

ON
SNOW SHOES



TO THE
BARREN GROUNDS

By
CASPAR W. WHITNEY

III.—A WOOD-BISON HUNT.

CHIPEWYAN has many claims to distinction. Built substantially upon one of the numerous rocky points which break the one hundred and fifty miles of Athabasca Lake's north shore line, it is the most picturesquely situated and most populous oasis in this silent white country. It is headquarters of one of the four districts into which this vast fur-bearing land of one million square miles is divided by the Hudson Bay Company; the chief forwarding point for the merchandise which the company sends in for trade, and the fur the Indians send out as pay; a general distributing post-office of the four yearly mails which reach this land, where man is but a mere track upon the snow, and not above one hundred of the roughly approximated ten thousand read English writing. It is the most important North-land mission of the Roman Catholic Oblates Fathers, and it is practically the northern boundary of the Cree and the southern boundary of the Montagnaise Indian family, which in its various branches spreads toward the Arctic Ocean.

I am sure Dr. W. M. Mackay, the Hudson Bay Company officer in charge, and his right and left bowers, "Nod" Camsell and "Sam" Emerson, would consider that I had slighted Chipewyan if I failed to record the further eminence it enjoys in having two streets. I was never able, unaided, to discover more than the one which separates the post's dozen log cabins from the lake, but that may have been due to the deflection of my compass needle. At all events, after McMurray, with

its four cabins, it seemed metropolitan, though of its "census" of four hundred men, women, and children only a small percentage is in actual residence. This is equally true of all the posts. The real dwellers within the settlements are a comparative handful, comprising chiefly the mission people, the company servants, and a few "freemen," as those who have served their five years' enlistment and set up a little independency of labor are called. Those that live within the company's gates are chiefly half-breeds. In summer they catch and dry the fish which forms the chief article of food for men and dogs, or work on the company flat-boats; and in winter they spend the short days in "tripping," and the long nights in smoking and talking about their dogs, or in dancing and sleeping. They have no other diversions; no indoor games, no out-door sports. Dancing and sleeping are the beginning and ending of their recreation, and I would not venture an opinion as to the more popular; certainly they have an abnormal capacity for either.

This applies to the men. Life is a more serious affair for the women. They too sleep and dance and smoke, but their sleeping comes as a well-earned respite after the day's toil; their dancing has the outward appearance of a sacrifice, to which they are silently resigned, and smoking is an accompaniment to work rather than a diversion in itself. The woman is the country drudge. Her work is never finished. She chops the firewood, dries the fish and meat, snares rab-

bits, and carries her catch into the post on her back; scrapes and tans the moose and caribou hides, from the latter of which she afterwards makes "babiche" by cutting it into strings an eighth of an inch wide; laces the snow-shoes, makes and embroiders with beads the mittens, moccasins, and leggings; yields the lion's share of the scanty larder to her husband when he is at home luxuriating in smoke and sleep, and, when he is away, gives her children her tiny *pref* (allowance) of fish and goes hungry without a murmur.

This is the woman of the post. She of the woods, the full-blooded squaw, and there are few Indians that ever take up a permanent abode in the settlement, does all this and more. In addition to chopping the firewood, she seeks and hauls it; not only dries, but catches the fish; goes after and quarters and brings in the game her master has killed; breaks camp, and pitches it again where the husband, who has gone on ahead with no load but his gun and no thought except for the hunt, and whose trail she has followed, indicates by sticking up brush in the snow. When there is plenty she makes her meal on that which her lord leaves, and when there is little she starves, along with her children and the dogs.

The Indian is the sybarite of the North-land, and the only genuine socialist on earth. He holds all the possessions of his country equally with his tribe, feasts and fasts and sorrows and rejoices in common, and roams where his legs carry and there is game for his gun. When there is abundance he smokes his pipe in happy indolence, and his wife does the work; when there is no meat for the kettle he shoulders his gun and goes out into the woods, leaving care and hunger at home with the squaw. But he by no means invariably escapes hunger. It is ever a feast or a famine with him, and it might always be a feast were he not so improvident and lazy. Clothing and food are at his very door. In the rivers and lakes there is fish in great quantity and variety; along their banks, fisher, otter, mink, beaver, and musk-rat; and in the forests, moose, caribou, bear, lynx, fox, wolf, wolverene, marten, ermine, and rabbits—to say nothing of the early spring and autumn migrations of ducks and geese, the packs of ptarmigan, which in their changing plumage of brown and

white are to be seen summer and winter, and the several other species of the grouse family that may be found the greater part of the year. There is no occasion for an Indian to starve in this country, if he keeps out of the Barren Grounds; but hunting demands skill, of which he has less than any other red man I ever knew, and a never-failing cache presupposes foresight, of which he has none—so that, in truth, he fasts more often than he feasts.

The dogs share equally the good luck or misfortune of their masters. The Indian is more regardful of his dogs than of his women, for dogs are less numerous than squaws, and necessary to his support. The driver lashes them mercilessly with his whip and beats them brutally with clubs, but he never fails to include their rations in his sledge-load, nor to divide his last fish for their benefit. It is not goodness of heart that stirs his consideration, but fear for his own safety and the loss of an indispensable draught animal. Without his dogs he would be compelled to pack on his back what he now packs in the sledge, to drag his game out of the woods, and carry his furs to the post, while the loss of dogs *en route* might mean for him delay, starvation—possibly death.

In the great civilized world the dog has been called man's best friend; in this limitless stretch of snow and desolation and need he may be declared man's only friend; in the *grand pays* he has earned the trust without the test; here in this lone land he is being continuously tried, and never found wanting. He has no pedigree, and he may be of any color, but his usual appearance is that of a fairly long-headed, sharp-nosed mongrel, well tucked up behind, with big feet, and a coat of hair equal to that of a cub. To call these dogs "huskies" is an error common to nearly every one who has had anything to say on the subject. The word "husky" is North-land slang for Eskimo, and is generally applied to that arctic denizen himself, as well as to everything belonging to him. Their dogs are properly called huskies, and thus it has come about that all dogs used to drag a sledge are ignorantly so called. The genuine husky is a distinct species, larger, more powerful, and faster, and is not easily to be had, since the Eskimos, like the Indians, are somewhat indifferent to

their breeding, and good dogs are highly prized. Moreover, there is no communication between the Eskimos and the more southern Indians, so that a genuine husky is a *rara avis* below the arctic coast.

The Indians say their dogs are descended from the wolf, and certainly appearances do not belie the assertion. Names are more plentiful than dogs, and the most commonly heard are Castor, Cabry, Soldat, Caesar, Cabrel, Coffee, Milord, the popular ones being always those of two syllables, with an R that may be rolled out to the whip's accompaniment. Nearly every post has a Bull and a Whiskey—only the name of that civilized stimulant can be found in all this land, though occasional hilarity is developed by some poor stuff made from sugar, and called beer. Whiskey was invariably the most forlorn-looking dog in the pack, while the laziest brutes I encountered were Bulls.

One would suppose that in a country literally dependent on dogs for winter transportation, quantity and at least some degree of quality would be kept up. And yet the facts are directly the reverse. Not only is quality wanting, but the quantity is limited. The Hudson Bay Company, strangely enough, seems to have made no effort to improve or even establish a breed, and at their more important posts rarely maintain more than one train, and never more than two. Throughout the length of my trip I saw just seven trains of dogs that could be called first class—Spencer's at McMurray; two belonging to the Hudson Bay Company at Chipewyan; McKinley's, the Hudson Bay Company officer at Fort Smith; Gaudet's, the company's officer at Resolution; the

Roman Catholic mission's train at the same post; and that of Beniah, the Indian leader with whom I went into the Barren Grounds. Spencer and McKinley probably have the two best trains in the country, which they have bred from separate bitches that had some Newfoundland blood in them, and were the only dogs I saw that would come to harness on call.

Beyond the "foregoer," upon whom the meanings of *ma-a-r-che* (start), *e-u-u* (right), *ja* (left), and *wooa* are impressed by a club, and the steer-dog—as the one at, say, the wheel, to make it comprehensible, is called—there is no training. The foregoer follows the trail and sets the pace. The steer-dog keeps the sledge upon a slanting track, and guides it through trees and rocks. He must be strong, and is the most important of the four in rough country. As for competent drivers, they are even scarcer than good dogs, but the few are exceedingly skilful; and of these, Spencer, McKinley, Gaudet, François and his brother William at Chipewyan, Michael, the interpreter at Resolution, and the Catholic "brother," whose



WAR-BONNET.

name I never knew, at Resolution, are easily the best. The difference between a good and a bad driver is that the former knows how and when to handle his sledge to ease the dogs, keeps them all up to their work, and does not "force" (urge) them at improper times. The bad driver spends his energy in throwing clubs at the foregoer and lashing the steer-dog, chiefly because the latter is within easy reach. He permits the sledge to slide hither and thither, to the exceeding wear and tear of the steer-dog. Now and then he stops the train

and lashes the dogs all round, and at all times he is forcing them. Only trains made up of exceptional dogs last more than a couple of seasons, and once their usefulness is passed the poor brutes are turned loose to seek a living where those for whom food is provided are more frequently hungry than satisfied. Their vagrancy is usually short-lived—death by starvation or freezing comes speedily to their relief.

The farther north, the better the dogs and more gaudy their harness and trappings. They are always savage and suspicious and noisy, but to the south, towards La Biche, they are miserable in body



HAND-WARMERS OF THE NORTH.

as well, and are hitched to the sledge with harness purely Indian, and utterly devoid of adornment. Strangely enough, the Indian, who likes to decorate his own person, as a rule utterly ignores that of his dog, though he may paint the moose-skin which covers the head of his sledge, or hang tufts of hair or yarn upon it, as he does sometimes on the toes of his snow-shoes. All harness is made of moose-skin, but at Chipewyan and north it is fashioned better, and there are, besides,

loin-cloths, called *tapis*, covered with bells and embroidery, and vivid pompons stuck into the collars, and floating ribbons of many contrasting colors. Add to this a driver in beaded moccasins, leggings, and mittens, with a *L'Assumption* sash about his waist, a caribou-skin capote on his back, and a fancifully ornamented and betasselled "Tommy Atkins" cap on his head, and the North-land express is complete and at its best. Indeed, there is no combination more sprightly than a dog brigade, with its brilliant and many-hued *tapis*, its nodding pompons and streaming ribbons, and its picturesquely costumed driver. There is no sensation more exhilarating than running with the dogs on snow-shoes and a good track, to the jingling of the bells—when storm obscures the pompons, and wind drowns the jingle, and there is nothing in the sledge to eat, the sensation is not so enlivening.

These dogs are certainly notable travellers, from the best fed down to the puniest of the Indian species, which are contemptuously called *giddés* by the half-breeds, and are not a great deal larger than a big fox. They draw a heavier load, at a faster pace, on less food, and for a greater length of time than one would believe without seeing. The usual number to a train is four, and tandem is the mode of hitching them to the sledge, which is about seven feet long by fourteen inches wide, and made of either two or three birch slats held together by cross-bars, and turned over at the head like a toboggan. These four dogs will haul four hundred pounds on a fair track from twenty-five to thirty-five miles a day. In the woods where the snow is deep and the trail must be broken the day's trip will be fifteen to twenty miles. On a good lake or river track, drawing a *carriote* (a passenger sledge), they will go forty to fifty miles a day, and keep it up several days, and this on two white-fish weighing about three pounds apiece, and given to each dog at night. I saw Gaudet's train bring into Resolution five hundred pounds of caribou meat, which remained after supplying two men and four dogs during a four-day trip on Great Slave Lake. Some great stories are told of the loads drawn by the Mackenzie River dogs, whose tails are docked short, to give a more workmanlike appearance, and keep the meek and lowly from advertising their shrinking nature and spoiling the appearance

of the train by sticking the offending tail between their legs. It is said that eight or nine hundred, and even a thousand, pounds are commonly hauled in the Mackenzie district by four dogs. But I am inclined to class these stories with those I heard concerning the wonderful strength of the old-time packers. When I was going in on snow-shoes marvellous tales were related for my benefit of men who had carried five and six hundred pounds, and of one particular giant who had loaded himself with seven hundred pounds, and had written his name on the wall with three hundred pounds' weight tied to his wrist. When I was coming out on the Hudson Bay Company's flat-boat I discovered no Indian or half-breed who packed more than two hundred pounds on his back, while the name-writing Hercules had left no successor. Snow-shoe running, packing, and canoeing are the three most resourceful fields of the Indian story-teller; and of the three, running affords him greatest scope for his peculiar imagination.

The Indian of the North-land is neither an ingenious nor a picturesque Munchausen. He is just a plain liar, who seems not even to count on the credulity of his hearer for acceptance of his tales. He lies by choice rather than from necessity, and should the necessity occur he makes a virtue of his lying. Nor is he abashed if discovered. Really I believe he views every plain statement as a lost opportunity. Every camp fire, every meeting at the post, invariably becomes an excuse for the discussion of dogs and the recital of astonishing feats of snow-shoe running. The fact that no one of the assemblage ever did or ever could perform the extraordinary feats recounted does not detract a particle from the quality of the story or its enjoyment by the listeners. It's a case of the man with the last story having the best of it. Still, with all his vainglorious talk, the Indian is an unhesitating admirer of real prowess, and good runners are indeed plentiful in this country, where shanks' mare is the only mount.

To be a good dog-driver and to run forty miles a day is to be a great man in this land of vast distances. There are instances where men have gone farther, but in most cases the going has been exceptional, or the "day" stretched



THE NORTH-LAND SHOEMAKER.

far into the night. In my effort to obtain authenticated information on big runs I found the "day" most elastic, extending, in fact, the full twenty-four hours, from midnight to midnight, and the "running" of the man to include riding on the sledge now and then when the going was extra good. The best day of actual running I was able to corroborate was sixty miles, done between 6 A.M. and 5.30 P.M. by Alexander Linkletter, an English-Cree half-breed now at Chipe-wyan, who made two fires en route. Another half-breed covered eighty miles between midnight and nine o'clock of the next night, and an Indian went seventy miles between 3 A.M. and 8 P.M., but these are notable chiefly because of the dogs' endurance, for both men rode most of the distance, and neither approaches the performance of Linkletter, who ran every foot of the way.

The condition of the going makes so great a difference in travelling that thirty miles on one occasion might easily be a more notable performance than fifty miles on another. Taking the average conditions of tripping, from twenty-five to thirty miles is considered a fair day, thirty-five miles a good day, and forty a big day's work. The *royageur* considers he is travelling well if he makes two fires during



SQUAW LEGGING.

is an object. Indeed, to me the days always seemed long enough, and the dogs to go well enough. In winter you start at three, make your first fire at seven, start again at eight, which is just about daybreak, have a second fire at eleven, and camp at three, which gives about an hour before dark to cut a supply of firewood. In spring it is daylight long before you start at six, and long after you camp at eight; in fact, in May I wrote in my note-book frequently at ten, and it was not really dark at midnight. In midsummer there is no night, and in midwinter the short days are of slight significance to the tripper, because the moon equalizes matters by shining full throughout the period in which the sun shines least.

I have said that Chipewyan is the practical dividing-point between two great Indian families, but the traveller who did not hear their speech, which is altogether dissimilar in intonation and word, would not appreciate it. There is no very noticeable outward distinction between the Cree and the Chipewyan Indian, except possibly the face of the latter is broader. Otherwise they have about the same physical characteristics—high cheek-bones, large mouth, African nose, dirty yellowish-ochre complexion, coarse straight black hair, and sparse mustache seen occasionally. They are never corpulent, and never clean. Ethically there is no choice between them: their capacity and prejudice for lying are equal, and one is as untrustworthy as the other. Generally

speaking, neither the men nor the women are good to look upon; but of course there are exceptions to every rule, and I think the exceptions in this case are more often Cree. The half-breeds are generally more agreeable to the eye; some of the women are even good-looking; and one of them, a daughter of Michael Manderville, the interpreter at Great Slave Lake, has excellent features, a sweet expression, and is quite the belle of the north country, though the wives of Spencer and of Chipewyan François press her very closely for the honor.

As to philological differences, they are too intricate to understand without long study, and too many for exploitation here. It will answer our purpose to know that the Cree nation is one of the largest of the Lenni-Lennappe family, itself the most widely distributed of the three great divisions—Floridean, Iroquois, and Lenni-Lennappe. The Cree is really a plains Indian, and as such superior to the few of the family in the North-land who are called Wood Cree. The Tené, or Montagnaise, is the great nation which spreads between the Rocky Mountains and Hudson Bay, and extends in its various tribes and dialects down to the arctic. Of these tribes the chief are Chipewyan, Yellow Knives, Dog-Ribs, Slaveys, Hare, Caribou-Eaters, whose language has mere dialectic differences. Then there are the Loucheux, on the Mackenzie River, which have a more distinct tongue, sharper features, almond-shaped eyes, and are the most intelligent and thrifty Indians in the country; and the Eskimo, that never hunt more than a hundred miles south of the arctic coast, have their own variation of the Eskimo

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PAPPOOSE IN ITS MOSS BAG.

speech, and, notably enough, average of greater stature than is commonly believed of this people.

Missionaries have now reached all these tribes from the different Hudson Bay Company posts, and their labors have been rewarded by the outward acceptance of their doctrines by a large number of the Indians that come into the posts to trade. The French half-breeds, and certainly seventy-five per cent. of the converted Indians, have adopted the Roman Catholic faith; the remainder have been won over to the Protestants. The most tangible evidences of church influence thus far seen are in the very general disappearance of the medicine-man and the suppression of polygamy and incest. So far as I could learn, the Indians never had any defined worship. Their religion was and is one of fear. They are ever propitiating the bad spirits, the demons of their dreams, and the imaginary "enemy" of the woods. I have seen burned leggings, worn-out moccasins, and broken snow-shoes hung up as peace sacrifices to change bad luck in hunting or a head-wind in tripping, and I never failed to note the predominant avarice stronger than the superstition, as revealed by the worthless character of the offerings. They lean to an inferior species of "totemism," although no religious ceremony was ever attached to its acceptance. Any animal or bird dreamed of used to be, and is yet in a minor degree, taken as the dreamer's totem. The medicine-man has gone, but has left the old superstitious and the pronounced fatalism, which the missionaries have not succeeded in destroying.

They conform to the ceremonies of religion, but little of true Christianity has been developed. It has been a change of method rather than of heart. Formerly female babies were killed on birth; now they live to become beasts of burden. Parents used to be strangled when they grew too old to seek a living; now they are left to slowly starve to death. In the old times men openly exchanged wives for a shorter or longer period; now the number of virtuous girls is very small, and wise indeed is the son who knows his father in this vale of unconventionality. The dead used to be swung in trees or hung from four posts, where the

wind rocked them in their eternal sleep; now they are buried in shallow graves, and the wolverene guards them by day and feeds on them by night.

Priests have not yet taught the Indians the golden rule, nor implanted respect for virginity. Chastity is regarded as a virtue to be honored in the breach rather than in the observance, and fidelity seems by no



THE BELLE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY.

means essential to the happiness of wedded life.

These people have not ventured far into civilization. Take from the Indian his copper kettle, steel knife, and .30-bore muzzle-loading gun, and give him his birch-bark "rogan," moose-bone, beaver-tooth, and flint-stone knives and bow, and he is just about where he was when the Hudson Bay Company brought the trinkets of the great world to him. Agricultural knowledge is of no use to him, because his country is not susceptible of cultivation, except in a few rare and isolated spots. And there are no native industries of any description, no weaving of blankets, no making of jewelry or pottery, absolutely nothing beyond some indifferent beading and porcupine-quill

work, which is done by several other tribes, and by none so well as by the Navajos.

As for sentiment, they have none beyond that torporific bliss caused by a full stomach. Yes, they have one other—fear. They are most abject cowards. In an earlier paper of this series I spoke of a gift of moccasins conveying indication of a tender sentiment; but that sentiment is relative. The men marry to have some one to make moccasins for them, and the women marry because, poor things, they have little choice in the matter, and that little probably suggests it is better to be the servant of one man than the drudge of a family. There are no playful displays of maternal affection. I think I saw just one instance of the kind on my trip; and, on the other hand, I saw one young mother take her crying and moss-bag enveloped baby out of the lodge and stand it up in the snow to weep itself into exhaustion! There are no gentle words to convey the tender solitudes of courtship, no terms of ordinary politeness; only in the Loucheux tongue can thanks be expressed. The exposure to which they are subjected in their wanderings, and the withering of the famines and gluttony of the feasts, combine to break down health and shorten life. And the greatest blessing they enjoy probably is that they die comparatively young, and go, wherever it may be, to a place which they make sure cannot be more barren of comfort or pleasure.

It must not be supposed that my researches at Chipewyan taught me all this, or that all I have said applies to the country immediately about that post. But while I am figuratively resting my ankle under Dr. Mackay's roof I have told something of the people and the country into which I am pushing. I rested only one day at Chipewyan, and with the exception of a most interesting visit to the Roman Catholic mission, in charge of Bishop Grouard (who is pursuing the only practical course of Indian civilization by beginning with the children), I spent my time getting my feet and ankle in condition for the onward journey, and in talking with the doctor, who is one of the real and prominent "old-timers." Two others are J. S. Camsell, the Hudson Bay Company officer at Fort Simpson, on the Mackenzie, one of the most popular factors and hardiest voy-

ageurs in the country, and C. P. Gaudet, in charge of Fort Good Hope, on the same river.

Nothing commanded my earnest attention more completely than this mission of the Oblates Fathers, with its bishop, three brothers, six nuns, forty school-children, and a saw-mill. Here, hundreds of miles from skilled labor, they have whipped out the planks for their church, invented a written language, somewhat after the Egyptian in character, taught it with slight modifications to both Chipewyan and Cree, printed and bound the Testaments and the Bible for distribution, and gone out into the woods to hunt their meat, and to suffer from cold, perhaps to starve, along with the Indians to whom they would preach the Word of God. I care not whether one's form of belief be for or against the doctrine preached by these men, one must be petty indeed who does not respect these workers, who, East and West, North and South, have gone far in advance of the pioneer, far beyond the plaudits of civilization, to carry their faith into the very heart of the wilderness.

Of Chipewyan itself there is little to say, other than it was from this point, then a post of the Northwest Company, that Sir Alexander Mackenzie in 1789 took his departure for his voyage of discovery; and here, too, Sir John Franklin spent some time previous to embarking on the trip which resulted in the starvation of several of his party, and eventually in his own death.

I was given the same assurances here that I had received all along my trip, of not being able to get into the Barren Grounds and out again in winter, but Dr. Mackay was good enough to yield to my determination to make the attempt, and to aid me by advice, and, what was more to the point, to place two of the post's best teams of dogs at my disposal. One of these was for the luggage, and the other to carry me one day on my journey, and then turn back, in order that my ankle, still very sensitive, should have another day's rest. We left Chipewyan on January 24th, in greater style than I affected at any subsequent time, with Maurice, one of the celebrated Beaulieu family, running before the dogs, and Rodrick Fleet and William Pini, English and French half-breeds respectively, doing the driving. I cannot declare my first experience in a cariole to have been one



THE "RABBIT CAMP."

of unalloyed pleasure. It saved my ankle, and for that I was of course grateful; but despite all the furs it is miserably cold travelling; and, what is equally as trying, the cariole keeps upsetting, unless you are on a well-worn lake or river track, and you, bundled up in furs, are dragged along face downwards, like a bag of meal, until the driver sets you up again. William was very attentive, but not all his care made me regret when the first day was over and my riding at an end.

We camped that night at the junction of the Peace and Slave rivers, and when we started the next morning, long before daylight, the temperature was 35° below zero, and our route lay down the Slave River. I noted very little difference between the scenery of this and that of the Athabasca River—unless possibly the banks of the latter are somewhat higher and more heavily wooded. In fact, there is slight change in the scene anywhere in the country, except that caused by the gradual diminution of timber as you go north, until it dwarfs into the "land of little sticks," above Great Slave Lake, and disappears altogether at the Barren Grounds. It is a country where the watercourses are the highways—for canoes in summer and snow-shoes in winter. The land is without roads, and stray where you will, you may stand on unexplored soil. The river-banks are well timbered, but back of them stretches away, far beyond the Indians' ken, the trackless, uninhabitable muskeg.

My joy at being out of the cariole was brief, for the pain of my ankle was intensified by the hard track on which we were running, and the ice was full of cracks and holes, which in darkness are always dangerous to the *royageur*, and were especially so to me in my crippled condition. We had the coldest weather I experienced before reaching the Barrens, the mercury touching 50° below the second night, and beginning at 42° and going to 48° on the third day. The only relief I had to the monotony of travel was afforded me by Roderick and Maurice in setting fox-traps, and my own experiment with a pair of Norwegian snowshoes (*skis*), which I had made at Chipewyan, and that I found inferior to the web shoe.

Although we were, indeed, going along at a pretty lively gait, and quite fast

enough for my physical condition, my mental half chafed at the pace, and was impatient to reach Fort Smith. My eyes had been on this post ever since I left the railroad. It seemed the Mecca of my trip, for here lived James McKinley, the only man who could really give me any information of the Barren Grounds, as he not only had been stationed at Great Slave Lake, but made a summer trip to that land of desolation with Warburton Pike. But the way was hard and the long stretches of river disheartening. It is an interesting fact that I always found I travelled easier where the river was tortuous, for, though knowing the distance to be none the less, the many bends gave heart to reach the point beyond, while when I came upon a long stretch the bare work of running stared me in the face, and the distance seemed twofold. We really made very good time, and arrived at Fort Smith on the morning of the 27th, having been three days and two hours doing the 118 miles.

Though prepared for a cordial reception at the post, since McKinley's big heart and helping hand are known from end to end of the North-land, the heartiness of my welcome and the solicitude for my condition quite overpowered me. To one coming from the pulsing city, where it is "every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost," it seems curious to have strangers that know you but in the passing take an interest in your movements and exhibit concern for your comfort.

I was soon sitting in McKinley's unpretentious cabin, with the water he had brought soothing my swollen feet, and the tea his wife had brewed warming me. When I was refreshed, McKinley made me lie down, and then we talked of my proposed hunt for musk-ox. He reiterated the assurances I had received ever since starting that I could not get into the Barrens in midwinter and get out again. He doubted whether I could induce Indians to make the attempt for love or money, but as I was bent on the effort, advised me to try to secure Beniah, a Dog-Rib leader, and one of the best hunters and most courageous Indians in the country. He said none of the Indians would be at Slave Lake at this time, and that the only sure way of getting into communication with them was by sending a runner to Resolition with a letter to Gaudet, the Hud-



CHIPWEYAN
TRAPPING-SHOE—
THREE FEET
LONG.

son Bay Company officer in charge, asking him to send after Beniah, who would very likely be hunting in the woods six or eight days' journey from Slave Lake. Meanwhile he was organizing a wood-bison hunt with Henry Toke Munn, an Englishman, who had been in the country a year, and made

a summer and an autumn trip into the Barrens, with the

hard luck of getting only a musk-cow head, after a most trying experience, and they would be glad to have me join them. This accorded with my plans nicely, for I had intended making a bison-hunt, and it could now be accomplished without loss of time—an important consideration—while Beniah was being found and brought to Resolution. Consequently an "express" was despatched to Resolution, and pending the return of Munn, who was in the woods trapping, and would be back the following day, I rested while "Mc" told me of the country and its people and its life, which he has learned so well in his twenty years' residence.

The wood-bison is the once familiar species of our own Western plains, grown heavier in his retirement from the old life, when the trail of his hunter never grew cold, and he rested neither by day nor night. He is the same animal with a more rounded stern, acquired by his life of comparative restfulness, and a heavier, darker robe to protect him from the colder climate of his adopted home. How long he has been in this country there are no means of knowing. The present generation of Indians, and their fathers before them, have always hunted him in a desultory way, but there are no traditions of an earlier bison, and the country in which he roams tells no tales. There are no well-beaten trails, such as those which on the plains last even to the present day, to remind us of the vast

herds that have been sacrificed to man's greed.

The muskeg where he ranges in the North-land shows no trail, and if it did, it would remain undiscovered, for it is impassable to the hunter in summer, and in winter is covered by snow to the depth of several feet. Really little is known of the wood-bison, except that he is gradually going the way of the plains species, from the difficulties of maintaining an existence where climate, pasturage,

and man are all against him. Recently a law has been passed by the Canadian government prohibiting their killing, but it will be impossible to enforce it, since no mundane power could stop a starving Indian from shooting if he got the opportunity. A check can be put to sending out the hide, but that would not prevent killing for the meat. Moreover, my inquiry did not discover any wholesale slaughter of these animals.

Some thirty years ago a sudden and exceptional thaw in midwinter, followed by a severe storm and bitter cold, that covered the snow with ice which the bison could not break, caused the death of a very great many from starvation and freezing. Again, three years ago, another thaw and storm

gave the Indians an opportunity for that diabolical diversion of crusting, by which method some men reared in the civilized world hunt deer and moose to this day, and about fifty bison were then run down and killed. But these were unusual occasions. Bison are not being killed in large numbers nor shot frequently as individuals. They range over a country too large and too difficult to reach, and require more skilful hunting than the average



CREE HUNTING-SHOE—
SIX FEET LONG.



LOUCHEUX SHOE—
SIX FEET LONG.

Indian is capable of. When I was in the country last winter not even a bison track had been seen up to the time of our hunt, and the head I obtained through the kindness of Dr. Mackay was the last one shot, and that two years before. So the extermination of wood-bison through their hunting by Indians is not to be apprehended, while the remoteness of their country, the difficulties of access—to say nothing of the dangers of starvation and freezing once you get there—protect them from the white hunter.

How many wood-bison there are is not easily estimated. I made diligent inquiry from all sources of information, and their numbers as told off to me ranged from 150 to 300. Joseph Beaulieu, at Smith Landing, popularly called "Susie" by the natives that cannot master the English pronunciation, and another of the famous Beaulieu family, said he believed there must be a thousand; but then "Susie" has the common failing of the country, and, moreover, he delivered himself of this statement when he was persuading us to take a hunter of his recommendation, and whom we afterwards cursed with all the depth and breadth and warmth of English expletive.

The bison range in the country bounded by Peace, Slave, and Buffalo rivers, which has an area of a good many hundred miles. As they roam this territory from end to end, and are usually found in small herds, the one of fifty that was killed a few years ago being an exceptional congregation, and as the Indians never hunt more than a very small piece of this section in one winter, the difficulty of arriving at a close estimate of their total number may be understood.

Personally I am convinced that 150 comes very near representing their total. Munn and I in our hunt very thoroughly covered the larger portion of their more southerly range, and discovered the tracks of thirteen; Munn in a subsequent hunt in a more northerly part of their range saw the tracks of forty; neither of us heard of any signs between these two sections, or Peace River way; and I, while at Slave Lake preparing for my musk-ox hunt, set inquiry afoot for signs of them in the most northerly piece of their range, without getting enough encouragement to warrant delaying my start for the Barren Grounds for another attempt to bring out a bison head of my

own killing. So that we two were the first to practically cover, one way and another, their entire range in one winter, and yet we heard of only fifty-three!

To plan a hunt was one thing, but to get started quite another. Half a dozen Indians told us by the hour how much they knew of the bison country and how undoubted their prowess, but whose knowledge, on close questioning, we found little more than our own. So we spent two days separating fact from fiction before finally deciding Calomé and Bushy to be the only two of the lot worth considering. But Calomé wanted a rifle for himself and a sack of flour for his wife before he would even discuss wages, and Bushy was uncertain of the section which we had decided to hunt. Meanwhile "Susie" sent word that he had secured a good hunter, Jeremi, who knew the country well, and was certain to find bison. We decided on Jeremi for our guide, and Smith Landing, sixteen miles south of the post, as our starting-point. It was 3.30 on the afternoon of February 1st when McKinley, Munn, and I got under way for the Landing, with two trains of dogs carrying our sleeping-ropes, twenty pounds of bacon, fifty pounds of flour, three pounds of tea, and six pounds of tobacco, to last five of us for the eight days we expected would complete the hunt, and it was 6.30 when we had gone the eighteen miles that brought us to "Susie's" cabin. We limited our own supplies to the last degree, because we knew the going would be heavy and the fish for the dogs more than a load, and we counted on the snares we had taken to replenish our stock from the rabbits that swarm the woods. Hunting in this country is a very different affair from hunting in any other. It is impossible to take a supply of good provisions, or even a good supply of the poor provision the land affords. We were particularly luxurious in having bacon and flour, for usually dried fish and dried caribou meat are all that may be had. It is out of the question to be well fed or comfortable; fish for the dogs must be carried, distances are great, travelling fatiguing, and hunting hard. Then there is the extreme difficulty of getting good hunters—the Indians are great braggarts but poor hunters—and the annoyance of making terms with them. They invariably want everything in sight while negotiating, and sub-



CUTTING A WAY THROUGH THE SMALL FIRS.

sequently discover either a starving wife, whom you feed, or moccasined feet, which you cover. But "Susie" assured us in Cree, Chipewyan, French, and in the limited English at his command, of which he is very proud, if uncertain, that we should have no trouble of any sort with Jeremi, or Joseph, his aide-de-camp. And so we accepted Jeremi in confidence, for "Susie" is an important personage among his people, who trade with him, and always refer to him as a *bourgeois*, which, curiously enough, in this country is a complimentary title indicating superiority.

Jeremi was one of the most unique tatterdemalions I beheld on my trip. Munn and I instantly dubbed him the Ancient Warrior; not that his appearance was forbidding, or that he ever revealed any predilection for the war-path, except perhaps when Joseph helped himself too generously to the grease in the frying-pan, but he looked as though he might have just come off a "march through Georgia," and there was a weariness about every motion that suggested long and arduous campaigning. He was tall and gaunt, with an appetite for tea and grease I never saw equalled, and a costume which baffled description. Two thick locks of hair hung forward of his ears and down to his chin, a turban whose original color had long since been lost to view encircled his head, and crowning all was a very small cap he had got from some trader many years before, and which sat rakishly on one side or the other of his head, and consistently fell off every time he departed from the perpendicular. His preparations for sleeping always afforded me a great deal of quiet amusement. He would squat Indian fashion (and Indian fashion differs from tailor fashion only in that the feet are crossed behind and are sat on) before the fire, warming his back and stomach alternately; then he would heap up a pile of frozen rabbits for a pillow, roll up in his robe, and lie down to snore. Very high pillows, by-the-way, are common to all these Indians; they gather everything loose about camp and stow it away under their heads, until they are raised a couple of feet. It was always a wonder to me how they slept at all, though I found in the Barren Grounds, where there is no brush to soften your bed, and you lie on rock chiefly, and always on your side, that a moderately high pillow is desirable, as it relieves the shoul-

der from bearing the entire weight of your body.

It was rather late in the afternoon of February 2d when we left the Landing on a southwest course, which took us to and up Salt River, and finally to a treeless twelve-mile stretch, on the edge of which we made a wretched camp in the increasing cold and with insufficient firewood. There "Susie," who had also decided to make a try for bison, joined us that night. This made us, all told, a company of seven, which was not to Munn's liking, and certainly not to mine, for of all things I have ever shunned, none has been avoided more studiously than a large hunting party. However, there was no way of mending matters. The wind grew stronger, and the mercury fell to 40° below, which not only froze the noses, ears, and chins of all of us the next morning crossing the open country, but, what was more serious, put such a crust on the snow that hunting an animal so wary as the bison was next to impossible. For two days we journeyed on toward the section Jeremi "knew so well," going through a fine game country of swamps covered with coarse grass, and surrounded by willows, small patches of pine, spruce, and poplar, and plenty of moose signs everywhere. In fact, this part of the country is one of the best game districts in the North. On the morning of the third day, being at the edge of the bison country, Munn, "Susie," Jeremi, and I went on ahead looking for signs, "Me" preferring to remain with the outfit to bring up trains, and pitch camp where we might indicate, as we did seven miles farther on. In a very cold wind we tramped for about twenty-five miles—stopping once to build a fire, that the Ancient Warrior might warm his feet, and again to eat a frozen biscuit we had each fetched—across small lakes, over marshes cut up by creeks, and along thickly wooded ridges, but the sight of not a solitary bison track rewarded our search.

"Susie" and Jeremi were both much disappointed, for they had confidently expected to find signs in this particular section; so the next morning, our provisions having run low, McKinley, "Susie," and his Indian turned back for the Landing, while Munn and I set Jeremi and Joseph to making snares, determined to lay in supplies here before going deeper into the bison country. Then, too,

we knew two sons of Jeremi's would be passing on their way to a cache of dried moose meat. So we bettered our camp to protect us from the wind, and while our two Indians caught rabbits, Munn and I chopped firewood, and smoked, and drank tea.

What truly astounding quantities of tea and tobacco one consumes, and what a craving for grease one acquires in this uncongenial clime! I found the strong black plug traded to the Indians a desirable stimulant in the Barren Grounds, where a pipe and a cup of tea constituted one's bill of fare for several days at a time, and tea to be much more bracing than coffee. Coffee is the alleged luxury of the North-land, and only to be had at an occasional officer's table; but grease, in point of fact, is the real luxury. Only eternal vigilance will save your cache, and nothing less persuasive than a shotgun rescue it from the hands of its Indian discoverer. We staid in this camp two days, and in that time snared rabbits enough to last us and the dogs a week, and to fill me with revulsion at the very sight of one.

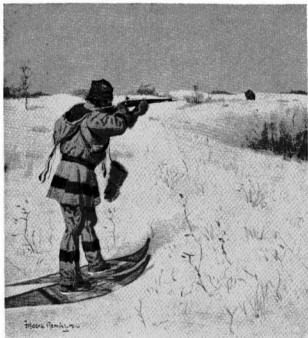
There is something peculiarly offensive in rabbit after continuous diet. I have lived at one time or another during my hunting experiences on one kind of game for periods of varying length, but nothing ever filled me with such loathing as rabbit. Indeed, it is commonly said by the Indians that they "starve on rabbit," and after my experience I can easily understand it; you may eat until you are surfeited, but after a couple of hours' hard travelling you feel as empty as though in the midst of a prolonged fast. There is neither nourishment nor strength in the meat, and yet the rabbit seems almost to be manna for the otherwise God-forsaken land. In countless numbers they scurry over the entire country, and are just the ordinary rabbit known everywhere, except that here they change to white in the winter, and on the lower Barren Grounds double in size, and become arctic hares. Every seventh year their numbers are decreased a good half by a mysterious and deadly disease, and then the Indians suffer, for no one can say how many depend on them for subsistence. If there is caribou or moose meat or fish at the lodge, it goes to the hunters, who must face the storms and withstand the hardships of travel; but the "squaw men," the old

men, and certainly the women and children, more than once during the year owe their very lives to the rabbit. So, although despised by me, he is revered in this home of snow and hunger.

We moved only fifteen miles the first day we broke our rabbit camp, keeping a sharp lookout all the way, and passing over a country filled with curious bowl-shaped depressions that ranged from ten to fifty feet in depth and proportionately wide, and at night the Ancient Warrior's sons turned up to gladden our hearts and relieve our stomachs with dried moose meat. Dried meat, by-the-way, caribou or moose, when at its best, is about as thick as sole-leather, and of the same consistency; when it is poor it somewhat resembles parchment in thickness and succulence. It is made by cutting the fresh meat into strips, which are hung in the sun to dry, and subsequently over the fire to smoke, and is the ordinary food on these expeditions, because dried it is so much easier carried about. It is not toothsome, but it is filling, and that is the main desideratum in this country. Fresh meat is the hunter's luxury.

The coming of these two boys gave me my first insight into the relations between Indian parents and children. They arrived, one with a badly frozen cheek, the other with frozen fingers, and both shivering with cold, yet Jeremi scarcely turned his head in greeting, made no sign to give them room by his own warm place at the fireside, nor showed paternal solicitude for their sufferings. They scraped away a little snow at the edge of our camp, and there rolled up in their blankets, while their dogs and ours, by the light of a glorious moon, mingled in an animated flight that lasted a good part of the night, and was waged vigorously around and over us. The dog is the one member of the Indian family that is no respecter of age or sex. But the boys pay the penalty of youth, as their sisters and mothers do of womanhood.

We were now where the sight of bison was an hourly expectation; we had come over one hundred miles into their range without a glimpse of a track, new or old, and Munn and I decided our quarry to be, as indeed he is, the rarest of the rare. We travelled all day along and up and down ridges, where men and dogs could scarcely drag the sledge for fallen timber and sharp ascents, and where the



JEREMI WAS TOO QUICK WITH HIS GUN.

snow was deep, and breaking trail excessively hard, especially with tripping-shoes on which you sunk to the knee, and with the toe of which you barked your shins as you raised your foot after every step to shake off the shovelful of accumulated snow. In this fashion we worked our way for about twenty miles, and yet saw no signs. But we did have a fine camp in the woods that night, with a roaring, warming fire, and such a glorious auroral exhibition as I had never before beheld, nor ever afterwards saw surpassed. Now there were dancing waves of changing red and violet expanding and narrowing and whirling across the sky in phantom dances; then great radiant streaks of golden-greenish pierced the

heavens like iridescent search-lights of incomparable power and brilliancy. It was all so startlingly brilliant and wonderfully beautiful. And I lay on my back, with the Indians on one side and the dogs all around, and stared at the magnificent spectacle, and forgot the rabbits.

The Indians have no definite idea touching the aurora; in their always apt nomenclature they call it the "lights that move quickly," and in general accept the exhibition as merely the sign of wind or fine weather. The Dog-Ribs say it is the spirits of their ancestors holding a dance; another tribe varies this only by substituting fighting for dancing; but there is really no attempt at solution. These

Indians are too thoroughly occupied in solving the problem of living. They do claim, however, that the aurora is at times audible, and some scientists bear them out. Personally I can add little certainty to the uncertain information on the question. Twice on my trip, at night, when there were auroral displays, I heard noises somewhat like the rustling or crackling of a silken banner standing out in the wind, but whether it was made by settling or cracking snow and ice, or by the aurora, I cannot affirm. There is little opportunity to test the matter in winter, for, what with storms and winds, an absolutely still night is as rare as a day in June.

The next, our ninth out from the Landing, was the memorable day of the hunt. It opened in hope—for we were in the heart of the bison country—and closed in despair, for in one short hour we had seen and chased and lost our game.

We broke camp at daylight, to reach on this day the lake about which we expected to find bison, and the country we penetrated had not before been hunted by the Indians. It was broken into numberless little gullies and ridges, none of which Jeremi missed in his wandering, and the snow was so deep, and dead timber and thickly grown small fir so formidable, we made haste very slowly. What with clearing a way for the sledge, disentangling the dogs, and keeping on our feet, we advanced but twelve miles all day. We were in an unexplored country, and the Ancient Warrior was lost. He invariably carried us to the top of the highest ridge that lay anywhere within striking distance of our course, and, once there, would send Joseph up a tree to scan the horizon, while he sank on his knees in what had the appearance of a supplication for light on the darkness of our way, but was in reality his habitual attitude when filling his pipe. From one of these ridges we saw Caribou Mountain near by, really not more pretentious than a foot-hill, but which in this flat country bears the distinction of great altitude.

So we travelled on, wearied by the very hard walking, and wondering if indeed there were any bison in the land. At one o'clock we crossed a lake, but not the lake, where we saw fresh moose and caribou tracks, which we could not of course afford to follow, at the risk of scaring

the big game we were after, much as we should have liked fresh meat. Just after crossing the lake the Ancient Warrior bore to the right of a sharp little ridge, and Munn and I gave the dogs a spell of a few moments, while we lighted our pipes, and joked about the old man having overlooked the ridge, and concluded he must have gone snow-blind. But even as we talked he turned to the left and began slowly plodding up the ridge; whereupon we agreed he was about to send Joseph aloft again, and was seeking high ground. Perhaps he, in fact, was—I never asked him—but Munn and I had hardly reached the foot of the ridge when Jeremi came hurrying back as excited as a phlegmatic Indian ever gets, and we suggested he had seen the "enemy," which these superstitious creatures are ever encountering, to their utter demoralization.

But the Ancient Warrior had the joke on us this time, for he fairly whispered, "Buffalo." Instantly Munn and I were tingling. At last the game we had tramped so far to get was at hand; heart-breaking trails, leaden snow-shoes, and rabbits were forgotten as the hunter's blood swept through our veins at the mention of bison. We four gathered closely in a little circle, and then in subdued tones Jeremi told Joseph, in Chipe-wyan, and Joseph, a few words at a time, translated to us in North-land French, that the ridge was literally covered with tracks, that they were fairly fresh, that we would leave the dogs where they were under cover, and take up the bison trail at once.

I do not become stirred easily, but when we got on top of the ridge and the tracks were before me, my heart quickened, and there seemed no obstacles I could not surmount to reach my quarry. There were the tracks, sure enough, like those of cattle, quite fresh—probably yesterday's. We moved slowly along the ridge, Joseph, Jeremi, Munn, and I, in Indian file, scanning the willow-surrounded swamps on either side, each stepping in the other's shoe-prints, but making quite a bit of noise, nevertheless, for the snow was hard, and the shoes crunched and cracked it to an alarming effect on the nerves of the stalking hunter. Fortunately a strong wind blew in our faces. In half a mile the tracks multiplied, and were very fresh—made that day—so we took off our snow-shoes and continued on as noiselessly as possible.

And now the ridge, hitherto thickly covered with poplar and pine, became a bare backbone which stretched away for about 125 yards between swamps, and ended in a sharp rise thickly grown with small spruce.

We had not advanced ten yards farther when we discovered, simultaneously, I fancy, for we all crouched and drew our rifles out of their coats together, a shaggy head about 115 yards in front of us. A second and careful look told me it was a bison cow about two years old, with forehead sprinkled with either gray or white hair on a background of light brown. She was standing under the spruce, and just over the rise of the ridge, so I could see only her forehead, eyes, and horns, which were about six inches long, and straight out from her head, with slight curve at tips; I could not see her muzzle. The wind was in our favor, and she had not scented us, though from her vantage on the knoll she had heard and evidently seen us before we sighted her.

Munn and I had not before hunted bison, but our hunting experience was sufficient to make action under such conditions intuitive. We knew for sure there was a herd over the ridge. We wanted a bull, and had no idea of firing on a heifer. We expected, of course, Jeremi would work around to the side and under the ridge, and up to where we could view and get a shot at the herd; or retreat and camp several miles away, to make another approach next morning. The heifer might scamper back to the cow, but she could not put the herd to flight, and meanwhile we should make our way along the ridge, perfectly certain the herd would not run until they scented or saw us, or we made undue disturbance. It was a splendid chance for a skilful stalk, just the situation a hunter loves most dearly. I did not consider the possibility of the Indians' shooting, for they had agreed at the Landing not to fire until Munn and I had done so, and "Susie" said they would keep their word, and I trusted them. I know more of these Indians now than I did then.

All this of course ran through my head in the few seconds I was taking my look at the heifer, and Jeremi's stealing off to the right and a little ahead rather corroborated my mental survey of the situation. Suddenly, however, up went

the guns of Jeremi and Joseph. There was no time for remonstrance, and Munn and I, in sheer desperation that luck might direct the bullets, threw up our guns also; those of the Indians exploded before we had ours fairly at shoulder, but we pulled trigger, chiefly because of that instinct which makes one's muscles at times work in sympathy with one's wishes.

I was so stunned by the sudden turn of affairs, so exasperated at the Indians, that I was sorely tempted to empty the magazine of my rifle into them. I knew I could not possibly have scored; I felt sure Munn had not, but hoped against hope that he might have got his gun up for a sight. I did not think the Indians had, for they can hardly hit a barn door a hundred yards off. If I thought at all of their scoring, it was that we might have meat, which we needed, but even that, I am sure, I did not consider.

The one miserable thought that we had lost what had been a good chance of getting a bison head was uppermost, for this herd would run for days, and entirely beyond our reach. Simultaneously with the shooting the heifer disappeared, and we ran to the top of the knoll in hopes of a shot at the flying herd, but not a hoof was in sight, so rapid had been their flight, although the ridge opened to view five hundred yards away.

We discovered a few small drops of blood where the heifer had stood, counted the beds of eleven cows, and noted the snow beaten down into paths leading toward the end of ridge and muskeg to the right; and then began a mad race along the faint trail of blood, in hopes that the heifer might have been more badly wounded than the blood showed, and turned aside (as is their custom when hard hit) from the fleeing herd. But we had only a hard run in the deep snow as recompense.

And then we returned to our sledge and sat down in silence, and with the bitter realization that the bison-hunt was at an end. We did not say much, Munn and I; words could not do our feelings justice. There is hunters' luck, and the sportsman who has sought big game, and experienced its operations for and against him, can sound the depths of our disappointment. To have got near bison at all was remarkable, but to have succeeded after a long hard hunt in getting so near, and actually seeing them, only to have our chance for a kill spoiled by the stupidity

or viciousness of our Indians was too keen a grief to be soothed by mutual condolence or by cursing Jeremi.

We went on another day, and saw more tracks of the same herd, but none others, and then we turned our faces Fort-Smithwards. For three days we travelled by the compass, for we were lost, cutting our way through forests of small fir, grown so closely as to render progress almost impossible to a man, much less for a train of worn-out dogs. The going was very hard, and hunger, our provisions be-

ing gone, less easy to bear now following upon our disappointment. On the fourth day we came out on our trail, and that night Munn and I reached McKinley's cabin, after covering forty-eight miles between 7 A.M. and 8 P.M. Before we slept we poured our tale of woe into "Mac's" sympathetic ears, and then we all decided the only chances of success in a bison-hunt to be—time enough to cover their entire range from north to south, and once on their tracks, binding the Indians hand and foot.