KINGS OF THE NORTH LAND

Sketch of the Hudson Bay Traders, the Greatest Fur Company in the World, and the Great Territory Still Covered by Their Operations.

In the history of the world only one corporate company has maintained empire over an area as large as Europe. Only one corporate company has lived up to its constitution for nearly three centuries. Only one corporate company's sway has been so beneficent that its profits have stood in exact proportion to the well being of its subjects. Indeed, few armies can boast a rank and file of men who never once retreated in three hundred years, whose lives — generation after generation—were one long bivouac of hardship, of danger, of ambushed death, of grim purpose, of silent achievement.

Such was the company of "Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay"—as the charter of 1670 designated them. Such is the Hudson's Bay Company today, still trading with savages in the white wilderness of the north, as it was when Charles II. granted a royal charter for the fur trade to his cousin, Prince Rupert.

AN OJIBWAY CHIEF AT 80, A MIGHTY HUNTER FOR THE HUDSON BAY COMPANY.

Governors and chief factors have changed with the changing centuries, but the character of the company's personnel has never changed. Prince Rupert, the first governor, was succeeded by the Duke of York (James II.), and the royal governor by a long line of distinguished public men down to Lord Strathcona, the present governor, and C. C. Chipman, the chief commissioner or executive officer. All have been men of noted achievement, often in touch with the crown, always with that passion for the mastery of difficulty which exults most when the conflict is keenest.

Radisson and Groseillers, the two Frenchmen who first brought back word of the great wealth in furs round the far northern sea, had been gentlemen adventurers — "rascals," their enemies called them. Prince Rupert, who leagued himself with the Frenchmen to obtain a charter for this fur trade, had been an adventurer of the high seas—"pirate," we would say, long before he became first governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. And the Duke of Marlborough, the company's third governor, was surely as great an adventurer as he was a general.

Latterly the word "adventurer" has fallen in such evil repute it may scarcely be applied to living actors. But using it in the old-time sense of militant hero, what cavalier of gold braid and spurs could be more of an adventurer than young Donald Smith who traded in the desolate wastes of Labrador, spending seventeen years in the hardest field of the fur company, tramping on snow-shoes, half the width of a continent, camping where night overtook him under blanketing of snow drifts, who rose, step by step, from trader on the east coast to commissioner on the west? And this Donald Smith became Lord Strathcona, the governor of the Hudson's Bay Company.

The governor, resident in England, is now represented by the chief commissioner, who, in turn, is represented at each of the many inland forts by a chief factor of the district. Virtually, the chief factor rules as autocratically today as he did before the Canadian government took over the proprietary rights of the fur company.

The colder the climate, the finer the fur. The farther north the fort, the more typical it is of the fur trader's realm.

For six, seven, eight months of the year the fur trader's world is a white wilderness of snow; snow water-waved by winds that sweep from the pole; snow drifted into ramparts round the fort stockades till the highest picket sinks beneath the white flood and the corner bastions are almost submerged, and the entrance to the central gate resembles the cutting of a railway tunnel; snow that billows to the unbroken reaches of the circling sky-line, like a white sea. East, frost-mist hides the low horizon in clouds of smoke, for the sun which rises from the east in other climes rises from the southeast here, and until the spring equinox, bringing summer with a flood-tide of thaw, gray darkness hangs in the east like a fog. South, the sun moves across the snowy levels in a wheel of fire, for it has scarcely risen full-sphered above the sky-line before it sinks again, etching drift and tip of half-buried brush in long, lonely, fading shadows. The west shimmers in warm purplish grays for the moist chinook winds come over the mountains, melting the snow. North, is the cold steel of ice by day, and at night, northern lights darting through the polar dark like burnished spears.

Christmas day is welcomed at the northern fur posts by a firing of cannon from the snow-muffled bastions. Before the stars have faded chapel services begin. Frequently, on either Christmas or New Year's day, a grand feast is given the tawny-skinned habitues of the fort, who come shuffling to the main messroom with no other announcement than the lifting of the latch, and billet themselves on the hospitality of a host that has never turned hungry Indian from its doors.

For reasons well known to the hungry woodcraftsman, a sudden lull falls on winter hunting in December, and all the trappers within a week's journey from the fort, all the half-breed guides who add to the instinct of native craft the reasoning of the white; all the Indian hunters ranging river course and mountain, have come by snow shoes and dog train to spend festive days at the fort. A great jangling of bells announces the huskies (dog trains) scampering over the frozen snow drifts. A babel of barks and curses follows, for the huskies celebrate their arrival by tangling themselves up in their harness and enjoying a free fight.

Dogs unharnessed, in troop the trappers to the banquet hall, flinging packs of tightly roped peltries down promiscuously, to be sorted next day. One Indian enters just as he has left the hunting field, clad from head to heel in white caribou, with the antlers left on the capote as a decoy. His squaw has togged out for the occasion in a comical medley of brass bracelets and finger rings, with a bear's-claw necklace and ermine ruff which no city connoisseur could possibly mistake for rabbit. If a daughter yet remain unappropriated she will display the gayest attire — red flannel galore, red shawl, red scarf, with perhaps an apron of white fox skin and moccasins garnished in colored grasses. The braves outdo even a vain young squaw. Whole fox, mink or otter skins have been braided to the end of their hair and hang down in two plaits to the floor. Whitest of buckskin has been ornamented with brightest of beads, and over all hangs the gaudiest of blankets; it may be musk-ox skin with the feats of the warrior in rude drawings on the smooth side.

A few years ago it would not have been safe to give this treat inside the fort walls. Rations would have been served through loop-holes and the feast held outside the gates, but so faithfully have the Indians become bound to the Hudson's Bay Company there are not three forts in the fur territory where Indians must be excluded.

Of the feast little need be said. Like the camel, the Indian lays up store for the morrow, judging from his capacity, for weeks of morrows. His benefactor no more dines with him than a plantation master of the south would have dined with feasting slaves. Elsewhere a bell calls the company officers to breakfast at 7:30, dinner at 1, supper at 7. Officers dine first, white hunters and trappers second, that difference between master and servant being maintained which is part of the company's almost military discipline. In the large forts are libraries, whither resort the officers for the long winter nights. But over the feast wild hilarity reigns.

A French-Canadian fiddler strikes up a tuneless jig that sets the Indians pounding the floor in figureless dances with moccasined heels till midday glides into midnight and midnight to morning. I remember hearing of one such midday feast in Red River settlement that prolonged itself past four of the second morning. Against the walls sit old folks spinning yarns of the past. There is a print of Sir George Simpson behind one raconteur's head. Ah, yes, the oldest guides all remember Sir George, though half a century has passed since his day! He was the governor who traveled with flags flying from every prow, and cannon firing when he left the forts, and men drawn up in procession like soldiers guarding an emperor when he entered the fur posts with courtiers and all the flourish of royal state.

And there is a crucifix high on the wall left by Pere Lacomb the last time the famous missionary to the red men of the far north passed this way, and every Indian calls up some kindness done, some sacrifice by Father Lacomb. On the gun-rack are old muskets and Indian masks and scalp-locks, bringing back the days when Russian traders instigated a massacre at this fort, and white traders flew at each other's throats as nor'wester struggled with Hudson's Bay for supremacy in the fur trade.

"Ah, oui, those white men, they were brave fighters, they did not know how to stop! Mais, sacre, they were fools, those white men, after all! Instead of hiding in ambush to catch the foe, those white men measured off paces, stood up face to face and fired blank — oui! — fired blank! Ugh! Of course, one fool he was kill' and the other fool, most like, he was wound'. Ugh! by Gar! What Indian would have so little sense?"

Of hunting tales the Indian store is exhaustless. That enormous bear skin stretched to four pegs on the wall brings up Montagnais, the Noseless One, who still lives on Peace river, and slew the largest bear ever killed in the Rockies, returning to this very fort with one hand dragging the enormous skin and the other holding the place which his nose no longer graced.

But in all the feasting, trade has not been forgotten, and as soon as the Indians recover from post-prandial torpor, bartering begins. In one of the warehouses stands a trader. An Indian approaches with a pack of peltries, weighing from eighty to a hundred pounds. Throwing it down, he spreads out the contents. Of otter and mink and pekan there will be plenty, for these fish-eaters are easiest taken before mid-winter frost has frozen the streams solid. In recent years there have been few beaver skins, a closed season of several years giving the little rodents a chance to multiply. Of muskrat skins hundreds of thousands are carried to the forts every season. Next to muskrat, the most plentiful fur will be that of the rabbit or, varying hare. Buffalo was once the staple of the hunter. What the buffalo was, the white rabbit is today. From it the Indian gets clothing, tepee covers, blankets, thongs, food. From it, the white man who is a manufacturer of furs gets gray fox and chinchilla, and seal in imitation. Except one year in seven, when a rabbit plague spares the land by cutting down their prolific numbers, the varying hare is plentiful enough to sustain the Indian.

Having received so many bits of lead for his furs, the Indian goes to the store counter, where begins interminable dickering. Montagnais' squaw has only fifty "beaver" coin, and her desires are a hundredfold what those will buy. Besides, the copper-skinned lady enjoys beating down prices and driving a bargain so well that she would think the clerk was cheating if he asked a fixed price from the first. Frequently an Indian presents himself at the counter without beaver enough to buy necessaries. What then? I doubt it in all the years of Hudson's Bay Company rule one needy Indian has ever been turned away. The trader advances what the Indian needs, and chalks up so many "beaver" against the trapper's next hunt.

Long ago, when rival traders strove for the furs, whiskey played a disgracefully prominent part in all bartering, the drunken Indian being an easier victim than the sober, and the Indian mad with thirst for liquor the most easily cajoled of all. But today, when there is no competition, whiskey plays no part whatever.

The only way to get an accurate idea of the size of the kingdom ruled by these monarchs of the lonely wastes is by comparison.

Take a map of North America. On the east is Labrador, a peninsula as vast as Germany and Holland and Belgium and half of France. On the coast and across the unknown interior are the magical letters, H. B. C., meaning Hudson's Bay Company fort (past or present), a little whitewashed square, with eighteen-foot posts planted, picketwise, for a wall, match-box bastions loop-holed for musketry, a barrack-like structure across the court-yard with a high look-out of some sort near the gate. In one of these forts Lord Strathcona passed his youth.

Once more to the map. With one prong of a compass in the center of Hudson Bay, describe a circle. The northern half embraces the baffling arctics, but on the line of the southern circumference, like beads on a string, are Churchill high on the left, York below in black capitals as befits the importance of the great fur emporium of the bay, Severn and Albany and Moose and Rupert and Fort George round the south and to the right—larger and more strongly built forts than in Labrador, with the ruins of stone walls at Churchill with a depth of fifteen feet.

Again to the map. Between Hudson Bay and the Rocky mountains stretches an American Siberia — the Barren Lands. Here, too, on every important water-way, Athabasca and the Liard and the MacKenzie into the land of winter, night and midnight sun extend Hudson's Bay Company posts.

The map again. Between the prairie and the Pacific ocean is a wilderness of peaks, a Switzerland stretched into half the length of a continent. Here, too, like eagle nests in rocky fastnesses are fur posts.

Before 1812 there was no international boundary in the fur trade. But after the war, congress barred out Canadian companies. The next curtailment of hunting ground came in 1869-70, when the company surrendered proprietary rights to the Canadian government, retaining only the right to trade in the vast north land. Yearly, the staffs are shifted as the fortunes of a hunt vary, but the principal posts have probably not exceeded two hundred in number, nor fallen below one hundred for the last century. When the Hudson's Bay Company was fighting rivals it must have employed as traders, packers, coureurs, canoe-men, hunters and guides, at least 5,000 men. Over this wilderness army were from 250 to 300 officers, each with the power of life and death in his hands.

FREIGHT SHIPMENTS

Spring Novelties Soon to Began Arriving

All the Leading Houses Will Make Extensive Importations of New Stock.

The market reporter of the Nugget has stated on one or two occasions that there was slight indication of any goods arriving this season over the ice from Whitehorse, and the statement was true as far as edibles were concerned, though investigation today has revealed the fact that tons and tons of other freight will be brought in 350 miles over the overland trail the same as usual. The shipments will embrace novelties in both ladies' and gentlemen's wearing apparel, dress goods, clothing, millinery, hats, etc., and will be larger in quantity than ever before. The fashionable lady of Dawson now-a-days is not content to wait until the opening of navigation for the arrival of feminine fripperies, but she must have them just as soon as her sister on the outside. Last year's bonnet and last season's gown will not do for Easter; she is willing to pay the extra cost of transporting the things dear to her heart from the end of the railroad to the city, hence the demand and the consequent placing of early orders by the dealers.

The first shipments are expected early in March and from then on new goods of various kinds will arrive almost every day for one firm or another. The N. C. Co. has placed large orders for their spring trade and the buyer is now in the eastern markets making his selection. Their goods are shipped in specially made zinc lined boxes costing $6 each alone for the package, and when packed they are soldered up completely making them absolutely water tight and saving the contents from any possible damage.

The N. A. T. & T. Co. has also placed heavy orders, General Manager McKee stating that the shipments over the ice this season would amount to fully twenty tons. It will consist mostly of clothing, dress goods, novelties and millinery. Mr. Parsons, of the Ames Mercantile Co., is going outside in a few days and will meet their buyer in the city in time to place their orders for a full line of spring novelties.

Mesdames Summers & Orrell are expecting the first of their spring shipments as early as next month, though for that matter they have been receiving new goods by express all winter. The ladies have a large store in Vancouver and as soon as anything dear to the feminine heart appears on the outside a duplicate order is sent here without being requisitioned. The main part of their spring stock will not arrive until March and April and some startling and beautiful novelties are promised as the result of the milliner's inventive genius. Madame Aubert, who deals almost wholly in Parisian goods, will soon begin receiving her new spring stock. They come direct from Paris as is shown by the customs papers which are in French and which the customs department has such a struggle with. Mme. Aubert, being from the gay French capital, has a perfect knowledge of what is desired and her new stock this spring will be fully in keeping with the very latest modes.

Harry Hershberg and also Sargent & Pinska will receive a large consignment of gentlemen's wear such as clothing, summer suits, novelties in neckwear, etc. The overland trail has been quiet this winter save for the coming and going of the mail stages, but within another month it will be lined with teams bringinb in freight containing not articles of food, but things for personal adornment which will make fond fathers and adoring husbands dig down deep in their pockets.

The total payments by the Dominion government for iron and steel bounties during the past fiscal year were $791,089. The total claims presented by the seven companies producing iron and steel were $947,361, but the balance, $156,272, is withheld pending decisions as to the liability of the government under the law.

Liverpool, Dec. 30.—In a letter dated Dec. 16, Andrew Carnegie offers to give $65,000 to build a branch library at Liverpool. His offer will be submitted at the next meeting of the city council.

The returns for the past fiscal year show that the total value of settlers' effects imported was $4,580,481. Of this amount $3,751,363 worth were from the United States and $802,313 worth from Britain.

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