

AN EXCERPT FROM



MOUNTAINS MOLEHILLS
AND

OR RECOLLECTIONS OF

ABURN JOURNAL

BY FRANK MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF "BORNEO AND THE EASTERN ARCHIPELAGO."

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR.

SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



BAR-ROOM IN CALIFORNIA.

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WARRANT JOURNAL

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Preface

One night in June, 1851, Marryat, sojourning in Vallejo, observed "a bright glare in the direction of San Francisco." (1) The high wind and the bright glow in the sky surely meant that the city was in flames. He immediately left for Benicia where he took passage on a steamer to San Francisco. When he arrived in San Francisco, the burnt wharves and docks made landing difficult, and the deserted city was glowing in smouldering red embers. Marryat's determination to hurry to San Francisco was prompted by concern for the property of a friend who had shown him much kindness and in whose warehouse many of his possessions were lost, including the diaries, notes and sketches of California. (2) Consequently, Marryat's observations were written from memory three years later. (3) The exodus of many San Francisco people to Sacramento after the fire is recorded in Marryat's *Mountains and Molehills*. The following is an account of Marryat's visit to Sacramento in June, 1851. (4)

J.F.W.

NOTES

1. Frank Marryat, *Mountains and Molehills or Recollections of a Burnt Journal* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855), p. 197. All page references are to this edition.
2. Between May 3, 1851, and the end of June, 1851, a series of devastating fires occurred in the city of San Francisco. The most destructive of these took place on May 3-4, 1851, and is mentioned

by Marryat in *Mountains and Molehills* (pp. 173-174). The date of the fire that brought Marryat on the run from Vallejo to San Francisco is difficult to ascertain. Since this section of Marryat's book is dated only June, 1851, we can surmise that the fire was either on June 16 or June 22. See the *Alta California* for an almost serial daily account of the descriptions and damage by the fires that ravaged the city in the spring and early summer of 1851. See also Helen T. Pratt, ed., "The California Letters of Edward Hotchkiss", Letter No. 33, *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 12, pp. 109-110.

3. Marryat, p. 200.

4. Marryat, pp. 201-207.

MOUNTAINS AND MOLEHILLS

“Burnt out.”—Sacramento.—Levee.—Hulks.—Rats.—Vigilance Committee.—Start for Volcano.—Crockett.—“Right side up.”

June, 1851.

The mail steamer had come in from Panama, and ladies who had just arrived to find their husbands, houseless and ruined, were hurrying careworn from their toilsome journey sorrowfully to seek a temporary shelter in Sacramento. There were troupes of actors, who, forgetting all rivalry in their common adversity, felt the reality of tragedy. The fire-bell had arrested their performances, and though they worked ever so manfully at the breaks, the temples of Thespis had been swept away in the storm, and with them their wardrobes and arrears of pay. There were professional gamblers for whom the losing card had now turned up, who, burnt out of their tinsel saloons, were starting for the mines, to commence life again in a thimble-rigging tent, until growing prosperous they could work gradually back again to San Francisco, where the tinsel saloons were already being rebuilt.

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THE SONORA STAGE.

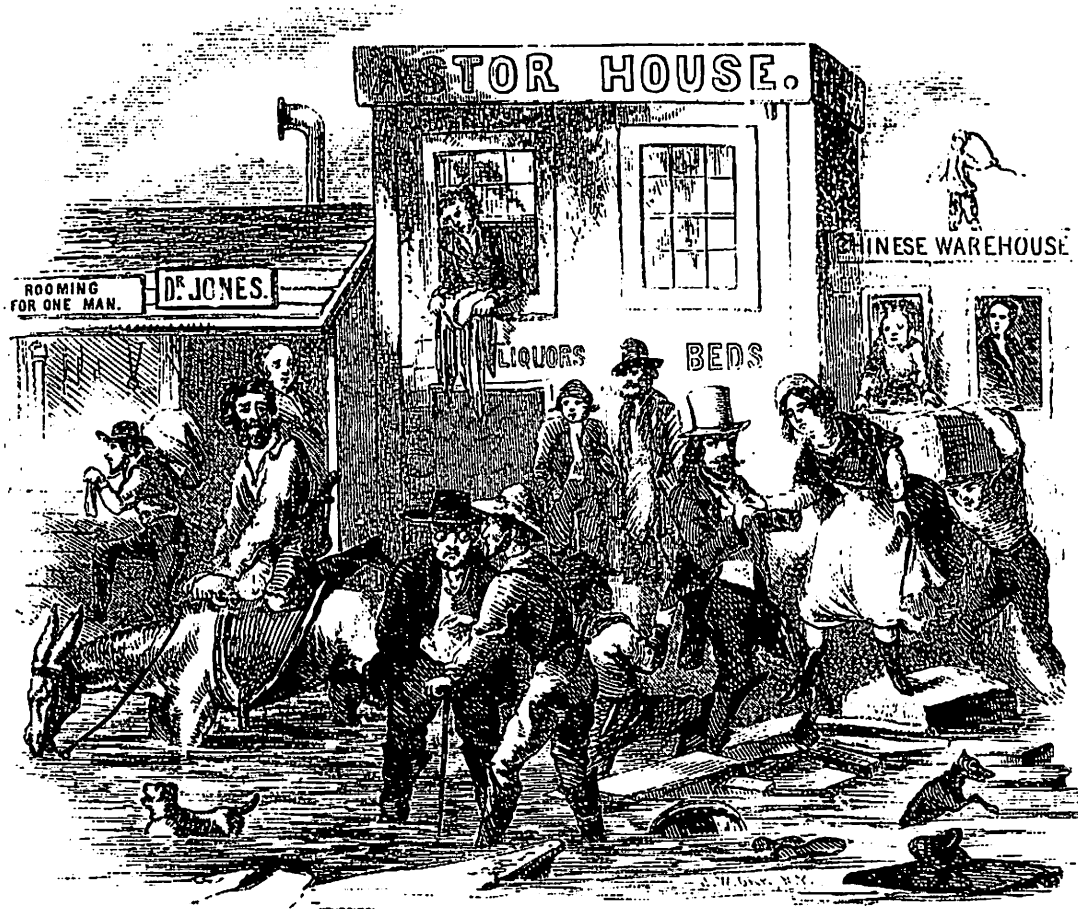
There were speculators who had a “snug lot” of flour or pork up country, and who were off to fetch it down and lock it up in store-ships, until the wants of the community should make it worth its weight in gold almost. There were small traders, whose debtor and creditor accounts had been, fortunately for them, buried in oblivion by the general ruin, and who talked furiously of their losses, and bespattered their hard fate with curses of the loudest and deepest character. And there were many who like myself had come to satisfy their curiosity, just as we go to the sea-shore

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and view the wreck of a noble ship; and these grew hilarious upon the strength of having lost nothing, and returned to their homes in famous good-humor with themselves and all the world.

Passing Benicia we entered Suisun Bay, on the shores of which a city was attempted—New York by name—but failed.¹ There is something to admire in the audacity of speculators, who finding themselves possessed of a few acres of swamp, wave their wands and order a city to appear. The working human tide of California ebbed and flowed past New York with great regularity, but all commands to arrest it, and direct it from its natural course were futile as regarded that city, which really presented no advantage that I could see. It is now dusk, and we enter the Sacramento river. Presently we pass a large steamboat going down, who gives us a close shave, and complimentarily strikes three bells, upon which we strike three bells; and in a few minutes we pass a small steamboat also going down, who gives us a closer shave, and shrieks three times out of something connected with her steam-pipe, upon which we groan three times out of something connected with our steam-pipe. These salutes are invariably observed, and the greater the rivalry between the boats, the louder they scream at each other.

The banks of the river are, for the most part, marshy; but in the fading light we catch glimpses here and there of small cultivated inclosures, with comfortable-looking shanties peeping between the oak trees. After supper every body turns in, and at daylight we arrive at Sacramento.



WINTER OF 1849.

Sacramento is built on the banks of the river, from the encroachments of which it is as often drowned as its sister city is burnt. The houses are gayly painted, and the American flag waves in every direction. The streets are wide, and some trees that have been left standing in the town give it a cheerful appearance.

It is an American town at the first glance. An immense quantity of sign-boards stare at you in every direction; and if any thing would induce a man to purchase "Hay and Grain," "Gallego Flour," "Goshen Butter," or any other article for which he has no want, it would be the astounding size of the capital letters in which these good things are forced upon his notice.

Every other house is an hotel or boarding-house; for, with few exceptions, every one is put out to "livery," as it were, in Sacramento; and in hard times, when cash is scarce, one half of the population may be said to feed the other half gratuitously, or on credit, which often amounts to the same thing; thus affording a beautiful illustration of mutual support and confidence.

Sacramento is terribly dusty. The great traffic to and from the mines grinds three or four inches of the top soil into a red powder that distributes itself every where. It is the dirtiest dust I ever saw, and is never visited by a shower until the rainy season sets in, and suddenly converts it into a thick mud.

I was introduced to a club of Sacramento gentlemen, who had formed themselves into what they called a literary society. In their rooms was to be found what in those days was scarce—a tolerable

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collection of books and the periodicals of the day. They were very jovial fellows, well-informed, not so literary as I expected, and certainly quite free from pedantry. The most important ceremony at their meetings consisted in the members standing in a circle, upon which a Chinese hat of teetotum shape was spun in the centre, and the "literary savant" who was indicated by a black mark on the hat when it ceased to spin, stood "drinks for the crowd."

The weather was oppressively warm, and the iced "drinks"* were necessary, even to a literary society; so much so, that the hat was kept continually spinning by public acclamation. There was no lack of sensible and entertaining conversation, and the evenings passed with these gentlemen were, to my thinking, none the less pleasant, although, perhaps, less literary, for the twirling of the Chinese hat.

A levée, or sea-wall, has been built in front of the city, to protect it from the river when it rises with the high spring tides; but the river generally undermines these works, and flows over the surrounding plain as it has been wont to do for ages past.

A large number of old dismantled hulks, now converted into floating houses, are moored along the front of the levée, and it is from these, probably, the rats first landed that are now so distinguished at Sacramento for their size and audacity. These animals come out after dark in strong gangs, as if the

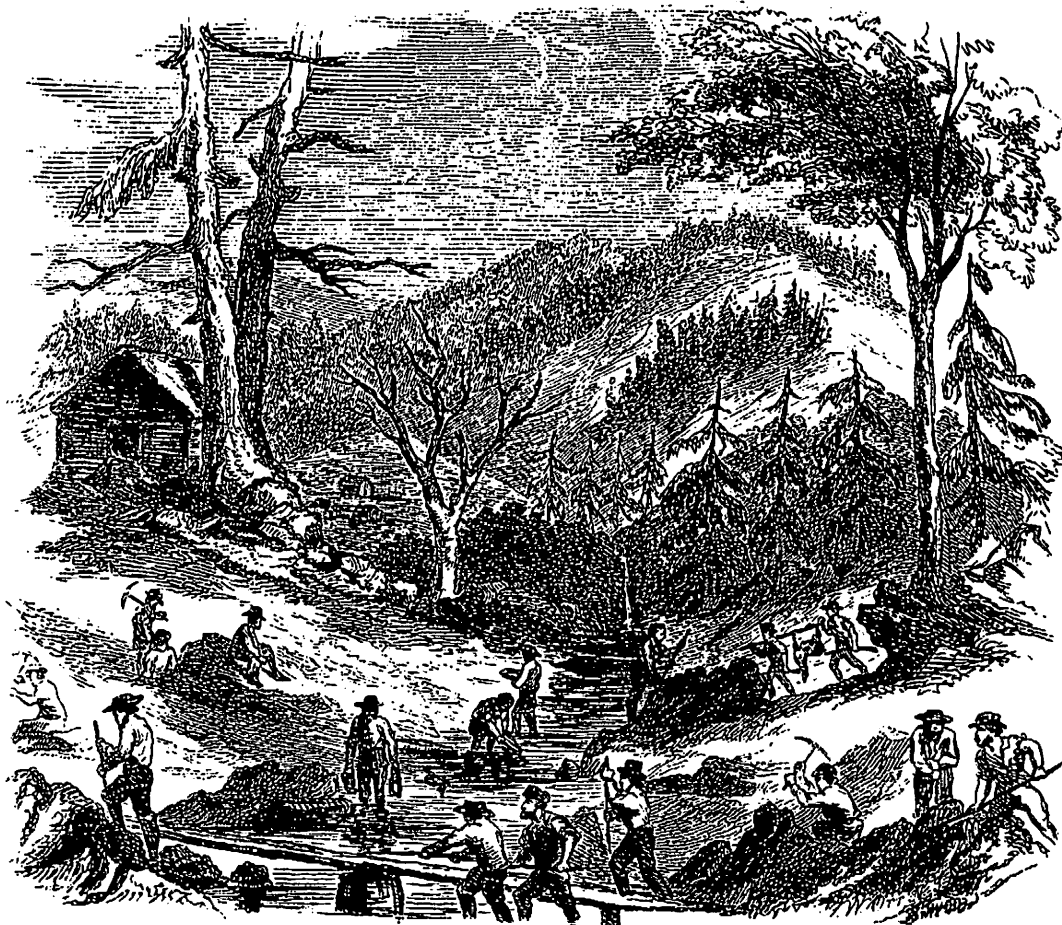
* "Drinks" are not necessarily composed of intoxicating liquors: on the contrary, the principal ingredients are ice, syrup, and herbs. I mention this because *we* mean by a man who "drinks," a drunkard, or the next thing to it.

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town belonged to them, and attack any thing that may happen to have been left on the wharf during the night; being very numerous, the destruction they cause to merchandise is a serious loss.²

Ten thousand dollars were offered, I was told, to the man who should clear the town; and, seduced by this bribe, some one in the rat-catching line volunteered to draw all the rats into the country, and there inclose them in a paddock, to be publicly exposed previous to a massacre; but whether the rats thought it best to leave well alone, and be content with the comfortable quarters and nice pine-apple cheeses they enjoyed in the city, or whether they objected to country air, does not appear; but they never went out to the paddock, except one, who is reported to have approached within a reasonable distance of the vain-glorious rat-catcher, and then standing on his hind legs, after the manner of rats, and scratching the tip of his nose contemplatively with his paw, he turned tail for the city, causing grievous disappointment to five terrier dogs, who ineffectually chevied him in.

The conflagrations of San Francisco had been attributed to incendiarists, and as many attempts to fire the town had been frustrated, it is probable that this was the case. A Volunteer-Guard, therefore, patrolled the city of Sacramento at night, to guard against this evil, and to protect the inhabitants from the wholesale plunder of organized bands of burglars.³ Crime had increased so rapidly of late in San Francisco, and robbers and incendiarists had become so emboldened by the impotence and venality of the justiciary,



WHERE THE GOLD COMES FROM.

that the citizens organized a society styled the Vigilance Committee, for the purpose of affording the protection to life and property that the law would not bestow.

So far was well ; but this society, composed of men who *smarted under personal loss*, attributed, *perhaps unjustly*, to incendiarism, took upon themselves the dispensation of life and death.

Men detected, as was supposed, in the act of *felony only*, were tried, sentenced, and executed, without defense, in the same night.

It is useless now to dwell on the summary executions that were put in force in half a dozen cases by the Vigilance Committee ; no one would defend their acts, and they met with opposition at the time from the better class of citizens ; the memory of them may pass away, but they certainly had the effect at the time of ridding the country of a set of desperate men, and of restoring a degree of security to the inhabitants of San Francisco that had never previously been enjoyed.

Colonel D——, a friend of Sir Henry's, had control of a quartz vein at a place called Volcano, in the northern mines, and we determined upon an inspection of this vein, which was reported to be highly auriferous.⁴

We started at daybreak, in a light spring-wagon, and taking with us our blankets, we were soon five miles from Sacramento, and pulled up at the young town of Brighton.

Colonel D—— appeared to be the owner of Brighton ; and, being a sporting-man, he had constructed a race-course here ; with the exception of the race-course

and one or two stables, there was not much of the town developed as yet; but being really advantageously situated, I have no doubt that it is well populated by this time.⁵

The road was straight and level, and on either side, inclosed by fences, were well-cultivated farms; numerous dwelling-houses lined the road, and it was difficult to believe that the signs of civilization and industry that met us on all sides, were the result of two years' occupation of the country by gold-hunters.

As we left Brighton we overtook long lines of wagons, heavily laden with stores for the mines; and these, drawn by innumerable oxen, plowed up the deep dust to such an extent as obliged us to cover our faces as we passed them. We met wagons coming in, containing miners, on whom, to judge by their appearance generally, a bath, a shave, and a new suit of clothes would not be thrown away; and I have no doubt they indulged in these luxuries on their arrival at Sacramento.

We stopped to breakfast at a house of entertainment kept by one Crockett, who had a very pretty wife; but the possession of this luxury, so far from humanizing Crockett, appeared to keep him in a continual fever of irritation; for he was jealous, poor fellow! and used to worry himself because there was ever a dozen or two of hairy miners gazing in a bewildered manner at Mrs. C.; but, if report speaks truly, the bonnet and boots of a "female" had been successfully exhibited in this region at a dollar a head (a glimpse of them being thought cheap even at that price), surely, therefore, Crockett might have excused the poor miners

for regarding attentively the original article when presented gratis in the shape of a pretty woman.

Crockett carried a revolver of disproportionate size, he not being a large man, and this instrument he occasionally used upon provocation. A great number of miners had looked at Mrs. Crockett on the morning of our arrival, and her husband had not quite finished foaming at the mouth in consequence, when we entered the house. It was some time before he condescended to be civil; but having at length informed us that he was "so riled that his skin cracked," he added that he was a "devilish good fellow when he was '*right side up*,'" and commanded us to drink with him. After this he procured us a most excellent breakfast, and, on the strength of our respectable appearance, allowed Mrs. Crockett to preside at this repast, which she did in a nervous manner, as if momentarily under the expectation of being shot.

We left our host "right side up," and proceeding on our way, we soon lost sight of the cultivated country, and began to traverse undulated plains studded with the dwarf oak. The road now gradually becomes worse, and has long ceased to be level; we pass roadside houses, whose names indicate the localities in which they are placed: "Rolling Hills," "Willow Springs," "Red Mountain," and so forth.

After traveling twenty miles we ascend the first range of hills; the pine-tree appears, and here and there we catch glimpses of the American Fork River. As we leave the plain, and ascend the wooded hills, trails may be observed indicated by blazed trees, leading to mountain gorges, where diggers are at work-

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A PROSPECTOR.

Flowers clothe the hills in the richest profusion, and most conspicuous is the yellow poppy, which lightens up these desolate red hills for a few weeks each spring; growing in rich masses that, in contrast to the bleak and stunted herbage, are like sunbeams, and like sunbeams leave every spot they cheer more gloomy, when, under the influence of the first hot summer wind, they droop in a night and pass away.



After leaving Sacramento, Marryat visited the gold mining regions and other places in Northern California. He tried his hand, not very successfully, at gold mining, farming, and hotel keeping. He left for England in the spring of 1852 via

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Panama and New York and returned to California a year later. His second visit was cut short by illness and he returned to England.

NOTES

1. New York was the most common of the names transferred from the East. Founded in 1849 by Colonel Jonathan D. Stevenson, who believed it would become a major port, the name was changed to Pittsburg in 1900 when the town developed a steel industry. See Erwin G. Gudde, ed., *California Place Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 338.

2. See also Carl Meyer, *Bound for Sacramento: Travel Pictures of a Returned Wanderer*, trans. Ruth Frey Axe (1855, rpt. Claremont, California, Saunders Studio Press, 1938), p. 237. Meyer, who lived in Sacramento for ten months in 1851, counted 30,600 rats in Sacramento by walking ten square blocks of the city at night.

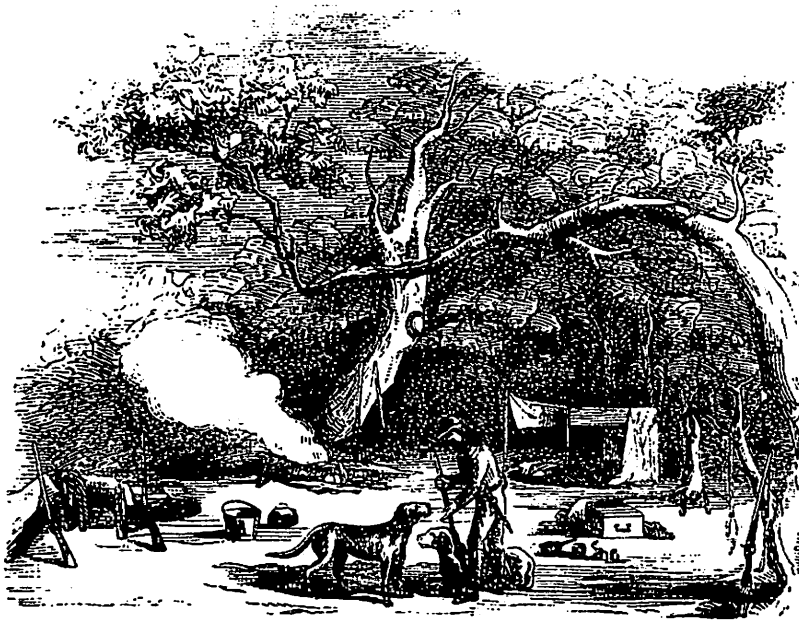
3. The volunteer Guard, called the Sacramento Committee of Vigilance, was formed in late June, 1851. It lasted but a short time. Joseph A. McGowan, *History of Sacramento County* (New York and West Palm Beach: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1961), Vol. 1. pp. 133-134.

4. Volcano, originally called Soldier's Gulch because some discharged soldiers mined gold there in 1848-49. It is located on Sutter's Creek twelve miles northeast of Jackson. The population in 1850 was 5000. Historic Landmark 29. See Gudde, p. 210. There is no clue to the identity of Colonel D. Sir Henry is Sir Henry Vere Huntly, a former manager of the Anglo-American Gold Mining Company. He is the Author of *California, Its Gold and Its Inhabitants*, published in London in 1856.

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5. Brighton Township, established by the Court of Sessions, February 24, 1851. See George F. Wright, ed., Thomas H. Thompson and Albert A. West, *History of Sacramento County* (1880, rpt. Berkeley: Nowell-North, 1960), p. 211. Brighton is the site of the present day Sacramento Water Filtration plant adjacent to the California State University campus..

J.F.W.



CAMPING OUT.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The fourth and youngest son of the famous Captain Frederick Marryat, R.N., author of numerous sea-adventure books, the best known of which is *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, Francis (later to be called Frank), wrote and illustrated two notable books before his early death at the age of twenty-nine. *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago* is a record of his cruise as a midshipman in the Royal Navy on board the H.M.S. SAMARONG, and *Mountains and Molehills*, an account of his experiences in the gold country of California.

Attracted to the gold fields of California, Frank came on a quest for travel and adventure, not necessarily to acquire wealth, for his family was wealthy. He arrived in San Francisco via the Panama Isthmus on June 14, 1850. He left for England in the spring of 1852 to tend to various family matters on the steamer NORTHERNER, crossed the Isthmus, and boarded the steamer GEORGE LAW for New York.

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Marryat returned to California in the following spring with his bride. Unfortunately both contracted yellow fever on their journey and arrived debilitated and exhausted. Their stay in California was short and they returned to England where he wrote *Mountains and Molehills*.

His constitution weakened by the effects of the fever, he died on August 12, 1855, at Mercer Lodge, Kensington. His obituary appeared in the *Alta California* on October 5, 1855, acknowledging Marryat "as an artist of much note as a painter and dramatist and author of an interesting work on California who inherited his father's ability and was a young man of exceeding promise."

J.F.W.