



“Is the pale-faced stranger to know the love-secrets of the White Eagle?”—PAGE 76.

THE
WILD HUNTRESS,

OR,

LOVE IN THE WILDERNESS.

BY

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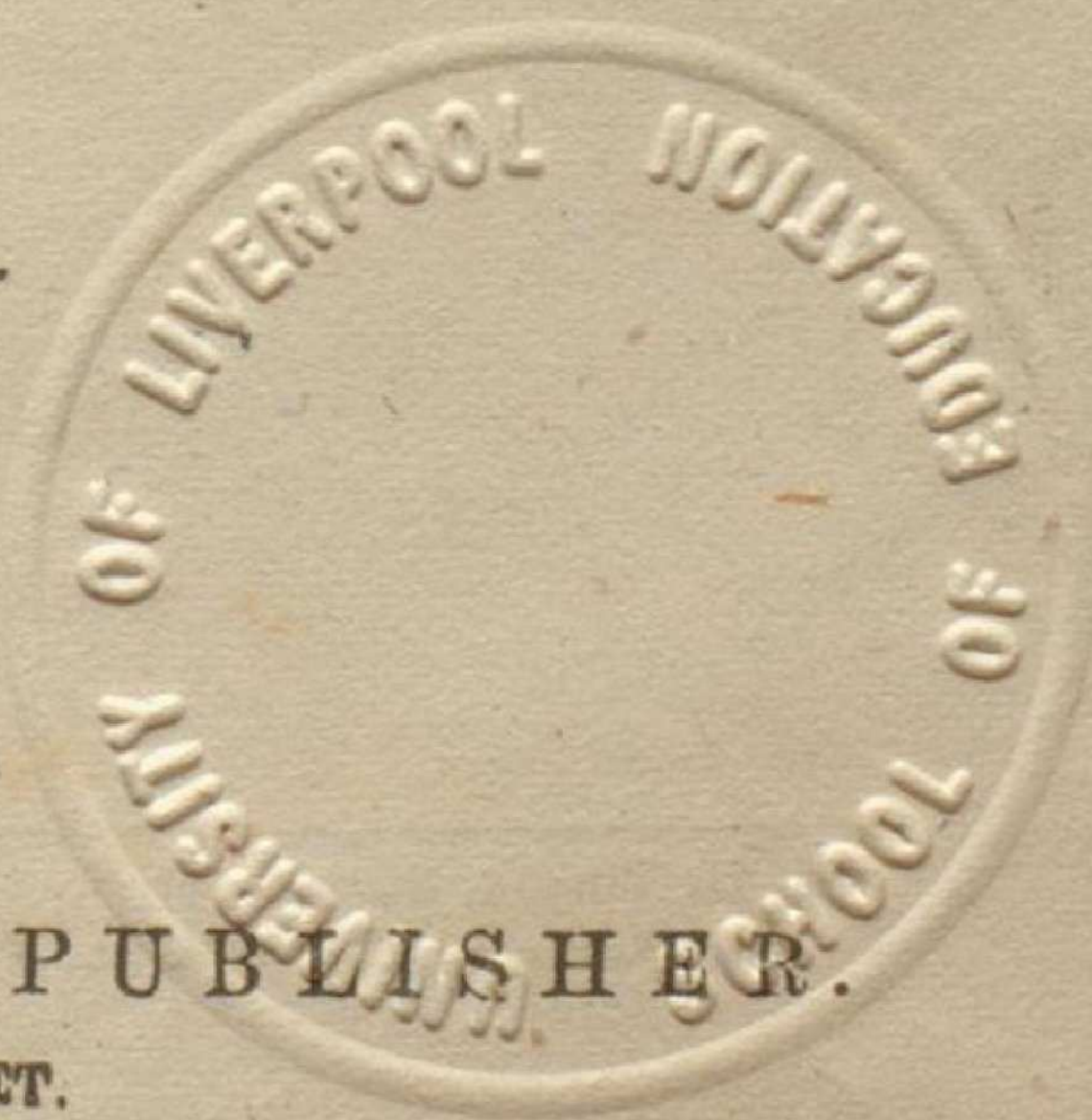
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"THE WAR-TRAIL," "OSCEOLA THE SEMINOLE," "WOOD-RANGERS," ETC.

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THE WILD HUNTRESS.

CHAPTER I.

THE SQUATTER'S CLEARING.

THE white-headed eagle, soaring over the spray of a Tennessean forest, looks down upon the clearing of the squatter. To the eye of the bird, it is alone visible ; and though but a spot in the midst of that immense green sea, it is conspicuous by the colour of the trees that stand over it. They stand, but grow not : the girdling ring around their stems has deprived them of their sap—the ivory bill of the *log-cock* has stripped them of their bark—their leaves and twigs have long since disappeared ; and only the trunks and greater branches remain, like blanched skeletons, with arms upstretched to heaven, as if mutely appealing for vengeance against their destroyer.

The squatter's clearing, therefore, still thus encumbered, is a mere vial opening in the woods, where the underwood alone has been removed. The more slender saplings have been cut down or rooted up—the tangle of parasitical plants has been torn from the trees—the cane-brake has been set on fire—and the brush, collected in heaps, has melted away upon the blazing pile. Only a few stumps of inferior thickness remain, as evidence that a little labour has been performed by the axe.

Even as it is, the clearing is a mere patch—scarcely two acres

in extent—and the rude rail fence, that zigzags around it, attests that the owner is satisfied with the dimensions of his agricultural domain. There are no recent marks of the axe—not even the ‘girdling’ of a tree—nothing to show that another rood is required. The squatter is essentially a hunter, and hates the sight of an extensive clearing, as he would the labour of making one.

The virgin forest is his domain, and he is not the man to rob it of its primeval charms. The sound of the lumberer’s axe, cheerful to the lonely traveller, has no music for the ear of the squatter; it is to him a note of evil augury—a knell of dread import. It is not often that he hears it: he dwells beyond the circle of its echoes. His nearest neighbour—a squatter like himself—lives at least a league off, and the most proximate ‘settlement’ is twice that distance from the spot he has chosen for his cabin. The smoke of his chimney mingles with that of no other; its tall column ascends to heaven, solitary as the squatter himself. The clearing is of an irregular semicircular shape—a deep, narrow stream forming the chord, and afterwards clearing its way through the otherwise unbroken forest; while in the convexity of the arc, at that point most remote from the water, stands the cabin—a log ‘shanty’ with ‘cla’-board’ roof—on one side flanked by a rude horse-shed, on the other by a corn-crib of split rails.

Such a picture is common enough in the backwoods of America; and some might deem it commonplace. For my part, I cannot regard it in this light. I have never looked upon this primitive homestead of the pioneer without being impressed with a peculiar feeling—one of pleasure. Something seems to impart to it an air of vague and mystic grandeur. Perhaps I associate the picture with the frame in which it is set—the magnificent forest that surrounds it, every aisle of which is redolent of romance. Such scenes are suggestive of border lore and legend—of perils by flood and field, always pleasant to be remembered—of desperate deeds of heroism performed by gallant

pioneers, or their equally gallant antagonists—that red chivalry who once strode proudly along the forest-path, but whose upright forms are no longer seen under the shadow of its trees.

Perhaps it is from reflections of this kind that I view with interest the clearing and cabin of the squatter; or perhaps it may be from having at one period encountered incidents in connection with such a scene, of a character never to be forgotten.

In a certain morning of mid-spring, perhaps the eye of the eagle soaring in the sky above, looked down upon just such a picture. If in winter it might be termed rude or commonplace, it now no longer merits the title: nature has girded on her robe of green, and by the touch of her magical wand, has toned down its rough features to an almost delicate softness. The young maize—planted in a soil that has lain fallow, perhaps for a thousand years—is rapidly culming upward; and the rich sheen of its long lance-like leaves, as they bend gracefully over, hides from view the sombre hues of the earth. The forest-trees appear with their foliage freshly expanded—some, as the tulip-tree, the dogwood, and the white magnolia, already in the act of inflorescence. The woods no longer maintain that monotonous silence which they have preserved throughout the winter: the red cardinal chatters among the cane: the blue jay screams in the pawpaw thicket—perhaps disturbed by the gliding of some slippery snake—while the mock-bird, regardless of such danger, from the top of a tall tulip-tree pours forth his matchless melody in sweet, ever-varying strain. The tiny bark of the squirrel, and the soft cooing of the Carolinian dove, may be heard among other sounds—the latter suggestive of earth’s noblest passion, as its utterer is the emblem of devotion itself. Other sounds are heard, perhaps less agreeable to the ear: the shrill ‘chirrup’ of cicadas and tree-toads ringing so incessantly, that only when they cease, do you become conscious of their existence—the dull ‘gluck-gluck’ of the great bull-frog, and the hoarse croak of the black vultures (*aura* and *cathartes*), that, perched upon the

tallest of the dead woods, press their foul beaks against its naked branches. Still less agreeable might appear the fierce miauling of the red *puma*—who has not yet retired to his lair—or the howl of the gaunt wolf; but not so to the ears of the awakened hunter, who, through the chinks of his lone cabin, listens to such sounds with a savage joy.

These fierce notes are now rare and exceptional—even in the backwoods—though, unlike the war-whoop of the Indian, they have not altogether departed. Occasionally, their echo may be heard through the aisles of the forest, but only in its deepest recesses—only in those remote river ‘bottoms’ where the squatter delights to dwell. Even there, they are heard only at night and in the morning to give place to softer and sweeter sounds.

Fancy, then, a fine morning in June—a sunshine that turns all it touches into gold—an atmosphere laden with the perfume of wild-flowers—the hum of honey-seeking bees—the songs of birds commingling in sweetest melody—and you have the *mise en scène* of a squatter’s cabin on the banks of the Obion, half an hour after the rising of the sun. Can such a picture be called *commonplace*?—rather say it is enchanting.

And well might this be said of it, the moment after. In another instant, the bright sunshine, the forest glories of green and gold, the bird-music among the trees, the flowery aroma in the air, were no longer needed to give grace to the clearing of squatter. It signified not that it was a morning in the middle of June: had it been the dreariest day of December, the effect would have been the same; and this resembled enchantment itself. The rude hut seemed at once changed into a palace—the dead trunks became Corinthian columns carved out of white marble—their stiff branches appeared to bend gracefully over, like the leaves of the recurvent *acanthus*—and the enclosure of carelessly tended maize-plants assumed the aspect of some fair garden of the Hesperides!

The explanation is easy. Magic is not needed to account for

the transformation, since there exists a far more powerful form of enchantment in the divine presence of female beauty. And it was present there, in its distinct varieties of *dark* and *fair*—typified in the persons of two young girls who came forth from the cabin of the squatter: more than typified—completely symbolised—for in these two young girls there appeared not one point of resemblance, save the possession of a perfect beauty. The eye of the soaring eagle might not discover their charms—as did the bird of Jove those of the lovely Leda—but no *human* eye could have gazed for a moment on either one, without receiving the impression that it was looking upon the loveliest object on earth. This impression could only be altered, by turning to gaze upon the other.

Who are these young creatures? Sisters? There is nothing in their appearance to suggest the gentle relationship. One is tall, dark, and dark-haired, of that golden-brown complexion usually styled *brunette*. Her nose is slightly aquiline, and her eye of the oblique Indian type. Other features present an Indian character, especially observable in the nation of the Chicasaws, the former lords of this great forest. She may have Indian blood in her veins, but her complexion is too light for that of a pure Indian.

Her dress strengthens the impression that she is a *half-blood*. The skirt is of the common home-spun of the backwoods, striped with a yellowish dye; but the green bodice is of finer stuff, with more pretensions to style; and her neck and wrists are embraced by a variety of those glancing circlets, so seductive in the eyes of an Indian belle. The buskin-moccasin is purely Indian, and its lines of bead-embroidery gracefully adapt themselves to the outlines of feet and ankles of perfect form. The absence of a head-dress is another point of Indian resemblance. The luxuriant black hair is plaited, and coiled like a coronet around the head. There are no combs or pins of gold, but in their place a red flower—the trumpet-shaped blossom of a *bignonia*. This,

set coquettishly behind the plaits, shews that some little attention has been given to the toilet; and simple though it be, the peculiar *coiffure* imparts that air usually styled 'commanding.'

Although there is nothing masculine in this young girl's beauty, a single glance at her features impresses you with the idea of a character of no ordinary kind—a nature more resolute than tender—a heart endowed with courage equalling that of a man. The idea is strengthened by the observation, that in her hand she carries a light rifle; while a horn and bullet-pouch, suspended from her left shoulder, hang under the right arm. She is not the only backwoods maiden who may be seen thus armed and accoutered; many are even skilled in the use of the deadly weapon!

In striking contrast with all this is the appearance of her companion. The impression the eye receives in looking on the latter is that of something soft and beautiful, of a glorious golden hue: it is the reflection of bright amber-coloured hair on a blond skin tinted with vermillion, imparting a sort of luminous radiance divinely feminine. Scrutinise this countenance more closely; and you perceive that the features are in perfect harmony with each other, and harmonise with the complexion. You behold a face, such as the Athenian fancy has elaborated into an almost living reality in the goddess Cytherea.

This creature of golden roseate hue is yet very young—scarcely more than a child; but in the blue sky above her burns a fiery sun; and in twelve months she will be a woman.

Her costume is still more simple than that of her companion: a sleeved dress of the same striped home-spun, loosely worn, and open at the breast; her fine amber-coloured hair the only covering for her head—as it is the only shawl upon her shoulders over which it falls in ample luxuriance. A string of pearls around her neck—false pearls, poor thing!—is the only effort that vanity seems to have made, for there is no other adornment. Even shoes and stockings are wanting; but the most costly *chaussure* could not add to the elegance of those little *mignon* feet.

Who are they—these fair flowers of the forest?

Let the mystery end. They *are* sisters, though not the children of one mother; they are the daughters of the hunter—the owner of the cabin and clearing—his only children.

Happy hunter! poor you may be, and your home lowly; it can never be lonely in such companionship. The proudest prince may envy you the possession of two such treasures—beyond parallel, beyond price!

CHAPTER II.

MARIAN AND LILIAN.

PASSING outward from the door, the two young girls paused in their steps; an object had attracted their attention. A large dog was seen running out from the shed, a gaunt, fierce-looking animal, that answered to the very appropriate name of 'Wolf.' He approached the sisters, and saluted them with an unwilling wag of his tail. It seemed as though he could not look pleased even while seeking a favour—for this was evidently the purpose that had brought him forth from his lair in the shed. He appealed especially to the older of the girls—Marian.

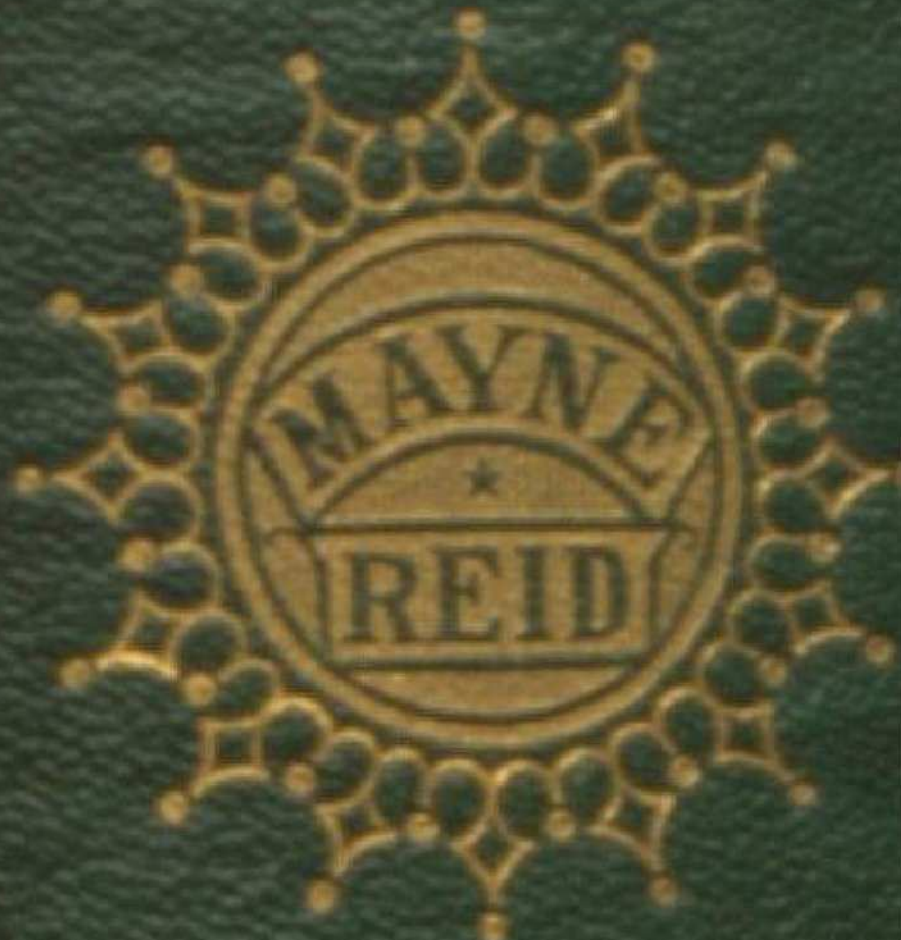
'Ho, Wolf, I see your sides are thin, old fellow: you want your breakfast? What can we give him, Lil?'

'Indeed, sister, I know not what.'

'There is some deer-meat inside?'

'Ah, I fear father will not allow Wolf to have that. I heard him say he expected one to take dinner with him to-day? You know who?'

An arch smile accompanied the half-interrogatory; but for all that, the words did not appear to produce a pleasant effect. On



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