

# NORTHWEST PASSAGE

By  
KENNETH ROBERTS



DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.  
*New York*

MCMXXXIX

For the assistance so generously and unfailingly given him in the accumulating of material for and the writing of *Northwest Passage*, the author is deeply grateful to

Anna Mosser Roberts

Major A. Hamilton Gibbs, *Middleboro, Mass.*

Stanley Pargellis, *Department of History, Yale University*

Dorothy M. Vaughan, *Portsmouth, N. H., Public Library*

Wallace H. White, Jr., *United States Senator from Maine*

S. H. P. Pell, *Director, Fort Ticonderoga Museum*

Dorothy C. Barck, *New York Historical Society*

R. W. G. Vail, *Librarian, American Antiquarian Society*

Chilson H. Leonard, *Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, N. H.*

Consul General and Mrs. Ernest L. Ives, *Algiers, Algeria*

Prof. Herbert Faulkner West, *Dartmouth College*

Gustav Lanctot, *Public Archives of Canada*

Richard Goddard, *Shattuck Observatory, Hanover, N. H.*

Milo King, *General Manager, Fort Ticonderoga Museum*

Paul Allen, *Baker Memorial Library, Hanover, N. H.*

Stephen Laurent, *Odanak (St. Francis), P. Q.*

Lucy Drucker, *London*

Harry deForest Smith, *Director, Amherst College Library*

Mary G. Nye, *Vermont Historical Society*

W. R. Gregg, *Chief, U. S. Weather Bureau*

Victor Hugo Paltsits, *New York Public Library*

Winold Reiss, *New York City*

Allan Nevins, *Department of History, Columbia University*

Nellie B. Pipes, *Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon*

Zoltán Haraszty and Harriet Swift, *Boston Public Library*

Superintendent, *Public Record Office, London*

The Library of Congress

The hitherto unpublished courtmartials of Major Rogers and Lieut. Samuel Stephens, and other explanatory documents, as well as a complete bibliography, appear in the Appendix of the special edition of this novel.

*"I HAVE no special regard for Satan; but I can at least claim that I have no prejudice against him. It may even be that I lean a little his way, on account of his not having a fair show. All religions issue bibles against him, and say the most injurious things about him, but we never hear his side. We have none but the evidence for the prosecution, and yet we have rendered the verdict. To my mind, this is irregular. It is un-English; it is un-American; it is French. . . . Of course Satan has some kind of a case, it goes without saying. It may be a poor one, but that is nothing; that can be said about any of us."*

MARK TWAIN  
*In Defense of Harriet Shelley  
and Other Essays*

## BOOK I

*The Northwest Passage, in the imagination of all free people, is a short cut to fame, fortune and romance—a hidden route to Golconda and the mystic East. On every side of us are men who hunt perpetually for their personal Northwest Passage, too often sacrificing health, strength and life itself to the search; and who shall say they are not happier in their vain but hopeful quest than wiser, duller folk who sit at home, venturing nothing and, with sour laughs, deriding the seekers for that fabled thoroughfare—that panacea for all the afflictions of a humdrum world.*

## CHAPTER I

**THIS BOOK** has not been written to prove a case. It is not an argument against what is called the crucible of war; nor is it an attempt to show that no man has ever been tempered in that crucible without bearing one of war's inevitable scars—without having become cruel, an ingrate, a wastrel; diseased, selfish, self-deluded, a drunkard; contemptuous of what is good, or without faith in God or mankind. It may, at times, seem to hint that patriots, steadfast defenders of their country against enemies in warpaint or scarlet, are still called patriots when, in times of peace, they sit traitorously irresolute or quiescent before those equally dangerous foes that lurk in the shadows of all wars—such foes as greed, short-sightedness, and the stupidity and cowardice of back-yard statesmen.

My purpose has been more simple. It has been my lot to have some contact with a man who was remarkable and strange; and by chance I encountered him at periods important in the early history of my country. Given the proper guidance, he might have been a greater prince than Jenghiz Khan. To me, at times, he seemed almost a god: at other times possessed by demons. Yet I think that at his best he benefited his country more substantially than have warriors, statesmen and authors of greater renown; and at his worst, I suspect he fell no lower than any one of us might fall, provided we had possessed his vision and energy to begin with, and then had undergone the same exertions, the same temptations, the same ingratitude and disappointments he endured. Therefore it has seemed to me worth while to write my recollections of the days when he fascinated me as no man has before or since.

### §

In telling this story, I would like above all things to be truthful; yet at the very outset I find it difficult to remember accurately the

beginning of the chain of circumstances that most affected my life.

I might, for example, blame my troubles on my habit of sketching scenes and faces in a commonplace book; I might ascribe them to my father's insistence that I go to Harvard College; or I might with equal accuracy say they were due to John Singleton Copley's words of encouragement. Some people, as I shall show, blamed Hunk Marriner and Cap Huff for visiting me in my college room in Cambridge and encouraging me to mock the Board of Overseers. I myself, for a long time, blamed Elizabeth Browne and my own youthful inability to keep my mouth shut. But it would be as reasonable to blame the terrible food in the Harvard Commons in the year 1759, or the French King for using St. Francis Indians to help him gain control of North America.

If any of those ingredients—my desire to sketch, Harvard College, its terrible food, John Singleton Copley, Cap Huff, Elizabeth Browne or the St. Francis Indians—had been lacking, my troubles, no doubt, would never have commenced, and I might have become a Portsmouth merchant, living comfortably and dully in a tall brick house and admiring the making of money, no matter how made.

Even though these subjects seem irrelevant, I must touch on all of them; for they have a bearing on what happened later.

## 5

Both my mother and my father had long lived in Kittery. My mother's home, before she married, was the square one at Pipestave Landing, the beautiful point which, near Salmon Falls, marks the limit of navigation on the Piscataqua River at low tide. Her great grandfather Richard Nason built that house in 1632.

My father, Humphrey Towne, owned a rope-walk at Kittery, opposite Badger's Island, where John Langdon of Portsmouth built his vessels. In his rope-walk my father made hawsers and cables for the King's ships—cables so large that when one was moved, eighty seamen took it on their shoulders and walked it through the streets, so that it had the appearance of a monstrous blue-legged centipede.

Most of my father's work, however, was done for John Langdon's brigs, which helps to account for my name—Langdon Towne.

My father was a kind man, but inclined to be impatient with those whose opinions were at variance with his own. This trait, seemingly, was inherited. His own great grandfather William had removed from Ipswich to Kittery in a fit of impatience. Three of William's sisters, Rebecca, Sarah and Mary, all women of probity and good sense, had denounced the vicious children responsible for the beginning of the witchcraft delusion in Massachusetts, and as a result had themselves been put on trial for witchcraft. Rebecca was acquitted: then called back and convicted because of the pretended agonies of those same terrible children. Then Sarah was convicted for openly upholding Rebecca, and both were hanged. At that William, really losing his temper, loaded his wife, his belongings and his eight children on three cows and a horse and removed to the eastward. He refused to stop until he crossed the Piscataqua River and came to Kittery where, as he put it, he could breathe the air of Maine, uncontaminated by the choking flavor of Massachusetts imbeciles and murderers.

Our home was on Mendum's Point in Kittery, handy to Badger's Island and the main ferry to Portsmouth; and beginning with the days when I was knee-high to a grasshopper, I had gone up and down the Piscataqua between Kittery and Pipestave Landing, sometimes afoot and sometimes by canoe, to spend Thanksgiving or Christmas with my grandfather, or to fish in the spring of the year, or to shoot geese and deer in the autumn. That was how I had come to know Hunk Marriner and Cap Huff.

Hunk's mother, Anna Marriner, owned canoes which she operated from a wharf near our house, and was called the commodore of the Kittery canoe fleet that daily brought fish to Spring Wharf in Portsmouth.

She was a playful woman, addicted to jesting and practical jokes; and it was one of her whims to name her children after prominent residents of Portsmouth. She named them for Governor Benning Wentworth, his brother Hunking, Samuel Langdon who became president of Harvard, Archibald Macphedris who built



the first ironworks in this country at Dover, Judge Peter Livius and others, most of them proud and wealthy Episcopalians. Thus she was anathema to Portsmouth society, which was composed exclusively of Episcopalians who had no relish for any sort of gaiety except their own. Ordinary citizens of Portsmouth and Kittery thought highly of her, however, because she worked hard, brought plenty of fresh fish to Spring Wharf, and retained the affectionate regard of her children, which was more than most of the Portsmouth Episcopalians were able to do.

Hunking Marriner had inherited some of his mother's playfulness, as well as her love for hard work; and although he worked at nothing but fishing and shooting, and was therefore called lazy and a loafer, he worked three times harder than any merchant ever worked at less exhausting labors, and had six times as much fun.

He shot, as the saying goes, for the market; and I have seen him come down the river, in the fall of the year, his canoe loaded to the gunwales with Canada geese, brant, black ducks and teal, all shot in one day. His skill was such that he could successfully stalk Canada geese in an open field.

Knowing my partiality for gunning, he took me with him for company, and we shot geese, deer and bear together as far north as Dover and as far east as Arundel, where I had relatives. Through him I met Cap Huff, another resident of Kittery, who made a living carrying packages express from Portsmouth to Falmouth. When business was slack, Cap joined us, claiming he did it for a rest. He was a prodigious eater, able to devour two dozen twelve-inch trout at one sitting; and it was his contention that a single goose was the most embarrassing piece of game a gunner could bring home, since it was more than one man could comfortably eat, but not enough for two.

It is singular but true that Hunk and Cap took more interest in my efforts to sketch than did any other person in Kittery or Portsmouth. My father and my older brothers seemed convinced that drawing was a waste of time, if not downright womanly, like painting on china, or embroidering. My mother, I had reason to think, was secretly pleased at my scratchings; but at the same time

she saw no reason for depicting subjects she considered unpleasant. A sketch of our kitchen, in which we lived, seemed to her to lack dignity. She preferred a sketch of our best room, which we never sat in and seldom saw.

Hunk and Cap, on the other hand, breathed anxiously down my neck while I struggled to get things on paper. Some of their suggestions were worthless, but others showed their observation had been superior to mine.

"Wouldn't those birches look better," Hunk asked, "if you put black triangles, like brackets, where the branches sprout out of the trunk?"

It was Cap who showed me that to draw an impression of a thing is sometimes an improvement on drawing an exact likeness. "Listen," he said, "that aint the way a partridge looks when he's in a hurry! He's all pale, like a ghost, and twice as long as what he'd measure if you put a yardstick on him."

## §

It was in 1757 that my father decided to send me to Harvard College. What led him to do so, I was never sure. My two older brothers were in the rope-walk, so there was no room for me. I had been sent to Major Samuel Hale's Grammar School in Portsmouth and had become friendly with all the young Episcopalians; and it may be my father figured a Harvard education would provide me with a business opening that would be advantageous to the whole family.

If that was what he thought, he was probably right. Nearly all of those Episcopalian men of Portsmouth had gone to Harvard. We were Congregationalists, and it was almost a miracle when a Congregationalist was admitted by Episcopalians of Portsmouth as a social equal. Yet as soon as I was safely enrolled in Harvard, the Portsmouth Episcopalians seemed willing to accept me as one of themselves, whether I wished to be accepted or not.

It is barely possible I was sent to Harvard because my mother had hopes of seeing me a clergyman, just as every mother, seem-

ingly, at some time dreams of her son in a pulpit, discoursing musically to weeping congregations. I mention this suspicion because there was rumor in Kittery and Portsmouth to the effect that I proposed to enter the ministry after leaving Harvard. This rumor may have been due to remarks which my mother let drop; or it may have been due to the erroneous belief that Harvard was a sort of religious institution, and that nearly every young man who went there from smaller towns in those days became a clergyman.

In my case there were three good reasons why the rumor had no foundation. For one thing, no system of Divinity or Ethics was taught in the College while I was there. For another, my aptitude for drawing inclined me toward the classes of the Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy. Under him I studied Natural and Experimental Philosophy, which matters were of small worth to a clergyman, but of great value to me—Pneumatics, Hydrostatics, Mechanics, Statics, Optics; the doctrine of Proportions; the principles of Algebra, Conic Sections, Plane and Spherical Trigonometry; the general principles of Mensurations, Planes and Solids; the principles of Astronomy and Geography; the doctrine of the Spheres; the use of the Globes; the motions of the Heavenly Bodies according to the hypotheses of Ptolemy, Tycho Brahe and Copernicus; the division of the world into its various kingdoms; the use of the Maps; and so on. It was from him that I first heard mention of the Northwest Passage, which was to loom so large in my life.

The third and best reason why I never studied divinity was that I had no desire to do so.

Nevertheless, the rumor persisted in Portsmouth, and before long it got me into real trouble. That's one reason why I have always hated rumors.

## CHAPTER II

**I**N THE SUMMER of 1759, when Hunk Marriner and Cap Huff unexpectedly visited me in Cambridge, the College would have been something of an eyecopener to those who thought of it as a nest of budding clergymen.

It was not, as the reformer Whitefield had implied a few years before, a mere seminary of Paganism; but on warm nights in the spring of the year it was likely to be a tumultuous place because of the determination of the students to show their disapproval whenever they received a bad supper in the Commons. Since this was a nightly occurrence, there was almost a regular evening hulla-baloo, followed by the ringing of bells and often a sprightly throwing of brickbats against the door of a Tutor.

Edicts and warnings were issued by the Board of Overseers of the College against these frequent disorders, complaining that there were combinations among the undergraduates for the perpetration of unlawful acts; that students were guilty of being absent from their chambers at unseasonable times of night; that the loose practice of going and staying out of town without leave must cease. The students must, the Overseers insisted, make an end of profane cursing and swearing. There could be no more frequenting of alehouses; no more fetching of liquors to the chambers of undergraduates; no further entering into extravagant and enormous expenses at taverns for wine, strong beer and distilled spirits.

Since it never seemed to occur to the Board of Overseers to see that our food was improved, the disorders naturally continued.

It even became the fashion to walk forth, on a warm evening, in search of disorders. The searchers were seldom disappointed; but when they were, they generously provided disorders of their own to keep late-comers from being disappointed too.

## §

My rooms were on the top floor of a small house on Brattle Street; for since there were 134 students in Harvard at that time, and since only 90 could be accommodated in Massachusetts Hall, the rest of us were obliged to lodge where we could.

It was late on a June afternoon, a little before the Commons hour, that I heard my name hoarsely spoken in the street below. When I went to the open window and peered out, I saw one of my classmates pointing up at my room. Beside him Hunk Marriner and Cap Huff, all sweaty and dusty, stared upward with mouths agape.

At my shouted invitation they stumbled up the dark and narrow stairs and pushed their way into the room, seeming to fill it to overflowing, not only with their bodies and their muskets and the packages which each carried, but with a singular ripe odor compounded of rum and a musty smell unfamiliar to me.

"What's that smell?" I asked, when I had made them welcome.

"Smell?" Cap said. "Smell? I don't smell nothing, only these books here." He waved a huge hand at my desk.

"What you smell," Hunk said, "might prob'ly be either us or these skins—five sea-otter and twelve sables. Cap got 'em off to the eastward somewheres, and we're taking 'em to Boston to sell to Captain Callendar."

"Well," I said, "you're in luck! Who'd you get 'em from?"

"Oh," Cap said indifferently. "I just stumbled across 'em, and so I picked 'em up."

"Why didn't you sell 'em in Portsmouth?"

Cap's reply was impatient. "Listen: there's times I wisht I'd never bothered to pick up one of these skins. Every time anybody mentions 'em, there's as much talk about 'em as there'd be about a cart-load of gold horseshoes. Prob'ly it's those skins you smell, the way Hunk says, but don't give 'em another thought, because we're going into Boston as soon as we get something to eat. Then you wont smell 'em any more."

"If you're going to eat," I said, "I'll go out and eat with you."

Hunk shook his head. "One of the reasons we stopped here was so we could leave our muskets while we go to Boston. The other reason was we didn't have any money, and we wont have any till we sell the skins. We thought maybe you'd have some."

"I haven't," I said. "This is the end of the year, and nobody has any. You'll have to go over to Commons with me for supper. Maybe you wont like the food, but it can't be helped."

"We'll like it," Cap assured me. "Anybody that's hungry likes anything, and I'm hungry enough to eat a porcupine, quills and all."

They were not, Hunk protested, suitably dressed to appear in polite society; but this wasn't true, for they had on their city clothes—homespun breeches, gray woolen stockings and towcloth shirts—and carried brown coats tied to their belts in back. Thus a little brushing made them presentable, aside from the wrinkles in their coats and the musty flavor of stale sea-otter pelts that clung persistently to them.

Noticeable as was this faint perfume, it was wholly submerged, when we entered Commons, by a noisome fragrance that struck against us in waves as we walked down the aisle. These surges of ripeness seemed propelled against us by an undercurrent of grumbling that rose from all the tables, frequently increasing to a noisy angry clamor, only to subside again to discontented mutterings.

When we seated ourselves, it was evident that Cap and Hunk might have worn buckskin hunting clothes and coonskin caps without exciting comment; for the attention of all the students at my own table and those adjoining was riveted on the pies which were being served. They had been baked in deep dishes, about the size of a barber's bowl; and whenever one of them was placed before a newcomer, all his neighbors leaned forward to watch it opened. In every case the owner, after piercing the protective covering, used forefinger, thumb and nose in the supreme gesture of loathing, while all adjacent colleagues groaned eloquently in unison. This, then, accounted for the resurgent clamor; and when we in turn received our own pies and opened them, we had little hope of containing our own emotion.

On the instant that I punctured the crust of mine, a hot and nauseous smell gushed upward—a smell so ripely evil that it caught at the throat and at the stomach too.

At the sight of my face, all the others at our table joined in the prevalent loud groan.

"For God's sake, what's in it?" I asked Wingate Marsh, a classmate.

"Carrion!" Marsh said. "Carrion!"

"Look here," I said to him, "these friends of mine walked all the way from Portsmouth today. Isn't there anything fit to eat?"

"Not one damned thing!" Marsh said. "There's nothing but this pie—carrion pie!" Then his eyes fixed themselves amazedly on Cap Huff, who sat beside me.

Cap had neatly folded back the crust of his pie, and was eating heartily. Hunk also dived into his with no sign of repugnance.

"Hold on!" I protested. "Don't eat that! You'll be poisoned! We can't leave the table till the tutors give the word, not unless we want to be fined five shillings; but if you'll wait, I'll borrow some money and we'll go to the Tavern and get something to eat."

"What's wrong with this?" Cap asked. He scraped his bowl with his spoon; then looked amiably around the incredulously staring table. "Maybe mine was better'n what you had. Anyways, I aint more than took the edge off my appetite, and if there's anybody wants to get rid of his pie, I'll trade him for it."

He eyed my friends innocently. "I'll trade a drink of rum for every pie. Tomorrow night I'll be coming out of Boston with some rum, and you can come around to Langdon Towne's room and collect."

With one accord the eleven other men at the table pushed their pies toward Cap. He took them all, arranging them in a semi-circle in front of Hunk and himself.

"What would you figure was in these pies?" he asked, as he smiled blandly at my classmates.

Matthew Weaver of Watertown answered for all of us. "We don't know what was in yours, but ours must have been horse. Old horse, a long time dead."

Cap rolled up his eyes and swallowed hard. "No; it aint horse: it's rabbit; but a natural good eater easy gets used to rabbits that might have lost their lives some little time back. Besides, if a rabbit's tuckered when he gets killed, he tastes kind of lively. I don't say but these was both kind of overkept and tuckered too; but on the other hand, look at all the flavor they gain by it."

Weaver stared at him incredulously. "Don't they taste *horrible* to you?"

Cap seemed to consult his inwards judiciously. "No, not horrible exactly. I've had rabbit pies that you didn't have to lift the cover of, because it was already blew off. Maybe you wouldn't call it no furbelowed lady's feed, but I've seen cheeses that wasn't, either. The way to learn how to eat a pie like this is to turn your head to one side while you open it, and until it kind of dies down; but that's only for beginners. Eggs too old I don't claim I ever could master, even myself; but take a nice old kept-over rabbit and there's something mighty strong and wholesome about him. It builds up the stomach."

Samuel Wingate of Dorchester cleared his throat. "We live and learn. Just let me have my pie back, will you?"

Cap stared at him. "Your pie? I already et yours. You aint got any! You traded it to me for a glass of rum tomorrow; and when you make a bargain, you got to keep it. Don't they learn you no morals at Harvard College?"

Sam was silent, and Cap conferred privily with Hunk, while I removed the crust from my pie and tried it. As Cap had intimated, it was not as bad as it smelled. Neither was it good.

Cap spoke benevolently to my friends. "This is how we figure it: all these pies belong to I and Hunk, but we wouldn't want to take advantage of a lot of nice young fellers—not if their education had been kind of neglected along some lines. If you fellers want to trade for what we got left, we'll trade. There's still enough of 'em so's each of you can have half a pie. You can have 'em back for a cigarro apiece, payable tomorrow night when you get your rum."



## CHAPTER III

**W**ORD SPREAD RAPIDLY, seemingly, concerning my amiable and eccentric acquaintances; for when Hunk and Cap returned from Boston at dusk on the following day, there were as many as twenty undergraduates, a few of them unknown to me, lounging on the grass before the house in which I lived. As soon as Cap came in sight at the end of the street, we saw that he intended to keep his agreement. Over his shoulder was a canvas sling; and in the sling, resting above his left hip, was a five-gallon keg. Hunk was laden with a number of lesser bundles, among them a paper cylinder the size of a small cannon. Evidently their skins had sold well in Boston.

These two friends of mine, it was easy to see, had made a strong and favorable impression in a short time; for Marsh and Wingate and the others hailed them profanely, asking how much rabbit pie they'd eaten during the day, and saying they should have been at Commons for supper, as we'd had a poison ivy soup that they'd no doubt have found appetizing.

"We've got your cigarros," Sam Wingate told Cap. "Knowing your tastes, we had 'em made specially for you out of horse hair and hoof parings."

"That's good," Cap said. "That'll be a nice change from the chopped fish skins and oakum that us country fellers have to smoke." He looked apprehensively up and down the street. "Listen! We only got five gallons in this here keg, and I been lugging it five miles, so I got a good deal of a thirst. There aint more'n enough to give us a couple all round, so let's get out of sight somewheres and drink it pretty quick. If we don't, we'll have the whole college wanting a taste of it, and there wont be enough left for us to do more than spill on our chins."

There was some truth in what he said, for already our numbers had been augmented by other acquaintances of mine; so after Cap had dispatched Wingate and Marsh for jugs of hot water and an