The Pack Train.

In much of our Western territory, particularly where the population is sparse and the country mountainous, provisions and other supplies are carried to the mines and ranches by trains of mules, which, on their return, pack ore or wool to places of shipment by rail or water. Such a pack train consists usually of about forty mules, with a bell-mare; and to run it to the best advantage, requires the services of a bell-boy and two sturdy packers. The bell-mare is usually white, well along in years, and wears a small cow-bell suspended from her neck. Mules raised for packing purposes have learned to associate a bell with a parent and sociable companions, so that as long as the bell-mare wears the bell, and rings it occasionally, the mules will never stray far from her. If, however, the bell is lost off, the mules will after a time become uneasy, and stray away; or, if the train is in motion, will not exert themselves so much in order to keep up, as they do if even the faintest tinkling is audible. When two trains pasture in the same locality, they usually mix indiscriminately; but if one bell-mare be led away, all her own mules will follow her, and none from the other train, provided there is a difference in the notes of the bells.

The bell-boy is usually a young Indian; and it is his duty, when on the move, to ride the bell-mare in the lead, and to keep along the proper trails. When the train is to be stopped, the bell-boy must do it by stopping the old mare—for were she to keep moving, a dozen men could not keep the mules still; their cunning would then display itself, in their endeavors to join the bell. The bell-boy need not halt if only one or two mules are to be stopped; the packer can do this by simply jumping right in front of the mule to be stopped,—when it will stand as if rooted to the ground, and allow itself to be handled.

When the train is busy packing, the men usually rise at daylight, immediately catch the bell-mare, and lead her to camp, the mules following. While the bell-boy prepares breakfast, the packers saddle the mules, each one of them having a name and a saddle of his own. The mules wait, unloaded, while the men are at breakfast, and that over, the packing begins. Each mule carries, on an average, three hundred pounds; and this weight is divided, as near equally as possible, into two portions, which balance each other on the saddle. Were a novice to put this load on the mules, it would probably have to be repacked a dozen times in going as many miles, for there is only one way to put the pack on tightly and quickly. This is done with two ropes, and when well done the pack will ride as long as the mule can carry it. The first rope is fastened at its center to the saddle, and in each half of the rope a loop is rigged. The equal portions of the load are put in these loops, which are then tightened and made fast. The second rope, which is by far the more important, is fastened by one end to the ring of a canvas cinch, at the other end of which a hook is fixed, the farther end of the rope being free. What is known as the "diamond" is thrown with this rope, and this holds the pack in its place on the saddle, preventing any slipping forward or backward. Two packers are necessary in throwing the diamond, the man on the left of the mule having all the rope at first. He throws a loop, which sits on the top of the pack; then over this another loop, which is fixed in the hook on the cinch, the free end of the rope not having moved. By a moment's manipulation the ropes are ready to be tightened, and first the cinch draws up. Taking in the slack tightens the cinch still more, and brings a heavy pressure to bear on the hind end of the pack. Taking in this slack rope tightens the cinch further, and makes secure the front half of the load. The tying of the end of the rope in half hitches, makes the load still firmer. The diamond is now thrown, and, as the name indicates, the course of the ropes has made a perfect diamond on the top of the pack. This hitch is quite difficult to learn, and exceedingly hard to remember, constant use alone keeping the process familiar to one's mind. Another combination, known as the "one-man hitch," is often used when one man does the packing; but as it