

CHAPTER X.

A FRUIT RANCH ON THE SACRAMENTO RIVER.

THE fruit of California is now known of all men, and women too, at least in our own country; but all do not know it in its best estate. Most varieties are not improved by age. To appreciate its delicate flavors and sweet lusciousness, it must be eaten where it grows, and tasted not long after it has left its parent stem.

It was my good fortune to spend several weeks upon a ranch that is esteemed one of the best in the State for fruit-growing. I thought myself happy to be there, not once only, but thrice at different seasons of the year, and have therefore had a chance to make myself thoroughly acquainted with the various operations by which such a ranch is carried on.

One of these visits occurred in the delectable season of the vintage. Shall I ever forget those delicious black Hamburg grapes? The white muscats commend themselves to the taste of many, and gain their preference; but as for me, give me Hamburgers, black, juicy and rich, and I will let who will have the others. The only fault I have to find with them is, they tempt too strongly to over-indulgence.

The ranch in question is situated on the Sacramento river, about a score of miles below the renowned city of that name. The land lying along the river between Sacramento and San Francisco is considered as good as any

in the State for fruit-raising, and is principally devoted to that purpose. The river affects the soil for about forty rods back from the bank, so that to that extent the fruit never fails from want of moisture. On the east side of the stream a levee protects the country from the overflow of its waters, from which there was formerly so much inconvenience and loss.

San Francisco is the market for the fruit, as well as all the other products of these ranches. Nothing is ever carried to Sacramento, though so near.

The large boats that ply between that place and San Francisco make but few landings, and do scarcely any of the way business. Two small sized steamers come up and go down on alternate days, and do a sort of general carrying trade. They go from ranch to ranch gathering up the baskets and boxes filled with fruit, and leaving the empty ones that are sent back by the consignees. Crossing the river diagonally is about all the headway gained sometimes for miles. As many as five thousand packages are handled by the men on these boats during a single trip, and the average number is about three thousand.

Apples, pears and grapes are shipped in boxes; most other kinds of fruit are sent in baskets. In this shape they are consigned to dealers in San Francisco, who, of course, have a percentage on the sales. The baskets and boxes are returned when emptied, as a general rule. Sometimes, in exceptional cases, the fruit is sold in and with that which contains it.

The ranch which is the subject of this writing was bought some fifteen years ago by the present owner at a cost of fifty-five hundred dollars. It was at the time of

purchase partially cultivated, and had beginnings of a fruit orchard upon it. It contains one section of land—six hundred and forty acres. The entire river frontage, about sixty acres, is in fruit. Of this, fifteen acres are in grapes and seven in pears; the remainder is divided between apples, apricots, cherries, plums, peaches and figs. The annual income of the ranch for the last few years has been from eight to twelve thousand dollars clear of all expenses.

Pears are the first fruit sent to market. These are dispatched the last of May, and those sent earliest command large prices, sometimes reaching as high as twelve cents per pound. The Madeline pear is the earliest; it is a very poor excuse for a pear, and later in the season would not sell at any price. A box of pears contains forty pounds. About two thousand boxes of this fruit are sent to market in a season, which bring an average price of one dollar and seventy-five cents per box. One hundred and fifty baskets of plums are sold at one dollar per basket. One hundred baskets of figs at from seventy-five cents to one dollar and fifty cents per basket. Fifty boxes of quinces at an average of one dollar per box; and three thousand boxes of apples at an average of one dollar and twenty-five cents per box. The receipts for cherries amounted to five hundred dollars. The vineyard furnished fifteen hundred boxes of grapes, the black Hamburgs averaging one dollar and fifty cents per box, and the white muscats two dollars. There were more than twice as many muscats produced than there were Hamburgs.

This is the product of the sixty acres of river frontage. There are five hundred and eighty acres of land to be used

for other purposes. From this amount two hundred must be subtracted for tule lands, one-half of which is a lake, the water being too deep for the tule to grow. Once or twice since the present owner has been in possession, the year being exceptionally dry, the lake has been so low that the ground has been cultivated. The soil is unsurpassed in richness. Such quantities of melons as were grown on a small extent of space, and vegetables in such numbers and in such multitudes, that it would strain the faith of any who were uninitiated to believe. A system of drainage is all that is needed to convert these tule lands into the richest and most productive soil.

The residue of the ranch is devoted to dairy purposes. There are kept upon it about forty cows, from which there is a yield of one hundred pounds of butter per week. This is sent to San Francisco, where it is sold at the average price of thirty-seven and a half cents per pound. The cows are not housed in winter, though they are fed a part of the time. There are fifty acres of alfalfa, or Chili clover, which is a species of lucern. This is wonderfully productive. The cattle are allowed to feed upon it from November until May, when they are turned off, and after that three crops are cut for hay, one crop being permitted to stand until the seed is ripe. This seed commands a ready sale in the market, and averages the owner about five hundred dollars per annum. About five hundred dollars' worth of beef is sold annually, the cattle bringing thirty-five dollars per head.

Of course, the master does not sleep while these processes go on. He is a prompt and attentive business man, and everything is kept up to the mark; but his is a life

wonderfully free from anxiety and that kind of fluctuating between hope and fear that is so wearing. There never has been a failure of crop, and apparently there is no danger of it. As long as the blessed sunshine comes to give richness to the pear and sweetness to the grape, so long will the harvest be gathered in.

None but Chinamen are employed on the ranch. The owner will have nothing to do with any other laborers, because he finds in these faithfulness and obedience—qualities which he looks for in vain in any other race. From six to ten Chinamen are kept at work all the time. In the season of gathering the fruit this force is sometimes doubled. In the winter time—winter by courtesy—they plow, prune, graft and transplant. There is no suspension of operations on account of frozen ground or inclement weather, though, of course, there is occasionally a rainy day when nothing can be done. One of the Chinamen has been employed six or seven years, and acts as interpreter and foreman. The laborers receive twenty-eight or thirty dollars per month and board themselves.

The statement of a fact will show to what extent the owner of this ranch trusts the Chinamen in his employ. Three years ago he went east twice; the first time in March, to accompany his family on a visit to their old home in Ohio. In September he went again to bring them back, and each time he was gone six weeks. During both absences he left the Chinamen in charge on his ranch. The whole business was in their hands. They gathered and shipped the fruit and attended to whatever was needed. Of course, as the fruit was consigned, there was nothing to be done in the way of making sales. When the mas-

ter returned he found everything in a satisfactory condition. The Chinamen had been faithful to the charge they had to keep.

This ranch is one hundred miles from the Golden Gate, and both the wind and tide reach it and affect the situation. There is enough of the influence of the trade-winds during the summer to counteract the intense heat of the sun, and it is very seldom uncomfortably hot. Here, as almost everywhere in California, the nights are cool and delightful.