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THE PIONEERS

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R. M. Ballantyne
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Preface

Sir Alexander Mackenzie was one of the most energetic and successful of the discoverers who have traversed the vast wilderness of British America. He did his work single-handed, with slender means, and slight encouragement, at a time when discovery was rare and the country almost *terra incognita*. The long and difficult route, so recently traversed by the Red River Expedition, was, to Sir Alexander, but the small beginning of his far-reaching travels. He traced the great river which bears his name to its outlet in the Polar Sea, and was the first to cross the Rocky Mountains in those latitudes and descend to the Pacific ocean.

Being a man of action, and not particularly enamoured of the pen, his journal (For a sight of which apply to the British Museum, London, or the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh)—full though it be of important and most interesting facts—is a bare and unadorned though valuable record of progress made, of work done, which is unsuited to juvenile minds, besides being bulky and scarce.

Having spent some years in Rupert's Land, and seen

something of Red Indian and fur-trading life, I have ventured to weave the incidents of Sir Alexander's narratives into a story which, it is hoped, may prove interesting to the young—perchance, also, to the old.

I take this opportunity of acknowledging myself deeply indebted to Sir Alexander's daughter, Miss Mackenzie, and to his two sons, for kindly placing at my disposal all the information in their possession.

R.M.B .

Edinburgh, 1872 .

Chapter One.
Shows how it began

"The world is round," said somebody in ancient times to somebody else.

"Not at all; it is flat—flat as a pancake," replied somebody else to somebody; "and if you were to travel far enough you might get to the end of it and tumble over the edge, if so disposed."

Ever since the commencement of this early geographical controversy, men have been labouring with more or less energy and success to ascertain the form and character of the earth; a grand, glorious labour it has been; resulting in blessings innumerable to mankind—blessings both spiritual and temporal.

We have heard some people object to geographical discovery, especially in the inclement parts of the earth, on the ground that it could be of no use, and involved great risk to life and limb. "Of no use!" Who can tell what discoveries shall be useful and what useless? "The works of God are great, sought out of all those that have pleasure therein," saith the Scripture. There is no reference here to usefulness, but the searching out of God's works, without limitation, is authorised; and those who "take pleasure therein," will be content to leave the result of their labours in the hands of Him who sent them forth. As to "risk,"—why, a carpenter cannot ascend to the top of a house to put the rafters thereon without

risk; a chemist cannot investigate the properties of certain fumes without risk; you cannot even eat your dinner without risk. Only this are we sure of—that, if man had never undertaken labour except when such was *obviously* useful and devoid of risk, the world would still be in the darkness of the Middle Ages.

Reuben Guff held these sentiments, or something like them; and Reuben was a man who had seen a great deal of life in his day, although at the time we introduce him to public notice he had not lived more than six-and-thirty summers. He was a bronzed, stalwart Canadian. His father had been Scotch, his mother of French extraction; and Reuben possessed the dogged resolution of the Scot with the vivacity of the Frenchman. In regard to his tastes and occupation we shall let him speak for himself.

Sitting under a pine-tree, in the wild wilderness that lies to the north of Canada with the drumstick of a goose in one hand and a scalping-knife in the other; with a log-fire in front of him, and his son, a stripling of sixteen, by his side, he delivered himself of the following sentiments:—

"I tell 'ee what it is, Lawrence," (the lad was named after the great river on the banks of which he had been reared), "I was born to be a pioneer. Ever since I was the height of a three-fut rule I've had a skunner at the settlements and a love for the wilderness that I couldn't overcome nohow. Moreover, I wouldn't overcome it if I could, for it's my opinion that He who made us knows what He wants us to do, an' has given us sitch feelin's and inclinations

as will lead us to do it, if we don't run mad after *notions* of our own, as the folk in the settlements are raither apt to do."

Here some of the "notions" referred to appeared to tickle the fancy of the backwoodsman, for he paused to indulge in a quiet chuckle which wrinkled up all the lines of good-humour and fun in his rough countenance. After applying himself for a few seconds with much energy to the drumstick,—he resumed his discourse in a slow, deliberate style of speech which was peculiar to him:—

"Yes, Lawrence, my lad, I've made it my business ever since I was fifteen to explore this here wilderness, livin' by my gun and guidin' the fur-traders on their v'yages, or consorting with the Injins, as you know very well; and, now that we've come to the big lake it is needful to tell 'ee that I'm still bent on followin' out my callin'. I'm goin' away to the nor'ard to explore, and you'll have to make up your mind to-night whether *you* will be my steersman or whether I'm to lay that dooty on Swiftarrow. I needn't say which I'd like best."

The hunter finished the drumstick at this point, threw the bone into the fire, lighted his pipe, and awaited his son's answer in silence.

But the son appeared to be in no hurry to reply; for, after giving his father a glance and nod, which were meant to say, "I hear and I'll consider, but I'm too much engaged just now to speak," he continued his occupation of devouring venison steaks, the sauce to which was evidently hunger.

Having finished his supper and lighted his pipe he became more communicative.

"Father," he said, "you have always advised me to think well before speaking."

"I have, lad; it's the natur' of our forefathers an' a very good natur' too. I'd be sorry to see it go out of the family."

"Well, then; I've thought my best about goin' with 'ee on this trip," returned the youth, "an' I've resolved to go on one condition —that Swiftarrow goes with us."

"Why so, my son? we don't need him."

"Perhaps not, but I like him; for he has taught me all that I know of woodcraft, and I'm certain that if you and I both leave him he'll be sure to return to the new settlement at the south end of Ontario, and you know what the end of that would be."

"Death by drinkin'," replied Reuben Guff shaking his head slowly, while he watched the upward flight of a ring of white smoke that had just issued from his lips.

"Well, I won't leave him to *that*," continued the youth, with sudden energy of manner and look, "as long as my name is Lawrence. You know that nothin' would please me more than goin' to explore the wilderness with you, father; but if Swiftarrow is to be left behind, there shall be no pioneering for me. Besides, three are better than two on such a trip, and the Injin will be sure to keep the pot full, no matter what sort o' country we may have to pass through, for he's a dead shot wi' the gun as well as wi' the bow."

"I daresay you're right, lad," replied Reuben, in a tone of one who muses. "There's room in the canoe for three, and it's not unlikely that the Injin would go south to the settlement, for he is a lonely man since his poor mother died. I do believe that it was nothin' but his extraor'nar' love for that old 'ooman that kep' him from goin' to the dogs. Leastwise it was that kep' him from goin' to the settlement, which is much the same thing, for Swiftarrow can't resist fire-water. Yes, lad, you're right—so we'll take him with us. As you say, three are better than two on such a v'yage."

Some weeks after the foregoing conversation the pioneers arrived at the northern end of that great inland sea, Lake Superior, which, being upwards of four hundred miles long, and one hundred and seventy-five miles broad, presents many of the features of Ocean itself. This end of the lake was, at the time we write of, and still is, an absolute wilderness, inhabited only by scattered tribes of Indians, and almost untouched by the hand of the white man, save at one spot, where the fur-traders had planted an isolated establishment. At this point in the wild woods the representatives of the fur-traders of Canada were wont to congregate for the settlement of their affairs in the spring of every year, and from this point also trading-parties were despatched in canoes into the still more remote parts of the great northern wilderness, whence they returned with rich cargoes of furs received from the "red men" in exchange for powder and shot, guns, hatchets, knives, cloth, twine, fish-hooks, and such articles as were suited to the tastes and wants of a primitive and

wandering people.

Here Reuben Guff and his son found Swiftarrow, as they had expected, and proposed to him that he should accompany them on their voyage north,—a proposal which he accepted with pleasure,—for the strong-boned Indian had an adventurous spirit as well as a healthy frame.

Swiftarrow was a brave and powerful Indian, and was esteemed one of the best hunters of his tribe; but no one seeing him in camp in a quiescent state would have thought him to be possessed of much energy, for he was slow and deliberate in his movements, and withal had a lazy look about his eyes. But the sight of a bear or moose-deer had the effect of waking him up in a way that caused his dark eyes to flash and his large frame to move with cat-like activity.

When Reuben Guff discovered him on the shore of Lake Superior, he was seated at the door of his skin lodge, anointing his hair, which was long and black, with bear's grease—the "genuine article," without even the admixture of a drop of scent! —so pure, in fact, that the Indian basted his steaks and anointed his hair with grease from the same box.

"Hallo! Swiftarrow," exclaimed Reuben, as he sauntered up to the savage, with his gun on his shoulder, "ye seem to be beautifyin' yerself to-day—not goin' to get married, eh?"

Swiftarrow, whose long hair hung over his face like a glossy curtain, tossed aside his locks and gazed earnestly at the hunter. A slight smile and a pleasant gleam lighted up his dark

countenance as he wiped his greasy right hand on his legging and extended it, exclaiming, "watchee!" by which he meant, what cheer?

"What cheer? what cheer?" replied Reuben, with a broad but quiet grin, as he shook his friend's hand heartily.

Each man understood the other's language perfectly; but each appeared to prefer to talk in his own tongue; for while Reuben addressed the red man in English, Swiftarrow replied in Indian. This had been an understood arrangement between them ever since the time when, as lads, they had first met and formed a close friendship, on the shores of Lake Huron.

"Is my brother's trail to be through the woods or on the waters? Does he go hunting or trading?" inquired the Indian, after the first salutations were over.

"Well, I may say that I'm neither goin' a-huntin' or tradin'—here, fill yer pipe wi' baccy from my pouch; it's better than yours, I'll be bound. In a manner, too, I'm goin' both to hunt an' trade in a small way; but my main business on this trip is to be diskivery."

The Indian uttered a sound, which meant that he did not understand.

"I'm goin' to sarch out new lands," explained Reuben, "away to the far north. I've heard it said by Injins that have wandered to the nor'ard that they've met in with red-skins, who said that there is a big river flowin' out o' a great lake in the direction o' the north pole, an' that it runs into the sea there. They may be tellin' truth, or they may be tellin' lies; I dun know; anyhow, I'm

koorious to know somethin' about it, so I'm goin' north to see for myself, and I've comed to ask if Swiftarrow will go with me."

The hunter paused, but the Indian remained silently smoking his long stone-headed pipe, or calumet, with a countenance so grave and expressionless, that no idea of his sentiments could be gathered from it. After a brief pause, Reuben continued—

"It won't be altogether a trip of diskivery neither, for I've got some bales of goods with me, and as we go in a small birch canoe, we'll travel light; but I hope to come back sunk to the gunwale with furs, for the red-skins of the far north are like enough to have plenty of pelts, and they won't ask much for them. As to grub, you and I could manage to supply ourselves wi' lots o' that anywheres, and I've got plenty of powder and lead. Moreover, my boy Lawrence is goin' with me."

During the foregoing remarks, the Indian's countenance betrayed no sign of feeling until the name of Lawrence was mentioned, when a gleam of satisfaction shot from his eyes. Removing the pipe from his lips, he puffed a volume of smoke through his nostrils, and said:—

"Swiftarrow will go."

Backwoodsmen seldom take long to mature their plans, and are generally prompt to carry them into execution. Two days after the brief conversation above narrated, the three friends pushed off in their little birch-bark canoe and paddled up the stream which leads to the Kakabeka Falls on the Kamenistaquoia River. Surmounting this obstacle by the simple process of carrying the

canoe and her lading past the falls by land, and relaunching on the still water above, they continued their voyage day by day, encamping under the trees by night, until they had penetrated far and deep into the heart of the northern wilderness, and had even passed beyond the most distant establishments of the adventurous fur-traders.

The world of forest, swamp, lake, and river, that still, however, lay between them and the land which they sought to reach, was very wide. Weeks, and even months, would certainly elapse before they could hope to approach it; one day, therefore, they buried their goods and stores in a convenient place, intending to dig them up on their return, and meanwhile turned aside into a country which promised to afford them a good supply of fresh provisions for the voyage north.

Here an adventure befell them which brought their voyage of discovery, at that time, to an abrupt close.

Chapter Two.
Terrible Discoveries and Altered Plans

"Ho!" ejaculated Swiftarrow.

"Smoke!" exclaimed Reuben Guff.

Both men spoke at the same moment,—their discovery having been simultaneous. At the same time Lawrence pointed with the blade of his paddle to a thin line of smoke which rose above the tree-tops into the blue sky, and was faithfully mirrored in the lake on which they floated.

"Injins!" said Reuben, resting his steering paddle across the canoe for a few seconds.

Swiftarrow assented with another "Ho," and Lawrence moved his gun into a handy position to be ready for an emergency; but there was no other sign of man's presence than the wreath of smoke. All was perfectly silent. The air too was quite still, and the surface of the lake resembled a sheet of glass.

"Strange," observed Reuben, "red-skins ain't usually so shy. If they mean mischief they don't ever let smoke be seen, an' when they don't mean mischief they generally show themselves. Come, push on, lads; we'll go see what's i' the wind."

"I'll show them the muzzle, father," said Lawrence, laying down his paddle and taking up his gun: "it may be well to let 'em see that we have arms."

“No need for that, boy. If they know anything at all, they know that white men don’t go about in the wilderness empty-handed. Put down the piece, and use your paddle.”

Thus reproved, Lawrence flushed slightly, but obeyed the order and resumed paddling.

In a few minutes they were on shore. Still all was silent as the grave. Hauling the bow of the canoe on the beach to keep it fast, the three men took their weapons, and, entering the woods in single file, walked cautiously but swiftly in the direction of the smoke. They soon reached the spot, and the scene which met their eyes was one which, while it accounted for the silence that reigned around, filled their minds with sadness and horror.

In an open space, where a number of trees had been cut down, stood about a dozen skin tents or Indian lodges, some with the curtain-doors closed, others open, exposing the interiors, on the floors of which the dead bodies of Indian men, women, and children, lay in every attitude and in all stages of decomposition. Outside of the tents other corpses lay strewn on the ground, and most of these bore evidence of having been more or less torn by wolves. The travellers knew at a glance that these unfortunate people had fallen before that terrible disease, small-pox, which had recently attacked and almost depopulated several districts of the Indian country.

How the disease was introduced among the Indians at the time of which we write, it is impossible to say and useless to conjecture. The fact of its desolating effects is unquestionable.

One who dwelt in the country at the time writes: (See Sir Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages*, page 14.) "The fatal infection spread around with a baneful rapidity which no flight could escape, and with a fatal effect that nothing could resist. It destroyed with its pestilential breath whole families and tribes; and the horrid scene presented, to those who had the melancholy opportunity of beholding it, a combination of the dead, the dying, and such as, to avoid the fate of their friends around them, prepared to disappoint the plague of its prey by terminating their own existence. To aggravate the picture, if aggravation were possible, the carcases were dragged forth from the huts by the wolves, or were mangled within them by the dogs, which thus sought to satisfy their hunger with the putrid remains of their masters. It was not uncommon at this time for the father of a family, whom the infection had not reached, to call his household around him, represent the terrible sufferings and fate that awaited them, which he believed was owing to the influence of an evil spirit who desired to extirpate the race, and incited them to baffle death with all its horrors by at once killing themselves—at the same time offering to perform the deed of mercy with his own hand if their hearts should fail them."

That some of the dead before our pioneers had acted in this way was evident, for while most of the corpses bore marks of having been smitten with the disease, others were there which showed nothing to account for death save a knife wound over the region of the heart.

It was a sad and sickening sight, and drew forth one or two low-toned sorrowful remarks from Reuben, as he moved slowly towards the tent from which smoke still issued.

The three men paused before it because a sound came from within, and they felt reluctant to disturb the awful silence. The pause, however, was but momentary. Reuben lifted the covering and opened it wide. A small fire still burned on the hearth in the centre of the lodge; around it lay the bodies of dead men, women, and children. Only one figure, that of an old woman, remained in a half-reclining position, but she was motionless, and they thought her dead also. This, however, was not the case. The flood of light which streamed in on her appeared to rouse her, for she raised her grey head, and, gazing anxiously at the figures which darkened the entrance of the lodge, asked in a tremulous voice: "Is that you, my son?"

"No, mother, but it is a friend," said Swiftarrow, who understood her language.

"A friend," repeated the old woman, shaking her head slowly, "I don't want a friend. The Master of Life is my friend. My people said that an evil spirit was slaying them; but I know better. It was the Great Spirit who came to us. We have been very wicked. We needed punishment. But why has He spared me? I was the worst of them all."

There was something terrible in the tone and manner in which this was uttered, as if the breast of the speaker were torn with conflicting feelings.

"She must have met wi' the missionaries some time or other," whispered Reuben.

"Is the old woman the only one of all the tribe left alive?" asked Swiftarrow.

"Ay, the only one—no, not the *only* one; my son is yet alive. He went to set a bear-trap not *very* long since; but he should have come back before now. He will be back soon."

The deep sigh which followed proved that the poor old woman was hoping against hope.

"How long is't since he left you, mother?" asked Lawrence eagerly.

"Two suns have risen and set since he left, and he had not far to go."

"Father, I'll go seek for this man," said Lawrence; "something may have befallen him."

Reuben made no objection, and the youth set off immediately in a direction which was pointed out by the old woman.

After he was gone his father and the Indian shifted one of the cleanest looking of the empty tents to a considerable distance from the spot where the terrible work of death had been done, and removing the old woman from the neighbourhood of the pestilential atmosphere, placed her therein, kindled a fire and cooked her a little food, of which she evidently stood much in need.

Meanwhile Lawrence sped through the pathless forest with the light step of a strong youth and the precision of a practised

hunter. About four miles from the Indian camp he came upon the track of a bear, the footprints of which proved that it was an unusually large one. He followed it up closely, and was led by it to a spot where some trees had been cut down, and not far from which he saw what appeared to him to be the remains of a trap. Almost at the same moment of his making this discovery he heard a growl, and saw the bear itself—a monster of the brown species, which differs from the ordinary black bear of America in being more carnivorous and much larger, as well as more savage and bold. No sooner did it see the youth than it rushed upon him with great fury. A piece of broken line was drawn tight round its neck, and another piece round its fore-leg, while four arrows stuck in its shoulder and side, showing plainly that it had broken loose from a snare and had been attacked by man. But Lawrence had no time to think on these things. He had barely time to throw forward and cock his gun when the bear was upon him. It rose on its hind-legs, and in doing so towered high above the youth, who, whatever his feelings might have been, looked undismayed. With an unflinching eye he took aim at the monster's heart, and shot it dead. So close was it to him that he singed the hair on its breast and had to leap to one side to avoid being struck as it fell.

Reloading quickly, the young hunter advanced towards the trap, where his worst fears were realised, for near to it he found the body of an Indian torn limb from limb, and mostly eaten, except the head, which remained entire. It was evident that the poor man, having set several snares for bears, had gone to visit

them, and found this brown bear caught by the head and leg. He seemed to have tried to kill it with arrows, but must have been afraid to go near enough to use his weapons with effect, and the enraged animal, having broken the snare, flew upon him and tore him to pieces.

Brown bears of this kind are very powerful. One traveller in these regions saw the footprints of a large one, which, having seized a moose-deer in a river, dragged it for a quarter of a mile along the sandy banks, and afterwards devoured it all except part of the hind-quarters; and the moose which had been treated in this unceremonious way, judging from the size and hardness of the bones, must have been upwards of a year old, when it would weigh as much as an ox of the same age.

Collecting the scattered remnants of the unfortunate Indian, who was no other than the old woman's son, Lawrence covered them over with leaves and sticks. He then skinned the bear and cut off its claws, which he carried away as trophies, along with one or two choice steaks cut from the creature's flank. He also collected the weapons and part of the dress of the Indian, with which he returned to the camp.

"Heyday! Lawrence, what have you got there, lad?" said Reuben, as his son came up and threw the bundle on the ground.

"A brown bear, father."

"Well done!" exclaimed Reuben, with a look of pride, for although his son had shot many a black bear in the forest, he had never before stood face to face with such a monster as that whose

skin and claws now lay at his feet.

"It would have been well, father," said Lawrence gravely, "if the man who first saw this had owned a gun. His arrows were no better than needles in such a hide. See here!"

He drew from his breast the bloody portions of dress which had belonged to the slaughtered Indian.

"The son of the old woman has gone to the happy hunting-grounds," said Swiftarrow, referring to the heaven of the Indian, as he lifted and examined the dress.

"Ay, ay," said Reuben sadly, "'tis the chances of the wilderness. You'd better tell the poor old creetur', Swiftarrow; you understand her ways and lingo better than me."

Silently the Indian went to the old woman, and laid the bloody garments before her. At first she did not understand what had happened. Suddenly the truth flashed upon her, and she looked quickly up into the grave countenance of the Indian, but death and sorrow appeared to have already done their worst on her, for she neither spoke nor wept for some time. She took up the shreds of cloth and turned them over tenderly; but neither sign nor groan escaped her. Evidently she had been already so stunned by the horrors which had surrounded her for some time, that this additional blow did not tell—at least, not at first—but Reuben observed, while trying to comfort her some time afterwards, that a few tears were coursing slowly down her withered cheeks.

That night, round the camp-fire, the pioneers held earnest counsel, and resolved, sadly but firmly, that their projected

journey must be given up for that season.

"It's a hard thing to do," said Reuben, as he lay at full length before the fire after supper, "to give up our plans after comin' so far; but it ain't possible to carry that old 'ooman along with us an' it's not to be thought of to leave her behind to starve, so there's nothin' for it but to go back an' take her wi' us to the settlements. I would feel like a murderer if I was to leave one o' God's creeturs to perish in the wilderness. What think you, Lawrence?"

"I think you are right, father," replied the youth, with a deep sigh.

"An' what says Swiftarrow?"

"Go back," was the Indian's prompt and laconic answer.

"Well, then, we're all agreed, so we'll turn back on our trail to-morrow; but I shall try again next year if I'm above ground. I once know'd a Yankee who had what he called a motto, an' it was this, 'Never give in, 'xcept w'en yer wrong.' I think I'll take to that motto. It seems to me a good 'un."

In proof, we presume, of his sincerity, Reuben Guff rolled himself in his blanket, stretched his feet towards the fire, pillowed his head on a bundle of moss, and at once *gave in* to the seductive influences of sleep; an example which was so irresistible that his companions followed it without delay.

Chapter Three.
Introduces the King of Pioneers

Discarding space and ignoring time, we seize you by the hand, reader, and bound away with you still deeper into the northern wilderness, away into that remote region which, at the time we write of, was the *ultima thule* of the fur-traders of Canada,—beyond which lay the great unknown world, stretching to the pole. Here, amid the grand scenery of the Rocky Mountains, lies the Athabasca Lake, also styled the Lake of the Hills. We prefer the latter name, as being more romantic.

This is no pretty pond such as we in England are wont to visit and delight in during our summer holidays. It is a great sheet of water; a grand fresh-water sea, 200 miles long and 15 miles broad—a fitting gem for the bosom of the mighty region on which it glitters.

A year has fled since the period of our last chapter, and here, in a birch-bark canoe on the waters of the Lake of the Hills, we find our pioneers—Reuben Guff, his son Lawrence, and his Indian friend Swiftarrow. There is also a young Indian woman in the canoe—Swiftarrow's wife.

The kind-hearted red man adopted the old woman who had been rescued on their previous trip, but, not finding her a good substitute for his own mother, he bethought him of adding a

young squaw to his establishment. While he meditated on this step, the old woman died. About the same time Reuben Guff made proposals to him to join him on a second "v'yage of diskivery." The Indian agreed; got married off-hand, and took his bride along with him. We now find them all four at the Lake of the Hills.

It may be as well to observe, in passing, that Indian brides are usually more robust than those of civilised communities. They are quite competent to follow their lords on the most arduous canoe voyages, and, besides being able to wield the paddle with great dexterity, are exceedingly useful in managing what may be styled the domestic matters of the camp. They also keep up a constant supply of the Indian's indispensable foot-gear—moccasins—which are so slender in their nature that a pair may be completely worn-out in a single day of hard hunting.

The brown bride, therefore, was not a hindrance to the party, but a useful member of it, as well as a pleasant companion. True, her companionship consisted chiefly in answering "yes" and "no" when spoken to, and in smiling pleasantly at all times; but this was sufficient to satisfy the moderate demands of her male friends upon her intellectual resources.

"Fort Chipewyan at *last*," said Reuben, resting his paddle across the canoe and looking earnestly towards the horizon; "I hope we ain't too late after all our pushin' on. It would be hard to find that Monsieur Mackenzie had started."

"Too much ice in the lake," said Swiftarrow. "He has not gone

yet."

"I'm not so sure o' that," observed Lawrence. "If reports be true, Monsieur Mackenzie is not the man to wait until the ice is all off the lakes and nothin' but plain sailin' lies before him."

"That's true, lad," replied Reuben, resuming his paddle. "I wonder," he murmured to himself, as he gazed wistfully towards the unknown north, "I wonder if the big river is really there, an' if it *do* jine the sea?"

That same question was put to himself that same evening—though not for the first time—by one of the inhabitants of Fort Chipewyan. The fort was a mere group of two or three log-huts. In the largest of these huts sat a man whose strongly-marked handsome countenance gave evidence of a bold enterprising spirit and a resolute will. He pored over a map for some time, carefully tracing a few pencil-lines into the blank spaces on the paper, and then murmured, in words which were almost identical with those of Reuben Guff, "I wonder if it joins the Polar Sea?"

This man was the true pioneer, or, rather, the king of pioneers, to whom Guff gave place without a murmur, for Reuben was a modest man; and the moment he heard that one of the gentlemen of the Canadian fur-trading company had taken up his favourite hobby, and meant to work out the problem, he resolved, as he said, "to play second fiddle," all the more that the man who thus unwittingly supplanted him was a mountaineer of the Scottish Highlands.

"It's of no manner of use, you see," he said to Swiftarrow,

when conversing on the subject, "for me to go off on a v'yage o' diskivery w'en a gentleman like Monsieur Mackenzie, with a good edication an' scienteefic knowledge and the wealth of a fur company at his back, is goin' to take it in hand. No; the right thing for Reuben Guff to do in the circumstances is to jine him an' play second fiddle—or third, if need be."

Alexander Mackenzie—while seated in the lowly hut of that solitary outpost poring over his map, trying to penetrate mentally into those mysterious and unknown lands which lay just beyond him—saw, in imagination, a great river winding its course among majestic mountains towards the shores of the ice-laden polar seas. He also saw the lofty peaks and snow-clad ridges of that mighty range which forms the back-bone of the American continent, and—again in imagination—passed beyond it and penetrated the vast wilderness to the Pacific, thus adding new lands to the British Crown, and opening up new sources of wealth to the fur company of which he was one of the most energetic members. He saw all this in imagination, we say, but he did *not*, at that time, see his name attached to one of the largest American rivers, classed with the names of the most noted discoverers of the world, and himself knighted. Still less, if possible, did he see, even in his wildest flights of fancy, that the book of travels which he was destined to write, would be translated into French by the order of Napoleon the First, for the express purpose of being studied by Marshal Bernadotte, with the view of enabling that warrior to devise a roundabout and

unlooked-for attack on Canada—in rear, as it were—from the region of the northern wilderness—a fact which is well worthy of record! (See Appendix for an interesting letter on the subject.)

None of these things loomed on the mind of the modest though romantic and enterprising man, for at that time he was only at the beginning of his career of discovery.

It may not be out of place here to say a word or two as to the early career of the hero whose footsteps we are about to follow.

He was a Highlander, to begin with; and possessed all the fire and determination peculiar to that race. At an early period of life he was led to engage in commercial enterprises in the country north-west of Lake Superior, joined the North-West Fur Company of Canada in 1784, and went into the Indian country the following spring. It is not necessary to say more than that Alexander Mackenzie proved himself to be a first-rate fur-trader at a time when the fur-trade was carried on under great difficulties and amid severe privations. For many years he was in charge of Fort Chipewyan, the remote establishment to which we have just conducted our reader. Seven years before his coming on the scene, the Lake of the Hills had not been visited by white men, and was known only through Indian report. When Mackenzie became ruler of the district, all beyond the lake was *terra incognita*. His spirit was one which thirsted to explore the unknown. He was eminently fitted both to hold an advanced post and to invade new regions, being robust in constitution, powerful in frame, inquisitive in mind, and enterprising in spirit.

Frequently had he arrived at Fort Chipewyan with ninety or a hundred men without any provision for their sustenance for the winter save their fishing-nets and guns. He was therefore accustomed to live from hand to mouth, and to depend on his own exertions and resources in a country where the winter is upwards of eight months long and the severity of the climate extreme.

It was in June 1789 that he made preparations to start on his first voyage of discovery.

Rising from the table at which he had been studying his projected route, Mackenzie turned, with the air of a man who has made up his mind, and said to a clerk who was smoking beside the fireplace—

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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