

Wilderness-Trained

Written for The Western Home Monthly By Aubrey Fullerton

FOR half an evening we had talked of the war, with that clear insight and unwavering assurance that come only from a wide reading of the newspaper. We had gone over the whole case, passed sundry judgments on men and methods, and reached a fairly satisfactory decision as to the end of it all. We had done, in fact, just what hundreds of other men were doing at the same time, and are doing now: for in these days all conversational roads lead to the front.

When we came to that part of our talk that had to do with the Canadians in action, one of our number, a man who has lived long and worked hard, sidetracked us for a few minutes on a new line of thought.

"What gets me," he said, in his emphatic way, "is how the English and French over there are laying themselves out to say nice things about our boys. They almost seem to be surprised there's such good stuff in 'em, and can't say too much about their pluck and courage, but, bless me, it's no surprise to us; and it wouldn't be to them either if they knew more about the country our soldier-boys went from. I tell you, there's good training ground in it for service at the front, and many's the man that's gone through tests in the wilderness as hard as any Kitchener can think of. Somehow, life in Canada, especially at the edge of things, puts nerve and pluck into a fellow, and some of it's showing itself now over in Europe."

The Old Timer's thought stayed with me, and during the next few days I went over certain facts and figures to see if they warranted his assertions. From the incidents known to myself—incidents by no means exceptional or unusual—I selected five that illustrated, it seemed to me, the kind of training he had in mind. They are not the records of historic personages, either, but of everyday men to whom these things have happened within the past four or five years.

Trapped in the Bush

First, there is the story of James Belanger, a French-Canadian lumberman on Georgian Bay.

Between French River, on the north of the Bay, and the Canadian Northern railway, is a stretch of wild land than which Ontario has not many rougher or more nearly impassable. Through it runs a private telephone line, connecting a lumber company's office in French River with Key Junction, on the railroad, and for most of the way that telephone line is the only suggestion of human voice. Something went wrong with it one day, and the company sent a repair crew into the bush to locate the trouble. On their way in the repair-men heard noises.

Now a noise in the wilderness always commands attention, for it is rare enough to be conspicuous, and very often suggestive enough to be alarming. This time it brought the men who heard it to a stop, with ears wide open.

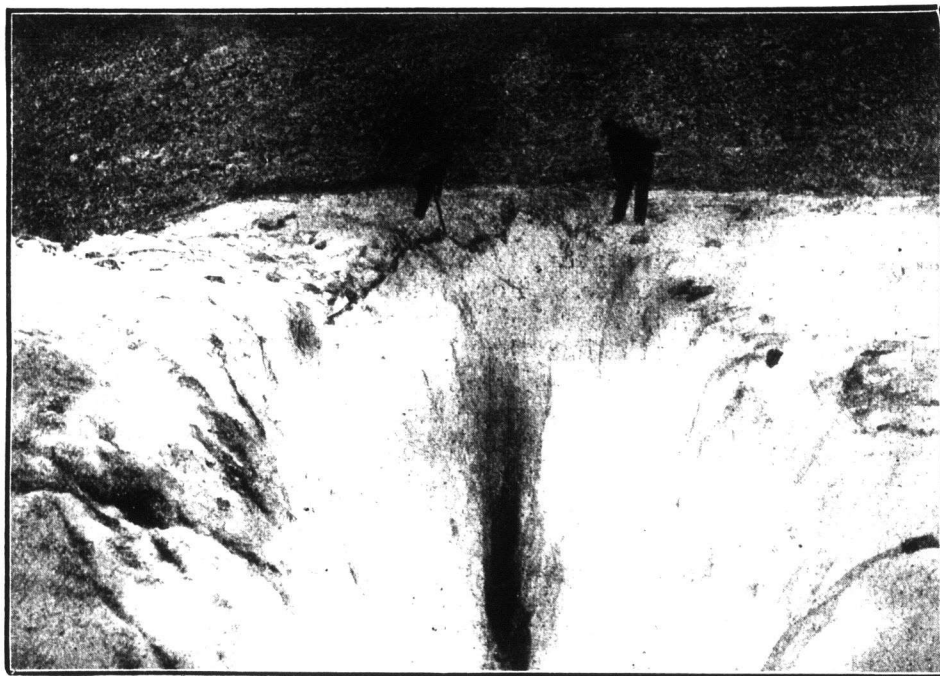
"Bears" said the first man.

"Just one bear," corrected another, and he's in trouble—in a trap, likely."

For the noise was a cry, a wild, sharp, painful cry that came at intervals, and ended in a moan. There was nothing to be alarmed about in a noise like that; but it was an appeal for relief.

When the phone-menders had tracked the cry through the bush, they found, not a bear, but a man.

Eight days before, the river-driver, Belanger, had started from French River for Byng Inlet, afoot. He didn't know the wilderness as well as he knew the river, and on his first day out he lost the way. For a week of days and nights he wandered about, and got nowhere. Up hills, into the bush, through swamps, over piles of forest waste, he went, more hopelessly entangling himself each day. There was no road or trail, no sign of man, no break in the dead monotony of the wilds. The thickets tore his clothes to shreds, pestilential black flies covered his face and hands with his own blood, and the summer sun beat on him like fire. Worse than all, after the first day he had nothing to eat. A porcupine that he killed with a stick was the only food he had been able to secure in the bush, and it was poor eating. Yet, daily weakening though he was, he kept moving, for the native pluck of the man was hard to down. At last, however,



Looking down a crevasse in a glacier, between walls of solid ice, to fatal depths

he reached his limit, and laid himself upon a brush-pile, and when he had the strength to do it he cried for help. There the phone-men found him, thinking first they had come upon a bear in trap.

A few days' rest brought Belanger to himself again, survivor of an endurance test that tried his very soul and marrow. It was a part of his wilderness training.

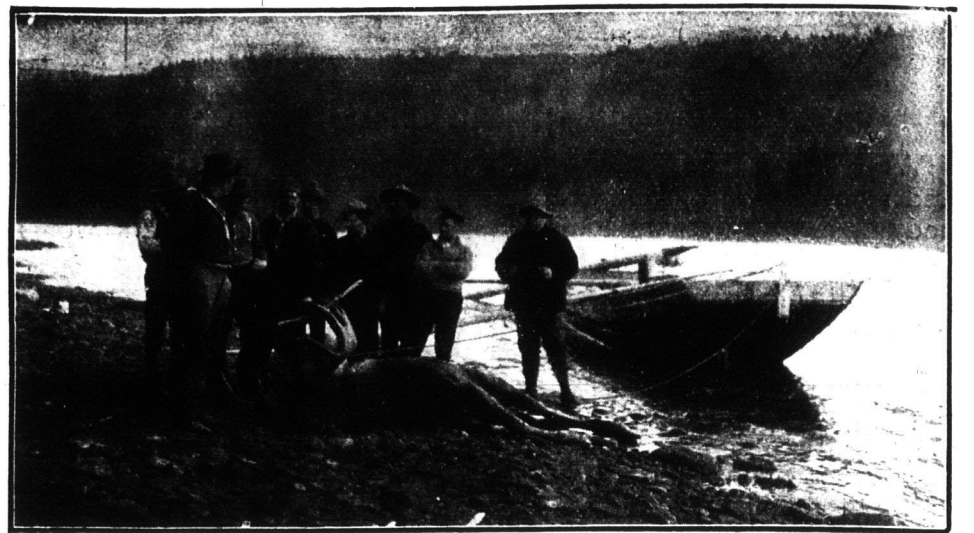
east, and camped on one of the many islands in a bay of the lake.

It was rather pleasant, except for the delay that it meant to their plans, and for the first two days they were at ease. On the morning of the third day, Ford went up alone to the far end of the island, to look around. When he returned, his companion, the canoe, and most of their outfit were gone. All that was left for him was a little bedding, an axe, and some flour, bacon, sugar and tea. The other fellow had made off with everything else, including both their guns and all their miscellaneous valuables.

It was a clear case of desertion. Ford was of an optimistic turn, however, and did not greatly worry; the steamer would be along soon, he thought, and would take him off. But when it did go by it was a mile out from shore, and he could not attract its attention. The same thing happened a second and even a third time, with several days between them. Then the days ran into weeks, till a month had passed, and still he had not made himself heard or seen.

At length he built a small raft, and paddled across to another island, a little nearer the steamer's route. There he waited another week, but with no better luck; he was still too far from the steamer, and nothing else more, upon the island. He gave it up, and went back to his original camp. That same night a storm came, and so close that he could hear the waves breaking against the shore.

One more week passed, and still the steamer had not come. He was getting desperate, and was beginning to think of the possibility of passing the winter on the island.



Surveyors' party in Northern Alberta, with a moose, just in time to re-stock their larder

Marooned for Six Weeks

What happened to George Ford sounds like a Robinson Crusoe story, but it's true as all the rest. He went with a companion into the wilds of Ontario, near the Manitoba border, the two intending to prospect and trap in that region for a summer and a winter. Their course lay west on the English River, by canoe, but after crossing Lost Lake they took a wrong outlet and got into Lac Seul. There they decided to wait till the little Hudson's Bay Company steamer came by, on its supply trip to the posts further north and

a big fire close to the water's edge, and the captain, seeing this last of many signals, ran in to investigate. When two of the crew went ashore in a canoe, the castaway rushed out to meet them to his shoulder's depth in the water.

He was very nearly a nervous wreck. For a month and a half he had been marooned on a wilderness island, with latterly no food but berries, and continually baffled in his appeals to help that always passed him by. The Crusoe of Lac Seul had had a harder time of it than even Robinson had, and all because of a comrade's treachery.

Crippled on the Barrens

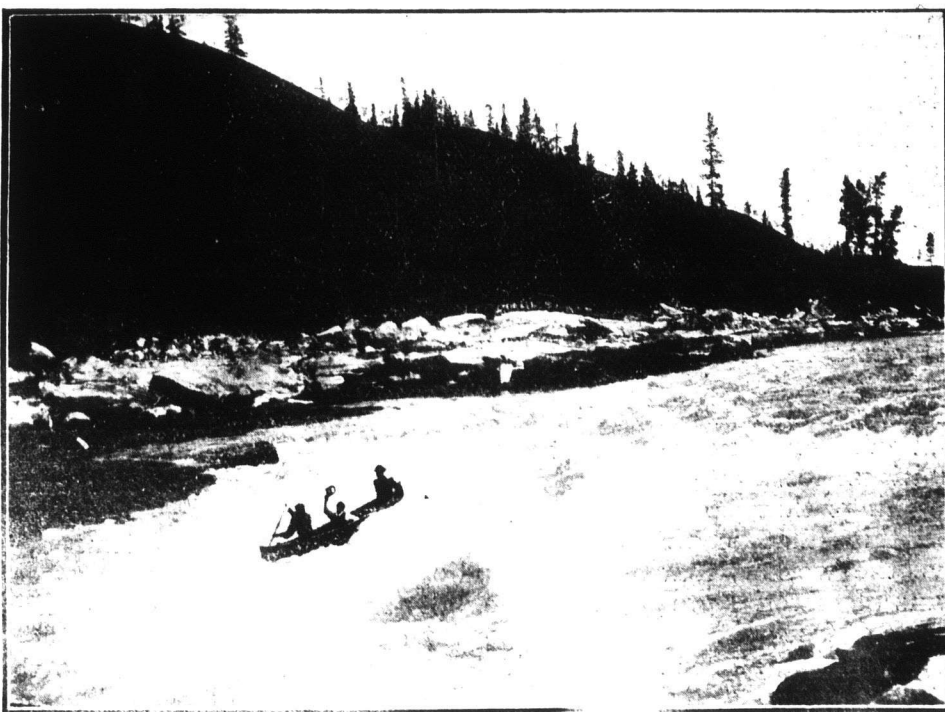
Charley Bunn's experience in the Barren Lands is the only one of the five here told that goes as far back as fifteen years. Bunn was one of two explorers who, with two halfbreed guides, were trying to find the source of the Coppermine River, under orders from the Dominion Geological Department. At a certain stage in their work it became advisable to divide the party, and while the other two went on, Bunn and his guide turned back over the way they had come. It was a rough country, where at any time they could get on but slowly, and to make matters worse Bunn slipped on a rock and dislocated his ankle. He called to the halfbreed, who was ahead of him, but that faithless servant gave no heed. Bunn hobbled after him, expecting to find him waiting a little further on, but it soon became evident that he had deserted. He knew the way back to the cache.

To be left alone on the Barren Lands of the big North, without food and crippled, was an ugly prospect. More than that, he was lost, for after a few wrong moves, he became hopelessly mixed as to his directions, and knew not whither he was going. The weather was cold, and he had no means of making fire, nor anything to eat but the berries that he picked from ground-bushes along the way.

His injured foot hurt him sorely, and the pain of it drove him nearly mad. He could not walk, or move at all except to crawl, in worse than animal fashion. This he did for eight days, and for as many nights he lay in what shelter he could find, suffering the while in every part of his body. At last came delirium, but still he dragged himself over the sub-Arctic plains, half-dead, and knowing only that he was lost. Thus he reached an Indian camp on Great Bear Lake, but to find it deserted. In the tents, however, were nets, and with these he caught some fish, which kept life in him until the Indians came back from their hunting. Through the winter that followed, the Indians cared for him, fed him, nursed him, till he was strong again, and in the spring they took him down to a trading post on the Mackenzie.

Field Work in the Mountains

Accidents and shortage of supplies are the greatest perils of the wilderness. Give a man his health and his food, and he will in most cases come out of the wilds unharmed. The mishaps that befell Charley Bunn were matched, with variations, by those that Clarence Hoadle came through in the country east of Portland Canal, where British Columbia neighbors Alaska. He was sent into that region to make a report upon its general character and resources, and took with him four guides, each of whom carried a fifty-pound pack of supplies. They made a good beginning, but the ending was rough.



The kind of thing that tests a man's skill and nerve. Through Horse Rapids in a canoe