

Returning Home

by

Anthony Trollope

Web-Books.Com

Returning Home

It is generally supposed that people who live at home,--good domestic people, who love tea and their arm-chairs, and who keep the parlour hearth-rug ever warm,--it is generally supposed that these are the people who value home the most, and best appreciate all the comforts of that cherished institution. I am inclined to doubt this. It is, I think, to those who live farthest away from home, to those who find the greatest difficulty in visiting home, that the word conveys the sweetest idea. In some distant parts of the world it may be that an Englishman acknowledges his permanent resting place; but there are many others in which he will not call his daily house, his home. He would, in his own idea, desecrate the word by doing so. His home is across the blue waters, in the little northern island, which perhaps he may visit no more; which he has left, at any rate, for half his life; from which circumstances, and the necessity of living, have banished him. His home is still in England, and when he speaks of home his thoughts are there.

No one can understand the intensity of this feeling who has not seen or felt the absence of interest in life which falls to the lot of many who have to eat their bread on distant soils. We are all apt to think that a life in strange countries will be a life of excitement, of stirring enterprise, and varied scenes;--that in abandoning the comforts of home, we shall receive in exchange more of movement and of adventure than would come in our way in our own tame country; and this feeling has, I am sure, sent many a young man roaming. Take any spirited fellow of twenty, and ask him whether he would like to go to Mexico for the next ten years! Prudence and his father may ultimately save him from such banishment, but he will not refuse without a pang of regret.

Alas! it is a mistake. Bread may be earned, and fortunes, perhaps, made in such countries; and as it is the destiny of our race to spread itself over the wide face of the globe, it is well that there should be something to gild and paint the outward face of that lot which so many are called upon to choose. But for a life of daily excitement, there is no life like life in England; and the farther that one goes from England the more stagnant, I think, do the waters of existence become.

But if it be so for men, it is ten times more so for women. An Englishman, if he be at Guatemala or Belize, must work for his bread, and that work will find him in thought and excitement. But what of his wife? Where will she find excitement? By what pursuit will she repay herself for all that she has left behind her at her mother's fireside? She will love her husband. Yes; that at least! If there be not that, there will be a hell, indeed. Then she will nurse her children, and talk of her--home. When the time shall come that her promised return thither is within a year or two of its accomplishment, her thoughts will all be fixed on that coming pleasure, as are the thoughts of a young girl on her first ball for the fortnight before that event comes off.

On the central plain of that portion of Central America which is called Costa Rica stands the city of San Jose. It is the capital of the Republic,--for Costa Rica is a Republic,--and, for Central America, is a town of some importance. It is in the middle of the coffee district, surrounded by rich soil on which the sugar-cane is produced, is blessed with a climate only moderately hot, and the native inhabitants are neither cut-throats nor cannibals. It may be said, therefore, that by comparison with some other spots to which Englishmen and others are congregated for the gathering together of money, San Jose may be considered as a happy region; but, nevertheless, a life there is not in every way desirable. It is a dull place, with little to interest either the eye or the ear. Although the heat of the tropics is but little felt there on account of its altitude, men and women become too lifeless for much enterprise. There is no society. There are a few Germans and a few Englishmen in the place, who see each other on matters of business during the day; but, sombre as life generally is, they seem to care little for each other's company on any other footing. I know not to what point the aspirations of the Germans may stretch themselves, but to the English the one idea that gives salt to life is the idea of home. On some day, however distant it may be, they will once more turn their faces towards the little northern island, and then all will be well with them.

To a certain Englishman there, and to his dear little wife, this prospect came some few years since somewhat suddenly. Events and tidings, it matters not which or what, brought it about that they resolved between themselves that they would start immediately;--almost immediately. They would pack up and leave San Jose within four months of the day on which their purpose was first formed. At San Jose a period of only four months for such a purpose was immediately. It creates a feeling of instant excitement, a necessity for instant doing, a consciousness that there was in those few weeks ample work both for the hands and thoughts,--work almost more than ample. The dear little wife, who for the last two years had been so listless, felt herself flurried.

"Harry," she said to her husband, "how shall we ever be ready?" And her pretty face was lighted up with unusual brightness at the happy thought of so much haste with such an object. "And baby's things too," she said, as she thought of all the various little articles of dress that would be needed. A journey from San Jose to Southampton cannot in truth be made as easily as one from London to Liverpool. Let us think of a month to be passed without any aid from the washerwoman, and the greatest part of that month amidst the sweltering heats of the West Indian tropics!

In the first month of her hurry and flurry Mrs. Arkwright was a happy woman. She would see her mother again and her sisters. It was now four years since she had left them on the quay at Southampton, while all their hearts were broken at the parting. She was a young bride then, going forth with her new lord to meet the stern world. He had then been home to look for a wife, and he had found what he looked for in the younger sister of his partner. For he, Henry Arkwright, and his wife's brother, Abel Ring, had established themselves together in San Jose. And now, she thought, how there would be another meeting on those quays at which there should be no broken hearts; at which there should be love without sorrow, and kisses, sweet with the sweetness of welcome, not bitter with the bitterness of parting. And people told her,--the few neighbours around her,--how

happy, how fortunate she was to get home thus early in her life. They had been out some ten,--some twenty years, and still the day of their return was distant. And then she pressed her living baby to her breast, and wiped away a tear as she thought of the other darling whom she would leave beneath that distant sod.

And then came the question as to the route home. San Jose stands in the middle of the high plain of Costa Rica, half way between the Pacific and the Atlantic. The journey thence down to the Pacific is, by comparison, easy. There is a road, and the mules on which the travellers must ride go steadily and easily down to Punta Arenas, the port on that ocean. There are inns, too, on the way,-- places of public entertainment at which refreshment may be obtained, and beds, or fair substitutes for beds. But then by this route the traveller must take a long additional sea voyage. He must convey himself and his weary baggage down to that wretched place on the Pacific, there wait for a steamer to take him to Panama, cross the isthmus, and reship himself in the other waters for his long journey home. That terrible unshipping and reshipping is a sore burden to the unaccustomed traveller. When it is absolutely necessary,--then indeed it is done without much thought; but in the case of the Arkwrights it was not absolutely necessary. And there was another reason which turned Mrs. Arkwright's heart against that journey by Punt' Arenas. The place is unhealthy, having at certain seasons a very bad name;--and here on their outward journey her husband had been taken ill. She had never ceased to think of the fortnight she had spent there among uncouth strangers, during a portion of which his life had trembled in the balance. Early, therefore, in those four months she begged that she might not be taken round by Punt' Arenas. There was another route. "Harry, if you love me, let me go by the Serapiqui." As to Harry's loving her, there was no doubt about that, as she well knew.

There was this other route by the Serapiqui river, and by Greytown. Greytown, it is true, is quite as unhealthy as Punt' Arenas, and by that route one's baggage must be shipped and unshipped into small boats. There are all manner of difficulties attached to it. Perhaps no direct road to and from any city on the world's surface is subject to sharper fatigue while it lasts. Journeying by this route also, the traveller leaves San Jose mounted on his mule, and so mounted he makes his way through the vast primeval forests down to the banks of the Serapiqui river. That there is a track for him is of course true; but it is simply a track, and during nine months of the twelve is so deep in mud that the mules sink in it to their bellies. Then, when the river has been reached, the traveller seats him in his canoe, and for two days is paddled down,--down along the Serapiqui, into the San Juan River, and down along the San Juan till he reaches Greytown, passing one night at some hut on the river side. At Greytown he waits for the steamer which will carry him his first stage on his road towards Southampton. He must be a connoisseur in disagreeables of every kind who can say with any precision whether Greytown or Punt' Arenas is the better place for a week's sojourn.

For a full month Mr. Arkwright would not give way to his wife. At first he all but conquered her by declaring that the Serapiqui journey would be dangerous for the baby; but she heard from some one that it could be made less fatiguing for the baby than the other route. A baby had been carried down in a litter strapped on to a mule's back. A

guide at the mule's head would be necessary, and that was all. When once in her boat the baby would be as well as in her cradle. What purpose cannot a woman gain by perseverance? Her purpose in this instance Mrs. Arkwright did at last gain by persevering.

And then their preparations for the journey went on with much flurrying and hot haste. To us at home, who live and feel our life every day, the manufacture of endless baby-linen and the packing of mountains of clothes does not give an idea of much pleasurable excitement; but at San Jose, where there was scarcely motion enough in existence to prevent its waters from becoming foul with stagnation, this packing of baby-linen was delightful, and for a month or so the days went by with happy wings.

But by degrees reports began to reach both Arkwright and his wife as to this new route, which made them uneasy. The wet season had been prolonged, and even though they might not be deluged by rain themselves, the path would be in such a state of mud as to render the labour incessant. One or two people declared that the road was unfit at any time for a woman,--and then the river would be much swollen. These tidings did not reach Arkwright and his wife together, or at any rate not till late amidst their preparations, or a change might still have been made. As it was, after all her entreaties, Mrs. Arkwright did not like to ask him again to alter his plans; and he, having altered them once, was averse to change them again. So things went on till the mules and the boats had been hired, and things had gone so far that no change could then be made without much cost and trouble.

During the last ten days of their sojourn at San Jose, Mrs. Arkwright had lost all that appearance of joy which had cheered up her sweet face during the last few months. Terror at that terrible journey obliterated in her mind all the happiness which had arisen from the hope of being soon at home. She was thoroughly cowed by the danger to be encountered, and would gladly have gone down to Punt' Arenas, had it been now possible that she could so arrange it. It rained, and rained, and still rained, when there was now only a week from the time they started. Oh! if they could only wait for another month! But this she said to no one. After what had passed between her and her husband, she had not the heart to say such words to him. Arkwright himself was a man not given to much talking, a silent thoughtful man, stern withal in his outward bearing, but tender-hearted and loving in his nature. The sweet young wife who had left all, and come with him out to that dull distant place, was very dear to him,--dearer than she herself was aware, and in these days he was thinking much of her coming troubles. Why had he given way to her foolish prayers? Ah, why indeed? And thus the last few days of their sojourn in San Jose passed away from them. Once or twice during these days she did speak out, expressing her fears. Her feelings were too much for her, and she could not restrain herself. "Poor mamma," she said, "I shall never see her!" And then again, "Harry, I know I shall never reach home alive."

"Fanny, my darling, that is nonsense." But in order that his spoken word might not sound stern to her, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"You must behave well, Fanny," he said to her the day before they started. Though her heart was then very low within her, she promised him that she would do her best, and then she made a great resolution. Though she should be dying on the road, she would not complain beyond the absolute necessity of her nature. She fully recognised his thoughtful tender kindness, for though he thus cautioned her, he never told her that the dangers which she feared were the result of her own choice. He never threw in her teeth those prayers which she had made, in yielding to which he knew that he had been weak.

Then came the morning of their departure. The party of travellers consisted of four besides the baby. There was Mr. Arkwright, his wife, and an English nurse, who was going to England with them, and her brother, Abel Ring, who was to accompany them as far as the Serapiqui River. When they had reached that, the real labour of the journey would be over.

They had eight mules; four for the four travellers, one for the baby, a spare mule laden simply with blankets, so that Mrs. Arkwright might change in order that she should not be fatigued by the fatigue of her beast, and two for their luggage. The portion of their baggage had already been sent off by Punt' Arenas, and would meet them at the other side of the Isthmus of Panama.

For the last four days the rain had ceased,--had ceased at any rate at San Jose. Those who knew the country well, would know that it might still be raining over those vast forests; but now as the matter was settled, they would hope for the best. On that morning on which they started the sun shone fairly, and they accepted this as an omen of good. Baby seemed to lay comfortably on her pile of blankets on the mule's back, and the face of the tall Indian guide who took his place at that mule's head pleased the anxious mother.

"Not leave him ever," he said in Spanish, laying his hand on the cord which was fastened to the beast's head; and not for one moment did he leave his charge, though the labour of sticking close to him was very great.

They had four attendants or guides, all of whom made the journey on foot. That they were all men of mixed race was probable; but three of them would have been called Spaniards, Spaniards, that is, of Costa Rica, and the other would be called an Indian. One of the Spaniards was the leader, or chief man of the party, but the others seemed to stand on an equal footing with each other; and indeed the place of greatest care had been given to the Indian.

For the first four or five miles their route lay along the high road which leads from San Jose to Punt' Arenas, and so far a group of acquaintances followed them, all mounted on mules. Here, where the ways forked, their road leading through the great forests to the Atlantic, they separated, and many tears were shed on each side. What might be the future life of the Arkwrights had not been absolutely fixed, but there was a strong hope on their part that they might never be forced to return to Costa Rica. Those from whom they now parted had not seemed to be dear to them in any especial degree while they all lived together in the same small town, seeing each other day by day; but now,--now that

they might never meet again, a certain love sprang up for the old familiar faces, and women kissed each other who hitherto had hardly cared to enter each other's houses.

And then the party of the Arkwrights again started, and its steady work began. In the whole of the first day the way beneath their feet was tolerably good, and the weather continued fine. It was one long gradual ascent from the plain where the roads parted, but there was no real labour in travelling. Mrs. Arkwright rode beside her baby's mule, at the head of which the Indian always walked, and the two men went together in front. The husband had found that his wife would prefer this, as long as the road allowed of such an arrangement. Her heart was too full to admit of much speaking, and so they went on in silence.

The first night was passed in a hut by the roadside, which seemed to be deserted,--a hut or rancho as it is called in that country. Their food they had, of course, brought with them; and here, by common consent, they endeavoured in some sort to make themselves merry.

"Fanny," Arkwright said to her, "it is not so bad after all; eh, my darling?"

"No," she answered; "only that the mule tires one so. Will all the days be as long as that?"

He had not the heart to tell her that as regarded hours of work, that first day must of necessity be the shortest. They had risen to a considerable altitude, and the night was very cold; but baby was enveloped among a pile of coloured blankets, and things did not go very badly with them; only this, that when Fanny Arkwright rose from her hard bed, her limbs were more weary and much more stiff than they had been when Arkwright had lifted her from her mule.

On the second morning they mounted before the day had quite broken, in order that they might breakfast on the summit of the ridge which separates the two oceans. At this spot the good road comes to an end, and the forest track begins; and here also, they would, in truth, enter the forest, though their path had for some time been among straggling trees and bushes. And now, again, they rode two and two, up to this place of halting, Arkwright and Ring well knowing that from hence their labours would in truth commence.

Poor Mrs. Arkwright, when she reached this resting-place, would fain have remained there for the rest of the day. One word, in her low, plaintive voice, she said, asking whether they might not sleep in the large shed which stands there. But this was manifestly impossible. At such a pace they would never reach Greytown; and she spoke no further word when he told her that they must go on.

At about noon that day the file of travellers formed itself into the line which it afterwards kept during the whole of the journey, and then started by the narrow path into the forest. First walked the leader of the guides, then another man following him; Abel Ring came next, and behind him the maid-servant; then the baby's mule, with the Indian ever at its

head; close at his heels followed Mrs. Arkwright, so that the mother's eye might be always on her child; and after her her husband; then another guide on foot completed the number of the travellers. In this way they went on and on, day after day, till they reached the banks of the Serapiqui, never once varying their places in the procession. As they started in the morning, so they went on till their noon-day's rest, and so again they made their evening march. In that journey there was no idea of variety, no searching after the pleasures of scenery, no attempts at conversation with any object of interest or amusement. What words were spoken were those simply needful, or produced by sympathy for suffering. So they journeyed, always in the same places, with one exception. They began their work with two guides leading them, but before the first day was over one of them had fallen back to the side of Mrs. Arkwright, for she was unable to sit on her mule without support.

Their daily work was divided into two stages, so as to give some hours for rest in the middle of the day. It had been arranged that the distance for each day should not be long,--should be very short as was thought by them all when they talked it over at San Jose; but now the hours which they passed in the saddle seemed to be endless. Their descent began from that ridge of which I have spoken, and they had no sooner turned their faces down upon the mountain slopes looking towards the Atlantic, than that passage of mud began to which there was no cessation till they found themselves on the banks of the Serapiqui river. I doubt whether it be possible to convey in words an adequate idea of the labour of riding over such a path. It is not that any active exertion is necessary,--that there is anything which requires doing. The traveller has before him the simple task of sitting on his mule from hour to hour, and of seeing that his knees do not get themselves jammed against the trees; but at every step the beast he rides has to drag his legs out from the deep clinging mud, and the body of the rider never knows one moment of ease. Why the mules do not die on the road, I cannot say. They live through it, and do not appear to suffer. They have their own way in everything, for no exertion on the rider's part will make them walk either faster or slower than is their wont.

On the day on which they entered the forest,--that being the second of their journey,--Mrs. Arkwright had asked for mercy, for permission to escape that second stage. On the next she allowed herself to be lifted into her saddle after her mid-day rest without a word. She had tried to sleep, but in vain; and had sat within a little hut, looking out upon the desolate scene before her, with her baby in her lap. She had this one comfort, that of all the travellers, she, the baby, suffered the least. They had now left the high grounds, and the heat was becoming great, though not as yet intense. And then, the Indian guide, looking out slowly over the forest, saw that the rain was not yet over. He spoke a word or two to one of his companions in a low voice and in a patois which Mrs. Arkwright did not understand, and then going after the husband, told him that the heavens were threatening.

"We have only two leagues," said Arkwright, "and it may perhaps hold up."

"It will begin in an hour," said the Indian, "and the two leagues are four hours."

"And to-morrow," asked Arkwright.

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow it will still rain," said the guide, looking as he spoke up over the huge primeval forest.

"Then we had better start at once," said Arkwright, "before the first falling drops frighten the women." So the mules were brought out, and he lifted his uncomplaining wife on to the blankets which formed her pillion. The file again formed itself, and slowly they wound their way out from the small enclosure by which the hut was surrounded;--out from the enclosure on to a rough scrap of undrained pasture ground from which the trees had been cleared. In a few minutes they were once more struggling through the mud.

The name of the spot which our travellers had just left is Carablanco. There they found a woman living all alone. Her husband was away, she told them, at San Jose, but would be back to her when the dry weather came, to look up the young cattle which were straying in the forest. What a life for a woman! Nevertheless, in talking with Mrs. Arkwright she made no complaint of her own lot, but had done what little she could to comfort the poor lady who was so little able to bear the fatigues of her journey.

"Is the road very bad?" Mrs. Arkwright asked her in a whisper.

"Ah, yes; it is a bad road."

"And when shall we be at the river?"

"It took me four days," said the woman.

"Then I shall never see my mother again," and as she spoke Mrs. Arkwright pressed her baby to her bosom. Immediately after that her husband came in, and they started.

Their path now led away across the slope of a mountain which seemed to fall from the very top of that central ridge in an unbroken descent down to the valley at its foot. Hitherto, since they had entered the forest, they had had nothing before their eyes but the trees and bushes which grew close around them. But now a prospect of unrivalled grandeur was opened before them, if only had they been able to enjoy it. At the bottom of the valley ran a river, which, so great was the depth, looked like a moving silver cord; and on the other side of this there arose another mountain, steep but unbroken like that which they were passing,--unbroken, so that the eye could stretch from the river up to the very summit. Not a spot on that mountain side or on their side either was left uncovered by thick forest, which had stood there untouched by man since nature first produced it.

But all this was nothing to our travellers, nor was the clang of the macaws anything, or the roaring of the little congo ape. Nothing was gained by them from beautiful scenery, nor was there any fear from the beasts of prey. The immediate pain of each step of the journey drove all other feelings from them, and their thoughts were bounded by an intense desire for the evening halt.

And then, as the guide had prophesied, the rain began. At first it came in such small soft drops that it was found to be refreshing, but the clouds soon gathered and poured forth their collected waters as though it had not rained for months among those mountains. Not that it came in big drops, or with the violence which wind can give it, beating hither and thither, breaking branches from the trees, and rising up again as it pattered against the ground. There was no violence in the rain. It fell softly in a long, continuous, noiseless stream, sinking into everything that it touched, converting the deep rich earth on all sides into mud.

Not a word was said by any of them as it came on. The Indian covered the baby with her blanket, closer than she was covered before, and the guide who walked by Mrs. Arkwright's side drew her cloak around her knees. But such efforts were in vain. There is a rain that will penetrate everything, and such was the rain which fell upon them now. Nevertheless, as I have said, hardly a word was spoken. The poor woman, finding that the heat of her cloak increased her sufferings, threw it open again.

"Fanny," said her husband, "you had better let him protect you as well as he can."

She answered him merely by an impatient wave of her hand, intending to signify that she could not speak, but that in this matter she must have her way.

After that her husband made no further attempt to control her. He could see, however, that ever and again she would have slipped forward from her mule and fallen, had not the man by her side steadied her with his hand. At every tree he protected her knees and feet, though there was hardly room for him to move between the beast and the bank against which he was thrust.

And then, at last, that day's work was also over, and Fanny Arkwright slipped from her pillion down into her husband's arms at the door of another rancho in the forest. Here there lived a large family adding from year to year to the patch of ground which they had rescued from the wood, and valiantly doing their part in the extension of civilisation. Our party was but a few steps from the door when they left their mules, but Mrs. Arkwright did not now as heretofore hasten to receive her baby in her arms. When placed upon the ground, she still leaned against the mule, and her husband saw that he must carry her into the hut. This he did, and then, wet, mud-laden, dishevelled as she was, she laid herself down upon the planks that were to form her bed, and there stretched out her arms for her infant. On that evening they undressed and tended her like a child; and then when she was alone with her husband, she repeated to him her sad foreboding.

"Harry," she said, "I shall never see my mother again."

"Oh, yes, Fanny, you will see her and talk over all these troubles with pleasure. It is very bad, I know; but we shall live through it yet."

"You will, of course; and you will take baby home to her."

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

