

**LIFE IN
THE FAR WEST**

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BY
GEORGE FREDERICK RUXTON, ^{*1820-1848*} 1820-1848
AUTHOR OF "TRAVELS IN MEXICO," ETC.

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THE LATE

GEORGE FREDERICK RUXTON

THE London newspapers of October 1848 contained the mournful tidings of the death, at St Louis on the Mississippi, and at the early age of twenty-eight, of Lieutenant George Frederick Ruxton, formerly of her Majesty's 89th regiment, the author of the following sketches.

Many men, even in the most enterprising periods of our history, have been made the subjects of elaborate biography, with far less title to the honour than this lamented young officer. Time was not granted him to embody in a permanent shape a tithe of his personal experiences and strange adventures in three quarters of the globe. Considering, indeed, the amount of physical labour he underwent, and the extent of the fields over which his wanderings spread, it is almost surprising he found leisure to write so much. At the early age of seventeen, Mr Ruxton quitted Sandhurst, to learn the practical part of a soldier's profession in the civil wars

of Spain. He obtained a commission in a squadron of lancers then attached to the division of General Diego Leon, and was actively engaged in several of the most important combats of the campaign. For his marked gallantry on these occasions, he received from Queen Isabella II. the cross of the first class of the order of St Fernando, an honour which has seldom been awarded to one so young. On his return from Spain he found himself gazetted to a commission in the 89th regiment; and it was whilst serving with that distinguished corps in Canada that he first became acquainted with the stirring scenes of Indian life, which he has since so graphically portrayed. His eager and enthusiastic spirit soon became wearied with the monotony of the barrack-room; and, yielding to that impulse which in him was irresistibly developed, he resigned his commission, and directed his steps towards the stupendous wilds, tenanted only by the Red Indian, or by the solitary American trapper.

Those familiar with Mr Ruxton's writings cannot fail to have remarked the singular delight with which he dwells upon the recollections of this portion of his career, and the longing which he carried with him, to the hour of his death, for a return to those scenes of primitive freedom. "Although liable to an accusation of barbarism," he writes, "I must confess that the very happiest moments of my life have been spent in the

wilderness of the Far West ; and I never recall, but with pleasure, the remembrance of my solitary camp in the Bayou Salade, with no friend near me more faithful than my rifle, and no companions more sociable than my good horse and mules, or the attendant cayute which nightly serenaded us. With a plentiful supply of dry-pine logs on the fire, and its cheerful blaze streaming far up into the sky, illuminating the valley far and near, and exhibiting the animals, with well-filled bellies, standing contentedly at rest over their picket-fire, I would sit cross-legged, enjoying the genial warmth, and, pipe in mouth, watch the blue smoke as it curled upwards, building castles in its vapoury wreaths, and, in the fantastic shapes it assumed, peopling the solitude with figures of those far away. Scarcely, however, did I ever wish to change such hours of freedom for all the luxuries of civilised life ; and, unnatural and extraordinary as it may appear, yet such is the fascination of the life of the mountain hunter, that I believe not one instance could be adduced of even the most polished and civilised of men, who had once tasted the sweets of its attendant liberty, and freedom from every worldly care, not regretting the moment when he exchanged it for the monotonous life of the settlements, nor sighing and sighing again once more to partake of its pleasures and allurements."

On his return to Europe from the Far West, Mr Ruxton, animated with a spirit as enterprising and fearless as that of Raleigh, planned a scheme for the exploration of Central Africa, which was thus characterised by the president of the Royal Geographical Society, in his anniversary address for 1845 :—“ To my great surprise, I recently conversed with an ardent and accomplished youth, Lieutenant Ruxton, late of the 89th regiment, who had formed the daring project of traversing Africa in the parallel of the southern tropic, and has actually started for this purpose. Preparing himself by previous excursions on foot, in North Africa and Algeria, he sailed from Liverpool early in December last, in the *Royalist*, for *Ichaboe*. From that spot he was to repair to *Walvish Bay*, where we have already mercantile establishments. The intrepid traveller had received from the agents of these establishments such favourable accounts of the nations towards the interior, as also of the nature of the climate, that he has the most sanguine hopes of being able to penetrate to the central region, if not of traversing it to the Portuguese colonies of *Mozambique*. If this be accomplished, then indeed will Lieutenant Ruxton have acquired for himself a permanent name among British travellers, by making us acquainted with the nature of the axis of the great continent of which we possess the southern extremity.”

In pursuance of this hazardous scheme, Ruxton, with a single companion, landed on the coast of Africa, a little to the south of Ichaboe, and commenced his journey of exploration. But it seemed as if both nature and man had combined to baffle the execution of his design. The course of their travel lay along a desert of moving sand, where no water was to be found, and little herbage, save a coarse tufted grass and twigs of the resinous myrrh. The immediate place of their destination was Angra Peguena, on the coast, described as a frequented station, but which in reality was deserted. One ship only was in the offing when the travellers arrived, and to their inexpressible mortification, they discovered that she was outward bound. No trace was visible of the river or streams laid down in the maps as falling into the sea at this point, and no resource was left to the travellers save that of retracing their steps—a labour for which their strength was hardly adequate. But for the opportune assistance of a body of natives, who encountered them at the very moment when they were sinking from fatigue and thirst, Ruxton and his companion would have been added to the long catalogue of those whose lives have been sacrificed in the attempt to explore the interior of that fatal country.

The jealousy of the traders, and of the missionaries settled on the African coast, who constantly withheld