

Adrift!

Written and Illustrated for The Western Home Monthly, by Bonnycastle Dale

"THAT looks like land?" queried the white man.

"Wake, wake" ("no, no," in coast jargon, called Chinook).

"It's thicker than fog I tell you, it must be land, I hear the surf—listen," and the haggard man rose up on the stern seat of the dory and gazed long and earnestly ahead. "Pull man, pull for your life," he shouted, as he stumbled off the thwart, "if we get dragged into those breakers it's all over." Both men pulled at the long oars, standing up to get a better grip. Minutes—ten minutes, half an hour's pulling—brought them to the north side of the surf. Even then, they were tumbled about ominously and the big red craft thrown up on the beach much too hard for its weakened condition. Quam, the Nootkan, rolled out into the shallow water and grabbed the bowline. Fraser, a sea-bitten Nova Scotian, fastened on and with many a tumble, many a blow from the sharp rocks, they finally succeeded in getting the dory ashore.

"We won't starve for fish," said the white man, as he pointed to many shining bodies rising above the waters of a nearby pass. "I can almost guess where we've stranded. I've heard of the Alki mackerel making the water alive in the Aleutian Passes, and our compass says we have set North since we lost the sealer. I've seen these here Aleutians before, too, I think," and off the two men stumbled up the shingle. "I've got the three matches yet, in my hatband all dry and hunky," said Fraser. The Indian grunted. Within an hour they had reached the highest point of the island, a mere scrap, some five miles square, but connected at low water with the next island of a little chain running eastward. Far out the great seas of the Northern Pacific swept steadily norwards. Somewhere in that glittering foam swept waste scudded the "Ol-Hi-Yu"—named after the fur seal, in Chinook—somewhere, perhaps a hundred miles off. Five mornings ago they had left her in search of—Oh well! there were halibut lines and cod tackle for the curious and the rifle. Well it was in case the fish bit at them, as Fraser afterwards told me, "do you think I'd shoot at a seal even if it was a-chasing me?" Over went the dory, in dropped the two men, and off they, and five other boats, set out.

Fraser first saw the clouds rising and headed for the schooner within two hours of launching. "But it dropped just like a bucket of soup, the fog was that thick, sir." Day and night, in gale and calm that dory drifted on until four days later she grounded on one of the inner Aleutians, with her crew just a thousand miles from any harbour used by man. The Russian Petropaulovski was then nearest, but straight west across the Bering Sea.

The men took stock of their supplies—an easy matter this—an almost empty water butt and a few pilot biscuits in the bottom of the box, one rifle and ten shells and the three matches.

Fraser, stooping over the dory on the shore, had been very intently watching a large brown "rock" on the brow of the hill.

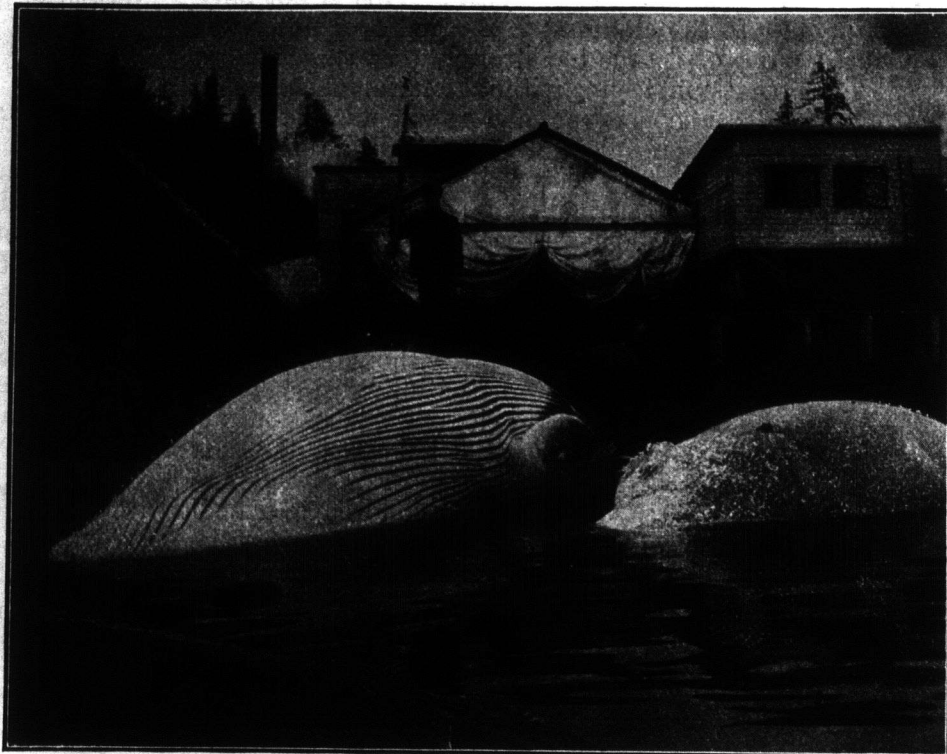
"Look, Quam, does the rock move?" The Indian set his big brown eyes intently on the spot the white man pointed out. Slowly he raised his hand and burst out with: "Wake stone! Hyas-Si-am" ("No rock, big grizzly") and the seeming rock started to amble down hill.

Those ten precious cartridges were examined and replaced, the heavy dory partly launched and then the big hulking brute

took into its head to go up the hill again. Up and down it wandered like an uneasy spirit, as, while it had always attacked dark objects on the shore—seals and sea lions—it had never seen any that stood so tall as these before, therefore it hesitated.

"Can we push the boat off and row over to that rock?" cried Fraser.

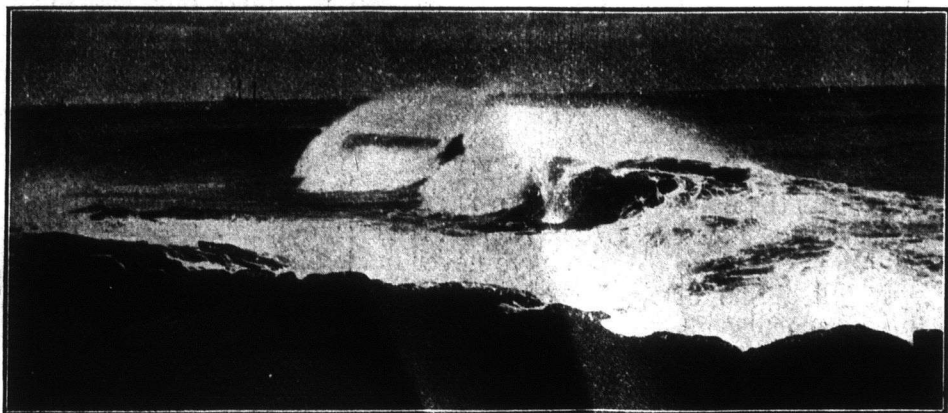
"Na-wit-ha" ("yes"), grunted Quam, and off the big boat slid and battled with the great surf again, finally landing heavily on the shore of the smaller island. From here they could dimly see the peaks of a chain of mountains. Fraser figured it must be the Alaskan Mountains and, therefore, the island they were on lay off the edge of the Alaskan Peninsula, further in than the Aleutians, still a fearful trip for two men without food or warm clothes. On the smaller islands they were safe from the Aleutian Grizzly, the mossy savage of any bear we have on this continent. While the ordinary Grizzly will rarely attack unwounded, this fierce lonely beast often does, no doubt because for ages it has vanquished, easily, all its enemies along this drear stretch of volcanic rock.



Bodies of inflated whales, one 80 ft. and the other a bit smaller, Pacific Coast Whaling Station

The Indian was an adept at catching mussels and clams, cockles and big rock oysters, so for five days, while the biscuits lasted, they saved their matches. At last Fraser succumbed to this diet of raw shellfish and the piercing cold of the night; they decided to make a fire and boil moss in the universal camp utensil of this coast, a five gallon coal oil tin. This mess was savoured with sea salt, scraped from the rocks. Quam blithely broiled his shell fish in their cases and made out famously, but the white man's stomach was slightly poisoned by the mussels—these shellfish, taken from the copper bearing rocks, exert some evil effect on the stomach, so, for a full week, this fire was never allowed to die down.

Then came the crowning disaster of all—launching the dory, when the tide was out a good twelve feet—the bow line parted, the boat fell and smashed on the rocks and was instantly swept away in a "long run out."



"The breaking waves dashed high."



Wreck of the "Seagull" on Seabird Rocks, Straights of Fuca, Northern Pacific Ocean

Fraser was so affected, both by illness and accident, that he cast himself down in the rocks and, for a moment, wished it was all over. Then the "spunk" that makes a Briton get up and start again, worked and, within an hour, the two poor castaways started to foot it over the low tide rocks, carrying the embers, partly covered by sand and bark, in the ever-present coal oil tin.

Fraser, burdened with the rifle, was so done that he has no memory of this week's work. He tells me that at times they had to climb a thousand feet to get past some cliff that jutted out into the sea. Time after time the Indian retrieved the rifle;

Slow though their progress had been around this, one of the roughest corners in the world, they had averaged fully ten miles a day on travelling days, but it was often ten great circles about as many bays. Soon they were out of meat, their last match gone and thoroughly dissipated. Fraser never saw so many uninhabited bays open up and close as he did that trip. For the last few days he had been humming "Will ye no come back again," until it got to be an obsession, and he declares both he and Quam were quite lightheaded, singing and reeling along. Totally without food, the rifle lost, neither could tell when, no embers, even the caribou skin capes lost—they knew that the end was not far off as they stumbled down the now snow laden slopes of this sub-arctic land—a land of such clear air that sound carried many miles.

"Hullo—Hullo—Hullo!" came a cry from a distant bay. The two perishing men sat down and pondered. Was it an echo? Was it an animal?

"Nah! nah! ship!" ("look! look! ship!") he burst out pointing across the bay with his stumpy brown fingers. Together they set up that awful cry—"Help! Help!"—used by us sons of men only in dire distress.

Soon a little boat is seen stealing out from the opposite shore and before nightfall the two starving men are warm and safe in the bunks of the "Klip-sun," northern codfishery craft.

Of the trip south, where they passed close to the poor "Soquel," high and dry on the Sea Birds, also of their visit to the whaling stations there is no room to speak, but plainly written on Fraser's face are the lines of this awful voyage.

The schooner "Ol-hi-yu" arrived at Victoria, B. C., a few months later. She had a load of codfish where her "skin-room" used to be and no sign of sealskin or sea otter was there. The captain was mightily relieved when I told him of the rescue of his men. The West Coast villages had raised an awful cry when no Quam appeared over the rail as the schooner cast anchor, as he, of all the men, had made most voyages into that great lone sea—some sixteen trips after seal and otter, whale and codfish had this grim quiet little Coast Indian made.

It seems the schooner was drifted far out of her course by the southwest gales until she was actually right in the sealing ground—not a sail from Japan or any European port was there, only U. S. Revenue cutters.

The captain had some fine pictures of the homing herds on the Pribilofs, but as he said, "A picture of a seal is one thing and a nice wet skin is another." When I reminded him that seal hunting was now a closed book, he sighed deeply and slouched down the gangplank.

The Crossing

It seemeth such a little way to me,
Across to that strange country—the
beyond.

And yet not strange, for it has grown
to be

The home of those of whom I am so
fond.

They make it seem familiar and most
dear,

As journeying friends bring distant
countries near.

And so to me there is no sting to death.

And so the grave has lost its victory.

It is but crossing with abated breath

And white, set face, a little strip of
sea.

To find the loved ones waiting on the
shore.

More beautiful, more precious than be-
fore.

—Ella Wheeler Wilcox.