

Chapter 9*

CHINESE, MEXICANS, AND INDIANS

I: *The Chinese*³²

WHILE at this camp I went down the river two or three miles to see a place called Mississippi Bar, where a company of Chinamen were at work. After an hour's climbing along the rocky banks, and having crossed and recrossed the river some half-dozen times on pine logs, I at last got down among the Celestials.

There were about a hundred and fifty of them here, living in a perfect village of small tents, all clustered together on the rocks. They had a claim in the bed of the river, which they were working by means of a wing dam. A wing dam, I may here mention, is one which first runs half-way across the river, then down the river, and back again to the same side, thus damming off a portion of its bed without the necessity of the more expensive operation of lifting up the whole river bodily in a flume.

*For the editor's introductory note to this chapter, see Appendix, pages 364-66.

³² From Chapter XVII of J. D. Borthwick, *Three Years in California*.

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The Chinamen's dam was two or three hundred yards in length, and was built of large pine trees laid one on the top of the other. They must have had great difficulty in handling such immense logs in such a place; but they are exceedingly ingenious in applying mechanical power, particularly in concentrating the force of a large number of men upon one point.

There were Chinamen of the better class among them, who no doubt directed the work and paid the common men very poor wages—poor at least for California. A Chinaman could be hired for two, or at most three dollars a day by any one who thought their labor worth so much; but those at work here were most likely paid at a still lower rate, for it was well known that whole shiploads of Chinamen came to the country under a species of bondage to some of their wealthy countrymen in San Francisco, who, immediately on their arrival, shipped them off to the mines under charge of an agent, keeping them completely under control by some mysterious celestial influence, quite independent of the laws of the country.

They sent up to the mines for their use supplies of Chinese provisions and clothing, and thus all the gold taken out by them

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remained in Chinese hands and benefited the rest of the community but little by passing through the ordinary channels of trade.

In fact, the Chinese formed a distinct class which enriched itself at the expense of the country, abstracting a large portion of its latent wealth without contributing in a degree commensurate with their numbers to the prosperity of the community of which they formed a part.

The individuals of any community must exist by supplying the wants of others; and when a man neither does this nor has any wants of his own but those which he provides for himself, he is of no use to his neighbors; but when, in addition to this, he also diminishes the productiveness of the country, he is a positive disadvantage in proportion to the amount of public wealth which he engrosses, and becomes a public nuisance.

What is true of an individual is true also of a class; and the Chinese, though they were no doubt, as far as China was concerned, both productive and consumptive, were considered by a very large party in California to be merely destructive as far as that country was interested.

They were, of course, not altogether so, for such a numerous body as they were could

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not possibly be so isolated as to be entirely independent of others; but any advantage which the country derived from their presence was too dearly paid for by the quantity of gold which they took from it; and the propriety of expelling all the Chinese from the State was long discussed, both by the press and in the Legislature; but the principles of the American constitution prevailed; the country was open to all the world, and the Chinese enjoyed equal rights with the most favored nation. In some parts of the mines, however, the miners had their own ideas on the subject, and would not allow the Chinamen to come among them; but generally they were not interfered with, for they contented themselves with working such poor diggings as it was not thought worth while to take from them.

This claim on the Yuba was the greatest undertaking I ever saw attempted by them.

They expended a vast deal of unnecessary labor in their method of working, and their individual labor, in effect, was as nothing compared with that of other miners. A company of fifteen or twenty white men would have wing-dammed this claim and worked it out in two or three months, while here were about a hundred and fifty Chinamen humbugging round it all the season,

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and still had not worked one-half the ground.

Their mechanical contrivances were not in the usual rough straightforward style of the mines; they were curious, and very elaborately got up, but extremely wasteful of labor, and, moreover, very ineffective.

The pumps which they had at work here were an instance of this. They were on the principle of a chain-pump, the chain being formed of pieces of wood about six inches long, hinging on each other, with cross-pieces in the middle for buckets, having about six square inches of surface. The hinges fitted exactly to the spokes of a small wheel, which was turned by a Chinaman at each side of it working a miniature treadmill of four spokes on the same axle. As specimens of joiner work they were very pretty, but as pumps they were ridiculous; they threw a mere dribble of water: the chain was not even encased in a box—it merely lay in a slanting trough, so that more than one-half the capacity of the buckets was lost. An American miner, at the expenditure of one-tenth part of the labor of making such toys, would have set a water-wheel in the river to work an elevating pump, which would have thrown more water in half an hour than four-and-twenty China-

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men could throw in a day with a dozen of these gimcrack contrivances. Their camp was wonderfully clean: when I passed through it I found a great many of them at their toilet, getting their heads shaved or plaiting each other's pigtails; but most of them were at dinner, squatted on the rocks in groups of eight or ten round a number of curious little black pots and dishes from which they helped themselves with their chopsticks. In the center was a large bowl of rice. This is their staple article, and they devour it most voraciously. Throwing back their heads, they hold a large cupful to their wide-open mouths, and with a quick motion of the chopsticks in the other hand they cause the rice to flow down their throats in a continuous stream.

I received several invitations to dinner, but declined the pleasure, preferring to be a spectator. The rice looked well enough, and the rest of their dishes were no doubt very clean, but they had a very dubious appearance and were far from suggesting the idea of being good to eat. In the store I found the storekeeper lying asleep on a mat. He was a sleek dirty-looking object, like a fat pig with the hair scalded off, his head being all close-shaved excepting the pigtail. His opium pipe lay in his hand, and the lamp still

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burned beside him, so I supposed he was already in the seventh heaven. The store was like other stores in the mines, inasmuch as it contained a higgledy-piggledy collection of provisions and clothing, but everything was Chinese excepting the boots. These are the only articles of barbarian costume which the Chinaman adopts, and he always wears them of an enormous size, on a scale commensurate with the ample capacity of his other garments.

II: *The Mexicans*³³

From Angel's Camp I went on a few miles to Carson's Creek, on which there was a small camp lying at the foot of a hill, which was named after the same man. On its summit a quartz vein cropped out in large masses to the height of thirty or forty feet, looking at a distance like the remains of a solid wall of fortification. It had only been worked a few feet from the surface, but already an incredible amount of gold had been taken out of it.

Every place in the mines had its traditions of wonderful events which had occurred in the olden times; that is to say, as far back as "'49"—for three years in such a fast

³³ From Chapter XXII of J. D. Borthwick, *Three Years in California*.