

THE SLOPE OF THE NORTHLAND

By W. B. FINDLAY

RIVERS that run northward to the sea; forests of spruce, white wood, Balm of Gilead, poplar, hemlock, and balsam; belts of clay wide as many townships and deep down to the foundation of things; waterfalls of marvellous horse-power, and over all the lakes, rivers and forests the quiet of an untenanted, unpeopled land. This is the land of to-morrow. When men are weary of rushing to the wind-swept, treeless prairie, they will turn to this wooded land, the hills and running streams will draw them, the charm of rustling leaves will call to them and the Northland will claim its own.

This is the slope of patience. Beaten by adverse winds and storm-tossed, the ships of the people of the Hudson Bay Company cast anchor in James Bay more than two hundred and twenty years ago and generations of factors and agents have looked southward from James Bay listening for the sounds of the coming of the people of their own colour and race.

Through the reign of nine British sovereigns the flag has waved on the shore of the Bay and now the sons of the race are pressing in from the south to fill the land.

Here, as everywhere, the Scotch have been. More than a hundred years ago one MacDougall felt it was getting crowded about Abitibi Post and slipped his canoe into the lake, placed his squaw in the bow and paddled down the Abitibi River and up the Black till he came to a fall that made him think of the rivers of the old land and so he made his camp. He sleeps back yonder in a quiet place near the river along which he trapped and fished. His grandsons still fish and hunt but the Highland blood is gone and they are Indians back to type and tradition.

Down the slippery bank of the Black we slid, a medicine man, the chief of the engineers who are putting the T. and N. O. through to the Grand Trunk Pacific, and the writer. We left 400 pounds of dynamite sitting on the bank and two greasy men who were fondling the parts of a gasoline engine and saying short words away down in their throats.

These are the rivers of yesterday, and as our 18-foot canoe glided along and we came to the place where the Black runs into the Abitibi and this great river carried us on northward, we knew we were on the great trade route along which for more than two centuries the traders, agents and Indians of the Hudson Bay Company travelled.

Northward and ever slipping a little westward, the Abitibi makes its way toward the Moose, past deeply-wooded banks that break away into hills and valleys, a rolling country of clay, deep and exhaustless. Here one misses the great rocks that mark the rivers farther south. Just an outcropping shows at intervals of miles and then once more the clay. So the waters are greyish, cold and uninviting to the swimmer.

Towards noon the whistle of a steam tug went echoing along the river and the doctor heaved a sigh of relief, dropped his paddle and declared he was ready to give up the gliding motion of the canoe and sit on the top of the steam whistle just for a change.

The little tug picked us up, swung the canoe to the rear and puffed onward. We were a small but conglomerate crowd. Two or three gold prospectors pushing north-east, a few labourers for the Grand Trunk Pacific, two engineers, a preacher, a doctor, a land-seeker, and always the captain sticking his head out of the wheel-house cursing us individually and collectively for pushing our heads in his line of vision.

We reached the Iroquois Falls just as the sun touched the white foam of the river, the spray and the shadowy mist with the golden glory of his noontide power. Unbroken by rapids, the river sweeps on to the brink of the falls, then, in a beautiful curtain of grayish white, drops twenty-five feet to the waters below.

Leaving the beaten path of the portage, we climbed up through the small growth of poplar and white wood and guided by one who knew the spot, came upon a grave. It was neatly fenced with cedar poles deeply notched and carefully measured. On a white painted post held by hand-made nails



A "H. B. Co." Canoe carrying Mail from Abitibi Post to Moose Factory—Passing the N.T.R. Crossing at Abitibi, on August 15th.



A Gold-Mining Outfit.



An Indian Trapper's Camp—Split Poles, Moss and Brush.



Northern Graveyard—A lone Wooden Slab in a Corral.

rests an oak slab brought in from the south, as there is no oak here. It bears the following inscription:

"Sacred to the memory of Thomas Bedds, who departed this life the 15th day of July, 1850, aged 18 years and 5 months."

Fifty-eight years ago on his way down from Moose Factory for medical treatment, this youthful servant of the great company could go no farther and here he died. Here on the slope overlooking the river, in sight and sound of the falls with its twining wreaths of spray and the deep-toned requiem of the waters—here he rests. Carefully through all the years has the Company kept his grave. He served them living and thus have they cared for their living and watched over their dead since 1670 when gay-hearted

Charles gave them their charter.

This way in the early days passed men who had in their souls no ambition to perpetuate the names of relatives by tacking them to river and lake. Therefore, they took the soft-sounding Indian names or some fitting term born of surroundings or of circumstances. Thus we have such river names as the White Clay, the Black, the Abitibi, the Shallow, the Driftwood, the Moose, the Missinabie, and as we passed Iroquois Falls working our way down ten miles we came to a break in the river right in the heart of the moose country, called the Buck Deer Rapids. The experts made ready to shoot the rapids while the rest of us walked about the portage. The doctor remarking as he walked along that while he loved the poetry of motion, still the land looked good to him.

At the foot of the rapids we came upon two youthful Americans. The size of the country had stunned them; they were facing the trip up the river to Lake Abitibi, then over the height of land and on down the waters until they reached the Ottawa. Our salutations were simple, for somehow in the North one finds but little to say and few questions to ask. As they looked up the Buck Deer Rapids and found it was forty-one miles to the lake, the elder one remarked, as if talking to the Balm of Gilead trees, "This is the biggest blankedest country I ever heard of, but it don't matter if we never get home."

Ten miles below the Buck Deer Rapids a bridge 800 feet long is being thrown over the Abitibi by the Grand Trunk Pacific. One single span of 400 feet will cross the water. But a matter of a few years and the moose reigned here supreme save a tramp caribou might wander down and give battle. As late as the August of this year six Indians in a 25-foot birch bark canoe passed down from Abitibi Post to Moose Factory carrying with them His Majesty's mail, being the yearly delivery to James Bay via the Abitibi and Moose River. These are picked men, they are the artists of the North, knowing the northern waters as a city man knows his own street, but as a tale that is told their day is wearing away and soon the sound of the whistle echoing along the muskeg will proclaim the arrival of the mail train at Moose Factory on James Bay.

Here six years ago everything was unbroken bush. In 1905 came the man Hanning; soft-footed and quiet, he seemed a part of the silence into which he faded, but as the months passed even he reappeared at broken points in the bush and a quiet whisper of his presence fell among the Indians who passed up and down the river. The man Hanning is still there, so is also the right-of-way of the Grand Trunk Pacific, which he located, and over the building of which he still presides, a son of our people, for our sons are the railway builders of the world—in Egypt, the Soudan, South Africa, in the early days of the American West, in China to-day and yesterday in South America—the world over they are found, quiet, sure-footed, responsible, the sons of our own people doing the world's work.

Late in the afternoon the chief of the engineers suggested we stroll over to Laing's Camp, the most northerly on the right-of-way of the T. and N. O. These men of the North need a northern dictionary. Terms here are relative. Beware of the Northman who, in this land, takes you for a stroll, and should he call it a walk or speak of a journey say farewell to your friends, for the end thereof may be anywhere till the trail stops. There is such a thing as a mile in the North, but it is a convertible term