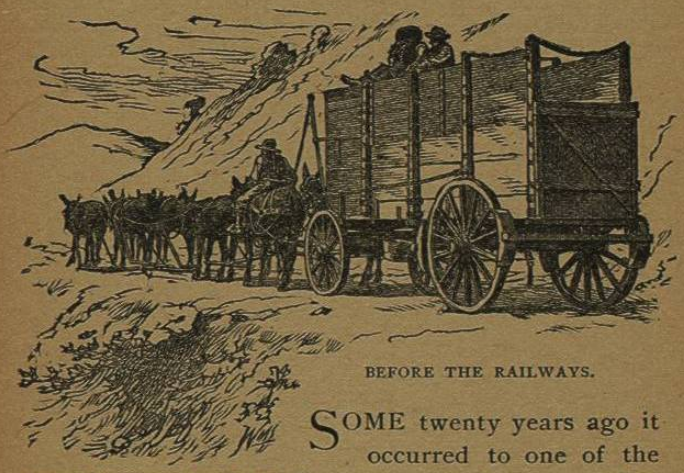
with an old gray horse. "*Ya ha benido,*" she said; "I knew something would happen when you came."

What had happened was more to her than all that was gone; a companion for the endless misery and squalor which she considered life; the pitiable beast of burden who shared the savage lot, and a silver half-dollar. When I arose to go I asked her if she thought this was really one of the days when everything went wrong. For the first time she laughed, and in the middle of her brown face, and between those uncomely lips, I saw the glistening rows of white and perfect teeth which are nature's almost only gift of comeliness to the aborigine of California.

CHAPTER IX.

SOME "ARGONAUTS."



BEFORE THE RAILWAYS.

SOME twenty years ago it occurred to one of the most brilliant and indolent geniuses this country has produced to bestow a generic title, a classic name, upon that remarkable body of men who were the first Americans to truly know California. Those were golden days, and their coming was not in vain. For then, and almost only then, did the placer yield for a body of hopeful adventurers a yellow store that could be known by sight as Gold. No capital was required; nothing but a pick, a shovel, a pan, a "cradle," "grub" and pluck. This last quality acquired among them the name of "sand," and they had it, and in many cases it was all they had. But

by it they acquired, in connection with that which they came for, the name of Argonauts, which in a sense, they truly were.

Most of them were young when they came, and only those who were yet survive. Nearly all, sooner or later, returned to "the States" and to a course of life not unusual, and have long since more than half forgotten all the wisdom of those times, applicable only to them and their circumstances, and confined to the Pacific coast exclusively. Many a deacon in good standing now was not so then. Many an one who might have been so if he had stayed at home, had his chances for being thus distinguished spoiled by an experience now impossible in any corner of the world.

To some, perhaps to most, who remained in California, was reserved a destiny of which they were not, and are not now, entirely conscious. They rarely or never married, but this not extraordinary circumstance must be taken in connection with another; that in the nature of the case they have, all their lives almost, lacked the subtle influence of woman. Mountain and wood and stream, and other men, have been their companions, and now at sixty they are what is termed "peculiar"; oddities; semi-misanthropic; lacking faith in the very axioms of life; not governed by the experience which is almost the common inheritance of the race. Wherever they finally go they are singularly inclined to live alone, and to make their own beds, and do their own cooking and washing, and they care not in what solitary nook the one-room house they call home is placed.

And these veterans of the old time, these Argonautic relics, are not disposed to shun association with their fellow-men. They want it, and like it, but they take it curiously. A thousand common ideas and experiences are new to them, and, indeed, the very commonest are the newest. An ordinary fatuity is to wish to do all those things now—except marry—which a man should do only in his youth, if at all, and to make themselves ridiculous by those performances which are expected only of boys. They *are* boys—with gray beards and decrepitude to call especial attention to an incongruous fact. Only one other class of men bears any comparison with them in this respect, and that is the briny mariner who has sailed the wide world over, who has visited every clime, and who comes ashore at last without having touched the bottom of anything except the bottom of his vessel, on sea or land; a man whose experiences are only wide, not deep, and whose beliefs, doctrines and superstitions, stuck to with the tenacity of a barnacle, amuse his fellow-mortals as long as he lives.

More or less so perhaps is the rare ascetic, monk, clergyman or college-professor, whose life, once common, can now only be lived by a rare being here and there to whom the world is nothing. The precise opposite of all such, Argonaut, sailor or scholar, is that man whom the times have developed into an unequalled radiance, and whom we know, even without an introduction, as the Commercial Traveller.

Take a nook in California where three or four of these ancient miners have chosen to reside, and their pranks are almost surely an unfailing amusement of

the community. They live apart, each one by himself, and the hotel, or the boarding-house, knows them not. They are nearly all "heeled." That is a phrase of Argonautical invention which saves tedious explanation, which means in Texas that one is armed, and in California that he has money. To this man a solitary blanket is a bed, and a pile of straw a luxury. He would walk across the continent if necessary, and when he had done so would walk back again if the town he had "struck" did not suit him when he got there. Easy-going and good-tempered, he is yet as ready to fight as an old bear, and with as entire a recklessness as to consequences. And you never can tell when he is going to begin. Silent usually, when he meets a man he knew in the old times his garrulity is grotesque. Yet he will rarely talk of those times, and his answers to your questions are merely tantalizing. For his idea of them is not yours, nor Mr. Bret Harte's either, and they seem to be accompanied in his mind with tinges of regret, not that they are gone, but that they ever came. So the story of early California, a wonderful one too, remains very largely untold. Part of it would be that of men of your own race, whose motives and feelings you can understand, whose sweethearts, or mothers, or mayhap whose wives, lived for thirty years and more after they came away, and they never saw them again, and do not perhaps now know whether they are living or dead. Part of it would be of years of unceasing but purely experimental toil, solitary in the river-bed or on the mountain side, hopeful ever; tempted from day to day; a failure at last. Part would be of the

failures of inexperienced and luckily-gotten wealth, gone in a day or a year, and gained in vain. Many an Argonaut has these things to carry about, concealed in the inner consciousness of one who never had a home, or reared a child, or knew a sister, or repaid the tears or cares of her who bore him. They also are part of the "romance" of early California, believed in by all who yet linger, and to be added to the oddities and crudities, the whims and notions and mistakes which are conscious possessions; the ineffaceable results of life in a womanless world.

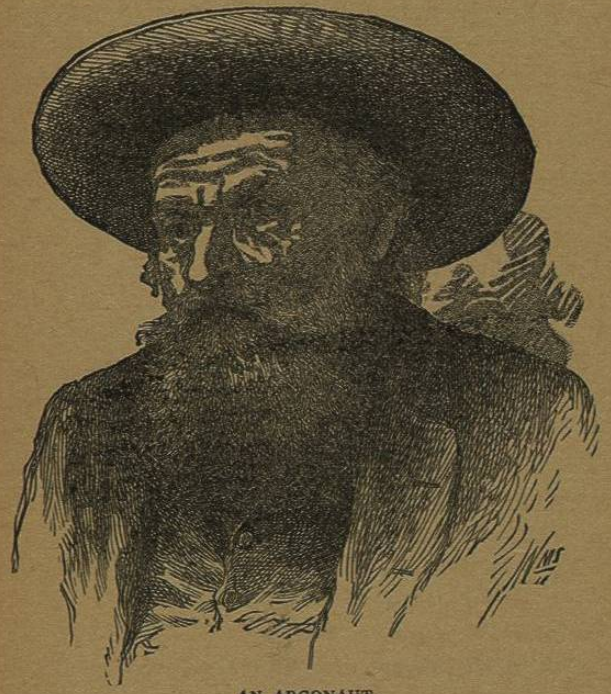
In some cases society has grown up around these old fellows in very late years, and surprised them with its vagaries. In such a case they are inclined to get together beneath some spreading tree where nobody can hear them, and take counsel in regard to its necessities. As likely as not they may then employ a dancing-master, or order blue-velvet suits for a projected masquerade, or do both, quite regardless of all expense. Having once attended a ball, this man will fancy that the way to do it is to do it all, and proceed to acquire what he considers the inevitable intricacies of the Highland Fling, the Double-shuffle, the endless varieties of the professional dancer, and all under the impression that these are what one should know if he dances at all. Yet he will never acquire the figure of a contra-dance as long as he lives, and hangs up the delicate fabrics of his masquerading caprice in a closet constructed for them alone, wondering why they should seem awkward upon him alone of all the giddy multitude.

Sometimes he fancies that he has neglected his musical education, and having lately heard or seen something which has had the effect of starting him in that direction, he concludes that he will apply himself. Thereupon he orders from some Eastern manufacturer all the pieces necessary for a "brass" band. Then he and his cronies proceed to "practice," first without a teacher and then with one, making night hideous for their fellow-citizens as long as the whim lasts them, or until public clamor forces them to take to the fastnesses of nature with their horns.

Ceasing at last from want of wind, or inability to master a score no less difficult to an aged beginner than Greek would be, or from the refusal of their lips to acquire that little horny callous on the inner side which is necessary to every horn-blower, our Argonaut never sees the real difficulty, but imagines the instruments to be imperfect or the assortment incomplete, and thereupon orders a banjo as the one remaining thing. Perhaps it is from a private conclusion he has arrived at that anybody can play a banjo, even the universal incompetent he has always been in the habit of referring to briefly as a "nigger," and he is going to come out master of something.

The tribulations incident to brass horns may be largely borne in private, but with the dance company is necessary. It is urgent that the feminine portion of the community should become interested, and that a teacher of the graceful should be hired to make his presence felt at the district school-house at least once a week. Our Argonaut being willing to furnish the money, one portion of this program is easy. It is the

"wimmin" that puzzle his well-meaning understanding. The duennas who own the pretty Spanish girls "play it low down on him" by alleging that while they may manage to see their maidens usually well



AN ARGONAUT.

shod,—*muy bien calzado*, as they express it,—they can not pecuniarily endure the well-known wear and tear incident to fantastic trippings on the school-house floor. Unless somebody furnishes the boots they can't go next Friday night, and the maiden says as much, regretfully but firmly.

This one can not be spared, nor that one, because they dance by nature, and so gracefully that the Argonaut wonders what is the matter with *him* and *his* legs. So he says that if that is all he will see that she has the boots, and gives her an order on the store. Very soon the arrangement, having been quickly grasped by the feminine community and their mothers, becomes so common that, to save trouble and do the thing systematically, he has these shoe-orders printed, and they become almost negotiable paper in the community. Every girl has a new pair of boots from an assortment running remarkably small in the sizes, and the feminine support is continued upon the preposterous hypothesis that she does not really wish to dance, but is willing to do so as an accommodation to the Argonaut if he will stand the wear and tear.

Having accomplished so much, and so very easily, the Duennas seem to have cast about them for another scheme whereby they might profit, and there is a strong disposition in attempting to describe it, to lapse into homely idioms, and to quote the memorable instance of him who, having for once the opportunity to take as much as he wanted of plug or pie—precisely which of the two not being mentioned in the narrative or essential to the moral—proceeded to excise considerably more than he could masticate. In going about to find out if there would probably be a good attendance at the next visit of the dancing-master, one demure damsel said she really did not think she could go, and yet would not state why. Two or three more acted likewise, and again the fate of the enterprise seemed trembling in the balance. The Argonaut was forced to inquire among the male members

of the community whether they, or any of them, could tell him what was again the matter with the "wimmin." Yes, one of them could. The matter was that these girls would not dance unless they looked real nice, and in order that they might, it was alleged to be necessary that some of them at least should have a new and more accurately-fitting one of those garments whose purpose is to make other garments fit, and which is alluded to in feminine serials as the corsage. Dolores wanted a new one.

"And what the blank is a corset?" exclaims the miner, "and what have I got to do with them?"

And thereupon he abandons for aye the whole capricious and precarious enterprise. If he ever dances again, it will be as he used to dance in the mines; with considerable inelegance, and with a piece of his red shirt tied to one arm to designate the sexes.

But it is not always in the line of the fine arts and frivolity that the Forty-niner exercises his public spirit. Having no child of his own, and privately considering his life largely misspent in that he has not, it is very characteristic of him to develop an unusual interest in the public-school system. If the treasury is temporarily vacuous, he goes into the depths and produces sufficient money to tide over the difficulty. He is interested in the library, and buys books for it, and makes the most extraordinary selections of them ever known. He wants banners, and what he considers emblematic devices and mottoes, to hang upon the school-house walls. He would put a globe three feet in diameter on each gate-post, and on this globe he would delineate in high colors the

seas and continents of the world. A favorite scheme, perhaps, is to occupy the whole of one inside gable-end with a gilt colossal eagle, and under the fierce bird to emblazon fourteen stars; thirteen ordinary ones and one big one—a "blazer," he remarks—for California. And under all this he would say: "The Poorest Child may tread the Classic Halls of Yore." Then he thinks the school-house would be about right, with all its appurtenances and belongings. Curiously enough, he meets opposition in these views from his fellow-members of the Board, and when he does he incontinently abandons his educational projects and turns his attention to some other enterprise, bringing to bear upon it in turn his remarkable ideas of what should be.

The reader will say: "But I myself know returned Californians, and they are not like this." They probably are not; the fact is readily conceded. But those who returned at all did so while still young, and their Californian experience is to them as the four years of the great civil war are to the veteran; a hiatus; so much practically left out. But it is an experience. Neither the war of secession nor the early days of California left their participants the same as their fellows are. They think and believe differently, though perhaps privately, upon a hundred subjects. Both were experiences rare, extraordinary, and impossible of repetition, and are now portions of a life apart from that of a new generation in a thousand particulars.

But he who stayed, who adopted for a life-time the ways he found in vogue in his youth in a State

unique in all its periods and in everything, is often, if not always, the character so far attempted to be described. Any one who will place himself among the scenes of those days may have a more or less vivid idea of the processes of his education. The mountains lie imperturbable on every hand, ethereal in the blue haze of the afternoon, and the valleys glow in the sunshine. The old red roads wind away among the hills, often now grown across with coarse herbage and having the air of melancholy the deserted pathways of men wear all over the world. The round hills are spiked with stumps where once the redwood grew, and a new growth of azalea and alder and sumach strives to hide the scars and gashes made by the pick and shovel of forty years ago. Old flumes have rotted and fallen, and still lie strewn in the ravines across which they once carried so many miner's inches of water every day, and poured it into a hundred "cradles" rocking to and fro between the gravel-bank and the growing pile of "tailings." Even here and there old cabins lean and rot, mementos and remains of the strangest domesticity that ever was; the womanless and childless little homes whose people had been dropped as from the skies into this sylvan world, and who lived in them the life of a society without law, gospel or school. Old dams lie in the streams; old stage-bridges preserve still a timber here and there at either end. Sometimes the rust-eaten fangs of an ancient pick may be found among the debris at the mouth of an excavation. Perhaps at rare intervals a grizzled veteran

may show you where so-and-so got his pile, and half wonders that you never heard of him.

There are graves, too; dimly discernible, but still to be known as the long-ago forgotten resting-places of the stranded Argonauts, whose comrades left them to be waited for, and never to come, in the home beyond the rugged mountains and the endless plains. There are little towns, built in gulches and straggling up hill-sides, which long ago saw their last inhabitant depart, and where now no one ever comes. Their hilarious nights have not left an echo, or their reckless days a sign. Fragments of glass may tell where the saloon was, and some charred earth where was once an hotel, and it is not possible to look at the place, and then inquire in vain for its name, and note the old road to it, and the faint straggling miner's paths that radiated from it up the hillsides, without a melancholy reflection upon the transitory nature of human schemes and ambitions, where or whatsoever they may be. This was one of the most fervid forms of American life less than forty years ago, and there are left now only the dimmest signs of it amid the mountain silence and shadows. Nature is already investing it with the signs of antiquity; with the creeping grass and growing shrubs wherewith she heals the wounds of human occupancy, and obliterates the records of human struggle and ambition, and asserts herself at last empress of all.

Every reflective man must have his moments of looking back, and his wholesome private reflections upon the theme of what an ass he has been in his time. Of these philosophers the boundless West is

full, for there they who endured the most now have the least. The early wanderers over Kansas and Dakota, the men to whom every feature of hill and plain was familiar, rounded out their experiences by an entire misconception of the final uses of the vast

IN THE 50'S.

expanse, and a total neglect of all opportunities. It may be slightly too strong an expression to say that the Argonaut who remained in California lives in a state of chronic surprise, but any casual observer is liable to fall into the error that he must and does.

Before he came, and while he was arguing the case with his relatives, so to speak, he regarded it as the land of gold. After he had reached the place he remained under that idea—if he could only "strike" it. The fever grew, and reached its climax, and declined, and he still thought and said that the country was good for nothing else. When the early times were gone and the gulches were deserted, and the placers had "played out," and the "leads" had "petered," and his chances were gone, he awoke slowly to the fact that California was not the land of gold at all, and that the real wealth was in the soil. The "greeny" and the "tenderfoot," knowing from the Argonautic standpoint nothing at all, came and seized upon the opportunities he had neglected, and filled up the country he had expected to see almost deserted. They diverted his flumes and ditches wherever they could, and turned the sage-brush and chapparal into fields and farms. It was not *El Dorado*, but a peach orchard; not the country of "camps," but of towns; not of wild oats of either the natural or artificial variety, but of vineyards and orchards.

And as time passed the deception grew worse and worse. The "desert" put in its claims. The country which the Argonaut never visited; the edge of that yellow-and-gray expanse that had killed of thirst and dust and hunger so many of his companions who only tried to hasten across it; began also to bloom. Cities sprang up beside a miserable ditch, embowered in tropical foliage, and containing more inhabitants than all the Argonauts ever numbered. The waste and lonesome acres began to have a value greater

than they would have had if they had been staked off as mining claims. People came in greater numbers, and with more enthusiasm, and possessed of considerably more money, than were seen by any of the golden years succeeding the historic 'Forty-nine. At first the old Californian calmly awaited the miserable failure of all this wildness, and knew as one does who has had experience that the world had to a considerable extent gone crazy, and counseled with his few remaining fellows as to the signs of the times. It is not to be denied that sometimes he also partook of the benefits accruing, in cases where for a quarter of a century or more he had been the owner of lands he never really wanted, and hillsides that came to him by chance. Where he drifted into South California, because there was nowhere else to go, or for some similar reason, he often awoke to find himself upon a "pocket" very late in life.

Go where one will on the Pacific slope, at long intervals widely scattered, here and there, will be found this grizzled memento of the old days. Perhaps it may be sitting on a bench in the shade in the neighborhood of the old Plaza at San Francisco, and there he will refer to the metropolis as "this town," and generally speak of it to you as to one who must of course readily recall the time when it was a little place, as he does. Or you may find him in a chair in the rotunda of the Palace Hotel; a man with a wide slouch hat, a splendid gray beard, and a look of prosperity. If one does not insist, and he be in the humor, he will amuse you for half an hour with desultory talk of those times whose annals have

entered into the folk-lore of America. Perhaps most prominent to his mind is that great day when the last spike was driven, and the first trans-continental line was finished across the wide expanse to California. It was not expected, he says; it was not even dreamed of. Nobody but a phenomenonally-endowed idiot would ever have conceived the project. We thought the ships were good enough, and the little steamers that ran up and down the river. This town was a big one in them days, and things was lively; but *now*, —since then—Lordy!

Then he will laugh quietly at their crudity and oddity, and tell you a little more of "them days." He will remark upon the enormous prices then ruling, and of how he has paid a dollar a pound for flour himself; of the Chinese and their advent; of how none of the men of those times were poor, and none really rich; of the comities and rules that governed in a country absolutely without any other law, and of the funny things that daily happened to this or that Argonaut, now asleep in one of the old graves. He tells you where the "heft" of the town was in those times, and how it looked, and ends with the remark that "we didn't have an idea of the facts in those days; not an *idea*," and gets up and goes away at the moment when you want him the most.

So far back as the annals of his family in America go, the ancestors of the present writer were all frontiersman, and he is therefore perfectly aware of the inadequacy of this chapter, or of any chapter that ever was written, to do justice to that class which is a distinctive product of this country, and which has been

the vidette of all its greatness. In common with all Saxon frontiersmen, the surviving Argonaut is a man misplaced in these times, but in his day he was the true representative of that sturdy valor which is now decaying in wealth and luxury; of that courage which then regarded danger and difficulty as incidents of daily life; and of the magnanimity which comes of the sharing of a common lot. There will be no more of him while the world stands, and his name, in the country whose hills he first scarred with his toil, is overwhelmed in modern wonders.