

A MORNING OF PERIL IN DEATH VALLEY

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WE Canadians travel with such comfort and confident security over our vast Dominion that it is difficult to realize the peril and uncertainty of journeys by rail in some parts of the neighbouring republic. I made a short stay in a mining town, in the Western States, on one occasion not long ago. Retiring to rest in the hotel rather early, having a long trip before me the next day, I was awakened about the middle of the night by loud reports of pistols which were being fired in the room below. I listened nervously for cries of alarm and appeals for help, but was agreeably relieved to hear only noisy laughter of men and women, and a hubbub of boisterous merriment. Next morning I scanned eagerly the local paper for notices of a shooting affray, and fully expected that at breakfast the waitress would tell me with bated breath of an attempted murder the previous night. But she merely burst out into loud laughter when I questioned her. She said that the "boys" had broken into the hotel at midnight, and "shot out all the lights"! That was all. How different in Canada, had some desperadoes fired off revolvers in one of our western hotels after the guests had retired for the night! Our press would have given the outrage prominence, and made much serious comment upon such lawlessness.

I took train, in the course of the morning, across the vast Nevada desert, and for some hours speeded over the dreariest waste of sand and scattered broken rock that the imagination could picture. Overhead stretched a colourless sky, hot and cloudless, and not of grateful blue, but of scorching white. The broiling sun poured its hot rays upon everything, and the scenery seemed to dance and shimmer in the heat. We had passed the lonely little station of Las Vegas, and rounding a sharp curve in the Las Vegas Valley, our train began to rock violently; valises, boots, hats, and other loose things went flying over our heads; and then, with a terrifying crash, a number of cars fell over on their sides. Fortunately the banks rose eight or ten feet, just at that place; and as they were of soft sand, the results were not very serious, but many passengers were hurt by broken glass. The engine-driver had been on the alert, fearing that the intense

heat might have caused "spread rails", but by a superhuman effort he brought the engine to a standstill, and with such cleverness that it remained on the steel track along with a baggage car and a "diner." The coloured porters sprang out and ran excitedly along the wrecked train, crying "Anyone killed? Anyone killed?". When the blinding dust and horrid noises subsided inside the cars, we crawled from the corners where the shock had thrown most of us, and soon emerged, carefully creeping through the broken windows, and carrying such baggage as we could readily pull out. I sat down to rest myself on the steel rail, but immediately I sprang up with great alacrity, for I found it to be as hot as if it had been just drawn out of a heated furnace!

Some Hindu students, who had been fellow passengers in my car, hurried up to the engine-driver and the stoker, and shook their grimy hands, vigorously thanking them for their coolness and skill in preventing a most serious accident. A group of Yale students, who had also moved towards the engine, seemed surprised at this exhibition of courtesy, and turning to me said "Those fellows can't be niggers after all! Can they?" Then they and the Hindus began to fraternize. Previously they had avoided each other. The American students had evidently not realized that the Hindu race and their own ancestors were, in the distant past, one people, that they had one racial ancestry, but imagined them to be negroes, and worthy of contempt because of their colour. "Guess you found Cornell exams pretty stiff", I overheard them remark to the Hindus. "No, we all had already graduated at Calcutta University", they politely replied, "and Cornell we found to be pretty easy." They had studied forestry in Cornell. And as academic people know, the examinations at Calcutta are, for special reasons, perhaps the most difficult in the world. We were detained for eight or ten hours until a gang of men arrived, who laid a new loop of lines over the sand, so that a relief train from Santa Barbara could come and pick us up. "Don't leave your baggage by the track, sir!" cried the porter after me, when during the hours of waiting I wandered away among the sand dunes, to catch and to "box", if I could for my zoological collection, some specimens of desert lizards and snakes which could be seen in numbers moving about among the sage brush. "Stay with your suit-cases or the Mexicans will steal everything when they are coming to the end of their job." That was the advice given to us, and we obeyed.

Our relief train arrived late in the afternoon, and we were soon gaily speeding along as though nothing had happened. But we were fated to have another adventure, not less thrilling than the

last. As we approached the famous, or infamous, Death Valley, great gullies began to yawn on either side the railway track, and high precipices rose above us. To the south an opening, wider and more grim and awful than anything we had yet seen, appeared. It was really a mile or two wide, but so lofty and precipitous at the sides that it appeared like a gigantic gorge. It was the mouth of Death Valley—of evil repute all the world over. Now a sudden shock of surprise assailed us. “Bang—Rush—Bang”—our train jerked and violently bounded forward—speeding ahead with a sudden rush that startled everybody. “What is the matter?” All the passengers pressed to the windows, for now we could hear the rattle of gun shots outside, and lo! we could see eight or ten mounted desperadoes, fifty yards away, hurrying to get up close to our train, some with rifles and some with revolvers, carrying on as they galloped towards us a murderous fusillade. Some were negroes, but most were apparently Mexicans, wearing wide-brimmed sombreros, coloured shawls, and displaying huge glittering spurs on their riding boots. They spread fan-like over the sandy waste. Happily the “spurt”, which shook us all so violently, and startled everyone on board as the train speeded up, achieved the purpose of the engineers, and the first part of the train had got well past the murderous gang, who had planned, apparently, to kill the engine-driver and stoker, mount the engine, and stop it. Then they would have robbed the passengers and stolen the baggage. They continued to fire shots at us, but the high speed at which we tore along made their bullets harmless, and we were soon beyond their reach, and out of danger. This is notoriously a lawless region, very unlike the western stretches of Canada, where British regard for law and order prevails everywhere. “How many policemen would you think necessary in the new mining town, Rossland, in British Columbia?” the Marquis of Aberdeen was wont to ask visitors to Canada, some twenty-five years ago, when his lordship held the office of Governor-General, and gold developments at that time had attracted a population of miners and others to Rossland probably exceeding five or six thousand, some of them lawless evil-doers, known to the police in American mining camps. Various answers would be given. The correct answer was very surprising to those questioned: “One policeman suffices to keep order in Rossland effectively”.

Soon Death Valley was left behind, and the desert plain—flatter than the proverbial pancake—extended in all directions. We breathed freely again, and not a few uttered a prayer of thankfulness to Heaven, for to have been robbed and held by wild criminals

in Death Valley would have been a dreadful experience. "Where's the Justice of the Peace?" asked a new arrival in one of the mining camps in Death Valley, as he rode in from the plains. "There ain't no Justice of the Peace hereabouts", was the reply; "the Justice of the Peace got shot." "Well, where's the constable?" "Why, it was him that shot the Justice of the Peace, and then he slipped out with a stolen bunch of horses, and he ain't been seen since." The story is not an improbable one. These Nevada desert lands are so lonely and silent. Man feels himself to be absolutely the only invader. As one miner familiar with these plains said: "You might as well be here a million miles from any other living being." Even the birds, whose powers of flight take them everywhere, shrink from intruding in these forbidding solitudes. The wide-winged vultures are seen no more sailing about the mighty walls of the towering Sierras; not a vulture (so familiar around the heights to the west) ventures east of the San Bernardino ranges; there are no deer or antelope, but only the skulking coyote, uttering his agonizing howls; and the spectre-like desert jack-rabbits, starving, dishevelled and disreputable, hopping about, among the darting lizards and sombre-tinted snakes, as partners in their wretchedness.

Now the pure and blue shadows—intensely pure and blue—of the deep mountain recesses in the distance grow darker as our train continues, at terrific speed, to leave Death Valley moment by moment further behind. If you look at the map, you will see that the region of Death Valley (where we have just passed through our two perilous experiences) stretches north and south for two hundred miles or more, and is mainly walled-in on the west by the bare jagged Panamints and on the east by the Funeral Range. They look coldly and cruelly down on this valley of evil omen, like gaol warders guarding those about to die. From Mojave mining-centre you can drive by stage to forlorn Keeler, just a hundred miles of parched desert and borax swamps, and then you see Owens river and lake. River and lake they are called, but the names could not be more inapplicable. For most of the year, they are bare, stony, and utterly without water. Rain rarely falls, and during many months there are no clouds to shield them from the brazen sun. When the snow melts upon the white peaks, torrential freshets hurtle down between the muddy banks! Many of the smaller rivulets never reach the river channel, being swallowed up by the burning sand. The river's yellow current is loaded with mud, minerals, and other floating sediment; and after being received by the lake, everything is soon dried up, and thick deposits of soda ash remain, blinding white, like snow. Borax is plentiful also,

indeed Borax Flat is a wide area, and two lakes are called by the same name—Borax Lake,—one in Lake County, and one in San Bernardino County, just over the western border of the state. Mammoth crystals occur, often exceeding a pound in weight, and seven or eight inches long, so richly impregnated with mineral matter is the water. Salt, sulphur, cyanite, and, it is said, the dreadful caustic soda, occur, with many other malignant crystal products, so that the dust blown about by the winds is poisonous to breathe, hurtful to the sight, and altogether deadly. The effluvia given off by the ground, in some parts of Death Valley, are noxious and fatal to man.

In every part the valley suggests death and desolation. Birds avoid these satanic gorges south of Monte Cristo and Silver Peak Mountains, and men die if they sojourn long in their lethal confines. Gold, and "black stuff" or silver ore, are the potent lure; but (to quote from a miner's testimony) "why more of it has not come out, is a question of evil omen." Frightful heat, the deadly atmosphere, lack of water, render the place almost uninhabitable, and men stay there but a short time when, to avoid certain death, they come out. But, worse than all, it is the resort of lawless desperadoes, who infest the gullies and creeks. Not a few gold prospectors, who ventured in, have never returned, being murdered in cold blood by cut-throats in ambush. There is no water in Death Valley, but only a liquid, dense with acrid chemical poisons. To this horror is to be added the tropical heat—heat without mercy—for the rays of the sun are so intense that a temperature of 129° Fahrenheit persists for weeks at a time. Yet there are men to whom Death Valley is alluring and irresistible! "It is so fascinating", one mining man declares", to anyone with a tinge of nomadic blood in his veins";—and, verily, there are venturesome ones who beholding the mountains shadowed in deep blue, and the peaks and ramparts standing out in bold relief, orange, black and brown, imposing and magnificent, but cruel and austere as only the Sierras can look, perforce must venture in. You cannot help admiring the courage of men who will coolly pack up their supplies of flour and bacon, their tea, coffee, and sugar, and a sack or two of "Arizona strawberries"—the miner's euphemism for beans, the wanderer's staple food—also a Dutch oven, mining implements, barley for the mules, and above all, half a dozen 5-gallon cans of water and, carrying a blanket and a gun, set out for Death Valley. In spite of all its terrors, its lure of shining gold calls them. The nuggets of Mojave Desert, the outcrops of yellow ore in Furnace Creek, and the rich veins about Bull Frog Mine, sixty miles east of Goldfield, summon

them irresistibly, to brave all the dangers. To work some claims the miners go in relays, and arrange to return at short intervals, but some do not return—very many never return. The conditions are such that no work can be done from 10 a. m. until 4 p. m. Tales of horror and crime, it is no surprise to find, are rife in such a region, where Nature is pitiless, and man knows no law, human or Divine:

They see the solemn silences
Move by and beckon: see the forms,
The very beards of burley storms,
And hear them talk like sounding seas.
They see the snowy mountains rolled
And heaved along the nameless lands
Like mighty billows.

Men go and gaze into the ghastly portals. The tenderfoots will turn and flee. Those who venture in, and strive with the stern inhuman conditions, may perish in their effort to find a way of escape. "That's part of the game", they say. Should you be fortunate, and come out, you will never forget it, and you will never speak of it—if you are like others who have passed through its horrors. "Out in California they hesitate even to talk of Death Valley", confesses a veteran Westerner. It is common to meet, on the Southern Pacific trains which connect with "The Valley", some gold miner, grim and tanned, on his way home. You would like to hear from his lips his thrilling tales. But he has no story to tell. He is silent. The memories of Death Valley are too torturing and grisly to recall. He strives to forget them. It is all horrible. There is little to relieve the picture. "A sun-scorched waste in summer", declared Theodore Roosevelt, "and, in winter, Arctic in its iron desolation."

There is a tragic record of one lone prospector, lost in Death Valley, which can scarcely be equalled in the weird pitiful story of suffering and death in these western wilds. The actual record was picked up beside the body, when a miner discovered it in a remote fastness of the rugged Argus Spur, above Borax Flat, some ten or twelve years ago. In his quest for gold, this unfortunate prospector had climbed a range of heights west of Salt Well Valley, wholly destitute of water. His own supply had given out, for he had lost his way. A few tattered pages tell the tale of his last days of agony. The scribbled sentences, when one reads them, become more and more disjointed and illegible, as his mental and bodily powers waned:

"No water to-day," he wrote. "Must get over the range to find my trail back. Mountains very high. Things ahead look bad." . . . "Tried hard all day; but no trail. Can't find it. No water now for two days." . . . "All silent and very lonely. Will hold out to-morrow though. Almost all in." . . . "Very weak—cannot carry my blankets. Must drop them. A little grub left; but dry. No water." . . . "Very weak." Am going blind with the sun. Headache and heat terrific. My lips cracked and bleeding. Must get water to-day, or will cash in. Darkness is . . ."

There the story stops.

Fainter and fainter growing, till his eyes,
Wide, blind, and staring, opened on the sky,
And the fierce sun-blaze could not hurt him more.

There the story stops, I say. Death Valley has worked her will.