

CHAPTER IX

THE TERRORS OF THE RAPIDS RATIONALLY CONSIDERED

Almost from the outset of my voyage I had been regaled with tales of the dangers of the rapids around the Big Bend, and the many accidents and deaths that had occurred.

The first was told me by Mr. Nixon, at Invermere, who related the trouble he had had in lining a canoe load of flour down the Twenty-three Mile Rapids. His helper had let the towline slip out of his hands, the canoe was dashed against the rocks; was finally recovered, but with nine holes punched in the bottom and sides. It was only kept from sinking by the flour squeezing into and plugging the holes.

The next story was retailed me by several persons at Golden. A Dane trapper, but a short time before, had his canoe upset at the bridge of the Donald railway crossing, had lost his entire winter's catch of furs, his rifle, and provisions, and only saved his life by swimming.

Mrs. Colwell, the wife of the section foreman, at Moberly, told how her brother was drowned at Beavermouth, by the upsetting of a boat, while crossing with two others. He alone of the three was drowned.

I heard, also, how Walter Steinhoff, a bootlegger, had lost his canoe load of liquor and his life in try-

ing to run Surprise Rapids; and about his body being buried at Middle River near where it was found.

I was frequently told about the terrible Death Rapids and the many accidents that had occurred there to the early voyagers. How, but recently, a man named Louis and an Indian had lost their outfit there. Also, how Bob Blackmore had lost his boat and load while lining down Priest Rapids, which are practically a continuation of Death Rapids.

Later, I heard how a young man and two girls lost their lives at Revelstoke by their boat going under the submerged dam at that place.

There were many doleful predictions of what would happen to me in the rapids. One man, that I particularly remember, said nothing, but as he shook my hand and bade me good-bye I could see pity shining in his eyes. They said as plainly as if expressed in words, "Good-bye, old chap, I will never see you again; your bones will rest in the bottom of the Columbia."

My knowledge of swift rivers and their rapids convinces me that practically all the accidents which occur are due either to inexperience, ignorance, incompetence, or recklessness. I met the Dane trapper near where his accident happened, and he admitted that the upsetting of his canoe was due to his own carelessness. I afterwards saw the canoe where she had gone ashore some distance down stream. Her side was crushed in, and she was a tiny craft, too small for the swift current near Donald. Mrs. Colwell's brother lost his life because the boat in which he was riding was being

paddled by a one-armed man, who was physically handicapped as a boatman. Walter Steinhoff lost his life by recklessness in trying to overtake another bootlegger who had preceded him a short time before. Blackmore lost his boat because his helper let the towline get away from him. (I learned later that Blackmore's boat and her load were recovered in the eddy just above Revelstoke.) Nixon's accident occurred for the same reason that Blackmore's did. The accident at Revelstoke was due to ignorance, as anyone familiar with swift rivers knows that if a small craft strikes an obstruction, broadside, it instantly fills and turns over from the outside and goes under the obstruction.

After I had safely run the rapids of the Big Bend, which are the most dangerous on the Columbia River, and proved that I was no reckless novice, people ceased trying to frighten me about the terrible dangers that would beset my pathway. Had I been of the kind easily influenced by tales of disaster I would never have gone down the Columbia farther than Donald. But the stories told had no other effect than to decide me to use due caution at each of the alleged bad places. I had every confidence in my experience and ability to meet any crisis that might arise, and the results of my trip proved whether, or not, that confidence was well placed.

The following articles, abstracted from various sources, will illustrate the statements above made.

In 1885 Mr. A. P. Coleman and a companion made a trip down the Columbia, below Beaver-

mouth. In his book *The Canadian Rockies*, he says:

"We had come to the head of Surprise Rapids, from Beavermouth, and our explorations had finally convinced us that it would be unsafe to run any part of the rapids with our small canoe—why not go down to the beach, build a small raft, and run swiftly, and without labor down to Lake Kinbasket? We soon found the right spot (to build the raft) where an eddy had piled up a great heap of driftwood, among which were planks and runaway boom logs from up river, containing spikes which we chopped out for our use.

"With much hammering of spikes, that kept the echoes busy, the timbers and planks were fastened together, and then the glacier rope was tied around each end of the raft to make things doubly sure.

"With some heaving and prying, the raft, already half in the water, was launched in the eddy, and after cooking dinner, each shaped a paddle and prepared a pole to suit himself, and finally the packs were made up carefully in their bags and wrapped in a waterproof to keep them dry if seas washed over. A strap was tied round them and made fast to the raft, and all was ready.

"We made no haste in paddling across the eddy, for who knows what was beyond? Presently the current caught us and we were swept past the point into the main stream.

"The waves began to drive over our knees, and we paddled desperately to keep clear of a sharp island ahead. We had thought the waves were not too much for rafting, but now they seemed mountains high, and we began to wonder if we would get through alive.

"It was nonsense to paddle any more, for our raft was revolving end for end, and then a great billow fell upon us sideways and the raft was overturned. There was a moment under water, snatched and tugged at by unseen fingers while I clung to the bind-

ing rope, and then dragged myself upon the upturned bottom of the raft, and saw Frank just scrambling up at the opposite end. I remembered that he could not swim, and shouted to him to hold for his life.

"We had rounded the island and were now far past it, in the very center of the current, the raft plunging and revolving while we shifted constantly to face the danger. One pitch followed another, the waves half smothering us from time to time. And now right ahead was the worst point of all—what the Ottawa raftsmen call a "cellar," where the water sucks down in front of a ledge of rock and flings itself as a towering wave. A strange sensation of sinking into the depths was followed by a deluge of water leaping and tumbling upon us, and then the raft struck, heavily, and was nearly dragged from under us. Was it going to pieces? Next moment we were above water again, half strangled, but alive, and we supposed that the packs underneath the raft had struck and been torn from their fastenings.

"The most violent part of the rapids was over but we were flying straight for a jagged projecting rock at a sharp bend of the river. If we struck the raft might go to pieces; so I braced myself and prepared to fend off with the pole that had caught in the binding rope. The pole was wrenched aside nearly pushing me overboard, and we shot round the bend like a projectile, just grazing the rock.

"The current now moderated, and paddling with the pole, we gradually drew to the right shore. Frank caught an overhanging bough and we were soon moored to a stump at the foot of a steep-cut bank, none too soon as the Columbia is largely snow water and we were shuddering with the cold.

"Transport by raft had certainly saved some time for we had come down at least four miles in fifteen or twenty minutes, but on the other hand we had not been able to admire the fine scenery of the canyon on the way, and we had lost everything we possessed, except

our dripping clothes. Still there was a certain thrill of pleasure and pride in having done it, though we did not want to repeat the exploit. Presently, as we stood there, I on the raft and Frank on the stump, a disagreeable feeling came over us that without blankets, rifles, frying-pan, or axe, life would be shorn of its comforts; however, our rashness deserved a fine, for we had foreseen the danger to some extent before starting.

"The romance of the situation had vanished and we began to think of scrambling up the steep bank when Frank caught sight of something black swaying in the water under the raft; there were the packs still enclosed in the waterproof, barely held at one end by the strap.

"Our water-soaked bags weighed a ton and could hardly be dragged up on the steep shore beside the stump. The blankets and other soaked garments were drawn out, and wrung before climbing the bank, which was about seventy feet above the river, and in successive journeys, all was carried up and spread on the rocks and bushes to dry in the afternoon sun.

"Rummaging in the dunnage bags disclosed the welcome fact that very little damage had been done, though the sacks of sugar and salt, of course, were half dissolved and proved very hard to dry, and as hard as bricks when dry; while the can of baking powder had exploded and filled the bag it was in with foam. The matches, put inside the blankets for safety, were so slimy that I was for throwing them away, but Frank spread them in the sun and actually coaxed one to light with a lens as a burning glass. Soon a splendid fire was roaring, while our clothes and blankets steamed in piles about it.

"Before night everything was dry and when we had fried bacon and made tea to accompany the sodden bannocks for supper we agreed that life was decidedly worth living, and were glad to crawl into the blanket bags and little shelter tent for the night."

Could anything be more foolhardy, and show more ignorance than the above described attempt to run Surprise Rapids with a raft?

In 1817, Ross Cox, one of the early voyagers, went up the Columbia as far as Canoe River. Some of his men he sent back down the Columbia, and he with the remainder journeyed up Canoe River, and thence went east over the Rocky Mountains. Some time later he describes the fate of those who returned down the River, and explains why Death Rapids were so named:

"Finding some of our men invalids it was deemed imprudent to bring them across the mountains and six Canadians and Holmes, the English tailor, were therefore sent back in the best canoe to Spokane House. Out of the seven men, two only were able to work; but as the current was in their favor it was hoped they would arrive in three days at Kettle Falls, from where they could easily reach Spokane. As our stock of provisions was very scanty, we could only spare them enough for the above period. On separating from their comrades, some of them appeared dejected and melancholy, and foreboded that they would never see Canada again. Their prophecy, alas! was too true.

"I did not hear the fate of the unfortunate party until three years afterwards. The following is the melancholy detail: On leaving the Rocky Mountains they drove rapidly down the current until they arrived at the Upper Dalles, or Narrows, where they were obliged to disembark, a cod line was made fast to the stern of the canoe, while two men preceded it along the banks to keep it from striking against the rocks. It had not descended more than half the distance, when it caught in a whirlpool and the line snapped. The canoe for a moment disappeared in the vortex; on emerging from which, it was carried by the irresistible force of the current to the opposite side, and

dashed to pieces against the rocks. They had not the prudence to take out either their blankets or small quantity of provisions, which were of course all lost. Here then the poor fellows found themselves deprived of all the necessaries of life, and at a period of the year when it was impossible to procure any wild fruit or roots. To return to the mountains was impossible, and their only chance was to proceed downward, and to keep as near the banks of the river as circumstances would permit. The continual rising of the water had completely inundated the beach, in consequence of which they were compelled to force their way through an almost impervious forest, the ground of which was covered with a strong growth of prickly underwood. Their only nourishment was water owing to which, and their weakness from fatigue and ill health, their progress was necessarily slow. On the third day poor Macon died and his surviving comrades, though unconscious how soon they might be called to follow him, determined to keep off the fatal moment as long as possible. They thereupon divided his remains in equal parts between them, on which they subsisted for several days. From the swollen state of their feet their daily progress did not exceed two or three miles. Holmes, the tailor, shortly followed Macon, and they continued for some time longer to sustain life on his emaciated body. It would be a painful repetition to detail the individual death of each man; suffice it to say that in a little time of the seven men, two only named La Pierre and Dubois, remained alive. La Pierre was subsequently found on the borders of the upper lake of the Columbia by two Indians who were crossing it in a canoe. They took him on board and brought him to Kettle Falls, from whence he was conducted to Spokane House.

"He stated that after the death of the fifth man of the party Dubois and he continued for some days on the spot where he had ended his sufferings, and on quitting it they had loaded themselves with as much

of his flesh as they could carry; that they succeeded in reaching the upper lake, round the shores of which they had wandered for some time, in vain search for Indians; that their horrid food at last became exhausted, and they were again reduced to the point of starvation; that on the second night after their last meal, he (La Pierre) observed something suspicious in the conduct of Dubois, which induced him to be on his guard; and that shortly after he had lain down for the night, and while he feigned sleep he observed Dubois cautiously opening his clasp-knife, with which he sprang on him, and inflicted on his hand the blow evidently intended for his neck. A silent and desperate conflict followed, in which after some struggling, La Pierre succeeded in wresting the knife from his antagonist, and having no other resource left, he was obliged in self-defence to cut Dubois' throat. A few days afterwards he was discovered as before related."

It was thus that Death Rapids, or Dalles des Morts, got its name. Not because the deaths occurred in the Rapids, but because they were the contributing cause of them.

The disaster, and the ultimate death of all but one of the participants, was in the first place due to using a light cod line to lower the canoe in the current—it is never safe, in any rapid, to line either a row-boat, canoe, or batteau, up stream or down, with anything less strong than a good, half-inch cotton or manila rope. The second reason was the lack of precaution in not removing the load from the canoe—it might have gone through safely if empty. Everyone acquainted with Death Rapids always "carry" the load there and line the empty boat.

In 1881, Lieutenant T. W. Symonds, in the service of the United States Government, made an exploration of upper Columbia River below the

Boundary; and navigated it, from Grand Rapids to Snake River, in a 30-foot batteau with a crew of four Indians and a Canadian half-breed called Old Pierre. His published report gives his experience at what is now known as Box Cañon.

“Every stroke of the oar is bearing us onward nearer and nearer to that portion of our voyage most dreaded, the terrible Kalichen Falls or Whirlpool Rapids. We hear the low rumbling of the water, and see the top of the high basaltic rocks and white foam of the tumbling waters. For a few moments the rowing ceases, while brave old Pierre gives his orders to his Indians in their native tongue. He knows that everything depends upon his steering and their rowing or backing at the right moment with all the strength that they possess. Years ago he was in a Hudson Bay Company batteau that capsized in these very waters and out of a crew of sixteen men eight perished in the water and on the rocks. The Indians made their preparations for the struggle by stripping off all their superfluous clothing, removing their gloves, and each tied a bright-colored handkerchief tightly about his head; poles and extra oars are laid ready in convenient places to reach should they become necessary; and then, with a shout, the Indians seize their oars, and commence laying to them with all their strength. We are rushing forward at a fearful rate, owing to the combined exertions of the Indians and the racing current, and we shudder at the thought of striking any of the huge black rocks, near which we glide. Now we are fairly in the rapids, and our boat is rushing madly through the foam and billows; the Indians are shouting at every stroke in their wild savage glee; and it is infectious; and we shout too and feel the wild exultation that comes to men in moments of great excitement and danger. Ugly masses of rocks show their heads above the troubled waters on every side, and sunken rocks are discernible by the action of the surf. Great billows

strike us fore and aft, some falling squarely over the bows and drenching us to the waist. This is bad enough, but the worst is yet to come as we draw near with great velocity to a huge rock which appears dead ahead.

"Has old Pierre seen it? The water looks terribly cold as we think of his failing eyesight. There is an order, a shout, backing on one side and pulling on the other, and the rock appears on our right hand. Another command and answering shout, and the oars bend like willows as the Indians struggle to get the boat out of the strong eddy into which Pierre has thrown her. Finally she shoots ahead and passes the rock like a flash, within less than an oar's length of it; we shout for joy and breathe freely again. The eddy becomes in a high stage of water a veritable whirlpool with the well at its center many feet in depth. Hence the name Whirlpool Rapids."

The foregoing is very graphically written, but I do not recognize Kalichen Falls, or Whirlpool Rapids, from Symonds' description. He has plainly drawn on his imagination and sacrificed accuracy to dramatic effect. I encountered no such conditions as he has elaborated upon.

Neither do I understand anyone running rapids in the wild manner of his Indians. In another section of his report he states that his crew (except old Pierre) were unacquainted with the rapids of the Columbia River. They must have acted as they did through ignorance, or because they were filled with "fire water." They would not have suited me.

Real rivermen do not dash recklessly, and shouting, through the breakers and whirlpools of a rapid. They are not of that type. Being skilled white-water men they have cool heads with brains that

act and re-act quickly in emergencies; and when in the rapids have their minds concentrated on the work in hand, and have no time for shouting or analyzing emotions. They never do things for spectacular effect, but avoid every possible danger. If unfamiliar with a rapid (and its character changes with flood conditions) they examine it carefully to see if it is runnable, and if so pick out their route through it. If unsafe to run they examine the chances of lining it, and if lining is impossible they resort to portaging or carrying. They rarely have a serious accident. I know of one man who constantly navigates the rapids of the Big Bend and never has had a serious mishap in 37 years.

As a partial corroboration of the statements I have made, the following taken from Stanley Washburn's *Trails, Trappers and Tenderfeet*, is pertinent:

"So the men who travel these rivers and survive year after year are the ones that take each rapid with every nerve on the alert and every ounce of strength thrown into the enterprise, for they realize the possibilities far better than the tenderfoot who sits on a heap of blankets, in a boat, and watches the scenery slide past. As a matter-of-fact my own experience in the mountains leads me to believe that one of the surest signs of a greenhorn is the recklessness with which he embarks on swift water enterprises which are little understood."

Warburton Pike in *Through the Subartic Forest* says this:

"Unless in the case of a perfectly straight piece of water, where you can form a pretty good opinion of the danger by standing up in the stern of the canoe, it is always well to put ashore, and take a look at what lies

ahead, when traveling down an unknown stream, as you may find yourself at the brink of a cascade, or an utterly impassable rapid, when it is too late to make a landing. Don't listen to the valiant fool in the bow, who shouts: 'Oh, hell! we can make that!' just as you are shooting into an eddy; and if he tries to enforce his opinion by dragging the bow of the canoe out into the current, no experienced voyageur will blame you for clubbing him on the head with a pole or paddle."

Considerable literature in relation to the Columbia River can be found on the shelves of the public libraries, but some of what has been written, although interesting reading, contains errors and gross exaggerations. As a sample of some of the ways in which errors about the River are spread, the following extract from a popular and widely read magazine is enlightening:

"One of the most interesting adventures to come to public notice in some time is the canoe trip of J. S. Wood, a trapper seventy-eight years old, who journeyed from the headwaters of the Columbia River to its mouth, a distance of two thousand three hundred and eighty miles. The source of the big river is in the Rocky Mountains near the fifty-third degree of latitude. Its headwater, the Canoe River, runs from a small lake in a remarkable cleft called Punch Bowl which is only a few feet from another little lake out of which rises the Athabasca River, a tributary of the Mackenzie emptying into the ocean.

"Wood, accompanied by an Indian friend, started his trip from Punch Bowl Lake. They floated and paddled the long journey, stopping when necessary to hunt, fish, or buy supplies. The trapper observed many bears on the mountain slopes, and reported that mink and muskrat were numerous and rabbits abundant. Though he had made the trip fifty-four years ago, when he was one of the pioneer Northwest trappers,

to sell furs to the traders near Astoria, Oregon, he found the banks of the streams and the forests much the same as they were in 1868.

"On his recent trip Wood made a point to record carefully every stream emptying into the Columbia River. He counted ninety-three. He portaged forty-two rapids and falls. The trip took a little over four months."

The above article, published in 1922, was shown me by a very good friend to prove that I was not the only one who had navigated the full length of the Columbia; and it would naturally deceive many who are unacquainted with facts. Its absurdity will be recognized by those who know that the Columbia River does not start at Punch Bowl Lake, or even from the mouth of Canoe River, but in a small flat between the Selkirk and Rocky Mountains, 232 miles southward of the mouth of Canoe River; that instead of being 2,380 miles long its length is 1,264 miles; that there are 91 rapids and waterfalls below Canoe River instead of 42, and 18 above that Wood seems to have known nothing about, and besides these a number of bad rapids on Canoe River itself; and that except geese, ducks, small birds, and a few coyotes and jack-rabbits, no wild creatures are now seen along the banks of the Columbia. The large game is only found by hunting for it back from the River.

Wood's story reads like fiction. There is no record to back it up, and if he really made the trip he must have done so largely by land. According to the story, Wood portaged the rapids and did not run them.

When I was employed as an engineer on the

survey of the Western Pacific Railway in the cañon of the North Fork Feather River, California, there was in my party a flagman who was a writer of western mountain and backwoods tales. He would frequently say that to make a story interesting to the reader it must be "colored"; in other words, literary liberties must be taken, or in plain English exaggeration must be resorted to. He was so clumsy that he could not stand erect on a side-hill; and frequently was unable to climb to some of the flagging points established in difficult places to reach—some other member of the party having to go there for him. The going finally became so rough that he had to quit the work in despair. Poor Jack! He is dead now. He was a likeable chap and a gentleman, but as a mountaineer and a woodsman he was a failure.

I have often had cause to protest against the custom followed by so many writers in describing nature, and natural conditions, and occurrences, who to make their stories more fascinating color the facts, and add glamour and romance that exists only in their perfervid imaginations, and which are conjured up in the quietude of their chamber long after the happening. Such writers are not to be depended upon, and are usually of the type that let others do the work, and, as Mr. Washburn says, "sit on a heap of blankets in a boat and watch the scenery slide past." The real adventurers and explorers are busy men, doing their full share of work, and having little time to indulge in romance. The record of their experiences and observations are

generally reliable and void of conscious effort to be dramatic.

Besides this, no one who has written about the Columbia, except David Thompson, ever traveled its full length. Other early voyagers such as Cox, Franchere, Ross, and others, made partial trips, and all of them, including Thompson, made simple records of their experiences. None of the later writers have followed its course completely, and have depended largely on hearsay and not personal observation. I have followed every foot of the Columbia and know it "first hand," and as a civil engineer and practical man, who makes no claims to being a finished writer; and although my observations were not as thorough as I wished, yet such as they were I intend the record to be one of facts, which will not only be readable, and I hope interesting, but will be instructive and useful to someone else desiring to descend the Columbia. If any romance or glamour creep into my story it will be because it is unavoidable and not because of a conscious attempt at word painting. I will leave my readers to supply the romance; and unless I am afflicted with mental "strabismus" they will see the Columbia River, and its valley, just as it was in the summer and autumn of 1921.

A very interesting work is that of Professor William D. Lyman, *The Columbia River*, which is partially a record of personal acquaintance, but goes farther afield than I do, taking in almost all the territory tributary to the Columbia, and dwelling largely on the early history of what was first known as Oregon Territory, and describing the experiences

and trials of the pioneers and early settlers, the up-building of the country, and the Indians and their myths and legends. It is somewhat out-of-date for present conditions along the Columbia River, but nevertheless it is, up to the present time, the definitive book on that river, accurate for the time in which it was written and containing but a few minor errors and omitting sections the Professor did not visit. It is written with a wealth of descriptive language, contains much of romance as well as facts, and is well worth attention and perusal by students as well as by those who enjoy interesting historical literature. It is a valuable supplement to my own story.