

CASTAWAYS ON EAST SPITZBERGEN.

A narrative of the singular adventures of four Russian sailors, who were cast away on the desert island of East Spitzbergen, etc. By P. L. Le Roy, translated from the German Original (s.l. et d.) [London, 1774].

BY SIR WILLIAM MARTIN CONWAY.



"SHE WAS BLOWN EASTWARD AND ENCOMPASSED BY ICE."



N the year 1743, about the month of May, a vessel sailed to Spitzbergen for the whale or seal fishery. On the ninth day after sailing from Archangel the fair wind changed, and she was blown eastward, and after some days was encompassed by ice and placed in a position of

great peril about two miles from the shore of East Spitzbergen. Expecting the destruction of the ship, the mate Alexis Himkof, his godson Iwan Himkof, and two other sailors, Stephen Scharapof and Feodor Weregine by name, prepared to land and search for a hut, which they knew had been built by countrymen of theirs with a view to wintering in those parts. It was determined that if the hut could be found the ship should be abandoned.

The four sailors provided themselves with such things as were necessary for their use during the few days they might be away from the ship, for they had to travel over piled and broken ice for two miles to the shore. They took a musket and twelve rounds of ammunition, an axe, a small kettle, a knife, a tinder-box and tinder, about twenty pounds of flour,

a bladder of tobacco, and each man his wooden pipe. They soon discovered the hut about a mile and a half inland. It was 36 ft. long, 18 ft. high, and 18 ft. wide. It contained a small ante-chamber about 12 ft. broad, which helped to keep the cold air out of the main chamber. In the latter was an earthen Russian stove without chimney.

Next morning they returned to the shore, and were horrified to discover that ice-pack and ship had been carried away, and the open sea confronted them. The ship was never heard of again. They immediately set to work to patch up their hut by help of their axe and the driftwood, of which they found a considerable quantity on the shore. Their twelve rounds of ammunition procured for them twelve reindeer, with which they started housekeeping. The only vegetable product of the island was a little scurvy-grass.

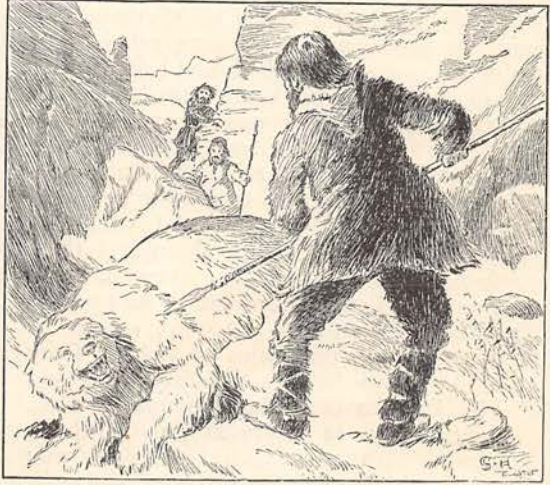
Amongst the driftwood they fortunately found fragments of wreckage which provided them with some boards as well as with a long iron hook, some big nails 5 or 6 inches long, and other bits of iron. They also found a piece of fir root which only required to be trimmed with their knife to form a handy bow.

By heating the hook and working at it with a nail they made a hammer of it. With

a large pebble for anvil and two reindeer horns for tongs they next forged two nails into spear-heads and fastened them into wooden shafts with thongs of reindeer skin. Thus equipped, they sallied forth and slaughtered a white bear after a most perilous fight. His flesh gave them food, and out of his tendons, which they discovered how to split, they made cords which served them for bowstring and for tying on to wooden shafts small iron arrow-points which they made in the same way as the spear-heads. With these arrows, during the years of their imprisonment, they slew no less than 150 reindeer, besides a great number of blue and white foxes. Of bears they killed in all ten, nine in defending themselves from attack and the one above-mentioned. Such was the entire supply of food on which these men subsisted till August, 1749—a period of six years. They smoked some of their meat, but ate most of it raw, for they had to husband their fuel. It was this plentiful supply of raw meat and fresh blood, coupled with their active life, that preserved three of them from scurvy. The fourth, Feodor Weregine, who was an indolent man and, moreover, refrained from drinking reindeer blood, was attacked soon after arrival in the island, and died of scurvy shortly before the others were relieved.

To keep their fire continually alight was a prime necessity, for, their supply of tinder being exhausted, if it were to go out they would be unable to relight it. They therefore determined to make a lamp. Nearly in the middle of the island they found some earthy clay of which they fashioned a rude

pot. They filled it with reindeer fat, and used some twisted linen for a wick. When the fat melted, however, it oozed away through



"OF BEARS THEY KILLED NINE OR TEN."

the sides, which were too porous to hold it. So they made a new lamp, dried it thoroughly, and then heated it red hot, and quenched it in their kettle in a mixture of flour and water boiled to the consistency of thin starch. They covered its outside with linen rags which had been dipped in the paste. This contrivance succeeded, and the lamp held oil; they accordingly made a second for fear of accidents. For wicks they used a small quantity of oakum and cordage washed up with the driftwood, and tore up their shirts and undergarments. The supply thus formed lasted as long as they were on the island.

They made clothes out of skins, which they soaked for several days in water till the hair could be pulled off, and then rubbed dry with their hands and afterwards thoroughly greased and rubbed. They made needles out of bits of iron and wrought them with considerable skill, as was vouched for by those who saw them on their return to Europe. Sinews served for thread. In summer they wore jackets and breeches of skins, and in winter long fur gowns with hoods.

They described the island as having many mountains and steep rocks of a stupendous height constantly covered with snow and ice. Its only vegetation is scurvy-grass and moss. About the middle of the island they found the "fattish loam or clay" above referred to. There are no rivers but many small rivulets. As for the weather, they said that from about the middle of November to the beginning of January it generally rained hard and continually, and all that time the cold was



"THEY MADE A HAMMER OF IT."

moderate. After this rainy season severe cold prevailed, especially when the wind was from the south. They only once heard thunder.

Shortly after the death of Weregim the survivors in August, 1749, were rejoiced by seeing a Russian ship, which had been carried out of its course to West Spitzbergen by contrary winds. She was driven close to shore just opposite the hut. The men on board saw the fires and reindeer hide flag of the castaways, and came to anchor near the shore. The three men agreed with the master of the ship to give them and their goods a passage to Russia in return for their work on board and a payment of 80 roubles. They had accumulated 2,000 lb. weight of reindeer fat and quantities of hides. They brought off also the poor tools by whose help they had been enabled to keep themselves alive.

They arrived in safety at Archangel on September 28th, 1749. Alexis Himkof's wife was present when the vessel came into port,

and immediately recognised her husband. She was so overcome with joy and eagerness to touch him that she fell into the water and was nearly drowned. All three men on their arrival were strong and healthy. They could not reconcile themselves to eating bread nor to the use of spirituous liquors, of which they had been so long deprived.

The account of their adventures was noised abroad, and attracted much attention. Alexis and Iwan Himkof were sent for to St. Petersburg, and took with them the tools they had made on the island. Their story was carefully examined by several persons, who became convinced of its veracity. It was written down and published in German by P. L. Le Roy, Professor of History and member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg. The pamphlet had a wide circulation, and was translated into English, French, Dutch, and (I believe) Italian, and published in numerous editions. From it the foregoing relation has been abstracted.



"THEY WERE REJOICED BY SEEING A RUSSIAN SHIP."

A FAIR CORRESPONDENT.

HER letter finished—she has laid
Her pen aside, and, half afraid
Of something written, vain or wrong,
The fond eyes search it long and long,
While smiles of lovely meaning grace
The youthful beauty of her face.

I mark—a vision sweet and fair—
The rapt, intent, and wistful air,
And strive to guess what thoughts engage
The heart whose language thrills the page,
Where love, that breathes in every word,
Each simple line with life has stirred.

"My Dearest," it begins! and see
It ends, "Your own, true Marjory."
This much, no more—what comes between
I must not tell, though all unseen,
By happy chance, I lean above
Her chair, and read these vows of love.

I find the old, old story here,
For ever new, for ever dear!
How many maidens—fair and bright
Like Marjory, with hearts as light—
Are writing thus, from day to day,
This old, old story, none can say!

J. R. EASTWOOD,