

SHARP TIME ON THE MATTAWA.

BY SIDNEY C. KENDALL.



TWENTY years ago the waters of Lake Nipissing were only stirred by the Indian's paddle or the plunge of the deer. There was a squalid Indian village on the north shore, a settlement

of whites, not much more prosperous, on the south shore; but for the most part the long, wave-swept margin was left to the solitude of primeval nature. I had spent three days among the colonists at South River and was impatient to get back to Pembroke; but the descent of the Mattawa was dangerous, and it was not wise to attempt it alone. There was a French Canadian who wished to go down, but he had no canoe. We were depending upon a certain Mr. Michael McMicken (locally known as Mick) who carried the mail.

While we were fighting mosquitoes upon the stoop of the best house in the village welcome news was brought by François that: "M'sieu Mick was come sure." I had an interview with "M'sieu Mick," and he promised to carry me to Mattawa by the "very tallest koind of thravellin' that iver was made, sorr." My request had evidently roused his mettle for he swaggered about all the evening bragging of the run he proposed to make and vowing that if "the gintleman wished he would run all the rapids from Nipissing to the say."

We started at the first gleam of day light on a chilly, foggy morning. I was glad to wear my rubber coat and to do a share of the paddling. The great lake looked almost dismal as we glided along the fringe of fallen timber that encumbered the south shore. We threaded the islands, shot across the bays and skirted the capes until we reached the extreme end of a long bay running into the east, where we landed to make a portage. Mick and François carried the canoe and I followed with my satchel and a few light effects. Our path lay up a steep rocky gully to the top of the cliff

where I paused for a parting glance at the lake. The sun was rising. Long streaks of vapor marked the water courses, and soon the broad face of the lake shimmered through its veil of mist. But I had to follow those fellows with the canoe and had no time for studying pictures.

I have frequently been very much struck with the indications of antiquity of Northern Ontario portage paths. This one runs straight as a railway over the height of land through a remnant of the forest primeval, spared by the lumberman, unscarred by fire. Smooth and erect stand the trunks of immense pines like colonnades rearing aloft the arches of a verdant roof. Unbroken by underbrush, the view stretches away in endless vistas streaked with shafts of pale green light. While these paths are surrounded by the very densest bush there is always room for the landing and portage of the largest canoes. The rocks in the track are worn like the pavements of cities, for portages are the pre-historic highways of the country. During the French régime this was the highway to the Northwest. Jacques Cartier was escorted this way by the Indians; Champlain, La Salle and others have passed along this very path. Long before the French came it was the "Trail of the warriors" on their way to the great rendezvous at the Tuque of the St. Maurice.

We descend rapidly the last half mile and soon we are afloat again; this time in a narrow river with a cataract behind and a good swift current ahead. It was exhilarating to sweep along that rapid stream. My companions with bow and stern paddles kept the bark off rocks and snags; the current did the rest. From the way that she swirled through the eddies and dropped down the ledges it was evident that Mick was making good his promise of quick time. When you are paddling a bark canoe you travel upon your knees, merely resting your sitting part against a cross bar. But if you are not paddling you can stretch out your legs and assume the posture of a half-opened jack-knife. It is imperative upon you to re-

member that you are not responsible for the equilibrium of the canoe; any effort to preserve her balance will result in disaster. You have simply to sit still and "let her rip," as Mick puts it.

A couple of hours of this traveling brought us to Lake Talon, the head of the Mattawa River. The bronzed face of my escort brightened at seeing that a strong west wind was sweeping down the lake.

What a wonderful creation is the Indian canoe! Light as foam it sits upon the placid water, blown like a feather by the slightest breeze, responsive as a cork to the least ripple; yet this same fragile bark is adapted to the wildest waters. It leaps in safety from crest to crest of the cataract, or buoyantly surmounts the billows of the stormy lake. It was well for us this morning that it was so, for we were heading toward a broad sheet of water that was thickly dotted with white caps. We were soon far enough out to feel the full force of the gale that stung our faces with wind and spray. To go against such a wind with a bark canoe would be an utter impossibility, but to run with it was great fun. Our safety depended upon the skill of the steersmen in keeping her before the wind. Certainly the day had commenced auspiciously: we were making quick time. The complacent Irishman was taking to himself all the credit for this gale as though it were a part of his business. I was forbidden to paddle, but with Captain Mick's consent I tied the tails of my rubber coat to the handles of two paddles and inserted the blades in the arm-holes. This extempore sail greatly added to the speed of our flying craft. On we flew, outstripping the spray that leaped after us and fell short. This kind of sailing furnished sensations for which no analogy can be found in the whole range of navigation. Instead of plunging deeply and laboring heavily as a wooden boat would, our buoyant vessel scarcely deigned to plunge at all, but seemed to skim like a sea-gull on the very foam itself. So we crossed Lake Talon in a boat which a man could carry, doing eight miles of angry waves without ship in a thimbleful of water.

When we had passed within the narrow walls of the Mattawa where no wind could reach us, Mick turned and remarked in a matter-of-fact tone:

"Thar, sorr; that's how we carry Her Majesty's mail."

"What do you do when you haven't a passenger with a rubber coat?" I asked wishing to get my share of the credit.

"Stick a bush in the nose av her and let her rip," was the ready answer.

Our course now lay along a narrow stream, deep and tortuous, bordered on both sides with lofty cliffs. So winding is the Mattawa at this point that it seemed as though the river was stealing through crevices made by an earthquake. Here was a region comparatively bare of vegetation where the rock strata had been upheaved as though by an explosion, splintered, melted, twisted into fantastic forms, reared aloft until their dizzy peaks hung threateningly, or piled in dismal ruins, full of caverns and grottoes. The current swept us rapidly through this gloomy gallery where every scene was a petrified nightmare. In time we reached another lake, known as Champlain's Lake. Not "Lake Champlain," but a sheet of water which has just as good a right to bear the name of the great French explorer, for he discovered it and sailed its waters long before he ever saw the gem of New York State. Champlain's Lake is an expansion of the Mattawa, not very wide, but long, stretching east and west exactly in our way. We traversed this lake as we had the other—literally on the wings of the wind. Mick vowed that if this continued we should break the record.

The journey we were taking usually occupied a cautious party three days. The mail-carrier, who knew every stone and eddy and could run more rapids than any other man, generally made the trip in two days unless delayed by head winds. But even Mick admitted that he never made such time as he was making to-day, though he would not admit that the rubber coat had anything to do with it. As we neared the eastern end of the lake the sky became overcast, heavy drops fell and a drenching shower threatened. I was about to take in sail and restore my coat to its legitimate service, when Mick remarked:

"We'll be at Paquet's in five minutes." Paquet's, I should explain, is a hotel of which the proprietor has been dead for two hundred years. In a few minutes we were there. It was a cave on the north shore, a few yards from the

lake. Being high above the water it was perfectly dry. The entrance was small and could be closed with a blanket. At the further end was a crevice which could be used as a fireplace. On the wall was cut the name "Jean Paquet, 16 —," and a half-defaced inscription which tradition declares read originally, "Tué par les Sauvages." Tradition also declares that Paquet was a member of Champlain's company who either deserted or was lost and left behind, and who inhabited this cave until he was discovered and murdered by the Indians. Many years afterward his skeleton, with arrows sticking between the ribs, was discovered on the very bench on which we sat to take our dinner. He had very thoughtfully made that inscription upon the wall to let the world know what had become of him. As to whether he made that inscription before or after the fatal visit of the savages, tradition is silent. Tradition cannot be expected to anticipate all possible inquiries. On the spot, surrounded by those grewsome associations, one is willing to believe all those legends and many more. Paquet's cave was used as a half-way house and travelers on the Mattawa usually planned to spend a night there.

The rain ceased as we finished dinner, so we set out at once. In that deep canyon no wind could reach us, but by vigorous working of three paddles we got up a "tamarack breeze" that carried us rapidly along. From this down, the river seemed to be alternately a lake and a cataract so that we kept up our speed. Mick took the rapids as they came with great coolness and skill. His oft-repeated vow to shoot everything on the river I knew to be mere bluff, for some of them were positively falls. After several minor rapids had been passed we came to a place where, with a preliminary canter, the river seemed to gather itself like a well-trained horse for a leap, and all signs indicated that we were approaching a cataract of unusual force. As it was no use addressing Mick, I turned and inquired:

"Can we get down there, François?"

"Yah! Oui; she go down. Le canoe big plunge, big pull; she all right. M'sieu Mick she know; no oder man."

In spite of this assurance, as I glanced at the rapid, I thought: "Surely he doesn't propose to take us down there!"

But from the grim silence of M'sieu

Mick and his resolute manner of handling his paddle it was evident that that was just what he did propose to do. The cataract began between two towering rocks, and as the canoe darted over the edge I distinctly felt that backward pitch that I have experienced on a horse when leaping a fence. From this point the river rushed down a narrow gorge as water pours through the tail-race of a mill. Our speed was such that I could make no observation of the banks. Between those walls all sounds were intensified; the roaring of the water was loud and threatening; spray showered upon us as the waves lashed the sides. Fortunately (though I did not know it at the time it was not so dangerous as it appeared, for the channel was deep and free from rocks, and it was only necessary to keep the canoe steady in the center. Still it was thrilling in the extreme and not without danger as the gorge was not straight, and at every angle the canoe swayed and swooped with swift and dizzy plunges. I was dazed with excitement at the conclusion of the wild rush and convinced that I was piloted either by the most skillful canoeist or by a madman. As we resumed our paddling in quieter water Mick half turned his head, his jaws still exercised upon his quid, and remarked:

"Nice place, that."

"Very," I replied, with great composure.

An hour passed without any special incident and we came to the mouth of the Mabelle du Font. The two streams at the point of junction combined to get up a very respectable cataract. It was not a dangerous rapid in itself, but we came along just as a shanty gang had turned a drive of square timber out of the branch. We should have halted some yards back to ascertain if the way were clear. But that reckless Mick had been so elated by the time we had made that he was getting impatient in his desire to heat all previous runs. The lumbermen shouted to warn us. But to turn back was impossible, though to advance was to run the rapids in company with huge masses of timber. The seriousness of the situation was indicated by the fact of the entire gang quitting work and running to watch our descent. Encouraging shouts of "Bully for you, Mick!" and "Steady, old man!" reached us. At the very crisis of the rush we

found ourselves traveling alongside a lumbering behemoth that threatened to roll over and swamp us. We could not get away from it as there were rocks on the other side. Neither could we go ahead, as the narrow channel was occupied by two other logs. To make matters worse one of those logs in front ran against a rock and its rear was raised out of the water by the force of the current. As we were slipping through the narrow opening that remained the log turned toward us, brushed the elbow of François and fell with a plunge just grazing the edge of the canoe. Even Mick shrugged his shoulders and chuckled at our lucky escape.

"What has come over you to-day, Mick?" I asked, somewhat angrily.

"I don't know, sorr; that whisky you gave me must have gone to me head.

"But, Mick, I never gave you any whisky."

"No, indade," was the reproachful reply; "if you had it would have gone to me stomach!"

I need not give in detail the rest of this day's experience, but hurry to the climax. As we were approaching a rapid I heard behind a "Sa-sa-sacre!" stammered in a tone of terror.

Looking ahead I saw through the waves a straight line across the river which I knew marked the edge of a fall.

"What is that, François?" I asked.

"La chute du Boom; mauvaise place!" replied François, whose meager English all left him in moments of excitement. The glare of the declining sun on the water made it difficult to discern anything distinctly, but we were nearing that ominous line with surprising rapidity.

Of a sudden, as I was straining my eyes to make out what we were coming to, I became conscious of an instant change in my environment. The canoe vanished from beneath me; the water had risen up to my chin—up to my eyes—over my head. There was a great darkness and a great roaring. My hind-quarters were being bumped along the rocks as I was swept and swirled by an irresistible force. It occurred to me to stretch my legs and rise to my feet. But as I attempted to do so the bottom suddenly sank down. There came a momentary gleam of light, and, as I dropped feet foremost over a chute, I saw, hanging above my head, an over-

turned canoe with a man clinging to it. Then followed a series of back somersaults in a gigantic churn and a furious struggle amid a million of bubbles that burst about my ears with a hissing sound. After which I found myself swimming quietly through a mass of frothy foam that rose up to my eyes, without any definite idea what had happened or what was to follow.

"Can ye swig, sorr?" roared a voice in my ear. M'sieu Mick was evidently looking after his passenger although it was rather late in the day to ask that question.

"Can ye reach that flat rock ferninst yander? I've got to lug the canoe."

I waded ashore followed by Mick dragging the canoe. Our things had been tied to the thwarts so that, although soaked, nothing was lost.

"Where is François?" I asked.

"Oh! he'll turn up somewhere; he's ben thar."

True enough, François did turn up even while we were talking about him. The current had swept him astride a rock, so that he had escaped the second chute. He had no comment to make upon the event either in French or English. It appeared to be a contingent which Mick's passengers might safely reckon upon. In fact I could never extract from either of them a word or sign admitting that this was not the strictly correct method of passing a cataract.

"Any more rapids, Mick?" I asked, in as composed a tone as I could command.

"No, sorr. We've run 'em all accordin' to contract."

I would have willingly released the rascal from his obligation respecting that last one if he had mentioned it before, but it wasn't worth while to mention it now.

We reached Mattawa after another hour's hard paddling, having made a record that has never been broken.

Our troubles were not yet over. In that little log village where every second house was a tavern with its knot of half-drunken shantymen we were received as a set of impostors for declaring that we had left South River that morning and had run all the rapids on the Mattawa. If we had taken the trouble to explain the manner of our taking the Boom chute it might have helped our case. But an explanation would have hurt Mick's feelings.