

An Excursion up the Coast

By Eliza W. Farnham

Some twenty to forty miles up the coast is a region famed for strawberries, to which we determined, in the winter, to pay a visit, when the fruit should be ripe. When we were very weary, we were used to borrow encouragement from this anticipated holiday, which at length dawned upon the last day of May. We set out—a company of four—Geordie, myself, and our gentlemanly neighbors, Messrs. G. and K. We had an extra horse on which to pack our provisions, camp-furniture, etc.; were well mounted and appointed in every respect, except that the loss of my saddle had necessitated the borrowing of one; and I was not at all suited with it. It was a Spanish, or California side-saddle, made for the rider to sit facing the right hand—the fashion of all the native women in these Spanish States. Except in this respect, this saddle is altogether superior to ours; and I was told that it could be ridden nearly as well on one side as the other.

But the experience of the first fifty rods contradicted this assurance. It was impossible for me to ride off a walk with any dignity; and as I considered myself responsible for a certain style, I protested against the sacrifice of my pretensions to any such mean necessity, and insisted upon being properly equipped before we left "the settlements." Accordingly, we stopped about four miles from home, where a good-natured neighbor furnished me with an American saddle, in which I found myself something freer. Then, when I first tried my horse's gait, I condemned him, and an exchange had to be made.

Mr. K., being an old campaigner, had been elected captain by acclamation, and he proposed to surrender, for my comfort, his own steed, which I at once christened Randolph, because in color and some other characteristics, he resembled a horse so named that had run away with me in the streets of San Francisco a few months before. He was a frisky, dashing-looking fellow, with easy gaits and a kindly spirit; but before we had gone far, after remounting, it was perceptible that the saddle did not fit his back. Thus there was another (a third) dismounting and remounting, at which Geordie, looking comfortably on from her reliable old roan, laughed triumphantly. My wrathful prophesy, that retribution would overtake her before we reached home, only brought a merrier shout and some bantering words, from which, as soon as I was once more in the saddle, Randolph and I absented ourselves without ceremony.

Ten miles up the coast, we passed the last habitation for forty miles. We called, and were treated to a pitcher of delicious milk—what New Yorkers would call cream—and some excellent radishes and turnips, some of which were added to our camp-stores. After a chat of half an hour, in which Mr. W--- related to us an adventure he had recently had with a grizzly bear, in the hills near his house, and described the method of capturing and killing the seals and sea-lions that were tumbling and bellowing on the rocks, not fifty rods distant, we again rode on, not much cheered by what he told us of the scarcity of strawberries, but fully resolved upon taking our full holiday, whether we found any or not.

Randolph's back occasionally protested, with the kind of wince one does not like to feel in a spirited horse, and which I was the more interested in observing, from his being a stranger and having times of treading very gingerly under me, and at the same time, of looking about his head and his ears, as if he were on the point of taking terrible fright, and

leaving everything behind him. But he had a broad, round, good-natured face, and he did not belie his physiognomy. So we went on without further trouble, after some very careful arrangements for his comfort.

The country at that time was glorious in herbage and flowers. From about four miles above Santa Cruz to the last rancho, it is less beautiful than below; but the bold coast, and the great variety of forms made in its outline by the gaps, fissures, arches, and broad gateways, through which the rocks admit the surf, and about which, on the detached fragments and great bases that project from them, the tremendous seals congregate for their sports and social shore-parties, make the seaward view sufficiently diversified and interesting; while on the right, the hills that swell into very considerable heights, offer you smooth curves and slopes of exquisite beauty, sometimes covered, and again richly flecked with golden, purple, scarlet, and pink flowers; among which the yellow lupin—a very beautiful shrub of large size—the low purple, and white lupin, the mallows of bright pink and rose color, and a flaunting euchroma, twin brother to my old friend of the prairies, abound. Innumerable smaller flowers, of almost every imaginable, color, lie below these showy dwellers of the plain, and shade the bright hues more softly down to the grass and herbage which, on the high lands, bear already the first tints of maturity in their tops.

As we advanced northward, we began to get the wind very fresh in our faces, charged with the spray thrown up by the surf beating against miles of broken rock and solid wall that bound the shore for a long way above us. What with the slow start, the frequent changes, the visit at the rancho, and the stopping to look at seals occasionally, the afternoon was pretty well worn away by the time we had traveled twenty miles; and the captain proposed that we should go into camp at the first locality that, offered us the requisites of wood, water, grass, and a lee.

We reached such an one about four o'clock. It was a narrow valley between two considerable hills, opening seaward, over cliffs eighty or ninety feet in height, and landward, up into the stern, sterile mountains, that come down here in a sharp spur from the coast range. The entire valley was not more than two acres in extent, and covered with a luxuriant growth of wild oats. We alighted, and in half an hour had a generous fire blazing before us, with a thick clump of shrubs at our backs which were also almost a roof for us. I had never camped before; Geordie had, in crossing the Isthmus; so the edge of the novelty was taken off to her; but we felt such an escape from the care and labor that had borne so heavily upon us at home, and enjoyed so keenly the old holiday feeling that light those rare seasons in childhood, that we did not require the stimulus of novelty to make us happy.

The event of the evening, after the horses were staked out, the fire made, and the blankets spread, was dinner. Good Miss Sampson had roasted, carved, and packed those moral antipodes, Dombey and Toots, in two small jars. We had a ham, bread, butter, cakes, nuts, raisins, brandy-peaches, and last our turnips and radishes, not the least desirable of our stores. It was first proposed to dine upon two courses; but there seemed a certain prodigality in this which prudence discouraged, so we agreed to disembowel one of the jars, and reserve the ham till next day. Mr. Toots was accordingly produced, and portions of him served on the small tin plates, which constituted the chief part of our dinner-service; but he had fared so hardly in life—having been the fag of the entire poultry-yard, and the unhappy recipient of so much [fowl] treatment—that, after the first few morsels, the flavor was voted bilious, and the ham taken in his stead.

This was really nice; and as we sat about the warm, bright fire, and saw the chill mist driving over the hills before us, and heard the surf madly chafing at the foot of the rocks, we felt much of the cosy comfort of a snug home. As the night threatened to be damp, and I was mentally wondering how Geordie and I were to sleep with nothing between us and the fog that occasionally shook out his gray wing, and again folded it, revealing momentary glimpses of blue sky and golden clouds far above us, our Captain threw out some hints about the practicability of making a house that should serve us for a shelter. We liked not to be too earnest in commendation of the proposal, lest the difficulty should prove greater than it seemed to be; but he assured us that nothing could be easier, there being a small axe, plenty of boughs near at hand, and among us all an abundant supply of blankets to cover it with. When dinner was fairly over, both gentlemen set themselves diligently to work, and in a short time we were completely sheltered from both wind and fog in a little lodge, which, though of small dimensions, quite sufficed us all for a sitting-room during the evening, and Geordie and me for a sleeping-chamber and dressing-room. It was larger than our state-rooms at sea had been; and

though we could not stand over four-and-a-half feet in it, we could sit very comfortably a' la Turque; while, by the light of the great fire, I read the Chronicles of Clovernook, what time the hills resounded to shouts of laughter, and the seals on the rocks responded in an occasional bellow, as if the Land of Turveytop were a familiar country to them, and the Asyoulikeans old friends, whom they were glad to hear of again.

We read till a late hour; then we talked till a later one, inspired by the incomparable book—by the novelty of our situation—by the stern majesty of the darkness which brooded over us, and let loose the wings of thought, and unsealed the fountains of memory—so that the life of the past seemed to have compressed itself into those hours. At last, Geordie intimated a wish to go to rest, whereupon the gentlemen, having renewed the fire, betook themselves to their blankets and saddles, and in five minutes she was as sound asleep as if she had been at La Libertad in our own chamber...

Day breaking over the hills, revealed a broad hollow, scooped out quite across the summit of the one opposite us before I slept. In a few minutes, it seemed, the sound of voices woke me to full light. The night had been very damp, as the dripping eaves of our lodge fully proved; but there was great relief, on finding ourselves all afoot, in ascertaining that no one had taken cold; the more that our friend, Mr. G., was in very delicate health, and wholly unused to sleeping on the ground. Our ablutions were made at the spring. Breakfast was over; the sleeping arrangements converted to sitting ones; the dishes cleaned and packed; Messrs. Dombey, Toots, and the ham bestowed in their respective quarters; watches pulled from under our saddles (which, for the untraveled I relate it, had been our pillows), wound and compared, and still, as the fog hung along the coast, we waited a little, and fell back upon the immortal Chronicles again for an hour or so; when, the mist clearing, there came to us from the blue sky, the dry air and the fleecy clouds it bore gaily inland from the still-shrouded main, an irrepressible desire for movement. We were off from Oatnook unanimously and swiftly.

The horses were as impatient as ourselves, and when we had reached the sandy tract over the hills and descended to the beach about a mile from our camp, they literally flew along the hard sand. The delicious breeze, the great surf rolling in and dashing its spray among their feet, seemed to inspire them, as it did us, with overflowing life. We scarcely broke a gallop for five miles, except in crossing the clear streams that fall over the cliffs, and run their short course of a few rods through the sand into the sea. One could not fail there to understand the anguish of that exquisite song,

" Where is the sea, I languish here!
Where is my own blue sea,
With all its barks in fleet career,
And flags and breezes free?"

The hills rise abruptly from the beach by a rocky wall, varying from forty to one hundred feet in height; the face of which presents a variety of strata piled upon each other as perfectly as if done by the art of man. The hard slate, near the base, is worn in places into caves of considerable depth and dimensions. Occasionally great fissures open an escape for streams falling from the tops of the hills.

Leaving the beach, we rise by an inconsiderable ascent to an open country, where the coast-range sweeps abruptly back some two or three miles from the spur we had passed. This was the most beautiful region we had seen since leaving Santa Cruz, and, indeed, very like it. Gentle hills were divided here, as there, by gulches running seaward from the mountains, but so open and luxuriant as frequently to deserve the name of vallies. In the distance we saw the low sandy point, in the neighborhood of which were the strawberry-beds, and, nearer, a hut, upon one of the swells, which indicated that we were upon one of the large grazing ranches into which the whole of this portion of the coast region is divided.

I omitted to mention that while encamped in Oatnook, we received several calls from Spaniards homeward bound, from these ranches, who all told us that there were no madusas (California for strawberry); and one young Caballero, who had been at La Libertad twice, with beef to sell, assured us, with friendly earnestness, that there was no nadita (not

one). These men had been up to mark the year's addition to the great herds that range those untenanted plains and hills. Every year this is done. Three, or four, or five men go up, driving before them as many horses, which they ride and drive alternately on the way, and use while there in herding the cattle. The herds are gathered to the corrals, which sometimes are complete yards, and at others, have only two sides—a deep gulch answering for a third, and two or three horsemen for the fourth. They are near water, close to which the hombres camp—that is, build a fire to roast their beef by—and there they live till the roder is over.

Near the hut we were approaching was also a large corral, where this process had been going on, and many of the fat-shining cattle were yet lingering on the plain around. At the sound of our horses' hoofs, they raised their heads, snuffed the air a moment, looked wildly at us, and took to their heels. Their timidity helped to remind us that we were away from the habitations of men, and gave further zest to the sense of freedom with which we flew over the plain, scattering them to the right and left.

The Captain had dashed out a few yards ahead, when suddenly he pulled up, with the cry of "here they are, and plenty of them," and the next moment was half knee deep in a sand knoll covered with strawberry vines. We all alighted, and several handfuls were gathered, some of which were ripe, and large enough to give us a correct notion of their quality, which is unlike any I have seen at home, but very like the garden strawberry of Chili. The fruit is firmer, and more deliciously flavored than those we have in the old states; and, when full grown, three or four times larger than the largest there. These beds, however, were small, and had been pretty thoroughly plundered; so we mounted, after an impatient inspection of them, to push on to a more fruitful spot, and one, also, that would furnish a camp.

Mr. K. and I stepped out in advance, to select a camp; and, as the country before us was dotted with lines of timber growing upon brooks or rivulets, we were confident of not having to go further than we chose. Coming upon a height, we saw a corral across a large gulch, through which ran a lively little stream. We were descending to it, with eyes open for any advantageous location, when suddenly four or five buzzards rose from beneath a clump of trees on its bank. Here we saw the brands and bones of a camp which the Spaniards had left the night before.

"Why, there is beef," said Mr. K., "hanging under those trees—the best kind—that those fellows have left to the buzzards; and a new coffee-pot, too. We must take some of this along," and the next moment he had his knife deep in the choicest part of the choicest of five nearly entire quarters of young animals that were hanging upon the boughs. "This will make us a splendid dinner," said he, "and I shall cook it in a way you have never tried. You will see how nice it is. I must cache this coffee-pot till we return. And then we will push on and have something cooking before those lagging folks come up." They were still out of sight when we had reached a beautiful valley, some two miles further on, near which were acres of strawberries. We had unpacked, unsaddled, and were just about starting to the beach for muscles, when they came up.

We found the shell-fish too small to take, but there were exciting prizes in the shape of numerous shells, and curious forms of animal life, which the advancing tide disputed with us at that time, and we submitted the more readily, for remembering the experience of the ancient Dane, and the fine steaks that would soon be awaiting us. To these we repaired, after innumerable solicitations from the Captain, who assured us that a more propitious time for beach-ranging would come when the tide was out, and our dinner disposed of. While it was cooking, we received a call from the female population of a neighboring rancho, six miles away. They were seven in number: an elderly woman, a middle-aged one, a young girl, and four children, one an infant.

The mother was a fat, happy, careless person, even for a Californian. The sight of her face would have been a blessing to the distracted mothers among our care-taking countrywomen. We asked if these were all her children. To which she replied that she had many more.

How many?—and she held up all her fingers, and then snapped them, as if she would defy twice that number to disturb the calm contentment of her life. They had been gathering strawberries, which they offered us, in civil exchange for which we gave them nuts.

They assured us it would rain and hospitably invited us to their casa, where we could get milk in plenty, if nothing else. They departed just as dinner was ready—a meal which we enjoyed exceedingly, not only because of the sharpness of our appetites after a long fast and ride, but of the exquisite flavor of the beef, which was simply roasted upon a stick before the fire. How it shamed the elaborate arts of French cookery! It is the trapper dish. I recommend it to the attention of epicures.

The evening was very threatening, and as we had been housed the last night, it was not to be thought of that we should pass this unroofed. So when the dinner things were out of hand, the erection of another house was commenced, and as there was plenty of drift-wood, spars and yards, that had, perhaps, once, floated in frozen Russian seas, or on the blue Egean, and been thrown, at last, into this little cove, whose frolicsome waters now lock in wintry imprisonment the hardy navigators of the north, and again bathe the flowery shores of the fragrant "summer isles," our architecture lacked not honorable and fitting material, and went swiftly forward to completion. It was christened Strawberry cottage, on the strength of our expectations, which we had not yet sought to realize. Its perpendicular capacity was greater than that of Oatnook; otherwise it showed very similar proportions. Before dark, a store of wood was gathered, and I was again appointed to conduct the entertainment of the evening, which was to consist of that noble sermon of Channing, on "the Church." The reading, and running comments, occupied us until ten o'clock, when we retired, agreeing upon an early stroll in the morning, on the beach. There were no seals that night, or if there were, my sleep was too deep to be interrupted by them.

In the morning, there was a long discussion on the expediency of rising early or late, first, between Geordie and me, but, finally, extending to the lodgers outside the blankets. It was ended by reference to the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, wherein I found a speech of the beloved old shepherd, so triumphant in the affirmative, that my hearers were afoot before I had fairly done with it.

But we found none of the poetry, beauty, and freshness, so vividly described in it; for the morning was damp, above and below, gray, thick, and uninviting. When the fire was replenished and the breakfast put in the first stage of preparation, Geordie and I walked quietly to the beach, with our coarse bathing-towels, and having doubled a jutting ledge of rock, about thirty rods north of the lodge, we tried the matutin, so much to our satisfaction and refreshment, that the steak 'a la trapper cooled while we ploutered, and the Captain, when we returned laden with magnificent shells, expressed his entire disapprobation of going sea-fairing so early-in the day.

The morning began to be rosy before we had finished some selected passages from the *Noctes*, and laughed at some special pleading from Mr. G., and then we betook ourselves to the strawberry beds, with a deep, precious sense of the rare freedom of coming and going at will, of lounging, sitting, reading, eating, riding or walking, at the bidding purely of our pleasure, for another whole day. By the afternoon, with intervals of rest on the cliffs, or in the lodge, as fatigue or caprice prompted, we had gathered several quarts of fruit, and a number of beautiful shells. A ride up among the hills, or to the rancho was talked of, but finally abandoned, and a quiet, grateful mood settling down upon us,...

In the morning, our fruit and shells were packed as judiciously as possible, and, after breakfast, it was announced to us that we had only radishes and butter left for our refreshment on the road. This was rather a startling announcement, but our reliance was on the excellent Captain, whose resources seemed inexhaustible, and who assured us we should find beef at the place where we had left it, that would serve for our dinners.

We mounted and set off about ten o'clock, the horses in high spirits for home. Randolph and I were renewing our acquaintance in sundry little passages of agreement and difference, as to the best path up the hill we had immediately to ascend, when, just as we reached the top, the Dutchman, who also felt his pack somewhat of a stranger, ran across us behind, taking his leading-rope over Randolph's back. I was a little behind the party which the Dutchman circumnavigated (in the ten or fifteen seconds that my horse's heels were flying in the air), and having gained the front, he commenced a dance, the like of which was never seen on circus-boards or elsewhere. My chief means of appreciating his performance, were the peals of laughter from my friends, for it seemed as if Randolph would never again consent to

the use of all his feet upon the ground, and while he remained in that state of mind, it seemed necessary for me to attend to him rather than the entertainment. At length the rope slipped from his back, and with half a dozen tremendous snorts of warning, he let himself down into a kind of dance, half of defiance, half of fear, and joined the company.

We were not long in reaching the beach, over which we had another gallop, not tamer but less joyous than that which had so exhilarated us going up. We alighted at Oatnook though our frame had been demolished, partly to look for a brooch which Geordie, in the scattering frame of mind common to her, had left there. We did not find it, however, and mounting, rode briskly on till two o'clock, when a halt for dinner was called, about twelve miles from home. It was at one of those great gateways by which the streams from the mountains pour themselves into the ocean. On either side were towering rocks in detached masses, and immense walls, whose masonry was as perfect as if they had been laid by the hand of man—at the foot of which spread the broad, white beach, clean as the most notable housewife's floor. Geordie and I strolled for shells or other curiosities, but, finding only some vertebrae of a whale, and being tempted by the flashing water as it rolled over the sands, we resolved upon another bath, which was only well over, when we heard shout after shout of dinner! dinner! to which we responded by presenting ourselves in person as hastily as possible, and partaking freely of the delicious beef, which was sated with butter and garnished with radishes.

We reached La Libertad a little after sunset, and I felt thankful, as the fresh evening breeze rustled the rich foliage of the hillside under which our path lay, that the home we returned to was more beautiful than any spot we had seen.

Charlie came out to meet us on Bill, and, in the excitement of showing off his horsemanship, which then, for the third time, perhaps, allowed him to indulge in a gallop, forgot, till we were fairly in-doors, to tell us the great event of our absence—the most wonderful one in the history of the rancho. The old shanty was burned, and all the powder had been blown up, and Tom's clothes were all gone, and Joe's boots -, "and the shafts of the wagon, too, mother," said little Eddie, holding my hand tight in his till he could tell me his news. "And, mother, Susan Nipper is hanged in the oak-tree, and Miss Tox has weaned my little chickens, and she went in the tree last night with Major Bagstock."

Indeed, there had been calamities little and great, but we had a joyous evening notwithstanding, and could not have lamented our misfortunes less under any circumstances.

Tom gave a very favorable account of the state of things, and it seeming to us that we had been gone long enough for the potatoes to have got three months growth, he averred that they had.

Sources

- *Eliza W. Farnham, who promoted social reform, became matron of the women's section of Sing Sing Prison in 1844. Despite the improvements she made, her liberal views brought her into conflict with other staff members and she was forced to resign in 1848. That same year, her husband (Thomas Jefferson Farnham), who practiced law and had a freight business in California, died suddenly in San Francisco. In 1849, at the age of 34, Eliza Farnham sailed to California to settle her husband's estate and start a farm, or as she called it, a rancho. El Rancho La Libertad was located in Santa Cruz County. She farmed there with her children and her friend Miss Sampson (Miss S.) for more than five years. Sometime during that period, she was joined by her former assistant matron at Sing Sing, Georgiana Bruce Kirby (Geordie). In 1856, Eliza Farnham wrote a book of her experiences called California, in-doors and out, which was published by Dix, Edwards & Co. in 1856. This article is an excerpt from her book, pp.213–222.—RAP, ed.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.