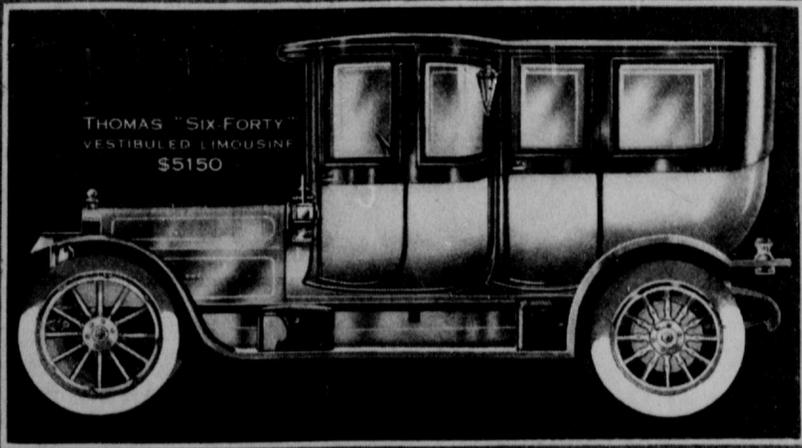


KING OF THE SOLITUDES

(Continued from Page 8)



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a huge, shining white column (as seen in front), full twenty feet long—before he heeled over with an appalling long-drawn sigh; and, falling back with a thunderous upheaval, vanished. It was a grampus, the dreaded "killer whale," the scourge of the seal "rookeries," the terror of the North Atlantic, the beast which of all beasts on sea, or land, or in the air, fears nothing.

In the meanwhile, the bear was going full speed ahead for the floating ice that could be seen from where the men were, half a mile out.

Then followed a race. The speed of the bear was a wonderful thing; but he was peculiarly liable to turn at any moment and to attack the pursuer. The speed of the "killer" was, however, a greater thing, and the possibility of the bear turning, only lent greater zest to the chase in his implacable mind. A seal—he was himself seven feet long—streaked from their path, as from a pestilence, and turned to watch this great sight with mild, gentle eyes. A shoal of porpoises scattered allwhither for dear life, as the bear hurtled through them like a sparrow-hawk through a flock of sparrows.

Then the ice showed. The bear did not wait to climb out. One does not wait to climb with a twenty-foot grampus chewing anticipatory lumps at one's heels, by the way. He sprang, tucking his great hind feet close up under him as he did so, and the rush of the grampus carried it half way up on to the ice, so that it poised for a few seconds see-sawing on the edge, gnashing within three inches of the bear's apology for a tail. Then it slid back with a long-drawn, ghostly sigh; and the bear turned to watch the sharp back-fin of the monster, cutting its way, shark-like, out to sea and another hunt.

The bear trudged sullenly on over the floating ice. At times, he swam from one ice peak to another. At other times he lay up and waited. Nothing showed, however; and the day slid into almost imperceptible night.

About noon, next day, he sighted a thing. Rather, I should say, it was a mass, a bull walrus twelve feet long, with tusks in proportion. The bear prospected him from an ice hutmock five hundred yards away, and mentally counted the chances of a fight with this ugly, warty monster. Then, first one seal, then another, and finally a third, came up out of the green sea and lay basking on its stomach beside the giant.

The bear cocked his absurdly small ears forward, and slowly licked his lips. Then he made silently—silently because of the fur which covered the soles of his feet—for the water. He took an observation, before he went under and dived. And from that moment he was no more than a nose, a nose and a pair of watchful, wicked, small eyes, which poked above water from time to time—singularly after the fashion of a submarine's conning-tower—ever nearer and nearer the basking seals. The third and last observation was taken within fifty yards of the seals; and then, the bear dived for the last time, and rushed.

Now, it was at that juncture that the bull walrus chanced to move toward the water. He shuffled, rolling clumsily on his great flippers, between the seals, and reaching the edge of the sea, paused to look back for a few seconds. Thus it happened that Mr. Bear, hurtling upward from the green depths, making, in fact, his final submarine dash upon the seals, hurled up over the edge of the ice and barged fairly into the walrus before he could stop himself.

If you know anything of the bull walrus, you will know that he is famed for many things; but good temper is not one of them. The bear had struck at the mighty beast before he realized his mistake, and the walrus struck back with the dreaded, slashing down-stroke of all his tribe. The bear promptly jumped for room, and was five-sixths of a second, which is a lot where these beasts are concerned, too late. He got

it, those appalling, curved, eighteen-inch tusks on his flank; and they left a trademark, a clean, red, parallel groove clean down the fleshy part of Mr. Bear's leg. If you had seen the walrus's enormous head and the mighty, rippling muscles of his neck, you might dimly have been able to imagine how the bear felt.

The blow would have half pulverised a lesser beast; but it simply turned the bear into a giant, ivory-yellow fiend. He had been spun clean round, and had fallen sideways; but he picked himself up with a roar.

Then events got hustled. The seals fled, as if all death was after them; and the walrus's little pig eyes turned a dull red, like that seen in live coals, and slashed with strokes calculated to brain any average elephant, and grunted like ten pigs rolled into one; and the bear hurled at him like a great, living, dirty yellow projectile, and grappled, and the path of his claws was written in red on the walrus's wrinkled throat; and one great yellow, curved tusk of the foe came down, as a steam-hammer might come down, and sank clean through the fleshy part of the bear's shoulder; and the two, grappling and grunting and roaring, fell into the cold sea, and cast up foam and spume after the fashion of a dozen fountains.

Now, all this time, the cause of the trouble, the thing which had in the first place induced the walrus bull to make for the ice at all and "haul out" was drawing slowly over the face of the sea toward them. A submarine might have looked as did this new apparition, gray, steely, and long—seventeen feet long, if an inch—but submarines are not spotted with black like a leopard, and submarines do not yet sprout from the right side of their nose an eight-foot horn, spiral and suggestive. This thing did that; and moreover, the thing was alive, so that you could see its eyes, like tiny convex port-holes, as it lay flat along the surface. It was no fish, for the undulations of its vast form were up and down, and its tail was flat. It moved as do plaice, in fact; but unlike plaice, it was narrow and torpedo-shaped; and though assuredly its heart was of stone, cold as the cruelty that lurked in its cold eyes, its blood was warm. It was a mammal, a narwhal, to be exact; a finned giant of mystery, who always has been, and is to this day, so far as man is concerned, little but a horn with a name.

All the fighters could have seen of this new foe—all are foes who are not prey in the Arctic sea—was a twin spout of spume traveling at amazing speed toward them. Possibly, this is all they ever saw—except, perhaps, the wicked, hissing little ripple at the very point of the pointed horn. Certainly, they continued to fight till the thing was upon them. There was no warning at all, no preliminary noise, nothing! Just a sheet of dazzling foam, a scream of cold waters cleft asunder; then a hazy vision, almost only a suggestion, of a monstrous, slim, dark shape shot across the vortex, and—the impact.

The bear was flung bodily high upon the ice, where he lay coughing and dazed; the walrus gave one leviathan and agonised heave and was still; and the narwhal, stopping absolutely dead as if a hand had gripped it, shuddered horribly from head to tail, from the very marrow outward, and sank like a log, leaving its horn behind it.

The walrus was dead, the narwhal's horn driven clean through his body. The narwhal was dead, killed by the shock, when its horn, after spitting the walrus as a skewer spits a joint, passed out on the other side, struck the solid ice, and, cleaving a split a foot deep therein, finally shattered from the point upward and broke, or jarred off at its base. Only the bear lived. After an hour he arose slowly and painfully. And there we will leave him, to gorge on walrus meat and to recover—King of the Solitudes still.

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