

AFOOT IN ULTIMA THULE

ARCHIBALD MACMECHAN

Strange fits of passion I have known,
And I will dare to tell
But in a lover's ear alone
What once to me befell.

Confessio Amantis.

I

EARLY this morning the rain began to fall gently, without wind, upon the expectant earth, putting thus a period to a long spell of entrancing June weather. After much activity in cloudless days of heat and dust, it is pleasant to sink back into a wise passiveness, to sit by the open window listening to the tinkling music of raindrops on green leaves, to feel the cool indraft of moist summer air, and, at peace in body and mind, to assemble and set in order thoughts born during much wandering by the way under June skies in the ancient province of Ultima Thule.

II.

There is no English equivalent for *chemineau* except "tramp", and that hardly conveys the right idea. "Highway-man" and "roadster", though deriving from 'way' and 'road', have indissoluble associations, predatory, equestrian and equine, and are therefore not available. "Foot-pad" is not to be thought of; "wayfarer" and "wanderer" are a trifle too poetic and romantic. Perhaps Kipling's coinage, "tramp-royal" comes nearest to this unknown, uninvented word, which should seem to signify devotee of the road, the open road, in preference to the by-path, the lane, the trail, the woodland alley, the mountain-track. Instead of these, to choose the road may argue a prosaic turn of mind. These all promise adventure or romance, while the ordinary road, the plain, practical, dusty strip of unproductive earth promises nothing. Still, at the lowest, wherever they go, roads mean men. They are man-made things designed for human intercourse and traffic, linking farm with farm, hamlet with hamlet, city with distant city. Roads are friendly contrivances, helpful to lovers of mankind.

Roads are for travel; and travellers pass up and down on them

in wheeled vehicles, or on the back of animals, but rarely on their own legs. In these days of fire-chariots, which one factory turns out at the rate of two thousand per day, there is danger of forgetting the advantages of the most natural and the most ancient method of locomotion. It may be held that Shanks his mare is superior to all other modes of transportation. There are no tires to puncture; the gear is self-adjustable; it never balks on a railway crossing; it never skids; rarely does it get out of hand and plunge the passenger over the edge of a precipice. Repairs are simple. A draught of water, or peradventure, beer, a foot-bath in the next brook, ten minutes rest in the shade of a tree, and Shanks is off again on his faithful steed. The best motor in the world dare not charge a two foot drain, but Shanks takes it in his stride. Over ruts and lumps, the motor racks the passenger and dislocates his cervical vertebræ. Horses must be walked up hill. But Shanks hardly alters his gait for inequalities, or inclines. A little additional strain on the back muscles marks the only difference to him between the level and the rise.

Tramping the roads under the goad of necessity is one thing; of your own free will, quite another. The peculiar fortune of the amateur *chemineau* or tramp-royal is that his favourite pursuit yields large returns in pleasure and health. He gets rid of what Stevenson calls "restaurant fat." Muscles harden until the process of putting one foot before the other becomes automatic and unconscious. The eyes are left free to measure the landscape round and the skies above, while the brain works busily on what they offer. Motion seems to churn up thoughts in the headpiece. Every march means steadier nerves and deeper sleep,—boons unpurchasable for money. But the march must be a proper march, not a stroll, or a saunter. Like tragedy, too, it must be of a certain magnitude, say, eight or ten miles easily covered in an afternoon, if there is to be the re-action of grateful lassitude which comes from well-worked muscles resting, and from drugging with fresh air.

Sometimes superior persons say in their superior way that they do not care for walking without an object, or without a companion. Thereby they show they do not understand the tramp-royal. To him the open road is of itself a perpetual lure. A new road is irresistible. What may not be hidden round the next turn? beyond the next hill? The "Road-song of the Prentice" expresses the sentiment:

So many a road there must be o'er
which I have not hied,
So many a brew of beer which I never
yet have tried.

Especially strong is the call of the road in the spring when the prison walls of winter fall asunder, and, on the hills, "the windflowers and the wind confer". In autumn too, the edge of frost in the air spurs the wandering blood to take to the road again. The leaves are red, and the days are growing short. Winter makes marching almost impossible; the snow-fall limits one's steaming radius; but even the heats of summer cannot keep the tramp-royal from the tramp. The road, then, is an end in itself. As for companionship, Comrade Sun and Comrade Wind seldom fail to join the pilgrim and to speed him on his way. Nor, as has been hinted, does Thought forsake him. In truth, he is never less alone than when alone. Padding the highway, he does not know what loneliness means.

But in taking to the road there is more than pleasurable exercise for the body, more than the joy of the explorer discovering new lands, more even than the delight of the eyes; there is the pride of life, which naturally runs over into song. The rhythm of the limbs seems to insist on the complementary rhythms of the voice. It is almost impossible to refrain from "May has come," or the "Road-song of the Prentice", or "The King's Highway," so often sung in the sentimental eighties, long before the war:

Who goes yonder, proud and gay,
Spurning the dust on the King's Highway?

The metrical version of a psalm will do as well to carry off the exaltation of the spirit. Music matters little; the main thing is a joyful noise before the Lord. *Juwat insanire*. And there is no one to listen and criticize. One bliss of solitude is the bliss of hearing one's own voice. The only blight is the occasional motorist, who comes indifferent well after the "lord of a thousand acres wide," and spurns the dust. The clouds which he compels with his fervid wheels mingled with the oily stench of gasoline, can, for the time being, make the proudest foot-passenger feel a veritable beggar. But the fire-chariot passes, the dust settles, the oil-reek fades out on the pure air, and the tramp-royal pursues his wonted way. Destiny may even decree for him a subtle revenge. A few miles farther on, he may overtake the insulting motorist labouring vainly with his balky steed.

III.

Such a *chemineau* do I profess myself. From boyhood I have been a devotee of the open road. There are roads which I know by heart; and there are others which I have traversed once only

and long to see again, like that over Solothurn and that which runs beside the Neckar from Heidelberg.

In this, the first year of the peace, a kind fate has set me in a little town of Ultima Thule for my summer holiday. If poor distracted humanity is still quivering with fear, and aching with its sore hurts, Nature is smiling and serene. Ever since the northern lights played in the morning sky, the day war ceased, the weather has prolonged the note of joy. Winter itself was changed into a season of mild airs and cheering suns. Spring followed eagerly; and June was once more the dear June the poet sang of and the birds praised God for.

My dwelling was on a little hill in the grounds of a little old college. It was beautiful for situation, overlooking a broad cultivated valley, trenched by a tidal river, the whole contained within a ring of wooded hills, which turn at evening into purple clouds resting on the earth. Along the edge of the terrace on which the college stands, a row of elms was planted some seventy years ago. They are giants now with feathery heads. They panel out and frame the landscape between their trunks, as in a primitive picture. Travellers look on the views from the hill and comment, "It is like England", and others, "It is like France", but all are in agreement. What they note is the finished mellowness of the scene. Unlike the greater part of the continent, which is parched brown in the summer, this remains a green land, for the early and the latter rains never fail. The moisture and the heat force on the vegetation into a luxuriance almost tropical within the walls of this sheltered valley. Here and there, the general greenness is broken by precise rectangles of plowed land, dark, rich red, or chocolate colour, attesting the fertility of the soil.

It is, then, a rolling country, a land of hills, not high, or steep, or rugged, with shallow valleys between. From any summit attained, other hills are to be seen in all directions. It is a land of hill-tops and wide horizons.

It is a land of hawthorns. They border the roads, they flourish everywhere, a wonder of white bloom and aromatic fragrance. By themselves they would make the spring. "When first the white thorn blows"—Milton compressed the whole spirit of the opening year into one simple, magical line. A single thorn stands before my open window, a snowy, incense-breathing pyramid in the softly falling rain. Even the pink May is to be found here and there. It is not native to this climate. Some true English heart brought the parent slip from beyond the sea. Thorns of both kinds overarch

and embower the Cher; the petals fall and fleck the smooth brown water with red and white.

It is a land of flowers, in the month of flowers. First to come is the trailing arbutus which grows in abundance everywhere. Before the drifts have quite thawed, under the dead leaves of last year, the shy pink-and-white blossoms may be found. Hence it has been adopted as the provincial flower, with the motto, "We bloom amid the snow". It is the darling flower of Ultima Thule. The yellow wealth of dandelions and buttercups may be taken for granted. The fields are golden with them. But rarer flowers grow with equal richness. Miles of the wayside grass are held together by constellations and Milky Ways of starry stitchwort. In the low-lying places wherever water stands, the blue iris grows rank. Most wonderful of all June flowers is the columbine which grows so tall and strong in all its changeful hues, running the gamut from violet and crimson to honey-gold. It escapes from the garden closes and riots into the fields, overtopping the highest grass, out-vieing its richest green, and weaving through it the most splendid colours. The columbine grows like a weed in Ultima Thule, the loveliest of weeds. Often a tall sheaf of blooms will be found springing from a shelf of earth by the roadside.

Above all, it is a land of orchards. Drilled battalions of apple-trees are drawn up on every southward facing slope. Even before the leaves come, they are a pleasing sight by reason of their ordered ranks and the spider-web tracery of their bare branches against the blue. When the blossoms burst forth, as they did this spring, in an ecstasy of fertility, the land becomes one great encampment of moon-white bowers and pavilions. The trees seem cascading to the ground in torrents of blossoms. There will be a plentiful apple harvest, four times last year's crop, and much honey; for the bees are busy by the million, winged alchemists distilling the potable gold of the so prized fragrant honey of spring.

IV.

Such a land was manifestly created and fore-ordained for the divagations of a tramp-royal. First the French and then the English have used and handled it for three centuries. They have built on it, —huts and stockaded forts and hamlets which have vanished. They have tamed the broad-spreading rivers with bridles of green dikes. The fertile acres thus reclaimed, they have plowed and sowed and reaped for generations. They have fought on this soil. It holds the bones of men who fell in battle, as well as the uncounted

thousands who died peacefully in their beds. The very face of the landscape has been altered by the hand of man. The clearings, and embankments, and planting of fruit-trees have changed the whole aspect. The Red Indian would not recognize the hunting-grounds which once were his. From all this human activity a suave appealing charm results. You might wander the whole world over and not find its equivalent.

And man has built himself roads across this land. They have been made, not in accordance with some preconceived paper scheme, or some stiff, prosaic government survey, but simply as the need of them arose, from time to time, for the settlers' use and behoof. Hence they follow old trails through the woods; they ramble, and wander, and wind in a pleasant maze, enlacing the hills, following the water-courses, and scoring the face of the plain. It is therefore easy to plan marches which shall fetch a compass, without any monotonous retracing of the way by which you came. For the most part the roads in Ultima Thule are good, and friendly to the foot passenger. Bordering the oldest of them are rich growths of alder, spruce, hawthorn, wild cherry, wild plum, wild rose and blackberry thickets which become rank, unpruned, green hedges, turning the norland roads into the likeness of English lanes. Sometimes when storms and spring tides combine with human neglect, the rivers burst their dikes, ravage the low-lying lands and kill out this wayside vegetation.

Another outcome of the long human usage of this land is a plentiful growth of place-names, which are unchanged by time. Such names both fix and make history. That King's Meadow should lie beside Lebreau's Dike is almost an epitome of provincial annals. Names like Retreat Farm, Martock House, the Ardise Hills, give character to the country-side. They pass readily into song, nor have they lacked the inspired singer to hitch them into rhyme. In the winter night, when the moon is shining on the snow, the lover is longing for the impossible, the presence of the beloved. The outer world is freezing, but the rendezvous is waiting and warm. He would use an incantation:

Come, for the night is cold,
The ghostly moonlight fills
Hollow and rift and fold
Of the eerie Ardise hills.

The icy breath of winter is in those lines, and the strange beauty of moonlight on snow, yet with a suggestion of comfort in the sheltered nook beside the open fire.

The roads, and the spring, and the countryside had one voice saying "Come!"; but even in Ultima Thule, and on a holiday, man cannot evade the penalty of Adam. Every morning was devoted to books and the labour of the pen; but the afternoon was free from study, and available for exploration of the surrounding country on foot. Body must have its part as well as brain. After the long winter, it was good to feel the ardent sun, and to re-learn once more the proverb, "Much sweat, much sweet". And every march was a voyage of discovery into new lands, north, south, east and west. Generally the march could be timed to end at a given hour, the hour of a movable feast, on the home green. But if not, it did not matter. At the journey's end, a cold tub, hot tea, and a pic-nic meal banished fatigue. The evening was a tranquil time for talk and watching sunsets, followed by early and dreamless slumber in a profound and healing silence, with the untainted night wind breathing on the sleeper from out vast clean spaces of sky, over forest and field and the salt sea.

Voyages of discovery! That was a good day when the march began at Ferry Hill. It overlooks the tidal river, the twin iron bridges which stride across the stream here at its narrowest part, and the orchard-covered uplands beyond. At flood tide, the river is level full from bank to bank; at low ebb, it is a mere trickle at the bottom of a broad, shallow, red ditch. Beyond the bridge end the road follows the shore northward, winding and doubling back on itself until the traveller at one point can look right across the broad river mouth to the town he left behind an hour before. Compact and small it looks by the waterside, with vessels lying at its wharves. That day the air was warm, holding a promise of rain; the orchards were in full flower; the road really ran through Avalon, the Cymric paradise

Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns,
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea.

Every turn in the road, every hill mounted brought a new picture to view. Farm-houses, large and handsome, in orderly grounds, with shade-trees and their complex of out-houses, lined the way. Beside it, like the accompaniment to a song, ran a well-worn foot-path betokening neighbourly intercourse. Fences are few, which gives the county an open look. Once or twice the railway crossed the road. Then it was seen in its true perspective as a mere irrelevance in the landscape, a troubler of its peace. Its value is apparent only when a march has stretched too far, and the up train or the down train ambles along in time to pick up the wanderer at a way station

and return him to his point of departure. This day the march ended in a quiet, spreading, little town of one long tree-shaded street, dreaming in the afternoon sun. Once many an able ship was built here and sailed hence to deep-sea ventures all the world over. Now its ship-yard is silent, but the town has a population of old master mariners snugly berthed ashore, and still beside the sea. That was such a pleasant road that I made the trip twice again, for the sake of the apple-blossoms. Once a drenching shower overtook me and drove me to shelter in the railway station, where I met a wise man, who had been overseas, and could talk profitably on the issues of war and peace.

Another memorable march was southward to the Forks, up one side and down the other of the broad tidal river. Unforgettable is the view from the upper bridge,—Island Farm with its clump of oaks, which was once truly an island, the Futurist colours of the red clay banks against the verdigris green of the salt grass, in the strong sunshine. That day I met a true farmer. Thirty years before he had bought his farm at sheriff's auction. It was run-down, almost worthless. Now it is one of the show-places of the country. He mentioned his profit on his latest shipment of apples, a price to set one's mouth watering almost as much as the Gravensteins themselves. He has a famous herd of prize-winning cattle. His two sons, silent, hard-handed young giants, had been at the war. He brought me into his immaculate farm-house and gave me cold water from the well. His talk was not all of bullocks. He produced, for my gratification, a copy of *Dr. Syntax*, with Rowlandson's illustrations. He had also an old Burns of which he was justly proud. That same afternoon, another farmer, whose house I invaded, referred to Burns, and how unintelligible he would be to coming generations nursed on Prohibition.

And that was a good march to Martock. The road ended in a gore, an acute angle made by meeting another road. In the gore stood a school-house, with a play-ground. Young Nausicaas were tossing a ball. The lower end of the field, where water lay, was purple with flower-de-luce. Turning into the other road, I soon made a notable discovery. It was the little stream beside which the government fish-hatchery is built. Rising in South Mountain, the rivulet flows along its feet for several miles, then turns and makes across country to the main river. This is the first brook I ever encountered in real life which looks like those which Edmund J. Sullivan draws in *The Compleat Angler*. Its course is unchanging, and has been unchanged for ages. It is free from mud or other defilement. The grass grows on its terraced banks to the water's edge, with here and

there a stray iris nodding to its own reflection in the clear brown stream. The fields it traverses are as green and pleasant as those in which the handsome milkmaid entertained Piscator and Venator with "that smooth song that was made by Kit Marlowe," when "she cast away care and sang like any nightingale". And there were trouts in that stream which gentle Izaak would not have disdained.

The fish-hatchery itself was worth noting. It stood close under South Mountain and was backed by a thick clump of willows. Like other such buildings, it represents a French architectural idea. It is of one storey only, with low walls and a high-pitched roof; and it is the roof which makes a building picturesque, as John Ruskin sayeth.

It was that day also that I discovered the old garden. The farmer-folk hereabout have time to cultivate flowers, as well as potatoes and apples, but this garden stands out from the others. It was in front of an old-fashioned, one-storey wooden house, with grey and green mosses growing on the shingles of the steep roof. The whole door-yard, between the house and the road, some forty feet square, was taken up with flower-beds of different shapes, a circular plot in the centre, and smaller ones, cut to fit about it, all of a size easy to plant and weed from the narrow walks which meandered between. The front door stood wide open. Near it was a basket-seated chair. On the ground beside it lay gardening tools, as if the gardener had just dropped them. Silence brooded over all. The beds were full of lilies, yellow, red, and white, bleeding-heart, bachelor's buttons, and cabbage roses. Here too was a wealth of columbines, as at Spa Spring Farm, overflowing the garden bounds into the neighbouring fields. The mistress of the mansion is over eighty, and "lives there by herself, mind you," as her small grandchild informed me farther down the road.

A sudden apology in a pleasant voice behind me made me turn to see a flaxen-haired, bare-headed, bare-legged lass of twelve or so, on a bicycle, who had almost ridden me down. She told me about the old garden and its mistress. When I admired the stretch of turf in front of her own home, she told me that she and her sister kept it shaven smooth, while father and the boys were putting in the crop. I parted from Miss Chatterbox reluctantly.

They do such things, the farmer-folk in these parts, towards keeping up appearances. On another route-march, I discovered such another green in front of a farm, only larger, and clipped as carefully as any city lawn. Before the house was a well-trimmed hedge, to ensure privacy; but the driveway ran through a gateless gap in the hedge guarded on each side by a magnificent towering elm.

The time would fail me to chronicle all my marches with all their surprising adventures. Twice I tramped eastward by Three Mile Plains to the river, which recalls French piety in the name of Holy Cross and the legend of Helena. The quiet, pretty hamlet of the same name is built on the lips of a deep gully. A mill-dam reduces the river below it to a mere wetness on the stones of the river-bed. Water finds its way over, and round, and through the dam, providing a hissing, spurting, rustling, splashing, fountain-like *concerto*, very pleasant to hear on a hot June day, in the shade of the heavy elms which tower above the bridge. When work stops in the mill at five o'clock, the sluices are opened and the Sainte Croix becomes, on sufferance, a river once more. Deluded salmon force their way into it, after their mysterious wanderings in the ocean, and anglers find good sport farther down stream between the lights in the long June evenings.

On the second journey, I marched first to the height of land, with its noble outlook to all points of the compass. All round the horizon, I viewed the farm-houses amid their clustering orchards, and I perceived for the first time the office which the orchards perform. They act like the embossings of jewels; they hold the dwelling down in the landscape, "fast rooted in the fruitful soil". On that high land, the whole atmosphere seemed to be all in gentle motion at once. The way home led through the old, silent gypsum quarries, deep pits with white sides and pools of clear, green water. A woodchuck crossed the road before me in a leisurely amble. Beyond the quarries, I made the acquaintance of a socialistic farmer, who was still not disposed to share his holding with anyone. He came and talked to me over the fence while I rested under a tree. He had just emancipated himself from the hired man status, and he had become a capitalist by acquiring property, his little farm, of which he was not a little proud. The way homeward brought me to the top of another high hill. Here was another farm of which the county bragged. From it unfolded a magnificent view over the lower reaches of the Ste Croix, and, far away on the northern horizon, the dim blue form of Blomidon.

Another discovery resulted from following a road till it ended at a little hill above a gravel pit, where men and horses were busy. It offered a view both down the river to the town with its twin bridges, and up the river to the Island Farm and the Forks. The red tide was brimming from bank to bank; the June day was radiant; and the eye could hardly be filled with seeing. At still another time, an unexpected friend kept an unset tryst. At the end of a tramp, she

came out at an open gate to meet me, smiling, with hands outstretched and the sunset glow on her face.

V.

Thus, within a circuit of some thirty miles, in a summer month, I came to know a portion of the ancient province of Ultima Thule, as no motorist, or horseman, or driver of a carriage could know it. The foot-passenger is closer, in every sense, to mother Earth, and sees the world from a different point of view. To pace the actual miles, to learn where the springs hide, where the flowers grow, to have speech with men, women and children has been an unalloyed good. *Meminisse jwabit*, with no hint of a 'perhaps'. Pleasant in acquiring, pleasant in retrospect, pleasant in transferring to paper are the memories of the past month's explorations. I live them over again, as I write, this cool morning, while the seasonable rain is falling so softly on the welcoming soil. The apple-blossoms have given place to green leaves and green fruit. The orchards will take no hurt. After the heats, the rain will force on the grass in the meadows and dike-lands. They may yield even four tons of hay to the acre. *Meminisse jwabit*. Meditation and the aid of the written word will fix these golden days in memory for the enrichment of less happier times to come.