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Fridtjof Nansen Translated by William Archer
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In later life the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian work, the Norwegian explorer and scientist Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930) led the team that in 1888 made the first successful crossing of Greenland's interior. Finding themselves cut off from the rest of the world for the winter, Nansen and his men spent several months living among the Greenlandic Inuit. Although 'far too short a time in which to attain a thorough knowledge', it was nevertheless sufficient to form a strong acquaintance and affection. First published in 1893, this English translation of the 1891 Norwegian original offers a valuable insight into much that was, and remains, foreign and peculiar to European experience. The coverage ranges from culinary to linguistic observations, and Nansen is by turns repulsed, fascinated and full of compassion, asking what the future holds for a people 'already stung with the venom of our civilisation'.

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A HUNTER, HIS WIFE, AND A YOUNG GIRL (WEST COAST OF GREENLAND)

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ESKIMO LIFE

BY

FRIDTJOF NANSEN

AUTHOR OF 'THE FIRST CROSSING OF GREENLAND'

TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM ARCHER

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.



BEFORE placing his 'Eskimoliv' in my hands for translation, Dr. Nansen very carefully revised the text, and made numerous excisions and additions. Thus the following pages will be found to differ in several particulars from the Norwegian original. I also requested and received Dr. Nansen's permission to suppress one or two especially nauseous details of Eskimo manners, which seemed to have no particular ethnological significance. The excisions made on this score, however, probably do not amount to half a page in all.

Dr. Nansen suggested that I should follow the example of Dr. Rink in his 'Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo,' and treat the word 'Eskimo' as indeclinable. I have ventured, however, to overrule

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his suggestion. There is precedent for both 'Eskimo' and 'Eskimos' as the plural form; and where there is any choice at all, it seems only rational to prefer the regular declension.

In Chapters XIII. and XIV. Dr. Nansen naturally makes numerous references to that great storehouse of Greenland folk-lore, Dr. Rink's 'Eskimo Sagn og Eventyr,' which has been translated and condensed by the author himself, under the above-mentioned title. Where it was possible, I have given the reference to the English edition; but in cases where the text has been very freely condensed or expurgated, I have referred to the Danish original as well. Even where I have not done so, students of folk-lore may be advised to go back to the original text, which is often fuller and more characteristic than the English version.

W. A.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.



FOR one whole winter we were cut off from the world and immured among the Greenlanders. I dwelt in their huts, took part in their hunting, and tried, as well as I could, to live their life and learn their language. But one winter, unfortunately, is far too short a time in which to attain a thorough knowledge of so peculiar a people, its civilisation, and its ways of thought—that would require years of patient study. Nevertheless, I have tried in this book to record the impressions made upon me by the Eskimo and his polity, and have sought, as far as possible, to support them by quotations from former authors. There may even be things which a newcomer sees more clearly than an observer of many years' standing, who lives in their midst.

On many points, perhaps, the reader may not

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think as I do. I cannot, it is true, find that whatever is is very good; I am weak enough to feel compassion for a declining race, which is perhaps beyond all help, since it is already stung with the venom of our civilisation. But I comfort myself with the thought that at least no words of mine can make the lot of this people worse than it is, and I hope that the reader will accept my observations in the spirit in which they are written. *Amicus Plato, amicus Socrates, magis amica veritas*—the truth before everything. And if in some points I should appear unreasonable, I must plead as my excuse that it is scarcely possible to live for any time among these people without conceiving an affection for them—for that, one winter is more than enough.

During the long, dark evenings, as I sat in the low earth-huts and gazed at the flame of the train-oil lamps, I had ample time for reflection. It often seemed to me that I could see these hardy children of Nature pressing westward, stage by stage, in their dog-sledges and in their wonderful skin-canoes, along the barren ice-coasts; I saw how they fought their way onward, and, little by little, perfected their in-

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genious implements and attained their masterly skill in the chase. Hundreds, nay thousands, of years passed, tribe after tribe succumbed, while other and stronger stocks survived—and I was filled with admiration for a people which had emerged victorious from the struggle with such inhospitable natural surroundings.

But in melancholy contrast to this inspiring picture of the past, the present and the future rose before my eyes—a sad, a hopeless mist.

In Greenland the Eskimos fell in with Europeans. First it was our Norwegian forefathers of the olden times; then they gradually overcame. But we returned to the charge, this time bringing with us Christianity and the products of civilisation; then they succumbed, and are sinking ever lower and lower. The world passes on with a pitying shrug of the shoulders.

‘What more can one say? Who’s a penny the worse
Though a beggar be dead?’

But this people, too, has its feelings, like others; it, too, rejoices in life and Nature, and bleeds under our iron heel. If anyone doubts this, let him

observe their sympathy with one another, and their love for their children; or let him read their legends.

Whenever I saw instances of the suffering and misery which we have brought upon them, that remnant of a sense of justice which is still to be found in most of us stirred me to indignation, and I was filled with a burning desire to send the truth reverberating over the whole world. Were it once brought home to them, I thought, people could not but awaken from their indifference, and at once make good the wrong they had done.

Poor dreamer! You have nothing to say which has not been better said before. The hapless lot of the Greenlanders, as well as of other 'native' races, has been set forth on many hands, and always without avail.

But, none the less, I felt I must unburden my conscience; it seemed to me a sacred duty to add my protest to the rest. My pen, unhappily, is all too feeble: what I feel most deeply I have failed to express: never have I longed more intensely for a poet's gifts. I know very well that my voice, too,

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will be as a cry sent forth over a flat expanse of desert, without even mountains to echo it back. My only hope is to awaken here and there a feeling of sympathy with the Eskimos and of sorrow for their destiny.

FRIDTJOF NANSEN.

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