

The Call of the Wild

THERE'S THE BILL BRUCE SPIRIT IN MOST OF US.

(By ANDREW SOUTAR.)

Hang their politics! Confound their knavish tricks! Me for the open air and the open sky and the company of men like Bill Bruce, famed as a hunter and guide throughout Northern Ontario.

In the winter of political strife and the choking of the newspapers with the vapourings of candidates, Bill's letter to the Prince of Wales (you read about it this week) came as a draught of sparkling champagne to me.

The letter was scrawled on a piece of birch bark (his ink should have been the blood of the moose he had just brought down with unerring aim, but I'll forgive him that):

Dear Prince:—This part of your dominion is the best moose country in America. Stop off a day with me and I'll prove it.—Respectfully yours, Bill Bruce.

And if I know my Prince and the glorious spirit of adventure that thrills his youth, he will stop off, and all the ceremonial of Court and statesmanship and rank will fall away like the skin of a snake, and for many days, not one, he will follow the trail with the redoubtable Bill through canyon and forest, by stream and mud-ringed swamp.

Never Crushed.

There's the spirit of Bill Bruce in most of us, though many in the staidness of middle-age and the respectability of citizenship will deny it. The spirit of eternal youth is never wholly crushed.

"When I was a boy," says the toothless old gentleman in the chimney-corner who has given his life to city drudgery in order to make sufficient money to justify his leaving a will when he dies, "when I was a boy I used to read the trash about hunting buffalo and trailing Indians, but I soon learned that it wasn't real life. All the same, he edges a little nearer to listen to the tale that's going forward."

Worry and debt, overdrafts and snappish bank managers, bills that accumulate like dead leaves on the lawn these days, income tax sleuths snarling at your elbow, City friends betraying your confidences, growing sons asking amid the turmoil: "What are you going to do for me?" rain and fog and cold and doubt and the walls of your house a prison, or your job the only gulf between you and salvation.

What's your sanctuary life? Isn't it when you can shut the world out in the silence of the woods where you may slay your quarry before you may eat, where bills have no significance, and you may close to a beard until it interferes with the easy swing of your gait?

Always Big.

Of course, there's a selfishness about the life, you'll say. Cavemen who shirk the responsibilities of the race, nomads who live in the wild and contribute little or nothing to progress. Somebody must stay at home and do the real work. Put them in the City for a spell, you say, and mark the evanescence of the strong, silent men. They wouldn't have the courage to endure the torments of a struggling suburban clerk.

Wouldn't they? The fellow who can be big in the big things of life is just the fellow to be a giant in the small. The fellow who has blazed a trail in a faraway country and slugged along on native food is just tickled to death, as he would say, when circumstances over which he has no control push him into a draper's shop—when a beaming old lady murmurs across the counter while ordering mittens: "Young man, you should go West and broaden your mind."

You say they never come back to the cities. That brings me to tell you of one of the greatest of the Bill Bruce tribe I have ever met, and I say to you now that his courage at the end of his great adventure was the finest thing of his career. You shall have names and places, for Squarey wouldn't mind. And many of my readers who were in the North Russian Expeditionary Force (I receive many letters from them) will recall the man of whom I write. Bill Bruce's letter to the Prince brought it all flooding back.

The Reindeer Transport.

Capt. E. M. Squarey, to give him his military title, he was just "Squarey" to everybody from the general downward, organized the reindeer transport from Murmansk. Reindeer were the only solution of a difficult problem for us, for outposts were scattered all over the snow-laden country. The Laplanders are the only people in the world who know how to get the best out of a reindeer. Squarey, a son of our oldest colony, Newfoundland, a sealer, a nomad, a man moved by all the wanderlust of the virile writers of the Yukon, came out to Russia from France, and Lt.-Col. T. C. R. Moore selected him for the job of getting in touch with the Lapps and enlisting them into the service.

As lean as a fence pole, Squarey might have stepped from the pages of Bret Harte. He went out with an interpreter's make new allies of the

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Lapps. He sent the interpreter back at the end of a fortnight and himself picked up the trail to the villages of the Lapps; he ate with them, slept in their tents, bargained with them, and, in his own words, treated them like white men.

"The Life."

In the result, five hundred Lapps, with two thousand reindeer and six hundred sleighs, were pressed into our service as transport. The Lapps were rationed and paid three kopeks per pood (26lb.) per verst for all they carried on their sleighs. Sometimes Squarey threw in a tot of rum.

The transportation of the mobile column, 11th Battalion Royal Sussex, from Petchenga, in the north, to the garrison at Kola, a distance, by the trail of 113 English miles, was done by reindeer. At the time when Squarey received instructions, the reindeer and sleighs were scattered between Murmansk and Kandalaksha—200 miles.

The lot were gathered together at Kola within seven days. In the transporting of the men of the Sussex, Squarey in charge, revolver and knife in his belt as every adventurous schoolboy would have had him, they ran into a blizzard. There was only one mishap during the journey; a soldier cut his foot while chopping wood in the forest beside the trail!

Squarey and I struck up a warm friendship. I trailed with him over twenty-five miles one day, and the two Lapps who drove the reindeer were instructed to make a race of it. "Da, da, captain!" We clung to the strips of hide stretched across the tiny sleighs, and the deer raced like the wind through the snow. I can see old Squarey, now, turning in his seat as his team passed mine and yelling like a boy: "Say, boy, ain't this the life!"

Met Again.

I wandered off the trail with him to where the tents of some Lapps were pitched in the snow. We entered and sat down on some skins while Squarey chatted with the Lapps and played with two little papooses. Squarey could speak only a few of their words, but the human side of the man appealed to the natives. By a gesture he could convey so much. They trusted him implicitly, refused to recognize any other authority, and looked to him for payment and their rations, and set him on a throne of their own imagining.

Never once did he deceive them or take advantage. If they loaded him with humble presents he saw to it that they were repaid. He asked them to take no risk than was greater than he himself would take.

I had to leave Squarey when I went further south to Archangel, and the days passed and the years began to rumble. And he slipped out of mind in the stress of other things and personalities. Then, one evening as I was crossing the booking-hall in the Central Station, New York—it was in late 1921—someone barred my progress, someone dropped two heavy portmanteaux at my feet, someone fairly yelled:

"Boy! Boy! Ain't there another 11' le old war where a fellow can have some fun?"

Squarey! Leaner than ever, since they don't wear reindeer coats in New York. Leaner than ever of laughter and good cheer.

The Youngsters.

"By the Lord, Squarey, what are you doing here?"

"I'm a bum solicitor, boy" (a commercial traveller).

"You! Of all people in the world?"

"Ha, ha," laughed Squarey. "I hate the damned things (he kicked at the bags), but what's the good of grumblin'? Might as well have fun in this game if you know how to look for it. 'Sides, there's a bunch of youngsters up country; I tell 'em about Russia now and again, but' (bless his sentimental heart) 'if you were to come along and tell 'em some more about the times we had and the work we did, you know?'"

But I was unable to fulfil the promise I made. Somehow I didn't want to see Squarey in a domestic environment, however beautiful it might have been. He was "Captain Squarey, King of the Lapps," to me. But I sent him along a pile of photographs I had taken out yonder, and I know they pleased the youngsters.

And these were the men when I say that a fellow who can be big in the big things is just the fellow to be big in ordinary affairs. Squarey had gone back to the city with all his humdrum toil and the responsibility, but he went with a smile.

Nonconformist Stampede

"The British people," says the Sunday Express, "are not prepared to scrap Christianity in order to assist the Bolsheviks to Bolshevize Britain. Mr. MacDonald and his friends rely on Nonconformist votes. They are alarmed by the Anti-Christian crusade. That is why at the last moment they have become more Moscovophobe than the Morning Post. Napoleon's army perished in the retreat from Moscow. Mr. MacDonald's retreat is equally disastrous. It leads straight to 'Waterloo'."

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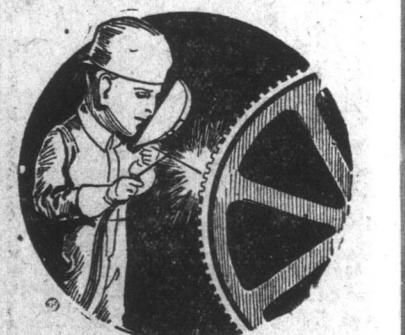
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