

Diary of the Fourth Waterborne Expedition, to Algonquin Provincial Park.

Undertaken in the summer of 2001, commencing on the 2nd day of August.

Under the pen of Robert Thomas.

Crew: Robert, Simon, Richard, Anthony

**To Strive
To Seek
To Find
And Not To Yield**

Thursday, August 2nd

We are slouched despairingly over a picnic table in the dread gloom of a moonless night, our world illuminated only by the hissing lantern whose eerie pall is half obscured by innumerable fluttering insects, drawn to the light in some deranged frenzy.

We have beer in quantity. The cannabis is there for those inclined. Yet we are morose and dispirited. And I scribble these lines, between swatting the moths that crowd my note pad, not knowing what the future holds or whether we may yet prevail.

We can see nothing beyond the immediate confines of our desolate campground. For the fire-pit lies vacant and forlorn. I have forbid the men to venture forth into the darkness, unaware what lies beyond, and bereft of the flame to repel predators. Richard strains to discern the words of a tattered magazine, and Anthony just sits there in silence, staring into the bright mantle of the burning lantern, skewering insects with a small stick. Simon, at a loss for words altogether, is alone with his thoughts, save the occasional murmur that I cannot make out.

The words of the radio announcer resonate within my skull.

Only with the greatest of difficulty did we extricate ourselves from civilisation. As we departed from the city, we were delayed at a strip mall in North York, to purchase beer for the stay-over at Pogg Lake. It was the typical example of an urban Hell. The place was unsightly, a concrete blight with no indication of green, the lot crowded with cars and humans, stinking and noisy, clogged with fumes and scattered with debris. And the sticky heat magnified the unpleasantness of the thing. Overhead, aeroplanes passed over at low altitude, their jet engines screaming, on their way to land, and we had to yell back and forth just to communicate. The whole experience was uncomfortable and depressing, not least because the enlisted men lingered beyond the purchasing of beer, to buy candy and sodas and cigarettes. And then Anthony, whose specialities include not only suspending tarpaulins and weaving impenetrable knots from nylon rope, but

also the elegant chaulking of trunks, expended some time in arranging all the articles, which included the case of beer, with due regard to the efficient use of space. It is truly fortunate that I purchased the cargo pod, secured above the cabin, which can hold three packs, leaving a greater sufficiency of room in the trunk proper, though it makes the vehicle top-heavy.

And then we toured Barrie. Not by design, but whoever was designated as navigator (I believe it was Simon) failed in his duties and caused me to lose my way, and we doubled back several times. Now Barrie is a lovely town, perhaps, but it was not our intention to experience the place at any length. An eerie sensation descended upon us. It seemed that some mysterious unseen force (or entity) was holding us back, keeping us from our destination, discomfiting us, preventing us from reaching the green forests of Algonquin, perhaps due to some past transgression, or so it was mused by the men, who as I have said repeatedly, are liable to embrace quirky superstitions. But in the event we reached the open highway, and the men became calm, and their fears and apprehensions abated.

And so we proceeded at a rapid rate of speed, and enjoyed the sunset, and discussed the forthcoming expedition with some excitement. And it became night, and we motored along the highway, enjoying the passing lakes and quaint villages and touristy restaurants and motels, and the magnificent outcroppings of granite which distinguish our northern regions. At length, we tuned the radio to the Algonquin Park Station, to obtain the latest reports on weather and any other intelligence that could be useful. At first it was innocuous and hardly relevant, and somewhat vague:

Wind 34 knots at the buoy yonder. 75 kilopascals. Barometric pressure moderate. Breeze nil. Waves moderate. 35 kilopascals. Air is hot and extremely dry. 85 kilopascals. Wind going hither at 25 knots. Moon located adjacent to the Earth. 63 kilopascals. Sun hot and very big. Kilopascals.

And then, with crystalline sharpness, words that penetrated our inmost beings and stabbed us. The sudden, unexpected, unutterable words hitherto locked in the deepest recesses of our consciousness. The painful, hated yet irrevocable words that struck our ears with almost physical impact, and sent us reeling and gasping and spitting out denial and defiance.

Total fire ban in effect. No fires may be lit. The forest is but a tinderbox. Absolutely no fires. No open flames of any kind are permitted. Cooking shall be done only by means of a propane stove. No campers shall be admitted who cannot produce a propane stove. Garbage cannot be burnt, but rather you will carry it with you and bring it back. Repeat, total fire ban in effect. No fires may be lit. No open flames of any kind are permitted.

The shock of it caused me to lose control of my vehicle, and I swerved uncontrollably. The men didn't care. They wanted to die. They begged me to drive the car into an outcropping of granite, for life was now futile. This was going too far, and after I had regained control of the car, and recovered my composure, I entreated the men not to despair, that life was still worthwhile, that they had families and wives and children and sweat-hearts and jobs and parents and siblings, and despite not being able to build fires, life retained that mystery and value which must not be

discounted.

In the end, the men chose life bereft of fire instead of grisly death, and they only sulked, and as I drove on, all was silent, but for the occasional sound of gentle weeping, or sudden, short outburst of cursing and swearing, or condemning of the gods for consigning us to such a fate. Perhaps a mysterious force was indeed bent on holding us back from Algonquin, and since we had contrived thus far to frustrate its will, this further plague was visited upon us.

At length we reached Pogg Lake campground, where we are encamped for the evening before we proceed to Opeongo to commence the main expedition. And so we linger in the dry stinking heat, lamenting the rich scents and happy crackling and soothing glow of burning logs and branches. And further circumstances compound our misery. Though we are engulfed by dark, and cannot make out the features of our campsite, we know two things for certain:

That we are encamped not twenty paces from the major highway. Inevitably, the drone of a diesel transport is discerned from afar, and by a maddening accretion the ugly noise accumulates, as this hulking monster with its gaping headlights bears down upon us, and then passes by insouciantly in a deafening roar, leaving a swirl of exhaust further to contaminate the heavy air. This is another reason for my restricting our movements. Indiscriminate wandering, when there is not a fire to mark the site as beacon, could result in one being mangled and pulverised by a many-wheeled truck, and then one of the boats would be a man short.

That in the immediate vicinity of our campsite, if not entirely adjacent thereto, is located what is commonly referred to as an outhouse. No significant amount of time passes that is not interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the dark, followed by the squeaky opening of a wooden door and the subsequent bang of its shutting. And then again, as the occupant vacates, the process repeating predictably in the reverse. In consequence of this procedure certain distinctive odours have invaded our site. Combined with the diesel fumes, it is overpowering.

I am distraught and discouraged at having led the men into such a debacle. In the days to come, my skills as a leader and orator will be severely tested. I only hope that the prevailing mood, and the moribund condition of morale, will not provide fertile ground for disaffection, dissent and disloyalty. One thing is for certain: it will be opportune for Simon to foment rebellion. I can see that even now he is turning over schemes and plots in his mind.

In this awful extremity, I harbour one last hope: that the morning sky will bring a new beginning, dispel the mood of hopelessness and gloom, and alleviate the men's distemper.

Thursday, August 3

A looming tower surmounting a hill on the opposite side of Big Crow Lake afforded what little deterrent I had against the building of a fire this evening. It was like a minatory beacon. The tower is plainly marked on the map, and I spied it with my Bushnells. Though I could not make out that it was occupied, I did not tell this to the men, who, fortunately, do not have clearance to use binoculars, owing to their inferior rank. I told them that the tower seemed occupied and that

it surveilled the entire lake, and that for certain any plume of smoke would be at once detected. But for this fortunate circumstance, and my subterfuge, I might have had to use force.

For one of the principal benefits of lighting a fire is that of repelling mosquitoes. In the present exigency, they became so severe that we had to retire to the tent prematurely. Quantities of repellent can of course be applied, but ultimately the creatures become so vexatious that we have little option but to withdraw. For even if one is liberally covered with repellent, yet still they hover in a cloud about one's face and neck, and of course the incessant buzz would over a period of time drive a man to insanity. In a previous memoir I recounted strong attacks by mosquitoes, and even then, with benefit of a smoky fire, resistance could only be continued for a period of time.

One tactic was for the group to walk rapidly in a wide circle, with even spacing, one man at each compass point, and to carry on conversation in this fashion. For if one moves quickly, the mosquitoes cannot keep up, or at least not as many of them. But we became exhausted, and our perspiration attenuated the effect of the repellent, so it proved ineffectual.

Despite our vexation by mosquitoes, however, on the whole the day has been a pleasant one. We arose at Pogg Lake and the sky was bright and clear. We could finally get our bearings and make out the features and characteristics of our site. It was a pathetic, unremarkable site, as I have described, and not well situated. The very act of collapsing the tent, packing our gear and vacating the place lifted our spirits, and the men looked forward to the impending commencement of the journey proper. But first our hunger must be sated, and for this purpose it was proposed that we make a short detour to the Lake of Two Rivers Canteen. Now the Lake of Two Rivers Campground is on a good weekend a vast expanse of close-packed tents and trailers, not in the least a venue we would camp in, especially since each site has access to electricity, a luxury to which the men must never be exposed.

The canteen, though, is itself an attraction, because it is bereft of any feature that would make it congenial, with its whitewash walls ornamented only by official notices and advisories and faded posters, creaky wooden floor, uncomfortable chairs and tables, and sparse menu produced by freckled teenagers. But we ventured forth and ordered a round of western sandwiches and coffee, which we took to the parking lot and consumed with gusto, standing around the car under a canopy of tall spruce.

Having thus fortified ourselves against hunger, we set out for Opeongo Access point, a major place of ingress to the interior and always busy. He had learnt from the mistake we made on our very first expedition, which also launched from Opeongo. In that year, we canoed the entire length of the lake, all the way to North Arm, an arduous and unremarkable paddle, and utterly regretted our lack of planning and foresight as many water taxis hurled by, canoes aloft on racks. Back then, we had little conception of distance, and anyway the weak and infirm had to be weeded out. I concluded the usual business at the office, where the attendant scrupulously explained, in response to Simon's rather persistent queries, that even in the event of rain we must not assume the fire ban lifted without official notice. After we dabbled perfunctorily at the general store and ate some ice cream bars, I had the boats brought up, called our taxi as

scheduled, and we embarked, dashing out in the direction of North Arm, our destination the Proulx Lake portage.

Proulx Lake to Big Crow was a rather long canoe through a boggy river, shallow and winding, tall reeds and bushes either side. The Forward Element, consisting as usual of Richard and Anthony, mistook their bearings and stopped at the interceding Little Crow Lake. They were under the impression that our reserved site was located there. By the time Simon and I came up, they were happily swimming. It was a good thing that in their lethargy (and preoccupation with swimming) they had not raised the tent. I admonished them, pointed out on the map our correct destination, and expressed my surprise and dismay that the Forward Element, normally efficient and reliable, should thus make ground improperly. They admitted their transgression, begged me to be lenient when it came time to hand out demerits, which they concurred must be forthcoming, and agreed to follow. This was the second time in as many years that Simon and I found ourselves in the awkward position of the lead boat. Last year, it will be recalled, Richard and Anthony made a deliberate diversion one afternoon, and then as well to partake of swimming. But Simon as the bowman acquitted himself well, and we did not collide with any obstacles, and before long we entered the larger expanse of Big Crow and made for a small promontory on the far side.

It was an oval-shaped promontory with a narrow wooded spit connecting its long side to the shoreline. There had actually been two sites there, one at each end, but the northern site had been closed, though it communicated with the southern one by means of a path. In fact it was the nicer of the two, because it occupied something of an open plateau surrounded by water, and it was no wonder that it might be closed for regeneration. Our own site, to the south, was not without its favourable aspects, wide and sparsely treed but with a good canopy, leading up from a small landing, with good sitting logs arranged horizontally around a large but unfulfilled fire pit. After the boats had been arranged and the gear hauled up, we did some perfunctory exploring, and contrived to follow a continuous path along the spit to a sandy beach area on the opposite side of the promontory, where we thought the swimming would be suitable. In the event, there was an area of lovely beach, but the water was excessively reedy. So we decided instead to repair back to the "secondary site" and swim there. This was most pleasant. The water was shallow for some distance out, and we could discern what seemed to be an extensive ledge, which eventually dropped off allowing one to dive down deep.

Dinner consisted of fried salmon steaks with a lemon tomato salad. This was prepared using what functioned as a kitchen counter, essentially a narrow board secured between two trees, no doubt contrived for the benefit of fishermen. We ate with gusto, discussing what might be contained in the small emergency canisters which each boat is now required to carry, while ensconced on the sitting logs around what may have been a crackling fire. It is obvious that conversation has deteriorated. Only a good fire elicits truly interesting discussions from the men, on politics and philosophy and geopolitical developments. The flame calls forth one's thoughts and feelings, as if as a kindling to feed the blaze. After dinner I proposed we discuss the appropriate penalty for the malfeasance of the Forward Element, which had egregiously gone off course and made an improper landing. In addition to any demerits, I determined, the grog ration was halved until further notice. Now grog is how the officer class refers to Alpenbitter, a cheap,

syrupe beverage imported from Bavaria, issued to the enlisted men in large quantity, to keep their spirits up. The men protested but the decision was made. The Forward Element must remain on its toes and this punishment will be a deterrent.

After dinner had been finished and the cleanup done, we repaired to the “secondary” camp site with our mugs of coffee. There, we appreciated an opulent sunset while ensconced on large boulders, and smoked and drank, for aside from the reduced grog, I had my flask of brandy and Simon his bourbon. Simon even tried one of my cigarillos, for he often aspires to emulate me. Eventually the mosquitoes became too numerous, though, and we repaired back to the principal encampment, where we commenced the ritual of packing all comestibles back into Anthony’s capacious food pack, finding a stout tree branch sufficiently high up and located at an appropriate distance from the main site, and suspending the heavy bag therefrom, then tying off the rope to the tree trunk. At this early stage, the pack is still very heavy, and it requires two of us to elevate it while Anthony pulls out the slack. In this way any ravenous bear will be discomfited, unless it prefers human flesh, in which case it will ignore the suspended food sack and simply tear into the tent and devour the expedition in its sleep. However, there is no safeguard against that, since Richard misplaced the bear repellent last year.

By the time this was done, the mosquitoes were unbearable. Some of us observed that usually they are not so numerous this time of year. There was nothing but to retire, and I activated the “Emergency Ingress Procedures”, in accordance with the field manual, whereby we enter the tent with particular speed and efficiency, also bringing in the sleeping gear, so as to prevent the mosquitoes from infiltrating. Some of the bugs still effected entry, of course, and after the tent was sealed from within, time was expended hunting them down with flashlights and killing them, after which we could sleep in peace. It was soon discovered, however, that Anthony forgot his dubage pouch outside, and it could attract a wandering bear if not secured. I let him go out and retrieve it quickly. For though I do not officially recognise the existence of dubage, and am loath to make exceptions or allow special arrangements to accommodate its use, I was in a magnanimous mood and did not wish to see morale plummet, which may happen if the men’s cannabis should be compromised. I declared, however, that in respect of any mosquitoes that should enter the tent as a result of Anthony’s egress and ingress, he was personally responsible for exterminating them. The only other event worthy of comment this evening was a persistent grumbling sound, which Simon declared was originating in his own stomach. Must be the cheap bourbon.

Mentioned in Dispatches:

Simon: for taking over the post of bowman in the lead boat *pro tem*, and acquitting himself well.

Demerits:

Richard and Anthony: for not paying attention at the initial briefing of the Forward Element, for misreading the map and losing their bearings, and for landing prematurely at the wrong site on the wrong lake and then dissipating themselves with swimming (500 points each).

Richard: for forgetting his soap and toothpaste (1000 points)

Anthony: for leaving the dubage outside the tent and having to retrieve it (200 points).

Saturday, August 4th

I am in so much pain that I can hardly write. For I seem to be afflicted with a mild heat stroke and my head is aching. No wonder, for my legs and the back of my neck are sunburnt, owing to my own carelessness. But I am inclined to assign culpability for my overall condition to the Forward Element.

We rose this morning at a reasonable hour, and I prepared the kippers and eggs fried in butter that have become an immutable custom on the first morning in back-country. To vary this menu would seem preposterous, the consequences for morale being quite severe, not to mention the gustatory aspect. Afterwards we broke camp, assembled the packs and launched the boats, moving southward past the looming fire tower, which will not be missed, and on to the Crow River.

Now we expected the winding Crow to provide a rather picturesque riverine journey, interrupted by only one significant portage and several minor ones, before reaching Crow bay and then the much larger Lake Lavielle, second only to Opeongo in size. It began as a narrow and meandering passage through a bog mat, not unlike our experience of the previous day. At first, it was most pleasant. However, after one had appreciated the beauty of the reed mats and various water flowers, the shallow and winding river at length became tedious, then simply annoying, and eventually torturous, for the river was surely much longer than it appeared on a small-scale map, owing to its wide meandering, and furthermore the sun was intense, and unlike a wide river or open lake, there was no significant breeze, and anyway the tall reeds and grasses almost had the effect of sheltering us from wind.

At the terminus of the one large portage, we stopped to enjoy a mid-day repast, and Anthony produced the cheese and *landjaeger* sausage, and we drank ravenously from our water skins, speculating how much longer the journey would take before reaching open water. Knowing that several much smaller portages were forthcoming, we agreed to a “Portage Circumvention Plan B”, whereby to the extent feasible, the boats would be hauled carefully over any dams or other minor obstacles, thereby saving time and effort (Recall that the original “Portage Circumvention Plan A” had been developed and proposed by Richard two years before in vastly different circumstances, and quietly abandoned). So Simon and I, participating fully in the Plan, managed to circumvent three minor portages in the following way. We would exit the canoe, our feet suitably clad as protection against the sharper rocks and stones, and then, Simon in the bow and I securing the stern, we would gently drag the boat along, hauling it over the larger boulders, branches and outcroppings. At one of the portages, which could not be circumvented, Simon and I spied a large moose cow nearby, grazing obliviously on the bog reeds, its calf adjacent. The bull was not visible, and we later learnt that Richard and Anthony had spied it briefly before it disappeared into the woods. For the bulls are more reticent and retiring than the cows.

As we continued to make our way along the twisting band of water, the bright afternoon sun became increasingly unbearable. Unlike Simon, I had not extracted my towel and so had no covering for my exposed legs. Furthermore, I had no protection for my head, as is my custom, and my neck and shoulders became sore and tender. Simon has a broad-brimmed cap, as does Richard, handy conveniences indicating presence of mind (Anthony's mop of long dishevelled hair is sufficient protection for him), and Simon repeatedly scooped up caps-full of water and soaked his entire head and upper torso. And not only was the sun oppressive, but the black flies descended, although not in significant number. These are in a sense worse than mosquitoes. The latter are simply noisy and vexatious, but the bite of the former is sharp and painful. The frogs also assailed us in number, and rarely could one extract one's paddle from the soupy water without numerous frogs clinging to it, weighing the paddle down and reducing the boat's efficiency. Dragon flies were also present, but these are one's friend, and though they swooped in close (they seem to be curious insects) did not otherwise perturb.

On finally reaching Crow Bay, however, Richard and Anthony could not be seen. This was not an issue, for I surmised that the Forward Element had simply continued on to Lavielle, and that as soon as we too emerged onto the open water, we would be able to spot them presently. However, the proved optimistic, for as we continued beyond Crow Lake, through a narrow channel and into a small vestibule lake, there was yet still no sign of them. Now I was becoming concerned. And then we emerged into Lavielle itself, and still they could not be spotted. In fact, we had no idea whither the Forward Element had proceeded or made ground. Since it is a sizeable lake, with many campsites scattered all over, it was impossible to conjecture where they might have gone, and we continued along the shoreline for some time, passing a number of vacant sites, increasingly embittered by the state of affairs.

"This is surely beyond the pale of acceptable conduct." said I. "The Forward Element is derelict if it does not make an attempt to retrieve the rearguard after planting the camp." To which Simon concurred, saying "Verily. In this exigent, I will not dispute your assertion. They should not proceed thus beyond our sight, that we are reduced to search the open lake, wandering in vain." Our annoyance was accentuated by the fact that we both of us were exhausted and sun-beaten, and I in particular felt the sting of reddening flesh.

Eventually we changed course and made for the distant islands in the middle region of the lake, and I used my Bushnells to scan the horizon repeatedly. At length, I could make out in the distance two figures on the rocky shore of an island, diving into the water and splashing about, two canoes overturned on the rocks nearby, and two packs adjacent.

We canoed at double time toward the merry-makers, our tempers boiling. "What say you, Simon, that the Forward Element behave thus oblivious to our predicament. Is it not impertinent that they disport in such a fashion while we search for them at length, baking in the sun. Surely swimming must wait until all members of the expedition have safely disembarked." And Simon again concurred: "It amounts to a surpassing callousness. And these are the men I have supported and encouraged, and taught to think and act as free men instead of living under the burden of your capricious authority. This is how they repay me!"

So we paddled feverishly and eventually reached the island. Anthony came over, shouting: "Rob, the swimming is perfect. Do thou come and swim, and Simon two, in the cool water. Richard and I have swum already, and it is most refreshing."

Whereupon, red with anger, I leapt from the canoe and pranced up the rocks toward him

"Anthony, do not address me in the familiar! Henceforth, you will call me 'Sir'. The familiarity of the Forward Element, its lax discipline, its sloppy attire and comportment, its renegade carelessness and its blatant disregard for authority is putting the entire expedition into grave jeopardy. Our lives may be in danger if matters are not put right. In the field, discipline must be foremost and the following of orders obligatory. Otherwise, the expedition cannot succeed, even if we are well- resourced. You dare to lounge in the absence of your leader? You have the gall to disport on the rocks and splash about in the cool waters, before the rearguard has safely arrived, before I have inspected personally your choice of site, examined its layout and confirmed the suitability of the venue. You have both of you been chosen as the Forward Element on account of your speed and efficiency, at both canoeing and the portage. You have severely abused the privilege, and I am compelled to assess whether the unit should be dissolved, or whether it should continue but its members reassigned. You have my word, evaluations will be made. You are the Forward Element, not the Disappearing Element. Nor the Swimming Element. Do you not appreciate how long Simon and I explored the lake and its inlets in utter frustration, roasting under the open sun, while we scanned the vacant horizon for any sign of you. For I have no cap, and could not scoop water from the river bed to mitigate the burning heat. Your duty is to find a suitable encampment, plant your standard, erect the tent with all speed, and then come out and retrieve the remaining boat, either by canoeing back in the direction whence you came, or positioning yourselves visibly on the lake, that we may recognise you. It is not for you to settle down without us, engaging in leisure, partaking of copious dubage, imbibing Alpenbitter, and otherwise dissipating yourselves, oblivious to the whereabouts and plight of the remaining boat! The dryness of the forest has precluded the building of a fire. But the enormities of the Forward Element have brought dismay and discomfiture. To our utter and collective shame, as matters stand, the expedition shall go down with infamy, a concatenation of disasters, unhappily recorded in the annals of camping."

To which Anthony retorted:

"Sir, this is outrageous! Perhaps the heat has overcome your good judgement, or you have contracted some deranging virus from the standing water of the bog you compelled us to paddle through. Whatever the cause of this outburst, I will not be held accountable for the predicament you describe. Do you not pay attention at the planning sessions? Are you not bound by your own pronouncements? Are you free to amend the Queen's Regulations at will, instituting new procedures without notice, without advising your subordinates or getting the opinions of experts? If you have no recollection of what has transpired, let me enlighten you. It was agreed this morning at the promontory, before we set out, that I would make for this site directly, which I pointed out on the map, and then, should this very site be occupied, another site was designated, and so on and so forth, and by this declension a hierarchy of desirable sites was postulated. Also, there was no indication that the usual practice would not be followed: the Forward Element

would canoe ahead, secure a suitable site according to said arrangements, prepare the fundamentals of an encampment, including erection of the tent, and wait for the main body to come up. This is our procedure. We have always done it thus. I know it is not your practice to micro-manage, instead allowing the Forward Element a free hand in scouting and reconnaissance, as long as the results are satisfactory. Is our site not well chosen. Is the place not well rocky, open and salubrious. Are we not oriented to appreciate the setting sun? We know you have a preference for islands, over the littoral and even promontories. You acquiesced in everything that was decided earlier, and the Forward Element conducted itself accordingly. So I will not be accountable for this mishap, and refuse to acknowledge that we have transgressed. Nor am I contrite for having dived from the rocks and enjoyed the refreshing waters. Small recompense to the Forward Element for a day spent in hardship and physical toil beneath a burning sun, carrying out a difficult and critical mission in loyal service to our leader and the Queen”

Simon was silent throughout all this, and I was unsure whether he would have an opinion or articulate a viewpoint, since he never shrank from seeing me frustrated. But he spoke out thus:

“I am always sympathetic to the predicament of the enlisted men. We toil endlessly under harsh conditions. Severe demerits are forthcoming for the smallest infraction. Yet there is a constant tension between the desire for freedom and the need for a measure of stability. We are isolated here and far from civilization. I am coming to appreciate the destructive potentiality of discord. As to the present issue before us, I will not pronounce or judge. Suffice it be said that we truly searched in vain for a period of time, that the sun was hot, and that our leader did not have cap or covering for his legs. Attribute this last to his own bravado. Myself, I was able to scoop caps-full of cool water from the surface of the lake, and veritably soak my head and upper torso, so as to abate the harshness of the burning sun, though it somewhat impeded our progress. I will not comment on what was planned or consented to. But our leader’s frustration is not entirely misplaced. It is best if the boats remain in view one of the other, so that the rear guard is not reduced to guessing and speculation. Let me hypothesise. If something untoward were to happen, to either the Forward Element or the rest, how should the others know? What countermeasures can be taken when the parties are separated incommunicado. The Forward Element is superb. There is no denying it. Would that my own meagre skill with the paddle even approximated their acumen. But we must be mindful and prudent. I do not endorse our leader’s outburst against you, nor do I repudiate his well-founded consternation. And furthermore: Anthony, while I commend your youthful exuberance, advantage can be had through discretion and diplomacy. As we approached ever closer, I said to myself, ‘Anthony, do not thou appear to be having fun. Do not approach merrily and commend our leader to the cool waters. Say nothing. Or if you must speak, affect a concern and a dismay for what has transpired.’ But no, you approach like some ecstatic Bacchanal, all animated and full of insouciant reverie, causing our leader to fly into the fervent rage wherein we now contend with!”

At this point Richard, previously drying himself off with a towel, seemingly oblivious to the controversy, interjected.

“I have weighed all the arguments for and against. I am loath to contradict our leader openly, for

I am sufficiently liable to demerits by my own carelessness, without incurring more through insubordination. All things considered, I pronounce the following verdict: I find for dubage and fillet. Is it not true that Anthony has not four but six fillets of sirloin wrapped in plastic within the food-sack? Are there not mushrooms and onions? Is it not the case that sufficient cannabis has been laid in to satisfy those partaking? Do we not pack a flagon of port, as well as whiskey, brandy and bourbon? Have we not chocolate in quantity? I could involve myself in these debates, or act as a kind of moderator, but having canoed all day and then swum, I am more hungry than vociferous, more thirsty than argumentative, more inclined to peaceful dissipation while the light persists (for we know that a fire is not within our discretion, and that come sundown we shall be impelled by swarms of insects) than to stand here in congress, deliberating on what transpired and how, who is culpable for what. Let us set to: the tent is to be erected, the kitchen prepared. And what about some tea? Robert, a cup of tea, sweetened with cubes of sugar, should soothe your anger, and you can have a pipe too. And then you can set about cooking, which we know relaxes you. As indicated, there cannot be a fire, but we have the dual propane stove, which this year has not been misplaced (the investigation into which, I understand, is continuing apace), and butter and olive oil, so as to fry the beef to perfection, delicately seasoned, and to saute the mushrooms and onions. My mouth is watering at the very prospect. So let it be decided thus: that mistakes have been made, that the forward element will communicate its plans, intentions and dispositions more clearly; that subsequently, agreement will be reached on routes and methods, and that safety shall govern all our deeds and actions. These fundamentals agreed, let us plant our stakes and dine.”

And so it was settled. Simon and I immediately dived headlong into the refreshing lake. The rock sloped downward gently into the water, and the topography was indeed choice for swimming, as Richard and Anthony had already discovered. We also took the opportunity to perform our ablutions, to be rid of the dirt and perspiration accumulated by a long and tedious day, Richard having proffered the bar of special camping soap, which is becoming progressively diminutive, being left over from last year. It may have to be rationed. Richard also prepared a pot of tea, which was soothing, but I did not have the luxury to enjoy it, since it was late afternoon when we landed, and the altercation had taken some time. So I erected the kitchen in the vicinity of the fire-pit, Anthony helping to position rocks formerly emplaced around the pit, to contain the fire, so as to protect the propane burner against excessive wind. I fried the steak, as Richard suggested, in the collapsible pan with butter and olive oil, having seasoned them, and the mushrooms and onions, after being sliced up by Simon, on the other burner in the sauce pot, also with butter and olive oil. It was a more arduous and much less pleasant process than having the luxury of an open bed of coals and a proper barbeque. The burner is intense and the heat is quite localised on the frying pan, and therefore uneven. This might also be due to the thinness of the base of the pan. At all events, it is task to keep moving the pan about the flame, and the fillets about the pan, so as to produce an even heat and prevent charring of the beef.

But thus did I slave, producing steaks and the onion-mushroom condiment for each enlisted man in turn as the light faded entirely and it became dark, the ad hoc kitchen illuminated entirely by torch light. And as I cooked, I became progressively tired and febrile and debilitated, on account of the sunburn I had sustained, a condition exacerbated by the hot stove. So after I had prepared meals for all the men, I actually declined to take a fillet for myself, being in a mood to cook no

further, and having lost my appetite because of my physical condition. No matter, said Anthony, for he would preserve the remaining two fillets in zip-locks, and I could have them for breakfast.

A kind of temporary panacea was to be found in Richard's port. Now I introduced Richard to the luxury of port many years ago, and he soon became devoted to it. In previous years, we had contemplated bringing port, but the plan did not eventuate. Whiskey and dubage were considered more efficient. For they last longer. But this year, Richard was adamant, and purveyed a bottle of Sandeman "decanted" into a plastic flask. It was a stroke of genius, and the decanting had actually rounded the port nicely. So we imbibed liberally, and my dinner this evening consisted of good port, pipe tobacco and chocolate, by no means a contemptuous repast. And, as a gesture of magnanimity, even in my extremity, I restored the full ration of Alpenbitter.

The mosquitoes were vexatious but not as bad as the previous night. For some reason I was able to stand at the edge of the water while a considerable swarm seemed to hover just off-shore, largely oblivious to the exposed and freshly bathed human before them. All the same, we retired early. I for one could not linger and badly needed rest, having taken aspirin for my heat-induced headache. The only other event of significance was that my electric torch suddenly failed. No matter, though, for the but of a Mag Light always carries a spare bulb.

Mentioned in Dispatches:

Simon: for uncharacteristically supporting his leader during a time of crisis, thereby redeeming himself to his leader and the Queen.

Richard: for purveying a flagon of port, despite years of official reservation, and producing it during his leader's extremity, as a palliative.

Demerits:

Richard and Anthony: for placing the entire expedition into grave jeopardy by precipitously canoeing beyond the sight of the main body, and causing same (including the leader) to wander dangerously on the wide lake and incur inordinate effects of the sun, all the while swimming obliviously (5,000 points).

Sunday, August 5th

I was last to emerge from the tent into a beautiful, sunny morning. My slumber had been total and the effect salubrious, for the pain of my sun burns had largely subsided. Immediately on joining the men around the makeshift kitchen, where a pot of coffee was already percolating, I recounted a strange dream which I'd had during the night, surely brought on by my delirium.

We four of us are standing around a camp fire. I berate you for violating the prohibition. A small man, dressed in black, suddenly emerges from the woods, saying we will never have jobs again. A thunderstorm. We are now running across a field, toward an opulent mansion, two dogs accompanying us. We enter the mansion, and step into a large, well appointed drawing room.

The men were amused, and being liable to superstition, as I have said on numerous occasions, all sorts of weird exegesis was forthcoming:

“You are inwardly rebellious against authority, but loath to face the consequences of dissent. You would give it all up for the life of a country squire.” said Anthony.

“No.” averred Richard. “You would turn us all in at a pinch if we got afoul of the law. The little black man is a magistrate. You would take your 30 pieces of silver and retire in luxury with your dogs, having abandoned us. The storm signifies the wrath of God upon you.”

“Nonsense”, said Simon. “Robert is the little black man, deprived of stature by his cruelty, hiding in the shadows until he can pounce. He relishes the prospect of destroying us, because he despises our kind. His depredations complete, he flies to the comfort of his luxurious mansion, gotten by exploiting the working class, sending his man-eating hounds to devour trespassers.”

I found this exegesis at once laughable and perplexing. But without faulting such noble simplicity, I reminded the men that in my dream, they had in fact had been running with me to the mansion, and had accompanied me into the drawing room. Furthermore, the dogs seemed friendly enough. The dream was a physical manifestation of my delirium brought on by sun-stroke, and nothing more. While Anthony might have the most plausible interpretation based on the content of the dream as I recalled it, the others indulging in malicious slander, we should not occupy our time in such meaningless pursuits and instead commence the preparation of breakfast.

At first, the men lobbied for bacon and eggs. But I vetoed this. It would require too much time. We had not even cleaned the dishes properly from dinner, since it had gotten dark (bears are not as much of a concern on an island, though I’m not sure if the assumption is prudent), and cleaning the dishes twice would significantly delay our departure. So we took porridge. At all events it is better to space the more luxurious foodstuffs, since the previous morning we had indulged in the customary kippers and eggs.

And so gradually the disbursed paraphernalia of camping consolidated into four sloppy mounds, which in time coalesced into four stout back-packs. Simon’s pack is always the most aesthetically pleasing. It is also the smallest and the lightest. But no matter, for the perfect shape of it, solid and compact and unsullied by dangling accessories and other bits, unlike the packs of the forward element, presents a sight both pleasing and soothing. Anthony has the largest and best pack, and from the first it has been the “food sack”. And because of our lavish victualling, it is by far the heaviest, at least for the first few days. But he does his duty with sullen equanimity. Richard’s pack is the worst, because it has already deteriorated somewhat, a strap having broken, and required various bits of mending and improvisation. He laments having opted for a less expensive pack, and concedes that where equipment is concerned, quality is predicated on outlay.

The goal today was to canoe down Lavielle to Dixon, and there to find an optimal sight for two nights. Although both lakes are larger than the average in Algonquin Park, it was not so arduous

a day as we had anticipated. Indeed, there was only a 90m portage between the lakes, which we simply dismissed. The Forward Element would, as per the usual practice, and by very definition, speed out ahead to scout, remaining, however, within sight of the main body, especially since we are not on a mere bog but in open lake, and also because the wind was picking up as we prepared to leave.

Again, the Forward Element achieved its objective. After some probing and lunging, it made ground at a nice little island facing an old growth sanctuary on the opposite mainland. The campsite proper was elevated on something of a plateau, yet sufficiently sheltered, so it seemed, from the wind, almost in a saddle. The north end of the island, just above the site, was dominated by a large granite outcropping which sloped down to the water, from whence one can easily dive, and the southern end by woods and other formations. Just before the forest was another wooden platform suspended at about chest height between two trees, the optimal kitchen counter. As indicated, we suspect these contrivances are assembled mainly for the commodity of fishermen.

After the perfunctory “landing swim” we ravenously set to lunch, partaking of salami, cheddar cheese, peanut butter and honey sandwiches, chocolate, halva and *landjaeger*. The feast was washed down with a pot of hot tea, taken as we sprawled out on our sleeping mats on the earthen ground under the shade (I cannot expose myself to direct sunlight today) around the periphery of the clearing. Richard and Anthony have light foam mats, Simon and I self-inflating ones, although I have frequently berated Simon for storing his mat un-inflated through the year, which compromises the integrity of the mat, causing him sometimes to inflate it manually, which is anathema to the purist. Reading material was procured, as were various other substances, being whiskey or brandy or grog.

Now in normal times, the first activity after establishing camp and taking lunch is the firewood detail, which is appointed by me and then dispatched to this or that area to collect ground wood of various sizes and thicknesses. Sometimes I accompany the detail myself, to stiffen the men’s resolve. The collapsible saw would be assembled and deployed to carve larger pieces into smaller ones, and the wood arranged beside the pit according to the Doctrine of Progressive Combustibility. Indeed the culture of the campfire is a visceral pleasure: the process of collecting wood, the excitement and exhilaration of discovering large, dry pieces, the logistics of cutting and processing, and arranging, lighting, stoking and maintaining the fire, not to mention supplemental details should supplies diminish. But those are days past. And of course the sensory appeal: the soothing blaze, the rich and pungent smells, the rhythmical searing and crackling.

This time, Mother Nature has intervened to deprive us of these simple and puerile pleasures. Sometimes, in the absence of such healthy activity, I fear the men in their idleness may become restive and even mischievous. But in the event there is plenty to occupy, either reading, walks in the woods (which is what I am fond of), swimming, conversing or planning. Indeed, this afternoon, the men poured over the map to plan out a prospective route for next year’s expedition, a commendable display of zeal. All sorts of elaborate schemes were tabled, including a proposal from Anthony concerning the Petawawa, a dangerous white-water course cutting the park’s northern half. I did not interfere beyond saying that all proposals would be studied.

At length, for it was a sunny, hot day, we went off to swim again, and Anthony, on swimming around the western edge, found a new diving place, along with a path leading from the spot up to the camp ground. He also discovered something of a beach further along, which, however, was less accessible, and that the island opened up somewhat on its southern flank. And so the afternoon was spent by turns reading, conversing, swimming and exploring. The quirky sub-culture of the Forward Element was manifested when Richard and Anthony began reciting humorous advertising jingles they knew as children. By late afternoon, once the cooking area was suitably in the shade, I proposed to concoct our evening repast. My plan was for Kraft Dinner done in the usual way: copious butter replacing milk, liberally coated with Parmesan cheese, and scattered with slices of Italian pepperoni. Anthony generously assisted me in hauling up a canoe, and positioning it astride the propane burner (which was emplaced near the cold fire pit) so as to block the worst effect of the afternoon breeze. The two steaks left over from the previous night (I had declined having them for breakfast) were now examined and deemed to have a sweet smell. There was nothing but to dispose of them. But since we had no fire, and could not leave them in the open, and since placing them in the yellow regulation garbage bag would cause a suppurating stench, it was decided the best course was to consign them into the lake to be eaten by fish and turtles.

The obligatory pot of coffee, as well as tobacco and whiskey, was enjoyed on the granite outcropping as we faced the lake and appreciated the soft orange glow of the setting sun. This is the most serene and relaxing time of day. The silence in particular is penetrating. Richard spent some time spying across the lake with my Bushnells, having obtained written permission to use them for a short time. It was agreed that the Queen's Regulations should be amended so that the Forward Element can obtain a pair, which would improve their scouting and reconnaissance, as well as a Union Jack to plant at any site they discover and occupy, as a beacon to the rear guard.

But before the sun disappeared over the horizon, it was necessary to complete the day's activities, especially since the cloud cover was thickening and rain was apprehended (not cheerfully though, for as I reminded the men, even if it down-poured for an hour, we could not assume the fire ban was lifted without official notification). Richard and Anthony pitched the tent at last, in the open next to the granite outcropping. Simon and I sought out a suitable tree branch to suspend the pack - this should still be done, despite our insular situation and the somewhat diminished risk of bear attack.

Lacking a camp fire to sustain us into the evening, and the mosquitoes in consequence making their presence more eagerly felt, we retired just after dark, concluding a day which was less arduous and more relaxing than we anticipated. I believe the final comment was to this effect: that although we lacked a fire, for two nights running we had not been molested by chipmunks.

Mentioned in Dispatches:

Anthony: for contriving to position a canoe to shelter the camping stove, thus avoiding excessive use of fuel.

Anthony: for conducting a thorough swimming reconnaissance of the island, confirming its insularity, and discovering an abundance of swimming places.

Richard: for making written application to use the Bushnells, instead of taking them outright.

Demerits:

Simon: for continuing to store his sleeping mat rolled-up and un-inflated through the year, thus compromising the integrity of the mat, and causing it to inflate more slowly and, once inflated, to be wrinkled and unsightly (1,000 points).

Monday, August 5th

It was slightly overcast this morning, a welcome relief from the intensity of the August sun. The fly was omitted again last night, for the warmth of the air caused us to despise the slight risk of precipitation, which in any event would not have been unwelcome. However, the fly was arranged nearby in such a fashion as to facilitate its quick deployment, using the protocol for rapid emergency egress. Since Anthony and Richard had carefully located the tent in a flat area with firm, rocky ground, the sleep was sound and comfortable, without having to accommodate one's back to the ambiguities of terrain, as is often routine.

Anthony and Simon were the first to rise, and the coffee was percolating by the time I joined them. Richard, of course, was last to emerge. As senior man of the Forward Element, he needs to rest and recuperate. Using the propane burner, I prepared bacon and eggs, which the men ate with gusto. The mood was giddy, for this day was bereft of travel, the "day of rest", as the men like to call it, and at our island refuge we would relax and recover our strength for the whole day. After breakfast, Simon inflated the sink, and I heated the water almost to scalding. There was more time now to administer a thorough cleaning to the nested cooking set, especially since Simon, the designated washer, is often derelict in his duties, parcel I think to his strategy of subversion. I also cleaned very carefully my multiplex implement (the men have nothing like it), being careful not to puncture the inflatable sink in the process, or myself. Concerning this last I once had a bad experience. For at Anthony's stag party in my bar, after several Martinis and Manhattans, I proceeded to demonstrate the implement to the assembled company, proud of my new acquisition, and promptly incised my left index finger severely, my guests not realising the fact until Richard yelled "Behold, our host is covered in blood."

After breakfast, we decided that a new strategic program was necessary. First, we devised a Mission Statement as follows: "We shall canoe whithersoever our Leader shall direct, in whatever conditions prevail, overcoming every hardship, preparing for every contingency, never flagging nor failing, to the ends of the earth if required, without food or water if necessary, enduring every peril of nature, in the constant service of the Queen." This the men chanted five times in unison, while I kept cadence. It was also agreed that we needed to do more with less, that is, more work for less food, except for Alpenbitter, which the men consider, and I concede reluctantly, as a kind of entitlement. Anthony, however, tends to resist change, and we suggested that he might be happier in some other organisation. I added the following addendum: "Men, I

declare that further miniaturisation will be essential to the new dispensation.” This included the elimination of Anthony’s humongous sleeping bag.

But the cloudy sky persisted all morning, and it was definitely a relief. The men poured over the maps some more after breakfast, as is their wont, Anthony again advancing his ideas for an expedition to penetrate the basin of the Petawawa River. Then we swam, this time bathing with soap, to remove several days of grime. Afterwards, we decided to carry out a scheme to investigate a sanctuary of old growth, clearly indicated on the map, situated just across the channel. I therefore issued orders, and we deployed in light or super-light formation. Equipment would consist of my utility belt (a prerogative of command), with repellent, iodine, compass, nine granola bars, my Bushnells and (freshly cleaned) multiplex implement, every man carrying besides a full water skin.

And so we launched and made our way to the opposite shore, and as we approached the great stand became even more awesome than we had been able to appreciate at a distance. We landed on a sandy beach, dwarfed by the fantastic, towering firs, whose very denseness and proximity smothered all sound, save for the whistling breeze and the subtle splashing of the breakers.

We advanced a short distance inland, like scurrying ants. And then we stood, and looked around at the vast girths of the trees, bewildered and dumbfounded by the grandeur of it all. “Think, Robert”, said Richard, “Caesar walked the earth, nay, was perambulating Gaul with his legions, when these mighty firs were but saplings. It is too marvellous to contemplate.” And he sat down against one of the solid walls of wood, silent and perplexed.

“Verily”, I replied, gazing upward, astonished. “It makes one feel so little, so unimportant, standing here beneath the lumbering giants of the forest. My powers, my authority are as nothing here. I am nothing.”

It was psychologically crushing. The swaying of the towering stands created a vast and echoing roar of creaking and moaning timber. This, combined with the greyness of the sky, and the low whistling of the wind, created an eerie and a haunting feeling, as if we had trespassed into the territory of the Ents of lore, disturbing the ancient creatures. I distributed some granola bars, silently, which the men ate quickly, with apprehension, careful not to litter on the sacred ground.

“We have lingered long enough.” said Simon. “Now let us withdraw from this place. Scarce a Christian has been here in many a long year, I wager, and I fear we are invading the pristine sanctity of the last of the mighty ancient groves of Algonquin. We should not have come.”

Anthony turned toward our island home, now so remote across the choppy inlet. The blue dome of the tent was visible, shivering in the breeze, and the towels and t-shirts, dangling from branches, and the shiny white hulls of the overturned canoes. It looked so inviting. “I want to go back, Sir. The mighty firs are averse to men, so many of their brethren felled for greed and profit. I want to go back to the island, and have some tea.” And so we made for the boats and departed quickly and nervously, like trespassers discovered, paddling feverishly for the island, averting

our eyes from the giant, sullen, daunting forest, and finally realising that boundaries are set by nature, even for our brave and cavalier adventurism.

After we had safely landed, it began to rain slightly. After hastily deploying the tent fly, Richard and Anthony decided to have a swim in the lake during the storm. This was typical of the slightly puerile rambunctiousness of the Forward Element. I did not interfere, aside from warning against the danger of lightening. Indeed, our site was located on a rocky island prominence in the middle of a lake, and the prospect of a direct strike upon us was very real. Simon and I repaired to the tent to read in comparative safety, but after a few minutes, the downfall abated, scarcely with any effect. But this was, in truth, a blessing. For I have indicated that, even if it rained continuously for a period of time, we could not presume the fire ban lifted, and could not, even then, contemplate building a fire. But it would have caused dissension and turmoil, some of the men, despite the clear injunction, advocating for a fire, others equivocating, others secretly plotting and conniving, myself endeavouring to uphold the law. In the event, since the storm was so despicable, the issue did not even arise, so that concord was preserved.

Indeed, there was clear sky on the horizon, and soon the sun shone upon us again. We eventually retreated with our air mattresses back into the shade on the periphery of the open area, just as we had done the day before, and there I myself fell into a comfortable sleep, awaking some time later to the men talking jovially. Anthony had begun carving a totem with his pocket knife. It was a grotesque, anthropomorphic figurine, and I inquired, half awake, what god he was representing. Anthony replied that it could only be Natatio, the god of swimming.

I admonished Anthony. "Do thou not recall, that two years hitherto, thou contrived to craft a totem unto the sky god, but in thine ignorance, rendered a phallic symbol, fitting to the minor deity Priapus, the god of fertility, and that in his wrath, the god of the sky caused thy hand to quiver and slip, and that thou suffered a most grievous injury, almost bringing ruin upon us? Wherefore then dost thou do this? For now we lack Andreas, whose medical acumen delivered thee from a long and agonising death, when thou had so gravely inflicted thyself."

"Do not perplex me while I work," he replied. "Not the wrath of any god, Sir, but thy hectoring shall cause my hand to slip. Previously, I concede, I transgressed and incurred the wrath of the mighty sky god, in my ignorance presenting a perverse phallic totem, where a symbol of lightning would have propitiated him. But now I am more learned. I worship Natatio, the god of swimming, and afford him special honour in my rites. And here I carve him well, with proper reverence and fitting iconography. So go hence. Prepare some repast, that I may complete the work and bring happy tidings to the expedition."

And so Anthony continued intently chiselling his totem, and I withdrew. His preoccupation with such idolatry was consequential of the idleness in which now we languished, owing in part to the lack of opportunities to set out on explorations, for the daunting forest had repelled us, and other opportunities did not avail. For though it was a welcome day of leisure, rest can become lethargy, and lethargy indolence, and indolence sloth, the men thus enervated by periods of idleness. A good, long portage, as I plan for tomorrow, will whip them back into shape and sharpen their

wits, restoring vigour to the expedition. At length I produced foodstuffs for the mid-day repast, arranging a buffet on the makeshift wooden counter: cheese and chocolate, honey and pita bread, salami and biscuits. And the propane burner was activated and the water set to boil for tea.

I was making these preparations when suddenly Anthony shrieked “By the gods, I have incised my finger yet again!”

And then Richard replied in horror, “Yet again! And you have incised the same finger, almost in the same place. It seems you are cursed, Anthony!”

And Simon, “The carving of totems should be interdicted. No good can come of it. If our leader were solicitous of our welfare, he would issue an injunction against these practices. Anthony, you must abstain henceforth from all carving of totems!”

But Anthony, doubled over, grasping his finger to stop the flow of blood, which made a pool on the earthy ground, moaned aloud in pain: “It is the blade. The blade! It does not have a lock. It swivelled on the haft, catching the tip of my extended digit as the implement articulated. Sir, come hither. Bring your First Aid Kit. I am in need of medical attention, and Andreas is not among us! Oh Natatio, why hast thou forsaken me!”

“He has not forsaken you, Anthony.” Replied Richard. “He has cursed you. I said so. And if you are cursed, the Forward Element is cursed. And if the Forward Element be cursed, the expedition shall come to naught, you may depend on it. Anthony, you are learned in the practices of ritual and sacrifice. How may we appease Natatio? I do not know why he visited the curse upon you. Perhaps you are not ardent enough in your desire to swim, or enthusiastic enough about swimming. But he must be propitiated, that we may be delivered from this evil omen.”

“Desist from such base and idle conversation.” I said, coming up with the First Aid kit. “The injury was an accident, owing to the inferior blade, not some vengeful visitation from one of your gruesome deities. Anthony, what you need is a multiplex implement like my own, for every one of its many implements locks securely. You must exercise better foresight, especially if whittling figurines be thy pastime.”

“But Robert,” said Simon, “the safeguards designed into your multiplex implement do not avail necessarily. Did you not, while demonstrating the blades at Anthony’s stag in your bar, after imbibing of several Manhattans, similarly lose control and deeply incise your index finger? The blood was everywhere. In your stupor, you did not seem to mind. Granted, you had access to proper medical facilities, and next day went for stitching. Anthony has not been so fortunate, and he is permanently scarred for life.”

“Truly, Simon,” I concurred, “but I was demonstrating the straight and serrated blades, and the other tools contained in the implement. It was in the process of extension and retraction of these blades and tools that my hand slipped. Simply put, I had extended too many implements and blades simultaneously, and being that my senses were dulled by your Manhattans, my hand slipped. Whereas, if I had been whittling, as Anthony is wont to do, only one blade would have

been extended, and this one locked securely, to prevent any pivot on the haft in the act of whittling.”

At which point Anthony moaned “By the gods, men, what does it matter! Sir, just bandage the wound, and stop dwelling on your minor setback at my stag. Simon, why do you distract the man with past history? When I sustained my first injury, two years hitherto, while carving the erroneous totem, I recall that you were oblivious to my plight then as well. Robert and Richard were off exploring the creek bed. I sliced my finger, and beseeched you to come to my aid, and you ignored me, intent on your magazine. At last, I veritably cried out in desperation, and when you heard my shrieks, and noticed that the creek was turning red from the effusion of blood, finally you became cognizant of my peril!”

“Relax, Anthony” I interjected, “Be calm, for you need your strength. For now, let us try to stop the flow of blood, and then bandage the wound. Andreas is not among us, so I will have to clean the wound properly, instead of packing it with dirt and impurities, allowing it to suppurate. It is the best I can do. Hopefully, you will survive, and the Forward Element will continue. I must ask Andreas to provide a brief medical treatise that we can bring with us.” So I cleaned the wound, administered antiseptic alcohol and ointment, and wrapped the finger in bandages. Meanwhile, Simon gave Anthony a shot of Brandy, to help alleviate the pain. “There now.” I continued. “Rest a while, Anthony. I have almost completed the mid-day repast, and soon you shall eat and recover your strength.”

But matters were now beyond my control. Richard’s claim that Anthony had fallen under some kind of curse for lack of enthusiasm for swimming now seized the men and animated them, and as soon as Anthony was able to walk, they commenced the rites of propitiation. I could not stop it. Indeed, they began to engage in the most grovelling manifestations of paganism. They bedecked the little statua with pine bows, and setting him upon a wooden stump, made a shrine with an altar, and brought offerings of tea, and poured libations of Alpenbitter and whiskey. They prostrated themselves before the altar, chanted verses of praise and beseeched the deity to forgive their transgressions. And they laid a curse upon the mighty fir trees yonder, imploring Natatio to make them wither and tumble. And they bound each other with terrible oaths, and performed various rites, and recited paeans, and they burned an offering of dried cannabis, mixed with tobacco, and in my generosity I gave them some Cavendish to offer separately. And they carried the statue aloft, Anthony having donned his towel as holy raiment and holding aloft his paddle as holy sceptre assuming the role of High Priest of Natatio, to lead the procession as it marched in circles around the campsite.

It has always been my policy to allow the men to worship their own gods. This brings a measure of contentment, and I secure the loyalty and devotion of the men by my tolerance and magnanimity. But I cannot allow superstitions to disrupt routine and interfere with the day-to-day operations of the camp, or permit devotion to a grotesque pagan deity to substitute loyalty to our Queen. But yet I realised that direct interference with the rites and the procession could place me in danger.

So, collecting my wits, I jumped in front of the procession, blocking its progress, and declared

“Men, no rite of Natatio is complete without a feast. So let us rest the figurine on its makeshift altar, and celebrate the god’s patronage with a meal. Only then shall he be fully propitiated. For in ancient times, to sacrifice a she-goat or a piglet or a steer was to burn the innards and entrails but eat the flesh, in holy barbeque. Similarly, come enjoy the sacred repast I have laid upon the side-board, in honour of your deity.”

The men by now were hungry from their exertions, and agreeing, laid the statue down on the god-stump, carefully and in reverence, and approached the buffet of foodstuffs. But Anthony insisted on sacrificing more cannabis before the meal commenced. Then we set to, with gusto, and soon the men were content to let the god sit there, suspending their adorations.

As the day progressed, the clouds returned, the winds increased and the lake became choppy. We spied a canoe in the distance. We were concerned for the safety of the occupants, who appeared to struggle against the wind. I deployed my Bushnells, but the boat was so distant, and the lake so rough, that even so I could not make out for certain whether they were in danger. In the exigency, I invited the men to appreciate the situation with my Bushnells too, so that we may discuss the matter with complete information. Anthony proposed to swim across the lake to reach the boat, for he was favoured of Natatio, and could never drown. I thanked him politely but insisted that as High Priest, the god would be displeased if Anthony swam in his name to deliver mere infidels. I used my torch to send out a signal, using Morse code, but there was no response, and the boat was likely oblivious. We are also proficient in the making of smoke signals, but alas the wind was too high to permit it, and at any rate we could not build a fire. I began laying plans for a rescue mission. The Forward Element would deploy in light formation, canoe at high speed through the wind and waves, and bring assistance to the imperilled canoeists yonder, in the Queen’s name. And so, Richard and Anthony began to ready themselves accordingly.

But Simon, who had been persistently spying with my Bushnells, suddenly erupted: “They are deploying fishing rods! Do you propose, Oh Leader, to dispatch our Forward Element across this turbulent lake, to advise perfect strangers on the use of flies and lures?” Simon handed the Bushnells back to me, contemptuously, adding “I am not even sure if Anthony’s fishing license is current.” And with that Parthian shot he went away, and the rest of the men shrugged and dispersed.

And so afternoon became evening, and I made dinner of curried rice, a treat which the men always anticipate. Afterwards, owing to the wind, the mosquitoes, as the night before, were minimal. So we could sit out on the granite prominence, despite the lack of a fire, and watch the sunset, the sky having cleared again, drinking tea and smoking, the chocolate also produced. Anthony noticed parts of the sky in the far distance lighting up, and at first thought it could be the Aurora Borealis. Actually, it was sheet lightning, for on the horizon were still clouds. It must be a storm far away.

We resumed the discussion about miniaturisation, this being essential to the new dispensation. Anthony’s sleeping bag is grotesquely large, and Richard’s, too, is somewhat oversized. Simon has always had a miniaturised sleeping bag, both effective and admired for its aesthetic advantages when rolled up into a tidy coil. This year I myself purchased a miniaturised version,

which, however, is not even as compact as Simon's. In fact, the bag Richard is using is my old one, since repudiated by me. Furthermore, the commissariat is altogether too lavish. Did we need an entire dispenser of honey, a whole container of peanut butter, copious amounts of dried pasta? Henceforth, let there be greater reliance on freeze dried foodstuffs, elimination of deemed superfluities, and appropriate reduction in quantity. This process of economy and miniaturisation would save weight and volume, and is part of our inexorable progress towards the perfection of the art of camping. I also advised, and Simon concurred, that Richard and Anthony should relinquish their bulky foam sleeping mats, and obtain the much more compact self-inflating versions, with the proviso that they not, unlike Simon, store the mats un-inflated.

But at length we became tired from a long and adventuresome day, and retired to the tent, to make use of our mats and sleeping bags, be they compact or excessive. But owing to the wind and the possibility of inclement weather, the tent fly remained deployed, just in case.

Mentioned in Dispatches:

Simon: for determining with my Bushnells that the canoeists yonder on the turbulent lake were in fact out fishing, and not imperilled, thus saving us much time and toil in mounting a rescue mission.

Demerits:

Anthony: for fumbling with an inferior blade, one that does not lock, and sustaining a further injury when the implement suddenly articulated, incising the same digit previously inflicted (500 points).

Richard: for insisting that Anthony was under a curse, causing the men to fly into a frenzy of gruesome paganism (350 points).

Tuesday, August 6th

“It is opportune to recall, men, the mission statement you recently formulated. Chanting in unison, while I kept cadence, you vowed to overcome every hardship, prepare for every contingency, never flag nor fail, to go to the ends of the earth if required, to endure every peril of nature. Do you think we could long explore the vast wilderness and never encounter this kind of obstacle? Do you think Mother Nature merely accommodating, laying out easy thoroughfares and by-ways for our puny boats to float along without discomfiture? For the natural world is chaos, disorganised, unpredictable. We are as nothing in the grand scheme of the universe. So take heart. We will conquer this obstacle, as we have conquered other obstacles on our storied journeys. Rise up, men, seize your paraphernalia, for the path awaits! Leave the canoes behind, as is our practice, and we shall come back to retrieve them. Onwards, and at the end of this ordeal, we shall enjoy whiskey and dubage and Alpenbitter and chocolate, if we have energy remaining.”

Meagre words of encouragement when even I was nervous and apprehensive. But it was

inevitable, and there was no turning back now. In the event, the men would acquit themselves well. We rose rather early to a sunny, rather windy morning, actually eager to vacate our island retreat and move on after two nights. But conversation was muted as we prepared the coffee and boiled the water for oatmeal. For the men knew that today they would be tested. Even after breakfast, as the scattered paraphernalia was located, organised and packed away, I could tell the thoughts of the men were occupied with the daunting task before them, which hung ominously over the expedition.

We managed to launch by 8:30, proceeding south-west a short distance to an inlet, and heading directly for a sandy beach landing, marked by one of those minatory signs in yellow depicting a camper walking sideways with a small canoe for a head, which read laconically “Dickson to Bonfield, 5, 305 m.” We unloaded the boats, and carried them further in to the top of the landing, and rested them to the side. Then we moved up our heavy back packs, putting them together in one place. It was a wide and spacious landing. For it had to be. And it did not have to be said that we could sit for a while, preparing for the ordeal and gathering strength. My words of encouragement were well-received.

“Robert is right.” said Richard, “We should not be dismayed. He has taught us to laugh in the face of adversity. At least we have had two full days of rest, to recover our strength and prepare ourselves psychologically and emotionally for what lies ahead.”

“I’m not looking forward to it.” replied Anthony. “It must be done, but it will not be pleasant. I will be glad when it is finished. Good thing too we rose at an early hour, evacuated the island quickly and arrived here in good time.”

“We can rest at points along the way, take our time, and do it carefully.” said Simon. “But to me, it is no big deal. Let’s just get it done. We have executed long portages before. To this point in the journey, they have been but small and infrequent.”

“This is commendable spirit, men.” I replied. “Now Anthony, roll a dube for the Forward Element. You deserve it. Simon, a dram, perhaps of brandy, to fortify us. And men, imbibe sufficient water, to keep you hydrated, for I want no one collapsing.”

And so we rose and set to. First, we changed our foot-ware. For every man has running shoes in addition to his sandals. On the trail, you need the additional traction and ankle support, especially carrying a heavy load. Then each man, with the help of another, lifted his heavy back-pack and fastened it, pulling taught the shoulder straps and waist belt. Along with the pack, one also brings his paddle and water skin, the latter sometimes hanging from the former. In my case, I also suspend my sandals from the paddle, holding it in my hands at both ends of the shaft. One’s towel is then rolled lengthwise and placed around the neck, to absorb perspiration and provide additional protection against mosquitoes (one can also wear the towel like a hood for this purpose). And speaking of mosquitoes, no one begins before spraying his legs and arms liberally with repellent, or in my case, Citronella, and rubbing one’s face with it as well. Thus deployed, we set off on the path, myself in the lead, followed by the Forward Element, Simon the rearguard.

And so we trudged along paths that were straight and easy, and windy and difficult. Up dangerous inclines, down into sandy depressions. Over thick brush and easy grassland. Through dense forest and sparse grove. On ground that was smooth and safe, and rocky and treacherous. Past small side-clearings where one could rest, ignoring them. The sun was in turns occluded by canopy, and the air was cool, or beat down without remorse, the air heavy and choking. Mosquitoes were omni-present, and I got ahead of the main group trying to walk fast and outrun them, my repellent being ineffectual. And the trail seemed endless. And the sweat dripped down profusely, the heavy back-packs becoming by degrees heavier, and one's arms, fumbling continuously with paddle and water skin, becoming tired. And the muscles in our legs began to tighten and become sore, and our feet began to ache as the skin on our toes loosened and became blistered. And at length, one just stared at the rolling ground, only concerned to avoid stumps and rocky outcroppings and potholes and other hazards, ignoring the surrounding terrain, which became blurry, falling into a kind of exhausted stupor, thinking only of the inevitably approaching but seemingly unattainable terminus.

At some point, Anthony yelled at me, "Sir, stop a while, we beseech thee. For we mean to take some water." And I snapped from my stupor, and turned and went back a short distance to the main group. "Of course." I replied. "Let us drink down." And as the mosquitoes gathered in a ravenous cloud around us, like vultures over carrion, we fumbled for the water skins, removed the caps and imbibed furiously. And for once the distinctive, tangy aftertaste of iodine was almost palatable. "I think it cannot be much longer." said Simon. "I say let us continue," replied Anthony, replacing the cap, "for if we stand here, we shall be devoured by bugs." And so we moved on, now slightly invigorated. But we had only reached about the half-way point. And the arduous trek continued for some time. It was glorious when the forest broke one last time, and we emerged onto a marshy terminus, on the shore of Bonfield Lake. We dropped our paddles and vehemently detached ourselves from our onerous back-packs, flopping them down with happy carelessness.

"Anthony, I am famished: open your pack and find the snacks." said Richard. And Anthony swigged from his water skin and then opened his pack, while the rest of us also drank eagerly again. And we stood exhausted and sweaty, and slightly dizzy from all the exertion. But soon we were eating cheese ravenously, and biscuits, and lumps of chocolate, and landjaeger sausage. There was no place to sit, however, and there was little good shade at the terminus, and furthermore, and most discouraging, we had to do it all again. For our canoes awaited us five kilometres back at the landing on Dickson Lake.

Unfortunately, because of our formation, it has always been practice to double back on portages. First the packs and paddles are conveyed to a terminus, then we walk back whence we came, take up the canoes (using the life jackets as shoulder padding), and carry them across as well. On any portage thus executed, the nominal distance is tripled. The policy was deliberate. For as indicated, we are lavish with the commissariat, and the miniaturisation process has not come to full fruition. We all have heavy packs, and we cannot carry these and the canoe aloft simultaneously. But it has not been to our disadvantage necessarily, for most portages are of moderate or short length. But it always means additional time spend in travelling, which is time

lost at the campground. And on a major portage like this one, the policy is ludicrous.

Nevertheless it had to be done, and we walked back along the same path, trying to appreciate the wilderness but in effect only desiring to reach the landing on Dickson with all reasonable speed. On the way, we passed other campers on portage. Most seemed perplexed that we should be making our way without impedimenta, as if on a Sunday stroll. One middle-aged man beheld us rather quizzically, as he stood aside to let us pass, small canoe resting with apparent comfort on his shoulders, compact rucksack fastened to his back. Perhaps he was thinking, "These must be the people who left those two canoes stranded back yonder, and the poor souls have to go back again. Beginners, surely." In the event, the unimpeded trek seemed faster than anticipated, as with most return journeys, and at length we came upon the landing, took some water and unceremoniously lifted the canoes upon our shoulders after adjusting our towels and life jackets to soften the burden.

Transporting the canoes alone was at once less arduous, because the kevlar vessels are light, but also more difficult owing to the awkwardness of negotiating pathways and inclines and narrow turns while so encumbered. But we proceeded in good time and eventually conquered the distance yet again and stood on the shore of Bonfield Lake, now fully equipped to proceed. And having rested a short while longer, I ordered a double grog ration for the men, then we sang God Save the Queen to celebrate the completion of our principal task for the day, and set off.

Bonfield Lake was very small and quickly crossed, and the portage thence into Wright Lake, where we were scheduled to encamp, was so minuscule (260m), that we refused even to acknowledge it. I did, however, spot a wild quail or some other strange bird on the path. I believe it was quail, though, and was inclined to catch it as an addition to the evening repast, but it escaped just in time. Wright Lake was similarly small, consisting of two sections almost cut by a peninsula. Our site was the single occupancy to be had on the lake, a fact which I had assumed would commend itself, offering seclusion and quite. In the event, the lake was ordinary and still, and rather swampy in places. The site was bereft of rock formation, flat and well treed, and altogether unremarkable. Just behind the site, though, and accessible from it, was a wide cart trail running laterally, which connected the Dickson-Bonfield portage, from a point about one-third along its distance, directly to East Arm of Opeongo (our ultimate destination), circumventing Bonfield and Wright lakes entirely. We might conceivably have used the trail, but it meant greater distance travelled overall, and in our current more heavy formation, having to double back all the time, it would not have been feasible. In any event, it is not known how well the trail is maintained along its entire length, for it is marked in black on the maps, even though the section nearest to our site was wide enough.

We had a perfunctory swim, mainly for the purpose of washing away our sweat. Richard and Anthony once again failed to wait for the main body before diving in. Considering the circumstances, however, and owing to the fact that we knew precisely where the Forward Element was this time, I overlooked the incident. Simon and I also swam, but the conditions for swimming, as Anthony was keen to point out, were not optimal, and we were obliged to wear sandals into the water. Then we all napped a short while on our sleeping mats, feeling quite entropic after our many exertions. After rising, we made a pot of tea, and I dressed Anthony's

wound again, advising him that when he is an old man, a notch for every two years of camping will help his memory.

I then set about preparing our last evening repast, which consisted of pasta with instant sauce, supplemented by salami. Simon upbraided Richard for wearing what he described as “fagoty pantaloons”. I concurred, and Anthony too, that indeed they seemed fagoty, being beige, baggy, plaid pantaloons. It was a good thing we were out in the wilderness, where no one else could notice. Richard protested that, although the pantaloons may seem fagoty, they were of cotton, and extremely comfortable in their bagginess, and furthermore he was not concerned to get them soiled or damaged, since they are (fagoty) pantaloons specifically for camping.

At sunset the lake was calm and glassy, and the silence was complete since we are indeed the only ones here (not that it makes any difference really, for most sites in the Park are sufficiently secluded to afford silence). We soon noticed that the place was rife with dragon flies, and indeed just off the shore there was a huge swarm of them, more than we had ever seen in one place. It was a fascinating spectacle, the plump insects with their helicopter wings fluttering this way and that, zooming down to skim the surface of the water and then ascending back up again. We could only assume they were hunting for mosquitoes while it was still dusk, the primary time for mosquito infestation. Or perhaps mosquitoes are simply plentiful on this Lake, with its swampy fringes. Indeed, dragon flies, for their grotesque size and menacing aspect, are friendly creatures, and their diet makes them a camper’s ally, and I stood there appreciating their frolic, completely unmolested.

But lacking a fire, and the site being without a significant view, rocky prominence or other feature of interest, and the mosquitoes prevalent despite the gorging of the dragon flies (surely the former greatly outnumber the latter), we considered retiring soon after dark. There was some debate as to whether the fly would be needed, but in the end it was deployed just in case. I chided Simon once again for being reduced to inflating his “self-inflating” mattress. Obviously, his habit of storing it year-long un-inflated (which I have previously alluded to) has to a great extent affected the integrity of the mat. Whereas I simply unroll my own, place it on the ground, and it inflates autonomously, fully and quickly, without intervention.

Mentioned in Dispatches:

Richard, Simon and Anthony: for acquitting themselves well on a the longest and most arduous portage we have encountered.

Demerits:

Richard: for loudly flatulating in the tent (250 points).

Richard: for donning “fagoty pantaloons”, even though they be of comfortable cotton (500 points).

Anthony: for situating the tent such that his leader is located on a tree root (1,000 points).

Wednesday, August 5th

This morning it was beautiful and clear. We took a leisurely breakfast on Wright Lake, for we were not scheduled to leave Opeongo by water taxi until 1:30 o'clock. So we had copious instant oatmeal and tea, and then a pot of thick coffee. Since it was the final repast, the remaining sugar was consumed liberally, and the coffee whitener depleted. After breakfast, as we relaxed, conversation wandered. Richard and Anthony began reminiscing about their former careers as bundleheads at the Toronto Star newspaper. It is believed that this is where the Forward Element acquired certain aspects of its quirky sub-culture. Simon, however, would not be outdone, and soon he was regaling us with tales from his summer stints at a Ford manufacturing plant, where his father worked. I affected to be visibly distraught that he had ever engaged in manual labour, and declared that he could never displace me as leader, being a man with such humble antecedents.

Anthony was eager to evacuate the camp and move on to Opeongo, where, he proposed, swimming would be more satisfactory. Being favoured of Natatio, he must swim presently and do it with alacrity. We agreed that some good swimming was indeed desirable, and by 11:30 o'clock, had collapsed the site, assembled all the paraphernalia and loaded the boats for launch. It was a short paddle around the peninsula and across the remainder of Wright Lake, and the portage thence into East Arm, being at a mere 285 metres, was, as the portage into Write Lake had been, just too contemptible to consider or discuss. And thus we arrived on the shores of East Arm, a wide expanse of water, forming a deep bay of Opeongo itself, the great thoroughfare into the central parklands.

We wait here for the water taxi, enjoying the wide, sandy and salubrious beach, the cool breeze and the pleasant sound of the breaking waves. The swimming is indeed optimal, the water clear and warm, and one can walk out into the lake some distance, before diving down. There are even the ruins of a small building, or at least the foundations of its walls. It was probably a ranger hut. More prominent is a large masonry structure, pyramidal in shape. Richard and I have a wager as to whether it is an old stone oven, long since bricked up and sealed, or a monument of some kind, the dedicatory plaque having fallen off or been removed. The purse is three pair of landjaeger sausage. We all regretted, and especially Anthony, having stopped on Wright Lake at all, for the shore here is dotted with lovely campsites, and it would have been a much better locale to spend our last evening, with a wide view of the lake and excellent swimming. Alas, I accepted responsibility but insisted I could not, in all propriety, award myself demerits, without severely undermining my own authority.

We finished the last of the granola bars and chocolate, and emptied our water skins. And of course, Richard and Anthony savoured a final, magnificent dube. I myself have taken my last two clove cigarettes, and the final shot of brandy, sitting on a boulder to complete my entries. Four inviting lawn chairs are situated side-by-side nearby, and seemed to greet us as we emerged from the portage. However, they must belong to fishermen, and our delicacy and decorum prevented us from occupying them. No matter, for at this point, lawn chairs seem almost shamefully decadent luxuries.

And now the water taxi approaches, the plain metallic vessel bouncing happily on the waves towards us, engine roaring, canoe rack visible on top. It would have been horrific to canoe the length of the great Opeongo basin again. I must, therefore, conclude at this point, for it is time to bring up the boats and back packs, so we can load them promptly, and I cannot sit idly by composing, while the men do all the work.

**This has been the diary of our Fourth Waterborne Expedition.
The events herein recounted have been set down faithfully,
without bias, passion or embellishment.**