who made his pile, went under in the massacre at Taos. And Kit, who was as famous a guide as he was a fighter, was a man of altogether exceptional genius, and of still more exceptional strength of will. For few could refuse to drink or gamble when the discourtesy was taken as the challenge to a duel.

These trappers were the last men to be addicted to seeing visions or dreaming dreams. But could any one of them have projected his spirit into the future, seeking to emulate the wizards or medicine-men of the Sioux or Blackfeet, he would assuredly, in his own emphatic language, have declared that hell was full of such doings. What trapper of fifty years ago could have imagined a time when the countless herds of the buffalo would be exterminated; when the Indians who had subsisted on them would have followed in their tracks, transferring the chase to their happy hunting-grounds; when the

broad prairies between the Mississippi and the Black Hills would be waving in expanses of golden grain; when the shriek of the engine would replace the scream of the eagle in the cañons of the Rockies spanned by girder bridges; and when the mountain torrents of Nevada or Idaho would be dammed to drive stamping machinery among the shafts and adits of busy mining townships? The trappers have gone, and have been succeeded in their turn by gold-seekers, road agents, and cowboys almost as lawless. Were they to come back, they would be in a changed and uncongenial world; a world in which the liberty of the free and independent hunter would be perpetually in conflict with obnoxious and newfangled laws; a world where the wiping out of a red varmint, far from being as much a matter of merit as setting the heel on a rattlesnake's head, would lead to a trial that might end in a halter; a world where the friendly knife-thrust that clenched a heated argument might mean penal seclusion on the silent system. Nevertheless they would chiefly have themselves to thank, for they mainly contributed to changes they would have deplored.

We have told in a former article¹ how the fur trade of the North had been virtually monopolised by the rival Canadian Companies, till Astor pushed his enterprise by land and sea to the headquarters he established on the Columbia estuary. In the war between

¹ See 'Blackwood's Magazine' for October 1898.

Britain and America Fort Astor passed into English hands, and changed its name to Fort George. The North-West Company had raced him to his goal, and remained after his ejection to reap the fruits of his labours. They did not enjoy the lucrative monopoly for long. The Hudson Bay Company followed fast on their heels, and, after some years of ruinous competition, the impoverished partners of the North-West sued for peace, and the associations were amalgamated. The predominant partner gave the name to the new society; but though it traded under the title of Hudson Bay, it is noteworthy that its agents were always known to the mountain men as the North-Westerns. The Hudson Bayers were foreigners from the Far North; the North-Westerns were neighbours, so to speak, who had latterly enlisted their services. For the Hudson Bay Company had originally traded in regions studded with lakes or inland seas, and traversed in every direction by water-channels. Consequently their wares had been transported by boats, and for the most part their *employés* were Canadian *voyageurs*. These men were familiar with the paddle, and prided themselves on their skill in navigating broken water or shooting the rapids. But they never pretended to readiness with the rifle, and were little to be relied upon in a scrimmage with the savages. The North-Westerns, in extending their ventures to the south of the Great Lakes and the west of the Mississippi, struck

into regions where boats were to be abandoned, and where their mounted parties, surrounded by dangers and threatened by surprises, must depend entirely on themselves. Hence they had to engage men of a very different stamp, and recruits were to be found in abundance among the restless spirits of the frontier.

Henry of the Missouri Company had crossed the Rockies in 1808, and we have described the frightful sufferings and hardships endured by Astor's overland expedition to the mouth of the Columbia. When Astor's enterprise had come to grief, the experiences of his pioneering parties, notwithstanding the profitable trade they had opened, acted rather as a deterrent than as encouragement. The superstitions which had enhanced the terrors of the Rockies may have been dispelled, but the material obstacles seemed more formidable than before. For a dozen of years the American fur-traders confined their operations to the Eastern watershed; nor had they any immediate inducement to go farther. Their daring hunters were the first to explore the head waters of the Missouri, the Yellowstone, and the shallow Platte, with the innumerable tributaries of the streams flowing towards the Mississippi. It was the golden age of the trapper: he had dollars for the gathering, and as to profusion of game, he was in a paradise. Countless buffalo swarmed on the plains in the periodical migrations; he gorged himself on the choicest fresh meat when

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the hunts were in full swing, and jerked strips of the flesh for future use. When the buffalo failed, there were antelope on the prairie, and black- or white-tailed deer in every wooded bottom. But the big game only supplied his larder, for he did not trouble himself to dress the bulky buffalo robes which afterwards became a profitable article of trade. His business was the trapping of the beaver, and in these days each beaver-plew of full-grown animal or "kitten" fetched six to eight dollars overhead. The beavers had multiplied undisturbed from time immemorial; indeed some of the Red men who believed in transmigration of souls claimed kindred with those solemn amphibious architects. Their dams were to be seen in every rivulet; they left their "sign" on the bank of each sandy creek; in some places there were populous settlements beneath lakes of their own formation. The beavers were plentiful enough; the trouble was to trap them. And nothing gives a better idea of the imperturbable coolness of the trappers. They had patiently to puzzle out the "sign," and note the spot where the animal took to treading the shallows. There the trap was to be set, and with every sort of deliberate precaution. No animal is more warily sagacious; his suspicion is instinctive, and his keenness of scent almost preternatural. Details had to be carefully attended to; and haste or carelessness was fatal to success. Yet all the time there was every chance that the trap-

per was being stalked by skulking enemies. If he were not transfixed when bending over his work by an arrow from an ambush, there was the probability that the trap for the beaver might prove a snare for himself. When he came back next morning to see what his luck was, the enemy might be lying in wait to take him unawares.

The mystery is how any one of these men escaped. The country to the west of the Rockies was in possession of warlike tribes, who naturally resented intrusion on their hunting-grounds. Sioux, Blackfeet, and the sneaking Crows, who had an exceptional reputation as thieves and horse-stealers, were always at feud among themselves, and consequently ever on the alert. They threw out mounted pickets in all directions from their villages and encampments, whose business it was to observe and report any signs of hostile movement. A thread of smoke seen in the distance attracted attention at once, and a startled deer or a fluttered water-fowl was enough to invite close investigation. It was impossible that a troop of white men, careless about the trail they left, which indeed they could in no case cover, should elude observation. The rather that, while the Indians smothered their fires, or dispensed with them altogether, when within possible touch of an enemy, the trappers would bivouac round a blazing pile when fuel in sufficient quantity was forthcoming. The pillar of fiery cloud flashing far and

near was a sort of contemptuous challenge to the Redskins to come on. It seldom pleased them to come on in these circumstances. The Indian had a superstition against attacks in the dark. Moreover, he knew that the whites kept their eyes skinned. The men lay around with feet radiating to the fire, each with his rifle ready to his hand. A guard was told off to look after the horses, and sentinels were regularly, though irregularly, set. For it need hardly be said they did not stand at attention to be shot at, or pace to and fro with disciplined precision. They were anywhere or everywhere: they were lying flat on their bellies, with eyes peering keenly out into the darkness; or they were crawling and taking advantage of each scrap of cover, pausing from time to time to listen with ears pricked like the coyote's. The first intimation the prowling marauder might have of their presence would probably be the gunshot that heralded a bullet in the body. If anything could screw up the Indians' courage to a nocturnal onset, it was the irresistible temptation of a haul of horse-flesh. The animals were secured and picketed somewhat apart from the fire and the main body; and if there were an attack, it was sure to be delivered in storm or rain and fitful moonlight, when the howling of the wind drowned other sounds, and the rain might have disarmed the vigilance of the guard or soaked the priming of the rifles. Then the slumbering camp was roused by the

war-whoop; the picket-ropes were cut, the beasts were stunned, and the baffled hunters were left to go afoot. Such mishaps were at first exceptional: when they did happen, the assailants were generally out of temper and reckless on returning discomfited from some unsuccessful raid. Besides, the trappers were for the most part accompanied by traders, and the Indians let the cavalcade go by as much from policy as from prudence. They had no desire to scare away the men who brought them powder and fire-water for barter. But when those flying expeditions began to cross the mountains, and to open markets on the Pacific slope, the tribes who held the passes saw matters in a different light. Now that there was competition, it struck them it was cheaper to plunder the caravan than to trade with it, and, ambushed among the rocks of gorges and cañons, they could shoot down their embarrassed victims with small personal risk. It was only after a few surprises of the kind that the partisans, as they were called, who led the trapping bands, began to learn some rude principles of military strategy. They threw out advance-guards, they crowned the heights with scouts, and threaded the defiles in relative security.

But it was when the band broke up, and the members were detached to hunt in couples, that the danger and romance of desperate adventure really began. Often absolutely ignorant of the country, armed only with the long single barrel and a knife, bound to bring back a

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certain quantity of fur or to be beggared and discredited, they were left entirely to their own devices. Weighted with traps and ammunition, they went mounted, and had led horses or pack-mules to carry their peltries. Their animals were of course an encumbrance and additional source of danger. They had sometimes to pick their way among precipices where the mountain sheep could scarcely find a footing, and to forage as they could on stony wastes, which towards winter were buried deep in the snow-drifts. If the horses came to grief the furs must be abandoned, and all the trapper's sufferings were bootless. Had he gone afoot he might have skulked in the thickets and hoped to elude the savages. With a train of beasts his trail was conspicuous, and we repeat that it is a matter of marvel how any of those adventurers escaped.

Even had those regions been unpeopled, the rugged character of the country and the cruel severity of the winters would have made existence impossible to ordinary men. The trappers have left no written reminiscences, but one who shared their perils as an amateur has described a scene he witnessed, in an interlude between storms of snow and sleet, when crossing the high dividing ridge between the valleys of the Rio del Norte and the Arkansas. He had picked himself up after being fairly knocked off his feet by a blast that met him on the crest. He had scrambled up, leading his horse, with the pack-mules trailing behind:—

“The view was wild and dismal in the extreme. Looking back, the whole country was covered with a thick carpet of snow, but eastward it was seen only in patches here and there. Before me lay the main chain of the Rocky Mountains, Pike's Peak lifting its head far above the rest. . . . Rugged peaks and ridges, snow-clad and covered with pine, and deep gorges filled with broken rocks, everywhere met the eye. To the eastward the mountains gradually smoothed away into detached spurs and broken spurs, until they met the vast prairies, which stretched far as the eye could reach, and far beyond,—a sea of seeming barrenness, vast and dismal. A hurricane of wind was blowing at the time, and clouds of dust swept along the sandy prairies like the smoke of a million bonfires. On the mountain-top it roared and raved through the pines, filling the air with snow and broken branches, and piling it in huge drifts against the trees. The perfect solitude of this vast wildness was appalling. . . . On all sides of me, broken ridges and chasms and ravines, with masses of piled-up rock and uprooted trees, with clouds of drifting snow flying through the air, and the hurricane's roar battling through the forest at my feet, added to the wildness of the scene, which was unrelieved by the slightest vestige of animal or human life.”

The allusion to the absence of animal life is suggestive. The trapper and the trader—who had loaded up, perhaps, with a little maize—lived mainly by their guns. Before such a storm as is described, the game would desert a district and shift to more sheltered retreats. Then it was a case of absolute starvation, unless the wanderer had an unexpected stroke of luck. We may imagine the solitary wayfarer staggering forward with failing strength, his head bowed to the blast which pierced his very marrow, ravenous with hunger,

and knowing all the time that it was doubtful whether he would have another meal on earth. Naturally he had learned to eat anything. When even a Digger Indian could have found no roots, for the plants and the beetles were buried deep in the snow, he had supported nature for days on the carrion of the coyote or the foul flesh of the vulture. The rattle of the rattlesnake had been music in his ears, for that was comparatively a dainty, if he could only find fuel to cook it. However, he was never fastidious, and was content to devour it raw. Perhaps the nerves were never more sorely tried than when he sighted a black-tailed buck, or an outlying buffalo bull—some venerable patriarch worn to skin and bone, feeble but yet more vigorous than himself. Life and the square meal that would make him forget his troubles were hanging on the stalk and shot. His nerves might be good, but his fingers were frozen, and his arms shook involuntarily with the cold. If the bullet flew wide, as was more than likely, philosophy or fatalism came to his help, and he still plodded doggedly onward. For his motto was, "Never say die!" and he knew nothing of despair. Or if he ever resigned himself to the inevitable, it was when caught in a blizzard on the plains. The dangers of mountain travel were bad—when he might have to take a perpendicular plunge into a cañon bottom in the darkness, with the chance of bringing a landslip or a snow avalanche along with him. But

the passage of a broad prairie in doubtful weather was like crossing the Jornada del Muerto in New Mexico, where there is not one drop of water in sixty miles of desert. If the blizzard broke, there was no shelter unless he could reach some clump of cotton-wood in a ravine. When the darkening scowl of the heavens brought premature night, he drifted aimlessly without guidance of any kind, for his brain was dazed and his instincts failed him. When he went through the mockery of camping, more from force of habit than anything else, to turn in fireless and supperless under his buffalo robe, it was by a miracle of hardihood he woke at all, to extricate himself from the drifts of snow and hailstones. But in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he dropped off into the sleep of death.

It was in 1822 that General Ashley, an enterprising Missourian, resolved to follow up the enterprise of Astor, and organize fur-hunting expeditions beyond the Rockies. Availing himself of the experience of Mr Henry, he established a post on the upper waters of the Yellowstone, whence his trappers pushed on to the Colorado of the West. His example animated others, and in a very few years there was keen competition among American adventurers on the Pacific slopes. They were encouraged by the fact that Ashley rapidly made a modest fortune. He sold his interest, and was succeeded by Sublette, renowned in frontier trading and fighting, who may

he said to have founded the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. The new association was not long without a rival, for its success brought the old America Fur Company into the field again. There was no lack of able partners to direct the trading operations, and of daring partisans to head their bands. Very soon, as they pushed westward down the Columbia, they came in contact with the agents of the Hudson Bay Company; and smaller syndicates from time to time tried their fortunes in that boundless field of adventure. It was a good time for the roving mountain men, always ready to hire themselves to the highest bidder, and seldom overscrupulous as to keeping their engagements. The partners, on whose dash and resource depended their Company's dividends, prided themselves as much on their craft as their courage. All methods which meant money-making were regarded as legitimate. They had learned their lessons of subtlety in the school of the Red men. It was natural that they should race for the best hunting and trading grounds, and many a clever trick was devised to steal a march upon watchful competitors. Two parties would meet around adjacent camp-fires, and, keeping up a friendly carouse into the small hours, exchange all manner of civilities. One of them, in the meantime, would be loading up the pack-mules, and would have marched many miles while the others were still slumbering. The free trappers who had provisionally at-

tached themselves to one side were lured to desertion by bribes and promises. Occasionally, rather than share prospective gains, one band would renounce the season's harvest, and lead another following jealously on their trail into some wilderness where furs were scarce, and both were confronted with starvation.

There was ample scope for that crafty strategy. On the Atlantic side of the mountains the trade was conducted with a certain system. It radiated from posts which were the local headquarters—whither the *employés* repaired with the products of the hunt, and where the Indians yearly brought their furs for barter. At the post of a Company there would be no competition, and unless excess in fiery spirits bred a riot, everything went off tolerably smoothly. But there were no regular forts between the Rockies and the Pacific, except the southerly outposts of the Hudson Bay Company; the natives were thievish, but not unfriendly on the whole, and they were widely scattered. There were no consolidated tribes of well-armed warriors like Sioux or Blackfeet. They seldom attacked a well-equipped party, though the lives of the trappers who went singly or in pairs were none the safer on that account. So it was the custom for each Company to arrange a rendezvous in the summer months, where a market was opened for the Indians in the vicinity. As much mystery as might be was made of the place of meeting;

but it was impossible to keep the secret when the object was to advertise. The market-stance in the wilderness was free to all comers; tents and wigwams would spring up like mushrooms, and rival bands would make their unwelcome appearance. The grand object was to be first on the ground, and to wheedle the aborigines out of their furs before prices ran up with competition. These Indians were shrewd hands at a bargain. Tempted as they were by the treasures displayed, they could have held on indefinitely in hope of better terms. But the sight and smell of the fire-water were irresistible, and when the kegs were broached the peltries were given away. There was little to be picked up by belated arrivals; they had but the choice of carrying back their goods or of caching them. Consequently, as we said, all devices were resorted to, and the rival partisans stuck at nothing.

Two of the most picturesque of American writers have described the methods and habits of those mountain men. Washington Irving, in 'The Adventures of Captain Bonneville,' goes into details, personally gathered from the captain's fresh recollections, of the desperate scramble of the Companies on the Pacific side. Years afterwards Parkman, the great historian of the French in Canada, went as a mere lad "on the Oregon trail," sharing the dangers and hardships of roving bands of the Indians, by way of strengthening a delicate constitution. Irving met Bonneville at dinner-tables in

New York, and industriously pumped the veteran explorer, who was as willing to talk as Irving was to listen. Bonneville, who had served previously in the frontier fighting, engaged with the American Fur Company. As to outfit and all the arrangements, he seems to have been given a free hand. It was he who originated the bold idea of taking waggons across the plains and the hills. Hitherto all goods had been carried on pack-saddles. Those waggons of his in no way resembled the ponderous "prairie schooners," which afterwards took to the Santa Fé trail, carrying valuable cargoes to the New Mexican markets, and paving the way for American annexation. Still less were they modelled on the waggon of South Africa, dragged by a score or so of sluggish oxen, which tumbles to pieces with a capsize, and is as easily put together again. They were light, and built of tough hickory, and were drawn by a four-in-hand of mules or horses. Assuming that they could scale the passes and thread the rocky gorges, the old soldier's idea was evidently admirable. He could load up heavily with goods and supplies. Besides, he took an ambulant fort along with him, for when his waggons were formed up in a square, enclosing a hundred rifles more or less reliable, the boldest chief of Sioux or Blackfeet would shrink from breaking his teeth on the intrenchment. On dark nights and when the Indians were on the prowl, the animals were picketed under cover of the guns. His plan worked

well upon the whole, but the journey was a wonderful record of resolute struggles with difficulties. On the prairies, flooded by rain, the wheels stuck in the mud, and the mules were well-nigh strained to pieces. Then the weather changed, and in the intense heat the woodwork shrank and the tyres 'dropped off. Across the Black Hills and up the Rocky slopes he threaded his way in a labyrinth of riverbeds, among rocks fallen from above, and boulders brought down by the torrents. But it was only on the summit of the mountains that the waggons were abandoned; for if the ascent had been dangerous, the descent was impossible. Then the goods were transferred to the backs of the unharnessed teams, and the train stumbled downwards in single file.

The inhospitable wilds had been solitary enough, and yet not altogether so solitary as he would have desired. He was overtaken by bands of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, of other associations, and by parties of free-trappers, all pressing forward to the general goal, though as to exact destinations all would be guided by circumstances. Among the men with whose experience and ingenuity he had to contend were names of renown in the romance of the fur trade—Sublette and Fitzpatrick, for example—who were never daunted by danger, and seldom at the end of their resources. The great thing was to arrange an efficient intelligence department, with capable scouts to report the movements of other adventurers. Not that

the rivals ever actually came to blows, as in the bloody feuds between Hudson Bayers and North - Westers. Sometimes, indeed, parties would unite in a common peril, and there is an animated account of storming a natural stronghold, where a swampy covert was held in force by a body of Blackfeet. Sometimes a partisan chief, to secure the season's trade, would risk an almost desperate enterprise, as when Fitzpatrick rode out alone to look for a lagging convoy, was tracked and followed up by the Indians, to reappear after days of lurking in the mountains, when he had been given up for dead. In avoiding pursuit he had nearly perished of cold and hunger, for he dared neither discharge his rifle nor kindle a fire. That, indeed, was a common experience when a man was lying close, with the scalp-hunters on his trail. But even at headquarters, in a winter camp, short commons might be confidently reckoned with. The fall of the snow suspended trapping; the passes were blocked and the waters frozen. Bonneville camped his first season on the banks of the Salmon River, where game and fish are abundant in the summer, but where even the natives are invariably in straits before spring raises the blockade. His party soon felt the pressure of hunger, and neither Nez Percés nor Flatheads were in a position to help them. Yet others of the band were worse off than himself, for a party of his belated trappers were unaccounted for. There is nothing more thrilling in the sensational narrative than

the story of suffering and stern endurance when he went out with a search expedition. Savages were manœuvring to cut them off, and every night, exhausted as they were, they had to improvise a rude breastwork of fallen trees and vegetable rubbish. When the provisions finally gave out they were saved almost by a miracle, driving some half-starved buffalo on to the ice, where they slipped, fell, and were slaughtered. They could scarcely make head against the blasts of icy wind, yet that wind proved their salvation, for their lives depended on their horses, and the only grazing the poor animals could find was where some scrap of coarse pasturage had been swept by the blizzard. But those brave fellows felt amply rewarded for their sufferings when they happily lighted on the missing men. Bonneville returned to civilisation after a three years' absence. He seems to have come back with the conviction that beyond certain limits it was hopeless to contend with the Hudson Bay Company. Organisation, discipline, ample capital, above all, established posts, and an effective chain of communications with Canada, gave the great association an unassailable superiority.

Parkman went "on the Oregon trail" in 1846. In a preface to the fourth edition, published nearly thirty years afterwards, he says, "The mountain trapper is no more, and the grim roinance of his wild, hard life is a memory of the past." Even in 1846 the survivors of the race had been

changing their habits, and, like the stage-coachman when run off their boxes by the rail, had been betaking themselves to other pursuits more or less congenial. The hatters of St James's and the Rue St Honoré had taken to using silk instead of beaver. The United States had been garrisoning forts in the wilderness, and many of the mountain boys attached themselves to these as hunters, guides, and scouts. In rare cases they had softened their manners without losing anything of their dash and courage. Parkman placed himself in the hands of Henry Châtillon, famous among frontier men for his shooting and scouting. He found him a staunch comrade, a chivalrous gentleman, and a devoted husband and father to boot, though he had sought a wife in a wigwam. But the old types of rugged and undaunted brutality were by no means extinct—men who were doggedly fearless because absolutely unimaginative. Adroit tacticians, they were careless of strategy; they scanned the ground at their feet for "sign" and never looked abroad. Parkman met two of them at Fort Laramie, and their conduct was so characteristic of the old breed that it is worth noting. The Arapahoes having refused to give up a murderer, had gone out on the war-path and were circumventing the tort. Each outlet was watched by eager eyes, and the smoke from the Indian fires went up from all directions. But a couple of trappers—Roulean and Seraphin—had arranged for a start, and would not be

deterred. Vain were the warnings of friendly Indians; they laughed at the danger and went on with their preparations. Parkman paints them to the life:—

“Seraphin was a tall, powerful fellow, with a sullen and sinister countenance. His rifle had very probably drawn other blood than that of buffalo or Indians. Rouleau had a broad, ruddy face, marked with as few traces of thought or care as a child’s. His figure was square and strong, but the first joints of both his feet were frozen off, and his horse had lately thrown and trampled on him, by which he was severely injured in the chest. But nothing could subdue his gaiety, and he had an unlucky partiality for squaws. . . . Like other trappers, his life was one of contrast and variety; but when once in pursuit of the beaver, he was involved in extreme privations and perils. Hand and foot, eye and ear, must be always alert. Frequently he must content himself with devouring his evening meal uncooked, lest the light of his fire should attract some wandering Indian; and sometimes, having made the rude repast, he must leave his fire still blazing, and withdraw to a distance, under cover of the darkness, that his disappointed enemy, drawn thither by the light, may find his victim gone, and be unable to trace his footsteps in the gloom. This is the life led by scores of trappers in the Rocky Mountains. I once met a man whose breast was marked with the scars of six bullets and arrows, one of his arms broken by a shot, and one of his knees shattered; yet still, with the mettle of New England, he continued to follow his perilous calling.”

Rouleau and Seraphin would go out, and “that,” says Parkman, “was the last I saw of them.” His volume has a great charm, as he eloquently describes from personal observation all that Irving had gathered from Bonneville’s report.

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He paints the red braves in their white buffalo robes, with their gaily bedizened squaws, as they stalked about the precincts of the forts; he blends sentiment with romance, as he recalls his impressions of blizzards and thunderstorms, and of lonely night quarters, when bivouacking on the plains, serenaded by owls and coyotes. He passed the mountains in company of a band of Sioux warriors, and “one morning’s march was not to be forgotten. It led us through a sublime waste, a wilderness of mountains and pine-forests, over which the spirit of loneliness and silence seemed brooding. Above and below, little could be seen but the same dark green foliage. It overspread the valleys and enveloped the mountains, from the black rocks that crowned their summits to the streams that circled round their bases.” Such vivid sketches present us with the surroundings in which the trapper passed his existence. And we see him at home—if he had a home—in his hours of idleness at St Louis, when getting rid of his dollars or looking out for a new engagement. There he was cock of the walk in the motley multitude, walking arsenals of rifle, pistol, and bowie-knife, the floating population of that base of operations for prairie traders and pioneers of agriculture. He had his favourite houses of call among the drinking and gambling saloons, where night and day, over the decks of cards, he fraternised or quarrelled in chronic intoxication. There have been more

refined societies, but none more exclusive, for the outsider would be a bold man who dared intrude upon the unhallowed revels.

If St Louis was the prairie capital, Independence sprang up, some sixty miles to the westward, as St Louis's prairie port. Thence trains of the heavy waggons, called prairie schooners, carried on the lucrative trade opened up with the Mexican settlements. They ran extraordinary risks, and required strong convoys. The country was perpetually raided by Indians, who had safe retreats in the western mountains. As the valuable cargoes were passing in transit, the Indians had no inducement to let them go by. They missed no opportunity of making captures, and massacres were of frequent occurrence. Moreover, capable guides were indispensable, for there were no regular tracks across the stony deserts, and in the dry season water was scarce. The waggons were in charge of Missouri teamsters, stout men of their hands, but unskilled as children in prairie navigation and frontier fighting. So, just when the trapping business had gone to the bad, the trappers came into request as hunters and guards to the caravans. The services of such a man as Kit Carson were invaluable; he made money fast, and had the wisdom to invest it. Another famous band of brothers took to speculating as traders and employers of trappers with great success. William, familiarly known as Bill Bent, gave his name to two forts he built on the Arkansas,

650 miles west of Leavenworth in Kansas. There he ruled as a sort of warden of the marches, and those outworks of civilisation, resorted to by mountain men and Indians, were resting-places where the caravans broke their journeys. Parkman went as far south in the course of his wanderings. He gives a graphic idea of the rude manner of living, and of the utter absence of discipline and precautions in what was regarded as an irregular military post. In fact, the occupants trusted to their rifles, their scouts, and their luck. "The Pueblo was a wretched species of fort of most primitive construction." The slender stockades were breached or broken down, and the gate dangled loosely on its wooden hinges. "We saw the large Santa Fé waggons standing together. . . . Richard conducted us to the state apartment, a small mud room. . . . There were no chairs, but instead of them a number of chests and boxes ranged round the walls." Other writers have described the scenes there. When the trappers were away on their hunts it was often dull enough. When they rallied for the autumn rendezvous there was incessant gambling, brawling, and fighting. In the palmy days, when "beaver was up," they would sometimes bring in a thousand dollars' worth of peltries. They never carried away a cent—all had passed into the hands of the traders. Not a few of those trapping worthies were illustrious in their generation, and have left their memorials on the Western maps,

standing sponsors to streams, bluffs, and cañons. Perhaps the most celebrated of those who had little more than the instinct of the sagacious brute was old Bill Williams. As the veteran mountaineer, he was painted to the life in Ruxton's 'Far West.' Familiar with every rood of ground, he could have threaded any of the passes blindfold. A misanthrope, he preferred to hunt alone; yet when the fancy took him to head a party, his followers confided themselves blindly to his guidance. Bill in his younger days had been a Methodist preacher in Missouri; latterly he believed firmly in the transmigration of souls. After innumerable, almost miraculous escapes, the pitcher was broken that had gone so often to the well, and the old man went under. An even more remarkable career was that of Rube Stevens. Rube's family had been massacred by Indians. They spared the boy, but cut out his tongue. He escaped to swear undying vengeance, and well he kept his vow. On one occasion, in a fight, three against thirty, after killing the chief of the savages in a desperaterough-and-tumble grapple, Rube fell into their hands. Tied to a pine-stem and confronted by a gigantic Indian with a scalp-

ing-knife, his friends, who were looking on helplessly from their lurking-place, could not detect a quiver in his muscles. Of similar stuff were Uncle John Smith, Uncle Dick Wooton, Kit Carson, and many another. They played their lives as they staked their dollars, and it was their pride not to flinch when the game went against them. The chief characteristic of the trapper was the iron nerve that never failed, the presence of mind that never deserted him. Such as he was, he was always equal to himself, and was at his best in moments of imminent peril. What gave him his superiority over the Indian was his swift determination in extreme difficulties, which seemed indeed to sharpen his faculties to the utmost. Absolutely indifferent to paralysing superstitions, he doubled the Indian sagacity and craft, with infinitely greater dash and daring. He was prompt to seize opportunities which the Red braves let slip. Embodying the hardihood and dauntless perseverance of the American character, these trappers constituted themselves into a faculty of State surveyors, and were the veritable makers of the empire of the West. The last of them had gone some thirty years ago, having pioneered the way for the gold-seekers and the ranchers.

