

# THE MOUNTAINS<sup>1</sup>

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AUTHOR OF "THE FOREST," "THE BLAZED TRAIL," "THE SILENT PLACES," ETC.

## IX.—The Trail

**W**HEN you say "trail" to a Westerner, his eye lights up. This is because it means something to him. To another it may mean something entirely different, for the blessed word is of that rare and beautiful category which is at once of the widest significance and the most intimate privacy to him who utters it. To your mind leaps the picture of the dim forest-aisies and the murmurings of tree-top breezes; to him comes a vision of the wide, dusty desert; to me, perhaps, a high, wild country of wonder. To all of us it is the slender, unbroken, never-ending thread connecting experiences.

For in a mysterious way, not to be understood, our trails never do end. They stop sometimes, and wait patiently while we dive in and out of houses, but always, when we are ready to go on, they are ready too, and so take up the journey placidly as though nothing had intervened. They begin, when? Sometime, away in the past, you may remember a single episode, vivid through the mists of extreme youth. Once a very little boy walked with his father under a green roof of leaves that seemed farther than the sky and as unbroken. All of a sudden the man raised his gun and fired upwards, apparently through the green roof. A pause ensued. Then, hurtling roughly through still that same green roof, a great bird fell, hitting the earth with a thump. The very little boy was I. My trail must have begun there under the bright green roof of leaves.

From that earliest moment the Trail unrolls behind you like a thread so that never do you quite lose connection with your selves. There is something a little fearful to the imaginative in the insistence of it. You may camp, you may

linger, but some time or another, sooner or later, you must go on, and when you do, then once again the Trail takes up its continuity without reference to the muddled place you have tramped out in your indecision or indolence or obstinacy or necessity. It would be exceedingly curious to follow out in patience the chart of a man's going, tracing the pattern of his steps with all its windings of nursery, playground, boys afiel, country, city, plain, forest, mountain, wilderness, home, always on and on into the higher country of responsibility until at the last it leaves us at the summit of the Great Divide. Such a pattern would tell his story as surely as do the tracks of a partridge on the snow.

A certain magic inheres in the very name, or at least so it seems to me. I should be interested to know whether others feel the same glamour that I do in the contemplation of such syllables as the Lo-Lo Trail, the Tunemah Trail, the Mono Trail, the Bright Angel Trail. A certain elasticity of application, too, leaves room for the more connotation. A trail may be almost anything. There are wagon-trails which East would rank as macadam roads; horse-trails that would compare favorably with our best bridie-paths; foot-trails in the fur country worn by constant use as smooth as so many garden-walks. Then again there are other arrangements. I have heard a mule-driver overwhelmed with skeptical derision because he claimed to have upset but six times in traversing a certain bit of trail not over five miles long; in charts of the mountains are marked many trails which are only "ways through"—you will find few traces of predecessors; the same can be said of trails in the great forests where even an Indian is sometimes at fault.

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"Johnny, you're lost," accused the white man. "Trail lost; Injun here," denied the red man. And so after your experience has led you by the camp-fires of a thousand delights, and each of those camp-fires is on the Trail, which only pauses courteously for your stay and then leads on untiring into new mysteries forever and ever, you come to love it as the donor of great joys. You too become a Westerner, and when somebody says "trail," your eye too lights up.

The general impression of any particular trail is born rather of the little incidents than of the big accidents. The latter are exotic, and might belong to any time or place; the former are individual. For the Trail is a vantage-ground, and from it, as your day's travel unrolls, you see many things. Nineteenths of your experience comes thus, for in the long journeys the side excursions are few enough and unimportant enough almost to merit classification with the accidents. In time the character of the Trail thus defines itself.

Most of all, naturally, the kind of country has to do with this generalized impression. Certain surprises, through trees, of vista looking out over unexpected spaces; little notches in the hills beyond which you gain to a placid far country sleeping under a sun warmer than your elevation permits; the delicious excitement of the moment when you approach the very knife-edge of the summit and wonder what lies beyond—these are the things you remember with a warm heart. Your saddle is a point of vantage. By it you are elevated above the country; from it you can see clearly. Quail scuttle away to right and left, heads ducked low; grouse boom solemnly on the rigid limbs of pines; deer vanish through distant thickets to appear on yet more distant ridges, thence to gaze curiously, their great ears forward; across the cañon the bushes sway violently with the passage of a cinnamon bear among them—you see them all from your post of observation. Your senses are always alert for these things; you are always bending from your saddle to examine the tracks and signs that continually offer themselves for your inspection and interpretation.

Our trail of this summer led at a general high elevation, with comparatively little climbing and comparatively easy traveling for days at a time. Then suddenly we would find ourselves on the brink of a great box cañon from three to seven thousand feet deep, several miles wide, and utterly precipitous. In the bottom of this cañon would be good feed, fine groves of trees, and a river of some size in which swam fish. The trail to the cañon-bed was always bad, and generally dangerous. In many instances we found it bordered with the bones of horses that had failed. The river had somehow to be forded. We would camp a day or so in the good feed and among the fine groves of trees, fish in the river, and then address ourselves with much reluctance to the ascent of the other bad and dangerous trail on the other side. After that, in the natural course of events, subject to variation, we could expect nice trails, the comfort of easy travel, pines, cedars, redwoods, and joy of life until another great cleft opened before us or another great mountain-pass barred our way.

This was the web and woof of our summer. But through it ran the patterns of fantastic delight such as the West alone can offer a man's utter disbelief in them. Some of these patterns stand out in memory with peculiar distinctness.

Below Farewell Gap is a wide cañon with high walls of dark rock, and down those walls run many streams of water. They are white as snow with the dash of their descent, but so distant that the eye cannot distinguish their motion. In the half-light of dawn, with the yellow of sunrise behind the mountains, they look like gauze streamers thrown out from the windows of morning to celebrate the solemn pageant of the passing of many hills.

Again, I know of a cañon whose westerly wall is colored in the dull rich colors, the fantastic patterns, of a Moorish tapestry. Umber, seal brown, red, terra-cotta, orange, Nile green, emerald, purple, cobalt blue, gray, lilac, and many other colors, all rich with the depth of satin, glow wonderful as the craftiest textures. Only here the fabric is five miles long and half a mile wide.

There is no use in telling of these things. They, and many others of their like, are marvels, and exist; but you cannot tell about them, for the simple reason that the average reader concludes at once you must be exaggerating, must be carried away by the swing of words. The cold sober truth is, you cannot exaggerate. They haven't made the words. Talk as extravagantly as you wish to one who will in the most child-like manner believe every syllable you utter. Then take him into the Big Country. He will probably say, "Why, you didn't tell me it was going to be anything like *this*!" We in the East have no standards of comparison either as regards size or as regards color—especially color. Some people once directed me to "The Gorge" on the New England coast. I couldn't find it. They led me to it, and rhapsodized over its magnificent terror. I could have ridden a horse into the ridiculous thing. As for color, no Easterner believes in it when such men as Lungren or Parrish transposit it faithfully, any more than a Westerner would believe in the autumn foliage of our own hardwoods, or an Englishman in the glories of our gaudiest sunsets. They are all true.

In the mountains, the high mountains above the seven or eight thousand foot level, grows an affair called the snow-plant. It is, when full grown, about two feet in height, and shaped like a loosely constructed pine-cone set up on end. Its entire substance is like wax, and the whole concern—stalk, broad curling leaves, and all—is a brilliant scarlet. Sometime you will ride through the twilight of deep pine woods growing on the slope of the mountain, a twilight intensified, rendered more sacred to your mood by the external brilliancy of a glimpse of vivid blue sky above dazzling snow mountains far away. Then, in this monotone of dark green olive and dull brown trunk and deep olive shadow, where, like the ordered library of one with quiet tastes, nothing breaks the harmony of unobtrusive tone, suddenly flames the vivid red of a snow-plant. You will never forget it.

Flowers in general seem to possess this concentrated brilliancy both of color

and of perfume. You will ride into and out of strata of perfume as sharply defined as are the quartz strata on the ridges. They lie sluggish and cloying in the hollows, too heavy to rise on the wings of the air.

As for color, you will see all sorts of queer things. The ordered flower-science of your childhood has gone mad. You recognize some of your old friends, but strangely distorted and changed—even the dear old "butter 'n' eggs" has turned pink! Patches of purple, of red, of blue, of yellow, of orange, are laid in the hollows or on the slopes like brilliant blankets out to dry in the sun. The fine grasses are spangled with them, so that in the cup of the great fierce countries the meadows seem like beautiful green ornaments enameled with jewels. The Mariposa Lily, on the other hand, is a poppy-shaped flower varying from white to purple, and with each petal decorated by an "eye" exactly like those on the great Cecropia or Polyphemus moths, so that their effect is that of a flock of gorgeous butterflies come to rest. They hover over the meadows poised. A movement would startle them to flight; only the proper movement somehow never comes.

The great redwoods, too, add to the colored-edition impression of the whole country. A redwood, as perhaps you know, is a tremendous big tree, sometimes as big as twenty feet in diameter. It is exquisitely proportioned, like a fluted column of noble height. Its bark is slightly furrowed longitudinally, and of a peculiar elastic appearance that lends it an almost perfect illusion of breathing animal life. The color is a rich umber red. Sometimes in the early morning or the late afternoon, when all the rest of the forest is cast in shadow, these massive trunks will glow as though incandescent. The Trail, wonderful always, here seems to pass through the outer portals of the great flaming regions where dwell the risings and fallings of days.

As you follow the Trail up, you will enter also the permanent dwelling-places of the seasons. With us each visits for the space of a few months, then steals away to give place to the next. Whither

they go you have not known until you have traveled the high mountains. Summer lives in the valley; that you know. Then a little higher you are in the spring-time, even in August. Melting patches of snow linger under the heavy firs; the earth is soggy with half-absorbed snow-water, trickling with exotic little rills that do not belong; grasses of the year before float like drowned hair in pellucid pools with an air of permanence, except for the one fact; fresh green things are sprouting bravely; through bare branches trickles a shower of bursting buds, larger at the top, as though the Sower had, in passing, scattered them from above. Birds of extraordinary cheerfulness sing merrily to new and doubtful flowers. The air tastes cold, but the sun is warm. The great spring humming and promise is in the air. And a few thousand feet higher you wallow over the surface of drifts while a winter wind searches your bones. I used to think that Santa Claus dwelt at the North Pole. Now I am convinced that he has a workshop somewhere among the great mountains where dwell the Seasons, and that his reindeer paw for grazing in the alpine meadows below the highest peaks.

Here the birds migrate up and down instead of south and north. It must be a great saving of trouble to them, and undoubtedly those who have discovered it maintain toward the unenlightened the same delighted and fraternal secrecy with which you and I guard the knowledge of a good trout-stream. When you can migrate adequately in a single day, why spend a month at it?

Also do I remember certain spruce woods with openings where the sun shone through. The shadows were very black, the sunlight very white. As I looked back I could see the pack-horses alternately suffer eclipse and illumination in a strange flickering manner good to behold. The dust of the trail eddied and billowed lazily in the sun, each mote flashing as though with life; then abruptly as it crossed the sharp line of shade it disappeared.

From these spruce woods, level as a floor, we came out on the rounded shoulder of a mountain to find ourselves nearly nine thousand feet above the sea.

Below us was a deep cañon to the middle of the earth. And spread in a semi-circle about the curve of our mountain a most magnificent panoramic view. First there were the plains, represented by a brown haze of heat; then, very remote, the foot-hills, the brush-hills, the pine mountains, the upper timber, the tremendous granite peaks, and finally the barrier of the main crest with its glittering snow. From the plains to that crest was over seventy miles. I should not dare say how far we could see down the length of the range; nor even how distant was the other wall of the cañon over which we rode. Certainly it was many miles; and to reach the latter point consumed three days.

It is useless to multiply instances. The principle is well enough established by these. Whatever impression of your trail you carry away will come from the little common occurrences of every day. That is true of all trails; and equally so, it seems to me, of our Trail of Life sketched at the beginning of this essay.

But the trail of the mountains means more than wonder; it means hard work. Unless you stick to the beaten path, where the freighters have lost so many mules that they have finally decided to fix things up a bit, you are due for lots of trouble. Bad places will come to be a nightmare with you and a topic of conversation with whomever you may meet. We once enjoyed the company of a prospector three days while he made up his mind to tackle a certain bit of trail we had just descended. Our accounts did not encourage him. Every morning he used to squint up at the cliff which rose some four thousand feet above us. "Boys," he said finally, as he started, "I may drop in on you later in the morning." I am happy to say he did not.

The most discouraging to the tender-foot, but in reality the safest of all bad trails, is the one that skirts a precipice. Your horse possesses a laudable desire to spare your inside leg unnecessary abrasion, so he walks on the extreme outer edge. If you watch the performance of the animal ahead, you will observe that every few moments his outer hind hoof slips off that edge, knocking

little stones down into the abyss. Then you conclude that sundry slight jars you have been experiencing are from the same cause. Your peace of mind deserts you. You stare straight ahead, sit *very* light indeed, and perhaps turn the least bit sick. The horse, however, does not mind, nor will you, after a little. There is absolutely nothing to do but to sit steady and give your animal his head. In a fairly extended experience I never got off the edge but once. Then somebody shot a gun immediately ahead; my horse tried to turn around, slipped, and slid backwards until he overhung the chasm. Fortunately, his hind feet caught a tiny bush. He gave a mighty heave, and regained the trail. Afterwards I took a look and found that there were no more bushes for a hundred feet either way.

Next in terror to the unaccustomed is an ascent by lacets up a very steep side hill. The effect is cumulative. Each turn brings you one stage higher, adds definitely one more unity to the test of your hardihood. This last has not terrified you; how about the next? or the next? or the one after that? There is not the slightest danger. You appreciate this point after you have met head-on some old-timer. After you have speculated frantically how you are to pass him, he solves the problem by calmly turning his horse off the edge and sliding to the next lacet below. Then you see that with a mountain horse it does not much matter whether you get off such a trail or not.

The real bad places are quite as likely to be on the level as on the slant. The tremendous granite slides, where the cliff has avalanched thousands of tons of loose jagged rock-fragments across the passage, are the worst. There your horse has to be a goat in balance. He must pick his way from the top of one fragment to the other, and if he slips into the interstices he probably breaks a leg. In some parts of the granite country are also smooth rock aprons where footing is especially difficult, and where often a slip on them means a toboggan chute off into space. I know of one spot where such an apron curves off the shoulder of the mountain. Your horse slides directly

down it until his hoofs encounter a little crevice. Checking at this, he turns sharp to the left and so off to the good trail again. If he does not check at the little crevice, he slides on over the curve of the shoulder and lands too far down to bury.

Loose rocks in numbers on a very steep and narrow trail are always an abomination, and a numerous abomination at that. A horse slides, skates, slithers. It has always seemed to me that luck must count largely in such a place. When the animal treads on a loose round stone—as he does every step of the way—that stone is going to roll under him, and he is going to catch himself as the nature of that stone and the little gods of chance may will. Only, furthermore, I have noticed that the really good horse keeps his feet, and the poor one tumbles. A judgmatical rider can help a great deal by the delicacy of his riding and the skill with which he uses his reins. Or, better still, get off and walk.

Another mean combination, especially on a slant, is six inches of snow over loose stones or small boulders. There you hope for divine favor and flounder ahead. There is one compensation; the snow is soft to fall on. Boggy areas you must be able to gauge the depth of at a glance. And there are places, beautiful to behold, where a horse clammers up the least bit of an ascent, hits his pack against a projection, and is hurled into outer space. You must recognize these, for he will be busy with his feet.

Some of the mountain rivers furnish pleasing afternoons of sport. They are deep and swift, and below the ford are rapids. If there is a fallen tree of any sort across them—remember the length of California trees, and do not despise the rivers—you would better unpack, carry your goods across yourself, and swim the pack-horses. If the current is very bad, you can splice riatas, hitch one end to the horse and the other to a tree on the farther side, and start the combination. The animal is bound to swing across somehow. Generally you can drive them over loose. In swimming a horse from the saddle, start him well



upstream to allow for the current, and never, never, never attempt to guide him by the bit. The Tenderfoot tried that at Mono Creek and nearly drowned himself and Old Slob. You would better let him alone, as he probably knows more than you do. If you must guide him, do it by hitting the side of his head with the flat of your hand.

Sometimes it is better that you swim. You can perform that feat by clinging to his mane on the downstream side; but it will be easier both for you and him if you hang to his tail. Take my word for it, he will not kick you.

Once in a blue moon you may be able to cross the whole outfit on logs. Such a log bridge spanned Granite Creek near the North Fork of the San Joaquin at an elevation of about seven thousand feet. It was suspended a good twenty feet above the water, which boiled white in a most disconcerting manner through a gorge of rocks. If anything fell off that log, it would be of no further value even to the curiosity-seeker. We got over all the horses save Tunemah. He refused to consider it, nor did peaceful argument win. As he was more or less of a fool, we did not take this as a reflection on our judgment, but culled cedar clubs. We beat him until we were ashamed. Then we put a slip-noose about his neck. The Tenderfoot and I stood on the log and heaved while Wes

stood on the shore and pushed. Suddenly it occurred to me that if Tunemah made up his silly mind to come, he would probably do it all at once, in which case the Tenderfoot and I would have about as much show for life as fossil formations. I didn't say anything about it to the Tenderfoot, but I hitched my six-shooter around to the front, resolved to find out how good I was at wing-shooting horses. But Tunemah declared he would die for his convictions. "All right," said we, "die then," with the embellishment of profanity. So we stripped him naked, and stoned him into the raging stream, where he had one chance in three of coming through alive. He might as well be dead as on the other side of that stream. He won through, however, and now I believe he'd tackle a tight rope.

Of such is the Trail, of such its wonders, its pleasures, its little comforts, its annoyances, its dangers. And when you are forced to draw your six-shooter to end mercifully the life of an animal that has served you faithfully, but that has fallen victim to the leg-breaking hazard of the way, then you know a little of its tragedy also. May you never know the greater tragedy, when a man's life goes out, and you unable to help! May always your trail lead through fine trees, green grasses, fragrant flowers, and pleasant waters!

## Now

By Liska Stillman

Centuries of color may burn in the west,  
And whole seas of dawn in the east reply,  
Before the sun's heart shall at anchor lie,  
Before moon and star grown tired of quest,  
Or heavenly lips to this earth are pressed.  
Yet ever, anon, through the spirit's cry,  
There cometh a breath, a vow from the sky,  
That sinks the soul into fathoms of rest.

Already befallen is day of doom,  
And, woven fast in eternity's loom,  
Glistening the threads of the past shine clear;  
While afar in the deeps of the atmosphere  
The rays of the future separate gloom,  
And soul of the farthest dream draws near.