

An Arctic Explorer

by Rupert Holland

When Columbus sailed from Palos in 1492 he hoped to find a shorter route to Cathay or China than any that was then known, and the great explorers who followed after him had the same hope of such a discovery in their minds. When men learned that instead of finding a short route to China they had come upon two great continents that shared the Western Ocean, they turned their thoughts to discovering what was known as the Northwest Passage. They hoped to find a way by which ships might sail from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean north of America. The great English explorers in particular were eager to find such an ocean route, and this search was the real beginning of the fur-trading around Hudson's Bay, the cod-fishing of Newfoundland, and the whale-fishing of Baffin Bay.

One sea-captain after another sailed across the Atlantic, and strove to find the passage through the Arctic regions; but the world of snow and ice defeated each of them. Some went back to report that there was no Northwest Passage, and others were lost among the ice-floes and never returned. Then in 1845 England decided to send a great expedition to make another attempt, and put at the head of it Sir John Franklin, a brave captain who had fought with Nelson and knew the sea in all its variety. He sailed from England May 26, 1845, taking one hundred and twenty-nine men in the two ships *Erebus* and *Terror*. He carried enough provisions to last him for three years. On July 26, 1845, Franklin's two vessels were seen by the captain of a whaler, moored to an iceberg in Baffin Bay. They were waiting for an opening in the middle of an ice-pack, through which they might sail across the bay and enter Lancaster Sound. They were never seen again, and the question of what had happened to Sir John Franklin's party became one of the mysteries of the age.

More than twenty ships, with crews of nearly two thousand officers and men, at a cost of many millions of dollars, sought for Sir John Franklin in the years between 1847 and 1853. One heroic explorer after another sailed into the Arctic, crossed the ice-floes, and searched for some trace of the missing men. But none could be found, and one after another the explorers came back, their only report being that the ice had swallowed all traces of the English captain and his vessels. At length the last of the expeditions sent out by the English Government returned, and the world decided that the mystery would never be solved. But brave Lady Franklin, the wife of Sir John, urged still other men to seek for news, and at last explorers found that all of Franklin's expedition had perished in their search for the Northwest Passage.

Arctic explorers usually leave records telling the story of their discoveries at different points along the road they follow. For a long time after the fate of Franklin's party was known, men tried to find records he might have left in cairns, or piles of stones through the Arctic regions. Whale vessels sometimes brought news of such records, but most of them proved to be idle yarns told by the whalers to surprise their friends at home. One of these stories was that all the missing records of Sir John Franklin were to be found in a cairn which was built near Repulse Bay. This story was told so often that people came to believe it was true, and some young Americans set out to make a search of King William Land and try to find the cairn. The party sailed on the whaler *Eothen*, and five men landed at Repulse Bay. The leader was Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka, of the United States Army. He had three friends with him named Gilder, Klutschak, and Melms, and with them was an Eskimo, who was known as Joe.

The young Americans set up a winter camp on Chesterfield Inlet, and tried to live as much like

the native Eskimos as possible. During the winter they met many natives on their hunting-trips, and the latter soon convinced them that they were on a wild-goose chase, and that the story of the cairn was probably only a sailor's yarn. Lieutenant Schwatka, however, was not the sort of man to return home without some results from his trip, and so he made up his mind to go into the country where Franklin's party had perished, hoping that he might find some record which would throw light on the earlier explorer's travels.

The Eskimos were a race largely unknown to civilized men. White men had seen much more of the native American Indians who lived in more temperate climates. These young Americans found a great deal to interest them during the winter among these strange people of the far North. Hunting was their chief pursuit, and the Americans found that they spent much of their time indoors playing a game called *Nu-glew-tar*, which sharpened their quickness of eye and sureness of aim. It was a simple sport; a small piece of bone, pierced with a row of small holes, was hung from the roof of the hut by a rope of walrus hide, and a heavy weight was fastened to the end of the bone to keep it from swinging. The Eskimo players were each armed with a small sharp-pointed stick, and each in turn would thrust his stick at the bone, trying to pierce one of the holes. The prize was won by the player who pierced the bone and held it fast with his stick.

As soon as spring opened Lieutenant Schwatka started out, leaving his winter camp in April, 1879, and crossing in as straight a line as possible to Montreal Island, near the mouth of the Black River. He took with him twelve Eskimos, men, women, and children, and dogs to pull the sledges. They carried food for one month only, intending to hunt during the summer. Every night the Eskimos built snow huts, or igloos, in which the party camped. As they went on they met men of another Arctic tribe, the Ook-joo-liks, who wore shoes and gloves made of musk-ox skin, which was covered with hair several inches long, and made the wearers look more like bears than like men. One of these natives said that he had seen a ship that had sunk off Adelaide Peninsula, and that he and his friends had obtained such articles as spoons, knives, and plates from the ship. Lieutenant Schwatka thought the ship was probably either the *Erebus* or the *Terror*. Later his party found an old woman who said that when she had been on the southeast coast of King William Land not many years before she had seen ten white men dragging a sledge with a boat on it. Five of the white men put up a tent on the shore and five stayed with the boat. Some men of the woman's tribe had killed seals and given them to the white men; then the white men had left, and neither she nor any of her tribe had seen them again. Asking questions of the Eskimos he met, Lieutenant Schwatka and his comrades gradually pieced together the story of what had happened to Franklin and his men. But the American was not content with what he had learned in this way, and he determined to cross Simpson Strait to King William Land, and search for records there during the summer. This meant that he would have to spend the summer on this bare and desolate island, as there would be no chance to cross the strait until the cold weather of autumn should form new ice for a bridge.

The Eskimos did everything they could to persuade him not to cross to the island. They told him that in 1848 more than one hundred men had perished of starvation there, and added that no one could find sufficient food to keep them through the summer. Yet the fearless soldier and his friends insisted on making the attempt, and some of the Eskimos were daring enough to go with them.

It seemed doubtful whether they could even get across the strait. Every few steps some man would sink into the ice-pack up to his waist and his legs would dangle in slush without finding bottom. The sledges would sink so that the dogs, floundering and scrambling, could not pull them. The men had to push the dog-teams along, and after the first day's travel they were all so exhausted that they had to rest the whole of the next day before they could start on again. Finally they reached the opposite shore

of the strait, and, while the natives built igloos and hunted, the Americans searched for records of Franklin's party. They found enough traces to prove that the men who had sought the Northwest Passage had spent some time on this desolate strip of land.

More than once they were in danger of starvation. In the spring the Eskimos hunted wild ducks, which they found in remote stretches of water. Their way of hunting was to steal up on a flock of the birds, and, as soon as the ducks took alarm, to rush toward the largest bunch of them. The hunter then threw his spear, made with three barbs of different lengths, and caught the duck on the sharp central prong. The long wooden shaft of the spear would keep the duck floating on the water until the hunter could seize it. But as summer drew on, and the ducks migrated, food grew very scarce. Once or twice they discovered bears, which they shot, and when there was nothing else to eat they lived on a small black berry that the Eskimos called *parawong*, which proved very sustaining.

As the white men tramped day after day over the icy hillocks their footwear wore out, and often walking became a torment. In telling of their march Gilder said, "We were either wading through the hillside torrents or lakes, which, frozen on the bottom, made the footing exceedingly treacherous, or else with sealskin boots, soft by constant wetting, painfully plodding over sharp stones set firmly in the ground with the edges pointed up. Sometimes as a new method of injury, stepping and slipping on flat stones, the unwary foot slid into a crevice that seemingly wrenched it from the body."

When they had nothing else to eat the white men lived on the same food as the native hunters. This was generally a tallow made from the reindeer, and eaten with strips of reindeer meat. A dish of this, mixed with seal-oil, was said to look like ice-cream and took the place of that dessert with the Eskimos. Lieutenant Schwatka said, however, that instead of tasting like ice-cream it reminded him more of locust, sawdust and wild-honey.

As autumn drew on they made ready to cross back to the mainland; but it took some time for the ice to form on the strait. Gilder said of their camp life: "We eat quantities of reindeer tallow with our meat, probably about half of our daily food. Breakfast is eaten raw and frozen, but we generally have a warm meal in the evening. Fuel is hard to obtain and now consists of a vine-like moss called *ik-shoot-ik*. Reindeer tallow is used for a light. A small, flat stone serves for a candlestick, on which a lump of tallow is placed close to a piece of fibrous moss called *mun-ne*, which is used for a wick. The melting tallow runs down upon the stone and is immediately absorbed by the moss. This makes a cheerful and pleasant light, but is most exasperating to a hungry man as it smells exactly like frying meat. Eating such quantities of tallow is a great benefit in this climate, and we can easily see the effects of it in the comfort with which we meet the cold."

As soon as the ice on the strait was frozen hard enough the reindeer crossed it, and by the middle of October King William Land was practically deserted. Then the Americans and Eskimos started back to the mainland. Winter had now come, and the weather was intensely cold, often ninety degrees below freezing. In December the traveling grew worse, and food became so scarce that they had to stop day after day for hunting. In January a blizzard struck their camp and lasted thirteen days; then wolves prowled about them at night, and once actually killed four of their dogs. "A sealskin full of blubber," said Gilder, "would have saved many of our dogs; but we had none to spare for them, as we were reduced to the point when we had to save it exclusively for lighting the igloos at night. We could not use it to warm our igloos or to cook with. Our meat had to be eaten cold—that is, frozen so solid that it had to be sawed and then broken into convenient-sized lumps, which when first put into the mouth were like stones. Sometimes, however, the snow was beaten off the moss on the hillsides and enough was gathered to cook a meal."

When they were almost on the point of starvation a walrus was killed, and supplied them with food to last until they got back to the nearest Eskimo village. From the coast they took ship to the United States. The records they brought with them practically completed the account of what had happened to Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition. And almost equally important were the new details they brought in regard to Eskimo life, and the proof they gave that men of the temperate zone could pass a year in the frozen land of the far north if they would live as the natives did, and adapt themselves to the rigors of that climate.

Source:

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