THE LAND OF THE MUSKEG.*

REVIEWED BY B. O. FLOWER.

I have seldom been so agreeably surprised in a book as in this volume, which describes in a charmingly direct and candid manner the story of an expedition across the great swamps or muskegs of western British America, a region which was in part explored by Mr. Dawson in 1879, but which, for the most part, is only familiar to the Indian tribes and a few half-breeds. On the maps this vast expanse is indicated as "good land," and works describing this section of British America are actual Baron Munchausen tales when they attempt to show the plenitude or bear, moose, beaver, and other kinds of game. It was these alluring descriptions, together with the desire to penetrate a vast region of British possessions which was practically unexplored and a love for the freedom which Nature gives to those who break away from the trammels and the comforts of civilization, which led Mr. Somerset and his friend, Mr. Arthur H. Pollen, to undertake a tramp across this uncivilized region of our continent. In being able to purchase whatever was needed, Mr. Somerset enjoyed an advantage which few explorers have experienced; while, on the other hand, I remember no instance where a traveller only nineteen years of age has displayed the sturdy qualities of our ancestors under the most trying circumstances as did young Mr. Somerset during the long, weary tramp through vast, dismal swamps and trackless forests.

In this expedition the youthful traveller found that the expected game was conspicuous chiefly by its absence, while millions of mosquitoes and the dreaded bulldog fly made life miserable. Rain fell almost incessantly until the weather grew extremely cold; and this cold found the little party without food and reduced to such extremity that they had at length to shoot and eat one of their pack horses to sustain life. Such were some of the experiences of our author; yet a delightful spirit of wholesome, sturdy, healthy youth pervades the volume, which is surpassingly well written, when one remembers the writer to be in his minority.

The diction is excellent, and a spirit of candor pervades the work, which is most delightful and draws the reader very close to the author. It is good to find an absence of all artificiality and an honest frankness in viewing all things described. We have seen so much of shallowness, so much of insincerity and intrigue among the scions of wealthy families and have so often been disgusted at the spectacle presented by the fortune hunters of European aristocracy, who constantly visit our shores in search of the purses of the daughters of the few, who, through unearned increment,

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class laws, special privileges, and gambling, have acquired the millions which in justice largely belong to society and the wealth creators, that to find a young man of the order of Mr. Somerset is delightful. Of course I know that his noble-minded mother would desire her son to evince that superb loyalty to conscience and sturdiness of character that mark true manhood, but which are so frequently absent among the children of wealth. But sons are by no means always what their mothers desire them to be, and I feared that this work would be disappointing in more ways than one. In point of fact, it is one of the most entertaining volumes of travel I have read within the past few years. The narration is constantly relieved by the introduction of matter which gives variety and interest to the work, and the general observations are, I think, eminently practical.

Mr. Somerset regards as extremely unwise the action of the Church of England in sending missionaries to convert the Indians, who have for generations been converted to Christianity as much as their nature is capable of being converted by Catholic missionaries. Moreover, he shows how the hard-earned money of many who contribute to missionary work for the heathen sometimes is largely employed for the comfort of the wolf in sheep's clothing who acts as missionary. A case in point which he cites is so suggestive and striking that I give it below:

John Gough Brick was standing at the door of his house when we rode up. He wore a large pair of moccasins on his feet, blue overalls covered his legs, surmounted by a long black frockcoat, a grey flannel shirt and a celluloid collar. Mr. Brick was kindness itself, entertaining us with a jovial hospitality that was past praise, and with a fund of Rabelaisian anecdote marvellous in its steady volume. I have heard that he has gained for himself quite a reputation as a *raconteur* in this particular line. And there can be no doubt that few ministers of the Church of England have so full and varied a vocabulary of purely secular language.

He has a large farm near the river, which, as he told me, had been started as a school of agriculture for the Indians. The game is fast disappearing from the country, and unless the natives are taught to raise crops and till the land, they will undoubtedly starve. But as Mr. Brick boisterously observed, "I don't allow any of those damned Indians around *my* place." He has not even a rudimentary knowledge of the language of his congregation, and so would be quite unable to preach in the native tongue, even if he had a mind to. But he has resided at the Mission for some years, and he told me quite seriously that "he knew the Cree for bread."

The mission is, I believe, not financed by the Church of England Missionary Society, although the Bishop of Athabaska retains his hold over the place, which will return to the Society upon the death or retirement of the present occupant.

Mr. Brick is, without doubt, a most capable and energetic farmer, but he has, of course, no market for his produce, and so, although he can almost make a living by his own industry, he cannot make sufficient to carry on the good work amongst the heathen (*i. e.*, Cath-

olic). Accordingly, from time to time he makes pilgrimages to England and there collects funds. If this gentlemen appeared in the old country saying: "I am an excellent farmer; I am a pioneer in a savage land; I am an honest man, who works to support a wife and family; my life is hard, but I am opening up a new centre for immigration," no one could have anything to say against the proceeding, although Mr. Brick might not acquire as much money as he does at present. But when one thinks of the needy people, who with many a struggle have subscribed their pittance that poor savages may gain knowledge and hear the gospel, the case alters considerably. For my own part, I believe that more good might be done nearer home by the outlay of the same money; and to me it seems particularly absurd to keep ministers of religion in a foreign land simply to convert the remnants of a dying race to Protestantism, when the Catholics have already made them about as Christian as they are capable of being.

I have long felt that if our Christian people would address themselves first to the crying abuses and the injustice at home, and strive to abolish the slums of our cities, to establish happiness through securing fundamental justice, insisting on more of the Sermon on the Mount in life here and now; in a word, if Christian nations would first remove the beam from their own eye, they would be doing better work than donating princely sums for foreign missions while vast numbers of our people are ignorant, naked, and depraved who might and could be lifted to a higher and happier plane of life.

Here is a vivid description of the Cree Indians, together with one of their popular legends:

The Cree Indians are, for the most part, dark, spare men, showing many of the usual characteristics of the aborigines of the continent, but of peaceful disposition and great charm of manner. They speak an exceedingly beautiful language, and converse with ease and fluency, pronouncing their words with wonderful distinctness, and showing their meaning with many well-considered gestures. Their chief topic of conversation is naturally hunting, for by this they gain their living, but they seem also to be very fond of tale-telling, and now and again one may hear legends and fables from the older men, which speak of the times when the game was more plentiful in the country, and consequently men had more time for talk. I have set down two such tales here, as I think they may be of interest. The first recalls the Welsh story of Gelert, and one would be curious to know if it is current amongst other peoples. Thus runs the tale:

There was once a young man who was very poor; his father and mother and all his relations had been killed in a raid, and he was left alone in the world with no friend but his faithful dog. So he journeyed for many days, picking up a living as best he could. One day he came to the lodge of an "Oukimow" or big chief. Now this chief had everything that he could possibly want—fine clothes, many wives, and the most beautiful cooking pots. But above all he had a lovely daughter. This lucky man had a bow which was enchanted. Whatever he shot at with his arrows died, so he had always plenty of meat hanging in his camp, and no one dared

quarrel with him, for if they did, they were sure to be killed. The mystery of the bow was a secret, but the great man's daughter had learned it from her father, and now she told it to this young man who had become her lover. But the chief found this out, so he drove him away, and again he wandered, thinking of the lovely girl, and full of rage at her father's treatment. One day when he was asleep under a birch-tree he was awakened by the Old Wanderer*—the cunning one—who asked him what service he could render him. So he told his story, saying that he was very anxious to kill the big Chief of the Bow, in order that he might marry his daughter, but that he knew he could not prevail against the magic weapon, and therefore he had not tried. Now the Wanderer knew all things, and he told him that the spell was broken since the tale of the bow had been told, and that he might safely go and kill his enemy. However, he said that he would make the matter certain, and provide the young man with another magic bow. So he told him to "cut down the birch-tree and make from it a bow and arrow, and make a bow-string from the fibres of the bark; and when you have done this," he said, "call me." The young man made the weapon and the string, and called. And the Wanderer came and spoke the magic word, and gave the bow to the young man, telling him that the arrow would hit whatever he fired at, but that he was only to use it once against his enemy. So the young man went and slew the "Oukimow," and became the chief of the tribe, and married the girl, and owned the fine clothes and beautiful cooking pots.

In his new greatness he became very haughty. So the "Wanderer" appeared and told him to go and do honor to the birch-tree; but he was proud and did not do it, saying that no harm would come. After a while a son was born to him. And the whole tribe feasted, and he said to his people, "Let us go and honor the birch-tree." And they all went. But instead of doing it honor he took a whip and lashed it, making the marks which may be seen upon the bark to this day. Then came the "Wanderer" a third time, and told him that his son was dead because of his sin. He hastened home and saw his dog standing over the cradle covered with blood. Then he was wild with rage and shot at the dog with his magic bow; and the arrow flew and killed the dog, but pierced his son as well, and he came and saw many dead wolves around the cradle, and realized that his faithful dog had protected the child, and that he had lost his son through disobedience to the laws of the "Cunning One."

The following description of an Indian sweat bath is interesting, and will further serve to illustrate the style of our author:

And thus, with many struggles and pantings, we reached the higher ground, and pushed forward through a fairly open country. Once during the day we came upon a deserted Indian camp. From the condition of the ashes and other signs we judged that it was not more than two weeks old. There had evidently been a sick man in the party, for the remains of a sweating-house were still standing. It is made after this manner: Many small branches are stuck in the ground in a circle, and the extremities and twigs are plaited together so as to form a kind of roof. Blankets are then thrown over the whole, and the patient creeps in and sits down upon the floor.

* This "Wanderer" appears many times in Indian legend. He seems to be an evil spirit with a strong tendency towards good. Thus he will benefit some unlucky person and yet be called "the evil and cunning one" by the narrator.

Meanwhile large stones have been heated in a fire, and these are passed into the hut by the man's friends, whilst he pours water upon them, and so makes a steam under the blanket. After a while the heat must become almost unendurable, but the process is continued until the unfortunate patient can stand it no longer, and is forced through sheer exhaustion to emerge from his Turkish bath. Whether this cure is beneficial in the treatment of the various diseases to which Indians are subject, I am unable to say, but they all place great faith in its healing powers."

And here is a description of a camping experience which will be more pleasant to the reader than it was to the explorer:

Once we had a really fine day, and made our camp in the evening in high spirits, for the sky was cloudless and the night still. We were so sure of the weather that we did not even unfurl the tent or stretch the fly, but made our beds where we pleased, and turned in under the shelter of some magnificent trees, confident of a good rest after our day's work. About one o'clock in the morning, however, it began to rain in torrents, and did not stop until midday. It had been so dark that we could not find our tent roll, and therefore we had returned to our blankets and slowly became soaked. I think I have seldom passed a more miserable night. I had a waterproof sheet under my bedding, and on getting up found that it had most inconveniently held the water, and that I was surrounded by a pool six inches deep.

It is a common fact that in all ages and among all people some members have been gifted with occult powers, such as clairvoyance, prevision, or clairaudience. Others may be present who have neither eyes, ears, nor consciousness to recognize that which comes to the sensitive when this strange, supernormal experience comes to him. Socrates had his demon or spirit; to Catherine of Siena her visions and voices were as real as the bread she ate; to the wonderful Maid of Orleans her angel visitors and communications were so real that they transformed the bashful peasant child into the most successful warrior of her time. Yet these gifts, if I may call them such, come to civilized and savage alike, and are most likely to appear where the spirit of arrogance and dogmatism are absent, and when people have not been taught to believe by self-sufficient authority that such things are *impossible*. A curious and interesting case of prevision is thus related by Mr. Somerset as having been experienced by John, a half-breed who was a member of their party:

John suddenly turned towards us and said, "Gentlemen, we shall meet three Beaver Indians to-morrow on the river." Of course we all imagined that he was joking, but Round told us that whenever John prophesied the coming of strangers he was always right. He said he had known him for close upon fourteen years, and that he had never made a mistake about this. The most of us were incredulous, thinking that the whole thing was absurd: but John stuck to it that he was right, and that we should see on the morrow.

On the following day we scattered through the country in search of meat. Daukhan and I had started towards the river, intending to ford the stream on horseback, and then leave our animals and

hunt to the right of the camp, when we were joined by Round and John, who also wished to cross the river and hunt to the left. The river was very rapid and the stones slippery, so that the horses stumbled and lurched in the swift water in a manner not very pleasant to the rider. When we reached the southern shore we tethered our horses and were on the point of starting into the bush when we saw something moving on the river some distance further down. We waited, and presently a canoe came round the point. Now it must be remembered that since we left Dunvegan, nearly two months before, we had not seen a single human being, and this made John's prophecy the more extraordinary, for there had been nothing to show that we should meet these Indians. John himself showed no surprise at seeing them, but simply remarked that he knew they were coming, and was glad they had arrived. He afterwards told me that he had not always possessed this gift of second-sight, but that he had had it since the death of his infant daughter some fifteen years before. He said that he was upon an island on the Peace River, twenty miles from Dunvegan, when one afternoon something told him that his child was dead, and that a man was coming to him in a canoe to break the news. After a few hours the man came, and ever since then he had always known when he was going to meet any one, and from which direction they would come. He added that sometimes people came when he had no presentiment; but when he had the presentiment they were sure to come. Whilst he was talking the canoe had approached, so we went down to the water's edge and signalled to the Indians to come ashore. They proved to be Beaver Indians, three in number, as John had foreseen—a young man, his wife and mother.

The Beaver Indians are described as being very different from the Crees, the former having made little progress in the way of civilization. In referring to them, Mr. Somerset says:

Fifty years ago the Indians of the Northwest were in the stone-hatchet period. Many of the tribes have made extraordinary mental strides in so short a time, but there has been little progress among the Beavers, so that one comes across the anomaly of a man with a primitive, stone-implement-period mind, carrying in his hand that product of centuries of thought—the Winchester rifle. His ideas and wants are expressed in a series of chucks and grunts, and he is careful to move his lips as little as possible in speaking. It would be impossible to shout in his language. He uses primitive gestures, pointing to mountains or trees when he speaks of them, and signifying the departure of an animal or person by throwing out his hand before him.

Somers Somerset may well feel proud of his work, both as traveller and author, and I shall be surprised if this gifted young man does not make an illustrious place for himself in whatever field of work he selects, as he has evinced the qualities of sturdy manhood and that daring spirit which, when controlled by judgment and conscience, contributes much toward enduring success. As I have observed, one of the great charms of this volume lies in the candor and frankness everywhere displayed; and the evident simplicity of life, as opposed to the feverish artificiality of present-day life,

adds to my conviction that the author has a brilliant future before him.

The book is handsomely printed in large type, and the maps are excellent. I regret to say, however, that the pictures in many instances are very poor, and I think the work would have been more attractive if at least one-third of these illustrations had been omitted. They are frequently small and so indistinct as to be valueless. Had the publishers had them photographed, enlarged, retouched and strengthened the effect would have been far different, and the volume would have been a fine example of the triumph of the printer's art.