

A Bohemian Excursion in the New North

Written for the Western Home Monthly by Edith G. Bayne.

THE Peace River country has a corner in sunshine—one form of golden prodigality in which the armchair philosopher of the Pullman car or cabin-de-luxe has no share. It is reserved for the humble occupant of a keg of nails in the fo'c'sle of a scow-steamer to drink it in at every pore. Had it been any city but Edmonton, therefore, through which we passed en caravan along the first stage of the journey it would have been the general impression that we were a circus. The Queen City of the North, however, accustomed to any sight ranging from the mildly ludicrous to the glaringly grotesque, scarcely noted the canvas covered wagons which, carrying a party of eleven with three Peterborough canoes, five tents, several complete sets of fishing tackle and all the paraphernalia considered necessary to a month's gipsying, and, having "in lead" two auxiliary horses, lumbered out over the pavements one summer morning along the Athabasca trail to the open country beyond. We might even have passed—elsewhere—for a troupe of strolling players, for on strolling and playing we were bent, the chief difference between us and the bonafide variety consisting in the fact that our playing and our strolling did not synchronize.

By train one may cover the distance from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing in a few hours, but at that point the railway ceases and the hinterland in all its virgin charm and crudity, begins. One of the wagons, with the fine scorn of the near-to-nature nomad for unnecessary luxuries, made the journey between these points in three shifts and two days and a half spending our first night at a stopping place thirty miles north of Edmonton. The stopping place of the Northland—as yet it has no synonym—by any other name would have the same effect on the olfactory senses, but in justice it must be stated that some of these road houses or wayside inns are almost all that could be desired—all things considered—from the point of view of the most exacting. Clean beds and well cooked food we encountered more than once and the other occasions—well, at such times we reminded ourselves that the true Bohemian entertains a supreme contempt for anything more elaborate than a wooden bunk and a hand-to-mouth meal and the luck of "the road."

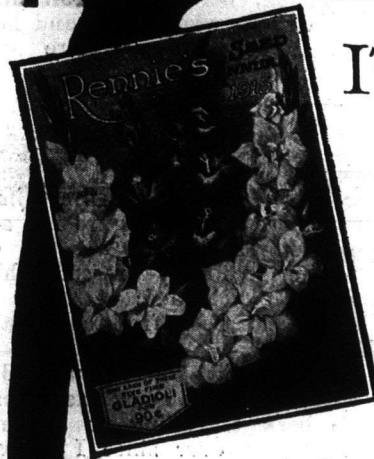
Reaching Athabasca Landing on the morning of the third day we travelled by steamer to Mirror Landing where our first guide took an affectionate leave of us in broken English and where we found our second and "permanent" one awaiting us on the dock. This fellow was a halfbreed Indian as the other had been, but with a name that sounded like a hopeless transposition of the entire alphabet. We agreed, after some deliberation, to allow him to keep his name intact and to call him Joe, which appellation delighted him vastly. At Mirror Landing we portrayed fifteen

miles by caravan to Norris Landing on the Lesser Slave Lake. Whenever a stopping place was not available we partook of our own food from the supply wagon cooked over the camp fire, and under the stars we rested in the camp beds which we placed within the rough circle of wagons as a measure of caution against possible—and probable—wolves. However, no such marauders appeared in the flesh, though we heard distant howling several nights and Joe the guide officiated as night watchman. At Norris Landing, when we approached the small hostel about nightfall of the seventh day, the strains of a musical instrument fell upon the ear and with an almost uncanny sound. One of our party had been strumming on a mandolin but the new sounds were distinctly those of a piano, and as our cavalcade drew up before the hostel door we recognized the enticing air of the "Staircase Waltz" from the Count of Luxembourg. Having supped in the room at one side we stepped across the narrow hallway to the other and looked in upon the merry-makers. It was a picturesque scene, a leaf from Wister's "Virginian." Husky trappers and homesteaders who had gathered to take the early morning boat, were waiting and "grapevining" with one another and squabbling good humoredly over the privilege of dancing with the four maidens, two white and two of dusky hue, who formed the feminine element of the throng. Joe proceeded at once to initiate the company into the intricacies of a new dance of which he was past master—being one of the all-year-round gallants of Mirror Landing—and the chief motions of which consisted of a shuffling of the feet, a polka-like "rush" and a kicking behind of one foot after the manner of a horse that is about to cast a shoe. We did not join the dancers, being content to watch Joe's antics, and our host having announced that all available bunk-space but sufficient for two was taken up, the rest of the evening was employed by the majority of the party in arranging outdoor beds on the small veranda and in seeking repose thereon.

The next morning witnessed an embarkation for Grouard which was as much of an event for the natives about Norris Landing as the launching of an ocean greyhound is to an easterner. Not usually did such a large party embark and we must have seemed like a huge order to the groups on the wharf side as horse after horse was coaxed up the gangway and the cumbersome wagons drawn up afterward, while the passengers filled the remaining deck space. The sun was dancing in a long shimmering ribbon upon the blue lake water as we steamed out upon a seventy-five mile voyage northward and as it rose higher over the eastern hills and showered a blaze of glory over us we felt "monarchs of all we surveyed" and envied no man his wealth in lucre. (There is a translucency or "headiness" in the air of this region which makes for high spirits.) On the dock at Grouard, after an uneventfully pleasant trip, we spied a motley company, awaiting the boat's arrival. There was no crowd as an easterner knows it, but almost every southern European nationality was represented, as well as Indians with their squaws. Three Canadians, one a journalist, greeted us enthusiastically. The spirit of the north had seized upon them and volubly they imparted information to us regarding the country, the route further West and the "prospects." The journalist, ridiculously radiant enjoying a holiday from business and a flood of "copy," in a sweater of indescribable hue and doubtful age, a pair of corduroys, prospector's boots, et al the regalia of a lord of the north joined our party at once and the following day we passed on along the trail to Peace River Landing seventy miles west and north and our destination for the time.

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