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978-1-108-07111-6 - New Land: Four Years in the Arctic Regions: Volume 2

Otto Neumann Sverdrup Translated by Ethel Harriet Hearn

Excerpt

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NEW LAND

CHAPTER I.

ISACHSEN RELATES.

ON June 19 Isachsen and Hassel returned on board, and the following is a brief account of their journey written by the former :—

‘On the morning of Easter Monday, April 16, just as we were about to start, a glimpse of land was discovered in the west ; and after a short consultation it was decided that Hassel and I should cross over to this “new land,” return thence to Cape Levvel, and then try to gain some knowledge of the land south and west.

‘After a short “good-bye, and a prosperous journey,” the Captain and Fosheim drove off northward. They disappeared at once from sight in the hummocky ice, and we then set to work to redistribute the loads on our sledges, taking with us provisions for a fortnight. The rest we cached in a snow-drift, and put up a mark. We did not think we were risking very much by doing this, as we had never seen any bear-tracks north of Cape South-West.

‘The faint glimpse of land in the west which we had seen in the morning at once disappeared from sight in the misty atmosphere, and shortly afterwards “Cape Levvel” behind us. For our guidance, therefore, we had only the chronometer, and the sun which shone on us every now and then. The shape of the drifts, which are conditioned by the prevailing direction of the winds, are also of some help, but the compass alone cannot be depended on in these regions. Early in the day we again managed to break the hand of the odometer in the rugged ice, but after that we got out on to largish old floes with high drifts.

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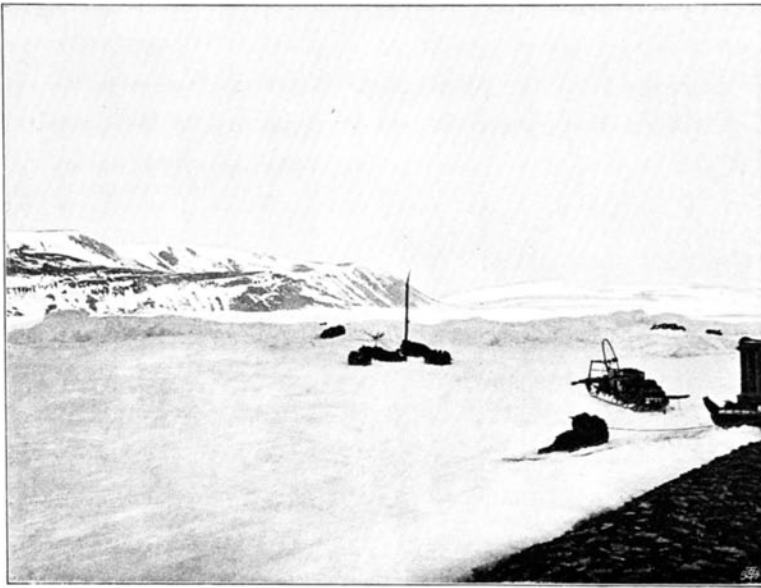
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‘During the following days we saw nothing of land, until the evening of April 20, when it cleared, and we saw that we were near the ice-foot, and that this was bounded by a high barrier of ice.

‘The direction of the coast here was north-west by south-west. We followed the ice southward. Inside our course was a large expanse of sand, behind which the land rose at a gentle gradient, with higher ground north and south, though nothing that we could see exceeded a height of about 900 feet. The



CAMP BY THE ICE-FOOT.

country was uniformly covered with snow, except for bare patches here and there where the ground fell away rather more abruptly. On these there was a good deal of moss and lichen, but of the vegetation on the whole it was difficult to form any opinion, as there was a great deal of snow on the places where it might be expected to be most luxuriant. Nor was it easy to get near the mountains for the purpose of taking specimens of the rock.

‘According to arrangement, we drove back to Cape Levvel, and arrived there on April 28. We had high wind from the south-east

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for three days. On the 25th it went over to the north-west, with snow.

‘Weather such as this is very trying for the dogs. “Vesla” had four puppies, which “went to the dogs,” and “Gamml’n,” poor fellow, we were obliged to shoot. He had always been rather weakly, and was now at the end of his forces, and besides he was not a young dog. The following morning there was nothing left of him but a few tufts of hair, his comrades having demolished the rest.

‘After leaving a letter for the Captain at Cape Levvel, at the spot we had agreed on, we drove south with a fresh north-west gale behind us, turning eastward at Cape South-West on May 2. As soon as we had passed the cape the wind went down and it became calm and sunshiny. This beautiful sunshine was especially welcome, and we at once made the most of it by turning our sleeping-bags inside out and letting them dry in it. The effects of the wet bag had shown themselves in various ways, one being that Hassel dreamed one night that he was on board, had been put on the capstan, and all hands were standing round, each playing on him with a hose.

‘The land here was of a quite different character from that west. Instead of an undulating surface and low hills, there were here steep precipices and heights rising to about 5000 feet. Here and there a glacier protruded, and they seemed—at any rate as far as the more southern ones were concerned—to issue from a central ice-cap, and seldom reached the coast. Whereas, also, the mountains between Cape Levvel and Cape South-West fell fairly abruptly into the sea, there was here on the south coast a considerable amount of underland, and less sharply defined transitions in the outlines of the mountains. The coast-line was also less indented than that of the west coast.

‘The snow on Norskebugten was deep, loose, and unusually heavy. On May 6 we passed Hyperitodden, round which point we saw the tracks of numerous bears. No sooner had we begun to drive across it than a north wind sprang up in our teeth. We camped in the middle of “Ulvefjord” (Wolf Fjord), as it was afterwards called. East of us we saw the snow being blown out

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from another inlet. The land between the inlets seemed to be two islands; but this, we concluded, we should find out for certain when we came to drive along the east side of the aforesaid land.

‘As the wind and drift grew still worse during the following days, we were obliged to remain where we were and wait—we simply *had* to see now.

‘At the time we had parted from the homeward-bound detachment, on March 31, we had been provisioned for fifty days, while the bear we had shot had provided us with food for another six days. Twelve days, we thought, must be allowed to drive from our present camping-place to Björneborg. The way overland would also take time, so that according to our calculations we could not continue our onward course for more than three days longer, though if we came across game we might still continue for a while. It would be very annoying if we were obliged to turn south now that we stood on the very threshold of the promised land.

‘On May 8 we drove north, up the eastern inlet, at first following the shore, until we had passed a low neck of land. We now saw that the southern hill was not an island, as we had thought. Some distance to the north there appeared to be a largish island in the midst of the fjord, and on about the western end of this we shaped our course. During these days the odometer was broken for the third time. I put it to rights again, but the rod was now so short that, practically speaking, it was useless. The weather at this time was particularly trying for the eyes, the atmosphere and the snow being both of the same grey tone; for this reason also we had great difficulty in seeing what the ice was like ahead of us. The mountains on this west side were unusually high, especially those nearest the coast; on the east side they were of less height.

‘We saw some heather, and the excrements of polar oxen and hares which had been blown hither and thither about the ice, and we therefore scanned the country eagerly for game. After we had passed the second fjord on this west side we saw two dark spots up on the talus, and shortly afterwards I noticed that they moved.

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They were polar oxen. I was not long in getting out my carbine and starting after them, but the animals moved away, and I therefore shouted to Hassel to set the dogs on them. The animals—they were a bull and a cow with its calf—had meanwhile formed up on a large knoll which it was very difficult to reach, as there was some hard steep snow below it. The dogs and I arrived there at the same moment. I crawled on my hands and knees, in the track of the animals, to the top of the snow slope, where they stood defiantly, with lowered heads, snorting and pawing up the ground with their fore-legs. They looked very formidable, but I had no time for reflection, and fired at the cow from where I stood. The bull immediately charged me, but two shots—one at four or five paces—brought it rolling to my feet.

‘The calf, which I had not hitherto noticed, as it had hidden itself in the long hair of the cow, had been attacked by the dogs, and I had a skirmish with them before I could prevent them from worrying it to death. It is with a curious sensation that one stands face to face with these animals; their appearance and environment carry one’s thoughts back to a time long past.

‘We rolled them down the snow slope and opened them, after first milking the cow. The dogs had one animal all to themselves; we harnessed all twelve to the other and drove it, on the skin, down the snow-slopes to the sledges on the ice. We now had what we had so often longed for—black puddings to our hearts’ content. “There’s many a one goes begging at home who hasn’t such food as this,” said Hassel, as usual when he wished to express his appreciation of the fare. Furthermore, we had a nip in the shape of a tablespoonful of brandy, and did not get into our bag before the small hours of the morning.

‘We saw a fjord next day extending in an easterly direction, and as it was important to discover for certain whether this was the same fjord that Braskerud and I had seen from the glacier in 1899, we decided to drive up it, and then follow its east side southwards. The country north became lower and lower as we went on, and appeared to be continuous on both sides. Through the telescope we could follow a pressure-ridge on the outer side of the fjord, which we thought probably indicated the trend of the coast-line.

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‘Unfortunately, there was no time to investigate this further. It was now the middle of May, the time when, probably, there would be open water in Hell Gate. Nor were we successful in getting the necessary observations in the eastern fjord, as it snowed almost continuously from the 13th to the 19th of May. On the latter day there was a snowstorm from the south-east. We dug ourselves down till only the ridge of the tent was above the snow, but even then I hardly expected the tent to hold.

‘Earlier the same day we had driven across a lane into which “Storebron” and “Skelettet” had fallen. This, in conjunction with the subsequent bad weather, had such an effect on “Skelettet,” that to our regret we were obliged to shoot him.

‘On May 21 we had another polar-ox hunt. We realized on this occasion how difficult it is to distinguish between an ox which is lying down and a stone with snow or lichen on it, the light patch on the animal’s back being particularly deceptive. It was very curious to see one of the oxen take up and toss a calf into the air, evidently under the impression that it was a dog. It came down bellowing, with stiffened legs.

‘As we were almost out of biscuit, it occurred to us to try the contents of the paunch as a binding ingredient for the traditional black puddings. Directly I tasted it I found out how horrible was the compound, but I thought it incumbent on me to say something in its praise to prevent it being at a discount. But when I saw dissimulation was absolutely of no avail, I asked Hassel what he thought of it. “I think it tastes something like cow-dung,” he answered.

‘On May 28 we were again at Norskebugten. It was very apparent that spring-time was near. Now and then a gull, or a skua, flew screaming past on its way north for the summer. We now drove at night, on account of the going, which was of the worst description. The snow at this time was at freezing-point on the surface, while lower down it was considerably colder, a state of affairs which causes ice to form under the sledge-runners. We had to give up cooking our food at this time, as we had used all the paraffin. Hassel called out solemnly as he was

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pouring the last of the oil into the cooker: "This is the last 'Primus,' Isachsen!" "All right," I answered, "we shan't die as long as we have raw meat and dog-food." Our great difficulty was to get a sufficient quantity of drinking-water, and in order to melt it we had to make use of physical warmth. Our meals had one advantage, however, inasmuch as they were easy to prepare. Later on, when on board, I was incautious enough to remark that dog-food tasted good, and ever after that a kindly soul placed a dole at my place at table on festive occasions.

'On June 3—Whit Sunday—at midnight, I saw a big bear rounding Björnekap and coming towards us. As it was coming down wind, it was to be expected that it would soon bear off to get scent of us. It was therefore necessary to prevent this, and *we* accordingly luffed. But then it gave up the idea and headed straight for us, and it was not long before bear and dogs were circling round each other. The bear sat himself down on his haunches and hit out valiantly, right and left, but a couple of bullets soon put an end to this. I had to walk close up to it before I dared shoot, as the dogs were so in my way. The "white 'un," however, was considerably injured. It had flung itself ten or fifteen paces away, and there lay moaning. It proved that its backbone was broken, and the hind-quarters entirely paralyzed. I had to give it another shot.

'We had now some blubber for fuel, and we ate that evening both long and well. What the dogs can put away on such occasions is something incredible; bear's-liver, however, they are not much addicted to, and those that eat it generally suffer for it. "Storebron," who was young and inexperienced, had thus to part with his again.

'As there was only open water and no ice farther south in the sound, we had to strike overland from here. We drove up to a height of about 500 ft., found a breach in the mountains, through which we passed, and came down to Gaasefjord, close by our last winter quarters.

'On June 13 we reached Björneborg. Here, contrary to our expectations, we found no people, but two dogs: "Fischer" and "Turisten," both as fat as butter. The mate had set them on a

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bear on May 10, since when they had been missing. They had lived well, however, doubtless by cheating the bears of their food, by driving them away from seals and the like. Plenty of food had been left at Björneborg, and as we had hardly tasted bread for the last month we found it especially delicious.



AN EXCURSION IN HAVNEFJORD, 1900.

‘As little work had hitherto been expended on the route between here and the “Fram,” we gave up the next few days to this, and arrived on board on June 19, black and dirty, just as the “Fram” folk were being called to “the plenty” breakfast.’*

* The steward’s English expression for everything big or fine.

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CHAPTER II.

SUMMER JOURNEYS AND FERTILITY.

BAUMANN and Schei came back on June 20. They had left the 'Fram' in company with Simmons and Stolz on June 5, at seven in the evening. The going was now considerably better at night than during the daytime, and it was often found preferable to drive at night.

On June 7 Simmons and Stolz had taken a line for Baadsfjord, while the two others continued west and reached Björneborg late that afternoon, where they found Fosheim in good health and spirits.

The sloping roof was finished, the tent was now watertight and comfortable, and the tin boxes had gone into the reserve. The game captured had at first been little, as the weather was so bad; but on the same day that Baumann and Schei arrived Fosheim had shot a bearded seal and two bears, which had come to visit him in company, so he had nothing to complain of that day. He was in the midst of skinning the bears when the party arrived.

He was unfortunate enough during this process to cut one of his fingers. As a wound it was nothing to speak of, and at first he took no notice of it, little thinking what a serious affair it was going to turn out. The finger developed what among whale-catchers is known as an 'Arctic Ocean fester.' This, as far as I know, is a local blood-poisoning, which is generally caused by handling blubber when one has a cut or scratch on the hand, so small perhaps that one has not even noticed it. In my experience blubber is one of the most dangerous things that can be touched in such circumstances, and many a stout whale-catcher has had to lay down his life for a trifle of the kind. The only way of making

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sure that no harm is likely to happen, when one has a wound of the sort, is to wash it continually with some disinfectant, such as carbolic water.

Fosheim suffered from his finger the whole of the summer, and it was a great trouble to him, for he was quite unfit for work. When a finger gets into the state that his did there is nothing to be done but lance it time after time. Failure to do this will cause the arm to swell and be painful for a long way up. But the incision must be made to the very bone, or it will be of no use. This is not a thing one feels very much inclined to do, but it is absolutely necessary, as I have had opportunities of observing. Simmons lanced Fosheim's finger several times without our noticing any great improvement. Then, one day, I cut a long gash in it down to the bone, and that was the last time it was lanced.

When Baumann and Schei arrived at Björneborg Fosheim was still alone, and it was decided that all three should return the next day. Their first camp was at Ytre Eide (Outer Isthmus), where Baumann took some observations.

The day afterwards they drove into Hvalrosfjord, took a line across Indre Eide (Inner Isthmus), and camped at the head of the fjord, near a river. The snow was soft and slushy, and also at times deep and granular, making it difficult for the dogs to get along. Baumann was again able to take observations in here.

While Schei was gone on a geological excursion up the valley, Fosheim and Baumann, in the afternoon, went shooting. They killed two polar oxen from a herd which numbered half a score of animals, and in addition to these shot a quantity of geese. They had seen geese on their first day's march, probably the first of the year, but this western fjord and valley were positively teeming with them; so the name of 'Gaasefjord' is borne by the inlet with every show of right. The teams were taken up to be fed next day, with one sledge only, to the place where the oxen were lying.

At six in the morning of June 12 Baumann and Fosheim started north to Land's End, with one sledge and two teams. Schei remained at the camp, where he had several things to do.