

A Novice on the Athabasca

(By W. H. Footner.)

The Peace River! For thirty years the most romantic associations have clustered about that name in the north. Returning missionaries and traders have had such alluring stories to tell of the beauty and fertility of that far-off land and its delightful climate, it has come to be considered a sort of agricultural El Dorado, and so young men can rest until he has seen it. He turns his face north with the feeling that he is hot on the track of the Spirit of Romance which is always retreating before the advance of steel rails and telegraph wires.

Athabasca Landing is the jumping-off place; this is the end of the telegraph wire, and the wagon road; here the good-byes are said as you go "in," and here you are welcomed as you come "out." Here you bid adieu to the last luxuries of civilization in the shape of barber chairs, billiard tables, and spring beds. The Landing is the great meeting place of the north; I have heard appointments made here for a whole year ahead. One is struck by the extreme smallness of this vast country; it is a point of pride for everyone to know everyone else and what he is doing. Away up in Fort McPherson, three months' journey from Edmonton, they speak of "town" as if it were five miles off.

At the Landing the main route to the north divides. You go up the Athabasca to Lesser Slave Lake and the Peace River country on the one hand, or down the river to the string of posts on Lake Athabasca, Great Slave Lake and the Mackenzie, on the other. Through the Landing passes all the freight for the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company, Revillon Brothers and the various "free traders," and through the Landing are returned the neatly packed bales of fur, the product of the north.

One is impressed by the contrast between the endless stretch of drift-stuffs and the wearing apparel put on into the north through this gateway and the comparatively few loads of fur which represent a fair exchange. But a single returning load may be worth ten thousand dollars. I met four small boats being driven by members of the same family, the trail from the Landing, which I was told represented \$30,000. A lot of fourteen was piloting \$10,000 worth of fur through the bush, half a mile behind the rest of his family. From the Landing I had expected to travel by York house, Athabasca and Lesser Slave rivers and across Lesser Slave Lake, but I found transportation even more uncertain than usual. A small stern-wheeler, the Midnight Sun, plies up and down the Athabasca between Pelican Rapids, a hundred miles below the Landing and the mouth of the Lesser Slave River, 75 miles above. From the latter point it was intended to carry passengers and freight by wagon around the 25 miles then have another steamer running on the lake and across the river and across the Lake Athabasca, a little wheeler, christened Northern Light, was built by young Captain Barber at the Landing for this purpose. But the water in the smaller stream was exceptionally low all summer and the Northern Light could not get up the rapids.

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At four o'clock a landing was made at Moose Portage for wood, and shortly afterwards we approached the most difficult place in the river, where an island divides the channel, and the river spreads out wide and shallow on each side. It is a place had been causing apprehension in the breast of Phillips, the half-breed pilot, all day. Choosing the most promising opening, he drove his boat cautiously ahead, but soon grounded; there was less than two feet of water in the channel. Finding that he could not put her through under her own steam, he allowed her to drift on a shoal while preparations were made to drag her over the stones.

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No labor is too arduous for the indefatigable "free traders" of the north. The whole of the next day was spent in similar laborious attempts to ascend the rapids around the island. Three times the half mile of hawser was painfully coiled in the skiff, and dragged up the bank, and the three times it broke as soon as the full strain was put upon it. Towards evening the captain gave up, and gathering in the broken strands of his hawser, turned the boat's head down stream. After supper the passengers were landed at Moose Portage.

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I was careful never to turn my back on the spot the sound issued from, while I built up a big fire and piled stones around the bottom of the tent. I was not armed. Later, after I had turned in, the coyotes, attracted by the smell of frying bacon very likely, gathered close around my camp, howling horribly. It's a fearful sound until you become accustomed to it.

The next day I saw not a soul, nor did I pass a human habitation of any kind. The banks of the river flattened down and heavy willow bushes grew along the edge. Below, the banks were low and level, and the water was shallow. The little inlets were covered with a tiny white water lily. There was nothing to suggest the north in the sunny, quietly flowing river, indeed I never saw such rich green vegetation.

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My driver was going to the head of the rapids, 25 miles further, and I continued with him on the chance of having better luck at that point. The road from here was slightly better, though as yet nothing to brag about. The way we passed the unfortunate Northern Light stuck in the rapids. For six weeks her tireless young skipper had been hauling her over the stones by casting lines around trees on the shore and winding them up over the main shaft of his little stern-wheeler. In the worst places he had raised the depth of the water by building wing dams. During this whole period he had made just ten miles. We left him a big package of mail. There was one fine little farm on the way, and two or three rich flats where others might be made. We reached Norris', our destination, at dusk.

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Instead, I bought a little punt from Norris, and took a lesson in poling. It was no sooner started than I discovered that I had no lessons. The crazy little craft absolutely refused to go forward and the current threatened to carry me down the rapids. With immense difficulty I succeeded at last in pulling around a bend where my ride-out to travel by York house, Athabasca and Lesser Slave rivers and across Lesser Slave Lake, but I found transportation even more uncertain than usual. A small stern-wheeler, the Midnight Sun, plies up and down the Athabasca between Pelican Rapids, a hundred miles below the Landing and the mouth of the Lesser Slave River, 75 miles above. From the latter point it was intended to carry passengers and freight by wagon around the 25 miles then have another steamer running on the lake and across the river and across the Lake Athabasca, a little wheeler, christened Northern Light, was built by young Captain Barber at the Landing for this purpose. But the water in the smaller stream was exceptionally low all summer and the Northern Light could not get up the rapids.

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The Midnight Sun is about 100 feet long. The accommodations for passengers would hardly be considered luxurious "outside," but by comparison with the usual hardships of travel in the north it is a very comfortable little vessel. There are several rough staterooms on the upper deck with bunks into which each passenger puts his own bedding. The rapids are excellent.

For fellow passengers I had two San Franciscans, who having suffered through the earthquake, were striking out to seek a new fortune in the Peace River country. The elder, who was about fifty years old, was an ex-masseur and osteopathist; his young companion had been a dining car conductor. They were quite unaccustomed to roughing it, and their orifices excited open ridicule among the crew. One could not help pitying the lot of their bewildered old ones, ex-cab horses from Vancouver, accustomed to smooth city streets and plenty of oats. They had two wagons loaded with all manner of unnecessary articles, such as an iron bedstead, an enormous, theatrical trunk, heavy wooden doors, etc. One of their wagons was a high seated affair which shortly afterwards capsized against a stump nearly killing the younger man. This party was several weeks going forty miles. They were undaunted, however, and camped for the winter, determined to press forward in the spring.

The Midnight Sun left the Landing late one afternoon, and after steaming a few miles against the current, tied up to the bank for the night. Re-

turning her journey at dawn, all day she passed between the pine-clad banks of the Athabasca, while the passengers and crew lounged about the captain's swaying yams. The character of the shore never changed; we rounded point after point covered with immense pine trees and occasionally poplars; the only breaks were the tracks cleared out by fire. These patches were blue with the flower of the fireweed. Now and then we came to a little rapid up which the Midnight Sun churned slowly. The ordinary speed of the current was about three miles an hour. A single hut on the bank built as a stopping place for travelers over the ice in winter and the main man coming down stream in a Petterboro canoe, were the only evidence of life. I was told that about the woods on the north bank stretched several fish traps of prairie land.

At four o'clock a landing was made at Moose Portage for wood, and shortly afterwards we approached the most difficult place in the river, where an island divides the channel, and the river spreads out wide and shallow on each side. It is a place had been causing apprehension in the breast of Phillips, the half-breed pilot, all day. Choosing the most promising opening, he drove his boat cautiously ahead, but soon grounded; there was less than two feet of water in the channel. Finding that he could not put her through under her own steam, he allowed her to drift on a shoal while preparations were made to drag her over the stones.

First a half mile of hawser was coiled in the "skiff." This skiff, a "poor noisium," sprang and then was hauled up to the bank, and was some 20 feet long. The skiff was then pulled ashore, paying out the rope as she went, and laboriously "tracked" that is to say, pulled up against the driving current until the rope was all paid out. This was then secured to a big tree on the shore, and further made sure by an anchor dropped in mid stream. On the return of the skiff to the steamboat, the other end of the hawser was turned about the capstan and engines and capstan were started to pull. But the Midnight Sun had no sooner started to pull herself up hand over hand, as it were, than the hawser parted with a loud report, the capstan spun round, and the steamboat settled back on the shoal.

No labor is too arduous for the indefatigable "free traders" of the north. The whole of the next day was spent in similar laborious attempts to ascend the rapids around the island. Three times the half mile of hawser was painfully coiled in the skiff, and dragged up the bank, and the three times it broke as soon as the full strain was put upon it. Towards evening the captain gave up, and gathering in the broken strands of his hawser, turned the boat's head down stream. After supper the passengers were landed at Moose Portage.

Moose Portage consists of two log huts in the bush. They are inhabited only in the winter. In summer the natives are off "pitching about" in tepees as long as the fine weather lasts. Two young men, however, had seen the struggles of the steamer to get around the island, and presently they came running through the trees, from these I learned through Phillips, who interpreted, that a party of half breeds were making hay about seven miles away, and that one of them was going west in a wagon next morning. So I engaged them to pack my belongings to the hay camp. The three of us trailed off in single file through the woods just as dusk was falling. With our backs bent under the packs, which were further supported by a strap across the forehead, we looked like a picture out of a tale of adventure.

Moore Portage, through the trees, was putting up my tent, some animals, I was afterwards told it was a lynx, took up a position among the bushes above my camp, and alternately growled and whined as much as to say, "I'd love to come down and scratch you up a bit, if I only dared!"

The first night's camp on the river was lonesome indeed. The silence seemed to press against one's ears; drums, one hated to chop wood, the noise of the axe crashed so startlingly through the woods. While I was putting up my tent, some animals, I was afterwards told it was a lynx, took up a position among the bushes above my camp, and alternately growled and whined as much as to say, "I'd love to come down and scratch you up a bit, if I only dared!"

I was careful never to turn my back on the spot the sound issued from, while I built up a big fire and piled stones around the bottom of the tent. I was not armed. Later, after I had turned in, the coyotes, attracted by the smell of frying bacon very likely, gathered close around my camp, howling horribly. It's a fearful sound until you become accustomed to it.

The next day I saw not a soul, nor did I pass a human habitation of any kind. The banks of the river flattened down and heavy willow bushes grew along the edge. Below, the banks were low and level, and the water was shallow. The little inlets were covered with a tiny white water lily. There was nothing to suggest the north in the sunny, quietly flowing river, indeed I never saw such rich green vegetation.

The willow offered a new problem to me and my tow line. I tried climbing over the bushes, and plunging through and crawling under; I slipped on clayey banks and dropped into water up to my middle; I took the rope in my teeth and crawled along in hand and knees and still that maddest rope would take half hitches and true lovers' knots

the stumps, the fallen trunks, and the preposterous slides. I walked most of the way with the other passengers, a handful of Indian women. The road was lined with delicious Saskatoon berries and high bush cranberries, a refreshing thin-skinned fruit something like a currant.

At noon we reached Revillon's warehouse at the mouth of the Little River, just in time to see a York boat pass down stream. Among the passengers were several sisters "bound 'out," on a vacation. There was no one on a boat going up and no one to give me any information. The little warehouse and a single half-breed shack comprised the settlement at that point.

My driver was going to the head of the rapids, 25 miles further, and I continued with him on the chance of having better luck at that point. The road from here was slightly better, though as yet nothing to brag about. The way we passed the unfortunate Northern Light stuck in the rapids. For six weeks her tireless young skipper had been hauling her over the stones by casting lines around trees on the shore and winding them up over the main shaft of his little stern-wheeler. In the worst places he had raised the depth of the water by building wing dams. During this whole period he had made just