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ON THE SIBERIAN COAST.

The Corwin Enters the Arctic—First News of the Missing Whalers—A Story of Death and Disaster—In the Ice Pack—Over the Ice in an Esquimo Sleigh—Reluctance of Esquimos to Leave Their Homes.

STEAMER CORWIN.
KABRAN, SIBERIA, May 31, 1881.

On the 24th of this month, a bleak, snowy day, we enjoyed our first view of the Northern Ocean ice at a distance of only a few hours from the Pribilof Islands in latitude 58°. This is not far from its southern limit, though strong north winds no doubt carry wasting fragments somewhat farther.

ENCOUNTERING THE ICE PACK.

Here it occurs in ragged, berg-like masses from a foot to a hundred feet in breadth, and with the highest point not more than ten or twelve feet above the water, the color bluish-white, looking much like coarse, granular snow. We were steering direct for St. Matthew’s Island, noted for the great numbers of polar bears that haunt its shores. But as we proceeded the ice became more and more abundant, and at length it was seen ahead in a solid pack. Then we had to abandon our plan of landing on the island, and steer eastward and around the curving edge of the pack across the mouth of Anadyr Gulph.

THE SIBERIAN COAST.

On the 27th we sighted the Siberian coast to the north of the Gulph, snow-clad mountains appearing in clear outline at a distance of about 30 miles. Even thus far the traces of glacial action were easily recognized in the peculiar sculpture of the peaks, which here is as unmistakably marked as it is on the summits of the Sierra.

AN ESQUIMO VILLAGE.

On the morning of the 31st we came to anchor near an Esquimo village at the north-west end of St. Lawrence Island. It was blowing and snowing at the time, and the poor storm-beaten row of huts seemed inexpressibly dreary through the drift. Nevertheless, out of them came a crowd of jolly, well-fed people, dragging their skin canoes which they shoved over the rim of stranded ice that extended along the shore, and soon were alongside the steamer, offering ivory, furs, sealskin boots, etc., for tobacco and ammunition.

FIRST NEWS OF THE LOST WHALERS.

After inquiring about the movements of the ice and whaling fleet, we steered for Plover Bay on the Coast of Siberia, but found it firmly ice-bound. In the edge of the pack we spoke the whaler Rainbow and delivered the Arctic mail, then put into Marcus Bay and dropped anchor. Here a boat load of natives came aboard and told a story “important if true,” concerning the destruction of the lost whaler Vigilant and death of her crew. Three Tchuch’t seal hunters, they said, while out on the ice last November, near Cape North, discovered the ship in the pack, her masts broken off by the ice, and the crew dead on the deck and in the cabin. They had brought off a bag...
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...and such articles as they could carry away, some of which had been shown to other natives, and the story had traveled from one settlement to another far down the coast. We were told with an air of perfect good-faith, and they seemed themselves to believe what they were telling. We had also heard substantially the same story at St. Lawrence Island, for knowing the ability of those people for manufacturing tales of this sort, we listened with many grins of allowance, though of course determined to investigate further.

...requisite and interpreters. Here we began to inquire for dogs, and were successful in hiring a man of six, and his owner to drive them. The owner is called "Tooshie Joe," and since he can speak a little English he is also in the capacity of interpreter, his language being the same as that spoken by the natives of the north Siberian coast. While we were trying to hire him one of his companions kept reiterating that there was no use in sending out our projective look for the crew of those ships, for they were all dead. Joe also said it was too soon going, and that he was afraid to venture so far for fear he would never get back. The snow, he objected, was too soft at this time of year, and many rivers had to cross were in the way, and he did not like to leave his family, etc., but after promising to pay him well, whether our two friends were found or not, he consented to go, and went ashore to get ready. He sized his boy in taking leave of him, a little toddler two years old, in a fur bag, who wanted to go with him. His wife accompanied him on board, and after a long farewell walk back in a canoe with tears in her eyes.

...to the story of the wrecked Vigilant in 1881. Joe also said that be had traveled from one point to another over a wide extent of country, without seeing any other ships. Here we found the natives eager to trade away everything they had. We bought a lot of furs and twenty dogs, paying a sack of flour for each dog. This Arctic cattle market was in every way lively and picturesque, and ended up with a visit to all the parties concerned.

...the Arctic Ocean without encountering any ice, and passed Cape Serdze this afternoon. The weather has been calm and tolerably clear for the last twenty-four hours, enabling us to see the coast now and then, and promising success in landing the sledging party well on its westward.

About (?) miles northeast from Cape Serdze we observed a matchless bluff where the shore ice seemed narrower than elsewhere, and we approached intending to examine it, with reference to landing the party here. When we were within a mile of it we saw a group of natives signaling us to land by waving something over their heads. The Captain, Joe, and myself got on the ice from the boat, and began to scramble over it toward the bluff, but found it very rough and made slow progress. The pack is made up of a crushed mass of ice, and pinnacles piled at every angle up to a height of from 50 to 100 feet, and seemed to become rougher and more inaccessible as we advanced.

...we discovered a group of natives a quarter of a mile, or so, or the westward, coming toward the ship, when we returned to our boat that was lying at the edge of the ice, and went around to meet them. Joe was told to tell them the object we had in coming, and to inquire whether two of their number would go with our sledging party to assist in driving the teams. One of them, a strapping fellow over six feet high, said he had a wife, and four boys and two girls to hunt seals for, and therefore could not go. Another said that the journey was too long for him, and that our friends were not along the coast, else he would certainly have heard about them, and therefore the journey would be vain. We urged that we were going to seek them whether they were to be found or not, and that if they would go with us we would leave more food for their families than they could get for them by hunting. Two of the number at length consented to go, after being assured that we would pay them well, whether the journey proved successful or otherwise. Then we instructed that we would like to visit their village, which seemed to please them, for they started at once to guide us over the hummocky ice to where they had left their dog teams and sleds. It was a rough scramble at first, and even the natives slipped at times and hesitated cautiously in choosing a way, while we, encumbered with overcoats and not so well shod, kept sliding with awkward gait and clumps into hopper-shaped hollows and chasms filled with snow.

...away over the frozen capping of the sea, two rows of sails ahead. The distance...
had to hold himself in constant readiness to jump off and hold the sled while guiding it around sharp angles and across the high cutting ridges. My sled was not upset at all, and the Captain's only twice. Part of our way was across the mouth of a bay on smooth ice that had not been subjected to the mashing, upheaving strain of the ocean ice, and over this we glided rapidly. My Tchuch driver, now that he had no care about the upsetting of the sled, frequently turned with a smile and did his best to entertain me, though he did not understand a word of English. It was a rare, strange ride with us, yet accomplished with such everyday commonplace confidence, that it seemed at the time as if this might be the only mode of travel in the world. The dogs are as steady as oxen, each keeping its trace line tight, and showing no inclination to shirk—as unlike the illustrations I had seen as possible, in which all are represented running at a wild gallop with mouths wide open.

The village is built on a sand bar pushed up by the ice. I counted twenty huts in all. When we drove up, the women and children and old men who had not been tempted to make the journey to the ship, came out to meet us, and received us kindly, showing us to good seats on reindeer skins, and making good-natured efforts to return our salutations. When we discussed the proposed land journey the women and children listened attentively and took part in it.

**THE WINTERING PLACE OF THE VEGA.**

We inquired about the Vega, knowing that she wintered hereabouts, and they took us outside the hut and pointed out the spot a few miles distant, and also showed us a pocket compass and spoon and fork of Russian manufacture, that they said the Captain had given them.

At the last moment, when we were ready to return to the ship, one of the men we had engaged to go with the land party changed his mind and concluded to stay at home, the other stuck to his engagement, though evidently feeling acrid about leaving his family. His little boy cried bitterly when he learned that his father was going away, and refused all the offers made by the women to comfort him, and after we had sped away over the ice, half a mile from the village, we could still hear his screams.

The weather is promising this evening. No portion of the Polar pack is in sight, and we mean to push on westward as far as we can with safety.

*John Muir.*