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Unfortunate Emigrants

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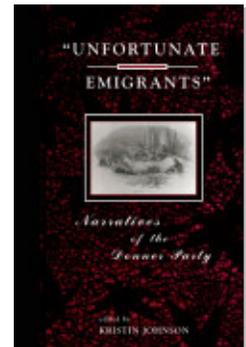
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FROM *LOS GRINGOS*

Previous to our arrival in the waters of Francisco, a frightful incident transpired amidst the Californian mountains, which goes far to surpass any event of the kind heard or seen, from the black hole of Calcutta, to smoking the Arabs in Algeria.² It relates to a party of emigrants, whose shocking inhuman cannibalisms and sufferings exceeded all belief. The news first reached us in Monterey, and also that a party had been despatched to succor them. From an officer of the navy in charge of the expedition [Woodworth], and from one of the survivors, a Spanish boy, named Baptiste,³ I learned the following particulars: The number of emigrants were originally eighty; through a culpable combination of ignorance and folly, they loitered many weeks on the route, when, upon gaining the sierra, the snows set in, the trails became blocked up and impassable, and they were obliged to encamp for the winter; their provisions were shortly exhausted, their cattle were devoured to the last horse's hide, hunger came upon them, gaunt and terrible, starvation at last—men, women and children starved to death, and were eaten by their fellows—insanity followed. When relief

2 The infamous Black Hole was a chamber measuring about 18 x 14 feet in the fortress of Calcutta. It was said that some 146 captured British defenders were crammed into the room the evening the fort fell, June 20, 1756; only twenty-three of them survived the night. This version of the tale is largely discounted as a gross exaggeration: one estimate puts the figures at about sixty-four soldiers and twenty-one survivors, another at twenty soldiers and three deaths.

"Smoking the Arabs" refers to an incident which occurred in June 1845 when French soldiers built up a large fire at the mouth of a cave in which a tribe of Algerians they were pursuing had sought refuge. The next day the fire was allowed to die down, the smoke cleared, and it was discovered that some 700 men, women, and children had suffocated.

3 Based on W. C. Graves's estimate, Jean Baptiste Trudeau, variously known as Trubode, Truvico, and Trauvico, has been described as twenty-three years old at the time of the Donner party. "Trubode" told Eliza Donner Houghton many years later, however, that he had been only about sixteen; the ages he reported in various censuses are consistent with that statement. That Wise and others refer to him as "the Spanish boy" supports the belief that he was younger than the age usually reported.

arrived, the survivors were found rolling in filth, parents eating their own offspring, denizens of different cabins exchanging limbs and meat—little children tearing and devouring the livers and hearts of the dead, and a general apathy and mania pervaded all alike, so as to make the scout the idea of leaving their property in the mountains before the spring, even to save their miserable lives; and on separating those who were able to bear the fatigue of traveling, the cursings and ravings of the remainder were monstrous. One Dutchman actually ate a full-grown body in thirty-six hours! another boiled and devoured a girl nine years old, in a single night. The women held on to life with greater tenacity than the men—in fact, the first intelligence was brought to Sutter's fort, on the Sacramento, by two young girls. One of them feasted on her good papa, but on making soup of her lover's head, she confessed to some inward qualms of conscience. The young Spaniard, Baptiste, was hero of the party, performing all labor and drudgery in getting fuel and water, until his strength became exhausted; he told me that he ate Jake Donner and the baby, "eat baby raw, stewed some of Jake, and roasted his head, not good meat, taste like sheep with the rot; but, sir, very hungry, eat anything."—these were his very words. There were thirty survivors, and a number of them without feet, either frozen or burnt off, who were placed under the care of our surgeons on shore.⁴ Although nothing has ever happened more truly dreadful, and in many respects ludicrously so, yet what was surprising, the emigrants themselves perceived nothing very extraordinary in all these cannibalisms, but seemed to regard it as an every day occurrence—surely they were deranged. The party who went to their relief deserved all praise, for they, too, endured every hardship, and many were badly frostbitten. The cause of all this suffering was mainly attributable to the unmeaning delay and indolence attending their early progress on the route, but with every advantage in favor of emigration, the journey in itself must be attended with immense privation and toil. The mere fact, that by the upper route there is one vast desert to be travelled over, many hundred miles in width, affording very little vegetation or sustenance, and to crown the difficulty, terminated by the rugged chain of Californian mountains, is almost sufficient in itself to deter many a good man and strong, from exposing his life and property, for an unknown home on the shores of the Pacific.

4 Many of the survivors and rescuers suffered from frostbite and several lost toes. Mary Donner was the worst off, having lost four toes on her left foot, but reports of her injuries were greatly exaggerated in the memoirs of W. C. Graves (in this volume) and Eliza Gregson, among others.