

"At places where public officials were to be interviewed the hotel was our Hobson's choice, but many a time would we gladly have ensconced ourselves in the kitchen garden of a country cottage when prudence and pre-arrangement compelled an advance into the city. If left to our own choice, however, we went into the business of reading character from the tilt of a roof, the cut of a hedge, or a sitting-room curtain, and thus selected our temporary home. A home it invariably proved to be, although embarrassments almost identical had to be faced on each occasion.

"First the self-introduction of ourselves and our subject. When I failed, the Skipper won. Then the proving that we wished to be one of the circle and make no trouble. Lastly the rate of payment. Invariably it was stipulated at the outset that we would pay and almost invariably it transpired that, by morning, we were all such good friends that the mention of money was poo-hooed. This was in turn overcome only by the firm stand that, should we permit ourselves to be freed, we could never have the face to introduce ourselves to another kind family next evening. Nothing but satisfaction and delightful recollections came of these visits, although our hosts were of diverse classes and characters.

"Many an evening spent around the organ or on the front steps has revealed to us the history of a whole county, which otherwise would have been lost ground. Some families wanted to know all about us, but most of them, thank heaven, wanted to tell us about themselves."

Distances Worth Noting—By Canadians and Others

"The King's International Highway" divides itself naturally into four divisions: "The East," 600 miles; the Lakes, 900 miles; the Prairie, 1000 miles, and the Mountains, 800 miles. At Thief River Falls the speedometer read 1,488. Thoughtfully of the belief that the diversified scenery was all behind us, we were in a state of keen, childish excitement to be abroad on the glorious expanse of that gigantic carpet called "The Prairie."

Prairie Perspective—Within and Without

"Like others who have crossed and re-crossed that great plateau in pullman cars, we had perceived it not. But, unlike many others, we knew that we knew it not. Since leaving Montreal we had unriddled the spirit of silent forests, the spirit of a beautiful river, the spirit of the Great Lakes. With this preparation we were impelled to grasp and grapple with the real spirit of this new region we were embarking upon, this broad smooth back of a continent, whereon men station themselves at unfeeling distances from their fellows and, in loneliness and moiling, endure the parching heat of summer and the relentless, stinging cold of winter.

"How often, toying with a silver spoon on the spotless napery of a luxurious diner, had we looked out commiseratingly on the squat weather-greyed villages, over the waste of brown, dry hills or momentarily at a child playing by a dolesome, windswept homestead—and shuddered. 'Ugh! What an existence; to think of wearing your life out that way!' A man driving jaded horses harnessed to a slowly jolting waggon on a bad road that stretched to barren eternity, with not even a shack on the horizon. Whither went he, and wherefore? The women? That far-off tiny light, twinkling in an ocean of gathering night—there she is, from four in the morning till dark, at her waiting, and her tasks, tasks, tasks. This limitless space in which to move, but still barred in a twelve-foot cabin, like a penned-in animal. It's all the same, all awful—except that the winter is worse."

"It was thus that we had been content to judge the prairie. And yet what would we have said of the man who published his description of a country from having navigated its shore line? We were destined to see the prairie in many lights and many moods, but our first hours were naturally richest in impressions....

More Light on Prairie Conditions

"After a while we came to a house—a real home—laughing children, garden, trees, barns, whitewashed fences. The farmer, standing there a minute and casting over those broad fields the eye of the master: what a realization must have been his, what a sense of kingship, what a place in the sun!

"Who lives in that house yonder?" I asked, pointing to the style of shack I had always associated with the prairie.

"Aw! I just keep some implements there. My father run it up for a temporary shelter when we first settled here. He has a fine home in Thief River now. I got a son running a bank there, too.

This, then, was what it meant to "live and die in those miserable shanties," as we had so commiseratingly decided in our farseeing wisdom and introspection.

"Has your father any other children?" I asked, in my impudent search for truth.

"Yes, I got a brother in the legislature; and my youngest brother—he owns the River Grand Lumber Company, but his wife's fond of travelling, and he spends most of the time away." While I was thinking, thinking hard, he added. "But I took the farm: suits me all right."

"I should say it would suit anybody, I echoed as we drove along. "What a lot there is for these people to get out of life."

"It seems to me, replied the Skipper, reflectively, that it is we, rushing by in railway trains, who are doing the standing still, while the farmer and his family are making off with the bacon."

"Yes, and 'the bacon' means a pretty good deal," I sympathized with myself.

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