

A Canadian Ramble 1837

Sketches in Canada, and rambles among the red men

Mrs. (Anna) Jameson

1852

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PREFACE.

NOBODY reads prefaces on a Railway journey. The leaves are turned over for something to arrest attention, or to dissipate weariness, or to “fleet the time,” which even at railway speed moves slowly compared to the “march of ideas.” It is, however, necessary to state in few words that these pages are a reprint of the most amusing and interesting chapters of the “WINTER STUDIES AND SUMMER RAMBLES IN CANADA,”—first published in 1838, in three octavo volumes, favourably received at the time and now out of print. The Authoress in the original preface to the work represents herself as “thrown into scenes and regions hitherto undescribed by any traveller (for the northern shores of Lake Huron are almost new ground), and into relations with the Indian tribes such as few European women of refined and civilised habits have ever risked, and none have recorded ;” and the adventures and sketches of character and scenery among the Red-skins, still retain that freshness which belongs only to what is genuine. All that was of a merely transient or merely personal nature, or obsolete in politics or criticism, has been omitted.

The rest, the book must say for itself.

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Toronto in 1837.

December 20

TORONTO—such is now the sonorous name of this our sublime capital—was, thirty years ago, a wilderness, the haunt of the bear and deer, with a little, ugly, inefficient fort, which, however, could not be more ugly or inefficient than the present one. Ten years ago Toronto was a village, with one brick house and four or five hundred inhabitants ; five years ago it became a city, containing about five thousand inhabitants, and then bore the name of Little York : now it is Toronto, with an increasing trade, and a population of ten thousand people. So far I write as *per* book.

What Toronto may be in summer, I cannot tell ; they say it is a pretty place. At present its appearance to me, a stranger, is most strangely mean and melancholy. A little ill-built town, on low land, at the bottom of a frozen bay, with one very ugly church, without tower or steeple; some government offices, built of staring red brick, in the most tasteless, vulgar style imaginable ; three feet of snow all around ; and the grey, sullen, wintry lake, and the dark gloom of the pine forest bounding the prospect : such seems Toronto to me now. I did not expect much ; but for this I was not prepared.

I know no better way of coming at the truth than by observing and recording faithfully the impressions made by objects and characters on my own mind—or, rather, the impress they *receive* from my own mind—shadowed by the clouds which pass over its horizon, taking each tincture of its varying mood—until they emerge into light, to be corrected, or at least modified, by observation and comparison. Neither do I know any better way than this of conveying to the mind of another the truth, and nothing but the truth, if not the whole truth. So I shall write on.

There is much in first impressions, and as yet I have not recovered from the pain and annoyance of my outset here. My friends at New York expended much eloquence wasted in vain!—in endeavouring to dissuade me from a winter journey to Canada. I listened, and was grateful for their solicitude, but must own I did not credit the picture they drew of the difficulties and *désagrémens* I was destined to meet by the way. I had chosen, they said, the very worst season for a journey through the state of New York; the usual facilities for travelling were now suspended; a few weeks sooner the rivers and canals had been open; a few weeks later the roads, smoothed up with snow, had been in sleighing order;—now, the navigation was frozen, and the roads so broken up as to be nearly impassable. Then there was only a night boat on the Hudson, “to proceed,” as the printed paper set forth, “to Albany, or as far as the ice permitted.” All this, and more, were represented to me—and with so much apparent reason and real feeling, and in words and tones so difficult to resist! But though I could appreciate the kindness of those persuasive words, they brought no definite idea to my mind; I could form no notion of difficulties which by fair words, presence of mind, and money in my pocket, could not be obviated. I had travelled half over the continent of Europe, often alone, and had never yet been in circumstances where these availed not. In my ignorance I could conceive none; but, with the experience I have gained, I would not lightly counsel a similar journey to any one, certainly not to a woman.

As we ascended the Hudson in the night, I lost, of course, the view of that superb scenery which I was assured even winter could not divest of all its beauty rather clothed it in a different kind of beauty. At the very first blush of morning I escaped from the heated cabin, crowded with listless women and clamorous children, and found my way to the deck. I was surprised by a spectacle as beautiful as it was new to me. The Catskill mountains, which we had left behind us in the night, were still visible, but just melting from the view, robed in a misty purple light, while our magnificent steamer—the prow armed with a sharp iron sheath for the purpose—was *crashing* its way through solid ice four inches thick, which seemed to close behind us into an adhesive mass, so that the wake of the vessel was not distinguished a few yards from the stern: yet in the path thus opened, and only seemingly closed, followed at some little distance a beautiful schooner and two smaller steam-vessels. I walked up and down, from the prow to the stern, refreshed by the keen frosty air, and the excitement caused by various picturesque effects, on the ice-bound river and the frozen shores, till we reached Hudson. Beyond this town it was not safe for the boat to advance, and we were still thirty miles below Albany. After leaving Hudson (with the exception of the railroad between Albany and Utica), it was all heavy, weary work; the most painfully fatiguing journey I ever remember. Such were the roads, that we were once six hours going eleven miles. What was usually a day’s journey from one town, or one good inn, to another, occupied sometimes a day and a night, or even two days. [1]

After six days and three nights of this travelling, unrelieved by companionship, or interest of any kind, I began to sink with fatigue. The first thing that roused me was our arrival at the ferry of the Niagara river at Queenston, about seven miles below the Falls. It was a dark night, and while our little boat was tossed in the eddying waters and guided by a light to the opposite shore, we could distinctly hear the deep roar of the cataract, filling, and, as it seemed to me, shaking the atmosphere around us. That mighty cataract, the dream and vision of my childhood and youth, so near—yet unseen,—making itself thus heard and felt,—like Job’s vision, consciously present, yet unrevealed and undiscerned! You may believe that I woke up very decidedly from my lethargy of weariness to listen to that mysterious voice, which made my blood pause and thrill. At Queenston we slept, and proceeded next morning to the town of Niagara on the shore of Lake Ontario. Now, as we had heard, the navigation on the lake had ceased, and we looked for nothing better than a further journey of one hundred miles round the head of the lake, and by the most execrable roads, instead of an easy passage of thirty miles across from shore to shore. But Fortune, seized with one of those freaks which, when we met them in books, we pronounce improbable and unnatural, (and she has played me many such, some good, some bad,) had ordered matters otherwise. A steam-vessel, making a last trip, had called accidentally at the port, and was just going off; the paddles were actually in motion as I and my baggage together were hurried—almost *flung*—on board. No sooner there, than I threw myself down in the cabin utterly overwhelmed with fatigue, and sank at once into a profound and dreamless sleep.

How long I slept I knew not : they roused me suddenly to tell me we were at Toronto, and, not very well able to stand, I hurried on deck. The wharf was utterly deserted, the arrival of the steam-boat being accidental and unexpected ; and as I stepped out of the boat I sank ankle-deep into mud and ice. The day was intensely cold and damp ; the sky lowered sulkily, laden with snow, which was just beginning to fall. Half-blinded by the sleet driven into my face and the tears which filled my eyes, I walked about a mile through a quarter of the town mean in appearance, not thickly inhabited, and to me, as yet, an unknown wilderness ; and through dreary, miry ways, never much thronged,, and now, by reason of the impending snow-storm, nearly solitary. I heard no voices, no quick footsteps of men or children ; I met no familiar face, no look of welcome !—Up to the present hour all objects wear one hue. Land is not distinguishable from water. I see nothing but snow heaped up against my windows, not only without but within ; I hear no sound but the tinkling of sleigh-bells and the occasional lowing of a poor half-starved cow, that, standing up to the knees in a snowdrift, presents herself at the door of a wretched little shanty opposite, and supplicates for her small modicum of hay.

The choice of this site for the capital of the Upper Province was decided by the fine harbour, the only one between Burlington Bay and Cobourg, a distance of about a hundred and fifty miles. General Simcoe, the first governor after the division of the two provinces, and a man of great activity and energy of character, entertained the idea of founding a metro- polis. At that time the head quarters of the government were at Niagara, then called Newark, on the opposite shore ; but this was too near the frontiers to be a safe position. Nor is Toronto much safer : from its low situation, and the want of any commanding height in the neighbour-hood, it is nearly defenceless. In case of a war with America, a few boats sent from the opposite coast of New York could easily lay the fort and town in ashes ; and, in fact, during the last war, in 1813, such was the fate of both. But the same reasons which rendered the place indefensible to us, rendered it untenable for the enemy, and it was immediately evacuated. Another objection was, and *is*, the unhealthiness of its situation,—in a low swamp not yet wholly drained, and with large portions of uncleared land immediately round it : still the beauty and safety of the spacious harbour, and its central position about half-way between Lake Huron and the frontier line of Lower Canada, have fixed its rank as capital of the province and the seat of the legislature. [2]

When the engineer, Bouchette, was sent by General Simcoe to survey the site (in 1793), it was a mere swamp, a tangled wilderness ; the birch, the hemlock, and the tamarac-trees were growing down to the water's edge, and even into the lake. I have been told that Toronto, the Indian appellation of the whole district, signifies *trees growing out of water*. Colonel Bouchette says, that at this time the only vestige of humanity for a hundred miles on every side was one solitary wigwam on the shore, the dwelling of a few Missassagua Indians. Three years afterwards, when the Duc de Rochefoucauld was here, the infant metropolis consisted of a fort and twelve miserable log huts, the inhabitants of which, as the duke tells us, bore no good reputation. The town was, however, already marked out in streets running parallel with the shore of the bay for about two miles, and crossed by others at right angles. It is a pity that while they were about it they did not follow the example of the Americans in such cases, and make the principal streets of ample width ; some hundred feet, or even furlongs, more or less, would have made little difference where the wild unowned forest extended, for all they knew, from the lake to the north pole,—*now*, it would not be so easy to amend the error. King Street, the principal street, looks narrow, and will look narrower when the houses are higher, better, and more regularly built. I perceive that in laying out the *fashionable*, or west-end of the city, they have avoided the same mistake. A wide space between the building lots and Lake Ontario has been reserved very properly as a road or esplanade, but I doubt whether even this be wide enough. One of the most curious and inexplicable phenomena connected with these immense inland seas is the gradual rise of the waters ; and even within these few years, as I am informed, great part of the high bank has been washed away, and a carriage-road at the foot of it along the shore has been wholly covered. If this process goes on, and at the same rate, there must be a solid embankment, or quay, raised as a barrier against the encroaching waters, or the esplanade itself will in time disappear.

January 14.

It should seem that this wintry season, which appears to me so dismal, is for the Canadians the season of festivity. Now is the time for visiting, for sleighing excursions, for all inter-course of business and friendship, for balls in town, and dances in farm-houses, and court-ships and marriages, and prayer-meetings and assignations of all sorts. In summer, the heat and the mosquitos render travelling disagreeable at best ; in spring the roads are absolutely impassable ; in autumn there is too much agricultural occupation : but in winter the forests are pervious ; the roads present a smooth surface of dazzling snow; the settlers in the woods drive into the towns, supply themselves with stores and clothing, and fresh meat,—the latter a luxury which they can seldom obtain in the summer. I stood at my window to-day watching the sleighs as they glided past. They are of all shapes and sizes. A few of the carriage-sleighs are well appointed and handsome. The market-sleighs are often two or three boards nailed together in form of a wooden box upon runners ; some straw and a buffalo skin or blanket serve for the seat ; barrels of flour and baskets of eggs fill up the empty space. Others are like cars, and others, called *cutters*, are mounted on high runners, like sleigh phaetons ; these are sported by the young men and officers of the garrison, and require no inconsiderable skill in driving : however, as I am assured, they are overturned in the snow not above once in a quarter of an hour, and no harm and much mirth ensues : but the wood sleighs are my delight ; a large platform of boards is raised upon runners, with a few upright poles held together at top by a rope, the logs of oak, pine, and maple, are then heaped up to the height of six or seven feet. On the summit lie a couple of deer frozen stiff, their huge antlers projecting in a most picturesque fashion, and on these, again, a man is seated with a blanket round him, his furred cap drawn down upon his ears, and his scarlet woollen comforter forming a fine bit of colour. He guides with a pole his two patient oxen, the clouds of vapour curling from their nostrils into the keen frosty air—the whole machine, in short, as wildly picturesque as the grape waggons in Italy, though to be sure, the associations are somewhat different.

January 16.

This morning, before I was quite dressed, a singular visit was announced. I had expressed to my friend Mr. H—— a wish to see some of the aborigines of the country : he had the kind-ness to remember my request; and Colonel Givins, the principal Indian agent, had accordingly brought some Indians to visit us.

The party consisted of three—a chief named the White Deer, and two of his friends. The chief wore a blanket coat and leggings, and a blanket hood with a peak, from which depended a long black eagle plume ; stout mocazins (shoes of undressed deer-skin) completed his attire : he had about fifty strings of blue wampum round his neck. The other two were similarly dressed, with the exception of the wampum and the feathers. Before I went down I had thrown a chain of wampum round my neck, which seemed to please them. Chairs being presented, they sat down at once (though, as Colonel Givins said, they would certainly have preferred the floor), and answered with a grave and quiet dignity the compliments and questions addressed to them. Their deportment was taciturn and self-possessed, and their countenances melancholy ; that of the chief was by far the most intelligent. They informed me that they were Chippewas from the neighbourhood of Lake Huron, that the hunting season had been unsuccessful, that their tribe was suffering the extremity of hunger and cold, and that they had come to beg from their Great Father the Governor rations of food, and a supply of blankets for their women and children. They had walked over the snow, in their snow-shoes, from the Lake, one hundred and eighty miles ; and for the last forty-eight hours none of them had tasted food. A breakfast of cold meat, bread, and beer, was immediately ordered for them ; and though they had certainly never beheld in their lives the arrangement of an European table, and were besides half famished, they sat down with unembarrassed tranquillity, and helped themselves to what they wished with the utmost propriety—only, after one or two trials, using their own knives and fingers in preference to the table knife and fork. After they had eaten and drunk sufficiently, they were conducted to the government-house to receive from the governor presents of blankets, rifles, and provisions ; and each, on parting, held out his hand to me, and the chief, with a grave earnestness, prayed for the blessing of the Great Spirit on me and my house. On the whole, the impression they left, though amusing and exciting from its mere novelty, was melancholy. The sort of desperate

resignation on their swarthy countenances, their squalid, dingy habiliments, and their forlorn story, filled me with pity, and, I may add, disappointment ; and all my previous impressions of the independent children of the forest are for the present disturbed.

These are the first specimens I have seen of that fated race, with which I hope to become better acquainted before I leave the country. Notwithstanding all I have heard and read, I have yet but a vague idea of the Indian character ; and the very different aspect under which it has been represented by various travellers as well as writers of fiction, adds to the difficulty of forming a correct estimate of the people, and more particularly of the true position of their women. Colonel Givins, who has passed thirty years of his life among the northwest tribes, till he has become in habits and language almost identified with them, is hardly an impartial judge. He was their interpreter on this occasion ; and he says that there is as much difference between the customs and language of different nations—the Chippewas and Mohawks, for instance—as there is between any two nations of Europe.

The cold is at this time so intense that the ink freezes while I write, and my fingers stiffen round the pen. A glass of water by the bed-side, within a few feet of the hearth (heaped with logs of oak and maple kept burning all night long), is a solid mass of ice in the morning. God help the poor emigrants who are yet unprepared against the rigour of the season !—yet this is nothing to the climate of the Lower Province, where, as we hear, the thermometer has been thirty degrees below zero. I lose all heart to write home, or to register a reflection or a feeling—thought stagnates in my head as the ink in my pen—and this will never do ! I *must* arouse myself to occupation ; and if I cannot find it without, I must create it from within. There are yet four months of winter and leisure to be disposed of. How ?—I know not ; but they *must* be employed, not wholly lost.

Winter Excursion to Niagara.

January 23.

At half-past eight my escort was at the door in a very pretty commodious sleigh, in form like a barouche with the head up. I was absolutely buried in furs ; a blanket netted for me by the kindest hands, of the finest lamb's wool, rich in colour, and as light and elastic as it was deliciously warm, was folded round my limbs ; buffalo and bear skins were heaped over all, and every breath of the external air excluded by every possible device. Mr. C. drove his own grey horses ; and thus fortified and accoutred, off we flew, literally “ urged by storms along the slippery way,” for the weather was terrific.

I think that but for this journey I never could have imagined the sublime desolation of a northern winter ; and it has impressed me strongly. In the first place, the whole atmosphere appeared as if converted into snow, which fell in thick, tiny, starry flakes, till the buffalo robes and furs about us appeared like swansdown, and the harness on the horses of the same delicate material. The whole earth was a white waste. The road, on which the sleigh-track was only just perceptible, ran for miles in a straight line ; on each side rose the dark, melancholy pine-forest, slumbering drearily in the hazy air. Between us and the edge of the forest were frequent spaces of cleared or half-cleared land, spotted over with the black charred stumps and blasted trunks of once magnificent trees, projecting from the snow-drift. These, which are perpetually recurring objects in a Canadian landscape, have a most melancholy appearance. Sometimes wide openings occurred to the left, bringing us in sight of Lake Ontario, and even in some places down upon the edge of it : in this part of the lake the enormous body of the water and its incessant movement prevents it from freezing, and the dark waves rolled in, heavily plunging on the icy shore with a sullen booming sound. A few roods from the land, the cold grey waters, and the cold, grey, snow-encumbered atmosphere, were mingled with each other, and each seemed either. The only living thing I saw in a space of about twenty miles was a magnificent bald-headed eagle, which, after sailing a few turns in advance of us, alighted on the topmost bough of a blasted pine, and slowly folding his great wide wings, looked down upon us as we glided beneath him.

The first village we passed through was Springfield, on the river Credit, a river of some importance in summer, but now converted into ice, heaped up with snow, and undistinguishable. Twenty miles further, we stopped at Oakville to refresh ourselves and the horses.

Oakville stands close upon the lake, at the mouth of a little river called Sixteen-mile Creek; it owes its existence to a gentleman of the name of Chisholm, and, from its situation and other local circumstances, bids fair to become a place of importance. In the summer it is a frequented harbour, and carries on a considerable trade in *lumber*, for so they characteristically call timber in this country. From its dock-yards I am told that a fine steam-boat and a dozen schooners have been already launched.

In summer, the country round is rich and beautiful, with a number of farms all in a high state of cultivation ; but Canada in winter and in summer must be like two different regions. At present the mouth of the creek is frozen up ; all trade, all ship-building suspended. Oakville presents the appearance of a straggling hamlet, containing a few frame and log-houses ; one brick-house (the grocery store, or general shop, which in a new Canadian village is always the best house in the place), a little Methodist church, painted green and white, but as yet no resident preacher ; and an inn dignified by the name of the “ Oakville House Hotel.” Where there is a store, a tavern, and a church, habitations soon rise around them. Oakville contains at present more than three hundred inhabitants, who are now subscribing among themselves for a schoolmaster and a resident clergyman.

I stood conversing in the porch, and looking about me, till I found it necessary to seek shelter in the house, before my nose was absolutely taken off by the ice-blast. The little parlour was solitary, and heated like an oven. Against the wall were stuck a few vile prints, taken out of old American magazines ; there was the Duchess de Berri in her wedding-dress, and, as a pendant, the Modes de Paris—“ Robe de tulle garnie de fleurs—coiffure nouvelle, inventée par Mons. Plaisir.” The incongruity was but too laughable ! I looked round for some amusement or occupation, and at last spied a book open, and turned down upon its face. I pounced upon it as a prize ; and what do you think it was ? “ Dévinez, madame ! je vous le donne en trois, je vous le donne en quatre !” it was—Don Juan ! And so, while looking from the window on a scene which realised all you can imagine of the desolation of savage life, mixed up with just so much of the common-place vulgarity of civilised life as sufficed to spoil it, I amused myself reading of the Lady Adeline Amundeville and her precious coterie, and there anent.

Society is smoothed to that excess,
That manners hardly differ more than dress.
Our ridicules are kept in the background,
Ridiculous enough, but also dull ;
Professions, too, are no more to be found
Professional, and there is nought to cull
Of Folly's fruit ; for tho' your fools abound,
They're barren, and not worth the pains to pull.
Society is now one polished horde,
Form'd of two mighty tribes—the *bores* and *bored*.

A delineation, by the way, which might almost reconcile one to a more savage locality than that around me.

While I was reading, the mail-coach between Hamilton and Toronto drove up to the door ; and because you shall understand what sort of a thing a Canadian mail is, and thereupon sympathise in my irrepressible wonder and amusement, I must sketch it for you. It was a heavy wooden edifice, about the size and form of an old-fashioned lord mayor's coach, placed on runners raised about a foot from the ground : the whole was painted of a bright red, and long icicles hung from the roof. This monstrous machine disgorged from its portal eight men-creatures, all enveloped in bear-skins and shaggy dread-noughts, and pea-jackets, and fur-caps down upon their noses, looking like a procession of bears on their hind-legs, tumbling out of a showman's caravan. They proved, however, when

undisguised, to be gentlemen, most of them going up to Toronto to attend their duties in the House of Assembly. One of these, a personage of remarkable height and size, and a peculiar cast of features, was introduced to me as Mr. Kerr, the possessor of large estates in the neighbourhood, partly acquired, and partly inherited from his father-in-law Brandt, the famous chief of the Six Nations. Kerr himself has Indian blood in his veins. His son, young Kerr, a fine boy about ten years old, is the present acknowledged chief of the Six Nations, in his mother's right, the hereditary chieftainship being always transmitted *through* the female, though passing *over* her. Mrs. Kerr, the eldest daughter of Brandt, is a squaw of unmixed Indian blood, and has been described to me as a very superior creature. She has the good sense to wear habitually her Indian costume, slightly modified, in which she looks and moves a princess, graceful and unrestrained, while in a fashionable European dress the effect would be exactly the reverse.

Much mischief has been done in this neighbourhood by beasts of prey, and the deer, driven by hunger, and the wolves from their forest haunts, have been killed, near the settle-ments, in unusual numbers. One of the Indians whom I saw at Toronto, on returning by this road, shot with his new rifle eight deer in one day, and sold them at Hamilton for three dollars each no bad day's hunting. The venison in Canada is good and abundant, but very lean, very unlike English venison ; the price is generally four or six cents (twopence or threepence) a pound.

After taking some refreshment, we set forth again. The next village we passed was called, oddly enough, Wellington Square ; it has been recently laid out, and contains about twenty wooden houses ; —then came Port Nelson, Mr. Kerr's place. Instead of going round the head of the lake by Hamilton, we crossed that very remarkable tongue or slip of land which divides Burlington Bay from Lake Ontario : these were, in fact, two separate lakes till a channel was cut through the narrow isthmus. Burlington Bay, containing about forty square miles, is now one sheet of ice, and on the slip of land, which is near seven miles in length, and about two hundred yards in width, we found the snow lying so deep, and in such irregular drifts, that we proceeded with difficulty. At length we reached Stony Creek, a village celebrated in these parts as the scene of the bloodiest battle fought between the English and Americans during the last war. We had intended to sleep here, but the inn was so uncomfortable and unpromising, that, after a short rest, we determined on proceeding ten miles further to Beamsville.

It was now dark, and the snow falling thick, it soon became impossible to distinguish the sleigh-track. Mr. Campbell loosened the reins and left the horses to their own instinct, assuring me it was the safest way of proceeding. After this I remember no more distinctly, except that I ceased to hear the ever-jingling sleigh-bells. I awoke, as if from the influence of nightmare, to find the sleigh overturned, myself lying in the bottom of it half-smothered, and my companions nowhere to be seen ;—they were floundering in the snow behind.

Luckily, when we had stretched ourselves and shaken off the snow, we were found unhurt in life and limb. We had fallen down a bank into the bed of a rivulet, or a mill-race, I believe, which, being filled up with snow, was quite as soft, only a little colder, than a down-bed. Frightened I was, bewildered rather, but “ effective” in a moment. It was impossible for the gentlemen to leave the horses, which were plunging furiously up to the shoulders in the snow, and had already broken the sleigh ; so I set off to seek assistance, having received proper directions.

Fortunately we were not far from Beamsville. My beacon-light was to be the chimney of a forge, from which the bright sparks were streaming up into the dark wintry air, visible from a great distance. After scrambling through many a snow-drift, up hill and down hill, I at last reached the forge, where a man was hammering amain at a ploughshare ; such was the din, that I called for some time unheard ; at last, as I advanced into the red light of the fire, the man's eyes fell upon me, and I shall never forget his look as he stood poising his hammer, with the most comical expression of bewildered amazement. I could not get an answer from him ; he opened his mouth and repeated *aw !* staring at me, but without speaking or moving. I turned away in despair, yet half laughing, and after some more scrambling up and down, I found myself in the village, and was directed to the inn. Assistance was immediately sent off to my friends, and in a few minutes the supper-table was spread,

a pile of logs higher than myself blazing away in the chimney ; venison-steaks, and fried fish, coffee, hot cakes, cheese, and whisky punch (the traveller's fare in Canada), were soon smoking on the table : our landlady presided, and the evening passed merrily away.

The old landlady of this inn amused me exceedingly ; she had passed all her life among her equals in station and education, and had no idea of any distinction between guests and customers ; and while caressing and attending on me, like an old mother or an old nurse, gave me her history, and that of all her kith and kin. Forty years before, her husband had emigrated, and built a hovel, and made a little clearing on the edge of the lake. At that time there was no other habitation within many miles of them, and they passed several years in almost absolute solitude. They have now three farms, some hundred acres of land, and have brought up nine sons and daughters, most of whom are married, and settled on lands of their own. She gave me a horrid picture of the prevalence of drunkenness, the vice and the curse of this country.

I can give you no idea of the intense cold of this night. Next morning we proceeded eighteen miles farther, to St. Catherine's, the situation of which appeared very pretty even in winter, and must be beautiful in summer. I am told it is a place of importance, owing to the vicinity of the Welland Canal, which connects Lake Ontario with Lake Erie : it contains more than seven hundred inhabitants. The school here is reckoned the best in the district. We passed this morning several streams, which in summer flow into the lake, now all frozen up and undistinguishable, except by the wooden bridges which cross them, and the mills, now still and useless, erected along their banks. The streams have the names of Thirty Mile Creek, Forty Mile Creek, Twenty Mile Creek, and so on ; but wherefore I could not discover.

From St. Catherine's we proceeded twelve miles farther, to Niagara. There I found some old English or rather Irish friends ready to welcome me with joyous affection ; and surely there is not a more blessed sight than the face of an old friend in a new land !

January 26.

The town of Niagara presents the same torpid appearance which seems to prevail every-where at this season ; it is situated at the mouth of the river Niagara, and is a place of much business and resort when the navigation is open. The lake does not freeze here, owing to the depth of its majestic waters ; neither does the river, from the velocity of its current ; yet both are blocked up by the huge fragments of ice which are brought down from Lake Erie, and which, uniting and accumulating at the mouth of the river, form a field of ice extending far into the lake. How beautiful it looked to-day, broken into vast longitudinal flakes of alternate white and azure, and sparkling in the sunshine!

The land all round Niagara is particularly fine and fertile : it has been longer cleared and cultivated than in other parts of the province, and the country, they say, is most beautiful in summer. The opposite shore, about a quarter of a mile off. is the State of New York. The Americans have a fort on their side, and we also have a fort on ours. What the amount of *their* garrison may be I know not, but our force consists of three privates and a corporal, with adequate arms and ammunition, *i.e.* rusty firelocks and damaged guns. The fortress itself I mistook for a dilapidated brewery. This is charming—it *looks* like peace and security, at all events.

January 29.

Well ! I have seen these Cataracts of Niagara, which have thundered in my mind's ear ever since I can remember—which have been my “ childhood's thought, my youth's desire,” since first my imagination was awakened to wonder and to wish. I have beheld them, and shall I whisper it to you ? —but, O tell it not among the Philistines !—I wish I had not ! I wish they were still a thing unbeheld—a thing to be imagined, hoped, and anticipated—something to live for :—the reality has displaced from my mind an illusion far more magnificent than itself—I have no words for my utter disappointment : yet I have not the presumption to suppose that all I have heard and read of Niagara

is false or exaggerated—that every expression of astonishment, enthusiasm, rapture, is affectation or hyperbole. No ! it must be my own fault. Terni, and some of the Swiss cataracts leaping from their mountains, have affected me a thousand times more than all the immensity of Niagara. O I could beat myself ! and now there is no help !—the first moment, the first impression is over—is lost ; though I should live a thousand years, long as Niagara itself shall roll, I can never see it again for the *first* time. Something is gone that cannot be restored.

But, to take things in order : we set off for the Falls yesterday morning, with the intention of spending the day there, sleeping, and returning the next day to Niagara. The distance is fourteen miles, by a road winding along the banks of the Niagara river, and over the Queenston heights ;—and beautiful must this land be in summer, since even now it is beautiful. The flower garden, the trim shrubbery, the lawn, the meadow with its hedgerows, when frozen up and wrapt in snow, always give me the idea of something not only desolate but dead : Nature is the ghost of herself, and trails a spectral pall ; I always feel a kind of pity—a touch of melancholy—when at this season I have wandered among withered shrubs and buried flower-beds ; but here, in the wilderness, where Nature is wholly independent of Art, she does not die, nor yet mourn ; she lies down to rest on the bosom of Winter, arid the aged one folds her in his robe of ermine and jewels, and rocks her with his hurricanes, and hushes her to sleep. How still it was ! how calm, how vast the glittering white waste and the dark purple forests ! The sun shone out, and the sky was without a cloud ; yet we saw few people, and for many miles the hissing of our sleigh, as we flew along upon our dazzling path, and the tinkling of the sleigh-bells, were the only sounds we heard. When we were within four or five miles of the Falls, I stopped the sleigh from time to time to listen to the roar of the cataracts ; but the state of the atmosphere was not favourable for the transmission of sound, and the silence was unbroken.

Such was the deep, monotonous tranquillity which prevailed on every side—so exquisitely pure and vestal-like the robe in which all Nature lay slumbering around us, I could scarce believe that this whole frontier district is not only remarkable for the prevalence of vice but of dark and desperate crime.

Mr. A., who is a magistrate, pointed out to me a lonely house by the way-side, where, on a dark stormy night in the preceding winter, he had surprised and arrested a gang of forgers and coiners ; it was a fearful description. For some time my impatience had been thus beguiled impatience and suspense much like those of a child at a theatre before the curtain rises. My imagination had been so impressed by the vast height of the Falls, that I was constantly look-ing in an upward direction, when, as we came to the brow of a hill, my companion suddenly checked the horses, and exclaimed, “ The Falls ! ”

I was not, for an instant, aware of their presence ; we were yet at a distance, looking *down* upon them ; and I saw at one glance a flat extensive plain ; the sun having withdrawn its beams for the moment, there was neither light, nor shade, nor colour. In the midst were seen the two great cataracts, but merely as a feature in the wide landscape. The sound was by no means overpowering, and the clouds of spray, which Fanny Kemble called so beautifully the “ everlasting incense of the waters,” now condensed ere they rose by the excessive cold, fell round the base of the cataracts in fleecy folds, just concealing that furious embrace of the waters above and the waters below. All the associations which in imagination I had gathered round the scene, its appalling terrors, its soul-subduing beauty, its power and height, and velocity and immensity, were diminished in effect, or wholly lost.

* * * * *

I was quite silent—my very soul sank within me. On seeing my disappointment (written, I suppose, most legibly in my countenance) my companion began to comfort me, by telling me of all those who had been disappointed on the first view of Niagara, and had confessed it. I *did* confess ; but I was not to be comforted. We held on our way to the Clifton hotel, at the foot of the hill ; most desolate it looked with its summer verandahs and open balconies cumbered up with snow, and hung

round with icicles—its forlorn, empty rooms, broken windows, and dusty dinner tables. The poor people who kept the house in winter had gathered themselves for warmth and comfort into a little kitchen, and, when we made our appearance, stared at us with a blank amazement, which showed what a rare thing was the sight of a visitor at this season.

While the horses were cared for, I went up into the highest balcony to command a better view of the cataracts ; a little Yankee boy, with a shrewd, sharp face, and twinkling black eyes, acting as my gentleman usher. As I stood gazing on the scene which seemed to enlarge upon my vision, the little fellow stuck his hands into his pockets, and, looking up in my face, said—

“ You be from the old country, I reckon ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Out over there, beyond the sea ?”

“ Yes.”

“ And did you come all that way across the sea for these here falls ?”

“ Yes.”

“ My ! !” Then after a long pause, and eyeing me with a most comical expression of impudence and fun, he added, “ Now, do *you* know what them 'ere birds are, out yonder ?” pointing to a number of gulls which were hovering and sporting amid the spray, rising and sinking and wheeling around, appearing to delight in playing on the verge of this “ hell of waters,” and almost dipping their wings into the foam. My eyes were, in truth, fixed on these fair, fearless creatures, and they had suggested already twenty fanciful similitudes, when I was roused by his question.

“ Those birds ?” said I. “ Why, *what* are they ?”

“ Why, them's EAGLES !”

“ Eagles ?” it was impossible to help laughing.

“ Yes,” said the urchin sturdily ; “and I guess you have none of them in the old country ?”

“ Not many eagles, my boy ; but plenty of *gulls* !” and I gave him a “ pretty considerable” pinch by the ear.

“ Ay !” said he, laughing ; “ well now you be dreadful smart smarter than many folks that come here !”

We now prepared to walk to the Crescent fall, and I bound some crampons to my feet, like those they use among the Alps, without which I could not for a moment have kept my footing on the frozen surface of the snow. As we approached the Table Rock, the whole scene assumed a wild and wonderful magnificence ; down came the dark-green waters, hurrying with them over the edge of the precipice enormous blocks of ice brought down from Lake Erie. On each side of the Falls, from the ledges and overhanging cliffs, were suspended huge icicles, some twenty, some thirty feet in length, thicker than the body of a man, and in colour of a paly green, like the glaciers of the Alps ; and all the crags below, which projected from the boiling eddying waters, were encrusted, and in a manner built round with ice, which had formed into immense crystals, like basaltic columns, such as I have seen in the pictures of Staffa and the Giant's Causeway ; and every tree, and leaf, and branch, fringing the rocks and ravines, was wrought in ice. On them, and on the wooden buildings erected near the Table Rock, the spray from the cataract had accumulated and formed into the most beautiful crystals and tracery work ; they looked like houses of glass, welted and moulded into regular and ornamental shapes, and hung round with a rich fringe of icy points. Wherever we stood we were on unsafe

ground, for the snow, when heaped up as now to the height of three or four feet, frequently slipped in masses from the bare rock, and on its surface the spray, for ever falling, was converted into a sheet of ice, smooth, compact, and glassy, on which I could not have stood a moment without my *crampons*. It was very fearful, and yet I could not tear myself away, but remained on the Table Rock, even on the very edge of it, till a kind of dreamy fascination came over me ; the continuous thunder, and might and movement of the lapsing waters, held all my vital spirits bound up as by a spell. Then as at last I turned away, the descending sun broke out, and an Iris appeared below the American Fall, one extremity resting on a snow mound ; and motionless there it hung in the midst of restless terrors, its beautiful but rather pale hues contrasting with the death-like colourless objects around ; it reminded me of the faint ethereal smile of a dying martyr.

It was near midnight when we mounted our sleigh to return to the town of Niagara, and, as I remember, I did not utter a word during the whole fourteen miles. The air was still, though keen, the snow lay around, the whole earth seemed to slumber in a ghastly, calm repose ; but the heavens were wide awake. There the Aurora Borealis was holding her revels, and dancing and flashing, and varying through all shapes and all hues—pale amber, rose tint, blood red— and the stars shone out with a fitful, restless brilliance ; and every now and then a meteor would shoot athwart the skies, or fall to earth, and all around me was wild, and strange, and exciting more like a fever dream than a reality.

Toronto, February 7.

Mr. B. gave me a seat in his sleigh, and after a rapid and very pleasant journey, during which I gained a good deal of information, we reached Toronto yesterday morning.

The road was the same as before, with one deviation however—it was found expedient to cross Burlington Bay on the ice, about seven miles over, the lake beneath being twenty, and five-and-twenty fathoms in depth. It was ten o'clock at night, and the only light was that reflected from the snow. The beaten track, from which it is not safe to deviate, was very narrow, and a man, in the worst, if not the last stage of intoxication, noisy and brutally reckless, was driving before us in a sleigh. All this, with the novelty of the situation, the tremendous cracking of the ice at every instant, gave me a sense of apprehension just sufficient to be exciting, rather than very unpleasant, though I will confess to a feeling of relief when we were once more on the solid earth.

It is a remarkable fact, with which you are probably acquainted, that when one growth of timber is cleared from the land, another of quite a different species springs up spontaneously in its place. Thus, the oak or the beech succeeds to the pine, and the pine to the oak or maple. This is not accounted for, at least I have found no one yet who can give me a reason for it. We passed by a forest lately consumed by fire, and I asked why, in clearing the woods, they did not leave groups of the finest trees, or even single trees, here and there, to embellish the country ? But it seems that this is impossible for the trees thus left standing, when deprived of the shelter and society to which they have been accustomed, uniformly perish—which, for mine own poor part, I thought very natural.

A Canadian settler *hates* a tree, regards it as his natural enemy, as something to be destroyed, eradicated, annihilated by all and any means. The idea of useful or ornamental is seldom associated here even with the most magnificent timber trees, such as among the Druids had been consecrated, and among the Greeks would have sheltered oracles and votive temples. The beautiful faith which assigned to every tree of the forest its guardian nymph, to every leafy grove its tutelary divinity, would find no votaries here. Alas ! for the Dryads and Hamadryads of Canada !

There are two principal methods of killing trees in this country, besides the quick, unfailing destruction of the axe ; the first by setting fire to them, which sometimes leaves the root uninjured to rot gradually and unseen, or be grubbed up at leisure, or, more generally, there remains a visible fragment of a charred and blackened stump, deformed and painful to look upon : the other method is slower, but even more effectual ; a deep gash is cut through the bark into the stem, quite round the bole of the tree. This prevents the circulation of the vital juices, and by degrees the tree droops and dies. This is technically called *ringing* timber. Is not this like the two ways in which a woman's heart

may be killed in this world of ours— by passion and by sorrow ? But better the swift fiery death than this “ ringing,” as they call it !

[1] Through all these districts there are now railroads, and every facility for comfortable travelling.

[2] Now removed to Kingston, though some of the courts of law still remain at Toronto.

Sketches in Canada, and rambles among the red men (1852)

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