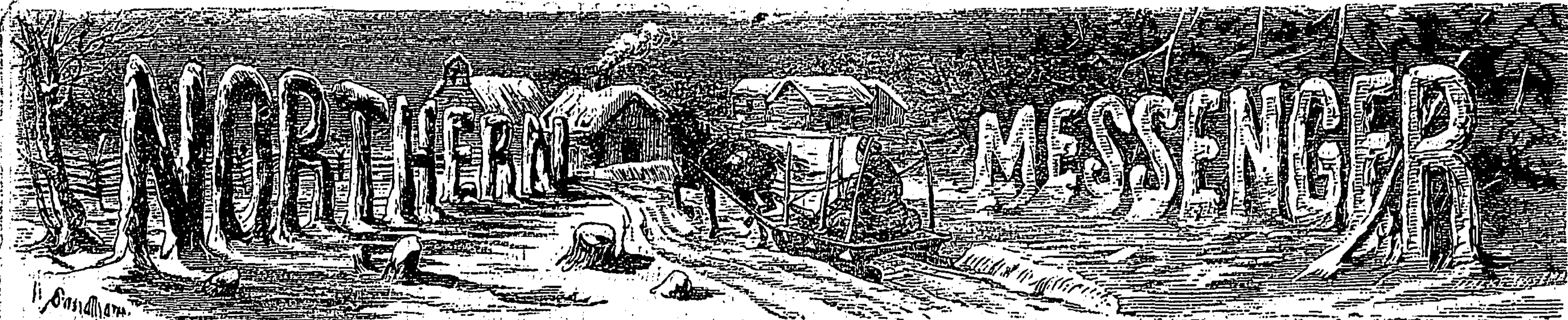

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SEALS AND SEAL-HUNTING IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC.

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The word "fishery" ought to imply a "fish" to be caught; but the term has become perverted: for instance, we speak of whale, sponge, coral, crab, and oyster, or clam fisheries, yet none of these animals is in the least a fish. Neither is the seal, although it lives in the water, swims and dives. It is, indeed, nothing but a warm-blooded, fur-coated mammal, with all the internal organs and outside structure of a quadruped.

On examining diagrams of the bones in a seal's flipper and an otter's fore leg, you will find that you can match every bone of the one by a similar bone of the other. The shapes of the bones, to be sure, are altered to suit the varied uses of swimming in the water and walking on the land; but all the parts of the arm and hand (or fore foot) of the otter, or any other mammal, are seen also in the flipper of our subject—only there they are shortened, thickened, and covered with a membrane which converts them into a paddle instead of a paw.

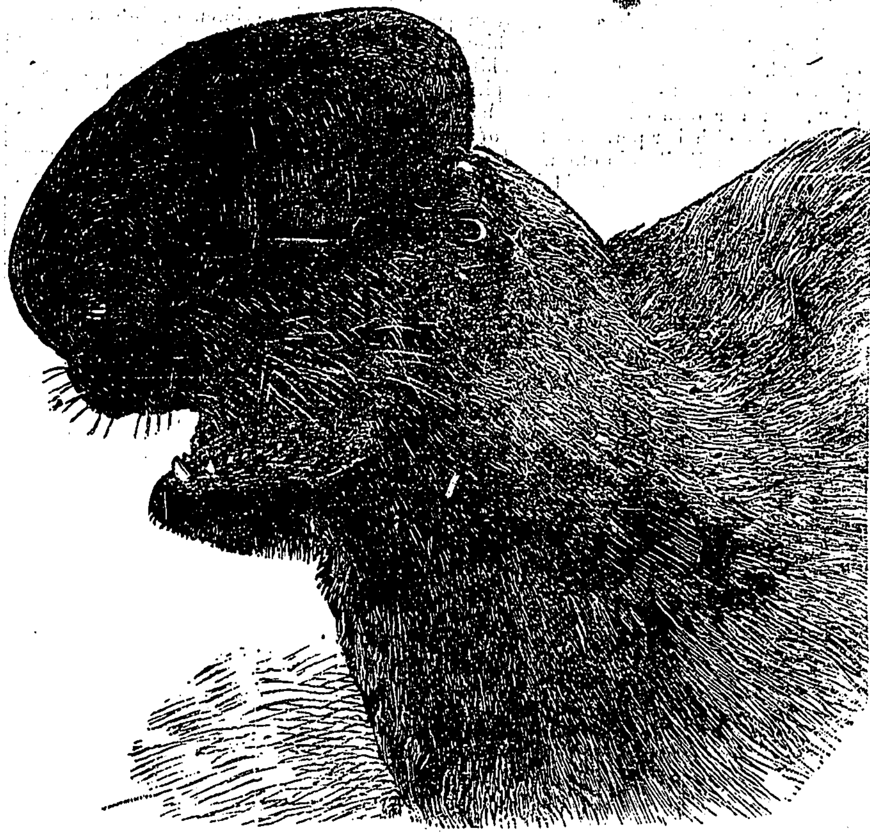
Of course, being mammals these animals must breathe air. You could drown any of them by forcing it to remain under the water too long. It is necessary for them, therefore, in the arctic seas, where mainly is their home, to be able to reach the air, even in spite of the sheet of thick ice which for half the year covers the whole ocean. But in large bodies of ice there always are some holes, no matter how cold the weather may be, and these holes afford the seals of that region an opportunity to come to the surface to breathe.

To the Eskimos seals are of the utmost importance, and we may say that in many parts of the arctic world men could not live without these animals.

The annual southward journey of the restless harp-seal furnishes a vivid picture of these great migrations which are so prominent a feature of polar history. Keeping just ahead of the "making" of the ice, or final freezing up of the fiords and bays, at the approach of winter they leave Greenland and begin their passage southward along the coast of Labrador, freely entering all the gulfs and bays. Arriving at the Straits of Belleisle, some enter the gulf, but the great body move onward along the eastern coast of Newfoundland, and thence outward to the Grand Banks, where they arrive about Christmas. Here they rest for a month, and then they turn northward, slowly struggling against the strong current that aided them so much in their southward journey, until they reach the great ice-fields stretching from the Labrador shore far eastward—a broad continent of ice.

During the first half of March, on these great floating fields of ice, are born thousands of baby seals—only one in each family to be sure, but with plenty of play-fellows close by—all in soft woolly dress, white, or white with a beautiful golden lustre. The Newfoundlanders call them "white-coats." In a few weeks, however, they lose this soft covering, and a gray, coarse fur takes its place. In this uniform they bear the name of "ragged-jackets"; and it is not until two or three years later that the full colors of the adult are gained, with the black crescentic or harp-like marks on the back which gives them the name of "harps."

The squealing and barking at one of these immense nurseries can be heard for a very long distance. When the babies are very young, the mothers leave them on the ice and go off in search of food, coming back frequently to look after the little ones; and although there are thousands of the small, white, squealing creatures, which to you and me would seem to be precisely alike, and all are moving about more or less, the mother never makes a mistake nor feeds any bleating baby until she has found her own.



HEAD OF THE HOODED SEAL, OR "SQUARE-FLIPPER,"—"THE SPECIES WHICH SHOWS FIGHT."

Those seals pursued by the Eskimos, are not the species that make the great southward migrations which I have just described, but the ringed seals (*Phoca fœtida*) which remain on the far arctic coasts all the year round. Upon this animal the Eskimos place almost their entire dependence for food, fuel, light and clothing.

At the end of winter, each of the female seals creep up through the breathing-hole (which is named *atluk*); and under the deep snow overlying all the ice-field she digs a cave, eight or ten feet long and three to five feet wide. At one end of the excavation is the breathing-hole, affording a ready means of retreat in case of danger. In this cave the young seal is born, and though protected from the sight of its enemies, here it is often captured.

The old-fashioned native manner of hunting—some of the Eskimos now have guns, and this spoils the interest—called for much skill and patience. In it, each hunter has a trained dog which runs on ahead, but is held by a strap around his neck from going too fast and far. The dog scents the seal lying in its excavation under the snow (the level surface of which of course gives no sign of the cave), and barks; whereupon the hunter, who is close behind, hastens forward, and by a vigorous jump breaks down the cover before the young seal can escape. If he succeeds in cutting off its retreat, it is an easy prey, for he simply knocks it on the head; otherwise he must use his seal-hook very quickly or his game is gone.

When the ice breaks up the Eskimos can go out in their kayaks, the crankiest of primitive craft, on the ugliest of voyages: but this is an adventure they never shirnk, and one that their acquaintance with Europeans has not changed at all. The kayak is eighteen or twenty feet long, but is so light that it can be carried by the one man who forms the crew. It is all decked over, excepting a little round hole through which the young Eskimo squeezes his legs and sits down. Then he puts on a tight oil-skin coat over his garments, and ties it down to the deck all around him, so that no water can pour in "'tween decks." But, on the other hand he must untie the knots before he can get out; so if by chance he capsizes, he must either be content to navigate head down and keel up, or else must right himself by a sort of somersault, which shall bring him up on the opposite side—and this he often actually does.

When the kayaker catches sight of a seal, he advances within about twenty-five feet of it, and hurls the harpoon "by means of a piece of wood adapted to support the harpoon while he takes aim." The animal struck dives, carrying away the coiled-up line with great speed; if in this moment the line happens to become entangled, the canoe is almost certain to be capsized and dragged away with no chance of rising again, many an Eskimo has lost his life through a similar mischance. But if the attack has been successful, the hunter follows with a large lance, which, when the seal re-appears, he throws like a harpoon. This he does again and again, the lance always disengaging itself until the poor seal becomes so weak that it can be overtaken, and killed by a lunge of the knife.

The flesh of the ring seal serves for food all through the summer, and is "cached," or concealed, in the snow, or dried for winter use. From the skins of the old seals the arctic natives make their summer clothing, while under-garments are fashioned from those of the young netsick. Children often have entire suits of the white skins of the baby seals in their first fuzzy coat.

The principal sealing-grounds are Newfoundland, Labrador, and the islands which lie between, but especially the ice-floes off the coast of Western Greenland, the Spitzbergen and Jan Mayen seas; Nova Zembla, the White Sea, and the Caspian Sea.

If the weather permit, the vessel is run into the ice and moored there; if not it sails back and forth in open spaces, managed by the captain and one or two others, while the remainder of the crew, sometimes sixty or seventy, or even more in number, get into boats and row swiftly to the floe. The young seals lie scattered about here and there, basking in the sun or sheltered under the lee of a hummock, and they lie so thickly that half a dozen will often be seen in a space twenty yards square. They cannot get away, or at most can only flounder about, and their plaintive bleatings and white coats might almost be those of lambs. The old seals are frightened away by the approach of the sailors, and never show fight, and the youngsters are easily killed; so the men do not take guns, but only clubs, with which they strike the poor little fellows a single blow on the head usually killing them at once.

Having struck down all they can see within a short distance, the small squad of men who work together then quickly skin, or (as they call it) "sculp" them, with a broad clasp-knife, cutting clear through the thick layer of fat which lies underneath the hide, and so leave a surprisingly small carcass behind. Bundles are then made of