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LIFE ON THE MACKENZIE RIVER.

THE immense territory stretching from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific Ocean, and from the northern boundaries of Canada to the coasts of the Arctic basin—but little inferior to Europe in extent—is a region of vast lakes comparable to inland seas, of rivers, torrents, swamps, and forests, with a similar proportion of naked plains intersected by as naked hills, often arranged in a wave-like form, as if an ocean had been suddenly petrified while heaving its huge billows under the influence of a strong and stormy gale. The dense forests occur in the southern part of this district. They contain various species of timber-trees, but are principally of pines, which have often a withered, scorched, and blackened aspect. The spark from an Indian's pipe, or the unextinguished fire of a bivouac, has ignited the dry moss and grass beneath them in summer, and the winds have kindled a conflagration, which has blazed till quenched by the winter's snows. Further north, a few stunted spruce firs line the banks of the streams, or are spread in patches over sheltered spots, till, on gaining a higher latitude, the zone of the woods is left completely, and only low willow scrub appears in hollows on the borders of the icy sea. Throughout this region, the signs of winter are unmistakable in October, and continue till May; but they commence even earlier and last longer on the coasts than in the interior. The cold is so intense, that the thermometer falls to 50° and even 70° below zero. Lakes and streams, ten to twelve feet deep, are masses of hard ice to the bottom. Brandy freezes, mercury solidifies, flannel may be snapped like a biscuit, and ice is occasionally formed in the nostrils. The breath, congealing as it passes from the mouth, becomes audible in a sharp whirr, like a small es-

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PACIFIC RIVER HIST.
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cape of steam; while the inside of heated apartments is encrusted with a thick coating of rime, produced from the respiration of the inmates and the steam of their victuals. Instruments and other articles of metal cannot be touched with impunity by the naked hand out of doors; for the skin will stick to them on contact, and, precisely the same effect as burning one's fingers be produced. Similar punishment follows on incautiously drinking from tin panikins. The lips cleave to the metal, and painful excoriations are often caused in removing them. It is curious to witness the mobile mercury, when brought into the atmosphere from a higher temperature, yield to the potent cold, and reluctantly resign itself to rigidity. The quicksilver slowly contracts, a dull film overspreads it, and next a bright fluid appears at the surface, when its consistency is akin to that of dough. Then follows the final change to complete congelation. King Frost has the prey fairly in his gripe when the temperature of his finger ends in about 40°. The metal hardens, till the before restless, volatile, and dancing mercury is stiff as a corpse—an indurated solid.

Severe as is the season, it is not without its glory. There are gorgeous spectacles in the heavens which canopy the dreary landscape and solitary country. Parhelia by day, and paraselenæ by night, are frequent, or mock suns and moons, with circles, arcs of circles, inverted or in a natural position, and horizontal bands, caused by the inflection of light from minute angular crystals of ice floating in the atmosphere. Then the Aurora Borealis adds its splendor to the visual variety, with an effect never witnessed in our own geographical position, or gladly would our population troop out of doors at midnight, and brave the bitterest blast to enjoy the spectacle. No language can adequately describe or pencil picture the phenomenon; its ever-varying phases, its fickle hues, its radiance, and its grandeur, rendered all the more imposing by the perfect mysteriousness of the cause.

What fills with dazzling beams the illumined air?

What wakes the frames that light the firmament?

The lightnings flash—there is no thunder there,

And earth and heaven with fiery sheets are blent:

The winter night now gleams with brighter,
lovelier ray
Than ever yet adorn'd the golden summer's day.

Is there some vast, some hidden magazine,

Where the gross darkness flames of fire supplies?

Some phosphorous fabric which the mountains screen,

Whose clouds of light above those mountains rise?

The arrival of migratory birds from the south heralds the approach of a more genial season; with an increase of temperature the snow melts. Pools of water are then formed on the lake and river ice, till the compact mass is itself broken up, the currents are again in motion, huge blocks passing along with the streams, grinding and hollowing out their banks. When impeded in their progress, they collect in enormous piles and form temporary dams, causing the obstructed waters to flood the adjoining country, till the barrier is removed by its natural dissolution. Upon the surface soil appearing, the ground is a universal swamp, but is gradually dried by drainage, in situations favorable to it, and by the increase of temperature. Summer comes at length, and though a briefer interval than the winter, it is rendered quite as distinct by its heat as the other season by its cold. Where the thermometer has fallen below zero, it often registers 84° in the shade and 100° in the sun, and by concentrating the solar rays on a black ground, a temperature as high as 112° may be obtained. Where, too, exposed limbs would be certainly frost-bitten in winter, they as surely wince at the bites of musquitos and gad-flies in summer. The region is thus one of surprising extremes, as well as of sudden changes; for the seasonal transitions are effected with marvelous rapidity, and the weather is subject to the most capricious variations. Thick fogs prevail for weeks after splendid sunshine, rain is sometimes abundant with a serene sky, and the sun will occasionally burst forth in the midst of the heaviest showers.

Such are the physical characteristics of the territory. Its human occupiers consist of Esquimaux, thinly sprinkled along the shores of the Arctic Ocean; Indians, of various tribes, sparingly scattered through the interior; and the officers and servants of the Hudson's Bay Company. The latter are for the most

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part Scotch, and chiefly Orkneymen, with French Canadians and half-breeds, the progeny of a mixed European and Indian parentage. They are stationed at isolated and far-asunder posts or forts, often amid dense forests and cheerless solitudes, with the wolf and bear prowling in the neighborhood, ranging to the distance of three and four thousand miles from York Factory, the head-quarters of the Company on Hudson's Bay. The officers are either chief factors, who superintend the business of a district, in which there are several posts, with one of superior pretensions for a kind of capital, but sufficiently rough and homely; or traders, who barter with the Indians for skins; or clerks, who keep an account of all transactions. The servants perform the miscellaneous menial labor requisite, as cutting wood, drawing home provisions on sledges, and transporting furs. The latter service involves labor of the severest description; for the difficulties of mountain and forest, torrent and shallow, have to be encountered and overcome, while the extremes of cold, heat, and privation are experienced. From the remote stations it requires nearly a twelvemonth to convey the goods to York Factory, from whence they are shipped for England. The furs are made up in closely-pressed packs, the smaller and finer skins—as those of the musk-rats, martens, and otters—being placed in the inside, and inclosed by those of the wolf, bear, and reindeer. In winter they are drawn on sledges to the nearest point from which water-carriage can be obtained in spring; and upon the rivers becoming open, they are placed in boats, which can only advance through immense distances by being dragged along; while at the rapids, goods and boats have to be transported on the backs of the men, to a point of the stream above the embarrassed locality.

The forts vary as to the number of persons attached to them, according to their importance; and their accommodations hinge upon the same circumstance, as well as upon their distance from the borders of civilized life. They are commonly constructed of roughly-hewn pine logs, of large dimensions, interstices being plastered with mud, the universal substitute for mortar. The roofs are composed of flat layers of sticks and moss; while light is admitted through casements of parch-

ment, which is repaired, when rent, with scraps of paper. As to interior furniture, there is neither sofa, ottoman, nor easy chair, though the inmates are not always bachelor Scotchmen. The bedsteads are branches of pine, the unadorned work of the ax; the chairs are stools, made out of huge single blocks; the tables are similarly made, and massive; while a most miscellaneous assortment of articles may be observed here and there, consisting of guns, blankets, skins, kettles, horns, coffee-pots, pemmican tins, and fishing-lines, with the woodman's and carpenter's implements. Yet the persons in charge of these primitive dwellings are gentlemen in manners, feeling, and intelligence; and at one of them—Fort Macpherson—the most northerly, a Scotch bride arrived in the winter of 1842, to commence the duties of married life amid the ice and snow of the Arctic zone. The northern district of the Company's territory, which includes the basin of the Mackenzie River, has Fort Simpson on its banks for the head station; in latitude 61°, that of the Great Slave Lake. Further north in succession are Fort Norman, on the Bear River; Fort New Franklin, at the south extremity of the Great Bear Lake; Fort Good Hope, on the Mackenzie, under the Arctic circle; Fort Confidence, at the north extremity of the Bear Lake; and Fort Macpherson, on the Peel River, an affluent of the Mackenzie. The natives of the district are the Loucheux, or Quarrelers, the Hare, Rat, Dog-rib, and Strong-bow Indians, with the Esquimaux of the coast.

There is little variety of food at these remote stations. Flour, bread, tea, and sugar—European importations—are articles of extreme luxury, owing to the difficulty of transport through such an immense distance and wild country. A certain quantity of these and other domestic stores is annually forwarded from York Factory; but in order to make the allowance last, it must be consumed in homeopathic portions, or reserved as a treat for Sundays. Fish is a main article of diet, summer and winter, prepared in almost every conceivable method—boiled and roasted, dried, smoked, and cured. There are fish soups and fish cakes, with "fish, fish, fish" in a variety of phases, somewhat taxing to ingenuity to invent. Summer fare includes fresh buffalo, reindeer, and elk flesh, with rabbits and other smaller animals, usually

obtained with little effort, and in great abundance. Winter fare comprises fresh bear and beaver meat occasionally; but pemmican, or dried buffalo and reindeer flesh, requiring vigorous mastication, is the ordinary dish, as the animals can then be rarely captured, having retired from the wind-swept plains to the shelter of distant woods. Two meals a day—at ten o'clock in the morning, and between four and six in the afternoon—are the usual repasts. Lieut. Hooper, who wintered at Fort New Franklin in 1849-50, in his account of the sojourn, mentions the very remarkable fact of the rabbits, throughout the whole region, being subject to periodical conditions of increase and reduction in their numbers. They overrun the country in astonishing quantities at one period, gradually lessen annually, until very few can be caught; then, having arrived at their minimum, they gradually increase, until the animals become as abundant as before. These cycles of progress and decay comprehend an interval of about eight or ten years. Several causes have been assigned for this extraordinary ebb and flow of life. Some assert that the rabbits migrate at regular intervals, to avoid the merciless persecutions of their many enemies—the lynx, wolf, fox, marten, and ermine. Others refer the circumstance to the periodical visitation of an epidemic. However this may be, the fluctuation has an important effect upon the fur trade. In the year succeeding that when the rabbits are most plentiful, the fur-bearing animals, whose prey they become, are most abundant, while the year following that of their greatest decrease is the most deficient in its supply of furs.

Plenty in summer, amounting to even wasteful abundance, often alternates at the isolated northern posts with absolute scarcity and positive famine in winter, owing to the migration of the larger animals, and failure in the arrival of customary supplies. Frightful crimes have been committed by the Indians to assuage the pangs of hunger; and even the whites—French Canadians and half-castes—have been driven to cannibalism by the pressure of the same dire necessity. During the winter of 1845 the Company's people at Fort Good Hope were short of provisions, and the Indians in the neighborhood were on the verge of starvation. One night the persons in charge of the station heard

the blows of the ax in the lodges around the Fort, by which the weaker were killed, in order to be devoured. Two expressmen, one Scotch and the other a native of the Orkneys, who were proceeding with letters to Fort Macpherson, met with a party of starving savages, who stole upon them in the night, murdered, and ate them, along with their provisions. While Lieut. Hooper was at Fort New Franklin, an old Indian hunter was located there, who had several times sustained life by feeding upon the corpses of those who had perished from famine, among whom were included his own parents, one wife, and the children of two. On one occasion this man made his appearance at Fort Norman to solicit food, and had, at the same time, the hands of his brother-in-law in his game-bag! At Fort Simpson there was another Indian, named Geero, who, according to report, had assisted in the consumption of eighteen individuals, and was said to prefer human flesh to any other kind of food. The lieutenant, being desirous of going off for a few days into the woods to find reindeer or moose, wished to have Geero for his companion and guide; but the Indian refused the service, and, on being pressed for a reason, he frankly told the interpreter that he did not dare to trust himself with any one alone in the woods, as he might be tempted to treat himself to a repast of his much-esteemed fare! The officer did not further solicit the honor of his company.

Some of the tribes, as the Slaves and Dog-ribs, are indifferent to these horrors; but others are less callous, and regard with abhorrence those who overcome a period of exigency by such revolting means. In the spring of the year 1850, which followed a terribly trying winter, an Indian of the Beaver tribe came to Dunvegan Fort, but refused to exchange greetings with the persons in charge of the post. When asked the reason of his unfriendly demeanor, he replied: "I am not worthy to shake hands with men; I am no longer a man, for I have eaten man's flesh. It is true I was starving, was dying of hunger, but I cannot forgive myself. The thought of the act is killing to me, and I shall die soon, and with contentment; for although I still exist, I cannot any longer consider myself a human being."

Such are some phases of life on the

Mackenzie River, sufficiently painful and forbidding. Yet has it features of interest to hardy adventurous spirits—the buffalo hunt, the bear chase, the capture of the fur-bearing animals, and the traffic with the Indians—which prevent monotony and offer excitement. This wild kind of occupation, together with certain remuneration and the prospect of rising in the Company's service, induces an adequate number of our countrymen to forego for a season the domestic comforts to which so much importance is attached at home, and doggedly endure the solitariness, desolation, fatigue, cold, and perils of a sojourn in the northern wilds of the western world. Nor is there perhaps to be found a more striking example of hardihood and energy in the search after commercial prosperity, than is afforded by the officers and servants of the Hudson's Bay Fur Trading Company at the remoter outposts, who live through half the year with a temperature below zero, and deem themselves fortunate if twice in a twelvemonth they hear a little of what is going on in merry England.
