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### *The Age Romantic*

WHO would not wish to have been an Athenian of the time of Pericles? Yet who would have wished to be one? Campbell's fine and smug assertion that

"'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view."

has this merit: it can be always "inserted with a wonderful facility of application." It is commonly so near and appropriate as to be about the handiest thing in literature.

The Periclesian Athenian whom we would all like to have been—provided that we could be also Rooseveltian Americans—took little thought, doubtless, of "the glory that was Greece." He thought himself a singularly unlucky dog to live in so prosaic an age. Ah, if he could only have been born an Assyrian in the golden prime of good King Assurbanipal, before the invention of such hideous commonplaces as mathematics, oratory, navigation (with its flaring pharos), its bad poets, its Pan and the peplum!

A picturesque period is always a period remote in time or distance. It is of the essence of the picturesque that it be unfamiliar. Look at the suave Mexican *caballero* with his silvered *sombrero*, his silken sash, his embroidered jacket, slashed trousers, fearfully and wonderfully bebuttoned, his ornate footgear! How he shines in the light of his uncommon identity!—how dull we look, how odious in the comparison! Can it be possible that this glorious creation envies us the engaging simplicity of our habiliments and the charm of our unstudied incivility? And does he execute a mild rapture over the title "Mister" and the name "John Smith"?

Who would care to lose his life in ascending White Mountain by a new trail? But Mont Blanc—that is a different matter.

Mont Blanc is the monarch of mountains; they crowned him long ago.

But I fancy it was not a Frenchman that crowned him—not with such a name as that! And if the exigencies of the literary situation had compelled Coleridge to think of him in the vernacular, he would never have stood in the valley of Chamouni and asked him who sank his sunless pillars deep in earth. "White Mountain" is well enough in its way if you think only of its color; but there is the always the suggestion of the disquieting possibility that it was named in honor of the discoverer, John White, of Podunk, like the eminences that "stand dressed in living green" down in New Hampshire.

Call Capri "Goat Island" and you class it with an abomination of the same name in the harbor of San Francisco. But to the Italian looking

"across the charmed bay  
Whose blue waves keep, with Capri's sunny fountains  
Perpetual holiday."

it is just Goat Island, “and it is nothing more.” The sunny fountains and the famous seacaverns do not interest him. They are possibly fine, but indubitably familiar.

All this has perhaps something to do with contentment; it may go a short step toward making us willing to be alive. We hear a good deal about the horrors of this “commercial age,” about the dull monotony of modern life, about the depressing perpetual contact with “the things we loathe, to wit, railways, steamships, telephones, electric lights and other prosaic things which, when we are not boasting of them, we are reviling. We shudder when we think of the railway from Joppa to Jerusalem (if there is one) and sigh for the good old days of the stagecoach, when my distinguished collaborator Max O’Rell might have met with many romantic adventures at wayside inns and at the hands of gentlemen who “on the high toby spice flashed the muzzle.” Well, as to that, it is still possible to renounce one’s purse to a “road agent” between Squaw Gulch and Ginger Gap if one wants to, and “hold-ups” are not altogether unknown to the laudatory temporis acti who in default of the stagecoach are compelled to travel by express trains.

Is any spectacle really more interesting than a railway train in motion? Did one ever pass your way, gentle reader, without compelling your attention? Why, even the stolidest laborer in the field, or the more *blasé* switchman, takes a moment off to turn and look at it. At night, with its dazzling headlight, its engine eating fire and breathing steam and smoke, its flashes of red light upon the trees as its furnace doors are opened and closed, its long line of gleaming windows, the roar and clang of its progress— not in this world is anything more fascinating, more artistic and, but for its familiarity, more truly picturesque.

It is so all round; the Atlantic “liner” is a nobler spectacle than the clipper ship of our fathers, as that was a nobler than the carvel of their fathers, and that than the Roman trireme— each in turn tenderly lamented by solemn protagonists of “the days that are no more” and might advantageously never have been. How the intellectual successors of these lugubrious persons will envy their dead predecessors in the days that are to come! As they go careering through the sky in their airships they will blow apart the clouds with sighs of regret for the good old days of the express train and the picturesque trolley car. While penetrating the ocean between the British port of New York and the Russian port of Liverpool they will read with avid interest the quaint old chronicles relating to steam-driven vessels that once floated on the surface and had many a merry bout with wind and wave. Immersed in waters all aglow with artificial light and color, passing in silence and security above the charming landscapes and among “the widefaced infamous monsters of the deep,” they will deplore their hard lot in living in so prosaic an age, “even as you and I.”

The truth of it all is that we of today are favored beyond the power of speech to express in having been born in so fascinating and romantic a period. Not in literature, not in art but in those things that touch the interest and fix the attention of all classes alike, the last century was as superior to all those that went before as a bird of paradise is superior in beauty and interest to a slug. Science has made the world a spectacular extravaganza. Man has employment for all his eyes and all his ears.