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THAT EVENING we were travelling from Montreal down to Quebec; and on the boat's bridge, several young people had begun to talk literature.

Needless to say, certain disgruntled individuals, following the current fashion, were accusing industry, commerce, the positive sciences, in a word modern progress, of being incompatible with matters concerning the ideal. According to them, Poetry had been killed by steam, electricity, and, especially, mercenary attitudes: its mausoleum was the Eiffel tower.

There is little ceremony between travellers.

"Permit me, gentlemen, but you are blaspheming," said one of the listeners attracted by the discussion. "While the human heart beats, Poetry does not die. It is much more in us than in external objects. What seems the most prosaic thing in the world may, at a given moment, assume an aspect, or inspire a feeling, of intense poetry. Everything

depends on the disposition of heart and mind in which you find yourself and, above all, on the point of view you take.

"Listen, do you want to know the most poetic thing I saw in my life, the object that gave my soul the liveliest, most touching impression? And yet it was rather banal, one of those things we tend to believe incapable of provoking emotion: it was quite simply … a telegraph pole!"

"A telegraph pole? Go on!"

"Word of honour, gentlemen! I'm not joking; and if I tell you my story, you'll have no trouble believing me."

"Speak, then, speak!" they said with one voice.

The new speaker was one of our fellow countrymen. Still robust, although past sixty, he had the penetrating gaze, the beautifully resonant voice, and the language of a cultured man. In sum, a most suitable bearing directed by an extraordinary intelligence. We listened to him with interest.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I spent sixteen years of what I may call my youth in regions rather obscure at the time, but whose name has much resounded since. I am speaking of the Klondike.

"Oh, we didn't think then of digging up the frozen earth, to extract golden ingots or nuggets from it; we were still only dealing in furs. It was the wild beast we tracked, whether with rifle in hand or by way of the natives who frequented our stores.

"I wouldn't mention the circumstances that led me there if they didn't help to explain the mood I was in when the incident I'm relating occurred. Here they are in a few words:

"I was born in Rivière-Ouelle, a pretty spot located, as you all know, some twenty-five leagues downriver from Quebec, on the right bank of the St Lawrence. My father died while I was a student at the college of Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, and my mother remarried two years later.

"My studies completed, my mother wished to see me take up a profession, which suited me well enough. But this required certain sacrifices, and my stepfather, who, by the way, had little liking for me, was squarely opposed. Hence misunderstandings, arguments, hurt feelings; in short, an impossible life for my mother and me.

"Poor mother, my presence made her suffer, my estrangement was to make her weep. To give her peace, I seized the first opportunity and left. An agent of the Hudsons Bay Company hired me, with a few bold companions, to go trade furs in the territories adjoining Alaska.

"I won't tell you of either my distant travels or my adventures in the different posts where I had to stay. Ah, take it from me, those who find modern civilization too down to earth would have had cause there to lose all taste for primitive poetry.

"The basic essentials of life were not lacking, but of the

thousand little pleasures, the thousand superfluous objects that make up the charm of life we were not to think. We had more than enough to occupy us during a good part of the year, but what to do to distract ourselves during the off seasons? Books were rare: what could be devised to dispel the monotony of the harsh and interminable winters, constantly face to face as we were with the same people and not numbering the days but by the sun's brief appearance on the horizon?

"And no news! Cut off from the entire world for twelve months from one year to the next! A single mail coach during the summer season, and that was all. Imagine sixteen years of such a life!

"finally, in the fall of 1876, the delayed mail brought me two pieces of news that, in a peculiar way, drew me closer to my country and my elderly mother: her husband had died, and the Canadian Pacific Railway had just reached Calgary, whence it was to launch a concentrated attack against the Rockies.

"At the time, I was at Fort Yukon, by the river of the same name, a hundred leagues north-west of the old Fort Reliance, a post now famous as Dawson City. No obligation kept me there; a Sioux, who knew the route well and was returning to Edmonton, could be my guide. My heart leaping in my chest, I made preparations to leave.

"So, on the morning of the first of November, my native guide and I were making our way on snowshoes

over the frozen surface of the Porcupine River, one preceding and the other following a long, solid toboggan loaded with our weapons and luggage, and dragged by four sturdy Eskimo dogs, *en route* for Fort Lapierre – a 250-mile journey in one breath, as it were.

"From Fort Lapierre you have to cross the Rockies to reach Fort McPherson. Seventy miles across an extraordinary labyrinth of streams, chasms, tumbling rocks, glaciers and inaccessible peaks! As for wild poetry, there it was; only, you thank heaven when it becomes a little less poetic.

"Speaking of Fort McPherson, first you follow the Peel River over a distance of nearly a hundred miles; then another hundred miles of prairie, rivers, lakes and portages leads you to Fort Good Hope, on the Mackenzie, which you have to ascend to Great Slaves Lake: a journey, this time, of roughly 600 miles.

"From this point, you cut across the prairie to Athabaska Landing, the last station before arriving at Edmonton; another 500 miles' walk, at least! You can see that these are not mere strolls; nor yet voyages to be undertaken lightly. But despite the long and difficult stages, we travelled them rather cheerfully, each bringing us closer to our loved ones.

"Our days were spent in walking without stop, excepting a few moments for the midday meal. At night we camped at the first likely spot, providing wood could be found to make a fire.

"When I say we camped, it's a figure of speech, as our encampment amounted to very little. first, we unharnessed the dogs and gave them their ration of frozen fish – you must always take special care of these poor animals, who are the supreme resource and of the utmost necessity on such voyages – then, the fire lit, we set the pot to boil.

"Yes, just so, in the open air, sheltered by whatever was at hand, sometimes in the wind, under the falling snow, in the blizzard. Then, after drying our furs, damp from a day of walking, we stretched out on the snow, side by side with our rifles, between a thick bear coat and a blanket of woven hare pelts; and goodnight, comrade!

"With the exception of our stops in forts and other stations, where we generally spent a much needed and particularly well-earned day of rest, we lived rough like this until December 24, when we hoped to reach Athabaska Landing early in the afternoon,

"I had made myself a calendar in the shape of a horse-shoe, on which little pegs indicated the day of the month and the names of the weekdays. I knew then that we were close to the Christmas vigil; and despite the fatigues of this endless voyage, I felt myself rather buoyed up by the idea of spending this touching family holiday under a civilized roof, in the company of my fellow men, perhaps in the midst of compatriots …

"Unfortunately, my wish was not to be realized. Since morning, a thick snow, stirred up by a violent north wind,

had made our progress very difficult. At noon, we were literally shrouded in a swirl that did not let us see ten paces ahead.

"The good people of Quebec imagine they know what a winter storm is: I wouldn't wish them to travel to the depths of the North-West to learn, to their cost, that they haven't the slightest idea.

"It is quite simply horrible. It blinds you, freezes you, jostles you, smothers you. You lose your footing, you no longer breathe, the notion of distance escapes you. Nothing to guide you: the sun's brightness is no more than a vague glimmer scarcely to be suspected through the impenetrable atmosphere; as often happens in these circumstances, the compass is driven wild; and you no longer go forward but aimlessly and, as it were, feeling your way, buried, submerged, drowned in the gusts and the furious heaving of the storm.

"It was this wild animal that had us in its jaws.

"If we hadn't been in such a hurry to arrive, we would have huddled at the bottom of some ravine, in a fold of the ground, behind a clump of trees, no matter where, and we would have let the squall pass over our heads; but, with the stubborness of despair, I was determined not to camp in the prairie that night, and we went forward all the same, despite everything, even our team, which would no longer walk but with the whip to their backs.

"Our efforts were futile: the post we hoped to reach

seemed to recoil before us; and with nightfall it became obvious that we had taken the wrong turn. We were particularly aware of it when, the storm abated and the sky again clear, we saw by the position of the stars that we had veered too much to the west. We had to resign ourselves to it.

"Changing direction, we wandered for several more hours, not so much in search of the post wished for as to find the wood necessary for camping. I was worn out with fatigue and, quite unsteady, I followed the dogs, my legs weak and my heart weighed down.

"Suddenly, the guide, who had taken the front position, cried out: 'A tree!'

"A tree, just like that, all alone, in the middle of the prairie, was unlikely: the poor fellow probably meant a bush.

"Nonetheless, I pulled the axe from under the cover on the toboggan and joined my companion. Indeed, we had before us a trunk stripped bare, rising from the ground, right in the middle of the great, deserted prairie. I stopped for a moment, surprised; then, suddenly, my heart fluttered in my chest; I couldn't hold back a shout – a shout smothered by a sob.

"This dry trunk, this dead tree, this isolated timber, raised like a solitary mast in the middle of the ocean, had been planted by the hand of man: it was a telegraph pole!

"We had passed Athabaska Landing, and we were on

the Edmonton road.

"Do you understand?

"A telegraph pole! The vanguard of civilization!

"A telegraph pole! Was this not like a friendly hand stretched towards me on the threshold of my homeland?

"To go further still, was this not the cordial greeting of a rediscovered world, a welcome onto the living earth, cultivated, peopled with intelligent beings, compatriots I had missed?

"I was finally restored to social life, to my country, to my century, after sixteen years' exile in the depths of immense, untamed solitudes. I was almost restored to my family, for this steel cable I heard vibrating above linked me with the past, with my native village, with the family home now dearer to me than ever, with my elderly mother, to whom I imagined I could shout a far-off greeting, despite the thousand leagues still separating me from her!

"Ah, but you would have had to experience this for yourselves, lost under a northern sky, in the middle of a frozen desert, in the mystery of the holy night of Christmas, to really understand me: I confess to you openly, I felt my mind become clouded.

"And there, under the astonished gaze of my companion in misfortune, who, quite puzzled by the strange sounds from the electric cable buzzing above our heads, murmured: 'Manitou! Manitou!' in a frightened tone of voice, I collapsed into tears, and, opening my arms, for a

long long time I embraced this unfeeling piece of wood, this telegraph pole – my brother!"

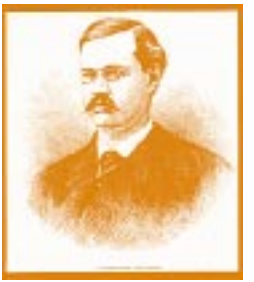
The voice of the teller trembled a little. As for us, we were moved listening to him. Even those who had so squarely denounced the prosiness of our "iron age" were disarmed. After a few moments of silence, the traveller from the North-West resumed:

"What shall I add, gentlemen? I didn't wish to go farther. We camped there as well as we could; and I slept at the foot of my new friend, my head lost in my dreams, while the sonorous cable, shaken by the night wind, brought to me, in tatters, something like a distant echo of the bells of Rivière-Ouelle and the holy songs that were, at this very moment, resounding under the domes of our churches.

"I have never attended a more beautiful midnight mass.

"No, no! Poetry doesn't die; it lives forever in the innermost reaches of our hearts; and the light touch of one of those supposedly stifling winds is all that's needed to awaken its most divine vibrations and make it sing its most touching melodies."

About the Author



THE UNOFFICIAL POET LAUREATE of French-speaking Canada, **LOUIS FRÉCHETTE** (1839-1908) was also a writer of plays, essays, and short stories. His early work drew its inspiration from both romanticism and radical politics. (He was often called "the Lamartine of Canada".) The most singular of these poems, *La Voix d'un exilé* (1866), he wrote in Chicago, where he had exiled himself in protest against the approach of Confederation. Much later, wealthy and respectable, he is said to have bought and burnt all the copies then extant. *Les fleurs boréales* (1879) won him the Montyon prize from the Académie Française and secured his reputation at home. However, the work for which he will perhaps be longest remembered is *La Légende d'un peuple* (1887), in which he enshrines the great figures of French Canada's past, such as Jolliet and Papineau.

It should be noted that, although Fréchette practised as a lawyer for most of his life, in 1859, after being expelled from school and banished from his father's house, he spent a month in Ogdensburg (New York) trying to make a living as first a telegraph operator and then a roadmender. (When he returned home, he was simply sent to another school.)