

In the Athabasca Valley

Making History

By JEAN BLEWETT

"The watchword I give to every settler's wife that passes by is: 'Look ahead, and laugh.'" says the dimpled Pioneer.

IT is at Moose Portage, two days' journey by trail from Lesser Slave Lake, that we make the acquaintance of two important people, the pioneer white woman of the district, and the housekeeper. The latter is also known as the Danish dear. Joan christened her this on the spot.

Introductions are empty things as a rule. People are so alike. One man seems the twin of another—at first sight, I mean. It is the same with women. And the remarks, the inarticulate murmurs, the polite fiction such as "Charmed to meet you," "Have known and admired," "Hope for a continuance of the acquaintance," ring little change.

But in the far away places it is different. Instead of a type you get an *individual*, the man or the woman who is not repeating his neighbour's texts, proverbs, or formulas, but has evolved a few things for himself or herself. Originality has a chance to develop in places too remote for fashion-following. You know how it is. So long as the voices of those we deem wonderful ring in our ears we are more or less mere echoes. It is when these voices have died away in a great enveloping silence that we grope our way to self-expression.

These Moose Portage introductions are uncommon enough to be remembered. The Danish dear is first on the list, not that she is more important than the other, but we come upon her first. She is the pleasant surprise of a weary day's travel over what is surely the roughest trail between Bald Hill and the Plains of Peace. Along about four in the afternoon the driver remarks that we will be late making camp to-night. Whereat Joan of Arc exclaims:

"I'm sick of camp meals. That Hudson Bay Co. bacon is as rusty as the clerk who sold it to us, the bread is dry as chips, and I've never pined for Blue-nose butter. Somehow canned butter seems a deceitful sort of thing at seventy-five cents a pound. With all the cattle one sees up here it's a shame to have to depend on an article manufactured by some Nova Scotian a dozen or so years ago. This big north country is all right, its rugged grandeur is wonderful, but I'd like a few more white families to the hundred mile. Yes I would. Now, if this jolted, hungry, black and blue waggon load could dispense with camp-making and camp-cooking for once, gather around some nice woman's table, and——" Here the waggon strikes a larger stump than usual, and Joan loses her equilibrium and the thread of her discourse.

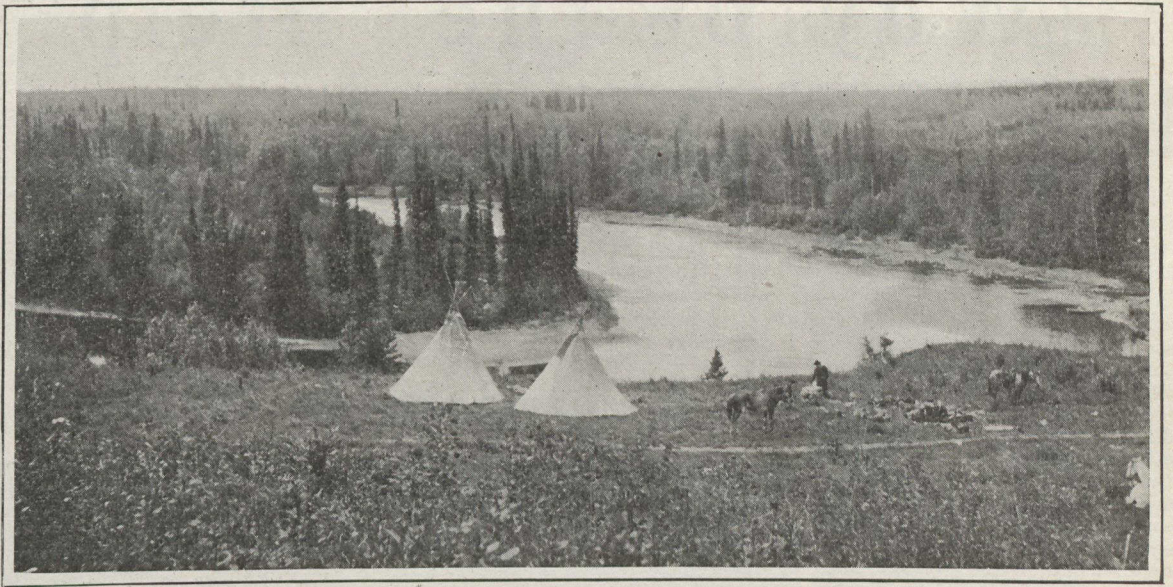
"It just might happen," suggests our optimistic driver. "There is quite a settlement out this way, and someone told me a couple from Denmark was talkin' of takin' charge of the rest-house if Powderface gave it up."

Nobody believes him, but when we come to Moose Portage the door of the only house discernible opens and out comes a woman whose hair is flaxen and speech broken, and who welcomes us so kindly we are in love with her on the instant.

"This make me glad," she says. "To have white friends from far away is good. Come in. I am just now cooking the meal. I am Mrs. —, and my man is away four days bringing our winter supplies by raft from the Landing. Four days is not long, but it seems so when one is alone. It takes time for a woman to make her heart to feel at home in a new country. Come in, come in." And, "Oh!" she cries, as our two-year-old tourist is handed out to her, "I wish I might keep you alway, you sweet thing! You girl baby!"

It is a beautifully kept house, with the unmistakable home flavour in every part of it. Just one square room with rafters showing, and most of the furniture home made. But the tin wash-dish is bright as a mirror, the roller towel spotless, the pine table almost as white as the cloth our hostess spreads on it; the boards of the floor look as though they have been washed, blued, and bleached; the stove is shining; so is the kettle bubbling on it, and the saucepan emitting the savory smell.

Once when we are alone for a moment by our



"—Wonderful, but I'd like a few more white families to the hundred mile."

two selves, I look at the young face, the neat figure, the capable hands, and say:

"You are quite content and happy here?"

"Happy, yes, I am that, but content—is any wife content who has no child of her own?" The brave eyes fill. "God may be good to me some day. I need a little one to keep me busy and full of tender thoughts, and—but now it is supper."

"Pinch me, pinch me," implores Joan of Arc as we sit down to the table. "I want to make sure I am awake—roast venison, stewed moose with cabbage, onions and 'sich,' delicious bread and butter, wild strawberry preserves, tea with cow cream instead of the kind you shake out of a tin. It's too good to be true!"

"Later you will bring in your beds and spread upon my floor," smiles the Danish dear, "and it may be that my neighbour will come to see how I fare here by myself. I trust so. She is worthy to meet. For four years she is the only white woman in this part of the country. Oh, she is a brave one, afraid of nothing. Has shot her bear, and deers many. Of coyote skins she has made her a carpet for the floor."

"Five years without seeing another white woman! How lost and lonely the poor creature must have been!" says the city lady, with a gasp.

"Two of her three babies were born in those days. She was neither lost nor lonely," comes the answer. "I wish she would come to-night."

The wish is granted. Dusk has crept around the cabin when arrives a waggon drawn by an ox-team, and carrying a whole happy family. Our hostess, with a cheery greeting to the man, bundles the woman and children into the house.

"This is the pioneer, the mother of us all, one of the best in God's world," says the Danish dear, drawing her visitor forward.

One naturally expects a pioneer to be, at least, middle-aged, a little stern and weather-beaten, with homesick lines apparent and wistful eyes that seem to be forever looking for something missed. Lo and behold our Moose Portage pioneer is in the twenties, a round, rosy, slip of a thing, with beautiful braids of hair, and more dimples than there is any call for. She is a proud person, proud of her husband, of her three romping, sturdy youngsters, of her position as leading lady of the place. Of pity she will have none.

"No, I didn't lose my grip, and I didn't whine for my folks—or even for neighbours. I knew they'd come. My man said to me often an' often, 'Can you stand it, Polly?' an' I generally answered with a laugh. It's a good way to answer a man, 'specially if he's kind of down in the mouth. What gives most women homesteaders the blues is thinking about their own loneliness, and pitying themselves. The only way to do is count the cost before you start, and *never look behind*. My man and I came out to make a home and get well-to-do. We've the home already, the well-to-do-ness will come after a while. Sure thing.

"It's worse than useless for any woman," specially any young married woman, to try life in the wilds unless heaven's given her a lot of hope and courage. Having her babies and raising them without a doctor or nurse—that's the hard part. You see, it's a time when a woman is naturally nervous—and nervousness is catching. The man gets it, too. I've seen more than one homestead abandoned about this

time. The couple trek back east and lose their chance, all through crossing bridges they've not come to yet. The watchword I give to every settler's wife who passes by is: 'Look ahead, and laugh.'

"Do I like it here? I wouldn't live anywhere else if I could. I'm proud of our settlement—oh, yes, we've a settlement now, and neighbours, and a post office, and lots of things. We're going to have a school. They're bound I'll be trustee, and I guess I will, just by way of example. It seems fair and proper that the women who help make neighbourhoods, and raise the kiddies that fill the school-houses, should take a hand in running things.

"Four years ago we gave a Christmas dinner, and all the persons we could drum up to eat my perfectly good wild turkey was a half-breed trapper, and old man Powderface—who couldn't relish any bird that had been plucked before roasting. This Christmas I'm giving a feast to the white families, and I've thirty-one acceptances. How's that for a growing population? Four fiddlers, a mouth-organ or two, and an accordeon—that's going some. I see where I'm going to be a busy woman. Say," with anticipatory relish, "I wish you could be at our pioneer party."

So do I. I would like to make the acquaintance of the settlers, the hunters, trappers, freighters, farmers, with their wives and bairns who will make up that party; like to hear their experiences. Would like to see the table with its weight of cheer; above all would like to watch the play of the Pioneer's dimples.

"Look ahead and laugh"—it is a pretty good motto.

"Whom Time Trots Withal"

WE feel safe in putting down Miss Evelyn McCullock in the list of those whom Time, at the moment, trots with. More properly, though, it was Miss McCullock who elected to trot with Time—she swelling the rank and file in that extraordinary crusade of suffragettes who marched to Albany lately.

Ridgetown, Ontario, has to claim this knight in petticoats who is said to have greeted Governor Sulzer in the name of Canada's women, and to have been by that gentleman so courteously received that she promptly pronounced him "a second Abraham Lincoln." Miss McCulloch is also widely acquainted in London, Ont.

The valiant lady's alleged intention is to go out through New York at once on a course of lectures, expounding the onward movement of women. Her pen will be also a weapon in the cause.

The provincial and district presidents of the branches of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the presidents of the branches of the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire will be invited to attend the approaching military conference, which will be held in Ottawa in February. Such is the decision of the Minister of Militia and Defence and his advisers. The canteen problem and the cadet movement are two questions which these men consider all the women of the country are interested in, as mothers and sisters of men. It is understood that a special session will be devoted to the discussion of military subjects, in which the women can take a part.