

Postmen of the Wilderness

By ARTHUR HEMING

Drawings by the Author



VOYEZ, voyez, le paquet!" shouted Delaronde as he floundered into the trading room without a thought of closing the door, though the drifting snow scurried in after him, and called to the others to come and see. Instantly trade was stopped. The factor, the clerk, and the Indians rushed to the doorway to obtain a glimpse of the long expected packet. For three days the storm had raged, and the snow was still blowing in clouds that blotted out the neighboring forest.

"Come awa", Delaronde, ye auld fule! Come awa' bea, an' steek yon door! Ye dinna see ony packet!" roared the trader, who could distinguish nothing through the flying snow.

"Bien, m'sieu, mebbe she not very clear jus' now; but w'en I pass from de Mad Wolf's Hill, w'en de storm she li' a leetle, I see two men an' dog tram on de bar below de islan's," replied the halfbreed fort runner, who had returned from a caribou cache, and whose duty it was to keep the fort supplied with meat.

"Weel, fetch me the gless, ma mon; fetch me the gless, an' abvins we may catch a glint o' them through this smooirin' snaw; though I doot it it's the packet, as ye say." And the factor stood shading his eyes and gazing anxiously in the direction of the invisible islands. But before the fort hunter had returned with the telescope, the snowy veil suddenly thinned and revealed the gray figure of a tripper coming up the bank.

"Quay, quay! Ke-e-e-pling!" sang out one of the Indians. He had recognized the tripper to be Kipling, the famous snowshoe runner. Immediately all save the factor rushed forward to meet the little halfbreed who was in charge of the storm bound packet, and to welcome him with a fusillade of gun shots.

The Coming of the Mail

EVERYONE was happy now; for last year's news of the "Grand Pays"—the habitant's significant term for the outer world—had at last arrived. The monotonous routine of the post was forgotten. Today the long, dreary silence of the subarctic winter would be broken in upon by hearty feasting, merry music, and joyous dancing in honor of the arrival of the half-yearly mail.

All crowded round the voyageur, who, though scarcely more than five feet in height, was famed as a snowshoe runner throughout the wilderness stretching from the Saskatchewan River to the Arctic Ocean. While they were eagerly plying him with questions, the crack of a dog whip was heard. Presently the faint tinkling of bells came through the storm. In a moment all the dogs of the settlement were in an uproar: for the packet had arrived.

With a final rush the gaunt, travel worn dogs galloped through the driving snow, and, eager for the shelter of the trading room, bolted pellmell through the gathering at the doorway, upsetting half a dozen spectators before the driver could halt the runaways by falling headlong upon the foregoer's back and flattening him upon the floor.

All was excitement. Every dog at the post dashed out with bristling hair and champing jaws to overawe the strangers. Amid the hubbub of shouting men, women, and children, the cracking of whips, and the yelping of dogs, the packet was removed from the overturned sled and hustled into the factor's office, where it was opened, and the mail quickly overhauled. While the factor and his clerk were busily writing despatches, a relay of dogs was being harnessed, and two fresh runners were making ready to speed the mail upon its northward way.

Presently the factor's letters were sealed and hurriedly deposited in the packet box, which was lashed on the tail of the sled, the fore part of which was packed with blankets, flour, tea, and pork for the packeteers, and frozen whitefish for the dogs. Then amid the usual handshaking the word "Marche!" was given, and to the tune of cracking whips, whining dogs, and crunching snow, we swung away from the quaint muddled log buildings, out through the big gateway, and down upon the snowy lake. The Indian track beater hurried on far in advance of the packet train, and the halfbreed driver loped behind, while my man and dogs brought up the rear.

On the Trail Again

AS the going was good, for the narrow trail lay on the sunlit lake for ten miles or more, little was heard except the hard breathing of men and dogs, and the monotonous swish, swish, swish of the snowshoes as they sent thin clouds of sparkling snow high into the frosty air. The trail, which led to an Indian encampment many miles away, was smooth and hard packed; for six trains had passed

over it not half an hour before. But when our route turned from it we entered a forest of heavy timber where a new track had to be beaten for the dogs to follow.

Here and there through the interlocked branches of the snow-mantled evergreens, whose spreading arms roofed the forest's silent aisles, long shafts of gladdening sunlight shone obliquely down upon the somber gray carpet of the woods, and marked it with ever varying splashes of dazzling white, which cast soft reflections far among the boles and lighted up the shadowy lanes where hares were still at play. Overhead, huge fluffy wreaths and long soft festoons were draped in graceful array; while on the tops of tiny, slender spruce trees, or upon rotten stumps, or even upon the fungous brackets that clung to lifeless trunks, rested big bosses of snow, sometimes two or three feet in diameter and four in height, that looked as if at any moment their fragile supports might break away. Yet, with the help of the sun's dancing rays, these strange forms fashioned in such fanciful shapes gave the winter wilderness an aspect of enchanting splendor recalling childhood's dreams of fairyland.

But in a moment the sunshine vanished, and the trees began to whisper of the coming wind, to shake their shaggy heads in discontent, and to sway their shoulders stooping beneath their heavy mantles of gray; until the enchanted wood became once more only a forest in a snow storm. Now, instead of sunlight showing the way, the gloom of night shrouded our course. Soon men and dogs alike were coated with snow, while not a sound was heard except the defiant roaring of the pines.

The Hasty Noon Lunch

AT noon the dogs were halted where dry wood and evergreens were at hand, the dry wood for a fire, and the evergreens for a carpet to protect our moccasins from the melting snow. Hurriedly we washed down freshly thawed bannock and slices of fried pork with dishes of steaming tea. A smoke, and then once more we turned to breaking a heavy trail. Soon, traveling into sunshine, we caught sight of two magnificent timber wolves trotting along among the trees not fifty yards away. Splendid creatures they were, with their shaggy coats waving as they ran, like fields of ripening wheat in a breeze. They were big brutes, looking taller and heavier than any of our dogs. With wistful faces and soft, friendly eyes they kept us company for over two hours. The dogs, of course, fretted to be at them; but the wolves were not afraid, for they seemed to know that they were a match for half a dozen dogs. As usual the packeteers had no gun; and, when they coaxed me to use mine, I was glad to find that I could do nothing with it; for, as sometimes happens in the North, the intense cold had contracted the spring and rendered the hammer useless.

Out upon a lake we swung where the wind packed snow made easy going. Here the heavy sleds slid along as if loadless, and we broke into a run. On rounding a point, we saw a band of woodland caribou trot off the lake and enter the distant forest. By the time we had reached the end of the lake, and had taken to the shelter of the trees, dusk was creeping through the eastern woods, the sun was nearing the southwestern hills, and we made camp for the night. We were to sleep in the open; for in winter the trippers, or packeteers, never carry tents, but bivouac on the snow with nothing but a blanket between them and the Aurora Borealis, though the thermometer may fall to sixty below zero. Instinctively we divided the work among ourselves. One, with a snowshoe, cleared a space on which to build the fire and spread our beds; another went in search of balsam brush to make a mattress beside the fire; another chopped firewood; another unharnessed the dogs. Presently a crackling, roaring fire, whose long-tongued flames seemed bent on reaching the



branches overhead, was sending a whirlwind of glowing sparks to the tops of the overhanging trees.

Arrival of the Brigade

JUST then the dogs began to blow and then to growl, as a strange Indian strode out of the gathering gloom into the brilliant glare of the fire. "Wat-che! wat-che!" (what cheer, what cheer) sang out a halfbreed.

The stranger replied in Cree, and the two began a lively conversation. The Indian was the track beater of a fur brigade that was approaching. All were now keenly interested. The cracking of whips and the howling of dogs was heard, and a little later the tinkling of bells. Then came a train of long-legged, handsomely harnessed dogs hauling a highly decorated carryall, behind which trotted a picturesque halfbreed dog driver. When the train had drawn abreast of our fire, an elderly white man, who proved to be the district chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company, clambered out from beneath a pile of robes, cheerfully returned my greeting, and accepted with dignified courtesy a seat upon my dunnage beside our fire. Other trains followed, until in a little while the woods seemed full of laughing, talking men and snapping, snarling dogs. Some sixteen men were soon crowding round the fire, and over fifty dogs and a dozen sleds were blocking the spaces between the trees.

Some of the men moved off with axes in their hands, and the sound of chopping began to echo through the woods. On every side big dry trees came crashing down. The roaring of the fires drove the darkness farther away. Then could be seen the building of stages on which to place the valuable fur laden sleds out of reach of the destructive dogs; the gathering of evergreen brush; the unhitching of dogs and the hanging up of their harness in the surrounding trees; the unloading of sleds; the placing of frozen whitefish to thaw for the dogs; the baking of bannocks, the frying of pork, and the infusing of tea. Then in silence the men ate ravenously, while the dogs watched them. When pipes had been filled and lighted, each driver took his allotment of fish, called his dogs aside, and gave each of them a couple. Some of the brutes bolted their food in a few gulps and rushed to seize the share of others; but a few blows from the drivers' loaded lashes—lead being woven in the center to give weight—drove them back.

When the dogs had devoured their day's rations,—