

## INCIDENTS OF WESTERN HISTORY.

## IV.

## Two Lone Americans.

As soon as the bars were down, the Americans began wandering about in their new pasture. Pike found one in Santa Fe when he reached that city, and Lewis and Clark left one on the Upper Missouri, who preferred staying and looking around in that terrific wilderness to returning to the life of civilization. How many others there were who did not happen to come in contact with any of the explorers who afterwards wrote books—how many who merely left their bones unnoticed somewhere on the plains or in the mountains—how many who ventured and returned, and left no token of their daring save in the bold blood of their sons, no one can tell. It was no small thing for a single man, or a handful of men, to go into the unexplored west in the first years of the last century, nor were they small men who did it. Let any one picture to himself a single man facing the awful labyrinths of the Rocky Mountains alone; a journey of months between him and any white man's dwelling; no companions but his rifle and his hunting knife; no store of ammunition beyond what his powder horn and bullet pouch contained; "the meat that he should sup withal running yet fast on foot;" perhaps no other human being within a hundred miles; none at any rate but the savages in their primitive wildness; and nothing anywhere around him but the stony mountains or the endless plains.

These are the men with whom many generations of American poets and sculptors are likely to busy themselves.

As for our narrative, the man whom Lieutenant Pike found in Santa Fe was a Kentuckian, whose name was probably James Purcell, though Pike got it Pursley, and Dr. Cones accepted it in that form. Pike's story of him is as follows:

"In the historical anecdotes of New Mexico, it may not be improper to record the name of James Pursley, the first American who ever penetrated the immense wilds of Louisiana, and shewed the Spaniards of New Mexico, that neither the savages who surround the deserts which divide them from the habitable world, nor the jealous tyranny of their rulers, was sufficient to prevent the enterprising spirit of the Americans from penetrating the arcana of their rich establishments in the new world. Pursley was from near Bairds Town, [Bardstown] Kentucky, which he had left in 1799. In 1802, with two companions, he left St. Louis and traveled west on the head of the Osage river, where they made a hunt; from thence they struck for the White River of the Arkansaw and intended to descend it to Orleans, but while making

preparations the Kauses stole their horses: having secured their peltries they pursued them into the village. The horses were there, but the Indians refused to give them up: Pursley saw his horse with an Indian on him going to the water at the edge of the town. He pursued him, and with his knife ripped open the horse's bowels. The Indian returned to the village, got his gun and came and snapped it at Pursley, who followed him into the village with his knife: the Indian took refuge in a lodge surrounded by women and children. This conduct struck the chiefs with astonishment and admiration of the "mad Americans," as they termed them, and they returned the other horses to the hunters. Pursley and his companions now returned to the place where they buried their peltries, and determined to pursue the route by land to St. Louis; but some persons stole their horses a second time, when they were no great distance from the Osage river, on which they formed a rough canoe and descended that stream nearly to its junction with the Missouri. Here they upset their canoe and lost their whole year's hunt, but saved their arms and ammunition, which are always the primary objects in a desert. On the Missouri they met Monsieur

[left blank by Pike, and not yet guessed] in his barge, bound to the Mandanes. Pursley embarked with him for the voyage; his two companions preferred returning to their homes. On the arrival of the former at the point of destination, his employer dispatched him on a hunting and trading tour, with some bands of the Paducas and Kyaways, with a small quantity of merchandise. In the ensuing spring they were driven by the Sioux from the plains into the mountains which give rise to the Plate, Arkansaw, &c., and it was their sign which we saw in such amazing abundance on the headwaters of the Plate, their party consisting of nearly two thousand souls with ten thousand beasts. The Indians knowing they were approximate to New Mexico, determined to send Pursley with his companions and two of their body into Santa Fe, to know of the Spaniards if they would receive them amicably, and enter into a trade with them. This being acceded to by Governor Allencaster, the Indian deputies returned for their bands; but Pursley thought proper to remain with a civilized people, among whom a fortuitous event had thrown him, a circumstance which he assured me he had at one time entirely despaired of. He arrived at Santa Fe, June, 1805, and had been following his trade, (a carpenter) ever since, at which he made a great deal of money, except when working for the officers, who paid him little or nothing. He was a man of strong natural sense, and of undaunted intrepidity; and entertained me with numer-

ous interesting anecdotes of his adventures with the Indians, and of the jealousy of the Spanish government. He was once nearly being hanged for making a few pounds of powder, which he innocently did, as he was accustomed to do in Kentucky, but which is a capital crime in these provinces. He still retained his gun, which he had with him during his whole tour, and spoke confidently that if he had two hours start, not all the province could take him. He was forbidden to write, but was assured he should have a passport whenever demanded; he was obliged, however, to give security that he would not leave the country without the permission of the government. I brought letters out for him. He assured me that he had found gold on the head of the Plate, and had carried some of the virgin mineral in his shot pouch for months, but that being in doubt whether he should ever again behold the civilized world, and losing in his mind all the ideal value which mankind have stamped on that metal, he threw his sample away; that he had imprudently mentioned it to the Spaniards, who had frequently solicited him to go and show a detachment of cavalry the place, but conceiving it to be in our territory he had refused, and was fearful that the circumstance might create a great obstacle to his leaving the country."

But for the steadfastness of this carpenter, we might not have had the southwest of today. If he had shown the Mexicans the placers of Colorado, history might have had another story to tell. He did, however, in all probability, effect his escape at last; for a St. Louis paper of April, 1824, mentions one James Purcell, lately returned from a 19 years' residence in Santa Fe, who must have been the man.

Our other subject, the man who chose to remain in the mountains, may also have been a Kentuckian, as many of Lewis and Clark's men were. His name was John Colter. The captains' record of the case is that about August 15, 1806, somewhere in the middle of North Dakota, "Colter applied to us for permission to join the two trappers who had accompanied us, and who now proposed an expedition up the river in which they were to find traps and to give him a share of the profits. The offer was a very advantageous one; and as he had always performed his duty, and his services could be dispensed with, we consented to his going upon condition that none of the rest were to ask or expect a similar indulgence. To this they all cheerfully assented, saying that they wished Colter every success, and would not apply for liberty to separate before we reached St. Louis. We therefore supplied him, as did his comrades also, with powder and lead, and a variety of