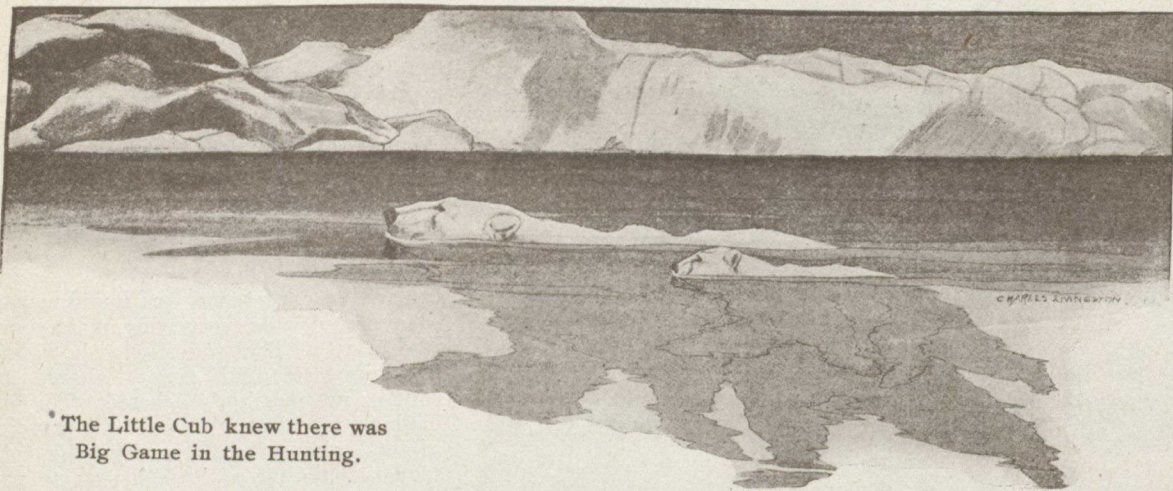


MOTHERS OF THE NORTH



*The Little Cub knew there was Big Game in the Hunting.

Some with Tusks like Stalactites and some with Coats like Snow

By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

IT was in the first full, ardent rush of the arctic spring. Thrilling to the heat of the long, long days of unobstructed sun, beneath the southward-facing walls of the glaciers, the thin soil, clothing the eternal ice, burst into green and flowering life. In the sunward valleys brooks awoke, with a sudden filming of grass along their borders, a sudden passionate unfolding of starlike blooms, white, yellow, and blue. As if summoned from sleep by the impetuous blossoms, eager to be fertilised, came the small northern butterflies in swarms, with little wasplike flies and beetles innumerable. Along the inaccessible ledges of the cliffs the auks and gulls, in crowded ranks, screamed and quarrelled over their untidy nests, or filled the air with wings as they flocked out over the grey-green tranquil sea. The world of the North was trying to forget for a little the implacable savagery, the deathly cold and dark of its winter's ordeal.

The great, unwieldy, grunting walrus felt it too, and responded to it—this ardour of the lonely arctic spring, astray in the wastes. On the ledges of a rocky islet, just off shore, the members of a little herd were sunning themselves. There were two old bulls and four cows with their sprawling lumps of calves. All were in a good humour with one another, lying with heads or fore flippers flung amicably across the others' grotesque bodies, and grunting, groaning, grumbling in various tones of content as the pungent sunlight tickled their coarse hides.

All seemed without a care beneath the sky, except one of the old bulls. He, being on watch, held his great tusked and bewhiskered head high above his wallowing fellows, and kept eyes, ears, and nose alert for the approach of any peril. One of the unshapely, helpless looking calves, with its mother, lay in a hollow of the rock, perhaps twenty feet back from the water's edge, a snug spot, sheltered from all winds of north and east. The rest of the herd were grouped so close to the water's edge that from time to time a lazy, leaden-green swell would come lipping up and splash them. The cubs had a tendency to flounder away out of reach of these chill douches; but their mothers were very resolute about keeping them close to the water.

PRESENTLY the little groups were enlarged by one. Another old bull, which had been foraging at the sea bottom, grubbing up clams, starfishes, and oysters with his tusks and crushing them in the massive mill of his grinders, suddenly shot his ferocious looking head above the surface. For all this gross bulk, in the water he moved with almost the speed and grace of a seal. In a second he was at the rock's edge. Hooking his immense tusks over it, he drew himself up by the force of his mighty neck, flung forward a

broad flipper, dragged himself out of the water, and flopped down among his fellows with an explosive grunt of satisfaction.

They were not, it must be confessed, a very attractive company, these uncouth sea cattle. The adults were from ten to eleven feet in length, round and swollen looking as hogsheads, quite lacking the adornment of tails, and in colour a dirty yellow brown. Sparse bristles, scattered over their hides in rusty patches, gave them a disreputable, moth eaten look. Their short but powerful flippers were ludicrously splayed. They had the upper half of the head small, flat skulled, and earless; while the lower half, or muzzle, was enormously developed to support the massive, downward growing tusks, twelve to fifteen inches in length. This grotesque enlargement of the upper jaw was further emphasised by the bristling growth of long, stiff whiskers that decorated it, giving the wearer an air of blustering irascibility.

As for the calves, their pudgy little forms had the same overblown looks as those of their parents; but their clean young hides were not so wrinkled, nor were they anywhere disfigured by lumps and scars. They were without tusks, of course; but the huge development of their muzzles, in preparation for the sprouting of the tusks, gave them a truculent air which was ludicrously belied by the mildness of their baby eyes. They rolled and snuggled against the mountainous flanks of their mothers, which watched them with vigilant devotion.

The calf that lay farthest inland, apart from the rest, was in some pain and whimpering. That morning it had got a nasty prod in the shoulder from the horn of a passing narwhal; and the



She dragged her prey beyond reach of the frantic mother.

anxious mother was trying to comfort it, gathering it clumsily but tenderly against her side and coaxing it to nurse. The rest of the herd, for the moment, was utterly content with life; but the troubled mother was too much engrossed with her little one's complaints to notice how caressing was the spring sun.

MEANWHILE, not far away was another mother which, in spite of the spring, was equally ill content. Down to the shore of the mainland, behind the island, came prowling a gaunt white bear with a cub close at her heels. The narrow bay between island and mainland was full of huge ice cakes swung in by an eddy of the tides. Many of these wave eaten and muddled floes were piled up on shore along tide mark; and as their worn edges softened under the downpour of the sun they crumbled and fell with small glassy crashes. Hither and thither among them stole the lean mother, hoping to find some dead fish or other edible drift of the sea.

She had had bad hunting of late—the shoals of the salmon had been inexplicably delaying their appearance on the coast—and was feeling the pangs of famine. To be sure, she was filling her stomach, after a fashion, with the young shoots of rushes and other green stuff; but this was not the diet that Nature had framed her for, and in her lack of right nourishment she was pouring her very life itself into her breasts, to feed her little one.

He, too, was suffering, so scanty was the supply of mother's milk. Even now, as the great bear stopped to nose a mass of seaweed, the cub crowded under her flank and began to nurse, whimpering with disappointment at the too thin stream he drew. Her fierce eyes filmed, and she turned her head far round in order to lick him tenderly.

THE stranded ice floes yielded nothing that a bear could eat; and she was ranging on down the shore disconsolately, when all at once a waft of air drew in from seaward. It came direct from the island. And it brought the scent of walrus! She lifted her long, black edged muzzle and sniffed sharply, then stood as rigid as one of the ice cakes and searchingly scrutinised the island. The cub, either imitating his mother or obeying some understood signal, stood moveless also. One of the earliest lessons learned by youngsters of the wild is to keep still.

There was not a walrus in sight; but the bear's nostrils could not deceive her. She knew the huge sea beasts were there, on the other side of the island; and she knew they would be much at ease on such a day as this, basking in the sun. Walrus were not the quarry she would have chosen. The great bulls, courageous and hot tempered, the powerful cows, dauntless as herself in defense of their young, she knew them for antagonists to be avoided whenever possible; but just now she had no choice. Her cub was not getting food enough. To her there was nothing else in the world so important as that small, troublesome, droll eyed, hungry white cub.

Keeping herself now well out of sight behind the ice-floes, with the cub close at her heels, she stole down to the edge of the retreating tide. The bay was too crowded with slowly moving floes to be as safe for the cub as she would have had it; but she could not leave him behind. She kept him close at her side as she swam. He was a good swimmer, diving fearlessly when she dived, his little black nose cutting the grey-green water bravely and swiftly. In everything he imitated her for he knew there was big game in this hunting.

The island was a ridge of some elevation, shelving down by ledges to the sea. The white bear knew better than to climb the ridge and try to steal down on the walrus. She was well aware that they would be keenly on the watch against any approach from the landward side. From that direction came all they feared.

When she arrived at the island, therefore, she swam along, close under shelter of the shore, till she reached its extremity. Then, behind the shelter of a stranded floe, she drew herself out, at the same time flattening herself to the rock till she seemed a part of it. Her every