

The Lure of the Rockies

By FREDERICK NIVEN

I HAD seen great rivers flowing between wilderness mountains; eddies half-a-mile in diameter spinning slowly like strange circular mirrors under the sky; the ceaseless polished rush of waters ending in the ceaseless white scroll of rapids, with a fish-hawk overhead. Hurrying tourists in western Canada can see all that without leaving the observation car. The roar of the echoes of the wheels suddenly dies away and they are launched over a bridge (some thousands of tons of steel spanning a gorge) and see eddy and whirlpool, revolving log and reflected cloud, and pass on.

I had stolen leisure to see a little more than these tourists see, such as the high land above timber, mile after mile of heather, or of heath, where the marmot whistles plaintively and the grizzly bear strolls along with lolling head. And suddenly I was appalled by the scenic splendors that had delighted me. There came into my mind what I had read regarding the thudding of the Pacific tides on the continental shelf, with a weight of so many trillions of tons per square mile, affecting (so goes the theory) the semi-liquid part of our globe just below its solid sheath, and urging certain acids upward, to change one stone into another—Nature an alchemist. I thought also of the pronouncement of some scientists that the pulsing of these tides is ever pushing the Rocky Mountains on to the prairies—at the rate of what? I forget. An almost microscopic fraction of space in a million years. Of course these recent theories may be proved all wrong, or

only half-truth, to-morrow. Even apart from the occasional charlatan, or the savant rendered suspect by reason of his having "an axe to grind"—or, otherwise, "a bee in his bonnet"—adding confusion to the difficult, in most sciences we have a procession of men refuting pronouncements of their predecessors. Sense or nonsense, I had read all that; it persisted in my mind as a bar of music may persist, with or without high musical value, willy-nilly, and it was by reason of these wild, yet probable statements, that something in the nature of terror came to me on the monstrous slopes of the Rocky Mountains. I was like the child in Henley's poem:

"When you wake in your crib
You an inch of experience,
Vaulted about with the wonder
darkness . . ."

Surrounded by these peaks, vaulted over by the tremendous drifting arrangements of vapour, grey and grey-blue, and ghostly clouds like shreds of steam, I realized that I had lived too long in the apparent, the superficial, security of houses, walked too much in streets dusted by the scavenging department, lunched too long in soft-carpeted restaurants forgetting that the illumination over the table was but harnessed lightning, seen too long the windows of pastry-cooks and confectioners, and silk merchants, and the delightful bric-à-brac for corner cupboards, in Regent Street.

A horrific sense of insecurity rushed upon me. There was some kind of shrub grew at that place; and one

side of a stretch of it, about a mile long, was neatly cut, as though by aid of a measuring tape, making it look like a trimmed box hedge, such as one sees in Suburbia. It was no gardener in a bowler hat that had done that clipping, but an avalanche of snow, gardening away up there where hardly ever a man comes. I sat and wondered over the riddle of our days, as men must always have wondered. That enquiry (which has the impression of bafflement between the lines in Darwin and Hæckel and Bergson; a smile and a shrug in Andrew Lang; seems perturbed in Lodge; tranquil, spiritual, poetic in Myers; hopeful, almost radiant in Gustave Geley) was in me there, in all my consciousness.

Eight thousand feet below, in the dining-car of the Trans-Canada, rushing past to Vancouver, people would then be sitting down, as easily as in the Ritz, unfolding the napkins over their knees, before electro-plate covers, neatly flicked in front of them by waiters (or is it stewards on a train?) in white jackets. I envied them, for a moment, their sense of security, till I realized it is only a relative sense of security. Next moment I was glad to be there, where I was, alone with the tremendous clouds and the miles of avalanche-pollarded brush, and the wind rushing down off the glacier as the warm air rose from the valley below.

I strove to exercise that feeling of my insecurity among these vast natural monuments of boulder and rocky crest reflecting a violet light, so that I could fully enjoy the lunch-time rest up there; but as I sat on my



The Selkirks