

Garland Hamlin

The Trail of the Goldseekers: A Record of Travel in Prose and Verse



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ANTICIPATION

I will wash my brain in the splendid breeze,
I will lay my cheek to the northern sun,
I will drink the breath of the mossy trees,
And the clouds shall meet me one by one.
I will fling the scholar's pen aside,
And grasp once more the bronco's rein,
And I will ride and ride and ride,
Till the rain is snow, and the seed is grain.

The way is long and cold and lone —
But I go.
It leads where pines forever moan
Their weight of snow,
Yet I go.
There are voices in the wind that call,
There are hands that beckon to the plain;
I must journey where the trees grow tall,
And the lonely heron clamors in the rain.

Where the desert flames with furnace heat,
I have trod.
Where the horned toad's tiny feet
In a land
Of burning sand
Leave a mark,
I have ridden in the noon and in the dark.
Now I go to see the snows,
Where the mossy mountains rise
Wild and bleak – and the rose
And pink of morning fill the skies
With a color that is singing,
And the lights
Of polar nights
Utter cries
As they sweep from star to star,
Swinging, ringing,
Where the sunless middays are.

THE TRAIL OF THE GOLDSEEKERS

CHAPTER I COMING OF THE SHIPS

I

A little over a year ago a small steamer swung to at a Seattle wharf, and emptied a flood of eager passengers upon the dock. It was an obscure craft, making infrequent trips round the Aleutian Islands (which form the farthest western point of the United States) to the mouth of a practically unknown river called the Yukon, which empties into the ocean near the post of St. Michaels, on the northwestern coast of Alaska.

The passengers on this boat were not distinguished citizens, nor fair to look upon. They were roughly dressed, and some of them were pale and worn as if with long sickness or exhausting toil. Yet this ship and these passengers startled the whole English-speaking world. Swift as electricity could fly, the magical word GOLD went forth like a brazen eagle across the continent to turn the faces of millions of earth's toilers toward a region which, up to that time, had been unknown or of ill report. For this ship contained a million dollars in gold: these seedy passengers carried great bags of nuggets and bottles of shining dust which they had burned, at risk of their lives, out of the perpetually frozen ground, so far in the north that the winter had no sun and the summer midnight had no dusk.

The world was instantly filled with the stories of these men and of their tons of bullion. There was a moment of arrested attention – then the listeners smiled and nodded knowingly to each other, and went about their daily affairs.

But other ships similarly laden crept laggardly through the gates of Puget Sound, bringing other miners with bags and bottles, and then the world believed. Thereafter the journals of all Christendom had to do with the "Klondike" and "The Golden River." Men could not hear enough or read enough of the mysterious Northwest.

In less than ten days after the landing of the second ship, all trains westward-bound across America were heavily laden with fiery-hearted adventurers, who set their faces to the new Eldorado with exultant confidence, resolute to do and dare.

Miners from Colorado and cow-boys from Montana met and mingled with civil engineers and tailors from New York City, and adventurous merchants from Chicago set shoulder to shoemakers from Lynn. All kinds and conditions of prospectors swarmed upon the boats at Seattle, Vancouver, and other coast cities. Some entered upon new routes to the gold fields, which were now known to be far in the Yukon Valley, while others took the already well-known route by way of St. Michaels, and thence up the sinuous and sinister stream whose waters began on the eastern slope of the glacial peaks just inland from Juneau, and swept to the north and west for more than two thousand miles. It was understood that this way was long and hard and cold, yet thousands eagerly embarked on keels of all designs and of all conditions of unseaworthiness. By far the greater number assaulted the mountain passes of Skagway.

As the autumn came on, the certainty of the gold deposits deepened; but the tales of savage cliffs, of snow-walled trails, of swift and icy rivers, grew more numerous, more definite, and more appalling. Weak-hearted Jasons dropped out and returned to warn their friends of the dread powers to be encountered in the northern mountains.

As the uncertainties of the river route and the sufferings and toils of the Chilcoot and the White Pass became known, the adventurers cast about to find other ways of reaching the gold fields,

which had come now to be called "The Klondike," because of the extreme richness of a small river of that name which entered the Yukon, well on toward the Arctic Circle.

From this attempt to avoid the perils of other routes, much talk arose of the Dalton Trail, the Taku Trail, the Stikeen Route, the Telegraph Route, and the Edmonton Overland Trail. Every town within two thousand miles of the Klondike River advertised itself as "the point of departure for the gold fields," and set forth the special advantages of its entrance way, crying out meanwhile against the cruel mendacity of those who dared to suggest other and "more dangerous and costly" ways.

The winter was spent in urging these claims, and thousands of men planned to try some one or the other of these "side-doors." The movement overland seemed about to surpass the wonderful transcontinental march of miners in '49 and '50, and those who loved the trail for its own sake and were eager to explore an unknown country hesitated only between the two trails which were entirely overland. One of these led from Edmonton to the head-waters of the Pelly, the other started from the Canadian Pacific Railway at Ashcroft and made its tortuous way northward between the great glacial coast range on the left and the lateral spurs of the Continental Divide on the east.

The promoters of each of these routes spoke of the beautiful valleys to be crossed, of the lovely streams filled with fish, of the game and fruit. Each was called "the poor man's route," because with a few ponies and a gun the prospector could traverse the entire distance during the summer, "arriving on the banks of the Yukon, not merely browned and hearty, but a veteran of the trail."

It was pointed out also that the Ashcroft Route led directly across several great gold districts and that the adventurer could combine business and pleasure on the trip by examining the Ominica country, the Kisgagash Mountains, the Peace River, and the upper waters of the Stikeen. These places were all spoken of as if they were close beside the trail and easy of access, and the prediction was freely made that a flood of men would sweep up this valley such as had never been known in the history of goldseeking.

As the winter wore on this prediction seemed about to be realized. In every town in the West, in every factory in the East, men were organizing parties of exploration. Grub stakers by the hundred were outfitted, a vast army was ready to march in the early spring, when a new interest suddenly appeared – a new army sprang into being.

Against the greed for gold arose the lust of battle. WAR came to change the current of popular interest. The newspapers called home their reporters in the North and sent them into the South, the Dakota cow-boys just ready to join the ranks of the goldseekers entered the army of the United States, finding in its Southern campaigns an outlet to their undying passion for adventure; while the factory hands who had organized themselves into a goldseeking company turned themselves into a squad of military volunteers. For the time the gold of the North was forgotten in the war of the South.

II

However, there were those not so profoundly interested in the war or whose arrangements had been completed before the actual outbreak of cannon-shot, and would not be turned aside. An immense army still pushed on to the north. This I joined on the 20th day of April, leaving my home in Wisconsin, bound for the overland trail and bearing a joyous heart. I believed that I was about to see and take part in a most picturesque and impressive movement across the wilderness. I believed it to be the last great march of the kind which could ever come in America, so rapidly were the wild places being settled up. I wished, therefore, to take part in this tramp of the goldseekers, to be one of them, and record their deeds. I wished to return to the wilderness also, to forget books and theories of art and social problems, and come again face to face with the great free spaces of woods and skies and streams. I was not a goldseeker, but a nature hunter, and I was eager to enter this, the wildest region yet remaining in Northern America. I willingly and with joy took the long way round, the hard way through.

THE COW-BOY

Of rough rude stock this saddle sprite
Is grosser grown with savage things.
Inured to storms, his fierce delight
Is lawless as the beasts he swings
His swift rope over. – Libidinous, obscene,
Careless of dust and dirt, serene,
He faces snows in calm disdain,
Or makes his bed down in the rain.

CHAPTER II OUTFITTING

We went to sleep while the train was rushing past the lonely settler's shacks on the Minnesota Prairies. When we woke we found ourselves far out upon the great plains of Canada. The morning was cold and rainy, and there were long lines of snow in the swales of the limitless sod, which was silent, dun, and still, with a majesty of arrested motion like a polar ocean. It was like Dakota as I saw it in 1881. When it was a treeless desolate expanse, swept by owls and hawks, cut by feet of wild cattle, unmarred and unadorned of man. The clouds ragged, forbidding, and gloomy swept southward as if with a duty to perform. No green thing appeared, all was gray and sombre, and the horizon lines were hid in the cold white mist. Spring was just coming on.

Our car, which was a tourist sleeper, was filled with goldseekers, some of them bound for the Stikeen River, some for Skagway. While a few like myself had set out for Teslin Lake by way of "The Prairie Route." There were women going to join their husbands at Dawson City, and young girls on their way to Vancouver and Seattle, and whole families emigrating to Washington.

By the middle of the forenoon we were pretty well acquainted, and knowing that two long days were before us, we set ourselves to the task of passing the time. The women cooked their meals on the range in the forward part of the car, or attended to the toilets of the children, quite as regularly as in their own homes; while the men, having no duties to perform, played cards, or talked endlessly concerning their prospects in the Northwest, and when weary of this, joined in singing topical songs.

No one knew his neighbor's name, and, for the most part, no one cared. All were in mountaineer dress, with rifles, revolvers, and boxes of cartridges, and the sight of a flock of antelopes developed in each man a frenzy of desire to have a shot at them. It was a wild ride, and all day we climbed over low swells, passing little lakes covered with geese and brant, practically the only living things. Late in the afternoon we entered upon the Selkirks, where no life was.

These mountains I had long wished to see, and they were in no sense a disappointment. Desolate, death-haunted, they pushed their white domes into the blue sky in savage grandeur. The little snow-covered towns seemed to cower at their feet like timid animals lost in the immensity of the forest. All day we rode among these heights, and at night we went to sleep feeling the chill of their desolate presence.

We reached Ashcroft (which was the beginning of the long trail) at sunrise. The town lay low on the sand, a spatter of little frame buildings, mainly saloons and lodging houses, and resembled an ordinary cow-town in the Western States.

Rivers of dust were flowing in the streets as we debarked from the train. The land seemed dry as ashes, and the hills which rose near resembled those of Montana or Colorado. The little hotel swarmed with the rudest and crudest types of men; not dangerous men, only thoughtless and profane teamsters and cow-boys, who drank thirstily and ate like wolves. They spat on the floor while at the table, leaning on their elbows gracelessly. In the bar-room they drank and chewed tobacco, and talked in loud voices upon nothing at all.

Down on the flats along the railway a dozen camps of Klondikers were set exposed to the dust and burning sun. The sidewalks swarmed with outfitters. Everywhere about us the talk of teamsters and cattle men went on, concerning regions of which I had never heard. Men spoke of Hat Creek, the Chilcoten country, Soda Creek, Lake La Hache, and Lilloat. Chinamen in long boots, much too large for them, came and went sombrely, buying gold sacks and picks. They were mining quietly on the upper waters of the Fraser, and were popularly supposed to be getting rich.

The townspeople were possessed of thrift quite American in quality, and were making the most of the rush over the trail. "The grass is improving each day," they said to the goldseekers, who were disposed to feel that the townsmen were anything but disinterested, especially the hotel keepers. Among the outfitters of course the chief beneficiaries were the horse dealers, and every corral swarmed with mangy little cayuses, thin, hairy, and wild-eyed; while on the fences, in silent meditation or low-voiced conferences, the intending purchasers sat in rows like dyspeptic ravens. The wind storm continued, filling the houses with dust and making life intolerable in the camps below the town. But the crowds moved to and fro restlessly on the one wooden sidewalk, outfitting busily. The costumes were as various as the fancies of the men, but laced boots and cow-boy hats predominated.

As I talked with some of the more thoughtful and conscientious citizens, I found them taking a very serious view of our trip into the interior. "It is a mighty hard and long road," they said, "and a lot of those fellows who have never tried a trail of this kind will find it anything but a picnic excursion." They had known a few men who had been as far as Hazleton, and the tales of rain, flies, and mosquitoes which these adventurers brought back with them, they repeated in confidential whispers.

However, I had determined to go, and had prepared myself for every emergency. I had designed an insect-proof tent, and was provided with a rubber mattress, a down sleeping-bag, rain-proof clothing, and stout shoes. I purchased, as did many of the others, two bills of goods from the Hudson Bay Company, to be delivered at Hazleton on the Skeena, and at Glenora on the Stikeen. Even with this arrangement it was necessary to carry every crumb of food, in one case three hundred and sixty miles, and in the other case four hundred miles. However, the first two hundred and twenty miles would be in the nature of a practice march, for the trail ran through a country with occasional ranches where feed could be obtained. We planned to start with four horses, taking on others as we needed them. And for one week we scrutinized the ponies swarming around the corrals, in an attempt to find two packhorses that would not give out on the trail, or buck their packs off at the start.

"We do not intend to be bothered with a lot of mean broncos," I said, and would not permit myself to be deceived. Before many days had passed, we had acquired the reputation of men who thoroughly knew what they wanted. At least, it became known that we would not buy wild cayuses at an exorbitant price.

All the week long we saw men starting out with sore-backed or blind or weak or mean broncos, and heard many stories of their troubles and trials. The trail was said to be littered for fifty miles with all kinds of supplies.

One evening, as I stood on the porch of the hotel, I saw a man riding a spirited dapple-gray horse up the street. As I watched the splendid fling of his fore-feet, the proud carriage of his head, the splendid nostrils, the deep intelligent eyes, I said: "There is my horse! I wonder if he is for sale."

A bystander remarked, "He's coming to see you, and you can have the horse if you want it."

The rider drew rein, and I went out to meet him. After looking the horse all over, with a subtle show of not being in haste, I asked, "How much will you take for him?"

"Fifty dollars," he replied, and I knew by the tone of his voice that he would not take less.

I hemmed and hawed a decent interval, examining every limb meanwhile; finally I said, "Get off your horse."

With a certain sadness the man complied. I placed in his hand a fifty-dollar bill, and took the horse by the bridle. "What is his name?"

"I call him Prince."

"He shall be called Prince Ladrone," I said to Burton, as I led the horse away.

Each moment increased my joy and pride in my dapple-gray gelding. I could scarcely convince myself of my good fortune, and concluded there must be something the matter with the

horse. I was afraid of some trick, some meanness, for almost all mountain horses are "streaky," but I could discover nothing. He was quick on his feet as a cat, listened to every word that was spoken to him, and obeyed as instantly and as cheerfully as a dog. He took up his feet at request, he stood over in the stall at a touch, and took the bit readily (a severe test). In every way he seemed to be exactly the horse I had been waiting for. I became quite satisfied of his value the following morning, when his former owner said to me, in a voice of sadness, "Now treat him well, won't you?"

"He shall have the best there is," I replied.

My partner, meanwhile, had rustled together three packhorses, which were guaranteed to be kind and gentle, and so at last we were ready to make a trial. It was a beautiful day for a start, sunny, silent, warm, with great floating clouds filling the sky.

We had tried our tent, and it was pronounced a "jim-cracker-jack" by all who saw it, and exciting almost as much comment among the natives as my Anderson pack-saddles. Our "truck" was ready on the platform of the storehouse, and the dealer in horses had agreed to pack the animals in order to show that they were "as represented." The whole town turned out to see the fun. The first horse began bucking before the pack-saddle was fairly on, to the vast amusement of the bystanders.

"That will do for that beast," I remarked, and he was led away. "Bring up your other candidate."

The next horse seemed to be gentle enough, but when one of the men took off his bandanna and began binding it round the pony's head, I interrupted.

"That'll do," I said; "I know that trick. I don't want a horse whose eyes have to be blinded. Take him away."

This left us as we were before, with the exception of Ladrone. An Indian standing near said to Burton, "I have gentle horse, no buck, all same like dog."

"All right," said partner, with a sigh, "let's see him."

The "dam Siwash" proved to be more reliable than his white detractor. His horses turned out to be gentle and strong, and we made a bargain without noise. At last it seemed we might be able to get away. "To-morrow morning," said I to Burton, "if nothing further intervenes, we hit the trail a resounding whack."

All around us similar preparations were going on. Half-breeds were breaking wild ponies, cow-boys were packing, roping, and instructing the tenderfoot, the stores swarmed with would-be miners fitting out, while other outfits already supplied were crawling up the distant hill like loosely articulated canvas-colored worms. Outfits from Spokane and other southern towns began to drop down into the valley, and every train from the East brought other prospectors to stand dazed and wondering before the squalid little camp. Each day, each hour, increased the general eagerness to get away.

FROM PLAIN TO PEAK

From hot low sands aflame with heat,
From crackling cedars dripping odorous gum,
I ride to set my burning feet
On heights whence Uncompagne's waters hum,
From rock to rock, and run
As white as wool.

My panting horse sniffs on the breeze
The water smell, too faint for me to know;
But I can see afar the trees,
Which tell of grasses where the asters blow,
And columbines and clover bending low
Are honey-full.

I catch the gleam of snow-fields, bright
As burnished shields of tempered steel,
And round each sovereign lonely height
I watch the storm-clouds vault and reel,
Heavy with hail and trailing
Veils of sleet.

"Hurrah, my faithful! soon you shall plunge
Your burning nostril to the bit in snow;
Soon you shall rest where foam-white waters lunge
From cliff to cliff, and you shall know
No more of hunger or the flame of sand
Or windless desert's heat!"

CHAPTER III ON THE STAGE ROAD

On the third day of May, after a whole forenoon of packing and "fussing," we made our start and passed successfully over some fourteen miles of the road. It was warm and beautiful, and we felt greatly relieved to escape from the dry and dusty town with its conscienceless horse jockeys and its bibulous teamsters.

As we mounted the white-hot road which climbed sharply to the northeast, we could scarcely restrain a shout of exultation. It was perfect weather. We rode good horses, we had chosen our companions, and before us lay a thousand miles of trail, and the mysterious gold fields of the far-off Yukon. For two hundred and twenty miles the road ran nearly north toward the town of Quesnelle, which was the trading camp for the Caribou Mining Company. This highway was filled with heavy teams, and stage houses were frequent. We might have gone by the river trail, but as the grass was yet young, many of the outfits decided to keep to the stage road.

We made our first camp beside the dusty road near the stage barn, in which we housed our horses. A beautiful stream came down from the hills near us. A little farther up the road a big and hairy Californian, with two half-breed assistants, was struggling with twenty-five wild cayuses. Two or three campfires sparkled near.

There was a vivid charm in the scene. The poplars were in tender leaf. The moon, round and brilliant, was rising just above the mountains to the east, as we made our bed and went to sleep with the singing of the stream in our ears.

While we were cooking our breakfast the next morning the big Californian sauntered by, looking at our little folding stove, our tent, our new-fangled pack-saddles, and our luxurious beds, and remarked: —

"I reckon you fellers are just out on a kind of little hunting trip."

We resented the tone of derision in his voice, and I replied: —

"We are bound for Teslin Lake. We shall be glad to see you any time during the coming fall."

He never caught up with us again.

We climbed steadily all the next day with the wind roaring over our heads in the pines. It grew much colder and the snow covered the near-by hills. The road was full of trampers on their way to the mines at Quesnelle and Stanley. I will not call them *tramps*, for every man who goes afoot in this land is entitled to a certain measure of respect. We camped at night just outside the little village called Clinton, which was not unlike a town in Vermont, and was established during the Caribou rush in '66. It lay in a lovely valley beside a swift, clear stream. The sward was deliciously green where we set our tent.

Thus far Burton had wrestled rather unsuccessfully with the crystallized eggs and evaporated potatoes which made up a part of our outfit. "I don't seem to get just the right twist on 'em," he said.

"You'll have plenty of chance to experiment," I remarked. However, the bacon was good and so was the graham bread which he turned out piping hot from the little oven of our folding stove.

Leaving Clinton we entered upon a lonely region, a waste of wooded ridges breaking illimitably upon the sky. The air sharpened as we rose, till it seemed like March instead of April, and our overcoats were grateful.

Somewhere near the middle of the forenoon, as we were jogging along, I saw a deer standing just at the edge of the road and looking across it, as if in fear of its blazing publicity. It seemed for a moment as if he were an optical illusion, so beautiful, so shapely, and so palpitant was he. I had no desire to shoot him, but, turning to Burton, called in a low voice, "See that deer."

He replied, "Where is your gun?"

Now under my knee I carried a new rifle with a quantity of smokeless cartridges, steel-jacketed and soft-nosed, and yet I was disposed to argue the matter. "See here, Burton, it will be bloody business if we kill that deer. We couldn't eat all of it; you wouldn't want to skin it; I couldn't. You'd get your hands all bloody and the memory of that beautiful creature would not be pleasant. Therefore I stand for letting him go."

Burton looked thoughtful. "Well, we might sell it or give it away."

Meanwhile the deer saw us, but seemed not to be apprehensive. Perhaps it was a thought-reading deer, and knew that we meant it no harm. As Burton spoke, it turned, silent as a shadow, and running to the crest of the hill stood for a moment outlined like a figure of bronze against the sky, then disappeared into the forest. He was so much a part of nature that the horses gave no sign of having seen him at all.

At a point a few miles beyond Clinton most of the pack trains turned sharply to the left to the Fraser River, where the grass was reported to be much better. We determined to continue on the stage road, however, and thereafter met but few outfits. The road was by no means empty, however. We met, from time to time, great blue or red wagons drawn by four or six horses, moving with pleasant jangle of bells and the crack of great whips. The drivers looked down at us curiously and somewhat haughtily from their high seats, as if to say, "We know where we are going – do you know as much?"

The landscape grew ever wilder, and the foliage each day spring-like. We were on a high hilly plateau between Hat Creek and the valley of Lake La Hache. We passed lakes surrounded by ghostly dead trees, which looked as though the water had poisoned them. There were no ranches of any extent on these hills. The trail continued to be filled with tramping miners; several seemed to be without bedding or food. Some drove little pack animals laden with blankets, and all walked like fiends, pressing forward doggedly, hour after hour. Many of them were Italians, and one group which we overtook went along killing robins for food. They were a merry and dramatic lot, making the silent forests echo with their chatter.

I headed my train on Ladrone, who led the way with a fine stately tread, his deep brown eyes alight with intelligence, his sensitive ears attentive to every word. He had impressed me already by his learning and gentleness, but when one of my packhorses ran around him, entangling me in the lead rope, pulling me to the ground, the final test of his quality came. I expected to be kicked into shreds. But Ladrone stopped instantly, and looking down at me inquiringly, waited for me to scramble out from beneath his feet and drag the saddle up to its place.

With heart filled with gratitude, I patted him on the nose, and said, "Old boy, if you carry me through to Teslin Lake, I will take care of you for the rest of your days."

At about noon the next day we came down off the high plateau, with its cold and snow, and camped in a sunny sward near a splendid ranch where lambs were at play on the green grass. Blackbirds were calling, and we heard our first crane bugling high in the sky. From the loneliness and desolation of the high country, with its sparse road houses, we were now surrounded by sunny fields mellow with thirty seasons' ploughing.

The ride was very beautiful. Just the sort of thing we had been hoping for. All day we skirted fine lakes with grassy shores. Cranes, ducks, and geese filled every pond, the voice of spring in their brazen throats.

Once a large flight of crane went sweeping by high in the sky, a royal, swift scythe reaping the clouds. I called to them in their own tongue, and they answered. I called again and again, and they began to waver and talk among themselves; and at last, having decided that this voice from below should be heeded, they broke rank and commenced sweeping round and round in great circles, seeking the lost one whose cry rose from afar. Baffled and angered, they rearranged themselves at last in long regular lines, and swept on into the north.

We camped on this, the sixth day, beside a fine stream which came from a lake, and here we encountered our first mosquitoes. Big, black fellows they were, with a lazy, droning sound quite different from any I had ever heard. However, they froze up early and did not bother us very much.

At the one hundred and fifty-nine mile house, which was a stage tavern, we began to hear other bogie stories of the trail. We were assured that horses were often poisoned by eating a certain plant, and that the mud and streams were terrible. Flies were a never ending torment. All these I regarded as the croakings of men who had never had courage to go over the trail, and who exaggerated the accounts they had heard from others.

We were jogging along now some fifteen or twenty miles a day, thoroughly enjoying the trip. The sky was radiant, the aspens were putting forth transparent yellow leaves. On the grassy slopes some splendid yellow flowers quite new to me waved in the warm but strong breeze. On the ninth day we reached Soda Creek, which is situated on the Fraser River, at a point where the muddy stream is deep sunk in the wooded hills.

The town was a single row of ramshackle buildings, not unlike a small Missouri River town. The citizens, so far as visible, formed a queer collection of old men addicted to rum. They all came out to admire Ladrone and to criticise my pack-saddle, and as they stood about spitting and giving wise instances, they reminded me of the Jurors in Mark Twain's "Puddin Head Wilson."

One old man tottered up to my side to inquire, "Cap, where you going?"

"To Teslin Lake," I replied.

"Good Lord, think of it," said he. "Do you ever expect to get there? It is a terrible trip, my son, a terrible trip."

At this point a large number of the outfits crossed to the opposite side of the river and took the trail which kept up the west bank of the river. We, however, kept the stage road which ran on the high ground of the eastern bank, forming a most beautiful drive. The river was in full view all the time, with endless vista of blue hills above and the shimmering water with radiant foliage below.

Aside from the stage road and some few ranches on the river bottom, we were now in the wilderness. On our right rolled a wide wild sea of hills and forests, breaking at last on the great gold range. To the west, a still wilder country reaching to the impassable east range. On this, our eighth day out, we had our second sight of big game. In the night I was awakened by Burton, calling in excited whisper, "There's a bear outside."

It was cold, I was sleepy, my bed was very comfortable, and I did not wish to be disturbed. I merely growled, "Let him alone."

But Burton, putting his head out of the door of the tent, grew still more interested. "There is a bear out there eating those mutton bones. Where's the gun?"

I was nearly sinking off to sleep once more and I muttered, "Don't bother me; the gun is in the corner of the tent." Burton began snapping the lever of the gun impatiently and whispering something about not being able to put the cartridge in. He was accustomed to the old-fashioned Winchester, but had not tried these.

"Put it right in the top," I wearily said, "put it right in the top."

"I have," he replied; "but I can't get it *in* or out!"

Meanwhile I had become sufficiently awake to take a mild interest in the matter. I rose and looked out. As I saw a long, black, lean creature muzzling at something on the ground, I began to get excited myself.

"I guess we better let him go, hadn't we?" said Burton.

"Well, yes, as the cartridge is stuck in the gun; and so long as he lets us alone I think we had better let him alone, especially as his hide is worth nothing at this season of the year, and he is too thin to make steak."

The situation was getting comic, but probably it is well that the cartridge failed to go in. Burton stuck his head out of the tent, gave a sharp yell, and the huge creature vanished in the dark

of the forest. The whole adventure came about naturally. The smell of our frying meat had gone far up over the hills to our right and off into the great wilderness, alluring this lean hungry beast out of his den. Doubtless if Burton had been able to fire a shot into his woolly hide, we should have had a rare "mix up" of bear, tent, men, mattresses, and blankets.

Mosquitoes increased, and, strange to say, they seemed to like the shade. They were all of the big, black, lazy variety. We came upon flights of humming-birds. I was rather tired of the saddle, and of the slow jog, jog, jog. But at last there came an hour which made the trouble worth while. When our camp was set, our fire lighted, our supper eaten, and we could stretch out and watch the sun go down over the hills beyond the river, then the day seemed well spent. At such an hour we grew reminiscent of old days, and out of our talk an occasional verse naturally rose.

MOMENTOUS HOUR

A coyote wailing in the yellow dawn,
A mountain land that stretches on and on,
And ceases not till in the skies
Vast peaks of rosy snow arise,
Like walls of plainsman's paradise.

I cannot tell why this is so;
I cannot say, I do not know
Why wind and wolf and yellow sky,
And grassy mesa, square and high,
Possess such power to satisfy.

But so it is. Deep in the grass
I lie and hear the winds' feet pass;
And all forgot is maid and man,
And hope and set ambitious plan
Are lost as though they ne'er began.

A WISH

All day and many days I rode,
My horse's head set toward the sea;
And as I rode a longing came to me
That I might keep the sunset road,
Riding my horse right on and on,
O'ertake the day still lagging at the west,
And so reach boyhood from the dawn,
And be with all the days at rest.

For then the odor of the growing wheat,
The flare of sumach on the hills,
The touch of grasses to my feet
Would cure my brain of all its ills, —
Would fill my heart so full of joy
That no stern lines could fret my face.
There would I be forever boy,
Lit by the sky's unfailing grace.

CHAPTER IV IN CAMP AT QUESNELLE

We came into Quesnelle about three o'clock of the eleventh day out. From a high point which overlooked the two rivers, we could see great ridges rolling in waves of deep blue against the sky to the northwest. Over these our slender little trail ran. The wind was in the south, roaring up the river, and green grass was springing on the slopes.

Quesnelle we found to be a little town on a high, smooth slope above the Fraser. We overtook many prospectors like ourselves camped on the river bank waiting to cross.

Here also telegraph bulletins concerning the Spanish war, dated London, Hong Kong, and Madrid, hung on the walls of the post-office. They were very brief and left plenty of room for imagination and discussion.

Here I took a pony and a dog-cart and jogged away toward the long-famous Caribou Mining district next day, for the purpose of inspecting a mine belonging to some friends of mine. The ride was very desolate and lonely, a steady climb all the way, through fire-devastated forests, toward the great peaks. Snow lay in the roadside ditches. Butterflies were fluttering about, and in the high hills I saw many toads crawling over the snowbanks, a singular sight to me. They were silent, perhaps from cold.

Strange to say, this ride called up in my mind visions of the hot sands, and the sun-lit buttes and valleys of Arizona and Montana, and I wrote several verses as I jogged along in the pony-cart.

When I returned to camp two days later, I found Burton ready and eager to move. The town swarmed with goldseekers pausing here to rest and fill their parflèches. On the opposite side of the river others could be seen in camp, or already moving out over the trail, which left the river and climbed at once into the high ridges dark with pines in the west.

As I sat with my partner at night talking of the start the next day, I began to feel not a fear but a certain respect for that narrow little path which was not an arm's span in width, but which was nearly eight hundred miles in length. "From this point, Burton, it is business. Our practice march is finished."

The stories of flies and mosquitoes gave me more trouble than anything else, but a surveyor who had had much experience in this Northwestern country recommended the use of oil of pennyroyal, mixed with lard or vaseline. "It will keep the mosquitoes and most of the flies away," he said. "I know, for I have tried it. You can't wear a net, at least I never could. It is too warm, and then it is always in your way. You are in no danger from beasts, but you will curse the day you set out on this trail on account of the insects. It is the worst mosquito country in the world."

THE GIFT OF WATER

"Is water nigh?"
The plainsmen cry,
As they meet and pass in the desert grass.
With finger tip
Across the lip
I ask the sombre Navajo.
The brown man smiles and answers "Sho!"¹
With fingers high, he signs the miles
To the desert spring,
And so we pass in the dry dead grass,
Brothers in bond of the water's ring.

¹ Listen. Your attention.

MOUNTING

I mount and mount toward the sky,
The eagle's heart is mine,
I ride to put the clouds a-by
Where silver lakelets shine.
The roaring streams wax white with snow,
The eagle's nest draws near,
The blue sky widens, hid peaks glow,
The air is frosty clear.
*And so from cliff to cliff I rise,
The eagle's heart is mine;
Above me ever broadning skies,
Below the rivers shine.*

THE EAGLE TRAIL

From rock-built nest,
The mother eagle, with a threatning tongue,
Utters a warning scream. Her shrill voice rings
Wild as the snow-topped crags she sits among;
While hovering with her quivering wings
Her hungry brood, with eyes ablaze
She watches every shadow. The water calls
Far, far below. The sun's red rays
Ascend the icy, iron walls,
And leap beyond the mountains in the west,
And over the trail and the eagle's nest
The clear night falls.

CHAPTER V

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE BLUE RAT

Camp Twelve

Next morning as we took the boat – which was filled with horses wild and restless – I had a moment of exultation to think we had left the way of tin cans and whiskey bottles, and were now about to enter upon the actual trail. The horses gave us a great deal of trouble on the boat, but we managed to get across safely without damage to any part of our outfit.

Here began our acquaintance with the Blue Rat. It had become evident to me during our stay in Quesnelle that we needed one more horse to make sure of having provisions sufficient to carry us over the three hundred and sixty miles which lay between the Fraser and our next eating-place on the Skeena. Horses, however, were very scarce, and it was not until late in the day that we heard of a man who had a pony to sell. The name of this man was Dippy.

He was a German, and had a hare-lip and a most seductive gentleness of voice. I gladly make him historical. He sold me the Blue Rat, and gave me a chance to study a new type of horse.

Herr Dippy was not a Washington Irving sort of Dutchman; he conformed rather to the modern New York tradesman. He was small, candid, and smooth, very smooth, of speech. He said: "Yes, the pony is gentle. He can be rode or packed, but you better lead him for a day or two till he gets quiet."

I had not seen the pony, but my partner had crossed to the west side of the Fraser River, and had reported him to be a "nice little pony, round and fat and gentle." On that I had rested. Mr. Dippy joined us at the ferry and waited around to finish the trade. I presumed he intended to cross and deliver the pony, which was in a corral on the west side, but he lisped out a hurried excuse. "The ferry is not coming back for to-day and so –"

Well, I paid him the money on the strength of my side partner's report; besides, it was Hobson's choice.

Mr. Dippy took the twenty-five dollars eagerly and vanished into obscurity. We passed to the wild side of the Fraser and entered upon a long and intimate study of the Blue Rat. He shucked out of the log stable a smooth, round, lithe-bodied little cayuse of a blue-gray color. He looked like a child's toy, but seemed sturdy and of good condition. His foretop was "banged," and he had the air of a mischievous, resolute boy. His eyes were big and black, and he studied us with tranquil but inquiring gaze as we put the pack-saddle on him. He was very small.

"He's not large, but he's a gentle little chap," said I, to ease my partner of his dismay over the pony's surprising smallness.

"I believe he shrunk during the night," replied my partner. "He seemed two sizes bigger yesterday."

We packed him with one hundred pounds of our food and lashed it all on with rope, while the pony dozed peacefully. Once or twice I thought I saw his ears cross; one laid back, the other set forward, – bad signs, – but it was done so quickly I could not be sure of it.

We packed the other horses while the blue pony stood resting one hind leg, his eyes dreaming.

I flung the canvas cover over the bay packhorse... Something took place. I heard a bang, a clatter, a rattling of hoofs. I peered around the bay and saw the blue pony performing some of the most finished, vigorous, and varied bucking it has ever been given me to witness. He all but threw somersaults. He stood on his upper lip. He humped up his back till he looked like a lean cat on a graveyard fence. He stood on his toe calks and spun like a weather-vane on a livery stable, and

when the pack exploded and the saddle slipped under his belly, he kicked it to pieces by using both hind hoofs as fealty as a man would stroke his beard.

After calming the other horses, I faced my partner solemnly.

"Oh, by the way, partner, where did you get that nice, quiet, little blue pony of yours?"

Partner smiled sheepishly. "The little devil. Buffalo Bill ought to have that pony."

"Well, now," said I, restraining my laughter, "the thing to do is to put that pack on so that it will stay. That pony will try the same thing again, sure."

We packed him again with great care. His big, innocent black eyes shining under his bang were a little more alert, but they showed neither fear nor rage. We roped him in every conceivable way, and at last stood clear and dared him to do his prettiest.

He did it. All that had gone before was merely preparatory, a blood-warming, so to say; the real thing now took place. He stood up on his hind legs and shot into the air, alighting on his four feet as if to pierce the earth. He whirled like a howling dervish, grunting, snorting – unseeing, and almost unseen in a nimbus of dust, strap ends, and flying pine needles. His whirling undid him. We seized the rope, and just as the pack again slid under his feet we set shoulder to the rope and threw him. He came to earth with a thud, his legs whirling uselessly in the air. He resembled a beetle in molasses. We sat upon his head and discussed him.

"He is a wonder," said my partner.

We packed him again with infinite pains, and when he began bucking we threw him again and tried to kill him. We were getting irritated. We threw him hard, and drew his hind legs up to his head till he grunted. When he was permitted to rise, he looked meek and small and tired and we were both deeply remorseful. We rearranged the pack – it was some encouragement to know he had not bucked it entirely off – and by blindfolding him we got him started on the trail behind the train.

"I suppose that simple-hearted Dutchman is gloating over us from across the river," said I to partner; "but no matter, we are victorious."

I was now quite absorbed in a study of the blue pony's psychology. He was a new type of mean pony. His eye did not roll nor his ears fall back. He seemed neither scared nor angry. He still looked like a roguish, determined boy. He was alert, watchful, but not vicious. He went off – precisely like one of those mechanical mice or turtles which sidewalk venders operate. Once started, he could not stop till he ran down. He seemed not to take our stern measures in bad part. He regarded it as a fair contract, apparently, and considered that we had won. True, he had lost both hair and skin by getting tangled in the rope, but he laid up nothing against us, and, as he followed meekly along behind, partner dared to say: —

"He's all right now. I presume he has been running out all winter and is a little wild. He's satisfied now. We'll have no more trouble with him."

Every time I looked back at the poor, humbled little chap, my heart tingled with pity and remorse. "We were too rough," I said. "We must be more gentle."

"Yes, he's nervous and scary; we must be careful not to give him a sudden start. I'll lead him for a while."

An hour later, as we were going down a steep and slippery hill, the Rat saw his chance. He passed into another spasm, opening and shutting like a self-acting jack-knife. He bounded into the midst of the peaceful horses, scattering them to right and to left in terror.

He turned and came up the hill to get another start. Partner took a turn on a stump, and all unmindful of it the Rat whirled and made a mighty spring. He reached the end of the rope and his hand-spring became a vaulting somersault. He lay, unable to rise, spitting the wind, breathing heavily. Such annoying energy I have never seen. We were now mad, muddy, and very resolute. We held him down till he lay quite still. Any well-considered, properly bred animal would have been ground to bone dust by such wondrous acrobatic movements. He was skinned in one or two places,

the hair was scraped from his nose, his tongue bled, but all these were mere scratches. When we repacked him he walked off comparatively unhurt.

NOON ON THE PLAIN

The horned toad creeping along the sand,
The rattlesnake asleep beneath the sage,
Have now a subtle fatal charm.
In their sultry calm, their love of heat,
I read once more the burning page
Of nature under cloudless skies.
O pitiless and splendid land!
Mine eyelids close, my lips are dry
By force of thy hot floods of light.
Soundless as oil the wind flows by,
Mine aching brain cries out for night!

CHAPTER VI

THE BEGINNING OF THE LONG TRAIL

As we left the bank of the Fraser River we put all wheel tracks behind. The trail turned to the west and began to climb, following an old swath which had been cut into the black pines by an adventurous telegraph company in 1865. Immense sums of money were put into this venture by men who believed the ocean cable could not be laid. The work was stopped midway by the success of Field's wonderful plan, and all along the roadway the rusted and twisted wire lay in testimony of the seriousness of the original design.

The trail was a white man's road. It lacked grace and charm. It cut uselessly over hills and plunged senselessly into ravines. It was an irritation to all of us who knew the easy swing, the circumspection, and the labor-saving devices of an Indian trail. The telegraph line was laid by compass, not by the stars and the peaks; it evaded nothing; it saved distance, not labor.

My feeling of respect deepened into awe as we began to climb the great wooded divide which lies between the Fraser and the Blackwater. The wild forest settled around us, grim, stern, and forbidding. We were done with civilization. Everything that was required for a home in the cold and in the heat was bound upon our five horses. We must carry bed, board, roof, food, and medical stores, over three hundred and sixty miles of trail, through all that might intervene of flood and forest.

This feeling of awe was emphasized by the coming on of the storm in which we camped that night. We were forced to keep going until late in order to obtain feed, and to hustle in order to get everything under cover before the rain began to fall. We were only twelve miles on our way, but being wet and cold and hungry, we enjoyed the full sense of being in the wilderness. However, the robins sang from the damp woods and the loons laughed from hidden lakes.

It rained all night, and in the morning we were forced to get out in a cold, wet dawn. It was a grim start, dismal and portentous, bringing the realities of the trail very close to us. While I rustled the horses out of the wet bush, partner stirred up a capital breakfast of bacon, evaporated potatoes, crystallized eggs, and graham bread. He had discovered at last the exact amount of water to use in cooking these "vegetables," and they were very good. The potatoes tasted not unlike mashed potatoes, and together with the eggs made a very savory and wholesome dish. With a cup of strong coffee and some hot graham gems we got off in very good spirits indeed.

It continued muddy, wet, and cold. I walked most of the day, leading my horse, upon whom I had packed a part of the outfit to relieve the other horses. There was no fun in the day, only worry and trouble. My feet were wet, my joints stiff, and my brain weary of the monotonous black, pine forest.

There is a great deal of work on the trail, – cooking, care of the horses, together with almost ceaseless packing and unpacking, and the bother of keeping the packhorses out of the mud. We were busy from five o'clock in the morning until nine at night. There were other outfits on the trail having a full ton of supplies, and this great weight had to be handled four times a day. In our case the toil was much less, but it was only by snatching time from my partner that I was able to work on my notes and keep my diary. Had the land been less empty of game and richer in color, I should not have minded the toil and care taking. As it was, we were all looking forward to the beautiful lake country which we were told lay just beyond the Blackwater.

One tremendous fact soon impressed me. There were no returning footsteps on this trail. All toes pointed in one way, toward the golden North. No man knew more than his neighbor the character of the land which lay before us.

The life of each outfit was practically the same. At about 4.30 in the morning the campers awoke. The click-clack of axes began, and slender columns of pale blue smoke stole softly into the air. Then followed the noisy rustling of the horses by those set aside for that duty. By the time the horses were "cussed into camp," the coffee was hot, and the bacon and beans ready to be eaten. A race in packing took place to see who should pull out first. At about seven o'clock in the morning the outfits began to move. But here there was a difference of method. Most of them travelled for six or seven hours without unpacking, whereas our plan was to travel for four hours, rest from twelve to three, and pack up and travel four hours more. This difference in method resulted in our passing outfit after outfit who were unable to make the same distances by their one march.

We went to bed with the robins and found it no hardship to rise with the sparrows. As Burton got the fire going, I dressed and went out to see if all the horses were in the bunch, and edged them along toward the camp. I then packed up the goods, struck the tent and folded it, and had everything ready to sling on the horses by the time breakfast was ready.

With my rifle under my knee, my rain coat rolled behind my saddle, my camera dangling handily, my rope coiled and lashed, I called out, "Are we all set?"

"Oh, I guess so," Burton invariably replied.

With a last look at the camping ground to see that nothing of value was left, we called in exactly the same way each time, "Hike, boys, hike, hike." (Hy-ak: Chinook for "hurry up.") It was a fine thing, and it never failed to touch me, to see them fall in, one by one. The "Ewe-neck" just behind Ladrone, after him "Old Bill," and behind him, groaning and taking on as if in great pain, "Major Grunt," while at the rear, with sharp outcry, came Burton riding the blue pony, who was quite content, as we soon learned, to carry a man weighing seventy pounds more than his pack. He considered himself a saddle horse, not a pack animal.

It was not an easy thing to keep a pack train like this running. As the horses became tired of the saddle, two of them were disposed to run off into the brush in an attempt to scrape their load from their backs. Others fell to feeding. Sometimes Bill would attempt to pass the bay in order to walk next Ladrone. Then they would *scrouge* against each other like a couple of country schoolboys, to see who should get ahead. It was necessary to watch the packs with worrisky care to see that nothing came loose, to keep the cinches tight, and to be sure that none of the horses were being galled by their burdens.

We travelled for the most part alone and generally in complete silence, for I was too far in advance to have any conversation with my partner.

The trail continued wet, muddy, and full of slippery inclines, but we camped on a beautiful spot on the edge of a marshy lake two or three miles in length. As we threw up our tent and started our fire, I heard two cranes bugling magnificently from across the marsh, and with my field-glass I could see them striding along in the edge of the water. The sun was getting well toward the west. All around stood the dark and mysterious forest, out of which strange noises broke.

In answer to the bugling of the cranes, loons were wildly calling, a flock of geese, hidden somewhere under the level blaze of the orange-colored light of the setting sun, were holding clamorous convention. This is one of the compensating moments of the trail. To come out of a gloomy and forbidding wood into an open and grassy bank, to see the sun setting across the marsh behind the most splendid blue mountains, makes up for many weary hours of toil.

As I lay down to sleep I heard a coyote cry, and the loons answered, and out of the cold, clear night the splendid voices of the cranes rang triumphantly. The heavens were made as brass by their superb, defiant notes.

THE WHOOPING CRANE

At sunset from the shadowed sedge
Of lonely lake, among the reeds,
He lifts his brazen-throated call,
And the listening cat with teeth at edge
With famine hears and heeds.

"Come one, come all, come all, come all!"
Is the bird's challenge bravely blown
To every beast the woodlands own.

*"My legs are long, my wings are strong,
I wait the answer to my threat."*
Echoing, fearless, triumphant, the cry
Disperses through the world, and yet
Only the clamorous, cloudless sky
And the wooded mountains make reply.

THE LOON

At some far time
This water sprite
A brother of the coyote must have been.
For when the sun is set,
Forth from the failing light
His harsh cries fret
The silence of the night,
And the hid wolf answers with a wailing keen.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACKWATER DIVIDE

About noon the next day we suddenly descended to the Blackwater, a swift stream which had been newly bridged by those ahead of us. In this wild land streams were our only objective points; the mountains had no names, and the monotony of the forest produced a singular effect on our minds. Our journey at times seemed a sort of motionless progression. Once our tent was set and our baggage arranged about us, we lost all sense of having moved at all.

Immediately after leaving the Blackwater bridge we had a grateful touch of an Indian trail. The telegraph route kept to the valley flat, but an old trail turned to the right and climbed the north bank by an easy and graceful grade which it was a joy to follow. The top of the bench was wooded and grassy, and the smooth brown trail wound away sinuous as a serpent under the splendid pine trees. For more than three hours we strolled along this bank as distinguished as those who occupy boxes at the theatre. Below us the Blackwater looped away under a sunny sky, and far beyond, enormous and unnamed, deep blue mountains rose, notching the western sky. The scene was so exceedingly rich and amiable we could hardly believe it to be without farms and villages, yet only an Indian hut or two gave indication of human life.

After following this bank for a few miles, we turned to the right and began to climb the high divide which lies between the Blackwater and the Muddy, both of which are upper waters of the Fraser. Like all the high country through which we had passed this ridge was covered with a monotonous forest of small black pines, with very little bird or animal life of any kind. By contrast the valley of the Blackwater shone in our memory like a jewel.

After a hard drive we camped beside a small creek, together with several other outfits. One of them belonged to a doctor from the Chilcoten country. He was one of those Englishmen who are natural plainsmen. He was always calm, cheerful, and self-contained. He took all worry and danger as a matter of course, and did not attempt to carry the customs of a London hotel into the camp. When an Englishman has this temper, he makes one of the best campaigners in the world.

As I came to meet the other men on the trail, I found that some peculiar circumstance had led to their choice of route. The doctor had a ranch in the valley of the Fraser. One of "the Manchester boys" had a cousin near Soda Creek. "Siwash Charley" wished to prospect on the head-waters of the Skeena; and so in almost every case some special excuse was given. When the truth was known, the love of adventure had led all of us to take the telegraph route. Most of the miners argued that they could make their entrance by horse as cheaply, if not as quickly, as by boat. For the most part they were young, hardy, and temperate young men of the middle condition of American life.

One of the Manchester men had been a farmer in Connecticut, an attendant in an insane asylum in Massachusetts, and an engineer. He was fat when he started, and weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. By the time we had overtaken him his trousers had begun to flap around him. He was known as "Big Bill." His companion, Frank, was a sinewy little fellow with no extra flesh at all, – an alert, cheery, and vociferous boy, who made noise enough to scare all the game out of the valley. Neither of these men had ever saddled a horse before reaching the Chilcoten, but they developed at once into skilful packers and rugged trailers, though they still exposed themselves unnecessarily in order to show that they were not "tenderfeet."

"Siwash Charley" was a Montana miner who spoke Chinook fluently, and swore in splendid rhythms on occasion. He was small, alert, seasoned to the trail, and capable of any hardship. "The Man from Chihuahua" was so called because he had been prospecting in Mexico. He had the best packhorses on the trail, and cared for them like a mother. He was small, weazened, hardy as oak, inured to every hardship, and very wise in all things. He had led his fine little train of horses from

Chihuahua to Seattle, thence to the Thompson River, joining us at Quesnelle. He was the typical trailer. He spoke in the Missouri fashion, though he was a born Californian. His partner was a quiet little man from Snohomish flats, in Washington. These outfits were typical of scores of others, and it will be seen that they were for the most part Americans, the group of Germans from New York City and the English doctor being the exceptions.

There was little talk among us. We were not merely going a journey, but going as rapidly as was prudent, and there was close attention to business. There was something morbidly persistent in the action of these trains. They pushed on resolutely, grimly, like blind worms following some directing force from within. This peculiarity of action became more noticeable day by day. We were not on the trail, after all, to hunt, or fish, or skylark. We had set our eyes on a distant place, and toward it our feet moved, even in sleep.

The Muddy River, which we reached late in the afternoon, was silent as oil and very deep, while the banks, muddy and abrupt, made it a hard stream to cross.

As we stood considering the problem, a couple of Indians appeared on the opposite bank with a small raft, and we struck a bargain with them to ferry our outfit. They set us across in short order, but our horses were forced to swim. They were very much alarmed and shivered with excitement (this being the first stream that called for swimming), but they crossed in fine style, Ladrone leading, his neck curving, his nostrils wide-blown. We were forced to camp in the mud of the river bank, and the gray clouds flying overhead made the land exceedingly dismal. The night closed in wet and cheerless.

The two Indians stopped to supper with us and ate heartily. I seized the opportunity to talk with them, and secured from them the tragic story of the death of the Blackwater Indians. "Siwash, he die hy-u (great many). Hy-u die, chilens, klootchmans (women), all die. White man no help. No send doctor. Siwash all die, white man no care belly much."

In this simple account of the wiping out of a village of harmless people by "the white man's disease" (small-pox), unaided by the white man's wonderful skill, there lies one of the great tragedies of savage life. Very few were left on the Blackwater or on the Muddy, though a considerable village had once made the valley cheerful with its primitive pursuits.

They were profoundly impressed by our tent and gun, and sat on their haunches clicking their tongues again and again in admiration, saying of the tent, "All the same lilly (little) house." I tried to tell them of the great world to the south, and asked them a great many questions to discover how much they knew of the people or the mountains. They knew nothing of the plains Indians, but one of them had heard of Vancouver and Seattle. They had not the dignity and thinking power of the plains people, but they seemed amiable and rather jovial.

We passed next day two adventurers tramping their way to Hazelton. Each man carried a roll of cheap quilts, a skillet, and a cup. We came upon them as they were taking off their shoes and stockings to wade through a swift little river, and I realized with a sudden pang of sympathetic pain, how distressing these streams must be to such as go afoot, whereas I, on my fine horse, had considered them entirely from an æsthetic point of view.

We had been on the road from Quesnelle a week, and had made nearly one hundred miles, jogging along some fifteen miles each day, camping, eating, sleeping, with nothing to excite us – indeed, the trail was quiet as a country lane. A dead horse here and there warned us to be careful how we pushed our own burden-bearers. We were deep in the forest, with the pale blue sky filled with clouds showing only in patches overhead. We passed successively from one swamp of black pine to another, over ridges covered with white pine, all precisely alike. As soon as our camp was set and fires lighted, we lost all sense of having travelled, so similar were the surroundings of each camp.

Partridges could be heard drumming in the lowlands. Mosquitoes were developing by the millions, and cooking had become almost impossible without protection. The "varments" came in

relays. A small gray variety took hold of us while it was warm, and when it became too cold for them, the big, black, "sticky" fellows appeared mysteriously, and hung around in the air uttering deep, bass notes like lazy flies. The little gray fellows were singularly ferocious and insistent in their attentions.

At last, as we were winding down the trail beneath the pines, we came suddenly upon an Indian with a gun in the hollow of his arm. So still, so shadowy, so neutral in color was he, that at first sight he seemed a part of the forest, like the shaded hole of a tree. He turned out to be a "runner," so to speak, for the ferrymen at Tchincut Crossing, and led us down to the outlet of the lake where a group of natives with their slim canoes sat waiting to set us over. An hour's brisk work and we rose to the fine grassy eastern slope overlooking the lake.

We rose on our stirrups with shouts of joy. We had reached the land of our dreams! Here was the trailers' heaven! Wooded promontories, around which the wavelets sparkled, pushed out into the deep, clear flood. Great mountains rose in the background, lonely, untouched by man's all-desolating hand, while all about us lay suave slopes clothed with most beautiful pea-vine, just beginning to ripple in the wind, and beyond lay level meadows lit by little ponds filled with wildfowl. There was just forest enough to lend mystery to these meadows, and to shut from our eager gaze the beauties of other and still more entrancing glades. The most exacting hunter or trailer could not desire more perfect conditions for camping. It was God's own country after the gloomy monotony of the barren pine forest, and needed only a passing deer or a band of elk to be a poem as well as a picture.

All day we skirted this glorious lake, and at night we camped on its shores. The horses were as happy as their masters, feeding in plenty on sweet herbage for the first time in long days.

Late in the day we passed the largest Indian village we had yet seen. It was situated on Stony Creek, which came from Tatchick Lake and emptied into Tchincut Lake. The shallows flickered with the passing of trout, and the natives were busy catching and drying them. As we rode amid the curing sheds, the children raised a loud clamor, and the women laughed and called from house to house, "Oh, see the white men!" We were a circus parade to them.

Their opportunities for earning money are scant, and they live upon a very monotonous diet of fish and possibly dried venison and berries. Except at favorable points like Stony Creek, where a small stream leads from one lake to another, there are no villages because there are no fish.

I shall not soon forget the shining vistas through which we rode that day, nor the meadows which possessed all the allurements and mystery which the word "savanna" has always had with me. It was like going back to the prairies of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa, as they were sixty years ago, except in this case the elk and the deer were absent.

YET STILL WE RODE

We wallowed deep in mud and sand;
We swam swift streams that roared in wrath;
They stood at guard in that lone land,
Like dragons in the slender path.

Yet still we rode right on and on,
And shook our clenched hands at the sky.
We dared the frost at early dawn,
And the dread tempest sweeping by.

It was not all so dark. Now and again
The robin, singing loud and long,
Made wildness tame, and lit the rain
With sudden sunshine with his song.

Wild roses filled the air with grace,
The shooting-star swung like a bell
From bended stem, and all the place
Was like to heaven after hell.

CHAPTER VIII

WE SWIM THE NECHACO

Here was perfection of camping, but no allurements could turn the goldseekers aside. Some of them remained for a day, a few for two days, but not one forgot for a moment that he was on his way to the Klondike River sixteen hundred miles away. In my enthusiasm I proposed to camp for a week, but my partner, who was "out for gold instid o' daisies, 'guessed' we'd better be moving." He could not bear to see any one pass us, and that was the feeling of every man on the trail. Each seemed to fear that the gold might all be claimed before he arrived. With a sigh I turned my back on this glorious region and took up the forward march.

All the next day we skirted the shores of Tatchick Lake, coming late in the afternoon to the Nechaco River, a deep, rapid stream which rose far to our left in the snowy peaks of the coast range. All day the sky to the east had a brazen glow, as if a great fire were raging there, but toward night the wind changed and swept it away. The trail was dusty for the first time, and the flies venomous. Late in the afternoon we pitched camp, setting our tent securely, expecting rain. Before we went to sleep the drops began to drum on the tent roof, a pleasant sound after the burning dust of the trail. The two trampers kept abreast of us nearly all day, but they began to show fatigue and hunger, and a look of almost sullen desperation had settled on their faces.

As we came down next day to where the swift Nechaco met the Endako rushing out of Fraser Lake, we found the most dangerous flood we had yet crossed. A couple of white men were calking a large ferry-boat, but as it was not yet seaworthy and as they had no cable, the horses must swim. I dreaded to see them enter this chill, gray stream, for not only was it wide and swift, but the two currents coming together made the landing confusing to the horses as well as to ourselves. Rain was at hand and we had no time to waste.

The horses knew that some hard swimming was expected of them and would gladly have turned back if they could. We surrounded them with furious outcry and at last Ladrone sprang in and struck for the nearest point opposite, with that intelligence which marks the bronco horse. The others followed readily. Two of the poorer ones labored heavily, but all touched shore in good order.

The rain began to fall sharply and we were forced to camp on the opposite bank as swiftly as possible, in order to get out of the storm. We worked hard and long to put everything under cover and were muddy and tired at the end of it. At last the tent was up, the outfit covered with waterproof canvas, the fire blazing and our bread baking. In pitching our camp we had plenty of assistance at the hands of several Indian boys from a near-by village, who hung about, eager to lend a hand, in the hope of getting a cup of coffee and a piece of bread in payment. The streaming rain seemed to have no more effect upon them than on a loon. The conditions were all strangely similar to those at the Muddy River.

Night closed in swiftly. Through the dark we could hear the low swish of the rising river, and Burton, with a sly twinkle in his eye, remarked, "For a semi-arid country, this is a pretty wet rain."

In planning the trip, I had written to him saying: "The trail runs for the most part through a semi-arid country, somewhat like eastern Washington."

It rained all the next day and we were forced to remain in camp, which was dismal business; but we made the best of it, doing some mending of clothes and tackle during the long hours.

We were visited by all the Indians from Old Fort Fraser, which was only a mile away. They sat about our blazing fire laughing and chattering like a group of girls, discussing our characters minutely, and trying to get at our reasons for going on such a journey.

One of them who spoke a little English said, after looking over my traps: "You boss, you ty-ee, you belly rich man. Why you come?"

This being interpreted meant, "You have a great many splendid things, you are rich. Now, why do you come away out here in this poor Siwash country?"

I tried to convey to him that I wished to see the mountains and to get acquainted with the people. He then asked, "More white men come?"

Throwing my hands in the air and spreading my fingers many times, I exclaimed, "Hy-u white man, hy-u!" Whereat they all clicked their tongues and looked at each other in astonishment. They could not understand why this sudden flood of white people should pour into their country. This I also explained in lame Chinook: "We go klap Pilchickamin (gold). White man hears say Hy-u Pilchickamin there (I pointed to the north). White man heap like Pilchickamin, so he comes."

All the afternoon and early evening little boys came and went on the swift river in their canoes, singing wild, hauntingly musical boating songs. They had no horses, but assembled in their canoes, racing and betting precisely as the Cheyenne lads run horses at sunset in the valley of the Lamedeer. All about the village the grass was rich and sweet, uncropped by any animal, for these poor fishermen do not aspire to the wonderful wealth of owning a horse. They had heard that cattle were coming over the trail and all inquired, "Spose when Moos-Moos come?" They knew that milk and butter were good things, and some of them had hopes of owning a cow sometime.

They had tiny little gardens in sheltered places on the sunny slopes, wherein a few potatoes were planted; for the rest they hunt and fish and trap in winter and trade skins for meat and flour and coffee, and so live. How they endure the winters in such wretched houses, it is impossible to say. There was a lone white man living on the site of the old fort, as agent of the Hudson Bay Company. He kept a small stock of clothing and groceries and traded for "skins," as the Indians all call pelts. They count in skins. So many skins will buy a rifle, so many more will secure a sack of flour.

The storekeeper told me that the two trampers had arrived there a few days before without money and without food. "I gave 'em some flour and sent 'em on," he said. "The Siwashes will take care of them, but it ain't right. What the cussed idiots mean by setting out on such a journey I can't understand. Why, one tramp came in here early in the spring who couldn't speak English, and who left Quesnelle without even a blanket or an axe. Fact! And yet the Lord seems to take care of these fools. You wouldn't believe it, but that fellow picked up an axe and a blanket the first day out. But he'd a died only for the Indians. They won't let even a white man starve to death. I helped him out with some flour and he went on. They all rush on. Seems like they was just crazy to get to Dawson – couldn't sleep without dreamin' of it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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