

THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE

VOLUME II.

CHAPTER VIII.

PART II.

THE INHABITANTS AT THE MAGNETIC NORTH POLE.

THE seasons in these regions end just as abruptly as they set in. The Eskimo awakes one morning to find himself in the depth of winter the sea is frozen over and the snow in places has formed drifts several yards deep. Now, there is no longer any excuse for delay in the building of snow-huts; they have all suffered enough from the cold during the past night. Soon the whole population of the colony is out selecting building sites. The main thing is to find a sheltered place, screened to some extent from the wind and not too far from water, as otherwise every drop they require would have to be procured at the cost of trouble and fatigue. The condition of the snow also is an important consideration; if it is not favourable the hut will not turn out a first-class job. The selection, therefore, of a good site for the hut is a very responsible task for the paterfamilias, and it

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often takes him a long time to decide on it. He carefully tests the snow with an instrument specially intended for the purpose, called a "hervon." This is a stick made of reindeer horn, straightened out like a long walking-stick. It is about four feet long. At one end there is a handle of reindeer bone and at the other a musk-ox bone ferrule (Fig. 3, p. 299, Vol. I). In the course of his examination he thrusts the "hervon" into the snow to "feel" its condition. It requires a very delicate sense of touch, developed by many years' practice and experience, to "feel" the condition of the snow. Anyone, by sticking a rod into the snow, can ascertain whether it is hard or soft, but to determine the number and condition of the various strata is a far more difficult task; for it very often happens that the snow drifts consist of layers swept together at different times and in different weathers, consequently they vary considerably in character. In one and the same snow drift you may find snow that has been beaten together into a compact mass by a storm, together with snow that has settled down on it gently in calm weather, forming a very loose layer, which is quite unsuitable for building purposes. Over this again you may get a hard stratum, and it needs the skill of an Eskimo to distinguish the loose layers in the mass of drifted snow. The ideal condition is attained when the drift has a loose layer of snow about one foot thick on the top, and a uniform mass of the requisite hardness below to a sufficient depth for making the blocks required; yet the snow must not be too brittle, as in

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that case the blocks are likely to crumble in course of preparation.

In order to obtain a correct idea as to how a hut should be built in the most approved style, we will pay a visit to the master-builder, Atikleura. He is standing just below the summit of the ridge beckoning to Nalungia to intimate that he has found a suitable spot and that she is to bring him his snow shovel. A glance at the site he has selected shows that Atikleura is a practical man as well as a man of taste. The position is well sheltered to the north, east, and west, and the crest of the ridge at the back will prove a barrier to the biting north wind. Towards the south the prospect is open and will have the full benefit of the sunshine. Close by there is a small lake or pond which will supply the most delicious drinking water for the family. The country hereabouts consists mainly of spacious plains and beautiful lakes. Meanwhile Nalungia has arrived with the snow shovel. This is made of a wooden board which Atikleura has obtained by barter from tribes dwelling further south, as there is no wood in Nechilli, nor does the smallest piece of drift wood ever find its way to these latitudes. The shovel is made in a very workmanlike manner, and excellently suited for its purpose as long as the snow is loose. For hard snow, of course, our iron spades would be preferable. It is strengthened at the lower end with reindeer bone. Now, the first thing that Atikleura does, is to shovel away the upper loose layer of snow, in the circumference within which he had planned to erect his

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hut. He does so with a true eye, as the large number of huts he has built in his lifetime has given him good practice. Then he draws out the knife which has hitherto been suspended by a loop on the bone peg at the back of his “anorak.” It is quite a monster knife, enough to frighten anyone who had not seen it before. The blade is as large as that of an ordinary good sized butcher’s knife and is made of iron, which has also come from the south; the handle is about a foot long, and is of wood or bone. Taking the handle with both hands he commences to cut out his ice blocks for building the hut. These are cut out to a size about eighteen inches wide, twenty-four inches long and four inches thick. If cut out in this way, the building site itself will yield sufficient material for the whole construction.

It is a pleasure to see how a good builder cuts each block so that it just fits where he sets it. Atikleura is a veritable prodigy at this work. Not one of his blocks ever breaks in pieces, although he appears to cut them out without any particular care. Just a cut here and there, then a kick, and the thin neat block stands separated from the mass of snow. All the blocks from Atikleura’s hand are so exactly equal in size that they look as if they had been accurately measured. The hut is built up in spirals in the form of a haycock or bee-hive, so that one layer of blocks rests on the previous one and extends a little further inwards. In joining the blocks, the sides must be fitted to each other so that the walls are perfectly tight. The builder’s skill can be gauged by

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the tightness of the hut ; but even with Atikleura's skill it is impossible to avoid some few small chinks here and there. It is Nalungia's task to fill up these chinks. For this purpose she works the shovelled-up loose snow until it is as fine as grated sugar, for it is only when it is in this state that it can be used for making the joints tight. It is thrown up against the blocks as soon as they are placed in position and fills in every little hole and crevice. The walls of the hut rise quickly. As the blocks are cut out the ground is cleared downwards, and as they are set into their places, they serve to increase the height of the walls of the cleared site. Atikleura looks as if he had been standing on his head in a flour-tub ; he is covered with snow all over ; his clothes, hair, and beard are white as chalk. His long gloves prevent the snow from getting into the sleeves of the " anorak."

Building the roof of such a snow hut is a very complicated affair to the uninitiated. Many a snow-block did I get on my head when I essayed this work. The snow-blocks have to be set back gradually inwards, and when the work is nearing completion, the last blocks would appear to be literally suspended in the air, without any base or support. The last block (or keystone) which closes the roof, in the centre, is quite small, and in most cases triangular. To fix it in its position from the outside, it must first be juggled out through the hole which it is eventually to fill. This looks impossible, but the Eskimo achieves the impossible. With one hand he raises his block to the outside, through the hole at

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the top, and while holding it he cuts it into the shape of a wedge with the knife he holds in the other ; and when he lowers it into the hole it fits it as if it had been moulded for the purpose.

Nalungia, aided by Errera, has perseveringly plastered over the outside of the hut with fine snow, so that it simply looks like a snow-heap. The outlines of the blocks are now quite concealed under the snow. But the hut is perfectly tight, as the fine snow works itself in wherever there is the slightest hole or crevice. The master-builder himself is not yet visible ; he is still busy in the interior of the hut, where he is now completely built in. At last his long-bladed knife protrudes from the wall of snow, and with a rapid movement he cuts a hole just large enough for him to creep through. I am surprised to see how high up the wall he cuts the hole, as in all the huts I have hitherto seen, this entrance hole was quite down to the floor. Now Nalungia creeps in through the aperture, and I follow her to see what she is going to do in the way of further internal arrangements. I am at once enlightened as to why the aperture is made so high up ; Atikleura has cut it on a level with the sleeping-berth, to expedite the work of “moving-in.” He has constructed the sleeping-berth as follows :—He has first divided the hut by a row of snow-blocks into two compartments, of which the inner one is twice as large as the outer. He throws all the loose, refuse snow lying in the hut, into the inner compartment, until it reaches the level of the row of blocks, and there you

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have the “bedstead” quite ready. At the opposite end of the hut is another small erection, made of two blocks set on edge, and a third laid across them, like a table slab.

Now commences the moving in, through the aperture above the sleeping-berth. Large quantities of skins are thrown in and slung topsy-turvy upon the sleeping place. Next comes all the furniture—a drying grid, water bucket, cooking pot, blubber lamp, provisions, blubber, meat and fish, and lastly the women’s personal belongings—which I dare not specify more fully. Now it looks as if all were over and Mrs. Nalungia casts an enquiring look at me, as much as to say, “Are you going to creep out?” I have no idea what is about to happen, but my curiosity prompts me to remain, thinking that anything much worse than I had seen before was hardly likely to occur; but I certainly was a little taken aback when the hole over the sleeping berth was suddenly blocked up again from outside and I was alone, with one lady, in a closed-up hut. However, as Nalungia did not seem to mind it in the least, why should I trouble? Disregarding me she set to work with a will. The heavy blubber lamp was first raised upon the little snow table near the wall opposite the sleeping berth. This lamp is made of a kind of stone they obtain from the Utkohikchyallik Eskimo; it is carved in the form of a crescent and is heavy and clumsy. It is placed upon three pieces of bone inserted in the snow slab, so that the inner edge of the crescent is turned towards the interior of the hut

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while the outer edge is towards the wall. The blubber bag is now brought out and a piece of frozen blubber taken from it ; this is beaten with a specially made club of musk-ox bone until it is quite soft. Now she produces, from one of her repositories, a little tuft of moss which she carefully soaks with seal-oil—ugh ! I remember with horror those mysterious “light pastilles”—and then she sets to work to get a light by rubbing pieces of wood together. The “pastille” soon sends out the most dazzling rays ; the crushed blubber is put into the lamp, and a wick of moss is laid along the whole of the inner straight edge ; this is sprinkled with seal-oil and ignited by means of the burning tuft of moss. The whole wick is now blazing and a brilliant flame lights up the roomy hut. I ask myself what in the world she wants with this brilliant flame, as she has now finished arranging the hut, and I am almost on the point of upbraiding her for this waste of precious oil, but I refrain, as I remember that an Eskimo never does anything without good reason. In fact it soon becomes apparent that here, too, my judgment is premature. Gradually an oppressive heat spreads from the mighty flame, and now I understand that her object is to cause the newly-built hut to settle well down at the joints. As the result of the heat thus produced, the snow blocks gradually close up till they may be said to form one single continuous wall.

While this is going on, Nalungia makes good use of her time, and gets the sleeping berth into proper order.

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The waterproof kayak skins are laid next to the snow ; these have been taken from the kayaks in the autumn, and will keep the moisture of the snow away from the reindeer skins neatly arranged over them, and the sleeping berth looks quite cosy. Again she turns her attention to the lamp and trims the wick—this has to be done frequently ; the saucepan is then filled with snow and suspended over the flame by two cords, secured to two bones fastened into the wall. The family may want refreshment after this job. The drying grid, made of reindeer bone, strung over with a network of sinew thread, is now fixed up over the saucepan but not too near the fire. The skins will not bear too much heat. Finally, the “anauta,” a small, round, thick, wooden stick with a handle, used for beating the snow off the clothes, is, by way of a finishing touch, driven into the wall. Everything is now ready. And none too soon ; for at this moment Atikleura is calling from outside asking if he may come in. Nalungia casts a last critical look round the walls, and tells him to wait a little. He goes off muttering something which, translated, would sound very much like “d——d womenfolk ” or something of the kind. Nalungia looks as though she meant to pay him out for his courtesy by keeping him waiting a little longer, and it is quite another half hour before she calls him in. Then an opening is made through the wall, right down to the floor, large enough for a man to creep through, and Atikleura’s head appears through it. A moment later he is inside the

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hut ; he takes off his soaking wet gloves and throws them towards his wife, who turns them inside out and hangs them on the drying grid ; then she takes his coat, shakes it and well beats it with the “anauta,” for it is important to remove every little grain of snow to prevent it melting and wetting the coat, which is then rolled up and thrown on the bed. The outer trousers are then treated in the same way and placed with the coat next the “anorak.” Atikleura stands there in his under garb. This does not sound exactly “comme il faut” according to our ideas, but it calls for no comment among the Eskimo. He now walks up to the sleeping place and sits down, not, as we might do, on the edge, but well back so that he can rest his legs. Now the footgear must be removed, and this is not a very simple matter, as an Eskimo’s footgear consists of five different articles. Outermost are the low reindeer-skin shoes, made with the hairy side inwards. For a man of Atikleura’s high descent these are half-soled with sealskin. On the bottom of the sole there are some perceptible ridges which, on closer inspection, prove to be strips of skin sewn on to prevent the foot from slipping. Next come the “kamiks,” which at this time of the year are exclusively of reindeer skin. There are two pairs of these. The outer are made of the hide from the reindeer’s leg, which is short-haired and very strong. They are made with the hairy side inwards, and reach up to the knee, where they are laced up with a thong. Underneath these is