



ON SNOW-SHOES TO THE BARREN GROUNDS

BY CASPAR W. WHITNEY

FAR to the northwest, beginning ten days' journey beyond Great Slave Lake and running down to the Arctic Ocean, with Hudson Bay as its eastern and Great Bear Lake and the Coppermine River as its western boundaries, lies the most complete and extended desolation on earth. That is the Barren Grounds, the land whose approximate 200,000 square miles (for its exact area is unknown) is the dwelling-place of no man, and its storms and sterility in its most northerly part are withstood the year round by no living creature save the musk-ox. There is the timberless waste where ice-laden blasts blow with hurricane and ceaseless fury that bid your blood stand still and your breath come and go in painful stinging gasps; where rock and lichen and moss replace soil and trees and herbage; and where death by starvation or freezing dogs the footsteps of the explorer.

There are two seasons and only two methods of penetrating this great lone land of the North—by canoe, when the watercourses are free of ice, and on snow-shoes during the frozen period, which occupies nearly nine of the year's twelve months. The deadly cold of winter, and greater risk of starvation, make the canoe trip the more usual one with the few Indians that hunt the musk-ox. But, because of the many portages, you cannot travel so rapidly by canoe as on snow-shoes, nor go so far north for the best of the musk-

ox hunting, nor see the Barren Grounds at their best, or worst, as you care to consider it. That is why I chose to make the attempt on snow-shoes.

And why did I turn my face towards a country which seemed to hold naught for the traveller but hardship? Well—certainly to hunt musk-ox, the most inaccessible game in the world, and to look upon his habitat at the period of its uttermost desolation; certainly also to study the several tribes of Indians through which I must pass on my way to the Barren Grounds; and *en route* to hunt wood-bison, undoubtedly now become the rarest game in the world. Possibly, too, I went that I might for a time escape the hum and routine sordidness of the city, and breathe air which was not surecharged with convention and civilization.

Arthur Heming, the artist, and I found ourselves, December 27, 1894, at Edmonton, the end of the railroad. We had travelled on the Canadian Pacific *via* Winnipeg and Calgary, and through the land of the Crees, Blackfeet, and Sarece Indians, without seeing anything so picturesque in the way of costuming as the Winnipeg dragoon and a Sarece young woman resplendent in beads and glittering tinsel. I really ought to include the mounted policeman, for he too has a uniform which, with scarlet jacket and yellow-striped breeches, is deserving of greater attention. But the mounted po-