

FORT St. James to me means frustration. When other men are jilted and speak of the quiet and peace of the grave, I think of what happened at Fort St. James and then we have pleasant times discussing the relative merits of cyanide and gun-barrel-in-the-mouth-toe-on-the-trigger methods of leaving this vale of tears.

Before Fort St. James I knew only Bowfort and Casa Loma. Bowfort was highly unsatisfactory because there was so little in the way of ruins; Casa Loma failed because there was too much ruin. After humps in the grass and towering Gothic arches one longs for a fort, just a common or garden fort with low buildings, a few nice Indian legends and a graveyard. Or, if you want to express your longing in the virile western style, you ache for the raw, red meat of history, for old stone walls which trembled when the cannon roared, for smoke-blackened rafters which echoed the songs of the voyageurs, for age-worn tables at which sat the great men of the fur-trade.

When the hunger comes there is no resisting. Sooner or later you will stub your toe on a rusty cannon at Fort Prince of Wales, distress comfortable clubmen at Lower Fort Garry or debate with airmen at Fort St. James.

A man driving a quick-silvery Ford coupe landed me at Fort St. James one August afternoon. We had played at hare and tortoise all the way from Vanderhoof, which the C.N.R. deigns to recognize in northern British Columbia. Either we progressed at breakneck speed and let the fenders fall where they cared or we ground along at five miles an hour while I was told about the size and trajectory of the mammoth mosquitoes of the

north. If it was not mosquitoes it was black flies. I clutched my bale of mosquito netting firmly and did nothing more than turn pale.

We finished our jaunt in a blaze of glory with the accelerator lost beneath the floorboard and a nice grade down to Stuart Lake. We flashed past a sign-board on which I saw the words "Simon Fraser."

"Ah," I bellowed, "that must be the road to the old fort itself."

"Yep," said he. "It's been Fort St. James for a long time."

"It's been Fort St. James for how long?" Honestly I couldn't help it. The question just popped out. The man changed before my eyes. Before, everything had been merry and bright. Besides mosquitoes and black flies we had discussed gold (I was on my way to see a gold producing district); we had chatted about aeroplanes (he was an airman); we had said the Government was not a good thing (he was C.C.F.), and we agreed the railway journey from Edmonton to Vanderhoof could be compared to Pilgrim's Progress, but like

Christian the train always wins through just when it has been decided the engineer is the Ancient Mariner.

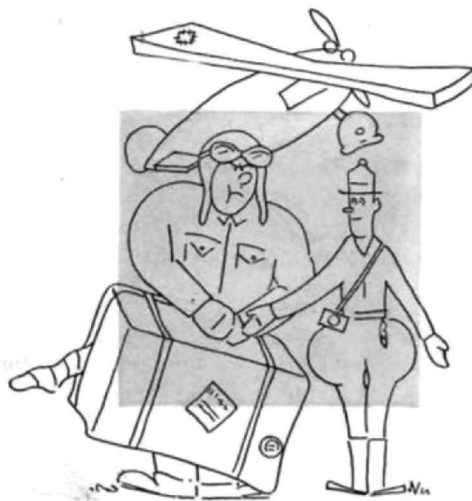
As I say, the man changed before my eyes.

"You interested in that old place?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why, yes, sure I am. Always like old places. Loads of romance. Do you know Simon Fraser and John Stuart founded this fort in 1806? It's the first white settlement in British Columbia? Isn't that great stuff?"

"Yeah," he muttered, looking at me strangely. "Great stuff. Yeah!"

He might have said "Yeah!" again, only we stopped at a beach where an



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imposing green aeroplane had been drawn up.

"He's interested in the old buildings," said my companion to the pilot. "Says something about them being the first white settlement in B.C. Sounds fishy to me."

"Don't you ever read signs, you goop?" asked the pilot. "It says all that on the sign at the entrance to the fort. You pass it twice a day; you ought to know what it says."

Aha! I had found a kindred spirit.

"Great yarn that about how Douglas was almost killed by the Indians here," I commented cheerily, looking towards the pilot. "What these walls have seen—bloodshed, tears, sacrifice and valour!" I finished, out of breath and thinking it wasn't a bad sentence.

The pilot looked at me for a long time.

"Yeah," he said. "Quite a yarn. How heavy's your suitcase?" When he had estimated its weight we went aboard the plane and flew away, admiring the red roofs of Fort St. James and enjoying a few sentimentalities, unspoken, about the aged walls echoing to the motors of the modern age, the stirring of the ghosts of the pioneers by the thunder of man-made wings. Many spiritual bruises can be healed by such reflections if you go in for that sort of thing.

Now the gold mine was one thing and very nice too. But Fort St. James, the home of the great of the olden days, the outpost of Empire, the frail symbol of British heroism, the spearhead of the attack on the wilderness, the spot of civilization in the void of savagery, the shining badge of the white man's power—Fort St. James, I say, drew me with the strength of wild horses, and if I knew any other things to call it I would use them too and let the printer throw himself in his linotype if he wants to.

When we got back to Fort St. James there were four pilots. Forthwith I tackled one.

"Now, mister," I said as if I wanted a cigarette card, "I've looked at gold and aeroplanes and Strong Men of the North. Now I want to see the Fort. I want to see old buildings reeking of romance and mildew. Even if there are hides that want tanning I don't care. I want to enjoy the finer things of life. I want . . ."

"Ah," says he. "'The finer things of life.' Now we were thinking we won't be flying for a couple of days and we were thinking a little party might be a good thing. One of the finer things of life, you know. Just a little bit of welkin-ripping."

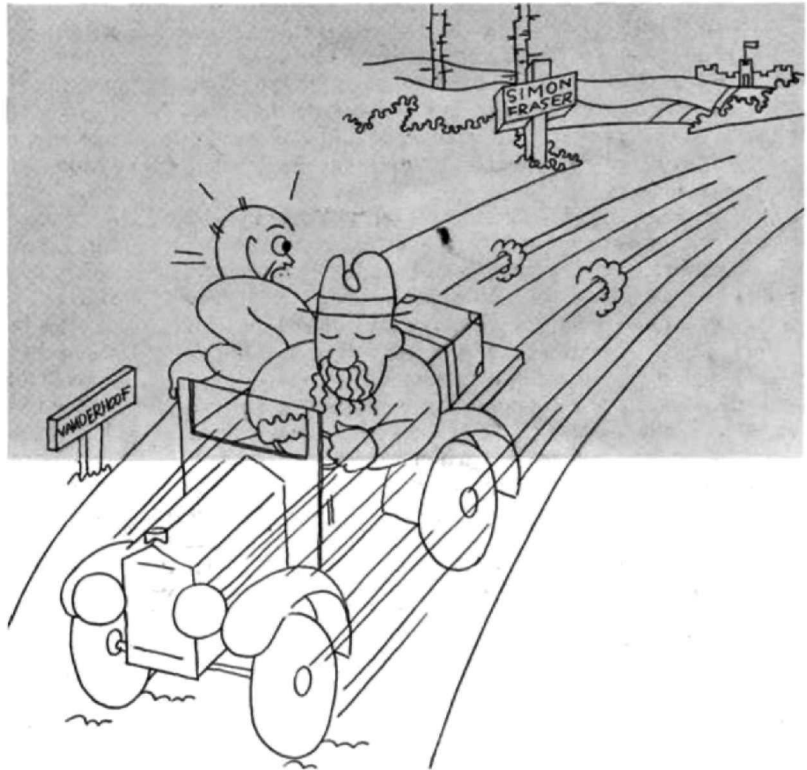
Next morning I assured them everything had been very, very nice, but I had to see Fort St. James. By some miracle of human endeavour we got started. Actually pilots were persuaded to guide me to the little cemetery where the names on the gravestones read like the roster of the Chief Factors of more than a century ago. As we were about to proceed to the Fort buildings and the highlight of the expedition, someone muttered: "Show him the wreck of the Junkers."

Now Fort St. James has been there over a hundred years and appeared good for a few more hours. But a Junkers is a transitory thing even if it is wrecked. This was an interesting wreck. Bits of the machine are scattered over half a mile of the lake shore. Not that an airman was similarly scattered over the shore, for the machine had been grounded by no more serious ailment than a difference of opinion with the authorities as to whether it should or should not be checked over. Once down, it was allowed to remain until the winds of winter and people who wanted a bolt for their bicycles caused it to look badly shopworn.

Having seen these things, we found it was dark. There is a paralysing finality about Fort St. James darkness. Cloaked in it you believe in Wendigos, water kelpies, werewolves and all the other things that go Womp! in the night.

In the morning, I had to go. Yes, the driver would be pleased to stop for a moment at the old buildings. Perhaps we could even go in for a second.

"You know," said this Jehu, "this is a new truck. Pretty fine, too, but this fourth gear gets me down."



"What are ye groanin' for? Got a toothache?"

Once she's in, it may take me fifteen minutes to get her out." With that he sighed and slipped into fourth.

"Easy," I cried. "Here are the Fort buildings."

He pushed down the clutch pedal and pushed the gear lever. Nothing happened.

"Try again," I cried. Again nothing happened. The signboard with "Simon Fraser" on it slipped by.

"Might as well forget it, buddy," said the driver.

"It's downhill most of the way to Vanderhoof and if we're stuck fifteen minutes you'll miss your train. Nothing to see anyway."

"What are ye groanin' for? Got a toothache?"