

NEWFOUNDLAND CORRESPONDENCE.

ST. JOHN'S, Nfld., March 4, 1872.

THE MODERN ARGONAUTS—START FOR THE ICE-FIELDS—KILLING AND "SCULPING" THE SEALS.

Within the last few days, ten thousand stalwart men have taken their departure from these shores, for the "ice-meadows," where the seals are captured. The "slaughter of the innocents" by such an army, will be prodigious. The American Indians were in the habit of scalping their foes and carrying home the hairy trophy as a proof of their prowess and an evidence that the work was effectually performed. Our seal-hunters follow a similar practice in "sculpting" the seal when slain and bringing home with them the skin of each victim, with the adhering fat, leaving the carcass on the ice as worthless. The skin and fat are called in our vernacular the "sculp" or "pelt," and each weighs from 30 to 50 lbs., and is worth from two to three dollars, according to weight. It is marvellous to think that creatures only three or four weeks old have, in that time, produced such a mass of fat, while lying on the ice, fed by their mothers' milk. When about four weeks old, they are in the best condition to be slaughtered, the fat being then in greater quantity and containing a purer oil than at a later period of their growth. The early part of their existence must be passed on the ice. Here they are "whelped" on the great ice-fields, hundreds of square miles in extent, that are floated down from the Arctic regions and borne on the bosom of the southerly current along our shores. The young seals, when born, are provided with a thick coat of fur and an abundant supply of fat; so that during babyhood they do not suffer from cold, and need no blanket to protect them from the chilling northern blasts. For the first five weeks after birth, they are most tenderly watched over by the mother-seals, who fish in the neighbourhood of their icy cradles, and return, at intervals, to suckle their offspring. Their affection for their white-coated darlings is most touching. Each mother-seal finds or makes an opening in the ice, near her baby, through which she passes into the water, to sustain herself by fishing. When the ice is thin, each mother makes a separate ice-hole for her own use. On a single small ice-field, there are at times thousands of young seals basking. Their mothers take their departure in the morning to fish; and after being perhaps many miles distant in the sea, each is able, by unerring instinct, to find her own ice-hole and her own dear cub among ten thousand, that, to human eyes, look exactly alike. When the cruel hunter approaches, the mothers plunge into the water with loud howlings of alarm, leaving their helpless offspring behind. The young "whitecoats" can only wriggle about a little, whimpering like babies in pain, or, as some say, like young lambs when frightened. It is not without a pang that the hunter kills his first seal, as with dark, lustrous expressive eyes it looks into his face, the eyes, it is positively stated, dimmed with tears, and with piteous cries it appeals to him for mercy. Soon, however, all tender-hearted squeamishness disappears, as the hunter-instinct, which is a part of our human nature, comes into play; stimulated, no doubt, by a recollection of the hungry mouths at home, and the dangers incurred in reaching the poor "whitecoats." The "gaff" is raised, the blow delivered on the nose, and with a sob the young seal stretches itself out in death. In a moment the "sculpting knife" is plunged into the belly of the animal; a few dexterous turns are given and the carcass, still palpitating with warm life, is flung on the ice, denuded of skin and fat. It is said that at times, so rapid is the operation, the bare carcass is seen swimming for some distance in the water, before the vital functions cease. Meantime, the anxious mothers are hovering around; and when the hunters move on, they pop their heads out of the water, and scramble on the ice, searching for the bodies of their murdered young. Their moans are piteous when they find the skinless flesh still quivering in a pool of blood. With a cry of distress they plunge into the water, as if desirous of leaving far behind the blood-stained spot. Three or four pelts make a load, which the hunter binds up in his "towing-rope," and fastening his "gaff"—a bat seven feet in length with a hook at the end—in his bundle, he turns his steps towards the ship. The "pelts" are left on deck for a little to cool ere they are stowed away in piles below. While these operations are going on, the deck has all the appearance of a slaughter-house, and is running with fat and gore. On the arrival of each hunter with his load, he rushes to the galley to snatch a bowl of tea and biscuit, and perhaps a piece of broiled seal. He does not lose time in washing his blood-stained hands; and has no squeamishness in spreading his butter with his thumbs. People who are very precise as to what they "eat, drink, and avoid," had better not engage in seal-hunting. Custom reconciles men to worse horrors than these in actual warfare; and it is not wonderful that our men, after a time, can look without shrinking on the seals rolling from side to side in dying agonies, writhing and crimsoning the ice with their blood; and, even when thrown on deck, sometimes showing by their startings and heavings that the vital spark is not extinct. These hunters feast luxuriously on the flesh of the seal. Being confined to salt pork, tea and biscuits, a slice of fresh seal is most acceptable and wholesome—and it is always remarked that they return from a voyage, when successful, much fatter than they departed. The heart of the seal is reckoned a dainty, and so are the "fippers." The flesh when boiled has the appearance of mutton. The best way of cooking it is to soak it in water, bake it in an oven, and bring it to table with berry sauce or preserved fruit. Not many landmen, however, can bring themselves to dine on seal's flesh.

"THE WHELPING GROUNDS."

The scene of this slaughter is the open ocean, to the north-east of the island. The distance from land at which the seals are found varies according to winds and currents. In an open season when the ice is some distance from the shore, the vessels push pretty far north before meeting the seals. Often, however, a sail of two or three days brings them to the

"whelping grounds." When north-east winds prevail for a long time, the ice, on which the seals are, is frequently drifted into the bays and harbours; and then all that are ashore, "young men and maidens, old men and children," take advantage of the lucky chance, and may be seen out on the ice in hundreds, slaughtering and hauling. In such seasons the sealing-vessels do badly, often missing the seals altogether. Indeed the seal-hunt is a lottery to a great extent. Over hundreds of square miles of ice the herds of seals, which are widely scattered, must be sought. Deer-shooting or partridge-shooting is not more uncertain in its results. The sealing-vessels have to bore their way through the ice fields, taking advantage of openings and lanes of water; at times, when beset, sawing and pounding the ice into fragments around the ship, and warping her through the opening. Pluck, energy and perseverance in beating about in search of the prey, are the main elements of success. Some of the old skippers are counted "lucky," and there is a great pressure to get berths in the vessels commanded by these renowned Nimrods. The immense extent of ocean covered by ice may be judged of by supposing that the English Channel, the Irish Sea and the German Ocean were blocked up with ice-floes, and that it were possible to cross from France to England and thence to Ireland; to proceed northward and pass over first to Scotland and then to Norway, and afterwards coming southward, to return again from France to England, all on solid ice. The scenery amid these ice-solitudes is said to be at times magnificent. The evenings, after a north-west wind, are lovely, the atmosphere clear and transparent, and having that dry crispness and elasticity which makes every breath send the blood dancing with fresh vigour from the heart. Ice-scenery, however, is best viewed beneath the mild light of the moon, and when contrasted with the deeper blue of the sky. The daylight is too dazzling, garish and monotonous for fine effects. The moon, the stars and the quivering aurora are the fittest accompaniments. When the ice opens before a light westerly breeze, and the sky is studded with bright stars and adorned with the presence of the young moon, and the flickering streamers of the aurora, and the ship moves on among numerous fairy islets of glittering ice and wreaths of snow—then indeed the scene is enchanting. The silence of nature is deep and solemn, and the unearthly loveliness of fairyland that sometimes visits us in the dreams of youth is realised for a time. Then when the storm blows the change to the sublime and awful is immediate. The unbroken swell of the Atlantic rolls in huge continuous ridges, heaving the pavement of ice on its mighty folds, lifting up the vessel alternately on its broad domes and swallowing it in its deep hollows; and at times piling up the huge blocks of ice, one on the other, to the height of twenty or thirty feet, and rending the ice-fields with a noise like the thunder of artillery. The icebergs are sailing about in solemn and lonely grandeur; carried through the floes by the deep-sea current, independent of winds and waves. In majestic grandeur the scene cannot be surpassed. The sunset lights up the icebergs with hues of liquid gold and rose colour; and the aurora, sometimes coloured with all the hues of the rainbow, and at other times covering the heavens with blood-red drapery that opens and closes like huge flame-curtains, completes the enchantment of the scene. As a general rule, the cold is far from being intense on the ice, and the thermometer is frequently above freezing point. When the vessel is fast among the ice and no seals are in sight, the men amuse themselves with games on the ice, leaping for wagers, and dancing reels without any female partners.

GAFFS AND POKERS.

The seal-hunters have a stirring time and hard work when, in a sailing vessel, they stick fast in heavy ice. Then the voice of the skipper is heard "singing" out, "overboard with you, gaffs and pokers." At the word of command the whole crew, excepting those who work the vessel, leap on the ice. The "pokers" are large poles of light wood, six or eight inches in circumference, and twelve or fifteen feet long. Pounding with these, or hewing the ice with axes, the men split the pans near the bows of the vessel, and then inserting the ends of the "pokers," use them as large levers, lifting up one side of the broken piece and depressing the other, and others getting round with their gaffs, they shove it, by main force, under the adjoining ice. Thus smashing, breaking and pounding, they make a passage for the vessel, and then laying out great claws ahead, on the ice, they warp the vessel on. When a very heavy ice-pan is met, the ice-saw is used. Sometimes a crowd of men will cling round the ship's bows, holding on to ropes suspended there for the purpose, and dancing and jumping on the ice, break it with their weight, shove it under the vessel and drag her over it with all their force. This is no child's play, and often they are up to their knees in water. Then the hauling of two cwt. of fat over hummocks of ice for a couple of miles, leaping from pan to pan, making rafts of ice with their gaffs, and bridging chasms with floating pieces,—all this requires men of iron muscles and stout hearts. No puny mortals need attempt seal-hunting. A finer body of men, physically considered, than those who start for the ice from our harbours, could not be found elsewhere.

STEAMERS versus SAILING VESSELS.

Up till recently, our seal-fishery was carried on in stout vessels of 150 or 200 tons. During the last six years, however, steamers have been employed more and more, and as in all other departments, steam is proving the conqueror, and driving all competitors to the wall. This year nineteen steamers have started for the ice-fields, carrying upwards of 3,000 men. A steamer can make two or three trips to the ice in one season, and one of them may bring in 50,000 or 60,000 seals if successful on both trips, and so clear her own cost, in a year, and leave a handsome profit. Of course the steamers are found best for pushing through the ice-floes and beating about in search of seals. All our best men prefer to go in steamers. Soon sailing-vessels will be entirely superseded.

KINDS OF SEALS.

There are four distinct species of seals frequenting our coasts.

1. The Bay Seal, which lives on the coast all the year round, frequenting the mouths of rivers and harbours. It breeds in the autumn or fall of the year, and is never found on the ice.

2. The Harp Seal—so named from the old male having on its back a curved line resembling an ancient lyre or harp.

The young harps are called "White-coats," and are the kind sought after most of all by our hunters.

3. The Hooded Seal, which is larger than the harp. The male or "dog-hood" has a singular hood or bag of soft flesh on his nose, which he inflates when attacked, and is strong enough to resist seal shot. The pelt of the hoods is not so fine as that of the harps, and they are not so valuable. They bring forth their young two or three weeks later than the harps, and are found farther north.

4. The Square Fipper Seal—the largest of all, but rarely taken.

SNOW-BOUND TRAINS IN NEW BRUNSWICK.

The fearful storms and intense cold of the present month will long be remembered by those who have charge of railway lines.

An incident on the European & North-American Railway (Westward Extension) will serve to illustrate the difficulties to be encountered in keeping the track clear for travel.

On the morning of the 7th instant three locomotives endeavoured to force their way through the drifts that had formed between Fairville and the Carleton terminus during the terrific north-west blast of the previous night. They left Fairville at 5 a.m., and did not reach Carleton, a distance of three miles, until 2 p.m. After attaching the mail and one passenger car they made for Bangor, the gales and drift from the north-west remaining unabated. About a mile and a-half from Carleton, their friends, the drifts of the morning, had again filled in. They found it necessary before making a plunge to detach the train. The first impediment was passed through in safety. Beyond was another more formidable than the first; at this with full head of steam they charged. Unhappily the great and unequal pressure on the rail caused it to spread. The first engine, the "W. Parks," took a course of its own for some distance, and finally brought up in an extensive snow bank, there she lays up to the present. The small shunting engine, "La Tour," and the "T. R. Jones," got off the track, but were dug out and re-adjusted during Friday.

The snow was so compact that for miles the snow-plough proved unavailing. The shovel and hard manual labour were alone sufficient to master the blockade. The manager of the New Brunswick section of the western extension, Howard D. McLeod, and the whole of the employes on that line, have had two or three weeks of unceasing labour, night and day. Iced rails, snow drifts, heavy storms, have followed each other with most embarrassing rapidity, taxing the labour and business capacity of the line to its utmost. The scene of disaster we have endeavoured to sketch proved the efficiency of the "shovel corps." At the rate those men worked a road to Richmond would have been "un fait accompli" had the young Napoleon, McClellan, possessed such active and willing shovelists when he made that well-remembered general order, "Shovels to the Front." E. J. R.

THE BRANDY-POTS.

Mr. Bohuslav Kroupa, of London, Ont., contributes to this issue a sketch of the Brandy-pots, in the Lower St. Lawrence, by moonlight. These curious rocks are situated to the east of Isle aux Lièvres, nearly opposite Rivière du Loup, and form one of the great attractions of the neighbourhood for tourists. The rocks are covered with cellules, (evidently formed at some distant date by the action of the waves) which are generally filled with rain-water. This water, after exposure, turns to a brown colour, not unlike that of dark brandy. Hence the fantastic name bestowed upon the rocks

AN INDIAN POW-WOW.

A correspondent at Fort Garry writes:—It is the custom of the Indians to visit, from time to time, the different posts of the Hudson's Bay Company in the North-West, and, planting their standard of coloured feathers in the ground, to perform around it the eccentric dances of their race. As the vile music of the tam-tam commences, first one and then another rises from the circle to join in the uncouth motions and swaying of the dance, uttering the while a monotonous and somewhat melancholy cry, which rises, with the excitement, to a succession of sharp, shrill, and very hideous yells. The performance appears to yield the participants infinite pleasure. The affair generally ends in presents of tobacco to the performers, who depart contented to their wigwams.

JAPANESE CARPENTERS.—The Japanese carpenters are ingenious workmen, and their work is done with marvellous neatness. A curious feature of their houses is that they do not contain a nail; all of the joints and timbers being dovetailed together by many ingenious devices; and the whole work, even to the rafters, is as smooth as if it had been polished down with sand-paper. And the Japanese are a neat people; for they use no paint to hide any blemish of construction or ornamentation, no filigree work or plaster of Paris gew-gaws, but every stick in the building is exposed. Every morning, as regularly as she cooks the breakfast or sweeps the floor, the Japanese housewife takes a wet cloth and scours the whole interior of the dwelling, leaving no part untouched, and no stain or dirt-spot to mark its cleanly appearance. Then the Japanese do not come into the house with muddy boots, after the style of the American sovereign; but, having covered the floor with neat matting, always remove the dirty sandals before stepping upon it. I stood and watched the Japanese carpenters at their work for some minutes, and noticed the peculiarity of their movements. The Japanese carpenter works toward him—that is, instead of shoving a plane upon the board at arm's length, he pulls it toward him; and he cuts, saws, and chops in the same way. His saws are fixed in handles like a butcher's cleaver, and the teeth slant or rake toward the handle. The planes are constructed like ours; but the wooden portion is very thin and wide. The adze is fastened to the end of a hooped stick, like the handle of one of the crooked canes worn on the arm on our streets; and altogether their tools are different from ours, yet I cannot observe that they are awkward in appearance, or awkwardly handled.—*American Manufacturer.*

A HARD FACT.—In the Christ Church district of South London the population is 40,000, of whom 30,000 are paupers. Nice for the rate-payers! *Court Journal.*—And the paupers?