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A NORTH GREENLAND WALRUS HUNT.

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"Othere, the old sea-captain,
Who dwelt in Helgoland,
To King Alfred, the Lover of Truth,
Brought a snow-white walrus-tooth,
Which he held in his brown right hand."
—Lengjéna's "Discoverer of the North Cape."

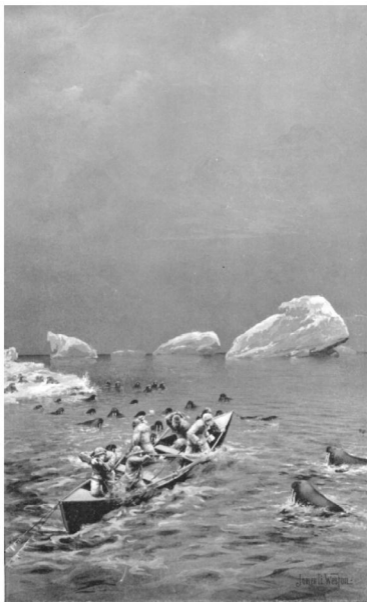
IT was perhaps a simple gift that Othere the Norseman brought to the great Saxon monarch, but it was one that he no doubt highly prized, for no product of northern seas was more eagerly sought by the ancient Scandinavian rovers than walrus ivory. Their chiefs delighted in adorning their weapons with it, and the sagas aver that King Magnus Barefoot's famous sword, *Legg-bitt* (*Leg-biter*), possessed guards of that material.

Nowhere in Greenland waters are walruses more abundant than along the coast between Capes Parry and Alexander, more than six hundred miles above the Arctic Circle. There, ex-

posed only to attack by a small, isolated tribe of Eskimos, they bid fair to escape extermination for many years to come.

As those who have been so fortunate—or unfortunate, as the case may be—as to come in personal contact with the walrus will attest, the chase of no other Arctic animal is productive of more thrilling excitement than that which usually attends the pursuit of this animal. Indeed, in point of reckless courage and ferocity, even the grim ice-bear, lord of the frost realm though he be, must surrender the palm to a wounded *abwík*. It should be borne in mind, however, that I refer particularly to the Greenland walrus, and not to his amiable Alaskan cousin, whose motto, when he is attacked, seems to be *Sauve qui peut*.

Walrus was the game we sought when, shortly before midnight on August 30th, 1893, our long whale-boat, the *Faith*, glided seaward across the bar near the



Painted for OUTRACK by James L. Weston.

"THEIR GREAT FLIPPERS CHURNED THE WATER INTO FOAM. (p. 543.)

little Eskimo settlement of Karnah, out into the open water of Murchison Sound.

We were six in number. Besides my artist comrade, Mr. Frank W. Stokes, and myself, the *Faith* was manned by four swarthy long-haired Eskimos, Mya, Annowka, Nipsangwa and Arnagloo, all picked men and expert harpooners.

The sun had dipped for a brief space beyond the white swell of the inland ice behind us, and a light northerly breeze was ruffling the sound's dark surface as we headed southwest toward Herbert Island, which, ten miles away, reared its snow-capped crest high above the sea. Beyond it, a single star, the first we had seen during many weeks, twinkled in the broad blue band of sky above the southern horizon. Between the mainland and the island we knew that WC would find walrus.

Floe-pans, with here and there an iceberg, were sluggishly drifting through the sound, and as we advanced we scanned them intently, momentarily expecting to discern walrus' dark shapes defined in silhouette upon their snowy surface. Except the faint noise of ripples set in motion by the boat, and lapping the sides of the gelid masses near us, the deep silence was broken only by the measured creaking of oars and the soft, musical splash of water dripping from the uplifted blades.

We had traversed perhaps two miles when suddenly we heard the resonant gurgling call of a walrus some distance ahead; but, although I was standing upright in the stern to steer, I strained my eyes in vain to catch a glimpse of the animal. The natives at once stopped rowing, and Nipsangwa volunteered to lure, it to us. Accordingly, we posted Annowka on the small bow-deck with his harpoon poised to throw and with a forty-foot rawhide line, of which one end was attached to the harpoon head while the other was made fast to the boat's bow, coiled at his feet. Then, with Stokes and myself in readiness for quick shooting, Nipsangwa began his ventriloquistic performance.

"Ee-ook! ee-ook! ee-ook!" he cried, imitating to perfection the walrus' guttural tone. The first syllables were muffled, and sounded as if uttered under water close beside the boat, but the last were enunciated loudly and distinctly; still there was no response.

Once more he tried, that time successfully. His voice was still echoing amid the neighboring icebergs when a round, white-tusked head was silently thrust above the surface, not thirty feet away. Next instant Annowka hurled his harpoon, but owing, as he claimed, to the imperfect light, he missed his aim, and the walrus promptly dived.

The derisive remarks which the other natives addressed to the harpooner as he drew in his line and harpoon manifestly increased his chagrin at his failure.

Presently Stokes' keen eyes detected another walrus, a fine cow, lying on a small ice-pan some three hundred yards to westward. Approaching cautiously, we arrived within easy harpooning distance before the drowsy animal discovered us, and Annowka, anxious to redeem his prestige, hurled his harpoon-head in her body. Simultaneously Stokes and I fired and scored. The stricken walrus rolled off into the sea, and the line, accompanied by a large ovoid sealskin float appended to it, sped out over the bow with surprising swiftness; for, however clumsy it may be on ice, the walrus is a remarkably powerful swimmer. Next second we were towed ahead at an exhilarating rate of speed. The fact that the combined weight of boat and crew was not less than eighteen hundred pounds will perhaps enable one to form some conception of the creature's strength.

As we swept past the ice-pan Annowka reached out and deftly snatched up the wooden harpoon-shaft, which was so designed as to detach itself from the head after the latter had been driven home.

The walrus' desperate effort to escape soon partly exhausted her. Our speed slackened, and, on a sudden, the float, hitherto completely submerged, bobbed into sight just as she turned and rose, so close at hand that her glistening tusks rasped harshly on the *Faith's* side.

We greeted her with several shots, whereupon she dived once more, but only to reappear a moment later on the opposite side of the boat. Throwing herself furiously upon the float, she punctured it with her tusks, rendering it useless for the remainder of our cruise; while the confined air thus released was hissing forth from it, a well-aimed shot terminated her struggles.

Pulling on the harpoon line, we drew the body up beside the boat, and Mya made two parallel incisions with a sharp knife in the tough, inch-thick skin, forming a flexible strip, a foot long and two inches wide, that resembled a leather valise-handle. He then selected one of the spare floats that we had with us, and, after expelling some of the air from it, he inserted it between the strip of hide and the underlying blubber, and then inflated it. This prevented our prize from sinking.

Meanwhile, we had made out three more walrus resting on a distant pan. So, delaying only to extract the imbedded harpoon-head, we left the dead one floating and slowly rowed toward them.

But they were not to be taken unawares. While we were yet too far away to hazard a shot, they saw us, and two of them splashed off into the water; but the third, which, we now perceived, was a small calf, made no attempt to follow.

Calling incessantly, the pair swam excitedly to and fro beside the pan, taking good care, however, to keep it between themselves and us, but the calf continued to stare stupidly in our direction and obstinately refused to budge. Hoping to capture it alive, we refrained from firing, but we increased our speed. Suddenly, one of the adults, presumably the calf's mother, placed her great fore-flippers on the edge of the ice, upreared half her huge bulk, and thrust forward so that with the tip of her short tusks she could almost touch the young one. What moral suasion she may have exerted we could only surmise, but her perverse offspring immediately rolled itself toward her and was apparently received on her outstretched flippers, for both went down together, and when, a minute afterward, we caught a parting glimpse of them, she was supporting it in that manner. At all events, the little fellow finally made his escape on such short order, and we were so intensely interested in witnessing this novel exhibition of maternal solicitude, that we had no opportunity to shoot, even if we had had heart to do so.

As no more walrus were then in sight, we put back to the one already killed. Taking it in tow, we resumed our voyage just as the sun came rolling into view from behind the mainland's *mer de glace*.

Shortly before 3 A. M., a family group of five walrus was seen basking on a floe. It was a mystery how the unwieldy beasts contrived to scale the vertical walls of ice, which, so far as we observed, rose on each side fully six feet above the sea. However, we did not linger to discuss this interesting problem, but, by rapid rowing, we succeeded in both shooting and harpooning an adult bull before he, together with the others, plunged into the water. A desperate though brief conflict ensued. Enraged by wounds and the smell of blood, and snorting and bellowing furiously, the walrus repeatedly charged the boat; and, although the Eskimos, hastily shipping oars and shouting vociferously, plied their lances with wonderful celerity while we distributed the contents of our rifles' magazines among them, it was not until we had finished the bull, and also a half-grown, tuskless *mikininni* (calf), that the survivors sank from sight.

Exciting though this contest was, it was merely a foretaste of what was in store for us.

During the *millec* one of our assailants struck the long steering-oar, which I had neglected to draw in, with its flippers, wrenching it so that the galvanized iron rowlock split in twain, but, fortunately, without breaking the oar. When I had replaced the fractured rowlock with a new one, we took the calf, which was nearly five feet long, on board and made the bull fast astern.

As, hampered by the two huge carcasses in tow, we laboriously rowed away from the broad patch of oily-iridescent, blood-stained water marking the scene of our encounter, a solitary walrus quietly rose to the surface far behind us. The Eskimos believed it to be one that was wounded too severely to recover, but, knowing that it would sink if we approached it, we did not put back.

Attracted by sight or scent of slaughter, rapacious burgomaster gulls, the white vultures of the frigid zone, soon flocked above us. Some remained circling over the dying walrus, but many followed the boat, swooping, with discordant, mournful cries, to skim and whet their beaks in its scarlet wake.

Two uneventful hours elapsed, and we were drawing near to the island, where we intended to land and cut up our quarry, when we beheld a floe-pan,

possibly a quarter of an acre in extent and slightly to the left of our course, which was literally covered with walruses basking in the early morning sun.

As I turned the *Faith's* prow toward the herd, the Eskimos slackened speed and began an animated consultation, the result of which was that they strenuously endeavored to persuade us to give the herd a wide berth, asserting that, while it was all very well to engage five walruses together, an assault on such a large number would prove to be an entirely different matter. Moreover, they averred that if the herd perceived those which we had already slain, and especially the calf, it would, without other provocation, attack us in overwhelming force.

Nevertheless, influenced by a desire for more hunting, and also by the fact of the herd's proximity to the island, where we could easily cache surplus meat and blubber, we rashly resolved to risk a battle. So, finding expostulation useless, the Eskimos pulled on, casting frequent apprehensive glances over their shoulders as they bent to their oars.

Being particularly desirous of obtaining a photograph of the herd, Stokes hurriedly arranged his camera and made a snap shot, while I supplied the men with hatchets for use at close quarters and thus partly restored their confidence.

Although the walruses had in the meantime discovered us, they gave no indication of alarm, unless their subdued "ee-ook! ee-ook!" could be so interpreted. A few, rearing lazily upon their foreflippers, stared inquisitively at the boat, but the majority appeared contemptuously indifferent to our presence. They were so closely huddled together that it was impossible to count them, but we estimated that the herd numbered between sixty and one hundred individuals.

We were within forty feet of the floe-pan when the command to ship oars was given. The camera was again focused and a second quick exposure secured; and then, each selecting a choice specimen, Stokes and I opened fire.

At the first shot, the startled beasts nearest the floe-pan's edge plunged with a mighty splash that dashed sheets of spray far out on the ice, while, those farther removed from the water floun-

dered after them, all bellowing loudly with pain or rage. Industriously pumping our weapons' levers, we hit several, but, failing to inflict wounds that were instantaneously fatal, all retained sufficient vitality to reach the sea, and the ice was quickly vacated. The one at which I had first aimed lurched off not six feet from our bow, the boat's momentum having carried her straight to the ice.

As the walrus dived, Nipsangwa harpooned it, but it sank slowly onto a broad ice-shelf protruding from the floe-pan's base, some eight feet below us, but visible through the pellucid water, where it expired almost immediately.

But now the infuriated walruses' deej-toned slogan resounded on every side, as, forming into squads comprising from a half-dozen to a score of warriors, they charged us, striving to hook their tusks over the boat's gunwales and bring them to the water-level. The uncouth, plethoric forms swathed in slimy, flabby skin, sparse-haired and deeply seamed with innumerable wrinkles; their great flippers churning the bloody water into crimson, soapy foam; the receding brows and thick-lipped, bewhiskered muzzles from which the stout, obtuse, gleaming yellow-white tusks flared downward with unpleasant suggestiveness; the sinister expression of the small, bulging, blood-shot eyes; the dilated nostrils, whence froth issued with every respiration; and, above all, the uncanny recklessness of wounds that they displayed—all these combined to give them the aspect of veritable marine demons. The cows came on no less desperately than the bulls.

The sharp reports of firearms blended with the dull clash of steel on ivory and the yells of the Eskimos, who, now that the fray was once begun, struck out like paladins with hatchets, lances and harpoons. Even the great burgomaster gulls seemed to share in the excitement, mingling their wild screams in the clamor, while a pair of ravens, flapping leisurely from the mainland to the island, paused to hover and croak hoarse encouragement to either our adversaries or ourselves until the uproar frightened them away.

Presently, four walruses, each fast to a line, were dragging the boat hither and thither, while we continued to beat off the rest as best we could.

We maintained a steady fire. Many of the beasts were wounded, and the blood and oil streaming over their grizzly heads and shoulders increased the hideousness of their appearance, and the sea was tainted by the effluvia they exhaled. But, like true believers in the Hebraic *lex talionis*, they were resolved on revenge and would not yield.

There is something in the walrus's countenance which, curiously enough, always reminds me of a certain caricature of a famous Prussian statesman, and assuredly the "blood and iron" spirit of determination that they evinced was worthy of him.

The *Faith*, as usual, leaked badly, and, as no man dared to desert his post to bail, we were compelled to stand ankle-deep in water, in which the dead calf swashed to and fro with the violent rocking of the boat. This made it difficult for us to retain our footing.

The Eskimos' transient valor was fast evaporating and we ourselves were longing for a Gatling gun, when suddenly, as if in accordance with a preconcerted signal, the vengeful horde vanished under water. Congratulating ourselves, on the supposition that we had effectually repulsed them, we bestowed our attention on the walrus secured to the harpoon-lines. We had dispatched two of them and made them fast astern when all at once the herd reappeared at some distance from the boat, but swimming aggressively toward it. We surmised that fresh recruits had joined them.

Panic seized on the natives, and before we could remonstrate they severed the two taut lines and released the struggling captives. Snatching up the oars, they attempted to row, but the dead weight of our booty was too much for them. One sprang aft to cut loose the four carcasses in tow, but I intercepted him. However, being no less anxious than the Eskimo to set foot on land, I permitted him to cast off two of

the walrus after chopping off the heads, which I wished to preserve. Then, just as the herd was closing in around us, we started for the island's shore, a mile away.

Although the walrus kept so near as to strike the oars and thus impede our progress, we succeeded in holding them at bay until, rowing and fighting alternately, we had traversed about half the distance to land. Then, to our relief, they abandoned the pursuit; but their derisive bellowing was still ringing in our ears when the boat's keel grated on the shore.

With the exception of another broken rowlock, a few scars on the boat's sides and gunwales, the loss of a couple of harpoon-lines and the expenditure of a good deal of ammunition, we were none the worse for the encounter. Although, as trophies, we had only two heads, we computed that at least twenty of our assailants had been slain. If victory was theirs, it was dearly won.

We disembarked on a sloping, wave-worn ledge forming a natural jetty, and, after mooring the boat by her grapnel, I got out blocks and tackle preparatory to beaching the carcasses we had retained. But the Eskimos, with characteristic aversion to physical exertion, pointed out that the tide was ebbing and that, if we hauled the walrus out into the shoal water partly covering the ledge, it would soon leave them stranded. And, sure enough, by the time we had finished cutting up the calf, the other two were high and dry on the ledge, and there we measured, skinned and dissected them.

We built a fire of dry, mossy peat, saturated with oil squeezed from the fresh blubber, and over it we cooked an abundant supply of walrus-liver, an appetizing Arctic tid-bit. On that, supplemented with tinned beef and hard tack, we breakfasted, and then, outstretching ourselves in the sun, on the gray, lichen-covered rocks, we slept.

