

HISTORICAL ADVENTURES ON THE PACIFIC COAST.*

BY MRS. F. F. VICTOR.

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE POSSESSION OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER.

When the colonies achieved their independence and became the United States of America, Louisiana comprised all that territory, not originally belonging to Spain, lying west of the Mississippi, and south of the 49th parallel. It had been French territory, but was ceded to Spain, thirty years before the discovery by Gray of the Columbia river; and as, according to the above description, it embraced the whole country to the Pacific, the Columbia river was in the Louisiana territory. In 1800, France regained possession of Louisiana, and in 1803, sold it to the United States. Thus, in addition to the right of discovery, which Great Britain contested on the evidence of her explorers, the United States had the right of purchase. To contest that successfully, it must be proven that the parties selling had no property in the territory sold, which is not so easily done.

Immediately following the Louisiana purchase, President Jefferson set on foot an exploring expedition that was to traverse the country to the Rocky mountains, and to discover the sources of the Columbia river. We are all familiar with the principal facts of the Lewis and Clark expedition, which arrived in Oregon from the sources of the Columbia river, and wintered at its mouth in 1805-6; but very few perhaps are aware that their steps were dogged by the Northwest Fur company, whose intention it was to anticipate Lewis and Clark in their enterprise. While the American explorers were at the Mandan villages, they had an interview with one of the traders of that company, who had a post there, and frankly expressed to him their intention of proceeding on an exploring expedition to the Pacific ocean. This information was immediately conveyed to a partner of the company, with the significant fact that the American explorers had "hoisted the American flag." Should the Americans claim the country west of the Rocky mountains, England's dream of a direct trade with China, across the American continent, would be at an end; and the Northwest company's princely, unrestricted trade with the Indians between the Great Lakes and the Rocky mountains would be interfered with. Therefore, the interests of the Northwest company and the home government were identical and both were interested in preventing the success of the American expedition.

The working of powerful monopolies like the East India, the Hudson's Bay and the Northwest companies, was well understood by the English government, and had long constituted one of its ablest engines of conquest in foreign countries. The King George's Sound company was a part of the machinery by which the Spanish possessions at Nootka were to have been wrested away from that government. The chartering of great corporations to operate in foreign countries was a highly respectable method of invasion, and had the merit of being a cheap one, as well as almost to a certainty a successful one. The Englishman who to-day kicks the Chinaman out of his path in Canton, is lord of that country, and knows it. The Sepoy who was blown from the cannon's mouth in India suffered that punishment because an insolent foreign power had, through one of its great commercial companies,

deprived him of every right dear to his race, and he was human enough to wish to be revenged.

The general characteristics of the fur companies of Great Britain did not differ from those of other commercial companies. Perhaps, so far as the nations were concerned, they practiced a certain degree of justice in their dealings, as being good policy as well as good Christianity; but their discipline was rigid, as well with the natives as with their own employees.

In the matter of anticipating the American explorers on this occasion, the Northwest company failed, whether from want of preparation at that time is not known. The partner who was written to, says the trader who gave information, "induced me to consent to a long and arduous tour of discovery. I am to leave about the beginning of June. Thence we shall steer our course towards the Rocky mountains, accompanied by a number of the Mandan Indians, who proceed in that direction every spring, to meet and trade with another tribe of Indians who reside on the other side of the Rocky mountains." The expedition proceeded no further, however, than the Mandan villages. Possibly the Mandans had made a treaty with Lewis and Clark that they thought best to observe. Spanish and French traders from the country of the Americans had for several years been in the habit of ascending the Missouri to the mouth of the Yellowstone; and the natives were able to comprehend the fact of jealousies and opposition, and probably had determined to give aid only to their old friends. Whatever the causes were that interrupted the rival expedition of the Northwest company in 1805, another attempt was made in the following year, by Mr. Simon Frazer, who, with a party of the company's men, pushed westward from Athabasca lake, and, crossing the Rocky mountains by the pass of the Peace river, reached the headwaters of the *Tacotchee Tesse*, discovered by Makenzie in 1792, and which was believed by him to be the Columbia, where he built a fort for the prosecution of the company's business. Frazer was not aware for several years of the mistake he had made, but until 1811, continued to reside as he believed, upon the Columbia, and to flatter himself that he held the key to the territory west of the Rocky mountains. When he did discover his mistake he made all haste to reach the mouth of the real Columbia, but arrived just in time to find the place occupied by an American company.

But let us return to Lewis and Clark, whom we left at the Mandan villages. These intrepid explorers pursued their way across the continent, meeting with no serious obstacles, until in October of that year they came amongst the Rocky mountains, to streams that flowed westward, and following them down, arrived in the Nez Perce country, and leaving their horses with that people, took boats and floated down, with the help of Indian guides, to the Clatsop peninsula, where they wintered within sound of the Pacific surf. That was not a comfortable winter, as any of us "old Oregonians" know to a certainty. I have stood upon the spot where the explorers had their cabin. It was upon the shore of Young's Bay, and thus protected in a measure from the winds that sweep the seaside of Clatsop Plains; but it does not require any great stretch of the imagination to picture the dreary dampness of the place, its loneliness, or its destitution of the ordinary elements of good living. Even such food as the natives use was not plenty, and as hunting amid the gloomy and wet forests

of the coast mountains was almost an utter impossibility, our explorers were in danger of being starved. In the spring of 1806, Lewis and Clark returned to the United States to report their observations to the government.

While Louisiana was alternately a French and Spanish province, a trade had been carried on with the Indians of the country bordering on the Missouri. One Manuel Lisa, had a grant from the Spanish government by which he enjoyed the monopoly of this trade up to the close of the expedition of Lewis and Clark. About this time a number of individuals entered upon the fur trade, carrying competition to so great lengths that the profits of the business were wasted, and serious quarrels occasioned. A better state of affairs ensued, when, in 1808, the principal traders united, and formed the *Missouri Fur Company*. This company spread itself over a vast extent of territory, from the Mississippi to the Rocky mountains and beyond. It is only of those establishments that were carried beyond the Rocky mountains that we have anything to relate in this place. The first of these was erected by Mr. Henry, one of the partners of the Missouri company, on the headwaters of the Snake, or southern branch of the Columbia; but as early as 1810, he was obliged to abandon it on account of the sterility of the country and the hostility of the Indians.

While the headwaters of the Columbia were left to the savage tribes of the plains, an attempt was being made by a couple of enterprising men to form a settlement on the Lower Columbia opposite the present landing of Oak Point. Ever since the apocryphal vision of Admiral Fonte, narrated in a previous chapter, there had been, as we know, many appearances of "the old man from Boston," whose business it was to "trade in skins," and to carry American enterprise to remote parts of the earth, after the manner of the irrepressible Yankee. On the 7th day of July, 1809, there sailed from Boston two ships, destined to the Pacific coast: the *O'Caïn*, Capt. Jonathan Winship, and the *Albatross*, Capt. Nathan Winship, the two captains being brothers. The *O'Caïn* proceeded direct to California, and the *Albatross* sailed for the Sandwich Islands, with twenty-five persons on board. At the Islands she provisioned, and took on board twenty-five more men, leaving port for the Columbia river on the 25th of March, 1810, and arriving in the river early in the spring. Here Capt. Winship examined the shores for some distance, and, finally, at the end of ten days, fixed upon the spot already mentioned, and commenced the work of founding a trading establishment. For a time, business progressed satisfactorily. A tract of ground was cleared and planted, a house erected, and while the forests about them were gay with blossoming undergrowth, and the summer was advancing, our captain and his colony of fifty men rejoiced in the prospect of a successful termination of their enterprise. But the ways of our great river were unknown to Captain Winship. As June came on, the river began to rise in a manner most unaccountable to those who knew not that its sources were among the great Rockies, not only where Lewis and Clark had discovered it, but far, far to the north of that; and that it received the tributary waters from many snow-fed branches. The volume of waters continued to increase, they rose up to a level with the new plantation, they overflowed it, they covered the house-floor to a depth of two feet, and they washed out of

the ground the seeds that had been planted in it. In short, the unfitness of the place for a settlement was demonstrated, and as it was thought to be too late to make a new beginning that year, and the men were discouraged by this unlucky ending of their enterprise, Captain Winship was fain to re-embark his men and sail for California, to consult with his brother. Here he was met with the information of the formation of the *Pacific Fur Company*, with Mr. Astor at its head, and being aware that he could not compete with so powerful an organization, he abandoned the enterprise that had been entered upon with such good hopes, and turned his attention to other fields. That Capt. Winship failed was no proof of want of business sagacity, as the result of Mr. Astor's enterprise sufficiently demonstrated, not long after.

Among those who had been quick to perceive the value of the Oregon territory to the United States, and to commence, was a German merchant of New York, John Jacob Astor. The scheme of Mr. Jefferson of establishing a chain of military posts across the continent, to be followed in time by a trans-continental railway, struck Astor's business judgment as being entirely feasible, and he proposed to be the first private individual in the great and promising field. How all these schemes have at last come out, we know. We have the military posts, the railway, the trade with China. But there were failures not a few, and struggles desperate and violent before these things were brought about.

Astor made a fatal mistake at the very beginning of his enterprise. In his anxiety to put the business in the hands of experienced men, he admitted, even sought, men of the Northwest company, and made them partners in his enterprise. His head "was in the lion's mouth then. But in addition to this error, there was the unfortunate fact that the government itself became so hampered by war with Great Britain in the year following Astor's settlement on the Columbia, that no assistance could be given the far-off establishment of Astoria.

Of ten partners beside himself in Astor's Company, six were Scotchmen of Canada, and about half as many were from the United States. The men were recruited from the Canadian *voyageurs*. In short it was but another Northwest Company, with a slight infusion of the American element. The history of all that befel, in consequence of this error in making up the company, is admirably recited in Irving's Astoria and supplemented in Franchere's Narrative. Briefly, the facts are these: In 1809, Mr. Astor dispatched a vessel, the *Enterprise*, to take observations along the Northwest coast, and to make arrangements with the Russians to supply their settlements in America with provisions. In September of the following year, he dispatched the ship *Tonguin* with the greater part of the Company, and all the Company's stores on board, on its way to the Columbia river. The voyage sped well enough, but the voyagers from first to last did nothing else but quarrel. The Captain, Jonathan Thorn, had been bred in the Naval service, and was in the habit of commanding to be obeyed. He found, however, that passengers were not inclined to be ordered about like marines. Neither could the passengers always agree with each other; and it was with longings that all looked to the Oregon coast for relief from the enforced companionship of a ship's narrow limits, and for freedom to express their opinions of each other. After touching at

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