

OUR WILD WESTLAND.

POINTS ON THE PACIFIC PROVINCE.

(BY MRS. ARTHUR SPRAGGE.)

THE MOSQUITO: SOME ACCOUNT OF ITS ORIGIN;
REMEDIES: OUT-OF-DOOR LIFE IN BRITISH
COLUMBIA: PECULIARITIES OF CLIMATE AND
VEGETATION: THE BEST TOURIST SEASON;
FOREST FIRES IN THE MOUNTAINS.

II.

The course of my daily life at Donald was somewhat monotonous, owing to the summer heat and the British Columbia mosquitoes, which conspire to destroy the peace and happiness of the unfortunate resident during the months of June, July and August, in a way that must be felt to be appreciated. An ancient account of the Pacific Province, published by one of its discoverers in the beginning of this century, sets forth, "that parts of the mainland are uninhabitable by man or beast, owing to the prevalence of swarms of noxious insects called 'Moskeeters.'" That elderly adventurer wrote wisely; and he had not penetrated into the interior of the country or he would have endorsed, with me, the testimony which two clever Englishmen gave last year, in print, to the persecution of that most pestilential fly:—"People at home, they say, read of sandflies, *Cingalese*, beetles, stinging ants, mosquitoes and the like, and the fashion is to treat all such matters, more or less, as jokes, and to affect merriment at the idea of getting well bitten by any of them, but the truth is that there is no misery on earth equal to a really bad attack of these demons. We all thought we had seen mosquitoes before, in Norway, in India and in the States, but until now we knew nothing—absolutely nothing—of the concentrated essence of torture that they are capable of inflicting when you invade their real home."

This pathetic description is written of a certain district on the Columbia river, about fifty miles from Donald, where the unfortunate authors had the pleasure of camping. Farther on in their most amusing book, "B.C. in 1887," they account for the mosquito's presence in the province by a parody on "Hiawatha," which is so appropriate and humorous it is well worth reproducing:

You shall hear how Hiawatha
Came into the Rocky Mountains,
Came to place upon the mountains
All the kinds of birds and insects.

* * * * *
All the creatures, as he freed them,
Skipped and frisked about the mountain,
Gambolled all about the mountain.
But the mountain ram, the Bighorn,
Took a very mean advantage
When he saw that Hiawatha
Was employed with other matters
Not attending to the Bighorn:
Swift he came at Hiawatha,
Butted him with both his Big horns
Just below his manly bosom

In the middle of his waistcoat
Of his best embroidered waistcoat.

Not a word said Hiawatha,
But he sat down very quickly,
With one little gasp and guggle,
Sat down with a sickly spasm
On a paper bag of insects,
On a busted bag of skeeters,
And Suggema, the mosquito,
Left the paper bag in fragments,
Scooted off into the forests,
Went rejoicing to the forests—
To the forests, dark and dreary,
Of the Western Province, B. C.,
Every blooming last mosquito
Went into the B. C. forests.

None were left for Hiawatha
To set free in other countries,
But the bugs, the Norfolk Howards,
And the fleas, the merry jumpers,
And the rattlesnakes, the reptiles,

Still were kept by Hiawatha;
None of them he loosed in B.C.,
Took them all away from B.C.,
Saying: "There's enough already,
Misery enough and cussing
With Suggema the mosquito,
With that darned, blank, blamed mosquito."

Further comment on the insect would seem superfluous. Still, for the benefit of that class which is ever prompt to suggest remedies for all the ills and troubles of humanity, and to say, why don't you use this, that and the other antidote, I will add, that it

is eminently satisfactory to theorize in the abstract, away from the scene of evil, about nets, and ointments, and washes of all kinds. The first mentioned are unbearable in the hot summer months, when every breath of cool air is in demand; for the last, no one, even with the courage of their opinions, wishes to make himself obnoxious to his fellow creatures as a perambulating drug-shop. It is out of doors, it will be remembered, that the pest is unavoidable, and the utter destruction of all open-air life amid mountains and pine woods, where picnics and parties of all kinds might be so enjoyable in the long days and cool afternoons, is the particular aggravation of nearly every district in the province, except Banff, which escapes, owing to its altitude, and the coast, owing to its briny atmosphere, which disagrees with Suggema. Every individual at Donald walks about in the summer, either beating the air with small branches of evergreen, or else moving his hands in a gentle rotary motion round the back of his neck, a habit that becomes so mechanical with men that it is often continued long after the mosquito has departed. The sufferings of the tortured townspeople are apparent in the evenings from a low cloud of white smoke, from individual smudges, hanging over the main street like a pall. Through personal experience I can recommend continued exercise in British Columbia with the head enveloped in the bag-like mosquito net, confined either in the patent balloon shape, with radiating ribs, attached to a brass dog-collar round the neck, fastening with a catch beneath the chin, or in the simpler form of bag applied with an elastic round the hat and another round the neck, as a suitable penance for the hardest sinner in the hot weather. Such contrivances may be suitable for shooting or fishing expeditions in the backwoods, but they are not adopted, even in semi-civilization, probably because the remedy is almost as bad as the disease.

A judicious netting of doors, windows and beds ensures a fair amount of comfort in the house; but who cares to patronize a house in a fine climate in the summer months, and who will not pine for the impossible enjoyment of a verandah and a hammock under the pine trees?

Heat, dust and mosquitoes are serious drawbacks to the Columbia Valley during the three summer months as I found to my cost; the heat, however, is mitigated by the fact that it only lasts in torrid fervour from eleven to four. As soon as the sun begins to descend behind the Selkirks he rapidly drops out of sight, and a perceptible coolness creeps over Donald, developing by dark into such decided chilliness that blankets at night as well as closed doors and windows are very acceptable. There must often be a difference of at least 30 degrees in temperature between midday and midnight at mid-summer. One peculiarity that impressed me particularly in 1886 was the intense stillness of nature. Day after day went by and no gentlest of breezes stirred the pines. The quiet and stillness which prevailed without rustle of leaf or song of bird were peculiarly oppressive, and always seemed to herald some approaching calamity, so that I often sighed for a little circulation of air through the valley. The freedom of this mountainous region from the storms invariably associated with such localities was another surprising fact. There were not more than two or three thunder-storms during that whole summer, and none of these in the immediate neighbourhood. Only one semblance of the phenomenal disturbances of nature I had read about and anticipated occurred; this was a mild little cyclone which began one silent afternoon with a crashing noise in the Selkirk range, close to our house, like the quick discharge of cannon, and was caused by the uprooting of falling trees in some forest belt high on the mountain side. About us not a leaf stirred; until some minutes later, when the storm, or fortunately only the edges of it, struck the valley, bending the tall young pines like reeds, while clouds of dust rolled up from the town, veiling every object in a mysterious half light. The trees about us were only partially thinned and protected each other, but further off on the top of the bank, above the flat (the western boundary of Quality Hill), where they were exposed to the fury of the tempest, some dozen or more went down like nine pins,

doing, luckily, no damage beyond blocking up the waggon road.

"The summer of 1886 was an extraordinarily dry one," I was assured. Certainly during the three months I spent in British Columbia there were but three showers of rain, and only one of these deserved more than that name; consequently the dust was deep and the vegetation scanty. The soil about Donald is naturally sandy, and the herbage not luxuriant cropping up in detached masses over the ground in the characteristic tufts of the bunch grass country. Wild strawberries are abundant throughout June, and all the other berries that grow in their summer order, but the gathering of them falls upon the householder, as no itinerant vendor of wild fruit with his pail or basket seeks patronage in the west, and it is a perfect penance owing to the booming mosquito also in season.

Every particle of foliage on the ground dons long before the autumn proper a livery that rivals the gorgeous tints of maples and oaks. The leaves of the wild strawberry glow with ruddy colour, and all through the woods a plant grew that year on a single stalk a foot high without fruit or flower in sprays like rose leaves, rivalling the Virginia creeper in richness of hue, splashing the ground beneath the dark pines with brilliant blots of crimson and gold. One peculiarity of the mountain flora is its endless variety; flowers that appear one year disappear the next, and are replaced by other different species. For instance, I have not seen that most effective foliage plant just described for the last two summers. In 1888 wild roses and Michaelmas daisies, flowers I had not previously remarked, abounded in profusion. Indeed, the past summer was essentially flowery for some reason or other. When I reached Donald early in May the ground was carpeted with violets of every shade, from heliotrope to the deepest purple. These were followed by wild roses, tiny dwarf bushes, ranging in colour from pale pink to maroon, to which succeeded wild sunflowers, cone flowers, orange lilies—growing only on the bank of the Columbia, and Michaelmas daisies of two varieties, which survived dust and drouth, and endured bravely up to the early frosts in September. The Oregon grape, known better in the East as the mahonia, offers a beautiful contrast to the bright hues that fleck the ground, with its low masses of glossy bright leaves and dark blue berries. It grows profusely in every locality, and is an eminently early plant, quite independent naturally of the straw winter coverings to which it is generally treated in civilization.

Nature is oddly reversed in the Columbia valley. Under foot is the glow of colour; overhead the sombre greens of pines and firs indigenous to the soil, their dark lines broken on the mountain sides by a scattered growth of poplar with its graceful birch-like foliage, which in the autumn makes every wooded height radiant with waves of molten gold.

One most evil result of the dryness of British Columbia summers is the prevalence of bush fires which rage generally during the month of August and spread rapidly throughout the mountains, destroying acres of valuable timber and totally obscuring the scenery by clouds of dense smoke from the disappointed tourist. In 1888 the whole of the province, from the Rockies to the coast, was an admirable illustration of the infernal regions. The sultry heat engendered by the numerous fires and thick heavy atmosphere was almost unendurable, and a certain journey I undertook to Victoria in the end of August lingers in my memory like a nightmare. The extraordinarily cool nights of the mountain districts, with their invigorating freshness, were gone, and the atmosphere seemed so thoroughly roasted there was no apparent difference between midday and midnight. Far up the side of every rocky height and water-worn gulch pine woods were aflame, single trees sometimes, like beacons, and again groups and masses of solid forest, burning like walls of fire. The whole Fraser canyon was a chapter of Dante's Inferno; its most inaccessible crags were tipped with wandering fiery points, zigzagging up and down, as if some monstrous torchlight procession were scaling its precipices, while lower down great beds of burning timber suggested the destruction of some mountain town, and the smoke and dust everywhere were positively