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A Narrative of the Extraordinary Sufferings of Mr. Robert Forbes, his Wife, and Five Children

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A
NARRATIVE

OF THE
EXTRAORDINARY SUFFERINGS

OF

Mr. ROBERT FORBES, his Wife, and
Five Children;

DURING

An unfortunate Journey through the Wildernefs,
from *Canada* to *Kennebeck River*,

IN THE YEAR 1784:

In which THREE of their Children were starved to
Death.



[Taken partly from their own mouths, and partly from an
imperfect journal; and published at their request.]

BY *ARTHUR BRADMAN.*

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A NARRATIVE, &c.

MR. ROBERT FORBES, not being a native of Canada, but having resided there several years, was desirous of being where he might have a more frequent opportunity of associating with his own countrymen.

He and his wife had premeditated a removal to the United States of America, when falling in company with three men, by the names of Midstaff, Pancake, and Christian, they were induced by their insinuations to undertake the journey by land: the said Midstaff engaging, for a certain sum, that with the assistance of the other two he would conduct them, in twelve days' time, to the settlement on Kennebeck River.

Mr. Forbes' neighbours endeavoured to dissuade him from the attempt, not only on account of the length and difficulty of the way, but because there was a possibility of his being deserted by his guides in the midst of the wilderness.

Nevertheless, being determined on a removal, and having paid to Midstaff a large stipulated sum for that purpose, on the seventeenth day of March, A. D. one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, they entered upon this unfortunate journey.

From Nouvelle Bois, on the river Chadore,* they took their departure. The men and Mrs. Forbes, (who was then pregnant) and Mr. Forbes' son John, a lad about thirteen years old, on snow shoes.

Their provisions and other effects, together with four children, viz. Mary, about seven years; Peggy, about five; Catharine, about three; Robert, about fifteen months old, they undertook to haul on Indian sleighs or hand sleighs.

In this manner, but with great difficulty, they pursued their

*Chaudière.

way eight days; and on the ninth, being obliged to leave the river which they had followed hitherto, and whereon they had travelled some part of the time, they found the country so broken with large and deep gullies, and so rough and mountainous, that they concluded it next to impossible to proceed any further with the sleighs.

Here they were obliged to make a halt; and after a short consultation, having first erected a small camp to leave the woman and children in, they took the chief part of their provisions, and as much of the rest of their baggage as they were able to carry on their backs; and leaving the woman and children about ten o'clock in the morning set out in quest of Meconick Pond, otherwise called Lake Chadore, expecting to return the next day. But meeting much difficulty, they did not reach the pond until the next day about three o'clock in the afternoon.

Here being much fatigued, they left their baggage; and Mid-staff having had some previous notice that there was an Indian residing not far from thence, went in quest of him to the other side of the pond, where they found an old camp, without inhabitants; and there they encamped that night.

The next morning, being Sunday, the twenty-seventh day of March, they crossed the pond back to where they had left their baggage. When, to the great astonishment of Mr. Forbes, his pilot and the other two, taking to themselves the provisions and his other effects of any considerable consequence, frankly told him that they were determined not to return with him to his family; and that they must now leave him and make the best of their way through to Kennebeck.

This may well be supposed to be shocking indeed to one who was already discouraged and disheartened. "This," said he, "struck me to the heart, and filled my eyes with tears; it confirmed what my neighbours had repeatedly mentioned amongst their fears of what might happen to myself and family."

Notwithstanding his importunities, his most earnest entreaties and solicitations, they would not be prevailed upon to continue any longer with him; but, leaving him only one axe, a small fire-lock, and two loaves of bread, they departed.

With a heavy heart did this unfortunate man then make the best of his way back to his family; where he arrived that evening, with the sorrowful tidings.

Here were they left in the wide wilderness, strangers to the country, destitute of provisions, and without a compass; eight days journey from the inhabitants in Canada, and how far from any other settlement they knew not; probably not less than one hundred and fifty miles.

The wife and son had laboured under the most terrible apprehensions during Mr. Forbes's absence, especially seeing he did not return at the time appointed. Their fears had almost driven them to despair; and the poor lad, a little before his father's return, had fatigued himself almost to death, having followed their tracks for several miles; and had just got back when his father arrived.

The next morning they were in the most doubtful perplexity whether to go backward or forward. Should they undertake to return to Canada, it might take them more than double the length of time in which they had got thus far, the river being then about breaking up; and in that case they must inevitably starve.

When the husband and wife were in this pitiable situation, gazing at each other, and tears gushing from their eyes, their children were hanging around them and crying bitterly for a morsel of bread.

Upon the whole, as the before-mentioned two loaves of bread were in the way towards Kennebeck, and as they might, peradventure, find the Indian at Meconick pond, they concluded, by the help of God, to proceed on their journey.

Accordingly they left the most cumbersome, though necessary articles, which they had now remaining, and the eldest daughter undertook to travel on foot with her mother, while Mr. Forbes took two of the children, and John one, upon sleds; and thus they proceeded with as much dispatch as possible.

The way, however, was rough; and they travelled but a short distance during that day. At night they encamped, and the next morning there came on a violent storm of rain, hail, and snow, which continued until Wednesday evening. In the mean while, the children were pinched with hunger and with the cold; and their cries were so bitterly distressing that, leaving the mother and children in camp, the father and son pushed forward with all speed to the pond; but it was still stormy, and travelling so difficult, that they did not get back with the two loaves until Wednesday evening.

Upon their return they had not a dry thing about them, nor any dry clothes to put on, And to add to their misfortune, the fire was extinguished and they were unable to rekindle it for the whole night.

The next morning, the storm being considerably abated, they proceeded on their journey; but the trees and bushes being wet they had an uncomfortable time, and did not reach the pond until Friday morning about ten o'clock.

Soon after this, to their great consolation they met with the beforementioned Indian, who proved to be one John Baptist, and with whom they had had some previous acquaintance in Canada. —He very hospitably invited them to his camp, which was at a considerable distance from the pond; and there he kindly treated them with the best of what his house afforded.

This was a camp where his wife resided, while he followed hunting, Here they tarried until the next Monday. And the Indian having, just before their meeting, killed a moose at a few

miles' distance, Mr. Forbes and his son went with their sleds, and assisted him in bringing it home.

The Indian gave them as much moose meat as they would undertake to carry; and agreed to pilot them to Kennebeck river. This agreement he punctually fulfilled; and would have proceeded with them to the settlements, but his wife was so sick that he did not dare to be any longer absent from her. He therefore marked the way on a piece of bark, representing the bends, windings, falls and carrying places along the river.—He then wished them well, and left them.

On taking leave of the Indian, they could not express their gratitude. His kindness was beyond their expectation. Before his departure, however, they gave him what things they had left behind, together with some other things of considerable value. And they had reason afterwards to wish that they had presented him with more; for their loads proved so much too heavy for them, that they were obliged to leave by the way a large bag full of valuable articles.

They now met with almost insurmountable difficulties; for in pursuing the river their progress was obstructed by craggy wind-falls, rocky ledges, lofty mountains and hideous precipices.

On the twelfth day of April their provisions were exhausted; and Mrs. Forbes thought it most advisable to have a camp erected, and for herself and the children to remain there, while her husband and oldest son should go forward to see whether they could find the inhabitants—apprehending that they were much nearer than they afterwards proved to be.

A camp was therefore erected, and leaving Mrs. Forbes with her four young children, Mr. Forbes and his son went forward with as much speed as possible. The first and second days, finding the ice would bear them, they travelled on the river; and would have made considerable progress, but unfortunately they mistook

their way at a very material carrying place where, instead of leaving the river, and crossing by land to the next bend, which was only twelve miles, they followed the river sixty miles around.

A little before night, the second day, they came to falls, and could go no further on the ice. They went on shore, and soon after came to a precipice where they were obliged to descend twenty feet almost perpendicularly, and at the risque of being dashed upon the rocks. Night coming on, they encamped; and the next day, finding a shoal rocky place in the river they crossed over to the other side, in hopes of finding better travelling, and a more convenient place to encamp. Here they were obliged by reason of stormy weather, to encamp for the remainder of the day.

The next day they travelled on; and perceiving the river to be almost clear of ice, they concluded to build a kind of raft—a thing with which they were altogether unacquainted, and by means of which they had both like to have lost their lives.

A few days after they got on the raft, and under way about ten o'clock in the morning. The current however, ran so swift that they soon found there was no possibility of turning it to the shore. As they passed down the river, they struck against a tree, which they were obliged to cut away in order to clear the raft. When they descended over ripples, the water never failed of dashing over them, so that they were wet continually.

About the middle of the day, the raft moving with great rapidity, struck a large rock, parted one of its corners, and spread into a single string of logs. At this time they lost their axe, and it became extremely difficult to keep upon their broken machine.

They were, from this time, driven with amazing rapidity, expecting every moment would be their last, until about four o'clock in the afternoon; when falling into an eddy, they were brought up by a point of land, and both got safe on shore.

They now travelled on by land until their strength was almost exhausted. About the twentieth of April, they heard the report of a gun, which seemed to give them new life. They fired several times, but were not answered. Then concluding that it might be nothing more than the falling of a tree, their spirits again sunk within them, and they moved on with heavy hearts.

But on the evening of the twenty-second, having kindled a small fire upon an eminence, they were discovered, and kindly relieved by two hunters—Jonathan Crosby and Luke Sawyer.

It was now the tenth day since they left Mrs. Forbes and the children. And during this time they had eaten up all the moose meat which they had taken with them (it being only two or three ounces) and their moggasons*—having had nothing else to subsist upon.

The hunters supplied them with such articles of nourishment as they had with them, and then conducted them to the settlements at Seven Mile Brook, a little above Norridgewalk, where they arrived in a few hours; but so reduced that they were scarcely able to stand alone.

Upon their arrival Mr. Forbes procured Major Hale, William Huston and Ebenezer Hilton, three of the most suitable men that could be found, to go with all speed to the relief of his wife and children. They set out immediately, and after having been gone thirteen days, returned without having been able to find them.

It was now twenty-four days from the time Mr. Forbes left them, with only one pound and an half of moose meat and a pound and a half of tallow, for their subsistence: It was the general opinion therefore, that they must have been dead.

Nevertheless, Mr. Forbes' anxiety would not permit him to rest satisfied until he had procured two other persons, Messrs. James M'Donald and Jonathan Ames, to go with him and see

*Moccasins.

whether they might not be still alive. But by this time all the low lands adjacent to the river were overflowed, which rendered the passing extremely difficult. For this reason, and because they had no expectation of finding them alive, they could not be prevailed upon to set off until the waters were abated.

On the twenty-eighth day of May they set out. Having travelled one day, Mr. Forbes found himself unable to keep up with them; and upon their telling him he could be of no service, and that he might depend upon their fidelity, he consented to return.

They proceeded on their way, and on the second day of June arrived at the place where Mrs. Forbes and her children were left. And here, to their great astonishment, they found the mother and one of her children alive. It was now fifty days since they were left with nothing besides the before-mentioned moose meat and tallow. Nor had they any thing else during that whole time, excepting cold water, and the inside bark of the fir tree. And in addition to this, they had been forty-eight days without fire.

To paint in proper colours this scene of distress is altogether beyond my powers of description. It must be left to the imagination of the reader.

On the thirty-eighth day after the departure of Mr. Forbes, the little boy expired. Catharine died the next day; and Mary lived but four days longer. This last child had often told her mother, they should all certainly starve to death; and earnestly begged, in case her mother should outlive her, that she might be put where the wild beasts could not devour her.

The poor woman was herself but just alive, and expected every hour to close the eyes of Peggy, her only remaining child and companion. The bodies of the deceased children were laid out, and kept by her side: for she was unable to bury them—hav-

ing been so weak for the last fifteen days, that she had been obliged to crawl upon her hands and knees to the spring for water.

The breath of life, however, was still remaining in them. And the two men who came to their relief afforded them such assistance and administered to them such nourishment as their situation and circumstances required.

On the third day of June they set out for home; and carried Mrs. Forbes and the child on a bier by land, and in a canoe by water, till they all safely arrived at Norridgewalk: where, to the surprise of the inhabitants, and the utter astonishment of Mr. Forbes, he was once more presented with a living wife, and one living child.

On this occasion, well might he adopt the language of holy David—in whose words we shall now close the narrative:

*MY soul with grateful thoughts of love
Entirely is possest,
Because the Lord was pleas'd to hear
The voice of my request.*

*Since he has now his ear inclin'd,
I never will despair,
But still, in all the straits of life,
To him address my prayer.*

*With deadly sorrows compass'd round,
With painful fears oppress'd;
When troubles seiz'd my aking heart
And anguish rack'd my breast:*

*On God's almighty name I call'd,
And thus to him I pray'd,
Lord, I beseech thee save my soul,
With sorrows quite dismay'd."*

*How just and merciful is God;
 How gracious is the Lord!
 Who saves the feeble, and to me
 Does timely help afford.*

*Then, free from doubtful cares, my soul
 Resume thy wonted rest;
 For God hath wond'rously to thee
 His bounteous love exprest.*

*When death alarm'd me, he remov'd
 My dangers and my fears:
 My feet from falling he secured,
 And dry'd my eyes from tears.*

*Therefore my life's remaining years,
 Which God to me shall lend,
 Will I in praises to his name,
 And in his service spend.*

POSTSCRIPT.

After the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Forbes at Norridgewalk, a number of gentlemen gave them a writing from under their hands; in which the relation of their unparalleled suffering was confirmed and by which they were warmly recommended to the notice and charitable assistance of all Christian people. This recommendation was signed of some of the first characters in the county of Lincoln.

Mr. Forbes and his wife, with their two surviving children are now living in the town of New-Gloucester, about twenty-five miles from Portland; where, by their industry and economy, they have since been enabled to procure a very comfortable subsistence.

Mrs. Forbes, from the emaciated state in which we have before described her, has now become a large and corpulent woman. And the child of which she was delivered soon after their arrival at Norridgewalk, is a healthy and very promising boy.

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