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Perils of Whaling. The Corwin Among the Whaling Fleet Off Point Barrow. Destruction of Whaling Ships by Ice-Esquimaux Wreckers. (Special Correspondence of the Bulletin.) Steamer Corwin, off Point Barrow, August 18, 1881.

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PERILS OF WHALING.

The Corwin Among the Whaling Fleet
Off Point Barrow.

 Destruction of Whaling Ships by Esquimaux Wreckers.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.

STRAIGHT CORWIN, OFF POINT BARROW, August 15, 1881.

Finding it impossible to get northward through the ice anywhere near the east side of Wrangel Land, it was decided that we should cross to the American coast to make another effort to reach Point Barrow, to learn the fate of the whaleship Daniel Webster, which, as I have stated in a former letter, was lost in the ice there, and to offer assistance in case it should be required.

On the 15th, we spoke one of the whalers near Icy Cape, from whom we learned that the Daniel Webster was crushed and sunk, that about half of the crew had made their way down the coast to, near Icy Cape, where they found the Corwin and were taken on board, and that the others were still at Point Barrow or scattered along the shore, unless picked up by some of the fleet that were going north in search of them as fast as the state of the ice would allow.

Captain Owen of the bark Belvedere had sent a letter to them by one of the natives, directing them to build large driftwood fires on the shore to indicate their positions, and assuring them that relief was near. We had hoped that enough bone in the heavy drifting pack and carried northward helpless and rigid as a fly in a maelstrom, some change in the wind and current might set them free. But in discussing the question with an experienced whaler who had lost the first ship that he was master of at the same place and in the same way, he said that he had given her up as lost as soon as she was known to be abandoned.

OFF FOR POINT BARROW.

On receiving this news we started for Point Barrow and found the way clear, the pack having been blown off shore a few miles, and a heavy current was sweeping to the northward. Tuesday, the 16th, was calm and foggy at times, large masses of beautiful ice, blue and green and white, of every conceivable form, like the berries derived from flowers, were drifting with the river-like current of lying around remnants of the grand pack that so handsomely possessed of all the sea horizons. When we were passing Point Belcher and Bannamara we learned from the natives that the ice was off shore as far as Point Barrow and beyond it, and that several whaleships were already there, and that all the men from the broken ship had been taken on board. For some time the fog was so dense and the large barks so abundant we were compelled to lie to and drift with the current; but shortly after noon the sun came out, making a dazzling show among the ice and silvery water. Then the conical huts of the Esquimaux village on Point Barrow came in sight, and rounding the Point we found ourselves in the midst of quite a fleet of whalers, from whom we received the good news that, as we had been told by the natives, all the missing portion of the wrecked crew had at length been picked up and were now distributed among the different vessels. A few of them have been permanently added to the crews of the rescuing ships lying here, and others have been received on board of the Corwin.

DANGEROUS WHALING GROUND.

The strip of water sometimes found between Icy Cape and Point Barrow is perhaps the most dangerous whaling ground yet discovered. The ice is of tremendous thickness, a hundred feet or more, and its movements are extremely variable from season to season, and almost from day to day. It seldom leaves this part of the coast very far, some years not at all, and it is always liable to be driven close in shore by a few hours or days of strong wind blowing from any point of the compass around from north to southwest. When, as frequently happens, there is a margin of fixed ice along the shore the position of ships is most dangerous, for when the pack comes in and catches vessels in this ice-bound lane while trying to beat southwest against wind and current it closes upon them, and crushes them like huge crushing jaws. Should there be no fixed ice, then vessels may simply be shoved ashore.

A LARGE FLIGHT OF LOST WHALERS.

It is not long since the first whaleship passed Bering's Strait, yet no less than forty-seven have been crushed hereabouts, or pushed ashore, or embayed and swept away northward to nobody knows where, while many others have had narrow escapes. Thirty-three were caught and lost in this way here at one time, during the following season, and one last July, while two others barely made their escape the same day just as the fatal ice-jaws closed behind them. This last victim, the Daniel Webster, left New Bedford in November, 1880, passed through Bering's Strait on the 10th of June, and was caught in the pack July 20. It seems from the account furnished us by the first mate that she
Written, Aug. 18, 1861

The Point Barrow Equinmaux, keenly familiar with the actions of the winds and currents, was destined to shew with its movements the state of the ice, watched the struggling ship, and came aboard before the lea had yet closed upon her, like wolves scenting their prey from afar. Many a wreck have they enjoyed here, and now, sure of yet another, they ran ashore the ship examining every movable article, and narrowly scanning the rigging and sails with reference to carrying away as much as possible of the best of everything, such as the sail, lead pipe for bullets, hard bread, sugar, tobacco, etc. In case they should have but a short time to work.

She filled so quickly after being crushed that the crew saved but little more than the clothes they were wearing. Some hard bread, beef and other stores were hastily thrown over upon the ice, and one boat was secured. As soon as she was given up, the Equinmaux climbed into the rigging, and desperately cut away and secured all the sails, which they value highly for making sale for their large traveling canoes and for covers for their summer huts. Then they secured as much as possible and anything they could lay hands on, acting promptly and showing the completeness of the apprenticeship they had served.

The ship was then about five miles from the Equinnaux village, and the natives were allowed to assist in carrying everything that had been saved, and under the circumstances, in getting over the five miles of ice with so much labor, they, like white men, reasoned themselves into the belief that everything belonged to them, even the chronometers and sextants. Accordingly, at the village a general division was made in so masterly a manner that by the time the officers and crew reached the village their goods had vanished into a hundred odd dens and holes; and when hungry, they asked for some of their own biscuits, the natives complimented them; and at the rate of so much tobacco space. From the chronometers had been divided, it is said, after being taken apart, the wheels and bits of lining being regarded as fine jewelry for the young women and children to wear. A keg of rum, that the officers feared might fall into their hands and cause trouble by making them drunk, was thrown heavily over on the ice with the intention of smashing it, but it was not broken by the fall. One of the Equinmaux picked up the price to him more precious than its weight in gold, and sped away over the slippery crags and hollows of the ice with admira­ble speed, vainly pursued by the first mate, and at the village it disappeared as far beyond recovery as it had been poured into a hot sand bank. As wreckers, traders and drinkers these sturdy Equinmaux are making rapid progress, notwithstanding the fortunate disadvantages they labor under, as compared with their white brethren, dwelling in so severe a climate on the confines of the frozen sea.

A WEARY TRIP—EXPEDITIONS OF THE SHIP-WRECKED WHALEMEN.

The crew, numbering twenty-eight men, comprising the second mate and two of the sailors, started down the coast about, after waiting some time for the ice to drift off shore far enough to allow some of the other ships to come to their relief, or at least far enough to leave a passage for their boat. At the river Ogina tea of the party turned back, hungry and hungry and discouraged, to Cape Smith, to pick up a living of oil and seal meat until replenished, rather than face the danger of fording the river and enduring yet greater hardships. The others pushed forward. Directed by one of the na­tives, they went up the bank of the river about twenty miles from its mouth, to where it is much narrower. Here they forded without danger, carrying their clothes on their heads to keep them dry. Both parties seem to have suf­fered considerably from hunger as well as from cold and fatigue, the seal and oil meal being the natives of the different villages they passed good naturally allowed them to share but not supply the place of their own-dimensional, re­lish and regular rations. They speak of hav­ing been reduced to the state of raving roots and leaves of the few dwarf plants found along their way. At Point Poisson they were so fortunate as to find a travelling party of natives, who, after their chumian had only consulted the spirits supposed to be influential and wise concerning the affairs of this rough region and reported favorably, agreed to take the party in their canoe southward to seek the whaling fleet, the pack having by this time commenced to leave the shore. By this means the wanderers reached the bark Coral in four days, at a cost of two rifles and some tobacco. The others were kindly received by the Cape Smith people and entertained until the ice left the shore. One of the three left at Point Barrow, it seems, wandered southward alone and lost himself with fatigue and hunger. He was without food for five days, save what he could pick up from the sparse today vegetation, and was nearly dead.
Written, Aug. 18, 1861

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when discovered by a relief party from one of the ships. The natives, he said, refused to allow him to enter their huts, because his eyes were wild and he would soon be crazy. Fortunately all are now cared for.

FREQUENCIES OF WHALING-GROUNDS.

Newly discovered whaling grounds, like gold mines, are soon overcrowded and worked out, the whales being either killed or driven away. But whales worth four or five thousand dollars apiece are so intensely attractive and interesting, the grand game has been hunted in the face of a thousand dangers over nearly all the seas and oceans on the face of the globe. According to Alexander Starbuck, in his history of the American whale fishery, in the year 1846, there belonged to the various ports of the United States, 678 ships and bars, 36 brigs and 16 schooners that were hunting whales. In 1848 the first bowhead whales taken in the North Pacific were captured on the coast of Kamtschatka, and in 1848 the first whale ship passed Bering's Strait. This was the bark Superior, Captain Royce. A full cargo was easily obtained, because of the abundance and tunableness of the whales. The news, like a gold discovery, spread rapidly, and within the next three years two hundred and fifty ships had obtained cargoes of oil and bones here. This, therefore, a comparatively new hunting ground, is nevertheless a thing being rapidly exhausted. The precious bowheads are no longer seen in "song wharves," as described by an old whaleman familiar with the region. This year only twenty vessels are engaged in the business.

DANGERS OF WHALE FISHING.

In 1871 thirty-three vessels were caught in one rock off Point Belcher and crushed or shoved ashore. One of them is said to have been "crushed to atoms," the officers and crew escaping over the ice, saving scarcely anything but their lives. In a few days after the 5th of August, most of the fleet was north of Brosson Shoals, and worked to the northeast as far as Wainwright crag. Here the ships either anchored or made fast to the ice which was very heavy and densely packed. On the 14th of August a sudden change of wind drove the ice inland, catching a large number of boats that were out in pursuit of whales, and forcing the ships to work north in the lee of the grounded ice. On the 15th, the incoming pack grounded, leaving only a narrow strip of water, in which the fleet was imprisoned more and more every day. The following, red, the 16th, a southwest wind again drove the ice inland, and once more ashore in the doomed fleet. The thirty-four vessels were scattered along the coast for twenty miles, more and more rigidly packed, until the 14th of September, when they were abandoned—that is, those of them not already crushed.

The following, a vivid light upon the subject, was written on the 14th of September, and signed by all the captains before abandoning their vessels:

POINT BEULTER, Arctic Ocean, September 14, 1871.

Know all men by these presents, that we, the undersigned, masters of whale ships now lying at Point Belcher, after holding a meeting concerning our drearful situation, have come to the conclusion that our ships cannot be got off this gale, and there being an improbability that we can ever be released, and being sensible that owing to the crowding to a barren country, where there is neither food nor fuel to be obtained, we feel ourselves under the painful necessity of abandoning our vessels, and trying to work our way south with our boys, and, if possible, get on board of ships that are south of the ice. We do not think it would be prudent to leave a single soul to look after our vessels, as the first weasally gale will crowd (the ice ashore, and therewith, the ships or crews) back upon the beach. Those of the boats that are already crushed, and two or more are lying here out, which have been out for six and seven months, we have no idea how to get them out. We have now left among us, we have barely room to swing an anchor between the ice and the beach, and we are lying in three fathoms of water. Should we cast on the beach it would be at least eleven months before we could look for assistance, and in all probability none of you would have discovered or saved one before the opening of spring.

All the officers and crew—1,319 souls—reached the seven relief vessels that had waited for us outside the ice, and were distributed among these, seven being the remainder of the fleet that passed through Bering's Strait in the spring.

Next summer only five of the thirty-three were seen, one of them comparatively maimed. All the rest had been smashed, sunk, burned, or carried away in the pack.

Five years later (1876), the fleet consisted of twenty ships and barks, and of thirty thirteen were employed in the pack, twenty or thirty miles of Point Barrow. After waiting and hoping for the coming of a liberating gale as long as they dared, the masters decided that it was necessary to abandon their vessels. Out of 352 persons, 30 remained with the ships, hoping to get them free in the spring; but ten of the ships, or of those who stayed on, were ever again seen. The 300, who left their vessels, after enduring great hardships, succeeded in making good their escape to the rest of the fleet waiting outside the pack—all save three or four that perished by the way.

TEN SCHOONERS LEFT THIS YEAR.

There are now twelve whale ships about Point Barrow in sight from the Corwin, and all that would be necessary to shut them in is a gale from the southwest. Still the great love of adventure, and the great love of money, compel the risk here and elsewhere over and over again.