Unfortunate Emigrants

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FROM CALIFORNIA, IN-DOORS AND OUT

Narrative of the Emigration of the Donner Party
to California, in 1846.

The self-sacrifice to which women, in all conditions, are called, presupposes the better nature which would prompt them to make it; and California is an exemplification of this on a scale to which the history of ages offers no parallel. There was no salvation for the country but from her presence in it, and the necessity to come was in very, very many instances, the cruelest she could be called on to obey. Thousands have reached the land through incredible hardships and scenes shocking to every sensibility; and thousands more, without these trials, have landed on our shores, unconscious that in doing so they were literally laying themselves upon a rack.

And if the weakness which has been cultivated and nurtured at home, failed to become strength and self-reliance in the new and fearful trials that awaited them, who should exercise harsh and unrelenting judgment toward them? Shame and ruin have been not only the precursors, but the consequents of anguish to many a wretched woman among us; but truth, which compels this acknowledgement, glories also in placing side by side with it the noblest proofs of all that we claim for our sex—illustrations of sublime self-sacrifice, of heroic fortitude, of calm endurance such as may have been equaled but never surpassed in its history. The annals of the overland emigration are especially rich in these histories, kindling, despite the detestable demonstrations about us, a love and reverence for humanity, which refreshes and strengthens the soul.

One of these is related in the following pages. I have gathered its material from several individuals of both sexes, who were members of the unfortunate party; and I believe that in almost every particular it is deserving of entire credit. This party emigrated before the discovery of the gold, and consisted chiefly of persons led by the love of adventure and confidence in the charms of the clime they sought.

They set out from St. Joseph's, Missouri, in May of the year 1846.

California was then in a state bordering on revolution; and among the male members of this party were several persons who, doubtless, believed
that among its half-civilized population, positions and advantages might be won, which they could never hope to enjoy at home. In any case, they were destined to a land unequaled in beauty, and in its magnificent generosity of soil and climate. And, though a long journey lay before them, they were confident, at the worst they could foresee, of a result that would satisfy, in a large measure, the hopes they entertained, and they were fearless of dangers by the way. They numbered from eighty to ninety, and comprised many families, with children of all ages, from a few months upward. They set out in spirits corresponding with the sunshine and breezes which accompanied them. The men were earnest—the young people gay—the mothers only, a little doubtful, when they considered the precious lives they had in charge, and the possible dangers that might have to be encountered before they should see them all safely housed in the distant land of their destination. Their journey was uninterrupted by any but the occurrences common to such travel—the delays to rest weary cattle or recover lost ones—the necessity to repair a broken wagon, or adjust some of the many affairs that on such a journey constantly lack adjustment.

There was then no thoroughfare on the great plains that lay stretched between them and the setting sun. Their solitude was rarely broken by the passage of a trading or trapping party, or a band of Indian hunters, moving to and fro, in search of game, or bearing homeward the trophies of the chase already past. But the emigrant fires burned at evening, and their light shone cheerfully into the silent darkness that walled them in. When supper was over, the young people gathered around one of the fires, and there were music and dancing, or social, cheerful chats, after the adventures of the day.

There was a family consisting of twelve members: a father, mother, nine children, and a son-in-law, husband of the eldest daughter. The father was a man in middle life; healthy, hopeful, adventurous; with strong affections, that were generous enough to receive a powerful stimulus from the presence of his large, active, and promising family. They had been born in one of the most beautiful regions of Illinois. The youngest, at the time of starting, was a babe, of four or six months. The eldest unmarried, a daughter of eighteen. The young women rode on horseback, or in the wagons, as suited their convenience or fancy. They were excited by the novel features of the country over which they passed, and the anticipations with which they looked forward to that region which had, in their minds, but a vague, half-real existence; and seemed, to the more imaginative of them, more like the happy hunting-ground, of which the Indian dreams in his untutored reveries, than a part of the commonplace, work-a-day world.

1 The Graves family, from Marshall County, Illinois. Farnham has omitted their teamster, John Snyder.
They crossed the Missouri on the 20th of May, and, on the 3rd of July, reached Fort Laramie.² Here they found a party of Sioux Indians; warriors going out to give battle to their old enemies, the Snakes. The Sioux were then the most powerful race of the great prairies; and our emigrants, partly, I suppose, from a desire to conciliate them, partly, because of their abundance, gave them a dinner at the Fort, on the 4th. They were grand looking men, the warriors, well-made, powerful, and lithe, grave and courteous, dignified, solemn, and majestic. The hospitalities over, they parted, with friendly remembrances on one side, and wishes on the other. The emigrants moved on, and were overtaken by the same party on the afternoon of the 6th. The recollection of bread and salt did not restrain the commoner sort from attempting to steal various articles that seemed desirable to them. They heeded no remonstrance from the whites, nor even from their chief, till the latter personage, with a majestic determination to rule, shot down two of the robber's horses. They wished to buy one of the young ladies, who was riding a little in the rear of the company, with her brother, and made two or three handsome offers for her, which, being declined by the brother, one laid hold of her horse's bridle, and attempted to lead her off a prize, but he dropped the rein when her protector leveled his gun, and rejoined his company.³ Such little incidents, happening rarely, served to enliven their travel, which now began to grow a little tedious.

They reached Fort Bridger in the latter part of August [July], and there heard much commendation bestowed upon the new route, via Salt Lake, by which Mr. Hastings had preceded them a few weeks. It was said to be shorter than the old one, by Fort Hall, and quite practicable. They debated, and delayed, and finally divided. A small company had proceeded, on the new route, from the fort, a few days before them, whom

² Fur traders had established Fort Laramie in 1834 near the junction of the Laramie and North Platte rivers, about eighty miles northeast of present-day Cheyenne, Wyoming. W. C. Graves mentions the Independence Day celebration at Fort Laramie in his memoir, in this volume. At this point the other members of the Donner party were a week ahead of the Graves family, having reached the fort on June 27.

³ The young lady is Mary Graves, the brother, W. C. Graves. The latter does not allude to these events in his own memoir, but they appear in McGlashan's history. Indians also attempted to purchase Virginia Reed Murphy and her pony; see her memoir in this volume. These incidents may represent folklore rather than history: according to Francis Haines, Sr., stories about the attempted purchase of a white child or young girl by Indians are common in late reminiscences of the overland journey but are not recorded in contemporary diaries and letters written on the trail. "Goldilocks on the Oregon Trail," Idaho Yesterdays 9 (Winter 1965–66): 26–30. My thanks to John Alley for bringing this reference to my attention.
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they overtook, and joined on the sixth day. Their whole number was now eighty-three, or, as some say, eighty-five; and this was the company fated to those appalling trials, under which so many perished, and so many more failed in all human senses. Terrors and sufferings, so great and protracted, seldom try the nature of men and women; but, rarely as they come, they find few among those whom they visit furnished to the occasion. In the trials of this kind, of which we have narratives, women have rarely been participants. Here the numbers were nearly equal; and the result is one of which every woman who reverences her sex may be justly proud.

At the time when they joined the advance company, it was lying still, awaiting the return of a small party that had been sent out to improve the road, and, if possible, overtake Hastings, who was supposed to be but a few days before them. They hoped to secure his guidance into the valley of Bear [Jordan] river. They were disappointed in this, and, after the loss of many days, finally journeyed on. Could the fearful consequences of this delay have been apprehended, it would not have been submitted to. But the disposition of common characters to be controlled by anything but their own intelligent determination, prevailed over the dread of the women, and the impatience of the men. Days went by, till they amounted to weeks. The fair summer had drawn to a close, and autumn had tinted with matchless pencil the herbage and foliage of the great mountain barrier that divided them from their land of promise, before their feet, now growing weary and slow, touched its eastern base. I extract from a narrative furnished me by the kindness of Mr. John Breen, who was of the party, and, at that time about fourteen.

He says: "We traveled several days, without much difficulty, till we left Weaver [Weber] river. Here our work commenced, for we had a new road to make through a heavily-timbered country, with no other guide than the sun. One day's travel from the river, the road became so bad that it was necessary to let the wagons lie still for two or three days at a time to prepare a way for them. Over much of the ground it was impossible to pass with the wagons till a great deal of labor had been done. In one place all the men in the company worked hard for two weeks, and only advanced

4 Though imprecise, this is the earliest report that the Graves family overtook the Donner party while Reed was away seeking Hastings. Farnham's source for this statement was almost certainly Mary Graves.

5 John Breen wrote a memoir for H. H. Bancroft in 1877, which generally agrees with what he had told Farnham years before, but the two accounts do not overlap at many points. The memoir appeared in the Pony Express Courier in January 1941 and in Stookey's Fatal Decision; King publishes most of it in Winter of Entrapment (1994).
thirty miles. We, at last, came within one mile of Salt Lake Valley, when we were compelled to pass over a hill [Donner Hill] so steep that from ten to twelve yoke of oxen were necessary to draw each wagon to the summit. From this height we beheld the Great Salt Lake, and the extensive plains by which it is surrounded. It gave us great courage; for we thought we were going to have good roads through a fertile country; but the saline atmosphere, and the long drives, without water, rendered our route through that valley particularly harassing. When we reached what was called the desert, we had a drive of seventy or eighty miles, without grass, or water over a plain covered with salt. Here our real hardships commenced; cattle giving out, or straying away, mad with thirst. One man (Mr. R.) lost all his oxen but one yoke, and was, consequently, compelled to leave all his wagons but one; into which he put a large family and their provisions, which, of course, made traveling very tedious. Several people came very near perishing on this desert for water; but, it was very remarkable that the women stood it better than the men. After we got across, we laid by one or two days to recruit; but, when we were ready to start, Mr. R.'s last yoke of cattle were missing; so, all hands turned out, and made a general search for six days, but we found no trace of them. In fact, it was impossible to find cattle on those plains, as the mirage, when the sun shone, would make every object the size of a man's hat look as large as an ox, at the distance of a mile or more; so one could ramble all day from one of these delusions to another, till he became almost heart-broken from disappointment, and famished from thirst. While we laid here, two men [Stanton and McCutchen] were sent on, on horseback, to California, to get provisions, and return to meet us on the Humboldt.

Thus their provisions were getting low. This, the loss of their cattle, and the reduced condition of those that were left, weighed upon their spirits, and impeded their progress. There had been no death in the party until they reached Salt Lake Valley. They had a consumptive invalid [Luke Halloran], who had been steadily declining through all their rough experience, and one afternoon, the wagon in which he was carried was observed to fall behind the others. Inquiry was made. He was not much worse, it was

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6 This is not far off Reed's statement in his memoir (this volume) that it took eighteen days to travel thirty miles.

7 Writers have inferred that Reed's allegedly huge family wagon had slowed the company's progress across the prairies, contributing to the animosity that erupted against him after Snyder's death. Breen is the only survivor who states that the Reeds impeded the company's progress, but only after the crossing of the Salt Desert, not previously.

8 Farnham started her account with the Graves family, who were not with the company when Sarah Keyes died.
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said, but after the party had encamped at evening the wagon came up bringing his corpse. He had neither wife, nor child, nor near friend. He had set out an invalid in search of health, and happily had expired before the terrible days came that were now drawing fast on. Next morning a rude coffin was constructed of boards taken from one of the wagons, and the body committed to the earth, according to the rites and ceremonies of that mysterious, and world-wide brotherhood to which he belonged. 9

Those who had before been comparatively indifferent to their delays, began, by this time, to be earnest. “The more so,” Mr. Breen says, “that on the morning of their leaving the long encampment at the desert, there appeared a considerable fall of snow on the neighboring hills. The apprehension of delay from this cause, and of scarcity, made the mothers tremble. But they knew that to give way was to make unavoidable that which they dreaded, and they put the best possible face on to meet their discouragements. The men were irritable and impatient. A dispute arose one day after dinner, between two of them, respecting the driving of a wagon up a very difficult hill. 10 Hot words were followed, almost instantly, by blows—one with a knife, or dagger, which proved fatal in about twenty minutes. The man was buried next morning. Feeling respecting the affair ran high, and the survivor very soon left the company, alone, his family being constrained to remain in it, by the previous loss of their cattle, on the desert. How keen must have been that parting—from a wife and four or five children!

“They reached Truckee river without any incident of an extraordinary character except the disappearance of a German [Wolfinger] whose immediate party lagged behind awhile, and when they at length came up, could, or would give, but a vague account of him. It was said that he had strayed away in search of cattle and they supposed he might have been killed or lost. The press of care had now become too great, from the necessity to get forward, to permit the loss of any time, or even the manifestation of any interest in the fate of one who was a stranger, by blood and tongue, to most of his fellow travelers. At the last encampment on Truckee river, another life was lost, by the accidental discharge of a pistol. Two men, brothers-in-law [Foster and Pike], had been handling their arms by the camp fire in the morning. Wood to replenish it was called for, when one said to the other, ‘hold my pistol while I go for some.’ In the transfer, by some means it went off, and the contents lodged in the body of the unfortunate man [Pike], who lived only two hours. Death did not startle them now. They were too

9 This is the earliest reference to Halloran’s Masonic burial.
10 In his 1877 memoir Breen recalled that the teams had stalled “on a sandbank on the Humboldt river,” a description which suggests a different scenario than his statement here.
much engrossed by their own necessities to heed his presence, further than naked decency required. They had buried their first dead in a coffin and shroud, with masonic ceremonies, their second with only a shroud and a board beneath and above him. The last man was buried literally dust to dust, nothing to separate his clay from that of the great parent who opened her bosom to receive him.

They journeyed on, hoping that at the worst they should be met by relief, but as the mothers have told me, with inexpressible anxieties at heart already.11 "On Truckee river," says Mr. Breen, "the weather was already very cold, and the heavy clouds hanging over the mountains to the west were strong indications of an approaching winter. This of course alarmed several people, while others paid no attention to it. My father's family, among the former, used every effort to cross the mountains if possible before the snow should become too deep. We traveled up the river a few days, when we met the excellent Stanton, returning with five or six mules, packed with flour and meat. Capt. John A. Sutter had given him the mules and provisions, for the mere promise of compensation, an act for which he deserves the love of every soul of that suffering company. He will always be remembered by me, with gratitude and reverence, for that generous act. And Mr. Stanton, who sacrificed his life to assist his companions—for he had no family or relations in the company—should be held in honored remembrance by every one who can appreciate a noble act. The clouds on the mountains looked very threatening, but he naturally looked at the bright side of things, and assured us there was no danger,12 little thinking that the next summer's sun would bleach his unburied bones, not far from that spot."

It had snowed at the last burial on this river, and they traveled up its banks amid wintry desolation, made a hundredfold more desolate by the frowning presence of the stern gigantic mountains, by the feeble condition of their cattle, which the snow deprived of sustenance, by their scanty stores and already overtasked powers of endurance. They reached Truckee Lake on the fourth of November. It was cold, and on its banks the snow already lay to the depth of a few inches. They encamped for the night, availing themselves of a couple of huts which had been erected there the winter previous by a few belated emigrants or trappers.13 They hoped to push on in the morning. Their exhausted and starving animals were

11 The word "mothers" is puzzling; it is not clear with what other mother or mothers besides Margaret Breen Farnham spoke. See note 19, below.
12 W. C. Graves also refers to Stanton's assurances, but gives a different impression; see his memoir, this volume.
13 When the emigrants arrived there was only the cabin which Moses Schallenberger had inhabited during the winter of 1844-45, which the Breens occupied.
offered some boughs. By this time their wagons were nearly empty of their burdens, but they were, even thus light, an overmatch for the feeble cattle.

Mr. Breen says of this day's work and that which followed it: "In the morning it was very cold, with about an inch of snow on the ground. This made us hurry our cattle still more, if possible, than before. We traveled on, and, at last, the clouds cleared, leaving the towering peaks in full view, covered as far as the eye could reach with snow. This sight made us almost despair of ever entering the long-sought valley of the Sacramento; but we pushed on as fast as our failing cattle could haul our almost empty wagons. At last we reached the foot of the main ridge, near Truckee Lake. It was sundown. The weather was clear in the early part of the night; but a large circle around the moon indicated, as we rightly supposed, an approaching storm. Daylight came only to confirm our worst fears. The snow was falling fast on that terrible summit over which we yet had to make our way. Notwithstanding, we set out early to make an effort to cross. We traveled one or two miles—the snow increasing in depth all the way. At last, it was up to the axle of the wagons. We now concluded to leave them, pack some blankets on the oxen, and push forward; but by the time we got the oxen packed, it was impossible to advance; first, because of the depth of the snow, and next, because we could not find the road; so we hitched to the wagons and returned to the valley again, where we found it raining in torrents. We took possession of a cabin and built a fire in it, but the pine boughs were a poor shelter from the rain, so we turned our cattle at large, and laid down under our wagon covers to pass the night. It cleared off in the night, and this gave us hopes; we were so little acquainted with the country as to believe that the rain in the valley was rain on the mountain also, and that it would beat down the snow so that we might possibly go over. In this we were fatally mistaken. We set out next morning to make a last struggle, but did not advance more than two miles before the road became so completely blocked that we were compelled to retrace our steps in despair. When we reached the valley, we commenced repairing the house; we killed our cattle and covered it with their hides."

The courage to make such great exertion was not evinced by the whole party. Many remained in the valley awaiting almost with indifference its result. One of the leading spirits in these efforts was the mother of our narrator, who had, indeed, a world to struggle for—a sick husband and seven children, the youngest a nursing babe, the oldest but fourteen years.

They were an Irish family, who had been well-to-do before leaving their last home in Iowa, and they had still a large number of cattle, and as many other resources as any other in the company. The father, in these terrible

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14 Patrick and Margaret Breen, natives of County Carlow, Ireland, had a farm near Keokuk, Iowa, before they and a neighbor, Patrick Dolan, left for California.
days, was nearly or quite disabled, from an attack of a distressing ailment which he had suffered for several days before reaching their encamp-ment,\textsuperscript{15} so that the responsibility of saving the family devolved chiefly on the mother. And the unshrinking firmness, resolution and self-devotion with which she served them, in that fearful season, deserve commemora-tion beside the noblest deeds of humanity. Conceive with what palpitating anxiety she watched every struggle of the faithful beasts; with what heart sinking she saw them utterly fail, thus dooming her tender babe, and young children, and feeble husband to trials of which human fear could not depict the appalling character and duration.

They sat down at the huts helpless—compelled to abide the issues that might await them. Their stores were nearly exhausted. Bread had quite dis­appeared—a little tea, coffee, and sugar were all they had left, except the flesh of their miserable beasts. The relief stores were very soon consumed by a community of seventy or seventy-five cold and hungry people, and as removal was impossible to any but the ablest, it was soon decided that the most hardy and capable should at once set off on foot, to complete their journey, taking with them only enough to support life for six days, by the end of which period, if ever, they thought they should reach Bear Valley. They set out, reached the tops of the mountain with infinite difficulty, and then, finding it impossible to ascertain what precise direction to take, waited on the snow two days and nights, for the man Stanton who had come out with the stores, and was to go in with them. His mules had strayed away, and he was reluctant to set off to go to their owner [Sutter] without them. So the foot party was obliged to return to camp, where, for the time, they might all be considered as settled. Trees had been felled for the walls of cabins, which were covered with the hides of their oxen and horses. There were three camps in the space of about three quarters of a mile, and another seven miles away further down the shores of the lake.\textsuperscript{16} In these the whole party were in some manner sheltered from the rigor and storms of that unfriendly region, and they had need be well sheltered, for on the night after the return of the party last spoken of from the summit, a snow-storm set in which continued almost without intermission for ten days.

Whose hand will ever adequately record the discouragements of those days? the sickening apprehensions, the yearnings over the helpless and

King's Winter of Entrapment contains a great deal of information about the Breen family.

15 Patrick Breen records that he suffered from "the gravel"—kidney stones—in his diary entry for December 22.

16 There were three cabins near the eastern end of the lake—the Murphy, Breen, and Graves-Reed cabins. The Donner families and their dependents were seven miles away, as Farnham states, but their camp was not on the shore of the lake.
unconscious ones, the destroying fluctuations between hopes that only
dawned upon the crushed spirit to be succeeded by fears of palpable mid­
night blackness! At length the storm was over. The dreary gray clouds,
which had lowered so mercilessly upon the devoted party, trooped away,
and the blue sky smiled coldly and finely down upon them, as a haughty
spirit triumphant does upon its subdued victim. The adventurers made
ready and started again on snow-shoes, it being impossible now to move in
any other manner.

Every day of the storm had reduced the provisions fearfully, and now
no relief could be relied on till fresh tidings of their dreadful situation were
taken into the settlements. They set out on the 16th of December. They
had been forty-two days at the cabins—an age of terror, anxiety, and
dread—but up to the time of their departure, actual starvation had not taken
place. They numbered fifteen—ten males and five females. The faithful
Stanton, and the two Indians who had been sent with him by Gen. Sutter,
were of the party. Under their guidance, hope was entertained that they
might reach Bear Valley in five or six days, and they took with them
enough of the poor dried beef to allow each person, thrice a day, a bit of
the size of two fingers. There was the father, before spoken of [Franklin
Ward Graves], and his two eldest daughters—the married one accompanied
by her husband [Mary Graves, Sarah and Jay Fosdick];—an unfortunate
young mother [Amanda McCutchen], who had been obliged to leave an
infant behind her, and two other females [Sarah Foster, Harriet Pike]. A
Mexican [Antonio], who had joined the emigrants at Fort Laramie, was of
the number; the remainder were all men who had come through from the
states. They took each upon his or her own person all on which the preser­
vation of life depended in the fearful journey before them—coffee, a kettle
to boil it in; beef, of their poor sort, barely enough to nourish their emaci­
ated bodies sufficiently to support life; matches; a flint-gun; a small axe,
and a blanket each. Their snow-shoes were made of their ox-bows and
green hide interlaced. They were about two feet in length, by one in
breadth. Thus they were equipped. There were but two or three who did
not leave behind them father, mother, wife or child, or brother or sister.
The country before them was a dreary waste of cold white. Frequently,
only the tops of the trees were visible above the snow, its depth varying
from a few feet to sixty.

All the long day—and it was long to them, though the sun was warming
the southern tropic—they urged their fainting, wasted bodies onward, and,
at nightfall, gathering a few boughs, they lighted a fire, boiled their morsel
of coffee, and drank it with the little scrap of beef they could afford for the
evening meal. They then wrapped their blankets about them and slept
upon the snow till the morning light recalled them to their weary travel. On
the morning of their fifth day out, poor Stanton sat late by the camp-fire.
The party had set off, all but Miss G., and as she turned to follow her father and sister, she asked him if he would soon come. He replied that he should, and she left him smoking. He never left the desolate fireside. His remains were found there by the next party who passed.

They pressed on. There was too little of life in them to wonder or fear at anything. They were alone with starvation, and would have been roused and even cheered by the sight of any living being ferocious or docile. Their helplessness and despair were fearfully increased by the loss of their guide. The Indians did not know the country when undisguised, and its chilling mantle would have deceived eyes the most familiar with it. They were now making the small allowance of one day serve for two; but even this could avail them nothing. Their whole store would not have satisfied the moderate appetite of one person for a meal. So, on the evening of the seventh day, when they had given up all expectation of seeing their guide, and would scarcely have lifted a hand or foot to escape from death, a violent rain set in. There was then no possibility of kindling a fire to warm their shivering frames. The pitiless flood drenched, in a short time, their tattered garments. They laid their aching bones upon the oozing snow, and wore away a night which inflicted the agonies of a hundred deaths upon them.

The morning came, and still the flood fell. They roused themselves to move on a little, if it were possible, despite the storm; but they had lost their course, and the sun no longer befriended them. It was proposed to return to the cabins, following their own tracks, but the Indians would not consent, and Miss G. resolutely determined to follow them. There was nothing possible, there, but starvation. The fate before them could not be worse, and might be better. Miss G.'s resolution encouraged her companions. They went on all day without a morsel of food, the rain pouring continuously. At night it ceased. Some were confused in their perceptions, some delirious, some raving. Those who were still strong enough to realize their condition, might well now despair. The women bore up better than the men. One of them had about her a cape or mantle stuffed with raw cotton, and, upon a minute examination of it, she found, between the shoulders, about an inch square of the inner surface dry. The lining was cut, and enough taken out to catch the spark from the flint. They had lost or left their axe, but were able to make a fire, after much difficulty, of a few gathered boughs. They sat down around it. There was nothing else to be done.

Preparing, distributing, or eating even the wretched morsel that had kept them alive to this time no longer occupied them. They had no speech but the ravings of their delirious companions, no hope but that of death.

Scarcely had they begun to feel the warmth which faintly revived their decaying sensibilities, when the angry clouds began to descend upon them in snow. It fell with a silent, blinding, merciless steadiness. It came as the messenger of that power whom they no longer dreaded—death. The father,
whose two daughters were of the company, was the first released. The
chilling rain had pierced his emaciated frame, and subdued the energy
which had resisted courageously all that had gone before. He had much to
struggle for. His wife and seven children were at the cabins, and he had
pressed forward, feeling in that effort the only hope of saving them. But
now, all power to serve them was gone, and, perfectly conscious of their
own and his condition, he laid down under the relentless storm to die. In
that desolate hour of death, he called his youngest daughter to his side, and
bade her cherish and husband every chance of life, in the fearful days
which he knew awaited them. They were still far from habitation or help,
except such as God gave them, and their own courageous hearts. She must
revolt at nothing that would keep life in her till she could reach some help
for those whom they both loved. He clearly foreshadowed the terrible
necessity to which, within a few hours, he saw they must come, and died,
leaving his injunction upon her, to yield to it as resolutely as she had done
everything else that had been required of her, since their sufferings
began.17

His death scarcely moved those to whom it was most important. To the
others, it, perhaps, furnished a hope—a fearful and terrible one certainly,
yet still a hope. But another victim was fast preparing; and scarcely had the
white mantle of the storm been softly and silently spread over the stiffening
limbs that had just ceased to struggle, when another soul took its flight—the
poor Mexican lad who had joined them at the fort. They had been forty­
eight hours without tasting food. The storm increased. They were in immi­
nent danger of perishing of cold, and the weight of the accumulating snow
upon their persons. They wisely took the only measure of defense that was
left them against the storm. They spread a blanket, and seating themselves
upon it in a circle, stretched another over their heads, thus raising a com­
munity of warmth, which greatly assisted their slow vitality. Occasionally
they had to raise the blanket, pushing up from beneath, to throw off the
accumulating snow.

Under its shelter what horrors were endured and apprehended! Some,
who raved, seized upon the persons of those near them—a hand or arm—
mistaking it for food, which they were eager to devour. Others sat in the
stupor of despair, the idiocy of inanition, or silent, sullen rebellion against
the fate which clasped them as in the arms of iron. During the night they
ate of the flesh of those who had died. That first dreadful repast! The heav­
ens frowning above; the earth glaring beneath; the night air moaning over
the great waste, whose silence seemed to snap and rend the very chords of
sensation and life in the lightened brains of those who partook. It roused

17 McGlashan and Harlan also report that Graves told his daughters to save them­selves by using his body for food.
them more effectually than anything had for days. It stirred their utmost remaining capacities for appreciating the horrors of their situation. But the voracious digestive function was more faithful to their need than the revolted will, which, though conquered, stood aloof. The sustenance they took assimilated rapidly and healthfully. They were better and stronger in a few hours.

The storm continued two days. At the end of that time they moved on. But two more died before they set out from the “camp of death.” While there, the Indians heard words which, though spoken in a language unknown to them, alarmed them. They left the party by stealth—ran away.

They now went forward without any guide but the setting sun. They took with them what they hoped would subsist them till they should reach human habitation; but when the last morsel was consumed, there was still the same white waste about them. Then the first providential relief came. A skeleton deer came in their way and was shot—for they had clung to their gun when every other implement had been cast away in weariness or despair. The wretched animal was starved, like themselves, upon the desert of snow, and its slight carcass was consumed to the last inch of hide—every atom that could be eaten. They descended till they reached bare ground. Their snow-shoes were no longer necessary, and the strings and bits of hide were eaten. And yet there were no indications that they were approaching relief. Suddenly they came, one day, upon the two fugitive Indians, resting. Poor fellows! They had had nothing to eat since they had fled from the camp of death on that terrible night. They had traveled on, feeble and hungry, but hopeful; for they knew that abundance was before them, and that it was really not far off, could they but struggle forward.

They never saw their bountiful home again. The starving emigrants, who could not slay each other, thought with less scruple of the fate of these. They had left the wintry mountains so far behind, that it seemed quite certain before the sustenance should be exhausted, which was thus providentially thrown in their way, relief would come from some source.

It was expected that parties would be out to meet them from the nearest settlement; and so, indeed, there were—but they did not fall in with the wanderers, and the first indication of human neighborhood to them was a rancherie, of Digger Indians, who gave them of their stores—acorns, seeds, etc. They sent them forward, when they had a little refreshed themselves, with a guide, to the next rancherie, whence another conducted them to the next, and so on, till they reached Bear Valley. In it an emigrant had settled the year previous, and there were shelter and food for them. They were then within a day’s travel of the rancho, where they arrived after nightfall.

18 This melodramatic name was first published by Thornton, but Farnham’s account shows little other sign of his influence.
Miss G. and one of her companions assured me that the cheer of a royal palace could never so satisfy them as did that of this rude home. The friendly light shining, not, as they afterward observed, from a window, but through gaps in the walls, far into the dreary darkness that had walled them in so long, seemed to promise them, while yet afar off, princely comfort and abundance.

They entered it on the evening of the thirty-second day from the cabins! They had set out, fifteen in number; they were now seven—haggard, tattered, with naked feet, frozen and bleeding, emaciated, wild countenances, unnatural voices, and incoherent speech, they entered the hospitable dwelling where they had been expected and prepared for—two men and five women!!

No more starvation, no more horror before them! Did they consider it then? No; they sat down, housed and fed, and simply rejoiced in the blessed sense of warmth and plenty and repose. Few experiences can be richer in satisfaction than theirs of the first few hours, before memory began her painful work—before the stunned sensibilities revived to feel their own wounds—before the subdued intellect reasserted itself—before, indeed, the life which was not animal reclaimed its power. How perfect the rest to the exhausted nature.

The party whose sufferings I have attempted to record, left at the cabins in the mountains about sixty souls. Nearly half of them were children, from a few months old, upward. When this party left, there were no provisions in their camps but the poor beef of the wasted cattle they had slaughtered, and this was so scarce that it was very sparingly used—the question with the thoughtful and faithful minds of that unfortunate community being, How little is it possible for me to support life on? The relief party had made them fully aware of the almost impossibility of transporting provision to them over the deep snow. Animal strength was out of the question, and men could bear but little beyond what was necessary for their own support in the journey to and fro. There could no others leave the cabins without a guide; the feeble and the young it was thought impossible to start with till the snow that lay in their way should have, at least partially, disappeared. Thus they were to husband every atom of sustenance. A few inches of hide supported a family an entire day. Nursing mothers could no longer nourish their infants. Some were happily released before the days of sorest hunger came.

19 The phrasing indicates that another member of the Forlorn Hope spoke with Farnham. William Eddy is a possibility (see note 39, below); however, if this person was one of the mothers referred to in note 11 above, Amanda McCutch- en is the most likely candidate: of the three mothers in the Forlorn Hope, she lived nearest Farnham.
Their cabins were deep down in the snow after the heavy storms came, and it had to be shoveled from the roof, and cut in stairs from the doorways, to afford communication with the upper world. In each of the three cabins that were near each other, as, indeed, in all, there were women and children, and kindly offices and sympathies were exchanged, as their needs varied.

There was little visiting, except when death entered one or more of those memorable homes. He was never preceded by disease; gaunter and feebler grew his victims daily, the strongest and ablest first. Men who loved none that were near—who felt themselves doing battle alone with the terrible foes that hemmed them in, were the first to surrender.20 Some half-grown youths and children perished, but no women—especially no mothers—for a considerable period.21 These went, where the deepest misery was, ministers of mercy and tenderness to the suffering—too earnest to mitigate the pains of others to be altogether consumed by their own;

"Love's divine self-abnegation"

raised them above the naked animal necessities which destroyed those not thus supported. With the true instinct which such a tremendous situation would unclotche of all conventional or false leanings, they were, in being always sought, acknowledged as the most merciful, the most tender, the most efficient. Starving men appealed to them. Women who had children perishing, called for help on women who also had children to suffer. In the middle cabin of the three I have described as being near together, lived the Irish family I have spoken of. They had reached that place with all their animals, and consequently were among those best prepared to meet the terrible emergencies before them. Their store of beef was piled in a corner of their little apartment, and upon the other side of a partition, which did not quite divide the house, there was a profane, coarse, blasphemous German, or Dutchman [Louis Keseberg]. His revolting language had terrified and shocked the good Catholic mother often, before they reached this spot, and now it made her tremble to hear his imprecations. He was entirely destitute, with a wife and two children, one of whom [Louis, Jr.], fortunately, died early in the days of starvation. He had wisely established himself near the largest stores and liberal hearts—his unblushing selfishness

20 When the Donner party was trapped it included ten men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five (whose ages are known) traveling without family members; only one of them survived.

21 Of the fifteen women over the age of eighteen trapped in the mountains, only five perished. The first to die was Eleanor Eddy on February 7; seven men had predeceased her.
having proved, before that time, that he would not lack what was essential
to support life while his neighbors had it.

There the indefatigable, self-denying mother and wife watched over her
family, nursed, tended, fed, clothed, and kept them alive from the sixth or
seventh of November till about the middle of February. What a record
would the history of those three months make! One feature of it, not to be
forgotten, was the constant expectation of relief. They lived, as it were, a
subterranean life. The people who came would first be heard above; and
the silence that surrounded them, no living thing approaching, was seldom
broken without. Those who were of their community, came silently and
grew silently; and their ears had soon become so familiar to the accus-
tomed noises, that they knew each one. But the painful tension of the
organs, to catch a tone that should foretell release from their dreadful lot!
A shifting of the wind, so that it brought from the angles of their snow
embankment an unfamiliar tone, would make their hearts beat more
quickly. They went to sleep with this hope, and woke with it. It attended
them in the preparation and taking of every miserable meal, and in all the
weary hours between those events; and though they talked many times as
if it had utterly forsaken them, yet it never did for a moment. But for it few
of those who survived to better days would have outlived those dreadful
ones.

Mr. Breen says: “About this time an incident occurred which greatly
surprised us all. One evening, as I was gazing around, I saw an Indian
coming from the mountain. He came to the house and said something
which we could not understand. He had a small pack on his back, consist-
ing of a fur blanket, and about two dozen of what is called California soap-
root, which, by some means, could be made good to eat. He appeared very
friendly, gave us two or three of the roots, and went on his way. When he
was going I could never imagine. He walked upon snow-shoes, the strings
of which were made of bark. He went east; and as the snow was very deep
for many miles on all sides, I do not know how he passed the nights.”22
One can believe that he would do as well in this respect as the poor starved
men and women who had left the cabins.

One day a man [Augustus Spitzer] came down the snow-steps of Mrs.
Breen’s cabin, and fell at full length within the doorway. He was quickly
raised, and some broth, made of beef and hide, without salt (that necessary
article having been forgotten in the wagons at the top of the mountains,
which were now entirely buried in snow), put into his lifeless lips. It
revived him so that he spoke. He was a hired driver. His life was of value
to no one. Those who would have divided their morsel with him, were in a
land of plenty. She said that when a new call was made upon her slender

22 Patrick Breen recorded this incident on February 28.
store, and she thought of her children, she felt she could not withhold what
she had. God had given and preserved it to her, and she trusted firmly in
Him to save them when all should be gone. 23

Thus she fed the fellow, her next neighbor, whose wickedness made her
tremble lest it should provoke the judgment of God, and whose dreadful
conduct afterwards showed a nature not human but altogether monstrous
and fearful; and thus she shared with perishing women and children the
store that had been spared to them. Her pious faith, her warm heart, and
her energetic nature fitted her for her lot. In her the sublime promise, “As
thy day, so shall thy strength be,” was literally fulfilled. Her husband had
been ill on their arrival, and he had barely recovered strength to move;
but, seconding her humane purposes, he dispensed their meat to those
who had none; and the houseless and starving never went from them al­
together unfed. Their hut became the resort of the utterly destitute—those
who had no share either in heart or hearth. 24 Eleven of the wretched ones
expired in it, and more who fed there live to this day. 25

“O! dear Mrs. Breen,” said one of her neighbors, coming quickly in one
morning, “my dear boy is dying. Will you not give me some food for him?”

“Indeed then I will, dear,” was the ready answer. “Take some of the
beef.”

The poor mother had often had some before. She took it, and, fast as
her wasted limbs would carry her, hurried back to her cabin. She first
tasted a few morsels raw, to give her heart; but this time her speed was vain.
The poor emaciated boy, though he tasted what she brought, was too far
gone to revive; and in a short time she sent a messenger up to ask her good
neighbor to come down with one of her sons, and assist in burying him in
the snow! 26 What a burial was that! Performed by two starving women, and
a lad scarcely more alive than the one he was assisting to bury!

23 The Breens were in a difficult position: they had larger stores of meat than did
did their neighbors, but they also had a large family to feed. No doubt they were as
genorous as they dared be under the circumstances, but claims of their gener­
osity to all and sundry are not confirmed by other sources.

24 On the contrary, the Breens permitted only Spitzer and the Reeds to live with
them; the Reeds’ hired help, Eliza Williams and Milt Elliott, had to fend for
themselves. Patrick Breen became uneasy when the latter came to the cabin one
day in early February and dozed off. Fearing that Milt would die and his death
demoralize the children, Breen made the teamster leave. Mrs. Reed helped Milt
drag himself to the Murphys’, where he died a few days later. Patty Reed Lewis
to C. F. McGlashan, bound letters, 47.

25 Only one person, Augustus Spitzer, died in the Breens’ cabin before they left.

26 This particular incident is corroborated. William G. Murphy described his
brother Landrum’s death in a speech given at Donner Lake in 1896, which
The man who had fallen in their door, died with them.₂⁷ Children, whose parents were gone before them, either to the grave or on the journey, were taken in and fed, and tended.₂⁸ It was wonderful how, with her nursing babe, with the care that was necessary in preparing and dividing the little food she dared to give them each day, with the constant calls upon her humanity and strength to attend to those whose lot was more deplorable than her own, she bore up under all—encouraged everybody, and constantly gave out, as it were, life to the sinking, hope to the despairing, courage and faith to the doubting. They needed it all and more, for the long-hoped relief came not. Day after day went past, and they wasted, and death crept closer and closer to them.

Mr. Breen says: “About this time, Mrs. Reed put afoot, a brave an undertaking as was ever recorded of woman. It was to travel with a man [Milt Elliott] and another woman [Eliza Williams] across the mountains and send relief to her family (her husband was gone before, and she had four children in the camp).₂⁹ But her heroic undertaking failed. After traveling several days she was obliged to return, and the greatest wonder is how they were ever able to retrace their steps, as the snow fell several feet while they were gone. The man who accompanied her died a few days after their return, then another man, then a child, and, in a few days, a woman, the mother of several children.³⁰ Death had become so common an event, that it was looked upon as a matter of course, and we all expected to go soon.”

With what joy and hope a relief party was hailed that arrived about the last of January [February 18]. It brought but slender supplies, and the individuals composing it were to return immediately with as many of the sufferers as could set out with them. This party had been sent out chiefly, or in part, through Mr. Reed’s effort, and his family were among twenty-one who left the cabins to travel over the snow, on the first of February. The

“Spitzer died... imploring, Mrs. Breen, to just put a little meat in his mouth, so he could just know, it was there, & he could die easy, & in peace. I do not think, the meat was given him, but he gave up the ghost, & was no more.” Patty Reed Lewis to C. F. McGlashan, March (or April) 1879.

At this point in the narrative the Breens were not looking after any children whose parents had “gone before.” Catherine Pike and George Foster were cared for by their grandmother, Levinah Murphy, who also tended James Eddy after his mother died; the Graves family took care of Harriet McCutchen. It was not until later that the Breens took in Patty and Tommy Reed and looked after the Graves and Donner children left with them at Starved Camp.

Patrick Breen records the departure of this group, which also included Virginia Reed, on January 4; they returned four days later.

These are the deaths of Milt Elliott, Charles Burger, Margaret Eddy, and Eleanor Eddy.
children were to be assisted forward by the strong men; but after a mile or
more up the mountain, the difficulty proved too great in the case of the two
younger, and they were taken back to Mrs. Breen’s cabin to await their fur-
ther chances there. The rest of the party pressed on.

I know but little of that transit; some perished by the way, and all were
reduced to the utmost extremity before they reached the settlements. Mr.
Reed’s wife and children reached him after a separation of four months.
What a meeting must that have been! The wasted persons, the haggard
countenances, the tattered clothing, and, then, the painful thought of those
who were yet behind. Could they also be saved? Two of Mrs. Breen’s sons
[Edward and Simon] were in this party, the ablest and eldest. She received
the little ones who were returned to her, and fed and cared for them with
her own, and she told me that in giving them their scanty meals, she could
never divide a larger portion to her own than to the strangers. Their con-
stant nourishment was the dry hide boiled without salt (she had a little
pepper) and a very little beef with it. The hide was burned to remove the
hair, scraped, and, when boiled, made a gelatinous broth, far more nutri-
tious than the poor beef would have made without it. But this could not
last them much longer. Already one cabin had been unroofed and thus
rendered untenantable.

Among those who perished was not the wretch who lived under the
same roof with the Breen family. He yet lived to consume the sustenance
that would have sustained a worthier life. His wife and surviving child had
come in with the last party, and there is a sort of satisfaction in knowing
that base and brutal as the man-cannibal was, the wife was not altogether
lacking in traits that allied her to him. For the only act told of a woman in
this whole dreadful history, that was unworthy of her sex, was of this one.
It is said that on their way in, after they were a day or two from the cabins,
her child appeared to be dying, and she herself seemed unable to travel.
She was advised to return. It was much easier traveling back than advanc-
ing, because the road was well beaten, and she was in no danger of
encountering anything, for the waste of snow was an utter solitude.

31 Farnham or her informant neglects to mention the Breens’ unwillingness to take
Patty and Tommy Reed back, as reported by Thornton.
32 Patty Reed Lewis does not confirm this statement in her letters to McGlashan.
Further, according to a late account based her testimony, Glover left seven tea-
spoons of flour and seven strips of beef with the Reed children, which was to
last them ten days. Patty cooked it herself over the fire in Keseberg’s lean-to.
She does not say that the Breens augmented this ration. Wells, “The Tragedy
of Donner Lake,” San Francisco Call, July 2, 1919.
33 The Reeds were reduced to eating the hides that roofed their side of the double
cabin they shared with the Graveses. It was at this point that they attempted un-
successfully to cross the mountains and afterwards took refuge with the Breens.
She refused; and with the word, tossed her helpless, sinking babe from her, saying: "Why should she go back with a half dead child!" The development of her husband's atrocity, which afterwards took place, would have made it painful to think of her as linked to him had she been altogether so noble and self-sacrificing as those of her sex who shared her lot.  

About the thirteenth of February [March 1], a relief party arrived. Mr. Reed conducted it. They had cached provisions on the road, and reached the cabins with only a small quantity of wheaten meal, made at Sutter's Fort. They left a morsel at each of the camps, and went below to the solitary one where death had been busy, indeed, and hunger had driven humanity to its last resort—preying upon the dead.

They left at this camp only a mother and her three children. Everybody else had perished, and the distraught mother refused to leave her wretched habitation because of the treasure of money and goods it contained, insisting that government should find means of transporting her family and effects safely to the country whither she was bound.

There was no time to be lost. Every day imperiled lives. So the second day after the arrival of Mr. Reed's party, twenty-one souls set out; many of them were children, and two infants who had been nursing till the maternal fountain had been dried. The wheaten-meal had been baked into biscuit for the journey, and the provident Mrs. Breen had reserved through all, a few strips of their poor beef dried, four pounds of coffee, and a small paper of tea. The latter article, with a lump of loaf sugar, weighing about a pound, she carried at her waist.

When they set out they left at the cabins a father near to death, a mother and three children; at the lone cabin two children, two and four years, and

34 This anecdote is unique to Farnham; generally survivors were sympathetic to Philippine Keseberg, whom they regarded as a battered wife. W. C. Graves, also rescued by the First Relief, remembered that Mrs. Keseberg offered twenty-five dollars and a gold watch to anyone who would carry Ada for her.

35 This is a variation of Wise's tale that the emigrants refused to abandon their property at the risk of their lives. The story was told of Tamsen Donner in McDougall's 1871 Pacific Rural Press article (in this volume); apparently the emigrants believed that George Donner was dead and they could conceive no reason other than avarice or insanity to explain why his wife would refuse to leave her camp, as she was in good health. Her sister-in-law Elizabeth, Jacob Donner's widow, was too weak to travel. Farnham confuses the two Donner families; her later statements point to Elizabeth Donner as the "insane mother." See notes 36 and 43.
The grandmother of one of them, and the dreadful German at the upper cabins.\textsuperscript{36}

The man was alone in the hut, he occupied; the woman and the two children in a neighboring one.

The moving party camped the first night at the top of the mountain, a place bleak and cold enough to bodies well fed and clothed, but dreadfully chilling and wretched to the feeble starving creatures who had, with difficulty, reached it from the comparative shelter and warmth of their habitation below. Here a very scanty supper was made of the biscuit; a few spoonfuls of meal, thrown into some snow-water, made a little gruel for the infants, and after a night of aching wretchedness which can well be imagined, they rose early, and taking a few morsels, each, of the bread, journeyed on. Mrs. B. was not fortunate enough to taste her beef or coffee, which she had, at starting, committed to the keeping of one of the men. Sometimes, when she sat in the long nights watching her perishing family by the camp-fire, she saw those on the opposite side of the logs preparing and drinking the latter; but with that feeling which will be readily understood by many natures, and those not of the worst, she could not ask for a drop of it.

On the third day out, they met a party going to the cabins—the fathers of the two children, to bring them on.\textsuperscript{37} And I may as well state here, that when these men arrived, they found their two young children dead; also the grandmother who was with them, and the husband at the lower camp.\textsuperscript{38} Evidences of the most atrocious conduct on the part of the German were too palpable to be mistaken; and on entering his hut, the father

\textsuperscript{36} Farnham has just said that everyone was dead at the farthest camp except the insane mother and her three children, but suddenly they have acquired a dying father. The individuals mentioned are evidently George and Tamsen Donner and their daughters, Frances, Georgia, and Eliza; George Foster, James Eddy, and Levinah Murphy; and Louis Keseberg. Farnham has overlooked Simon Murphy; Elizabeth, Lewis, and Samuel Donner, left at the Alder Creek camp; and Mary and Isaac Donner and Solomon Hook, rescued by the Second Relief.

\textsuperscript{37} After the Second Relief reached the emigrants, some of the rescuers stayed at the lake while Reed and others went to the Donner camp. When they returned to the lake they brought three children from Jacob Donner's camp: Isaac and Mary Donner and Solomon Hook. Farnham has confused Reed's small party with the Third Relief led by Eddy and Foster.

\textsuperscript{38} Eddy and Foster found that their sons James and George had died; Levinah Murphy and George Donner were still alive. Keseberg had resorted to cannibalism; there is no proof that he killed anyone for food, but there are several reports that he threatened to do so. Eddy and Foster rescued Simon Murphy and George Donner's three girls.
"UNFORTUNATE EMIGRANTS"

of one of the murdered children seized an axe with the purpose of cleaving him to the earth; but in the act of upraising it, he said he suddenly remembered to what dreadful straits they had all been reduced, and it fell at his side. 39 They left this wretch,* who was well able to travel, and the insane mother, at the lower camp (taking with them the three children), the only living beings in those homes of desolation and death, and journeying as rapidly as possible, overtook the party they had passed, before they were far on the way. 40

On the afternoon of the day they joined them, a snow-storm set in very violently, and increased to blinding thickness before the evening was far advanced. They encamped early, and the men of the relief party gathered and set brush in the snow, and threw up a bank against it, to break the storm off the fire and those who surrounded it. Mrs. B. told me that she had her husband and five children together, lying with their feet to the fire, and their heads under shelter of the snow breast-work; and she sat by them, with only moccasins on her feet, and a blanket drawn over her shoulders and head, within which, and a shawl she constantly wore, she nursed her poor baby on her knees. Her milk had been gone many days, and the child was so emaciated and lifeless, that she scarcely expected at any time, on opening the covering, to find it alive. The other [Mrs. Graves] lay with her babe and three or four older children, at the other side of the fire, where were, also, most of the rest of the party. The storm was very violent all night; and she watched through it, dozing occasionally for a few moments, and then rousing herself, to brush the snow and flying sparks from the covering of the sleepers.

Toward morning, she heard one of the young girls opposite call to her mother to cover her. The call was repeated several times impatiently, when she spoke to the child, reminding her of the exhaustion and fatigue her mother suffered in nursing and carrying the baby; and bidding her cover herself and let her mother rest. Presently she heard the mother

* Not to have to return to this monster again, I may as well state, that the next party who went out in the spring, found him still there alone, and in a box in his cabin, the body of the unfortunate woman who had been left in the camp below, chopped up! When accused of her murder, he denied it stoutly, and said she had died; but a pailful of blood, found beneath his bed, gave the lie to his words. He had murdered the woman, plundered her cabin, and was at last compelled, after reaching California, to give up a part of his stolen treasure. [Farnham's note. Here again we encounter the "boxful of bones" and "bucket of blood" motifs; see Thornton, notes 113 and 114.]

39 Thornton also mentions Eddy's temptation to kill Keseberg; the phrase "he said" suggests that Eddy may have been one of Farnham's sources.

40 Eddy and Foster overtook the Breeens after the events at Starved Camp; see note 37, above.
ELIZA W. FARNHAM

speak, in a quite unnatural tone, and she called to one of the men near her
to go and speak to her. He arose after a few minutes, and found the poor
sufferer almost past speaking. He took her infant; and after shaking the
snow from her blanket, covered her as well as might be, and left her.
Shortly after, Mrs. B. observed her to turn herself slightly, and throw one
arm feebly up, as if to go asleep. She waited a little while, and seeing her
remain quite still, she walked around to her. She was already cold in death.
Her poor, starving child wailed and moaned piteously in the arms of its
young sister; but the mother’s heart could no more warm or nourish it.

This was the first death in this party. The storm continued through two
days and great part of two nights, and the whole party were obliged to lie
waiting its close. As the third morning advanced, it abated; and the men,
feeling how nearly impossible it would be for the young and feeble to
move on over the deep fresh-fallen snow, and the certainty of death to all,
if they remained waiting, proposed going on rapidly, taking Mr. Reed’s
two children, and hurrying out help to those who were obliged to stay
behind. The provisions that had been brought out to this point had been
consumed; so that those who remained, remained to certain death, unless
relief came speedily. They departed, promising, in this respect, everything
that was possible, and leaving poor Mrs. B., the only active, responsible
adult, beside her feeble husband, to care for those ten starving children. A
higher trust sustained her, or she had sunk in that appalling hour. The sky
was yet draped in sad-colored clouds, which hung over them most of the
day. They had no food—nothing to eat, save a few seeds, tied in bits of
cloth, that had been brought along by some one, and a part of the precious
lump of sugar. There were also a very few spoonfuls of the tea remaining
in the bottle. They sat and lay by the fire most of the day, with what heavy
hearts who shall ever know? The husband, the wife, their five children—the
three just left motherless, and two or three others—the remnants of families
that had perished.

They were upon about thirty feet of snow, beside a fire made by falling
several trees together from opposite directions. The stark mother lay there
before them—a ghastlier sight in the sunshine that succeeded the storm,
than when the dark clouds overhung them. They had no words of cheer to
speak to each other—no courage or hope to share, but those which pointed
to a life where hunger and cold could never come, and their benumbed
faculties were scarcely able to seize upon a consolation so remote from the
thoughts and wants that absorbed their whole being.

41 J. H. Merryman’s more nearly contemporary article, based on information
from Reed, states that Isaac Donner was the first to die at Starved Camp.
42 Reed has been criticized for abandoning his charges at Starved Camp, but un-
der the circumstances he could hardly have done otherwise.
A situation like this, will not awaken in common natures religious trust. Under such protracted suffering, the animal outgrows the spiritual in frightful disproportion; yet the mother's sublime faith, which had brought her thus far through her agonies with a heart still warm toward those who shared them, did not fail her now. She spoke gently to one and another—asked her husband to repeat the litany and the children to join her in the responses, and endeavored to fix their minds upon the time when relief would probably come. For nature taught her as unerringly and more simply than philosophy could have done, that the only hope of sustaining them was to set before them a termination to their sufferings.

What days and nights were those which went by while they waited. Life waning visibly in those about her; not a morsel of food to offer them; her own infant, and that little one that had been cherished and saved through all by the mother now lying dead; wasting hourly into the more perfect image of death; her husband, worn to a skeleton, indifferent to his own fate or any one's else. It needed the fullest measure of exalted faith, of womanly tenderness and self-sacrifice, to sustain one through such a season. She watched by night as well as by day. She gathered wood to keep them warm. She boiled her handful of tea and dispensed it to them; and when she found one sunken and speechless, she broke with her teeth a morsel of the precious sugar and put it in his lips. She fed her babe freely on snow-water, and, scanty as was the wardrobe she had, she managed to get fresh clothing next its skin two or three times a week.

Where, one asks in wonder and reverence, did she find strength and courage for all this? She sat all night by her family, her elbows on her knees, brooding the meek little victim that lay there; watching those who slept, and occasionally dozing, with a fearful consciousness of their terrible condition always upon her. The sense of peril never slumbered. Many times during the night she went to the sleepers to ascertain if they all still breathed. She put her hand under their blankets and held it before the mouth. In this way she assured herself that they were yet alive; but once her blood curdled to find, on approaching her hand to the lips of one of her own children, there was no warm breath upon it. She tried to open the mouth, and found the jaws set. She roused her husband.

"O, Patrick, man, rise and help me; James is dying!"

"Let him die," said the miserable father; "he will be better off than any of us."

She was terribly shocked by this reply. In her own expressive language, her heart stood still when she heard it. She was bewildered, and knew not where to set her weary hands to work; but she recovered in a few moments, and began to chafe the chest and hands of the perishing boy. She broke a bit of sugar, and with considerable effort forced it between his teeth with a few drops of snow-water. She saw him swallow; then a slight
convulsive motion stirred his features; he stretched his limbs feebly, and in a moment more opened his eyes and looked upon her. How fervent were her thanks to the great Father, whom she forgot not, night nor day.

Thus she went on. The tea-leaves were eaten, the seeds were chewed, the sugar all dispensed. One child [Franklin Ward Graves, Jr.] of the mother, who lay upon the snow, perished—not the youngest. An older sister [Nancy] had that in charge, and it still lived, though not a particle of anything but snow-water had passed its clammy lips for near a week.

The days were bright, and, compared with the nights, comfortable. Occasionally, when the sun shone, their voices were heard, though generally they sat or laid in a kind of stupor, from which she often found it alarmingly difficult to rouse them; but when the gray evening twilight drew its deepening curtain over the cold, glittering heavens and the icy waste, and when the famishing bodies had been covered from the frost that pinched them with but little less keenness than the unrelenting hunger, the solitude seemed to rend her very brain. Her own powers faltered—her head seemed to distend enormously, and grow to a vast cavern, in which a thunderous silence reverberated—ceasing at intervals, when it appeared to have gone out into the borders of that great ringing space.

But she said her prayers many times over in the darkness as well as the light, and always with renewed trust in Him who had not yet forsaken her, and thus sat out her weary watch. After the turning of the night, she always sat watching for the morning-star, which seemed, every time she saw it rise clear in the cold eastern sky, to renew to her the promise, “As thy day is, so shall thy strength be.”

Their fire had melted the snow to a considerable depth, and they were lying upon the bank above it. Thus they had less of its heat than they needed, and found some difficulty in getting the fuel she gathered, placed so that it could burn. One morning, after she had hailed her messenger of promise, and the light had increased so as to render objects visible in the distance, she looked, as usual, over the white expanse that lay to the southwest, to see if any dark moving specks were visible upon its surface. Only the tree-tops, which she had scanned so often as to be quite familiar with their appearances, were to be seen, and with a heavy heart she brought herself back from that distant hope, to consider what was immediately about her.

The fire had sunk so far away, that they had felt but little of its warmth the last two nights, and casting her eyes down into the snow-pit, where it sent forth only a dull glow, she thought she saw the welcome face of beloved mother earth. It was such a reviving sight, after their long freezing separation from it! She immediately roused her eldest son, and with a great deal of difficulty, and repeated words of cheering and encouragement, brought him to understand, that she wished him to descend by one of the
tree-tops which had fallen in, so as to make a sort of ladder, and see if they could reach the naked earth and if it were possible for them all to go down. She trembled with fear at the vacant silence in which he at first gazed at her, but at length, after she had told him a great many times, he said, "yes, mother," and went.

He reached the bottom safely, and presently spoke to her. There was naked dry earth under his feet; it was warm, and he wished her to come down. She laid her baby beside some of the sleepers and descended. Immediately she determined upon taking them all down.

How good, so she thought, as she ascended the boughs, was God whom she trusted!

By persuasion, by entreaty, by encouragement, and with her own aid, she got them all into this snug shelter. At this removal another child was found dead. He was one of the three that had been brought from his mother in the lower cabin. He had a young sister [Mary] who had set out in comparatively good condition, but was not emaciated and stupefied. The warmth of the fire revived and enlivened her, and when she missed her brother and learned that he was dead, she begged Mr. B. to go up cut a piece off him, for her to eat.

"O child," exclaimed the horror-stricken woman, "sure you would not eat your own brother."

"O yes, I will. Do, Mr. Breen, I am so hungry, and we ate father and uncle at the cabin!"

The man dared not resist her entreaty; for he thought, If she should die when her life might be saved by it, the responsibility would be on me! He ascended to the terrible task. His wife, frozen with horror, hid her face and could not look up. She was conscious of his return, and of something going on about the fire; but she could not bring herself to uncover her eyes till all had subsided again into silence. Her husband remarked, that perhaps they were wrong in rejecting a means of sustaining life, of which others had availed themselves; but she put away the suggestion so fearfully, that it was never renewed nor acted upon by any of her family.

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43 Farnham intends Isaac Donner, though, as noted above, she has apparently confused the order of the deaths. Since Isaac was the son of Elizabeth Donner, she must be Farnham's "insane mother."

44 The reference to eating "father and uncle"—Jacob and George Donner—is evidence that some of Farnham's informants thought George Donner dead before the Second Relief left.

45 It is simply not credible that the Breens abstained from human flesh, a fact conceded by Joseph A. King, though he accuses Farnham of manufacturing the falsehood; see Winter of Entrapment (1994), 104.
But they were now, indeed, reaching the outmost verge of life. A little more battle with the grim enemies that had pursued them so relentlessly, twenty-four or at most forty-eight hours of such warfare and all would be ended. They wished it was over; those who were capable of wishing anything. The infants still breathed, but were so wasted that they could only be moved by raising them bodily on the hands. It seemed as if even their light weight would have dragged the limbs from their bodies. Occasionally through the day, she ascended the tree to look out. It was an incident now, and seemed to kindle more life than when it only required a turn of the head or a glance of the eye to tell that there was no living thing near them. She could no longer walk on the snow, but she had still strength enough to crawl from tree to tree, and gather a few boughs, which she threw along before her to the pit and then tumbled in to renew the fire.

The children, who had refreshed their failing powers with the food that others refused, were soon in a better condition, and so her burden was somewhat lightened, and her fear lessened. But those, whose life was her life, were yet failing. The eighth day was past. She watched for the star of mercy. On the ninth morning, clear and bright it stood over against her beseeching gaze, set in the light liquid blue that overflows the pathway of the springing day. She prayed earnestly as she gazed; for she knew there were but few hours of life in those dearest to her. If human aid came not that day, some eyes, that would soon look imploringly into hers, would be closed in death, before that star should rise again. Would she herself, with all her endurance and resisting love, live to see it? Were they at length to perish? Great God, should it be permitted that they, who had been preserved through so much, should die at last so miserably?

Her eyes were dim, and her sight wavering from inanition. She could not distinguish trees from men on the snow; but, had they been near, she could have heard them; for her ear had grown so sensitive, that the slightest unaccustomed noise arrested her attention.

She went below with a heavier heart than ever before. She had not a word of hope to answer to the languid inquiring countenances that were turned to her face, and she was conscious that it told the story of her despair, yet she strove with some half insane words to suggest, that somebody would surely come to them that day. Another would be too late, and the pity of men's hearts and the mercy of God would surely bring them.

The pallor of death seemed already to be stealing over the sunken countenances that surrounded her, and weak as she was, she could remain below but a few minutes together. She felt she could have died, had she let go her resolution at any time within the last forty-eight hours. They

46 The refugees had been at Starved Camp only five days; Farnham means the ninth morning since they left the cabins.
repeated the litany—the responses came so feebly that they were scarcely audible, and the protracted utterance seemed wearisome; but at last it was over, and they rested in silence.

The sun mounted high and higher in the heavens, and when the day was three or four hours old, she placed her trembling feet again upon the ladder to look out once more. The corpses of the dead lay always before her as she reached the top—the mother and her son, and the little boy, whose remains she could not even glance at, since they had been mutilated. The blanket that covered him could not shut out the horror of the sight! The rays of the sun fell on her with a friendly warmth; but she could not look into the light that flooded the white expanse. Her eyes lacked strength and steadiness. She rested herself against a tree, and endeavored to gather her wandering faculties. In vain. The enfeebled will could no longer hold rule over them. She had broken, perceptious fragments of visions, contradictory and mixed, former with the latter times. Recollections of plenty, and rural peace, came up from her clear, tranquil childhood which seemed to have been another state of existence; flashes of her latter life—its comfort and abundance—gleams of maternal pride in her children, who had been growing up about her, to ease and independence.

She lived through all the phases which her simple life had ever worn, in the few moments of repose after the dizzy effort of ascending. As the thin blood left her whirling brain, and returned to its shrunken channels, she grew more clearly conscious of the terrible present, and remembered the weary quest upon which she came. It was not the memory of thought, it was that of love—the old tugging at the heart that had never relaxed long enough to say, “Now I am done; I can bear no more.” The miserable ones, down there: for them her warring life came back; at thought of them, she turned her face listlessly the way it had so often gazed, but this time something caused it to flush as if the blood, thin and cold a it was, would burst its vessels. What was it? Nothing that she saw; for her eyes were quite dimmed by the sudden access of excitement. It was the sound of voices. By a superhuman effort she kept herself from falling. Was it reality or delusion? She must, at least, live to know the truth. It came again and again. She grew calmer as she became more assured, and the first distinct words she heard uttered were, “there is Mrs. Breen, alive yet, anyhow!”

There were three men advancing toward her. She knew that now there would be no more starving. Death was repelled for this time from the precious little flock he had so long threatened, and she might offer up thanksgiving unchecked by the dreads and fears that had so long frozen her.

A little food was soon dispensed, and shortly after a little more, and soon a third meal. It was astonishing to see the almost instantaneous revivification that took place. Some had voracious appetites, and had to be imperatively restrained. In the other parties, lives had been lost by overeating at
first. Here, that danger was carefully guarded against, and by morning they were all, except the poor infants, so much refreshed and strengthened, that it seemed possible to set out: indeed, it was an imperative necessity to move, as the supplies that had been brought were very slender, and were already materially reduced. They had snow-shoes, and sank deep—almost to the body at every step. O, it was weary traveling! but hope and fear both urged them forward, despite their extreme feebleness. The poor mother bore her baby, and the little orphan was taken by turns.

One source of exquisite suffering, was the dreadful condition of their feet. They had been so often frosted, that, in several cases, every trace of the integuments had disappeared, and the unsheathed, lacerated flesh left its bloody mark at every step on the snow. This was torture to the poor mother’s heart. But she had to urge her little ones onward, painful though it was to them and herself. Their road often lay along the slopes of hills, where a single false step would have precipitated them fifty or a hundred feet; but feeble as they were, they went on without accident, sometimes two, sometimes five miles, a day, till they reached Mule Springs, whither government supplies had been sent, and were then awaiting them, together with animals, and whatever was necessary for the further safe transport of the disabled. There Mrs. B. learned of the safe arrival of her sons who had preceded her, and of the fate that had befallen others, and there she found new cause of thanksgiving for the unspeakable love that had sustained them through all the sufferings and perils which it froze her very heart to look back upon after they had escaped them.

Conclusion.

The sublime endurance which I have here attempted to portray, as well as that discovered by females in innumerable other instances where hardships and danger have had to be borne, are now confessed by all acquainted with these movements. And one is surprised to hear, even among intelligent persons, all causes but the true one assigned for so significant a fact. It is said that men perish first because they have all the care, but the same argument would prove that women—mothers, have none at all, or the least of any class for they are the last to perish, or they survive all. This is too absurd to deserve a moment’s notice.47

47 The question of why there were more female survivors of the Donner party has intrigued many. Farnham’s interpretation is in contrast to that of some (male) commentators who are inclined to attribute the difference to “male chivalry.” There are no clear answers, and a combination of factors—physiological, psychological, and cultural—must be taken into account. See Donald K. Grayson’s
It is not negative circumstances of qualities of character, that can confer the power of which I speak. It springs from the noblest human attributes—it is their highest exercise. It is love—the most devoted and self-oblivious love, such as only woman’s heart is capable of—love, that is nowise allied to intellect—neither limited nor expanded by it—love, such as outlived Gethsemane and triumphed over Calvary. Give to a nature, largely endowed with this divine quality, a motive, and it will prove itself possessed of fortitude as noble as its love. Thus have many delicate women, who at home were invalids, exhibited on these dreadful journey such powers, such miraculous endurance, such indifference to personal suffering, such fertility of resource, in serving others, as have seemed incredible when related. The littleness, the petty weaknesses, and querulous selfishness which women often show under the ordinary fatigues and annoyances of travel, are, in all characters of real worth, replaced, when times of danger and suffering come, by the nobles courage and self-sacrifice. Sensible, honest, and brave men, who have crossed the plains, agree that they would greatly prefer, for courage and resolution, a company of women to one of men, unless the latter were picked and proved beforehand.

I must be permitted to a single remark on the condition of my sex in this anomalous country before closing my last page. It is to express my full persuasion, that the distrust shown towards women here, is in a far greater degree a consequence of the corruptness of the other sex, than of ours. Men whose consciousness accuses them, if not of crime, at least of fearful proclivity to it, believe that they are not alone in experiencing this. They go further and judge others, whom they see tried in similar ways, to be worse than themselves; for if they have, perchance, resisted temptation a little, they are apt to believe that their neighbor, under the same circumstances, has yielded—it is so comforting to many persons, to think worse of the condition of those about them than of their own. And men of common intelligence and perception of character, often think women weak in the very directions wherein those whom they judge know themselves to be strongest, and thus it happens that in chaotic communities, the harshest judgments may be exercised toward large numbers who are least deserving of it. Every thoughtful observer of a new society can testify to this truth; and painful as it is, to think on the ruin that has overtaken such numbers in this land, there is strength in the knowledge that human nature never, in any other age or clime, resisted more potent of pervading temptations. Honor and love to the souls that have proved their integrity here! They should never more be doubted.