

IX.—SVEND FOYN'S WHALING ESTABLISHMENT.*

In the remote northeastern part of our continent, where the White Sea and the Polar Sea meet, lies Vadsoe, a miserable little town, with about 1,800 inhabitants, scarcely one-half of whom are civilized Europeans, for upwards of 900 are Laplanders and Finns. The town is divided into two distinct parts, according to the character of the population. It extends for a considerable distance along the coast, and one part consists of dark log-houses covered with turf, such as are frequently seen beyond the arctic circle, while the part inhabited by the Europeans is built up more closely and has a more cheerful look. In strolling through the streets and alleys of Vadsoe we meet with many strange and characteristic figures. Russians, Finns, Laplanders, and Norwegians mingle in the streets; and this mixture of different nationalities gives a peculiar character to the little town. Here is the small Laplander in his gaudy costume and his soft, cat-like walk. The Russian is generally dirty and seedy in his appearance, with a nose indicating deep and frequent potations of strong whiskey, and with his long hair hanging wildly about his forehead; and towering above all the rest, like a lord and master, is the tall and well-made Norwegian, with his blonde hair and Teutonic features.

The most important person in the whole town of Vadsoe—more important even than the mayor—is Svend Foyn, an old whaler; and it is to him and his whaling establishment that I now desire to introduce my readers.

Fish and whales are the principal sources of income in this country, and as all the fisheries are free, every one endeavors to earn his living thereby. This was also the case with Svend Foyn, who in his youth was a simple whaler, and now carries on the whaling business on an extensive scale. His establishment is located on the coast opposite Vadsoe, and occupies a considerable space. The nearer our boat approached it, the more unendurable became the odor arising from it. When we approached Vadsoe by steamer and the establishment was pointed out to us, our attention had been attracted by some large white hills on the shore whose nature we could not understand; now, however, it became clear to us that these hills were whales undergoing the process of manufacture. At a short distance from the establishment a large

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object rose from the water, which at first we took to be a small island or rock, although we had passed the region of the innumerable rocky islands which line the northern and western coasts of Norway. When we came nearer we found that it was a large whale, which had been killed only a few hours before. We must confess that the enormous dimensions of this animal exceeded all our expectations. It measured almost 60 feet in length, and was correspondingly thick; its head and tail were under water, and only the body proper, like an oval cut lengthwise, rose from the sea, whose waves were washing it. We rowed entirely around the whale. It was in every sense of the word a monster; for even the largest land animal known, the elephant, seemed a dwarf when compared with it. Firmly anchored, it awaited its fate. We now rowed to the wharf which extends in front of the establishment. On this wharf stood an old man, the master himself, Svend Foyn, as our boatman told us reverently. We landed, but the ascent offered considerable difficulties. The steep stairs had no railing, and were covered to the depth of several inches with mud, which, mixed with fat, had become a compact and slippery mass.

When we had accomplished the dangerous ascent, we were met by Svend Foyn himself. Truly he presented a most remarkable figure. He was a stout, short man, whose body, in spite of his age, showed strength and flexibility. He was clad in wide flowing garments of a blue color, almost giving him the appearance of a ball; under the broad-brimmed black hat there was a head covered with snow-white hair, but with a pair of bright blue eyes revealing great intelligence. The one of our number who was something of a polyglot addressed to him in Danish a request to allow us to visit his establishment. We had first to undergo a long examination. He wanted to know who we were, whence we came, our names, and where we were going. Only after we had told him that the American among our number was a clergyman, that the other two were Germans, one of them a geographer and the other a lawyer, did he consent, but not until we had assured him that we had not been sent by other whalers to study the secrets of his "manufacture." After we had solemnly assured him that this was not our object, he nodded assent, and the audience with the king of whalers had come to an end.

We now took a survey from the bridge. The white hills on our right and left were actually whales which had been skinned. There were at least from six to eight of them, from the fresh whale, perhaps caught only yesterday, to those which had been lying here from eight to fourteen days, and which, having been continually exposed to the rays of the sun, emitted a very strong odor. Some of them measured sixty feet in length, veritable monsters, which, half floating in the water and half drawn ashore, presented a horrible spectacle. Wherever there was any fat they looked white, and where the flesh had been cut they appeared red, in all imaginable shades and colors. The sight was one which required strong nerves. About a dozen workmen were busy with these whales

engaged in various manipulations. Pieces of fat two and three times the length of a man were cut from the large animals and simply thrown into the water (the workmen partly stand on the whales) and drawn ashore with large hooks. Large quantities of whalebone were lying about on the shore, and I would like to have seen the expression of one of our fashionable ladies when viewing this whalebone and thinking of the delicate pieces of the same material in a prepared condition destined to give a slender appearance to her waist. No doubt she would have characterized this sight as simply horrible.

In a large shed the whales are cut to pieces. After all the fat has been removed they are floated to the shed and hoisted up by means of a windlass on an inclined plane. Here the dissecting process begins. The flesh which still remains is cut off to serve as guano, and the bones are taken out and crushed, to become a fertilizer. Prior to this, however, the entrails are removed—the only part which is of no use—tied together with ropes, and laid at anchor in the harbor till a sufficient quantity has accumulated. Then a steamer takes them in tow and sails out into the open Polar Sea, where they are loosened from the steamer and left to serve as delicious food for different fish.

We wandered farther, again on *terra firma*, which, however, was anything but firm. Supporting ourselves with our umbrellas, we slowly slid forward, carefully placing one foot before the other. Woe unto him who fell as he would inevitably be lost. All the roads leading through the establishment, which has almost the appearance of a small town, were completely soaked with train-oil and grease. To “step into train-oil”—a proverbial phrase with us—is here not only possible, but even pardonable. It might happen to any one of our number, for we were literally wading in a mire of dirt and grease.

We first visited the train-oil warehouse, where about 1,000 barrels of train-oil were stowed away; and thence we went to the guano factory. Here all the meat—everything which is not fat—is turned to guano, by being dried and pulverized. The residue of the fat which has been fried out is likewise utilized in this manner. From here we went into the bone-mill, where the bones are crushed to powder; and finally we visited the trying-house, which was one of the principal objects of interest. It is an enormously long building, or rather shed, having a roof to keep out the rain, its floor being below the surface of the ground and resembling a cellar. In this cellar many small fires were burning, which make the ceiling very warm. The entire building forms one large room or hall; on the warm floor lies the fat, cut into innumerable small pieces and piled up to the height of 2' or 3 feet. The whole mass of fat is seething and bubbling, and every now and then a man stirs it with a large shovel and turns it upside down; but the smell! Along one side of the building, whose floor slightly slants in that direction, there runs a trough into which the train-oil flows, and which conducts it to large basins, where it is rectified. More we did not wish, and actually were

not able, to see; for about an hour we had wandered about through all this dirt, grease, and foul odor, and now we had to say *satis superque* (enough and more than enough). We were truly thankful when, after having slid back over all these dangerous *ὕγρα κέλευθα* (watery ways), we sat again in our boat, which took us back to the steamer. To honest Svend Foyn we hereby express our deepfelt gratitude for having given us permission to visit his establishment; we shall not betray any of his secrets, and cheerfully leave him sole possessor of his "filthy lucre;" in spite of the horrible smell he doubtless thinks *non olet* (it smells not).

After we had gone about a hundred paces from the factory we noticed a small steamer, painted green, which was slowly approaching the shore. Its shape was very peculiar; it was small and short, exceedingly dirty and greasy, without masts, and instead of the prow it had a large board shaped like the top of a table. It was one of the vessels which catch whales. Svend Foyn has four of these steamers, which, during all summer, excepting the close season, cruise day and night in the Polar Sea. Their whole arrangement is peculiar in every respect. As we have said, they are not very large, scarcely from 50 to 60 feet long, and have powerful engines, which can propel the steamer at a rapid rate both backward and forward. There is no room for any cargo, only for the engine, for coal, and for the crew, which comprises from 6 to 8 men. It has no masts and prow, and therefore no rigging, and is really nothing but a hull. The board referred to above lies entirely free, so that from it an unobstructed view is obtained both towards the right and the left. On it there is a gun on a movable carriage. It is loaded with a harpoon, whose pointed head protrudes from the mouth of the gun, and to which is attached a long rope, which is wound on a roller.