

A letter from a gold miner, Placerville, California, October, 1850, with an introduction by Robert Glass Cleland

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Letter from a Gold Miner

PLACERVILLE, CALIFORNIA

OCTOBER, 1850

With an Introduction by

ROBERT GLASS CLELAND

San Marino, California

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Introduction

A GENERATION rooted and grounded in the classical tradition naturally spoke of the participants in the California Gold Rush as the Argonauts. The word connoted romance, riches, and adventure. But, as in innumerable other cases, the reality belied the name. Aside from their youth, a touch of restlessness, and a certain measure of initiative, most of the California Argonauts of 1849-51 were simply middle-class Americans, typical representatives of the culture, family background, education, and religious training characteristic of that day.

The journey to California, whatever route an emigrant elected to take, was always an adventure—but an adventure in most instances characterized infinitely more by monotony, privation, discomfort, and the tragedy of unromantic disease than by stirring episode, thrilling excitement, or hairbreadth risk. Once in California, moreover, most of the so-called Argonauts underwent a painful disillusionment. They discovered that mining was a rough, hard, monotonous job, and that life in a mining camp, like the work itself, was 6 rough, hard, monotonous, and sometimes almost unendurably lonesome. Accident and sickness, the latter arising chiefly from exposure, epidemics, and the lack of fresh foods and vegetables, also brought suffering, incapacity, chronic invalidism, and even death to many of the miners.

Yet, despite all such hardships, limitations, and discouragements, a vast majority of the artisans, shopkeepers, farmers, and professional men, so recently transplanted to California from the sheltered life east of the mountains, retained their optimism, decency, and sense of values. Equally to their credit, it should be said, these same run-of-the-mill Americans, even in the absence of all formal government and law, refused to permit society to disintegrate or capitulate to anarchy, but set up rules, regulations, and courts of their own to enable men to live and work together in some degree of peace and order.

The chief value of the manuscript printed below, as a souvenir for the Friends of the Huntington Library, lies in the fact that, instead of describing some highly colorful or dramatic incident, it simply represents a typical example of the letters written to the “folks back home,” by the tens of thousands of emigrants who came to California in the Gold Rush. In the document one detects the

stilted note of formality, the somewhat florid literary style, the tendency to give vent to verse on the slightest provocation, the deep, simple piety, overlarded by set

theological phrases and expressions, so characteristic of the letters of the time.

Of S. Shufelt, the writer of the letter, we know but little. His name appears on the passenger list of the express steamer "Panama," sailing from New York for the Isthmus on May 11, 1849. He refers to Fulton, Durham, Cairo, and Windham, in New York State, and apparently he came from the last named town. He was married and had one child. As for the rest, Shufelt's very obscurity makes him all the more typical of that vast multitude who were caught up in the cyclonic excitement of 1849, 1850, and 1851 and swept across the continent to California.

Shufelt's experiences, as he describes them to his cousin, John, differed in no respect from those of thousands of his fellow Argonauts. Delay, disease, deaths on the Isthmus, the tedious, almost interminable voyage to San Francisco, speedy disruption of the company or association that had been organized in New York sometime before the group embarked for California, a measure of success in the mines, the death of friends and his own serious illness in the mountains, the long, heartbreaking months that brought no word from wife, child, or other relatives—in all these matters the man merely suffered the common lot of his fellow Argonauts.

But in addition to the picture he gives of the life and activities of the average Forty-Niner, Shufelt adds specific bits of information, such as commodity prices, interest rates, cost of postage, and the returns from mining operations, that are of very definite value from an economic and social standpoint. His descriptions, too, of the various kinds of apparatus used in mining, and of mining operations themselves; his contrast between the eastern landscapes and those of California; his account of scurvy and other typical diseases from which the miners suffered; and his shrewd observations on the misfortunes most emigrants were doomed to undergo add materially to the interest and historical value of Shufelt's letter. Evidence of deep religious fervor, usually expressed, as already suggested, in stilted, trite, and artificial phrases, appears in various places in

the manuscript. In all this, too, Shufelt was merely following a familiar pattern employed by many of his fellow Forty-Niners.

One further suggestion may be offered. Human nature was the same in 1849 as it is in 1943. The thousands of adventurers who then left wives, children, parents, friends, and familiar surroundings to go to California waited with the same impatience, anxiety, and longing for word from home with which the tens of 9 thousands of young Americans now at the far ends of the earth look forward to that word today. In the same way that the thoughts and prayers of the wives, mothers, and sweet-hearts of today go out to their men across the seas, so did the thoughts and prayers of the women of that distant generation go out to the husbands, sons, and lovers who braved the uncertainties and perils of the little-known wilderness of California in 1849.

ROBERT G. CLELAND

NOTE: The Shufelt letter was acquired by Mr. Huntington at an auction in New York in 1924. So far as is known, it has not hitherto been published. In preparing the copy for printing, the author's irregularities of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been allowed to stand except where clarity demanded modification.

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A

Letter from a Gold Miner

March 3d 1850 Placerville Eldorado co. California

Dear Cousin

Agreeable to my promise & after thus long delaying, I now sit down to address a few lines to you touching my general health, my success thus far in our expedition & of California news and prospects generally. First, my health has been very good most of the time since I left home. I was sea sick a few days after leaving New York but soon got over this & enjoyed myself very well

the rest of the passage to Chagres, & here I will not weary you with a long description of our journey across the Isthmus & of our long stay there. But simply say that we did not find any of those difficulties & frightful obstacles that played before the timorous imagination of Stephen H. Branch, but proceeded up the river in canoes rowed by the natives, and 12 enjoyed the scenery & howling of the monkeys & chattering of Parrots very much. We pitched our tents at Gorgona & most of our party stayed there several weeks. S. Miller & myself went on to Panama to look out for a chance to get up to San Francisco. Of our ill success you have probably been informed & consequently of our long stay there, & of the deaths in our party. Yes, here Mr. Crooker, J. Miller & L. Alden yielded up their breath to God who gave it, & as I humbly hope & trust their spirits winged a happy flight upward to that world of bliss & love where sin & sorrow never can come & where parting is not known. After many delays & vexations, we at length took passage on a German ship & set sail again on our journey to the Eldorado of the west. We went south nearly to the Equator, then turned west, the weather was warm, the winds light & contrary for our course. Our ship was a slow sailer & consequently our passage was long & tedious. Nothing worthy of note occurred, except now & then the spouting of Whales, & occasionally their broad backs & enormous tails would be seen rolling up from their watery abodes, & the nimble Porpoises & smooth Sharks & beautiful Dolphins, were seen playing around our ship & the long & wearisome days were seemingly shortened by the sport & excitement of catching them. Our appetites were sometimes satisfied by the excellent dish 13 that was served up from them. One of the sailors fell from the rigging into the water & it was known that he could not swim, so the excitement was great. Ropes, planks and every thing that could be got hold of was thrown to him. He caught a plank & got on it, a boat was lowered & soon they had him on board again. He was much frightened, but not much hurt. We had one heavy squall of wind & rain, that tore the sails & broke some of the yards in pieces, & gave us a quick step motion to keep upon our feet, but soon all was right again & we were ploughing through the gentle Pacific at the rate of ten knots pr hour. On the 85th day out we hove in sight of an object that greatly attracted our attention & ere long the green hills of San Francisco bay began to show their highest points, & soon we were gliding smoothly along between them, down the bay, & when the order came to let go anchor, we brought up directly in front of the City amidst a fleet of vessels, of all kinds & sizes. One of our party went on shore &

obtained some letters for us. I received one from my wife & the first word I had received from home was this. You can imagine with what anxiety I read it & how pleased I was to hear that all was well. The next morning we all went on shore & glad was all to once more set foot on land & be able to enjoy the fresh breezes & fresh food & water that it contains. 14 The city is built on the side Hill south of the bay & commands a fine view of the harbor & shipping and the distant hills that surround it on all sides. The buildings were mostly of cloth, some small frames were covered with it, others covered with shingles & boards, & some few good buildings were up & many more in the course of erection. The hills in all directions were covered with tents & the streets crowded with people from all parts of the world anxious to make their fortunes in a few days in this golden land of promise. Here our company disbanded, owing to several causes which I will not now stop to mention & a division was made of all property funds on hand & each man took his share & went his own way. I was much opposed to this & used my best endeavors to keep them together, but was overruled by the casting vote of our President H. Taylor of Prattsville. Mr. J. S. Cornwall & S. L. Hayes of Cairo were sick at the time & we took the money that belonged to the shares of those that died in Panama & took Cornwall to a good hospital & Hayes went with him to take care of him & for company, not being able to work. We paid 10 Dollars pr day for Cornwall & \$2 for Hayes. We left \$300 with them & most of the company gave a joint note for the payment of this to those that it belongs to. We staid here about one week, then eight of us left for Sacramento City 15 enroute for the mines. Cornwall & Hayes both Died here, Cornwall of Diahareah & Hayes of Dropsy. We took passage on a small schooner, crossed the bay with a gentle breeze & soon were winding our way up the crooked Sacramento. We passed the town of Benecia a pleasant place, also N York on the other side of the Sacramento & at the mouth of the San Joaquin. It is destined to be a business place, & of considerable importance. We soon entered Soosoon bay & our Capt. not being acquainted with the channel we ran on the ground at high tide & a stiff breeze, so that we were fast in reality. As the tide fell our little schooner fell also on her side & filled with water. We clung to the upper side, but were so thick that as night drew on the Capt. thought some of us had better go on shore. Some of our party went, myself among the rest. We came very near getting swamped on the water, but nearer, after landing. For it proved to be a swamp surely, & the musquitoes gave us battle immediately in such numbers that we were obliged to give them a fire that subdued all...

[FRAGMENT MISSING]...we laid our frail bodies down to rest, & after a short nap the watch waked us with the sad news that the tide was rising fast & would soon overflow our resting place. Some found their feet asoak, others their blankets, & all jumped up exclaiming what shall we do, but we 16 managed to keep out of the water by getting on old logs & bogs until morning, which being Sunday & being obliged to stay there all day made it one of the most unpleasant Sabbaths that I ever spent. At night the Capt. sent a boat and took us on board & at high tide at midnight we succeeded in getting off & after spending one week & getting fast several times more we at length reached Sacramento City to the joy of our hearts & the relief of our hands. We staid here some week or more viewing the sights & wonders of this City of a months existence, composed principally of tents & situated on the east bank of the river, & at the mouth of the American fork, & is I think destined to be the pleasantest & most business City in California. But will have to be levee'd to prevent inundations, as it has all been overflowed this winter. We hired an ox team to carry our baggage & started for this place then called Hangtown, from the fact that three persons had been hung here for stealing & attempting to murder. Ten miles from the river we passed Sutters fort, an old looking heap of buildings surrounded by an high wall of unburnt brick, & situated in the midst of a pleasant fertile plain, covered with grass and a few scattering oaks, with numerous tame cattle & mules. We walked by the waggon & at night cooked our suppers, rolled our blankets around us & lay down to rest on the 17 ground, with nothing but the broad canopy of the heavens over us & slept soundly without fear or molestation. After leaving the plains we passed over some hills, that looked dry & barren being burnt up by the sun & the long droughts that we have here. We reached this place at night on the fourth day, & in the morning found ourselves in the midst of the diggings, being surrounded by holes dug...[FRAGMENT MISSING]...

We pitched our tents, shouldered our picks & shovels & with pan in hand sallied forth to try our fortunes at gold digging. We did not have very good success being green at mining, but by practice & observation we soon improved some, & found a little of the shining metal. Wm Ramsdell & Cooke of our party were sick with the scurvy & could not work. This is the worst disease that we have to contend with here, it settles in the legs & ancles, making the person quite lame. The skin turns purple & if not arrested soon, spots will decay & fall off leaving a running sore. It is brought

on by eating salt food & no vegetables. Some are also troubled with diarreah, others with ague & fever & various other diseases incident to all new countries. It is quite sickly here & every person ought to be very careful & not expose himself more than is necessary. Many here are so anxious to get rich that they work, rain or snow, regardless of life or health. After 18 working a few weeks I was taken sick very suddenly & became deranged & for four days the Drs all thought that I could not live, but that God in whom I trust for life & health, interposed his almighty arm & spared my life & restored me to health again. And I will praise him while I've breath & when my voice is hush'd in death I hope to praise him through a vast Eternity. After I got well five of us concluded to build a saw mill, so we went two miles below town & built us a fine log cabin & we have our mill nearly built. Lumber has been worth 4 & \$500 pr thousand. But now it comes in so fast from the states, that the price is down from 50 to \$100 pr thousand. Our mill is on a stream that dries up in summer so we shall not do much more to it until fall. We think of going up on the Yuba river this summer among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where the Indians & Grissely Bear are plenty & troublesome. But gold is plenty too.

I am going to give you a long yarn & make you pay double postage, but never mind it will not cost you half as much as I have to pay for mine, for I have paid \$2.40 for some...[FRAGMENT MISSING]...And now probably you have read better descriptions of the country, mines, & the manner of obtaining the gold than I can give, but as many conflicting accounts have been given, & believing that you will place some confidence at least in what I write, I will give you a short description of what I know, have seen & heard from sources of credit. First then, the country around the mines, is hilly, mountainous & barren of vegetation, except trees & these being rooted so deep do not dry up in summer like all other vegetables, consequently we have some fine pines, spruce, fir & oaks of smaller size. The hills resemble the color of the Windham soil & are high & steep in many places, & some very deep ravines, in which there has been large quantities of Gold found. The rivers appear to a person standing on the bank almost sunk out of sight, & in places very difficult to descend & ascend on foot. Along the banks & in the bed of some of them very large quantities of Gold have been found & taken out & large quantities still remain for American industry to extract & put in circulation. And most of the country around the mines never can be

made productive & consequently never will be worth any thing for agricultural purposes. We have the dry season that lasts from six to ten months without any rain. The wet commenced about the first of Nov last, nearly 2 months earlier than usual. Many had not got their provisions up from Sacramento City & the roads became very bad. Hauling was 50 cts per pound with the prospect that soon all transportation would be impossible, consequently provisions ran up in price to an enormous height. Flour & pork were \$125 pr Bll., lard & Butter \$200 Bll., Cheese \$1.50 lb., Dried Apples, \$1.50, Saleratus \$5.00, Molasses from \$8. to \$10.00 pr Gallon & all other things about in that proportion. Potatoes & onions were worth \$1.25 & \$1.50 pr pound &c. In Dec. we had a dry spell & then all went to getting up provisions. I went down to Sacramento City & found our provisions had got around but most of them were left down...[FRAGMENT MISSING]... Sacramento City. Here I learned that Hayes, Cornwall & Wm Ramsdell had all died. The latter left the mines on account of the scurvy, & was taken with the diarrah & bloody flux & died in a short time. Thus six of our little party have gone to their long home & rendered up their last account to their maker God, & have received their sentences of wo, or bliss. May it have been the latter, is my humble hope & prayer, & that I may meet them in that world of love & joy shall be my chief desire & the great object of my life. I saw Mr Jones from Durham, at San Francisco. He was well & doing very well, & I was told that he was very steady & saved what he earned. I staid here about one week & went back to Sacramento & then up home to the mines, a distance of 50 miles from Sacramento. I staid a few days & then went back again. Sold some more of our provisions, some were spoilt, some sold low, others high. 21 Our cook stove I sold for \$200.00, butter \$1.00 pr lb., Oil \$3.00 pr Gallon, Sperm candles \$3.00 pr pound, Pork from 25 to \$30 pr Barrell &c. Here I got our Mill Irons made, they cost us \$800.00. Our provisions we had to pay 50c pr lb. for hauling, which brought us in debt about \$2,000. We paid on \$500.00 of it 60 pr cent. Some here pay 10 per cent pr month for money, others less, as they can get it. We have paid nearly all of our debts & have earned it or dug it out of the creek within a few weeks past. Now I will give you a short history of the mode of getting it, of where it is found, & in what quantities so far as my knowledge extends. It is found (as I have said) along the banks of the streams & in the beds of the same, & in almost every little ravine putting into the streams. And often from 10 to 50 ft. from the beds up the bank. We sometimes have to dig several feet deep before we find any, in other places all the dirt & clay will pay to wash, but

generally the clay pays best. If there is no clay, then it is found down on the rock. All the lumps are found on the rock—and most of the fine gold. We tell when it will pay by trying the dirt with a pan. This is called prospecting here. If it will pay from six to 12 1/2 pr pan full, then we go to work. Some wash with cradles some with what is called a tom & various other fixings. But I like the tom best of any thing that I have seen. 22 It is a box or trough about 8 or 9 feet long, some 18 in. wide & from 5 to 6 in. high, with an iron seive in one end punched with 1/2 in. holes. Underneath this is placed a ripple or box with two ripples across it. The tom is then placed in an oblique position, the water is brought on by means of a hose. The dirt, stone, clay & all is then thrown in & stirred with a shovel until the water runs clear, the gold & finer gravel goes through the seive & falls in the under box & lodges above the ripples. Three men can wash all day without taking this out as the water washes the loose gravel over and all the gold settles to the bottom. One man will wash as fast as two can pick & shovel it in, or as fast as three rockers or cradles. And now I will tell you what I have done by digging for the last few weeks. I commenced about the first of Feb with F. Allerton of our party & L. Dutcher of Cairo. The first week I made \$82.72 cents, the next, \$42.00, we had to prospect some this week & fix a new place, the next I made \$61.44, we built a dam & dug a race to turn the water this week & one day it rained & snowed. The next week \$112.81, & one day it stormed so that we did not work. The next week two of us dug on Monday and made \$21.50, each. The next day three dug in the forenoon & made \$11.33 each. In the afternoon three of us dug & we made \$24.00 apiece. This was the 23 best half day's work that I have done in the mines & the last that I have dug as it has rained & snowed most of the time since. Some of our party have not done so well, & none better. Some have done very well about here last fall & this winter. Pieces have been found that were worth from \$1. to \$50. Allerton found one, worth \$20.00. Some have made as [much as] 4, 5, 6, & 8 oz. per day, & one man last fall made one pound or \$192. in one day, near here, & at Georgetown about 25 miles from here one man took out 27 1/2 lb in one day, & another party found one lump worth \$1019.00 & another worth \$450.00. This I was told by one of the party that found the big lumps, & the largest one they sold [for] \$1150.00 & I frequently hear of others making fortunes in one day or a week. These statements are all made calling the gold worth \$16.00 pr ounce, as this is what it is worth here, but in the states it is worth more. It passes here at that as quick as the coin & is taken every where but at the Post Offices. So you see that all is not Gossip

about California, after all, there is gold here in abundance, but it requires patience & hard labor, with some skill & experience to obtain it. If any man has his health & will work, he can make more than ten times as much here as he can in the states in the same length of time. But many, very many, that come here meet with bad success & thousands ²⁴ will leave their bones here. Others will lose their health, contract diseases that they will carry to their graves with them. Some will have to beg their way home, & probably one half that come here will never make enough to carry them back. But this does not alter the fact about the gold being plenty here, but shows what a poor frail being man is, how liable to disappointments, disease & death. How many that left home & friends with every comfort of life that any man ought to ask, & with hopes high & prospects fair, have been cut down by the destroying angel, Death, & left their friends & families to weep & mourn over their untimely end & to struggle through this world, perhaps dependant upon the cold charities of its inhabitants & finally be called upon by the same messenger to depart hence & be here no more forever. How sad the thought that man did sin, & thus Death entered our world and passed upon all—for all had sinned. But how Glorious the thought that Christ hath died to redeem us from sin, & that we, poor, frail, & sinful as we are, can by a life of obedience & love to him, look up on death without afear & rise triumphant o'er the tomb & wing our happy course to his bright mansion in the Skies, where sin & death cannot come, but where all will be happiness, love & praise. Oh, is not this worth living for, is not this worth more than all the gold of ²⁵ California & the riches of India. Surely it is. Then let us bear the ills of this life & meet its disappointments with Christian fortitude & patience. Nor never by the changes of fate be deprest, Nor wear like a fetter time's sorrowful chain, But believe that this world though it be not the best, Is the next to the best we shall ever attain....

There is a good deal of sin & wickedness going on here, Stealing, lying, Swearing, Drinking, Gambling & murdering. There is a great deal of gambling carried on here. Almost every public House is a place for Gambling, & this appears to be the greatest evil that prevails here. Men make & lose thousands in a night, & frequently small boys will go up & bet \$5 or 10— & if they lose all, go the next day & dig more. We are trying to get laws here to regulate things but it will be very difficult to get them executed. We have had the President's message & some of the proceedings of

congress. The Message was generally liked here by those of both parties. Congress has probably had a stormy session, in relation to California & Slavery. But the South cannot compel us to receive their slaves as such, nor can they expect to fasten that black & wicked institution upon the soil of California. If they do, their expectations will fail, for the spirit of freedom is too strong here to ever be 26 admitted into the Union except as a free State. Slavery never can exist here unless an entire revolution of feeling takes place for nearly all are deadly opposed to it. I am very anxious to get the later news from Washington. There is considerable excitement here to know the result of the application for admission. We cannot get papers very often. When we do we have to pay one dollar each for them, so that we do not get all the news from the states. The Message was the last we got. Our Post Office affairs are in a state of perfect derangement, & if something is not done soon by the government we shall make our own laws & execute them too, for we have the cash & plenty of *grit* & enterprise to carry them out. And now my second sheet is full & I have not told half yet, but you will probably be glad to find the end & here it is, so good bye, excuse all mistakes. Give my best respects to all inquiring friends & write soon.

March 15th

Dear Cos.

Not having an opportunity of sending my letter to the Office as soon as I expected I shall trouble you with a few lines more. I shall send this tomorrow, by a friend. It has rained & snowed all this week so that we have not dug any, but have been making shingles in our Cabin. We have a good Cabin, with windows, fireplace & oven. There is seven of us & we 27 live very well & enjoy life as well as any one can under such circumstances. We have plenty to eat. Beef is from 25c to 50c pr pound, fresh pork from 60c to 80c pd & venison about the same. We have not killed any deer, but we found a calf that a Spanish cow had with her & we shot it & had some veal, & today we shot a spanish steer & now we have fresh a plenty. These cattle get away from drovers that bring them from the plains where they run wild, & they never look for them. So any one kills them that pleases. We get potatoes plenty, Irish at 50 cts pr pound, & sweet ones at from 60 to 75c pd...[FRAGMENT MISSING]...are brought from the Sandwich Islands. Onions we pay...[FRAGMENT MISSING]...5

pr pound. We do our own cooking, washing & mending & some of it is in good style too, but after all it is not like home to me, & I look forward to the time when I can say tis enough now I will go home, with a good deal of anxiety. But I have left those that I love as my own life behind & risked every thing and endured many hardships to get here, & I want to make enough to live easier & do some good with, before I return. And if God sees fit to spare my life & health I think I shall. My great anxiety is for my wife & child. I cannot hear from them. The last time I heard from them was dated the 14 August. I think Margaret has written often but owing to the 28 disarrangement of the Post Office & the distance that I am from one, (50 miles) makes it very difficult to get etters. I got one from Fulton a short time ago. Mother & the girls ere well, & now John I want when you receive this, you should take his & your wife & go over and see Margaret & let her read it & make her a visit, now, won't you? well I think you will. I do not know as she has ever got any of the letters that I have written her from California, for I have written 7 or 8, & have not received an answer to one yet. I sent her a small specimen of the gold in one by a Methodist Minister that was going to the States. Also let Mr Tibbal's family read this, to whom I send my best respects, as I count them among my best friends & shall write to them after I get upon the Yuba & see what success I have there, tell them to write to me. Also give my best respects to the rest of the cousins & families, to Mr Hotchkiss & Lady, & to your Father & Mother, when you write to them & to all that take the trouble to enquire after my welfare. Also to Mrs Crooker although a stranger. Still I feel an interest in her welfare, & shall ever consider myself her friend. Should fortune frown, or sickness bring low, write to me & direct to Sacramento City, California. Give my respects to your wife & reserve a large share to yourself. Yours ffectionately

S.SHUFELT