

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING.

A STORY OF NEBRASKA.

The low sun had blazed all day in a cloudless sky, and all day no sound had broken the silence of the primitive wilderness, save the rustling of a rabbit now and then in the dry grass or the distant cawing of crows in the trees that fringed the creek, or flapping their way to the wooded island under the hill. The sun was drawing toward the western horizon, where the yellow prairie hills stretched, roll after roll, to the limit of vision, and the mild southern breeze began to take on a chill. It was the 24th of November, 1842.

A traveler toiled up the northern slope of the hill from the creek bed that lay at its foot. When he reached the level top he laid his parfleche-covered pack on the ground, took off his fur cap and stood leaning on his heavy rifle, surveying the quiet landscape before him, while the breeze swayed his long hair. He was a very tall man, of the broad-shouldered and spare build that promises limitless endurance; his frame was bowed, but evidently more with hardship than with age, as the hair that lay about his shoulders was untouched with gray; and as his keen eyes scanned the wide river-bottom before him, he fell into an attitude expressive of great weariness.

Suddenly the weariness fell from him, and he started into the alert posture of a listening wild animal. Up the long slope from the south came two horsemen, driving a pack animal before them. The tall man faced them and shifted his grasp on the rifle, then stood leaning on it as before and awaited them, immovably. Presently they halted; evidently they had seen him. They seemed to consult, and then turned their horses towards him. As they approached within hailing distance, he tossed his gun into his arm; "Who be ye?" he called.

One laughed. "I took ye for an Indian," he said. "We're white men, all right," and they came jogging toward their questioner, whose stern features relaxed into a child-like expression of curiosity. "If you're looking for a place to camp, better stop here," he said. "You won't get nowhere tonight."

"This was where I aimed to camp," said the other. "I been here before. This good enough for you, Batiste?"

His companion made no reply, but leaped heavily to the ground and began to unsaddle.

"Where ye from?" inquired the tall man from the north, "and where ye bound for?"

"We're company men," was the reply, "just from Cyprien's and going

to Sarpy's. We'll winter there and thereabouts. My name's Jackson, his'n's Batiste Labadie. What's your name and business?"

"I was there last night," said the tall man, "at Sarpy's. The first time I've slept under a wood roof for twenty years. I was half froze for fresh air, but I reckon I'll have to get used to it. I'm Richardson, and I'm just in from the mountains."

"Paul Richardson?" asked the other; and the man assented with a nod. "Haven't left the mountains have ye?" Another nod. "Left 'em forever. Have ye been there? Do ye know what that means?" "I've been there, and I guess I know," said the man from the south.

The sun sank behind the prairie, and the west was flushed with red. In the east a deep blue band above the Iowa hills heralded the coming night, and the full moon stood forth, with her light reflected in the water of the great river, which from this height was like a blue mirror. Batiste had made a fire and withdrawn with the three horses to picket them where there was grazing for the night. The two Americans sat down and talked of the doings of their world.

"Did ye see anything of Cap. Fremont?" the mountain-man inquired. "He's gone down," the other answered, "but he never stopped. We heard of him from the landing. I see him last spring when he went out. He fitted out at our place. How is't you didn't come down with him?" "I was sick up at the Hole," Richardson said. "Been sick all summer. The Indians brought word that there were soldiers in the mountains, and I'd have come down with them but I couldn't get down in time. I was only three weeks behind them at Laramie, but they were nigh eight weeks ahead of me at Sarpy's. I couldn't travel very fast." "Get hurt?" asked the man named Jackson. "Eight arrows," the other answered, "one in my ribs. Blackfeet. The Indians are all consid'able riled this summer, account of all them folks going through to Oregon. I and another man, named Wheeler, were out after meat, and the devils surrounded us. We stood 'em off all day, and crawled out. I was hurt pretty bad. Wheeler got rubbed out since after all—on Medicine Bow." "Any scalps?" the other inquired. "Nary scalp but my own," said the trapper. "I've had scalps enough in my time, but my day is about over. One more scalp and I'm done." "Who's wearing that?" Jackson asked.

"An Otoe," was the reply, and the two men looked steadily in each other's eyes. The company man asked no questions, and Richardson presently went on. "There was an Otoe, a big

devil that camped with me one night ten years ago on the upper Platte. I was alone, coming down to meet Milton Sublette; there was a dozen of the Indians. While I was getting my dinner they jumped on me and robbed me of everything but my clothes; horse, knife, flint and steel—everything. There was snow on the ground—I begged the chief for my rifle and a little ammunition; he laughed, and they rode off yelling. With my bare hands I caught game to keep me alive till I came to white men; but I swore to have that chief's scalp. This morning I was at the Otoe village above here; my man is dead, died last winter of smallpox. But there are others; a band of them is camped below here somewhere."

The trapper's face had lost its look of simplicity; it was fierce and merciless, like a wild beast's. "I want an Otoe scalp," he said.

They were silent; one stared into the fire, the other smoked and watched the moon. The third traveler came back from the horses and began to unlace the packs.

"What do they call this place?" Richardson inquired suddenly. "Blest if I know," said Jackson; "do you, Batiste?" "Yass," answered Batiste; "I been here plenty time. My fader, she bring me here when I was little boy. Da's Table Creek." "About four miles below here they are," said the trapper, and fell again into silence.

Batiste stirred about, getting supper, and presently began to whistle and then to sing. He produced coffee, sugar and bacon; he scraped the dirt off a fresh quarter of venison with his knife, and began to slice it. Richardson watched him with softening look, but at this he shook his head. "Cutting it across the grain," he said. Then Batiste opened a tin can of hard bread, and at this he laughed aloud. "Gimme one of them, Batiste," he said; "I've been a year at a time without seeing bread." And as he crushed it in his strong jaws his face took on its childlike expression again.

Presently he looked across the fire with an oddly timid glance. "Where you from, Mr. Jackson?" he said. "Chouteau's," said Jackson. "No," said the trapper; "where was you born?" The other looked up defiantly; hesitated, then said "Kentuck." Richardson laughed merrily again. "And I'm from old Connecticut," he said. "Twenty years a mountain-man, and now going to turn farmer back at the old home I left when I was a boy. Yonder," waving his hand across the river, "is the United States. I heard a cowbell this morning, a thing I hadn't thought of in years. And I've been thinking all day—say; ain't this Thursday?" The other