The American Novelist.

From the New-York Commercial Advertiser.

The Pioneers.—We have given below a chapter from this new descriptive novel, which will make its appearance about the 1st proximo. It is a description of the Christmas sport which almost universally prevailed in the interior of this State until within a few years, and even now, for any thing that we know to the contrary. From personal knowledge we can pronounce it 'a touch to the life.'

"I guess by all this quaint array
The burghers hold their sports to-day.
Scott.

The ancient amusement of shooting the Christmas turkey is one of the few sports that the settlers of a new country seldom or never neglect to observe It was connected with the daily practices of a people who often laid aside the axe or the sithe, to seize the rifle, as the deer glided thro' the forests they were felling, or a bear entered their rough meadow, to scent the air of a clearing, and to scan, with a look of sagacity, the progress of the invader.

On the present occasion, the usual amusement of the day had been a little hastened, in order to allow a fair opportunity to Mr Grant, whose exhibition was not less a treat to the young sportsmen than the one which engaged their present attention. The owner of the birds was a free black, who had been preparing for the occasion a collection of game, that was admirably qualified to inflame the appetite of an epicure, and was well adapted to the means and skill of the different competitors, who were all of ages. He had offered to the younger and more humble marksmen divers birds of an inferior quality, and some shooting had already taken place, much to the pecuniary advantage of the sable owner of the game. The order of the sports was extremely simple, and well understood. The bird was fastened by a string of tow to the base of the stump of a large pine, the side of which, towards the point where the marksmen were placed, had been flattened with an axe, in order to serve the purpose of a target, by which the merit of each individual might be ascertained. The distance between the stump and this point was one hundred measured yards; a foot more or a foot less being thought an invasion of the rights of one of the parties. The negro affixed his own price to every bird, and the terms of the chance; but when these were once established, he was obliged, by the strict principles of public justice that prevailed in the country, to admit any adventurer who chose to offer.

The throng consisted of some twenty or thirty young men, most of whom had rifles, and a collection of all the boys in the village. The little urchins, clad in coarse but warm garments, stood gathered around the more distinguished marksmen, with their hands stuck under their waistbands, listening eagerly to the boastful stories of skill that had been exhibited on former occasions, and were already emulating in their hearts these wonderful deeds in gunnery.

The chief speaker was the man who had been mentioned by Natty, as Billy Kirby. This fellow, whose occupation, when he did labor, was that of clearing lands, or chopping jobs, was of great stature, and carried in his very air the index of his character. He was a noisy, boisterous, reckless lad, whose good natured eye contradicted the bluntness and bullying tenor of his speech. For weeks he would lounge around the taverns of the county, in a state of perfect idleness, or doing small jobs for his liquor and his meals, and cavilling with applicants about the prices of his labor; frequently preferring idleness to an abatement of a tittle of his independence, or a cent in his wages. But when these embarrassing points were once satisfactorily arranged, he would shoulder his axe and his rifle, slip his arms through the straps of his pack, and enter the woods with the tread of a Hercules. His first object was to learn his limits, round which he paced, occasionally freshening, with a blow of his axe, the marks on the boundary trees—Then he would proceed, with an air of great deliberation, to the centre of his premises, and throwing aside his superfluous garments, he would measure, with a knowing eye, one or two of the nearest trees, that were towering apparently into the very clouds, as he gazed upward.—Commonly selecting one of the most noble, for the first trial of his power, he approached it with a listless air, whistling a low tune; and wielding his axe, with a certain flourish not unlike the salutes of a fencing-master, he would strike a light blow into the bark, and measure his distance. The pause that followed was ominous of the fall of the forest, that had flourished there for centuries. The heavy and brisk blows he struck, were soon succeeded by the thundering report of the tree, as it came, first cracking and threatening with the separation of its own last ligaments, then thrashing and tearing with its branches the tops of its surrounding brethren, and finally meeting the ground, with a shock but little inferior to an earthquake. From that moment, the sounds of the axe would be ceaseless, while the falling of the trees was like a distant cannonading; and the daylight broke into the depths of the woods, with almost the suddenness of a morning in winter.

For days, weeks, nay months, Billy Kirby would toil with an ardor that evinced his native spirit, and with an effect that seemed magical; until, his chopping being ended, his stentorian lungs could be heard, emitting sounds, as he called to his patient oxen, which rung through the hills like the cries of an alarm. He had been often heard, on a mild summer's evening, a long mile across the vale of Templeton; the echoes from the mountains taking up his cries, until they died away in feeble sounds, from the distant rocks that overhung the lake His piles, or, to use the language of the country, his logging, ended, with a dispatch that could only accompany his dexterity and Herculean strength, the jobber would collect together his implements of labor, light the heaps of timber, and march away, under the blaze of the prostrate forest, like the conqueror of some city, who having first prevailed over his adversary, places the final torch of destruction, as the finishing blow to his conquest For a long time Billy Kirby would then be seen sauntering around the taverns, the rider of scrub races, the bully of cock-fights, and not unfrequently, the hero of such sports as the one in hand.

Between him and the Leather-stocking there had long existed a jealous rivalry, on the point of their respective skill in shooting. Notwithstanding the long practice of Natty, it was commonly supposed that the steady nerves and quick eye of the woodchopper rendered him his equal Their competition had, however, been confined, hitherto, to boastings, and comparisons made from their successes in their various hunting excursions; but the present occasion was the first time that they had ever come in open collision A good deal of higgling, about the price of a shot at the choicest bird, had taken place between Billy Kirby and its owner, before Natty and his companions rejoined the sportsmen. It had however been settled at one shilling a shot, which was the highest sum ever exacted, the black taking care to protect himself from losses, as much as possible, by the conditions of the sport. The turkey was already fastened at the "mark," its body being entirely hid by the surrounding snow, and nothing left visible but its red swelling head, and long proud neck If the bird was injured by any bullet that struck beneath the snow, it was still to continue the property of its present owner; but if a feather was touched in the visible part, the animal became the prize of the successful adventurer.

These terms were loudly proclaimed from the mouth of the negro, who was seated in the snow, in a somewhat hazardous vicinity to his favorite bird, as Elizabeth and her cousin approached the noisy sportsmen. The sounds of mirth and contention sensibly lowered at this unexpected visit; but after a moment's pause, the curious interest exhibited in the face of the young lady, together with her smiling air, restored the freedom of the morning; though it was somewhat chastened, both in language and vehemence, by the presence of such a spectator to their proceedings.

'Stand out of the way, there, boys,' cried the wood-chopper, who was placing himself at the shooting-point—'stand out of the way, you little rascals, or I will shoot through you. Now, Brom, you may say good-by to that turkey.'

'Stop!' cried the young hunter; 'I am a candidate for a chance too. Here is my shilling, Brom; I wish a shot too.'

'You may wish it in welcome,' cried Kirby; 'but if I ruffle the gobbler's feathers, how are you to get it? Is money so plenty in your deer-skin pocket that you pay it for a chance you may never have?'

'How know you, sir, how plenty money is in my pocket?' said the youth, fiercely. 'Here is my shilling, Brom, and I claim a right to shoot.'

'Don't be crabbed, my boy,' said the other, who was very coolly fixing his flint. 'They say you have a hole in your left shoulder, yourself; so I think Brom may give you a fire for half price. It will take a keen one to hit that bird, I can tell you, my lad, even if I give you a chance, which is a thing I have no mind to do.'

'Don't be boasting, Billy Kirby,' said Natty, throwing the breech of his rifle into the snow, and leaning on its barrel; 'you'll get but one shot at the creater, for if the lad misses his aim, which would'nt be a wonder if he did, with his arm so stiff and sore, you'll find a good piece and an old eye comin a'ter you. Maybe it's true, that I can't shoot as I used to could, but a hundred yards is but a short distance for a long rifle.'

'What, old Leather-stocking, are you out this morning?' cried his reckless opponent. 'Well, fair play's a jewel But I've the lead of you, old fellow; and so here goes, for a dry throat or a good dinner.'

The countenance of the negro evinced not only all the interest which his pecuniary adventure might occasion, but also the keen excitement that the sport produced in the others, though certainly with a very different wish as to the result.—While the wood-chopper was slowly and steadily raising his rifle, he exclaimed—

'Fair play, Billy Kirby—stand back—make 'em stand back, boys—gib a nigger fair play—poss up, gobbler; shake a head, fool; don't a see 'em poking gun at 'em?'

These cries, which were intended as much to distract the attention of the marksman as for any thing else, were, however, fruitless. The nerves of the wood-chopper were not so easily shaken, and he took his aim with the utmost deliberation. The dead stillness of expectation prevailed for a moment, and he fired. The head of the turkey was seen to dash on one side, and its wings were spread in momentary fluttering; but it settled itself down, calmly, into its bed of snow, and glanced its eyes uneasily around. For a time long enough to draw a deep breath, not a sound was heard. The silence was then broken by the noise of the negro, who laughed, and shook his body, with all kinds of antics, rolling over in the snow with the excess of his delight.

'Well done a gobbler,' he cried, jumping up, and affecting to embrace his bird; 'I tell 'em to poss up, and you see 'em dodge. Gib anoder shillin, Billy, and hab anoder shot.'

'No—the shot is mine,' said the young hunter; 'you have my money already. Leave the mark, and let me try my luck.'

'Ah! it's but money thrown away, lad' said Leather stocking. 'A turkey's head and neck is but a small mark for a new hand and a lame shoulder. You'd best let me take the fire, and may be we can make some settlement with the lady about the bird'

'The chance is mine,' said the young hunter. 'Clear the ground, that I may take it.'

The discussions and disputes concerning the last shot were now abating, it having been determined, that if the turkey's head had been any where but just where it was at the moment, the bird must certainly have been killed. There was not much excitement produced by the preparations of the youth, who proceeded in a hurried manner to take his aim, and was in the act of pulling the trigger, when he was stopped by Natty.

'Your hand shakes, lad,' he said, 'and you seem over eager. Bullet wounds are apt to weaken the flesh, and, to my judgment, you'll not shoot so well as in common. If you will fire, you should shoot quick before there is time to shake off the aim.'

'Fair play!' again shouted the negro; 'fair play—gib a nigger fair play! What right a Natty Bumppo tell a young man? Let 'em shoot—clear a ground.'

The youth fired with great rapidity; but no motion was made by the turkey; and when the examiners for the ball returned from the 'mark,' they declared that he had missed the stump.

Elizabeth observed the change in his countenance, and could not help feeling surprise that one evidently so superior to his companions should feel a trifling loss so sensibly But her own champion was now preparing to enter the list.

The mirth of Brom, which had been again excited, though in a much smaller degree than before, by the failure of the second adventurer, vanished the instant that Natty took his stand. His skin became mottled with large brown spots, that sullied the lustre of his native ebony most fearfully, while his enormous lips gradually compressed around the two rows of ivory that had hitherto been shining in his visage like pearls set in jet. His nostrils, at all times the most conspicuous features of his face, dilated, until they covered the greater part of the diameter of his countenance; while his brown and bony hands unconsciously grasped the snow-crust near him, the excitement of the moment completely overcoming his native dread of cold.

While these indications of apprehension were exhibited in the sable owner of the turkey, the man who gave rise to this extraordinary emotion was as calm and collected as if there was not to be a single spectator of his skill.

'It was down in the Dutch settlements on the Schoharie,' said Natty, who was carefully removing the leathern guard from the lock of his rifle, 'just before the breaking out of the last war, and there was a shooting-match amongst the boys; so I took a hand in it myself. I think I opened a good many Dutch eyes that very day, for I won the powder horn, three pounds of lead, and a pound of as good powder as ever flashed in the pan of a gun Lord! how they did swear in German! They did tell of one drunken Dutchman, who said he'd have the life of me before I got back to the lakes ag'in. But if he had put his rifle to his shoulder with evil intent, God would have punished him for it; and even if the Lord didn't, and he had missed his aim, I know one that would have given him as good as he sent, and better too if good shooting could come into the 'count.'

By this time the old hunter was ready for his business, and, throwing his right leg far behind him, and stretching his left arm along the barrel of his piece, he raised it towards the bird. Every eye glanced rapidly from the marksman to the mark; but at the moment when each ear was expecting the report of the rifle, they were disappointed by the ticking sound of the flint only.

'A snap—a snap,' shouted the negro, springing from his crouching posture, like a madman, before his bird. 'A snap as good as fire—Natty Bumppo gun he snap—Natty Bumppo miss a turkey.'

'Natty Bumppo hit a nigger,' said the indignant old hunter, 'if you don't get out of the way, Brom. It's contrary to the reason of the thing, boy, that a snap should count for a fire, when one is nothing more than a fire-stone striking a steel pan, and the other is good lead, ay! and with a good aim; so get out of my way, boy, and let me shew Billy Kirby how to shoot a Christmas turkey'

'Gib a nigger fair play!" cried the black, who continued resolutely to maintain his post. 'Ebbery body know that snap as good as fire. Leab it to Massa Jone—leab it to lady.'

'Sartain,' said the wood-chopper; 'it's the law of the game, in this part of the country, Leather-stocking. If you fire ag'in you must pay up the other shilling. I b'lieve I'll try luck once more myself; so, Brom, here's my money, and I take the next fire.'

'It's likely you know the laws of the woods better than I do, Billy Kirby!' returned Natty. 'You come in with the settlers, with an ox-goad in your hand, and I come in with moccasons on my feet, and a good rifle on my shoulder, so long back as afore the old war; which is likely to know best! I say, no man need tell me that snapping is as good as firing, when I pull the trigger.

'Leab it to Massa Jone,' said the alarmed negro; 'he knows ebery ting.'

This appeal to the knowledge of Richard was too flattering to be unheeded.—He therefore advanced a little from the spot, whither the delicacy of Elizabeth had induced her to withdraw, and gave the following opinion, with all the gravity that the subject and his own rank demanded:

'There seems to be a difference in opinion,' he said, 'on the subject of Nathaniel Bumppo's right to shoot at Abraham Freeborn's turkey, without the said Nathaniel paying one shilling for the privilege.' This fact was too self-evident to be denied, and after pausing a moment, that the audience might digest his premises, Richard proceeded:—'It seems proper that I should decide this question, as I am bound to preserve the peace of the county; and men with deadly weapons in their hands should not be heedlessly left to contention, and their own malignant passions. It seems that there was no agreement, either in writing or in words, on the disputed point; therefore we must reason from analogy, which is, as it were, comparing one thing with another. Now, in duels, where both parties shoot, it is generally the rule, that a snap is a fire; and if such is the rule, where the party has a right to fire back again, it seems to me unreasonable, to say that a man may stand snapping at that turkey all day. I therefore am of opinion, that Nathaniel Bumppo has lost his chance, and must pay another shilling before he renews his right.'

As this opinion came from such a high quarter, and was delivered with so much effect, it silenced all murmurs, for the whole of the spectators had begun to take sides with great warmth, except from the Leather stocking himself.

'I think Miss Elizabeth's thoughts should be taken,' said Natty. 'I've known the squaw give very good counsel, when the Indians have been dumbfoundered in their notions. If she says that I ought to lose, I agree to give it up'

'Then I adjudge you to be a loser, for this time,' said Miss Temple; 'but pay your money, and renew your chance; unless Brom will sell me the bird for a dollar. I will give him the money to save the life of the poor victim.'

This proposition was evidently but little relished by any of the listeners, even the negro feeling unwilling to lose the sport, though he lost his turkey. In the mean while, as Billy Kirby was preparing himself for another shot, Natty left the goal, with an extremely dissatisfied manner, muttering to himself, and speaking aloud—

'There hasn't been such a thing as a good flint sold at the foot of the lake, sin' the time when the Indian traders used to come into the country; and if a body should go into the flats, or along the streams in the hills, to hunt for such a thing, it's ten to one but they be all covered up with the plough. Heigho! it seems to me, that just as the game grows scarce, and a body wants the best of ammunition, to get a livelihood, every thing that's bad falls on him like a judgment. But I'll change the stone, for Billy Kirby hasn't the eye for such a mark, I know.'

The wood-chopper seemed now entirely sensible that his reputation, in a great measure, depended on his care; nor did he neglect any means to insure his success. He drew up his rifle, and renewed his aim, again and again, still appearing reluctant to fire. No sound was heard from even Brom, during these portentous movements, until Kirby discharged his piece, with the same want of success as before. Then, indeed, the shouts of the negro rung through the bushes, and sounded among the trees of the neighboring forest, like the outcries of a tribe of Indians. He laughed, rolling his head, first on one side, then on the other, until nature seemed exhausted with mirth.—He danced, until his legs were wearied with motion in the snow; and, in short, he exhibited all that violence of joy that characterizes the mirth of a thoughtless negro.

The wood-chopper had exerted all his art, and felt a proportionate degree of disappointment at his failure He first examined the bird with the utmost attention, and more than once suggested that he had touched its feathers; but the voice of the multitude was against him, for it felt disposed to listen to the so often repeated cries of the black, to 'gib a nigger fair play.'

Finding it impossible to make out a title to the bird, Kirby turned fiercely to the black, and said—

'Shut your oven, you crow! Where is the man that can hit a turkey's head at a hundred yards? I was a fool for trying. You needn't make an uproar, like a falling pine tree, about it. Show me the man who can do it.'

'Look this a-way, Billy Kirby,' said Leather-stocking, 'and let them clear the mark, and I'll show you a man who's made better shots before now, and that when he's been hard pressed by the savages and wild beasts.'

'Perhaps there is one whose right comes before ours, Leather-stocking,' said Miss Temple; 'if so, we will waive our privilege.'

'If it be me that you have reference to, madam,' said the young hunter, 'I shall decline another chance. My shoulder is yet weak, I find.'

Elizabeth regarded his proud but forced manner, and even thought that she could discern a tinge on his cheek, that spoke the shame of conscious poverty. She said no more, but suffered her own champion to make a trial.

Although Natty Bumppo had certainly made hundreds of more momentous shots at his enemies or his game, yet he never exerted himself more to excel. He raised his piece three several times; once to get his range; once to calculate his distance; and once because the bird, alarmed by the death-like stillness that prevailed, turned its head quickly to examine its foes. But the fourth time he fired—The smoke, the report, and the momentary shock, prevented most of the spectators from instantly knowing the result; but Elizabeth, when she saw her champion drop the end of his rifle in the snow, and open his mouth in one of its silent laughs, and then proceeded, very coolly, to re-load his piece, knew that he had been successful. The boys rushed to the mark, and lifted the turkey on high, lifeless, and with nothing but the remnant of a head.

'Bring in the creater,' said Leather-stocking, 'and put it at the feet of the lady. I was her deputy in the matter, and the bird is her property.'

'And a good deputy you have proved yourself,' returned Elizabeth—'so good, cousin Richard, that I would advise you to remember his qualities.' She paused, and the gaiety that beamed on her face gave place to a more serious earnestness. She even blushed a little, as she turned to the young hunter, and, with the insinuating charm of a woman's best manner, added—'But it was only to see an exhibition of the far-famed skill of Leather-stocking, that I tried my fortunes Will you, sir, accept the bird, as a small peace-offering for the hurt that prevented your own success?'

The expression with which the youth received this present was indescribable. He appeared to yield to the exquisite blandishment of her air, in opposition to a strong inward impulse to the contrary.—He bowed, and raised the victim silently from her feet, but continued silent

Elizabeth handed the black a piece of silver, as a remuneration for his loss, which had some effect in again unbending his muscles, and then expressed to her companion her readiness to return homeward.