

THE WILDERNESS AND THE WAR PATH

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The Wilderness and the War Path by James Hall

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JAMES HALL

**THE WILDERNESS
AND THE WAR PATH**

THE
WILDERNESS AND THE WAR PATH

BY JAMES HALL,

AUTHOR OF

"
LIFE OF
CALIFORNIA

LEGENDS OF THE WEST, BORDER TALES, SKETCHES OF THE WEST,
NOTES ON THE WESTERN STATES, ETC., ETC.

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THE WILDERNESS AND THE WAR PATH.

THE BLACK STEED OF THE PRAIRIES.

A TALE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS.

THE life of the American Indian is not so destitute of the interest created by variety of incident, as might be supposed by a casual observation of the habits of this singular race. It is true that the simple structure of their communities, and the sameness of their occupations, limit the Savage within a narrow sphere of thought and action. Without commerce, agriculture, learning, or the arts, and confined to the employments of war and hunting, the general tenour of his life must be monotonous. His journies through the unpeopled wilderness, furnish him with no information as to the modes of existence of other nations, nor any subjects for reflection, but those which nature supplies, and with which he has been familiar from childhood. Beyond his own tribe, his intercourse extends only to savages as ignorant as himself, and to traders but little elevated above his own moral standard.

But there are, even in savage life, seasons of great excitement, and instances often occur in which individuals are drawn into adventures of the most singular and perilous description. The state of war is prolific of those chances and changes which call forth the energies of individual character; and the chase, when pursued not merely for spot, but as a serious occupation, in wilds frequented for the same purpose by hostile bands, becomes really what the poet has described it,

"Mimicry of noble war."

The following legend exemplifies some of the accidents of this singular mode of existence, and shows the training, by which the Indian youth are prepared to encounter dangers, and achieve exploits, which would seem incredible to those who are unacquainted with the habits of that remarkable race.

Our scene lies in a region seldom visited by civilized men, and only known to us through the reports of the adventurous trappers who seek there the solitary haunts of the beaver, and of a few travellers of the more intelligent class, who have been led thither by scientific curiosity or missionary zeal. We stand upon the Eastern declivity of the Rocky Mountains, and see stretched before us the Great Plain, which extends thence to the frontier settlements of the United States. Around us are immense bulwarks of rock, towering towards the sky in all the gigantic magnificence of mountain scenery, while we see below us, in beautiful contrast, an interminable carpet of verdure, extending to the distant horizon. The rays of the morning sun have lighted up the mountain sides, and are reflected from peaks covered with snow, while the mists of the dawn are reposing upon the prairie, whose rich pastures display the luxuriance of the summer vegetation.

The Flatheads of the Rocky Mountains were encamped in one of the gorges of the Eastern declivity of that Ridge. The spot was wild and secluded, indicating the cautious habits of the people who had thus concealed their temporary residence in one of the most inaccessible spots of that inhospitable wilderness. It was a deep ravine, bounded on either side by parapets of solid rock, whose rugged peaks towering upward to an immense height, concealed and shaded the narrow glen, so as to wrap it in perpetual gloom. A strip of ground margining a small rivulet that leaped in a succession of cascades down the gorge, afforded a pathway accessible in most places for but a single horseman, but sometimes spreading out to a width sufficient to accommodate a small encampment.

In one of those nooks, which might have suited the ascetic fancy of a misanthrope who desired to separate himself from his species, the Flatheads had pitched the skin lodges, that formed their only habitation throughout the year. It was the village of a migratory people, habituated to sudden changes of residence,

and always ready to move at a moment's warning, with all their population and property. Their horses, whose rough coats showed continual exposure to the weather, were browsing upon the scanty herbage that grew along the banks of the rivulet; sentinels were posted in the defiles leading to the village and by which alone it could be approached, while a watchman perched like an eagle upon one of the tallest peaks, but concealed in the shadows of the grey rock, looked abroad upon the neighbouring plain, and upon the mountain passes, to give due notice of any approaching danger. Even the children, as they dabbled in the brook or climbed the precipices, seemed instinctively jealous of danger, throwing up their dark eyes, and silently exchanging glances, if an owl hooted, or a vulture sailing aloft threw his shadow in the glen; and the dogs, with slouched tails, pointed ears, and wild eyes, skulked about with the stealthy pace of the wolf.

These appearances, indicating a quick sense of surrounding danger, were characteristic of the habitual watchfulness of this band, who lived in continual terror of the Blackfeet, a tribe much more numerous than themselves, and noted as well for their predatory habits, as for the ruthless ferocity which marked their conduct towards their enemies. To the Flatheads especially they bore an irreconcilable hatred, which was indulged in an unremitting and unsparing warfare. There was a great disparity in numbers between the two tribes, the Flatheads being a very small band, while the Blackfeet were numerous, so that they never met on equal terms, and although their battles were often desperate, they were usually unsought by the weaker party. Both were wandering tribes, having no fixed boundaries or settled habitations, and deriving a precarious subsistence from the chase; but the Blackfeet were the banditti of the mountain country, a fighting, thieving, cut-throat nation, who made themselves formidable to all who fell in their way, and observed no rule of justice unless it was that of plundering alike the white man and the Indian, and being terrible equally to friend and foe—while the Flatheads were a fugitive people, pursued continually by their relentless enemies, whom they had no hope of escaping but by cunning and swiftness of foot.

The Flatheads are in many respects an interesting people.