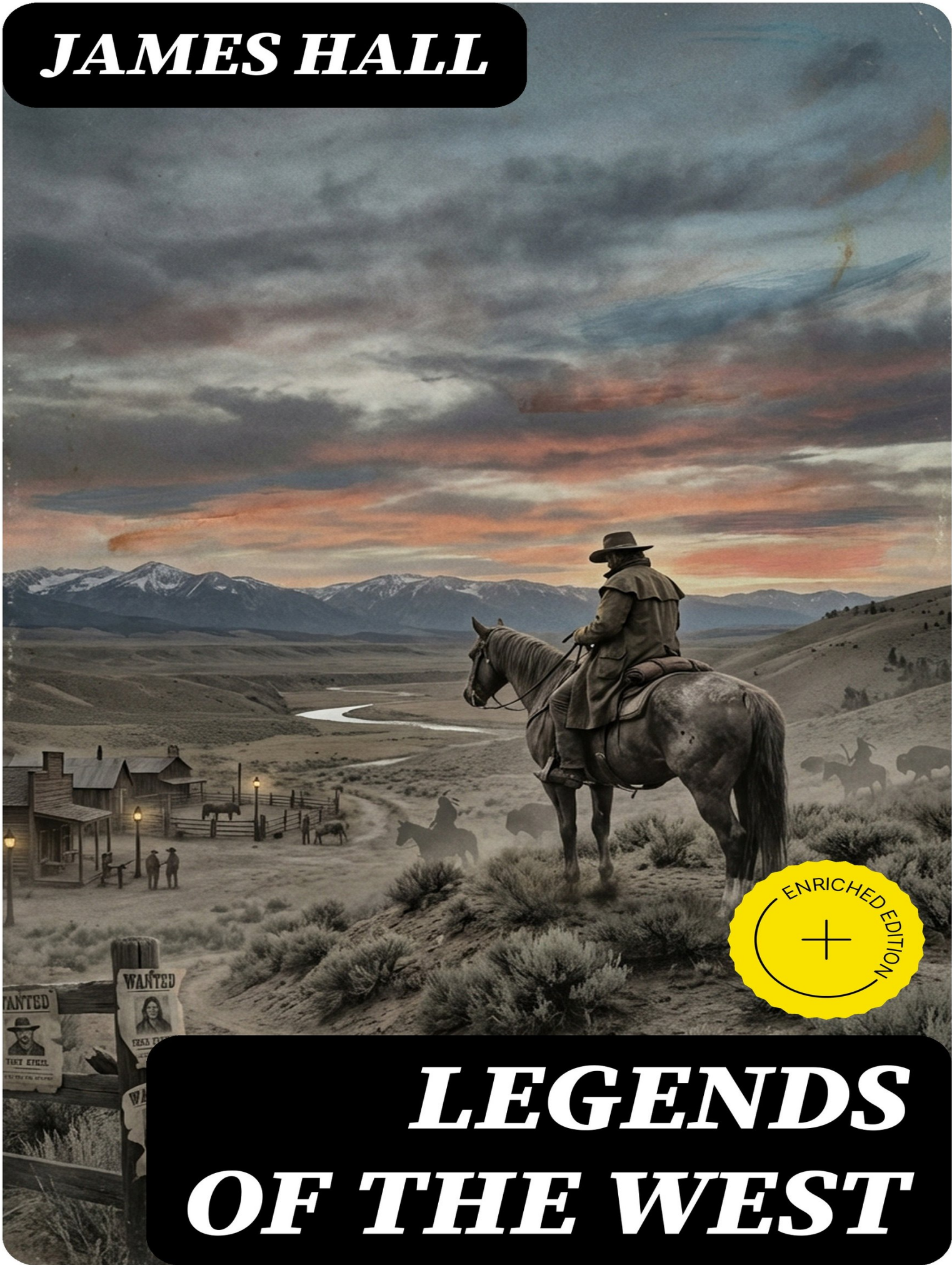


JAMES HALL



**LEGENDS
OF THE WEST**

James Hall

Legends of the West

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Max Dillon

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PREFACE.

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The sole intention of the tales comprised in the following pages is to convey accurate descriptions of the scenery and population of the country in which the author resides. The only merit he claims for them is fidelity. It will be for others to decide whether this claim is well supported.

The legends now presented to the public are entirely fictitious; but they are founded upon incidents which have been witnessed by the author during a long residence in the western states, or upon traditions preserved by the people, and have received but little artificial embellishment. They are given to the American reader with great diffidence, and with a disposition to submit cheerfully to any verdict which public opinion may award.

THE BACKWOODSMAN.

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The beautiful forests of Kentucky, when first visited by the adventurous footsteps of the pioneers, presented a scene of native luxuriance, such as has seldom been witnessed by the human eye. So vast a body of fertile soil had never before been known to exist on this continent. The magnificent forest trees attained a gigantic height, and were adorned with a foliage of unrivalled splendour. The deep rich green of the leaves, and the brilliant tints of the flowers, nourished into full maturity of size and beauty by the extraordinary fertility of the soil, not only attracted the

admiration of the hunter, but warmed the fancy of the poet, and forcibly arrested the attention of the naturalist. As the pioneers proceeded step by step, new wonders were discovered; and the features of the country, together with its productions, as they became gradually developed, continued to present the same bold peculiarities and broad outlines. The same scale of greatness pervaded all the works of nature. The noble rivers, all tending towards one great estuary, swept through an almost boundless extent of country, and seemed to be as infinite in number as they were grand in size. The wild animals were innumerable. The forests teemed with living creatures, for this was the paradise of the brute creation[1q]. Here were literally "the cattle upon *a thousand* hills." The buffaloe, the elk, and the deer roamed in vast herds, and all the streams were rich in those animals whose fur is so much esteemed in commerce. Here lurked the solitary panther, the lion of our region, and here prowled the savage wolf. The nutritious fruits of the forest, and the juicy buds of the exuberant thickets, reared the indolent bear to an enormous size. Even the bowels of the earth exhibited stupendous evidences of the master hand of creation. The great limestone beds of the country were perforated with spacious caverns, of vast extent and splendid appearance, many of which yielded valuable minerals; while the gigantic bones found buried in the earth, far exceeding in size those of all known animals on the globe, attested the former existence in this region, of brutes of fearful magnitude.

Such were the discoveries of the first adventurers; such the inducements which allured them onward, and inclined

them to linger in these solitudes, enduring the severest privations, and beset by dangers which might have shaken the firmest manhood. But the pioneers were men whose characters were not now to be formed in the school of adversity or danger. They were the borderers, already trained to war and the chase upon the extensive frontiers of our country; men cradled in the forest, and accustomed from their infancy to the bay of the prowling wolf, and the yell of the hostile Indian. Trained to athletic sports and martial exercises, their military propensities were cherished throughout their whole lives, and became engrafted in their nature. Martial habits mingled in all their rural pursuits. If they travelled or walked abroad, it was with the wary step, and jealous vigilance of the Indian: with an eye continually glancing into every thicket, and an ear prepared to catch the slightest alarm of danger. They slept upon their arms[2q], and carried their rifles to the harvest field, to the marriage feast, and to the house of worship. Simple, honest, and inoffensive in their manners, kind and just to each other, they were intrepid, fierce, and vindictive in war. Under an appearance of apathy, with a gait of apparent indolence, and with careless habits, they were muscular and hardy, patient of fatigue, ardent in their temperament, warm hearted, and hospitable. They were the borderers of Virginia and North Carolina, where they had long formed a rampart between the less warlike inhabitants and the savage tribes. In the war of the revolution they had engaged with ardour; but while the acknowledgement of our national independence brought peace to the rest of our country, it left the frontiers still embroiled with the savages.

The backwoodsmen therefore, when they first emigrated into the western forests, had not to learn the rude arts of sylvan life, or to study the habits of the Indian and the beast of prey. These were enemies with whom they had long been familiar, and with whom they delighted to cope.

They lived in cabins hastily erected for temporary shelter[8q], and as hastily abandoned when a slight allurements at some distant spot invited them to change their residence. Their personal effects were of course few, and their domestic utensils rude and simple. Their horses, their rifles, and their herds, constituted their wealth; and with these they were prepared at a moment's warning to push farther into the wilderness, selling their habitations for a mere trifle, or abandoning them to any chance occupant who might choose to take possession, and conquering for themselves a new home, from the panther and the Indian.

In the settlement of Kentucky, the pioneers emigrated singly, or in small parties. Unused to congregate in large bodies, unless on special occasions, and unaccustomed to military discipline, they chose to rely for defence on their own personal courage and vigilance. The boldest went foremost, traversed the country fearlessly, and having selected the choicest spots, however remote from other settlements, built their cabins, surrounded them with palisades to protect them from the Indians, and set all enemies at defiance. Others followed and settled around them, forming little communities, detached from each other, and each organized independently, for its own defence; and it was not until these insulated settlements extended, so as to come into contiguity, that the arm of government was

felt, and the mild operation of law diffused. In the mean while the vast deserts by which they were separated, retained their pristine wildness, traversed in common by the Backwoodsman and the Indian, who never met without a conflict, which was usually of the most exterminating character.

The ferocity of the Indian was not likely to be tamed, nor his animosity to the white man to be conciliated, by this state of things. He had to do with men who had long been taught to consider the savage as a natural enemy, as hateful as the serpent, and as irreconcilable as the wolf; men whose ears had been accustomed from infancy to legends of border warfare, in which the savage was always represented as the aggressor, and as a fiend stimulated by hellish passions, and continually plotting some detestable outrage, or horrible revenge. Most of them had witnessed the Indian mode of warfare, which spared neither age nor sex; and many of them had suffered in their own families, or those of their nearest friends. They were familiar with the capture of women and children, the conflagration of houses, and the midnight assassination of the helpless and decrepid; and they had grown up in a hatred of the perpetrators of such enormities, which the philanthropist could hardly condemn, as it originated in generous feelings, and was kept alive by the repeated violation of the most sacred rights and the best affections.

As the settlements expanded, the wealthy and intelligent began to follow the footsteps of the pioneer. Virginia, the parent state, had rewarded the patriotism of many of her distinguished revolutionary officers, by large grants of land

in Kentucky, and some of these emigrated among the early settlers. Many young gentlemen with elevated views and liberal educations, followed; and some of those who thus came with the rifle in hand, and commenced their professional career amid the commotion of the battle field, have since been widely known to fame, as among the most distinguished lawyers and statesmen of the nation.

There were others of a character still more essentially peaceful, who at an early period braved the dangers and privations of that unsettled region, stimulated by a noble and self denying sense of duty. While the tomahawk and fire brand were still busy; when to travel from one settlement to another, required the courage and hardihood of the hunter; the ministers of the gospel penetrated into the wilderness, and zealously pursued their sacred calling in defiance of every danger. They learned to endure fatigue, to provide for their wants, and to elude the common enemy, with the sagacity of woodsmen; and those of them who lived to enjoy the dignity of grey hairs, and the luxury of peaceful times, could narrate a series of strange adventures, and "hair breadth 'scapes," such as seldom occur in the lives of the clergy.

The incidents of the following tale have their date at a period when the settlements, though still detached, began to be so strong as to be considered permanent. Some of them were now regularly organized, and felt no longer any dread of predatory incursions of the neighbouring savage. The one particularly in which the scene is laid, had experienced a long interval of uninterrupted peace; agriculture was beginning to flourish, and the civil arts had

been introduced. The woodsmen still retained their cabins, pursued the wild game for a livelihood, and joined in distant expeditions against the savages, and in defence of feebler settlements; while a number of the class who might more properly be called farmers, and several intelligent and wealthy families, had moved into the neighbourhood. Civil institutions had been introduced and the spirit of improvement was awake. The sound of the axe saluted the ear in every direction; roads were opened; magistrates had been appointed, and were assuming the authority of their stations; and females who had heretofore confined themselves within doors, brooding over their offspring like watchful birds, and who had found even the sacred fortress of women, the fire side, no protection from violence, now felt at liberty to indulge the benevolent propensity for visiting their neighbours, and talking over the affairs of the community, which is said by those acquainted with human nature, to be peculiar to the sex.

Among other novelties, a *camp meeting* was about to be held for the first time. This popular mode of worship was familiar to the emigrants from Virginia and North Carolina, where it had long been practised, and found highly beneficial and convenient in new settlements, where public edifices had not yet been erected, and where private habitations were too small to accommodate worshipping assemblies; and the effort now about to be made for its introduction in the west, was hailed as a happy omen for the country. The spot was selected with great care; the whole neighbourhood united in clearing the ground, erecting huts, and making the most liberal arrangements for the

accommodation of the concourse which was expected to be assembled. For the convenience of obtaining water, a place was chosen on the margin of a small rivulet, and near a fine spring. The ground was a beautiful elevation, sloping off on all sides, and crowned with a thick growth of noble forest trees. The smallest of these, together with all the underbrush, were carefully removed, leaving a few of the most stately, whose long branches formed a thick canopy, at an elevation of fifty feet from the ground. The camp was laid off in a large square, three sides of which were occupied by huts, and the fourth by the *stand* or pulpit. The whole of the enclosed area was filled with seats roughly hewed out of logs.

A busy scene was presented on the day before the meeting commenced, occasioned by the arrival of the people, some of whom had travelled an immense distance. The larger number came on horseback, some in wagons, and some in ox-carts. They were loaded with beds, cooking utensils, table furniture, and provisions. These articles, however, were chiefly furnished by the inhabitants of the vicinity, who claimed the privilege of entertaining strangers. The persons resident in the immediate neighbourhood had each erected his own hut, with the intention of accommodating, besides his own family, a number of guests; large quantities of game had been taken, beef, pigs, and poultry had been killed, and the good wives had been engaged for several days in cooking meat, and preparing bread and pastry. The loads upon loads of good things for the body, which were accumulated, were marvellous to behold; not that there was any indulgence of luxury, or

extravagant display, but as was very judiciously remarked on the occasion by a veteran hunter, "it took a *powerful chance of truck*, to feed such a *heap of folks*," and the generous Kentuckians, accustomed to practise the most liberal hospitality, could not be backward on a public occasion.

The meeting commenced on Thursday, and lasted until Monday, the whole of each day being occupied with religious exercises. At day-light in the morning, the voice of prayer was heard in each hut, where the families were separately assembled, as such, for worship. Shortly afterwards, the fires were kindled around the encampment, and a few of the females were seen engaged in cooking. A few individuals then collected on the seats in the area, and raised a hymn; others joined them, and the number swelled gradually until nearly the whole company was collected. They sang without books[3q]; the pieces being those of which the words were generally known. Some of the tunes were remarkably sweet, and thus sung in the open air, under the broad canopy of Heaven, and as it were in the immediate presence of the great object of all worship, were indescribably solemn and affecting; some were peculiarly wild, and some cheerful; many of them being the beautiful airs of popular ballads, which were in this manner appropriated to Divine worship. The balmy freshness of the morning air, the splendour of the rising sun, the stillness of the forest, and the wild graces of the surrounding scenery, gave a wonderful interest to this voluntary matin service. It was thus our first parents worshipped their Creator in Paradise[4q], thus the early Christians assembled in groves

and secluded places; and so close is the union between good taste and religious feeling, that while civilized nations have set apart the most splendid edifices for worship, ruder communities, in a similar spirit, assemble for the same purpose at the most genial hour, and the most picturesque spot. The heart powerfully excited by generous feelings always becomes romantic; the mind elevated by the noble pursuit of a high object becomes enlarged and refined; and although such impulses may be temporary, the virtuous actions which they produce have a tendency towards the soft, the graceful, and the picturesque, in their development. After the morning hymn, the preachers ascended the *stand*, and service was performed before breakfast. The rest of the day, with the exception of short intervals for refreshments, was filled in the same manner. But nothing could exceed the solemn and beautiful effect of the meeting at night. The huts were all illuminated, and lights were fastened to the trunks of the trees, throwing a glare upon the overhanging canopy of leaves, now beginning to be tinged with the rich hues of autumn, which gave it the appearance of a splendid arch finely carved and exquisitely shaded. All around was the dark gloom of the forest, deepened to intense blackness by its contrast with the brilliant light of the camp.

But we must hasten to our narrative. On Sunday morning a company consisting of three persons, was seen approaching the camp-ground. The elder of these, who rode alone in advance of the others, was Mr Singleton, a gentleman who had recently emigrated from Virginia. He was a farmer, a well educated man, in easy circumstances,

who not being religious, nor in any manner connected with the sect under whose auspices the meeting was held, contented himself with participating no further in its proceedings, than by being a regular and respectful attendant on the daily services. Miss Singleton his only daughter, and Edward Overton her affianced lover, were his companions. They were to be married in a fortnight from this time. It is unnecessary to inform the erudite reader, that the young lady, who was just turned of seventeen, was beautiful and interesting, and her lover tall and handsome. Had they been otherwise, their lives might have slept in oblivion, with the fame of the "mute inglorious" rustics in Gray's elegy. Dennie, who has been called the American Addison, once amused himself by criticising an advertisement of a man who had stolen "a *chunky* horse," and with such a lesson before our eyes, we should hardly venture upon a *chunky young man* for a hero, or a hard favoured lady for a heroine. The decree of literary ostracism by which short gentlemen have been banished from the pages of fiction, is, in our humble opinion, unjust, believing, as we do, that to be an interesting man, and a tender lover, it is by no means necessary to possess the corporeal altitude of a grenadier. For the homely and the dull we put in no plea: it is a standing rule among writers, having a laudable care of their own fame, not to waste their midnight oil upon ugly or insipid people. The reader is therefore desired to understand distinctly, that the young couple now introduced, were not only worthy and amiable, but were in point of appearance all that the most romantic peruser of these veracious pages could rationally desire.

As they rode slowly along, they were deeply engaged in conversation; but it was easy to see from the sedate demeanour of Ellen Singleton, that the subject was suited to the day and the occasion. She was naturally gay and volatile; but latterly her thoughts had been turned to the subject of religion; and as the day approached when she was to take upon her the vows of wedlock, and to enter upon new and solemn duties, she felt more and more the necessity of directing her life agreeably to the precepts of the gospel. To these virtuous resolutions a new impulse had been given by the exercises of the camp-meeting. Her heart was sensibly awakened, and her judgment fully persuaded; and after serious reflection and preparation she was now ready to make a profession of her faith, by uniting herself with the church, and assuming those engagements which are imposed upon the disciples of the Redeemer. These duties she expected to take upon her that day; and Edward Overton felt deeply affected as he noticed the solemn tone, the deep conviction, and the firm determination of her mind; for however a false shame may sometimes induce the concealment of devotional feelings, under the mistaken notion that they will be considered as the evidence of weakness, the truth is, that a young lady is never so interesting in the eyes of her lover, as when conscientiously engaged in the performance of her duty. The senses of a young man are easily excited by beauty, wit, gaiety, and the thousand attractions of feminine loveliness, but there must be moral energy and pure principle, to secure his affections. Edward had admired Ellen when he saw her in the pride of beauty, and the flush of overflowing spirits; he had long

known her to be refined and generous, and loved to contemplate her soft attractions and delicate graces; but he now witnessed the operations of her mind under a new aspect, and when he saw the good sense, the energy, and the strength of principle, which supported her in the determination to act up to her sense of duty, his love rose to a sentiment of devotion. Formerly Ellen had been in his eyes a beautiful vision, floating along in the tide of youthful enjoyment; but now that she had assumed an individuality of character, asserted her independence as a moral agent, and acknowledged her accountability to God, she became invested with a dignity, which gave an almost angelic sacredness to her charms.

On that day the concourse was greater than it had been before; and those who had been for years accustomed to the solitude of the forest, to alarm, toil, and privation, felt their hearts elevated with a new species of joy and gratitude, when they found themselves surrounded by their countrymen, and united with them in social and sacred duties. With many of them the sabbath had long passed unhonoured and even unnoticed, and its public acknowledgement called them back to holy and happy feelings; for there is in the observance of this day something so noble, so heart-cheering, so appropriate to the most virtuous impulses of our bosoms, that even the thoughtless cannot divest themselves of its influence. It is, to all who submit to its restrictions, a day of repose, when "the weary are at rest, and the wicked cease from troubling;" a day from which care and labour are banished, and when the burthens of life are lightened from the shoulders of the

heavy laden. But to him who sincerely worships at the altar of true piety, and especially to one who has been led in infancy to the pure fountains of religion, the return of the long neglected sabbath brings up a train of pure and ecstatic recollections. To all it was the harbinger of peace, security, and civil order. It was delightful to see a whole community, who but recently had assembled only at the sound of the bugle, or by the glare of the beacon fire, now coming together by a spontaneous impulse, to mingle their hearts and voices in the rational and solemn exercises of religion. Insulated as that congregation was from the rest of mankind, the individuals composing it felt as if they were reunited with the great human family, when they resumed the performance of christian duties, and knelt before the Redeemer of men, in common with all Christendom, on his appointed day. Many of them had reared the altar of worship in their own families, and the sweet accents of praise had been heard, ascending through the gloom of the forest, mingled with the fiendish sound of the war-whoop, and the dissonant yell of the beast of prey; and they had seen days of moral darkness, of bodily anguish, of almost utter despair, when it seemed as if their prayers were not heard, and that God had abandoned that land to the blackness of darkness forever. But now He had set his bow in the heavens; His altar was publicly reared, and His presence sensibly felt; and they who believed in the reality of religion, felt assured that a sign was given them that they should not be destroyed from off the face of the land. Never did those simple and affecting words seem more appropriate, "How

beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace."

In the evening, when Mr Singleton and his daughter were about to return home, Edward Overton hastened to join them. Ellen had that day been among the number who became attached to the church, and deeply absorbed in devotional feelings, had abstracted her senses and thoughts from all other subjects. Edward had watched her with deep emotion, and he now approached her with a feeling of reverence, such as he had never felt towards her before. She extended her hand, and spoke to him with her usual kindness of manner, but in a tone in which seriousness was mingled with unwonted tenderness; and as he assisted her to mount her horse, whispered to him not to accompany them: "I cannot converse with you this evening, Edward," said she, "I wish to be alone, and I am sure that you will gratify me—come tomorrow." He saw the propriety of her request, and pressing her hand affectionately, bade her adieu, with a promise to visit her early the next morning.

The sun had just set as Mr Singleton and his daughter left the camp-ground, but having only a short distance to go, they were in no haste. It was a serene evening in September. The air was still and soft, and the sky had that richness and brilliancy of colour, which travellers describe as peculiar to the genial atmosphere of Italy. The leaves still hung upon the trees, and some of them retained their verdure, while others were tinged with yellow, brown, or deep scarlet, giving to the foliage every variety of hue. The wild fruits were abundant. The grape vines were loaded with purple clusters. The persimmon, the paw-paw and the crab-

apple, hung thick upon the trees, while the ground was strewed with nuts. Ellen, who was fatigued with the confinement of the day, enjoyed the exercise, and the balmy air of the evening, and felt that the passing moments were among the most delightful of her life. They were in unison with her feelings, and emblematic of her situation: she had passed the joyous spring of life, and a season of riper enjoyment, of serene quiet, and useful virtue was pictured to her fancy in agreeable perspective.

They had nearly reached home when they met one of their neighbours, with whom Mr Singleton wished to converse for a few moments; he therefore stopped, desiring Ellen to ride slowly forward. Absorbed in her own reflections, and not dreaming of danger, she gave the rein to her spirited horse, who, impatient to return to his stable, quickened his pace imperceptibly, and she was soon out of sight of her parent. But their dwelling was now in view, and she felt no alarm, until her horse suddenly stopped, and snuffed the air, as if in great terror. She had heard of the keenness of scent by which these animals discover the approach of an Indian, and the affright that they evince on such occasions; and feeling confident that nothing but the vicinity of a savage, or of some ferocious beast, could thus alarm her gentle nag, she attempted to rein him up, in order to return to her father. But the horse stood as if fixed to the ground, trembling, and snorting with an accent of agony; and before she could form any other resolution, a party of Indians, lying in ambush on each side of the road, rushed forward, and dragged her from her horse, while the high bred animal, becoming frantic with terror, tore the bridle,

which they had seized, from their grasp, and made his escape at full speed.

The savages having secured their prize, immediately began to retreat towards their towns at a rapid pace, forcing the afflicted girl to exert her utmost strength to keep up with them. It soon however grew dark, and they proceeded at a more deliberate gait, but still pursued their journey through the whole night, groping their way amid dense thickets beset with thorns and briars, and over ravines and the trunks of fallen trees, with ease to themselves, but with brutal violence to the delicate frame of their captive. Poor Ellen had need now of all the consolations which the religion that she had just professed could afford. She had been told that day that she would meet with afflictions that would try her faith, but that God would never forsake those who believed on him; and she now threw herself entirely upon him for protection. She prayed earnestly and sincerely [5q], and felt a conviction that she was heard. Her courage rose with her confidence, and she went forward without a murmur, resigned to meet her fate, whatever it might be. Ellen, too, was naturally a girl of good sense and high spirit, and while she humbly relied upon divine protection, saw also the propriety of exerting herself; and knowing that the Indians would soon be pursued, she deliberately laid plans to retard the retreat, and disclose their path. Keeping up an appearance of diligence and obedience, she contrived to linger at the various obstacles which obstructed their way, while she employed herself, whenever she could do so without attracting notice, in tearing off small pieces of her dress, and dropping such articles as she could dispense

with, in places where they would be likely to attract attention. The darkness of the night favoured this scheme; her reticule, handkerchief, &c. were thus strewed by the way, and in brushing through the thickets she broke the twigs with her hands, as signals to her pursuers.

The morning added to her griefs. The warrior who claimed her, and who seemed to be the leader of the party, having led her during the night by thongs of skin bound round her wrists, now removed the bands, and seemed to contemplate his prize with complacency. He assured her, in broken and barely intelligible English, of kind treatment, and promised that, if she behaved well, he would make her his wife. When Ellen shook her head in alarm, as if dissenting from this matrimonial arrangement, he said, "May be, you think I cannot support you. That is a mistake. The *Speckled Snake* is a great hunter. My lodge is on the bank of a great river, where the water is cold, and the big fish love to swim. The plains all round my village are covered with deer and buffaloe. The stars in the heavens are not so many as the cattle on our hunting grounds. The white man does not come there to destroy every thing that the Great Spirit made for his red people, like the hurricane when it sweeps through the woods. I can outrun the elk; I am stronger than the buffaloe; I am more cunning than the beaver. They call me the *Speckled Snake*, because I can conceal myself in the grass, so that my enemies step on me before they see me. I have only three squaws. I can support another very well, and my lodge is big enough for three or four more. You need not be afraid of my women treating you ill. I will beat them unmercifully if they strike you. My squaws fear me; I whip