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Unfortunate Emigrants

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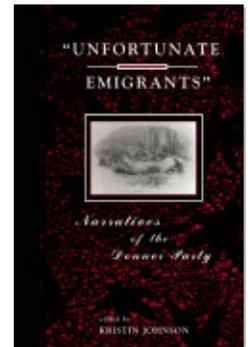
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FROM "A DANGEROUS JOURNEY"

I stopped a night at San Jose, where I was most hospitably received by the Alcalde, an American gentleman of intelligence, to whom I had a letter of introduction. Next day, after a pleasant ride of forty-five miles, I reached the Mission of San Juan [Bautista]—one of the most eligibly located of all the old missionary establishments. It was now in a state of decay. The vineyards were but partially cultivated, and the secos, or ditches for the irrigation of the land, were entirely dry. I got some very good pears from the old Spaniard in charge of the Mission—a rare luxury after a long sea-voyage. The only tavern in the place was the "United States," kept by an American and his wife in an old adobe house, originally a part of the missionary establishment. Having secured accommodations for my mule, I took up my quarters for the night at the "United States." The woman seemed to be the principal manager. Perhaps I might have noticed her a little closely, since she was the only white woman I had enjoyed the opportunity of conversing with for some time. It was very certain, however, that she struck me as an uncommon person—tall, raw-boned, sharp, and masculine—with a wild and piercing expression of eye, and a smile singularly startling and unfeminine. I even fancied that her teeth were long and pointed, and that she resembled a picture of an Ogress I had seen when a child. The man was a subdued and melancholy-looking person, presenting no particular trait of character in his appearance save that of general abandonment to the influence of misfortune. His dress and expression impressed me with the idea that he had experienced much trouble, without possessing that strong power of recuperation so common among American adventurers in California.

It would scarcely be worth while noticing these casual acquaintances of a night, since they have nothing to do with my narrative, but for the remarkable illustration they afford of the hardships that were encountered at that time on the emigrant routes to California. In the course of conversation with the man, I found that he and his wife were among the few survivors of a party whose terrible sufferings in the mountains during the past winter had been the theme of much comment in the newspapers. He did not state—what I already knew from the published narrative of their adventures—that the woman had subsisted for some time of the dead body of a

child belonging to one of the party. It was said that the man had held out to the last, and refused to participate in the horrible feast of human flesh.²

So strangely impressive was it to be brought in direct contact with a fellow-being, especially of the gentler sex, who had absolutely eaten of human flesh, that I could not but look upon this woman with a shudder. Her sufferings had been intense; that was evident from her marked and weather-beaten features. Doubtless she had struggled against the cravings of hunger as long as reason lasted. But still the one terrible act, whether the result of necessity or insanity, invested here with a repellant atmosphere of horror. Her very smile struck me as the gloating expression of a cannibal over human blood. In vain I struggled against this unchristian feeling. Was it right to judge a poor creature whose great misfortune was perhaps no offense against the laws of nature? She might be the tenderest and best of women—I knew nothing of her history. It was a pitiable case. But, after all, she had eaten of human flesh; there was not getting over that.

When I sat down to supper this woman was obliging enough to hand me a plate of meat. I was hungry, and tried to eat it. Every morsel seemed to stick in my throat. I could not feel quite sure that it was what it seemed to be. The odor even disgusted me. Nor could I partake of the bread she passed to me with any more relish. It was probably made by her hands—the same hands that had torn the flesh from a corpse and passed the reeking shreds to her mouth. The taint of an imaginary corruption was upon it.

The room allotted to me for the night was roughly furnished, as might reasonably be expected; but, apart from this, the bedding was filthy; and in common with every thing about the house, the slatternly appearance of the furniture did not tend to remove the unpleasant impression I had formed of my hostess. Whether owing to the vermin, or an unfounded suspicion that she might become hungry during the night, I slept but little. The picture of the terrible Ogress that I had seen when a child, and the story of the little children which she had devoured, assumed a fearful reality, and became strangely mingled in my dreams with this woman's face. I was glad when daylight afforded me an excuse to get up and take a stroll in the fresh air.

2 The peculiar tale which Browne relates is otherwise unrecorded and reverses what Farnham reports, that Patrick Breen suggested cannibalism but Margaret demurred so strongly that he did not broach the subject again. If such stories had been circulating about Mrs. Breen, it would help explain the exaggerations in her statement to Farnham.