

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America
Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

A HUNTER'S EXPERIENCES.



CHAPTER I.

HINTS ON FOREST AND PRAIRIE LIFE.

EVER since the days when Nimrod was a 'mighty hunter,' there has been a class of men who have pursued wild animals, not only for the sake of feeding, like wild beasts, upon their flesh, but out of pure love of the excitement attending the chase, a pride of mental and physical endurance which leads them to face boldly dangers and difficulties so discouraging to men of weaker mould, that to incur such hazard seems to them mere madness. Amongst those who have thus gone forth into the wilderness, the Anglo-Saxon race stands pre-eminent.

Nor is it for the sake of excitement alone that they put their lives in peril. Wherever the cause of science or commerce requires that discoveries

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America
Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

should be made, or geographical problems solved, we find the Englishman foremost; venturing with his frail bark and his reindeer sled amongst the icebergs of a frozen ocean in search of a north-west passage: laboriously tracing the Nile to its source, in unknown lands, amongst a fierce and savage people; braving the tropical heats and deadly miasmas of Central Africa; or working their way across the arid deserts of Australia, to set up land-marks, and point the way to future discoverers.

And in every phase of their wandering life they are attentively watched by those who are unable to accompany them. Elderly, staid, respectable gentlemen, with a slight inclination to Toryism, may profess to think it rather low to go rambling about over a whole continent, subsisting on the produce of the chase, and bartering Birmingham goods with naked savages; but when the name of one of our travellers is mentioned they cannot help feeling a pride in him, and reflecting that the same country gave them birth. The old man who knows what the gout is, suffers a little from indigestion, and is slightly disposed to asthma, looks with a touch of envy upon the bronzed, healthy face and keen eye of the rover, and wishes that his own step was as firm and light. With a sigh he thinks upon his bankers' account, and the years of toil which

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America

Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LOVE OF ADVENTURE.

3

have made him what he is; and would willingly give a cheque for a very large amount could he, by so doing, assure himself of one-tenth part of his robust hardihood.

Wherever commerce has established itself, the children of almost every nation under the sun may be seen jostling and pushing each other in the pursuit of golden treasures; but where nothing but perilous adventures may be expected, it is rare to meet any but Englishmen, or at all events men of Anglo-Saxon parentage. And of that race many names could be mentioned of men who, for the mere sake of enjoying Nature in all her loveliness, have willingly abandoned home to rove at will far away from the comforts and restraints of civilization.

And where does Nature assume a more beautiful aspect than on the mighty American continent, where dense forests stretch away for leagues, bounded only by some broad river whose impetuous flood could engulf all the tiny streams of England; while beyond, far as the eye can reach, and miles further, stretches a vast meadow of green, waving grass? Where can the hunter find game more worthy of his gun than in the wild woods and almost boundless prairies of the West; where the huge buffalo stalks in all his shaggy majesty; where the deer and antelope bound, where the boar and bear roam about the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America
Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 HINTS ON FOREST AND PRAIRIE LIFE.

dense thickets, and game birds of large size and delicious flavour are as plentiful as blackbirds in England? It is in pursuit of such game that many a wealthy Englishman has earned himself a name in sporting history, to the envy of young Nimrods, who would fain outvie the deeds of their more celebrated compeers.

Though my hair is not yet white with age, I can still say I was a young man when I first visited the prairies and woods of the West, where the best years of my life were passed, and I have often since regretted leaving those wild scenes; though why I did so is a question I have never been able to solve to my own satisfaction. Perhaps it was the effect of that very desire for change which first led me to the wilderness.

Often in my dreams I wander over the prairies; often in my waking moments I recall happy times spent in the woods; but now that I can no more take part in those inspiring scenes, I cannot refrain from recording my experiences by flood and field, for the benefit of all who may feel inclined to pay a visit to those game-filled regions,—the Paradise of the true sportsman, and the ‘happy hunting-grounds’ of the Indian warrior.

In the prairies and forests of Texas, where I lived for years, a medium sportsman, with a good double-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America
Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SPORT IN TEXAS.

5

shot gun and a brace of pointers, can kill quail and grouse to his heart's content. In the winter, the swamps, lakes, and rivers swarm with almost every kind of wild fowl, ducks, geese, swans, and two or three varieties of cranes. Should he be of a more ambitious disposition, and wish to try his skill on game of a larger size, bears and peccaries are always to be found in the cane-brakes and thickets; and if even this should fail to satisfy him, the great bison is to be found on the western prairies, where he can have adventures to his heart's content.

I once passed nearly a twelvemonth in the forest with no companions but my dogs, and no means of subsistence but the produce of my gun. My good thick blanket was my only bed, and a rude hut of branches piled and woven together, my home. It was only when powder and lead grew scarce that I returned to the settlements; and on once more reaching a spot where civilization had made some progress, I felt about as awkward as a Maori woman in a ball-room dress, and as fearful of doing wrong as a schoolboy may be on finding himself at his school gate after the holidays.

But no one need live this solitary hermit-like existence from choice, for in every little town it is easy enough to find two, three, or half-a-dozen comrades who desire no greater enjoyment than a month or two months of camp hunting; and, with-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America

Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 HINTS ON FOREST AND PRAIRIE LIFE.

out the guidance of some tolerably experienced hunter, who knows a little of the country and of woodcraft, it would not be advisable for a novice to venture many miles away from the haunts of men. In all probability he would be lost in the forest; and a man who has only seen forests, as they are called, in England, can form little idea of the extent and appearance of an American wilderness. Even the Hampshire New Forest, large in extent and diversified in appearance as it may seem to the eyes of a city-bred man, is but '*a patch*' upon the woods of the Southern States of America. In some parts, the trees, the undergrowth, and huge weeds are so matted together with briars and vines, that the hunter is literally compelled to hew a passage through them for hundreds of yards; while in other parts the trees stand as regularly, as far apart, as well trained, apparently, as in any English park, and as free from weeds and bushes. Sometimes, again, there are low flats the soil of which is as bare as a turnpike-road or a brick-field, while close by, and without any perceptible difference in the soil, is a tall growth of palmetto, sedge, and coarse grass. Further on may be seen a genuine cane-brake, where the reeds are of all sizes, from a crow-quill to a man's leg, and in height from three inches to thirty feet.

Cedar swamps are almost as impenetrable as the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America
Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

AMERICAN FORESTS.

7

canes. The trees are, perhaps, not quite so close together, but many of them lie on the ground; and then broken branches, concealed in a dense growth of rank grass, are ever ready, like so many iron spikes, to inflict wounds upon the intruder. On higher ground the wild peach-bush grows abundantly, and so thickly together that their tops shut out the light of heaven, and thus check all the undergrowth, though they spring to a sufficient height to allow the deer-stalker or still-hunter to exercise his calling with comparative freedom. In other thickets all the varied shrubs of America, hickory, dog-wood, thorn, grow close together, and present a most formidable array of sharp spikes.

Often, while wandering in the depths of the wilderness, the hunter will come upon some large, deep lake, whose placid waters will, in winter-time, reflect the floating form of thousands of wild fowl, and where (I am speaking only of the more southern of the United States, in which King Frost has no dominion) huge lilies float upon the mirror-like surface of the blue water. There, too, the wild beasts come to drink,—deer, hogs, panthers, and bears,—while wolves and wild cats hide in the thickets by the bank to seize the more weak and timid denizens of the wild,—themselves frequently becoming the prey of some alligator which lies like a huge log on the shore till food of some kind comes within his reach.

But the hunter's progress is often barred by impassable swamps, where vegetation runs riot and drops to decay; where amongst the tangled ferns, rushes, and long grass, the moccasin snake crawls forth from his den, and hisses its defiance to the intruder; where pools of stagnant water, covered with rank weeds, afford board and lodging to the toad; where the mass of vegetation breeds a vapour scarcely less poisonous than the noxious reptiles which it nourishes; where, on the top of tall, blasted pine trees, vultures sit, with bloated crops and glazed, sleepy eyes, trying to digest their carrion food.

But let me speak of more pleasant scenes—of a bubbling spring at the foot of a mossy bank, beneath the shade of some ancient tree, where the hunter, as he reposes, can watch the silver thread of water as it winds down the valley, till it loses itself in some larger stream, not poisoned yet by a foul manufactory.

But I feel that it is impossible to give on paper any adequate idea of the vastness and variety of an American wilderness,—so different from English forest scenery, where woodmen are constantly employed to 'keep the place tidy,' and withered branches are converted into faggots of fire-wood as soon as they fall. In the forests of Texas all is natural; the trees are planted by Nature's hand; they fall from decay or from the effects of a fierce tempest,—and where

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00252-3 - A Hunter's Experiences in the Southern States of America

Captain Flack

Excerpt

[More information](#)

AMERICAN FOREST SCENERY.

9

they fall they rot ; scarcely one in a thousand being used by the hunter for his camp fire.

The scenery, viewed from the surface of a river, exhibits an equal variety. The hunter is ascending one of the rivers (say the Brazos), sees on one side a dense mass of forest, the depth of which may be measured by yards or miles. On the other side is a precipitous bluff bank ; and though the traveller cannot see up to the summit of it, he knows well enough that beyond it there is a wide, rolling expanse of prairie. Further on, the banks become so low that they scarcely confine the waters, and then the hunter sails betwixt groves of tall canes and weeds,—the luxuriant vegetation of a marsh. After some little progress, green meadows, as level as a bowling-alley, are seen on both sides, while buffaloes and wild horses and deer graze contentedly upon the soft grass.

When the hunter, be he white or red, roams these solitudes by himself, his very loneliness compels him to strain his senses to the utmost ; and sometimes the exhibitions of keen intellect, displayed by the veterans of the forest, are surprising. The white hunter is, as a rule, far ahead of the Indian in that learning which the red-man formerly excelled in.

The extraordinary sagacity which many animals display in avoiding the snares of man,—the almost reasoning powers of the bee, the ant, the beaver, and

10 HINTS ON FOREST AND PRAIRIE LIFE.

the bear, sink into nothingness compared with the cultivated intelligence of the men who make it their business to go forth into the wilderness and take the most wary animals in their dens.

The sight of the practised hunter is so cultivated, as to rival in delicacy of perception the touch of the blind man. The contact of a passing object with the trees, grass, or solid earth, leaves some slight trail which, though imperceptible to the novice, can be read by the practised hunter as easily as the open page of a book. From such slight things as a broken twig, a bruised blade of grass, or a pebble that has been kicked from its bed in the softer earth, the learned in forest lore can not only tell what animal has crossed his path, but will be able to form a pretty correct estimate of the size and sex of the game, and the time that has elapsed since the 'sign' from which he draws his knowledge was made.

In this lies the great difference between the hunter and the sportsman. The former trusts to his own unaided intelligence and forest experience to bring him to his game, which his rifle then secures. The latter employs the keen scent of his dogs to bring him to the quarry, confining himself to the killing portion of the business.

The hasty stride and hurried movements of English sportsmen would be of little value in the backwoods. The hasty hunter would, in all probability, frighten