The FIRST TRAVELER

by Britton B. Cooke

WITH DECORATIONS BY
J·E·H· MACDONALD

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The T. H. Best Printing Company,
200-206 Adelaide Street West,
Toronto

To J.

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& Nine Idle Essays on the Trans-Canadian Portage

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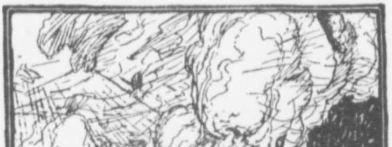

1 · The First Traveler

HE paused, listening—head crouched on shoulders, small eyes alert. One heavy brown hand parted cautiously the screen of whispering green before him: the other rested uneasily on the rude weapon slung from his side; uncertainty clouded his face until the wind, leaping from cover, again carried a sound, the idle calling of a strange bird, one that had not happened into the valley below and behind him.

Peering anxiously from side to side and as far before him as his eye could penetrate, he toiled on, gaining higher ground. Half afraid, half expectant, he ventured across the open spaces in the wood. Panting, he reached the top-most point on the hill and saw below him for the first time the world that surrounded his native valley!

The sun flecked him with gold. The mellow sky poured light upon him. The earth lay at his feet green and palpitating, mottled with the shadows of clouds. The wind lifted strange incense to his nostrils. He compressed his eye-lids and beheld countless valleys greater than the one from which he had this morning made his way. For a long time he gazed at the challenging distances, then descended by the way he had come, and in the circle of the fire-light told the tribe the wonders he had seen.

They stoned him for his folly.

A few believed, and made the journey to the hill-top for themselves, secretly. In time public opinion changed. Soon they placed a large stone to mark the grave of the pioneer, the first traveler, and the priests worked his name into the ceremonies. In his name they explored two valleys, and succeeding generations went even farther afield until in time they forgot the stone over the grave of the First Traveler and pushed on, as we push on to-day, in the name of necessity, of commerce, of war, of religion, and of adventure. Columbus answered, in vain, the challenge of the western horizon. Behring flung himself eastward, across the Pacific. Drake pursued the sun. Men designed, as ages went by, great ships by which to reach new continents and when they had reached them, built railways to carry them farther across. We are still producing more ships and more steel rails. The earth swarms with journey-makers. The world is laced with the paths of the restless.

Yet the challenge has not been satisfied. It is re-iterated from each mountain-top and every horizon. It calls as it called the cave-dweller and as it called the great explorers. It was not answered when Champlain landed at Quebec, nor when La Salle's friends found that the St. Lawrence did not lead to Cathay, nor when the

Russians were cast upon the shore of Alaska. It persists, to mock each new generation. Each day thousands answer. Each day a thousand passengers landing at Quebec rediscover the Terrace, and a thousand arriving at Euston re-discover the Cheshire Cheese, in vain.

2·The Spirit of Adventure

When we were children we read books of adventure. We are now compelled between the covers of political essays, or matrimonial autopsies by sad novelists. At nine we knew heroes. At something over thirty we have only political leaders and family traditions to sustain us. In our more or less remote youth there were times when imagination defied nursery authority and transmuted the substantialities of our environment into a magnificent world peopled with demi-gods: about tea-time one planted dragons in the shadows of rhododendrons and slew them carefully before being led to bed: one summoned Blue Beards by the lifting of the eyelashes: one had as many lions and major generals at one's disposal as Nebuchadnezzar or the War Office.

We do none of these things now. We are content to know and to be known by each flagstone in each street we patronise. We pension off our sense of adventure by efforts in the stock market or by subscriptions to polar expeditions. It is true we make journeys, and in a sense we travel, but it is not as we might travel. When we leave home we carry introductions to other cities from history; to monuments by Baedeker; to a few men from our few friends: and to hotels by a motor club's guide book. We risk nothing. We run no chance of adventurous mishap. We see only what history, the guide books and our friends say are proper for us to see. For the spark of adventure is dead in most of us. We do not travel, but make journeys: on business, for

health, to gamble, or to be temporarily rid of one's obligations. We move from appointment to appointment, from old friends to new friends, from historic ruin to fashionable resort, from cathedral to art gallery, from point of departure to point of arrival. Of travel for travel's sake we know surprisingly little.

3 · The Art of Travel

It has been said that they most enjoy life who not merely exist from event to event, but who spend well the intervals of life as well as its intense moments, and who find a pleasure in the mere passing of quarter-hours at whatever best occupation each quarter offers them. They, as it were, sip life. They know its subtler flavours. They look upon living as, after all, only a matter of making a journey and spending the interval between one depot and the other more or less agreeably. These make good travelers, for what is true, in this connection, of living is true also of the making of journeys by rail or vessel, by foot or motor. To live well or to travel well, one must study the intervals, spending each hour like a given number of gold pieces, on the best the market affords.

Books and bridge parties have their place in any itinerary. Cigars and smelling salts and huge quantities of luggage may be necessary, but more necessary is it to open the windows of the mind and look out upon the pageant of the miles. Release the faculties, as it were, from office hours. Bid reason, forging logic upon logic, engage itself towards finer ends. Loose fancy. Mount the senses at vantage points where they may oversee the triple pageant of the day. Let them report the men, the colours, the music, and the fragrance of the marching world. Applaud the vagabond hours.

To see new scenes, to hear new songs, to smell the new perfumes in new winds—in short, to see the world alive, at work and growing—is the real joy of the traveler. Forget for a little while whence you came and why you go. Catch the spirit of travel, which is companion to the spirit of adventure, and let it amuse you.

4. Old Travel & New

Two centuries ago it was an adventure to travel from Manchester to London by stage coach. To-day the great journey is across Canada by railway coach. In place of the shining horses, the grumbling wheels, and the driver's cracking whip, is the lean, black beast of steel, and the train—a chariot drawn by a Pegasus into the blaze of the sun. In place of the coachman's whip and the horn of the guard is the cry of the Western locomotive, summoning Echo from her hiding-places in the hills, flying ahead and afar—the cry of the wild stallion leading his battalions across the plains.

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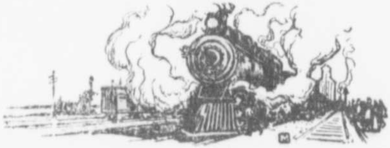


This Canadian locomotive, high-chested, arrogant, beautiful in its sheer naked ugliness, is not like the masterpiece of compactness and concealed strength which draws the steamer trains into Liverpool. Its bigness, its weight, its unclothed vigour is like the very country across which it portages the world's traffic. It tolls a heavy bell when it commences to move from the station. Its departure is in the nature of a ceremony. There is the hiss of steam. The driving wheels respond to the thrust of the exposed bars and cylin-

ders. The earth trembles as the caravan rolls from the station platform.

There is no wonder men do it honour, that its bearing is arrogant and its departure and arrival ceremonious. England and Scotland flourished ages before steam was found out. Caesar conquered Gaul by foot or horse. But British North America was unconquerable until the advent of the railway. One might almost say this Western locomotive is the Caesar of this Western world—his retinue of carriages, his legions. The history of the Dominion of Canada really begins with the history of railways. The Imperial Limited, hurtling across the continent from Montreal to Vancouver, and the heavy freight train labouring from town to town, are the alternating pulse of the nation, quickening every fibre of the organism.

5. "One Fine Day"

For a moment the impressions were confused. I could not account for the circumstances; semi-darkness; quiet , pervated by a humming from somewhere underneath; until, as from a great distance came a long cry—a whistle, peremptory in tone. I awoke. Last night had been Montreal—the station, a sleeping car.

The blinds moved easily, and I could see that it was still very early morning. The earth had changed. From a populous city I had come suddenly into a virgin land of rocks and water, trees and sunlight; a land where were no signs of human habitation. It seemed, as the train swept on, to have no end. Miles fled while I was yet blinking; there a high hill; there a valley; there a crooked lake —a series of crooked lakes, black-blue set in gray-black rocks, the water placid close to shore where the trees leaned over to dream, but laughing where an early-prowling breeze blew into the face of the reflected sky. Everything dew-soaked and peculiarly *clean*. The freshness and sweetness of the air like fine water in a perfect goblet. The morning scintillated, a very gem.

*

With a curt tug the locomotive, somewhere ahead, hurries his following head-first through a cutting. The granite walls through which engineers gone and forgotten once blasted this right-of-way shout back at the roaring wheels, as though some old resentment still lies between the train and vanquished nature. The argument stops, and there comes the thunder of ten thousand tons rolling over a bridge. Moving in stately mien beneath the straddling steel, flows a black river. Not a sign of man's handiwork anywhere save for this railway, a tangle of logs—deserters from some lumberman's last year's boom—and a motionless Indian fishing from a bark canoe

And then, we are among trees, young green things that become excited as we approach, wave their arms madly and point after us. Then a sombre forest of steadfast spruce, a cluster of sapphire lakes, a pine growing from a cleft in a mossy cliff, a little stream, in flight, stumbling over stones—and five red deer breaking for cover.

The train curves, and there stands the source of the morning's gladness. Attendant clouds are just withdrawing. He mounts toward his noon-day throne, and as he climbs, lakes and dew-wet rocks, pale soft-wood of the second growth and black evergreens, birds and streams salute him! A glorious morning!

6 · The North Shore

In the melancholy of deserts and the sorrow of waste places there is a quality too often overlooked, an underlying tenderness, a wealth of resignation. Beneath the seeming gloom is a constant optimism which one finds only in nature. The grim armies of the spruce, frozen upon the slopes of these northern solitudes have no prettiness to recommend them, no delicacy of colouring or variety of form, and yet each up-swelling morning when the sun appears they seem to lift their heads in salute, as though merely to see the miracle of the dawn were enough for them to wait thus, bound to the frozen earth. So always, I fancy, does the desert wait, and at each rising and each setting of the sun flushes with the memory of some underlying hope, belying the melancholy men seem to find.

This train enters now such a region, the wilderness on the North Shore of Lake Superior. The men in the smoking compartments grow tired of their cigars. Women nod over magazines and novels. Conversations stumble. A hush comes over the car, broken only by the stertorous efforts of the locomotive at the head of the train. He persists unabashed, but does not whistle for right-of-way, since there are none to dispute it save an occasional gang of navvies sweating over one square yard of this gigantic railroad. The gang waves red handkerchiefs thoughtfully and is swallowed up in hazy distance.

About are low hills, each hill like its neighbour, mile upon mile. There is no green here except where a mad second-growth of poplar seeks a career in a fissure of rock. The rock is gray and cold, not even cragged, which might lend it character. Neither stream nor lake, nor half-grown tree, nor voice of bird, or water mingles with the humming of the swaying train. Even the wind is dumb, lacking strings to play upon, and sweeps low over the land, touching with furtive hand the dull blueberry shrubs that struggle at the foot of the ballast-slope. The never-ending hills, like mounds in a forgotten cemetery of Titans, appear and disappear, swinging into new groupings with each turn of the sinuous path, offering always new perspectives of the old bleakness as though they thought to cheat you.

*

"There's silver in those hills," said a fat man, finally breaking the silence of the smoking-room. "Yes, sir. Bushels of it, I bet."

"Indeed," replied the youthful Oxonian to whom apparently the remark had been addressed. "Is it mined?"

"Not yet," uneasily, "but—but it's there. I've heard mining sharps say so."

"I see," returned the Oxonian, losing interest.

"Did y'ever see her lookin' more—more God-forsaken?" demanded the talkative one, craving conversation.

"See what?"

"This here—this bit'v country?"

"This is my first visit to Canada."

"First! Then you don't understand about this here region. This

part we're passin' through used to be a fine piece of country. Had trees on it and everything. And then there comes a fire—a whale of a big fire—and the whole stretch goes up in smoke!"

Silence.

"Not a tree nor anything left. Rain falls and washes away the soil. Whole thing's gone to pot. Makes a person think of a poor old woman I knew out West once. She lost all her children, one by one, and still kept on livin' and livin'—without havin' anything worth livin' for."

The idea amused the Oxford man, who smiled indulgently.

"The Greek Mother!" he said. "That would be a better likeness."

"The what?"

"I referred to the classics."

"Oh!"

The blighted country moved heavily past. Cigars were re-lighted. The porter diverted the company by polishing the panellings till they shone.

"Look!" called the fat man suddenly. "Look! Sun's settin'!"

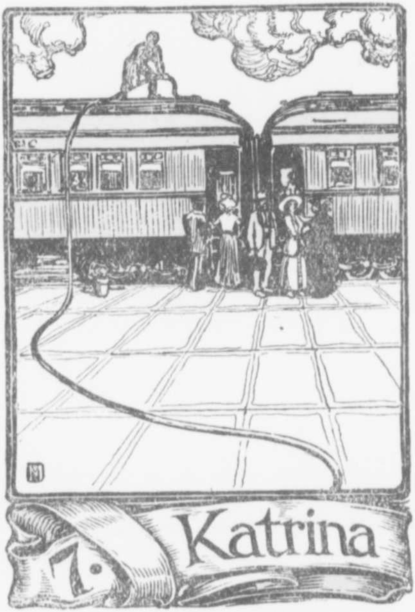
We looked: the old lawyer going to Winnipeg to attend an important directors' meeting, the rector from Kent, an Indian civil servant, the Oxford graduate, and I. And we beheld the grim, disfigured hills turning black against the flaming West, each black mound tipped with a rim of golden fire where the sun fell upon it. It remained so several moments, then faded.

Conversation leaped up like a smouldering fire. The rector started a story.

"Say," said the fat man aside to the scholar, "have dinner with me, will you?"

"I—I'm afraid I—not just yet."

"Oh, come on," retorted the other. And they went out, together.



7. Katrina

Not all the North Shore is wilderness. There is the sharp-etched beauty of Jackfish, where the cold fingers of Superior reach in about the rocks. There are muskegs full of cedars and wild roses. There is the canyon of the Nipigon, and, for that matter, two cities. But the blighted land adds the note of sadness which makes the song linger in the memory, the hint of tragedy which lends the tale depth.

The train rolls its length to rest at the side of the wind-swept platform at Fort William. Crowds descending from the train are swallowed up in the greater crowd which swarms out of the city to meet it and to bid good-bye to some that are to board it, westward bound. To one side is the harbour, crowded with grain vessels; to right and left are the blank shapes of elevators; and beside the main lines, miles of storage and switching tracks, and herds of grain cars awaiting their turn under the elevators.

⁂

"Katrina," quavers an old voice from somewhere in the crowd. "Katrina! You will be leaving me now! O, Katrina! My little Katrina!"

"Hush, Moot-her. Hush!"

"But Katrina—you will make a letter to the neighbour woman, Jacobi, that she may read it to me to say how you and the man get on?"

"Iss Moot-her. Iss," hurriedly. "But Hush! Hugh is ready. The bell makes a tolling. Good-bye, Moot-her, good-bye!"

The engineer who is to take the train over the next division of the road and whose faded blue "over-alls" are freshly washed and ironed, nods to his fireman to set the bell valve open: the heavy brass intones a second warning that the time for departure has come. The engineer lays a gauntleted hand on the gleaming throttle and draws the heavy bar smoothly, notch by notch, toward him, liberating the steam. He watches his straining drivers. He listens to his valves, catching and sobbing with the rush of steam. The great black pistons quiver with the white energy they hold. The rods strain, the tires bite the rail. The train slips out. There on the station platform remains one old woman. gazing after the train. Her friends catch at her hands to lead her off.

The Oxonian and the other had observed the episode: a wedding party, the young persons setting off for the West in a colonist coach ahead, the bride, like all brides, beautiful, but with a strange foreign sort of beauty, probably a Slav type. The husband, young and ruddy, proud beneath his awkwardness.

"I was speaking to the conductor," explained the Canadian to the Oxonian. "He says the young fellow's an Englishman, was a foreman of freight

handlers. He boarded with the old woman and now he marries the daughter. They are going West to take up a homestead in the Peace River country."

"And what race is she?"

"Foreigner of some kind."

"Curious! I suppose it is an episode in the process of assimilation. And they call these people British citizens?"

"Citizens! Of course! I'm one. My father was Irish, my mother was a French-Canadian. I was born in the United States at a time when my parents were working in the New England mills. I am married to a Swedish woman."

"And you—"

"I am a British subject!"

"But—"

"And what is more, I am the Colonel of our regiment, out West."

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There were, on the train, as it sped westward, nineteen different languages, and people born in scores of different parts of the earth. Most in the train were elements in the making of the new nation. The train, as I venture to believe, is the chief factor in the reduction and compounding of the various elements.

8·The Flat Lands

The prairie comes, like Dawn, like a cool wind, like soft music welling up out of silence, like a serene lake at the end of a troubled river. Many small valleys roll into a few larger valleys. These, in turn, flow out in long, sweeping lines, carrying with them only a faint undulation. The timber disappears. The lakes are fewer, rounder, more shallow. The woods dwindle into stretches of low brush; the brush dissolves into scattered clumps of low willow. One colour melts into another. The train begins the traverse like a madly spinning bowl launched by a giant hand across this smooth-rolled green. And the prairie opens out with a wide smile.

This is the land of sweep and swing, height and breadth, depth and length. The land of no limitations, where there is neither master nor servant, past nor present, but only to-morrow, smiling behind to-night's dull sunset, and Opportunity waiting for his cue.

"I don't know," observes Jones, the Canadian. "I can't get used to this country. It's monotonous, yet it's never twice the same. I get dizzy here. It's so flat. I feel like a baby let loose on a big, flat roof by accident, and likely to stumble on the edge any minute, and fall over. I feel I'm high up in the air because I can't see anything higher, except clouds and grain elevators. I'd rather be ten thousand feet up, in my mountains in a comfortable gully. This here country'd make me godless, too self-content, too self-reliant. Mountains make a man, well—wait."

"Wonderful colouring," mused the Oxonian, smoking one of the fat man's cigarettes. "It recalls Morrice. I like it. See! Yellow merging into brown and green, green stippled into blue, blue into purple, purple into emerald sky: the impossible possible."

"Wait till you see more of it," the other cautioned. "Wait till you see Winter—the everlasting whiteness, solemn as a woman with her first baby sort of warning you not to wake it. It—it's uncanny. I've seen the snow look pink, while the shadows seemed full of purple, and then suddenly, with the shifting of a cloud it would become sheer white again, terrific white. Blind you. In the fall it gets so yellow that it makes the sky yellow—looking down on nothing but wheat."

We pass Winnipeg at the door of the plains proper. The long train thrums diligently toward Calgary on the other side of this sea, passing Regina, Moose Jaw, and Medicine Hat. And now, over the horizon, appears a cluster of purple clouds, directed by a high-riding wind. He deploys them to right and left, deftly, as we run. They mount the sky. They pass the zenith and meet the horizon on the other side. The prairie is dark, and suddenly still.

Somewhere action is imminent.

From which direction it may come one cannot tell. The heavy air hangs motionless. Only the dried grasses along the right-of-way stir in the wake of the flying train. A gopher squints at the glower.

There is a rush of wind and again the stillness. Again the wind. Stillness. A flash! A note of thunder! And the wind rushes from cover, cool and sweet-smelling, through the window screens. Big drops splash against the glass. Sweeping sheets of silver flit across the land.

We swing in beside a valley, one of the few valleys in the prairie. It is a huge coulée which cherishes in its heart a small stream. This vast scene, this monstrous rainstorm seem to pay tribute to this stream, as a strong man pays tribute to a woman. Water hurries to it in numberless rivulets that break in over the edge of the coulée. The stream swells as we race. The low green bushes which in dry weather huddle thirstily over the water-course, jealous of the sun's bold eye, riot in drink. There is movement everywhere, the train, the flying drops, the stream! Behind the clouds lingering daylight finally departs. Night drops. And in the night, over the humming of the train, I can hear the rain, thrashing against the windows, washing six hundred miles of country at a sweep.

In the dining-car next morning is a man who, having made his fortune in real estate, is now studying medicine. He is forty. In this country they do not think it is ever too late to do anything.

"Why," explained the stout man to the Oxonian, "he's made his money; why shouldn't he spend it on a college professor if he wants to?"

9 · The Ascent

The flatness ends. The plain is swept up into swelling green hills, and sucked down into velvet valleys, in which impetuous mountain rivers ride hard over the clear, cold pebbles. The long, smooth traverse on the prairie is completed. Here lies a city of the foothills, a wealthy merchant prince. Westward lie the peaks of a continent's vertebrae.

The last engine of the plains is unharnessed from the cars and rolls heavily away into the maze of tracks which lead somehow to the roundhouse, where he is to be rubbed down and repaired like an Olympian runner in the hands of his friends. In his place comes another, no plainsman, but a mountaineer, greater, blacker, more ugly, if that were possible, than his predecessor. Softly he backs down upon the waiting train. There is a quick collision and to the lifeless tons of colonist cars, diners, and standard sleeping-cars is set a head, a heart, and a single eye, glaring at the fastnesses ahead. Laundrymen, grooms, curriers, and attendants finish their tasks and step aside. The bell tolls for the departure.

This is an earnest business, this negotiation of the mountains. We run lightly from the Calgary yards, leaving the switch points of the sidetracks chattering behind us, and the semaphores moving gravely in the gathering dusk to cover our rear. The city recedes into the distance. We enter a valley and begin to climb; at the foot of the valley the Bow River rushes east. The speed does not seem to slacken, but there is more pull on the couplings; they creak. We surmount the first big rise, and, looking down, see sun-lit slopes of green across which fall the long shadows of cattlemen and cattle. The sun, which from Calgary was hidden, is here visible, dozing off toward Japan. Presently he drops behind the farthest line of foothills. The dusk comes up. A heavy golden moon peers balefully over the horizon and as he rises casts the hills, as we top them, in deep black shadow. The air on the observation platform grows cold.

The Oxonian and the fat man have lingered in the dining-car with two bottles of mineral water between them; for they had become friends, such is the power of the Western train.

"I've seen mountains, you know," says the Oxford man, a little afraid of being misunderstood, "in Wales, you know."

"Any good?" says the fat man.

"Very!"

"Wait 'll y' see *these!*"

The train climbs steadily.

"Is that one?" demands the academic one, suddenly pointing with the stub of a cigar.

"Where? That? That purply thing? No. Just a cloud. Y'd think it was a peak, though, at first, wouldn't y'?"

The waiters in the dining-car are counting the silverware, and the head waiter is adding his receipts.

"There!" whispers the fat man, in a hoarse whisper. "There they are!"

"Over there?"

"Yes!"

It is the first clear view of a peak that rivets their attention. Even the waiters leave their silver cleaning for a moment to peer from the windows. The car is suddenly quiet, save for two Hebrews playing pinochle.

Each mile lifts the train to a higher vantage point. With many turnings it winds past the first great spur of rock, then a second, then a dozen, and on all sides are nothing but peaks. At Banff there is an alteration in the passenger lists: some leave, others come aboard. The two travellers, oblivious to the passage of time, stand on the observation platform.

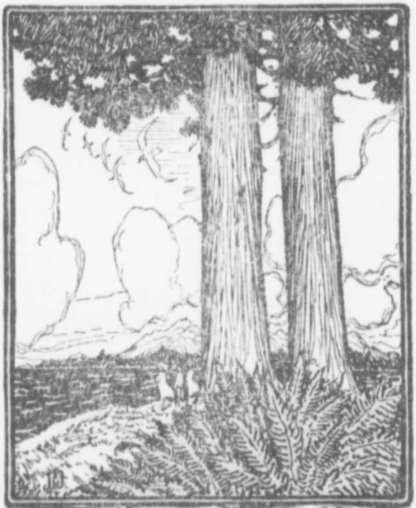
"I was born among these mountains," says Smith, "and I love 'em. Ev'ry time I go 'way from this country and these mountains, I get sort of hungry t' get back. Ev'ry time I get back and see 'em, like this here now—I feel *diff'rent.* I feel healthier, an' cleaner, an'—Oh, well, dammit there's somethin' *noble* about these hills. Now, isn't there?"

"Mighty!" assented the Balliol man, for his speech had become contaminated.

One does not write of mountains lightly. Men have tried to paint them and have failed—miserably. Others have photographed them. It is only the thin soul of a camera that can attempt to record their immensities. Snap the shutter! Turn to the next film! You have a picture, and it is no doubt worth having, but it is really only a little better than a hurried memoranda.

Late in the night comes a change in the motion of the train. The vigilant brakes lie close to the tires. The locomotive is no longer pulling, but resisting the pull of gravity. We slip softly down into the velvet maw of the Yoho Valley, through the great spiral tunnels bored in the thighs of the hills, the peaks glittering in the moonlight, close to the river, whose song comes up through the stillness of the Great Pit. It is walled by precipices and has planets set in its very ceiling. It is a place of fearful heights and awful depths, a place of calm so intense that only the rumble of the train keeps the ear from catching the music of night birds crying a mile down the valley, and the silver tinkle of a water-fall flitting down the face of a precipice.

Here in the valley bottom the sky is higher than it ever was before, yet closer. The brakes are released. The oil-burner which has taken the place of the coal-burning engine out of respect to the forestry regulations of the Province of British Columbia, has met the Kicking Horse and is racing with it, cheek by jowl, through the night-shadowed mountains.



10·The Pacific

Of the remaining distance through to the City of Vancouver and the edge of the sea I shall not write. Having thus entered the mountains one can see only for oneself. Of the Thompson Canyon and the Fraser Canyon, and of the Fraser's sudden conversion from a riotous life in a gray-blue gorge to a placid state among green meadows and trees—I shall not write. Of Victoria and the Island of Vancouver, of the whole brilliant, fascinating coast, with its touch of Orient and its flavour of the south latitudes, one can write but lamely. They are a fitting end to the crescendo. There is no anti-climax.

The few impressions of which I have thus written are only some out of many. You will not see what I saw, nor what your neighbour sees from his window across the aisle of the car. For we are, by good fortune, differently adjusted—open to different impressions, and to different interpretations of the same experience.

This, I venture to believe, is wherein the Art of Travelling lies: that the mind is in a mood to receive the impressions and to suppose interpretations. Catch the spirit of this Western train, which is the spirit of this country. Revive in you the sense of Adventure. Catch the rhythm of a young nation's tumultuous pulse. So —at least, in this Western Hemisphere—one may truly practise the most ancient and the most refreshing of the arts.