

## Vermont — A First Impression



o the Southern New-Englander entering Vermont for the first time there is a sense of mystic revivification. On the towns of the lower coast the blight of mutation and modernity has descended. Weird metamorphoses and excrescences, architectural and topographical, mark a menacing tyranny of mechanism and viceroyalty of engineering which are fast hurrying the present scene out of all linkage with its historic antecedents and setting it adrift anchorless and all but traditionless in alien oceans. Swart foreign forms, heirs to moods and impulses antipodal to those which moulded our heritage, surge in endless streams along smoke-clouded and lamp-dazzled streets; moving to strange measures and inculcating strange customs. All through the nearer countryside the stigmata of change are spreading. Reservoirs, billboards, and concrete roads, power lines, garages, and flamboyant inns, squalid immigrant nests and grimy mill villages; these things and things like them have brought ugliness, tawdriness, and commonplaceness to the urban penumbra. Only in the remoter backwoods can one find the pristine and ancestral beauty which was Southern New-England's, or the unmixed signs of that continuous native life whose deep roots make it the one authentic outgrowth of the landscape. There are traces enough to allure and tantalise, but not enough to satisfy. With our keenest pleasure and satisfaction is mixed a certain melancholy; for it is upon the ghost of something beloved and departed, rather than upon the thing itself, that we gaze. Our own country and history seem subtly dissolving away from us, and we clutch frantically at the straws and symbols through which our imaginations may momentarily recall and recapture a past which is really our own.

With such a mood, softened perhaps by the beauty of the hills and river-bends which flank the gateway, the Southern New-Englander enters Vermont. He has seen its hills for some time across the Connecticut, domed and undulant, and shining with a clear emerald light unmarred by vapour or defacement. Then comes a sweeping downward curve, and beyond limpid water the climbing terraces of an old town loom into sight, as a loved, remembered picture might appear when the leaves of a childhood volume are slowly turned. It is plain from the first that this town is not quite like those one has left behind. Roofs and steeples and chimneys, prosaic enough in the telling, here cluster together on the green river-bluff in some magical collocation that stirs dim memories. Something in the contours, something in the setting, has power to touch deep viol-strings of feeling which are ancestral if one be young and personal if one be old. The whole scene vaguely brings us a fleeting quality we have known before. We have seen such towns long ago, climbing

above deep river-valleys and rearing their old brick walls beside sloping, cobbled streets. Grandeur may be wanting, but the marvel of rekindled vision is there. Something is alive that is dead elsewhere; something that we, or the blood that is in us, can recognise as more closely akin to ourselves than anything in the busy cosmopolis to the southward. This, in fine, is a surviving fragment of the old America; it is what our other towns used to be in the days when they were most themselves, the days when they housed their own people and gave birth to all the little legends and bits of lore which make them glamorous and significant in the eyes of their children.

By an ancient covered bridge we ride back through decades and enter the enchanted city of our fathers' world. We had not thought such bridges still existed, for southward the last of them was demolished years ago. The river-valley is deep, and as we come from the wooden tunnel we feel the kind guardianship of the ancient hills and the eternal streams from unknown fountains of the north. On past an island stepping-stone we go, and up the homely slopes of the dawn-fresh town. There is life here, and the clatter of modern industry; but somehow the life and industry are more our own than the febrile bustle to the southward. It is the fresher, more coherent vitality that springs from continuity with ancestral sources; the vitality our own coastal region might have had under different dispensations of history. This, then, is Brattleboro; the town where Kipling wrote and Royall Tyler rhymed. Say what you will of changing Vermont life, the outsider can still find in it far more of basic worth, far more of the unmixed primal fund of mood and fibre which was New-England's supreme heritage, than the commerce-plagued cities to the south can shew. Into this hive of half-concealed glamour we ascend, stirred and rejuvenated by memories and influences too ethereal to define. The kinship and hospitality of the Main Street spread over us, and encourage us to climb higher into the charmed sea of westerly greenness to which these atavistic bricks form pylon and peristyle. The wild hills are before us, where song and witchery lurk.

And now we cast off all allegiance to modern things; to change, and the rule of steel and steam, and the crumbling of ancient visions and simple impulses. The tar and concrete roads, and the vulgar world that bred them, have ended; and we wind rapt and wondering over elder and familiar ribbons of rutted whiteness which curl past alluring valleys and traverse old wooden bridges in the lee of green slopes. The nearness and intimacy of the little domed hills have become almost breath-taking. Their steepness and abruptness hold nothing in common with the humdrum, standardised world we know, and we cannot help feeling that their outlines have some strange and almost-forgotten meaning, like vast hieroglyphs left by a rumoured titan race whose glories live only in rare, deep dreams. We climb and plunge fantastically as we tread this hypnotic landscape. Time has lost itself in the labyrinths behind, and around us stretch only the flowering waves of faery. Tawdriness is not there, but instead, the recaptured beauty of vanished centuries—

the hoary groves, the untainted pastures hedged with gay blossoms, and the small brown farmsteads nestling amidst huge trees beneath vertical precipices of fragrant briar and meadow-grass. Even the sunlight assumes a supernal glamour, as if some special atmosphere or exaltation mantled the whole region. There is nothing like it save in the magic vistas that sometimes form the backgrounds of Italian primitives. Sodoma and Leonardo saw such expanses, but only in the distance, and through the vaultings of Renaissance arcades. We rove at will through the midst of the picture; and find in its necromancy a thing we have known or inherited, and for which we have always been vainly searching.

At the heart of this weirdly beautiful Arcadia Vermont's gentle poet dwells. One with his hereditary hills and groves, with the spreading, venerable trees and the ancient peaked roofs of the vine-banked cottages, lives Arthur Goodenough; singer of the olden strain and last of the long line of New-England's Puritan oracles. Tilling ancestral acres in the good old way, and keeping alive beside his daily hearth the well-loved thoughts and customs of our Golden Age, he is vastly more than a retrospective teller of bygone tales. Alone amongst the surviving choir he truly leads the pastoral life he breathes; so that we need not wonder at the flawless authenticity of his message. He has prolonged our old New-England in himself, and his stately charm and genial hospitality are as truly poems as anything the pen could write. Lovely beyond words is the realm over which the poet holds agrestic sway. The ancient house on the hillside, embowered in greenery and shadowed by a lone leafy monarch; the dream-stirring slope to the westward, where earth's beauty melts into the cosmic glory of sunset; the narrow, beckoning roads, the outspread dew-glistening meadows, and the hint of spectral woodlands and valleys in the background—all these mark out a perfect poet's seat, and cause us to thank Fate that for once in history a man and his setting are well matched.

Northward from Brattleboro the charm still holds. There are glorious sweeps of vivid valley where great cliffs rise, New-England's virgin granite shewing grey and austere through the verdure that scales the crests. There are gorges where untamed valleys leap, bearing down toward the river the unimagined secrets of a thousand pathless peaks. Narrow, half-hidden roads bore their way through solid, luxuriant masses of forest, among whose primal trees whole armies of elemental spirits lurk. Archaic covered bridges linger fearsomely out of the past in pockets of the hills, and here and there a summit bears a tiny hamlet of trim, clean old houses and steeples that Time has never been able to sully.

Now to the right the river shimmers mystically around its bends, while New-Hampshire's granite vistas stretch panoramically toward the unknown East, whence far birds bring legends of the sea's wonder. Putney, East Putney, Grout, Westminster—one by one new piquancies unfold and retire as the traveller fares northward. The steep river-bank quaint-

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ness and ancient Yankeedom of Bellows Falls appears, a bridge is crossed, and suddenly one realises that Vermont has been left behind.

But it is still visible for leagues across the river, veiled in distance and golden with elfin light. The spell of the past has not departed, for Vermont has given us something that we have always sought, and that can never be effaced from our spirit. Dim on the horizon the purpling hills rise, Ascutney towering in lordship above its neighbours. A bend shuts it from sight, and we are alone with our meditations.