Adventure

(Registered U. S. Patent Office)

1928
VOL. LXVI NO. 3

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for April 15th

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Cover Design by Duncan McMillan *Headings by A. E. Lundquist*

Published twice a month by The Butterick Publishing Company, Butterick Building, New York, N. Y., U. S. A. Joseph A. Moore, Chairman of the Board; S. R. Latshaw, President; Levin Rank, Secretary and Treasurer; Anthony M. Rud, Editor. Entered as Second Class Matter, October 1, 1910, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Chicago, Illinois. Yearly subscription $4.00 in advance. Single copy, Twenty-five Cents, in Canada Thirty Cents. Foreign postage, $2.00 additional. Canadian postage, 75 cents. Trade Mark Registered:

SKULE SKERRY

A Scientist's Weird Experience on a Desolate Isle of Birds

By JOHN BUCHAN

"Who's there—besides foul weather?"
—KING LEAR

IT HAPPENED a good many years ago, when I was quite a young man. I wasn't the cold scientist then that I fancy I am today. I took up birds in the first instance chiefly because they fired what imagination I had got. They fascinated me, for they seemed of all created things the nearest to pure spirit—those little beings with a normal temperature of 125°. Think of it! The goldcrest, with a stomach no bigger than a bean, flies across the North Sea! The curlew sandpiper, that breeds so far north that only about three people have ever seen its nest, goes to Tasmania for its holidays.

So I always went bird hunting with a queer sense of expectation and a bit of a tremor, as if I were walking very near the boundaries of the things we are not allowed to know. I felt this especially in the migration season. The small atoms, coming God knows whence and going God knows whither, were sheer mystery. They belonged to a world built in different dimensions from ours. I don't know what I expected, but I was always waiting for something, as much in a flutter as a girl at her first ball. You must realize that mood of mine to understand what follows.

One year I went to the Norland Islands

for the spring migration. Plenty of people do the same, but I had the notion to do something a little different. I had a theory that migrants go north and south on a fairly narrow road. They have their corridors in the air as clearly defined as a highway, and keep an inherited memory of these corridors, like the stout conservatives they are.

I didn't go to the Blue Banks or to Noop or to Hermaness or any of the obvious places where birds might be expected to make their first landfall. At that time I was pretty well read in the Sagas, and had taught myself Icelandic for the purpose.

Now it is written in the Saga of Earl Skuli, which is part of the Jarla Saga or Saga of the Earls, that Skuli, when he was carving out his earldom in the Scots Islands, had much to do with a place called the Isle of the Birds. It is mentioned repeatedly, and the saga-man has a lot to say about the amazing multitude of birds there. It couldn't have been ordinary gullery, for the Northmen saw too many of these to think them worth mentioning.

I got it into my head that it must have been one of the alighting places of the migrants, and was probably as busy a spot today as in the Eleventh Century. The saga said it was near Halmarsness, and that was on the west side of the Island of Una, so to Una I decided to go. I fairly got that Isle of Birds on the brain. From the map it might be any one of a dozen skerries under the shadow of Halmarsness.

I remember that I spent a good many hours in the British Museum before I started, hunting up the scanty records of those parts. I found—I think it was in Adam of Bremen—that a succession of holy men had lived on the Isle, and that a chapel had been built there and endowed by Earl Rognvald, which came to an end in the time of Malise of Strathearn. There was a bare mention of the place, but the chronicler had one curious note.

Insula Avium, quae est ultima insula et proxima abysso.

I wondered what on earth he meant. The place was not ultimate in any geographical sense, neither the farthest north nor the farthest west of the Norlands. And what was the abyss? In monkish Latin the word generally means hell—Bunyan's Bottomless Pit—and sometimes the grave; but neither meaning seemed to have much to do with an ordinary sea skerry.

I ARRIVED at Una about eight o'clock in a May evening, having been put across from Voss in a flitboat. It was a quiet evening, the sky without clouds but so pale as to be almost gray, the sea gray also, but with a certain iridescence in it, and the low lines of the land a combination of hard grays and umbers, cut into by the harder white of the lighthouse.

I can never find words to describe that curious quality of light that you get up in the North. Sometimes it is like looking at the world out of deep water. Farquharson used to call it "milky," and one saw what he meant. Generally it is a sort of essence of light, cold and pure and rarefied, as if it were reflected from snow. There is no color in it, and it makes thin shadows.

Some people find it horribly depressing—Farquharson said it reminded him of a churchyard in the early morning where all his friends were buried—but personally I found it tonic and comforting. But it made me feel very near the edge of the world.

There was no inn, so I put up at the post office, which was on a causeway between a freshwater loch and a sea voe, so that from the doorstep you could catch brown trout on one side and sea trout on the other.

Next morning I set off for Halmarsness, which lay five miles to the west over a flat moorland all puddled with tiny lochans. There seemed to be nearly as much water as land. Presently I came to a bigger loch under the lift of ground which was Halmarsness.

There was a gap in the ridge through which I looked straight out to the Atlantic,

and there in the middle distance was what I knew instinctively to be my island. It was perhaps a quarter of a mile long, low for the most part, but rising in the north to a grassy knoll beyond the reach of any tides. In parts it narrowed to a few yards width, and the lower levels must often have been awash. But it was an island, not a reef, and I thought I could make out the remains of the monkish cell. I climbed Halmarsness, and there, with nesting skuas swooping angrily about my head, I got a better view.

It was certainly my island, for the rest of the archipelago were inconsiderable skerries, and I realized that it might well be a resting place for migrants, for the mainland cliffs were too thronged with piratical skuas and other jealous fowl to be comfortable for weary travellers.

I sat for a long time on the headland looking down from the three hundred feet of basalt to the island half a mile off—the last bit of solid earth between me and Greenland. The sea was calm for Norland waters but there was a snowy edging of surf to the skerries which told of a tide rip.

Two miles farther south I could see the entrance to the famous Roost of Una, where, when tide and wind collide, there is a wall like a house, so that a small steamer cannot pass it. The only signs of human habitation were about a small gray farm in the lowlands toward the Roost, but the place was full of the evidence of man—a herd of Norland ponies, each tagged with its owner's name, grazing sheep of the piebald Norland breed, a broken barbed wire fence that drooped over the edge of the cliff.

I was only an hour's walk from a telegraph office, and a village which got its newspapers not more than three days late. It was a fine spring noon, and in the empty bright land there was scarcely a shadow.

All the same, as I looked down at the island I did not wonder that it had been selected for attention by the sagaman and had been reputed holy. For it had an air of concealing something, though it was as bare as a billiard table. It was an intruder, an irrelevance in the picture, planted there by some celestial caprice. I decided forthwith to make my camp on it, and the decision, inconsequently enough, seemed to me to be something of a venture.

THAT was the view taken by John Ronaldson, when I talked to him after dinner. John was the postmistress's son, more fisherman than crofter, like all Norlanders, a skilful sailor and an adept at the dipping lug, and noted for his knowledge of the western coast. He had difficulty in understanding my plan, and when he identified my island he protested.

"Not Skule Skerry!" he cried. "What would take ye there, man? Ye'll get a' the birds ye want on Halmarsness and a far better bield. Ye'll be blawn away on the skerry, if the wind rises."

I explained to him my reasons as well as I could, and I answered his fears about a gale by pointing out that the island was sheltered by the cliffs from the prevailing winds, and could be scourged only from the south, southwest, or west, quarters from which the wind rarely blew in May.

"It'll be cauld," he said, "and wat."

I pointed out that I had a tent and was accustomed to camping.

"Ye'll starve."

I expounded my proposed methods of commissariat.

"It'll be an ill job getting ye on and off."

But after cross examination he admitted that ordinarily the tides were not difficult, and that I could get a rowboat to a beach below the farm I had seen—its name was Sgurravoe. Yet when I had said all this he still raised objection till I asked him flatly what was the matter with Skule Skerry.

"Naebody gangs there," he said gruffly.

"Why should they?" I asked. "I'm only going to watch the birds."

But the fact that it was never visited seemed to stick in his throat and he grumbled out something that surprised me.

"It has an ill name," he said.

But when I pressed him he admitted that there was no record of shipwreck or disaster to account for the ill name. He repeated the words "Skule Skerry" as if they displeased him.

"Folk dinna gang near it. It has aye had an ill name. My grandfather used to say that the place wasna canny."

Now your Norlander has nothing of the Celt in him, and is as different from the Hebridean as a Northumbrian from a Cornishman. They are a fine, upstanding, hard headed race, almost pure Scandinavian in blood, but they have as little poetry in them as a Manchester radical. I should have put them down as utterly free from superstition and, in all my many visits to the islands, I have never yet come across a folk tale—hardly even an historical legend.

Yet here was John Ronaldson, with his weather beaten face and stiff chin and shrewd blue eyes, declaring that an innocent looking island "wasna canny," and showing the most remarkable disinclination to go near it.

Of course, all this only made me keener. Besides, it was called Skule Skerry, and the name could only come from Earl Skuli, so it was linked up authentically with the oddments of information I had collected in the British Museum—the Jarla Saga and Adam of Bremen and all the rest of it.

John finally agreed to take me over next morning in his boat, and I spent the rest of the day in collecting my kit. I had a small E. P. tent, and a Wolseley valise and half a dozen rugs, and since I had brought a big box of tinned stuffs from the stores, all I needed was flour and meal and some simple groceries. I learned that there was a well on the island, and that I could count on sufficient driftwood for my fire, but to make certain I took a sack of coals and another of peats.

So I set off next day in John's boat, ran with the wind through the Roost of Una when the tide was right, tacked up the coast and came to the skerry early in the afternoon.

YOU COULD see that John hated the place. We ran into a cove on the east side and he splashed ashore as if he expected to have his landing opposed, looking all the time sharply about him. When he carried my stuff to a hollow under the knoll which gave a certain amount of shelter, his head was always twisting round.

To me the place seemed to be the last word in forgotten peace.

The swell lipped gently the reefs and the little pebbled beaches, and only the babble of gulls from Halmarsness broke the stillness.

John was clearly anxious to get away, but he did his duty by me. He helped me to get the tent up, found a convenient place for my boxes, pointed out the well and filled my water bucket and made a zereba of stones to protect my camp on the Atlantic side. We had brought a small dinghy along with us, and this was to be left with me, so that when I wanted I could row across to the beach at Sgurravoe. As his last service he fixed an old pail between two boulders on the summit of the knoll, and filled it with oily waste, so that it could be turned into a beacon.

"Ye'll maybe want to come off," he said, "and the boat will maybe no be there. Kindle your flare, and they'll see it at Sgurravoe and get the word to me, and I'll come for ye though the Muckle Black Silkie himsel' was hunkerin' wi' the skerry."

Then he looked up and sniffed the air.

"I dinna like the set of the sky," he declared. "It's a bad weatherhead. There'll be mair wund than I like in the next four and twenty hours."

So saying, he hoisted his sail and presently was a speck on the water toward the Roost. There was no need for him to hurry, for the tide was now wrong, and before he could pass the Roost he would have three hours to wait on this side of the Mull. But the man, usually so deliberate and imperturbable, had been in a fever to be gone.

HIS DEPARTURE left me in a curious mood of happy loneliness and pleasurable expectation. I was left solitary with the seas and the birds. I laughed to think that I had found a streak of superstition in the granite John. He and his Muckle Black Silkie! I knew the old legend of the North which tells how the Finns, the ghouls that live in the deeps of the ocean, can on occasion don a seal's skin and come to land to play havoc with mortals.

But *diablerie* and this isle of mine were worlds apart. I looked at it as the sun dropped, drowsing in the opal colored tides, under a sky in which pale clouds made streamers like a spectral *aurora borealis* and I thought that I had stumbled upon one of those places where Nature seems to invite one to her secrets. As the light died the sky was flecked as with the roots and branches of some great nebular tree. That would be the weatherhead of which John Ronaldson had spoken.

I got my fire going, cooked my supper and made everything snug for the night. I had been right in my guess about the migrants. It must have been about ten o'clock when they began to arrive—after my fire had died out and I was smoking my last pipe before getting into my sleeping bag.

A host of fieldfares settled gently on the south part of the skerry. A faint light lingered till after midnight, but it was not easy to distinguish the little creatures, for they were aware of my presence and did not alight within a dozen yards of me. But I made out bramblings and buntings and what I thought was the Greenland wheatear; also jacksnipe and sanderling; and I believed from their cries that the curlew sandpiper and the whimbrel were there.

I went to sleep in a state of high excitement, promising myself a fruitful time on the morrow.

I SLEPT badly, as one often does one's first night in the open. Several times I woke with a start under the impression that I was in a boat rowing swiftly with the tide. And every time I woke I heard the flutter of myriad birds, as if a velvet curtain were being slowly switched along an oak floor. At last I fell into deeper sleep, and when I opened my eyes it was full day.

The first thing that struck me was that it had got suddenly colder. The sky was stormily red in the east, and masses of woolly clouds were banking in the north. I lighted my fire with numbed fingers, and hastily made tea.

I could see the nimbus of seafowl over Halmarsness, but there was only one bird left on my skerry. I was certain from its forked tail that it was a Sabine's gull, but before I got my glass out it was disappearing into the haze toward the north. The sight cheered and excited me, and I cooked my breakfast in pretty good spirits.

That was literally the last bird that came near me, barring the ordinary shearwaters and gulls and cormorants that nested round about Halmarsness. (There was not one single nest of any sort on the island. I had heard of that happening before in places which were regular halting grounds for migrants.) The travelers must have had an inkling of the coming weather and were waiting somewhere well to the south.

About nine o'clock it began to blow. Great God, how it blew! You must go to the Norlands if you want to know what wind can be. It is like being on a mountain top, for there is no high ground to act as a windbreak. There was no rain, but the surf broke in showers and every foot of the skerry was drenched with it. In a trice Halmarsness was hidden, and I seemed to be in the center of a maelstrom, choked with scud and buffeted on every side by swirling waters.

Down came my tent at once. I wrestled with the crazy canvas and got a black eye from the pole, but I managed to drag the ruins into the shelter of the zareba which John had built, and tumble some of the bigger boulders on it. There it lay, flapping like a sick albatross. The water got into my food boxes, and soaked

my fuel, as well as every inch of my clothing.

I had looked forward to a peaceful day of watching and meditation, when I could write up my notes; and instead I spent a morning like a Rugger scrum. I might have enjoyed it, if I hadn't been so wet and cold, and could have got a better lunch than some clammy mouthfuls out of a tin.

One talks glibly about being "blown off" a place, generally an idle exaggeration—but that day I came very near the reality. There were times when I had to hang on for dear life to one of the bigger stones to avoid being trundled into the yeasty seas.

About two o'clock the volume of the storm began to decline, and then for the first time I thought about the boat. With a horrid sinking of the heart I scrambled to the cove where we had beached it. It had been drawn up high and dry, and its painter secured to a substantial boulder. But now there was not a sign of it except a ragged rope end round the stone. The tide had mounted to its level, and tide and wind had smashed the rotten painter. By this time what was left of it would be tossing in the Roost.

This was a pretty state of affairs. John was due to visit me next day, but I had a cold twenty-four hours ahead of me. There was of course the flare he had left me, but I was not inclined to use this. It looked like throwing up the sponge and confessing that my expedition had been a farce. I felt miserable, but obstinate, and, since the weather was clearly mending, I determined to put the best face on the business, so I went back to the wreckage of my camp, and tried to tidy up.

There was still far too much wind to do anything with the tent, but the worst of the spindrift had ceased and I was able to put out my bedding and some of my provender to dry. I got a dry jersey out of my pack and as I was wearing fisherman's boots and oilskins I managed to get some slight return of comfort. Also at last I succeeded in lighting a pipe.

I found a corner under the knoll which gave me a modicum of shelter, and I settled myself to pass the time with tobacco and my own thoughts.

ABOUT three o'clock the wind died away completely. That I did not like, for a dead lull in the Norlands is often the precursor of a new gale. Indeed, I never remembered a time when some wind did not blow, and I had heard that when such a thing happened people came out of their houses to ask what the matter was. But now we had the deadest sort of calm.

The sea was still wild and broken, the tides raced by like a millstream, and a brume was gathering which shut out Halmarsness—shut out every prospect except a narrow circuit of gray water. The cessation of the racket of the gale made the place seem uncannily quiet. The present tumult of the sea, in comparison with the noise of the morning, seemed no more than a mutter and an echo.

As I sat there I became conscious of an odd sensation. I seemed to be more alone, more cut off not only from my fellows but from the habitable earth, that I had ever been before. It was like being in a small boat in mid-Atlantic—but worse, if you understand me, for that would have been loneliness in the midst of a waste which was nevertheless surrounded and traversed by the works of man, whereas now I felt that I was clean outside of man's ken. I had come somehow to the edge of that world where life is, and was very close to the world which has only death in it.

At first I do not think there was much fear in the sensation; chiefly strangeness, but the kind of strangeness which awes without exciting. I tried to shake off the mood, and got up to stretch myself. There was not much room for exercise, and as I moved with stiff legs along the reefs I slipped into the water, so that I got my arms wet. It was cold beyond belief—the very quintessence of deathly Arctic ice, so cold that it seemed to sear and bleach the skin.

FROM that moment I date the most unpleasant experience of my life. I became suddenly the prey of a black depression, shot with the red lights of terror. But it was not a numb terror, for my brain was acutely alive . . . I had the sense to try to make tea, but my fuel was still too damp, and the best I could do was to pour half the contents of my brandy flask into a cup and swallow the stuff. That did not properly warm my chilled body, but—since I am a very temperate man—it speeded up my thoughts instead of calming them. I felt myself on the brink of a childish panic.

One thing I thought I saw clearly—the meaning of Skule Skerry. By some alchemy of nature, which I could not guess at, it was on the track by which the North exercised its spell, a cableway for the magnetism of that cruel frozen uttermost, which man might penetrate but could never subdue or understand.

Though the latitude was not far North, there are folds and tucks in space as if this isle was the edge of the world. Birds knew it, and the old Northerns, who were primitive beings like the birds, knew it. That was why this inconsiderable skerry had been given the name of a conquering Jarl.

The old Church knew it, and had planted a chapel to exorcise the demons of darkness. I wondered what sights the hermit, whose cell had been on the very spot where I was cowering, had seen in the winter dusks.

It may have been partly the brandy, acting on an empty stomach, and partly the extreme cold, but my brain, in spite of my efforts to think rationally, began to run like a dynamo. It is difficult to explain my mood, but I seemed to be two persons—one a reasonable modern man trying to keep sane and scornfully rejecting the fancies which the other, a cast back to something elemental, was furiously spinning. But it was the second that had the upper hand . . .

I felt myself loosed from my moorings, a mere waif on uncharted seas. What is the German phrase? *Urdummheit*—primal idiocy—that is what was the matter with me. I had fallen out of civilization into the outlands and was feeling their spell . . .

I could not think, but I could remember, and what I had read of the Norse voyagers came back to me with horrid persistence. They had known the outlaw terrors—the Sea Walls at the World's end, the Curdled Ocean with its strange beasts. These men did not sail north as we did, in steamers, with modern food and modern instruments, huddled into crews and expeditions. They had gone out almost alone, in brittle galleys, and they had known what we could never know.

And then, I had a shattering revelation. I had been groping for a word and I suddenly got it. It was Adam of Bremen's "*proxima abysso.*" This island was next door to the Abyss, and the Abyss was that blanched wall of the North which was the negation of life.

That unfortunate recollection was the last straw. I remember that I forced myself to get up and try again to kindle a fire. But the wood was still too damp, and I realized with consternation that I had very few matches left, several boxes having been ruined that morning.

As I staggered about I saw the flare which John had left for me, and had almost lighted it. But some dregs of manhood prevented me—I could not own defeat in that babyish way—I must wait till John Ronaldson came for me next morning. Instead, I had another mouthful of brandy, and tried to eat some of my sodden biscuits. But I could scarcely swallow; this infernal cold, instead of rousing hunger, had given me only a raging thirst.

I FORCED myself to sit down again with my face to the land. You see, every moment I was becoming more childish. I had the notion—I cannot call it a thought—that down the avenue from the North something terrible and strange might come. My state of nerves must have been pretty bad, for though I was

cold and empty and weary I was scarcely conscious of physical discomfort.

My heart was fluttering like a scared boy's; and all the time the other part of me was standing aside and telling me not to be a damned fool.

I think that if I had heard the rustle of a flock of migrants I might have pulled myself together, but not a blessed bird had come near me all day. I had fallen into a world that killed life, a sort of Valley of the Shadow of Death.

The brume spoiled the long northern twilight, and presently it was almost dark. At first I thought that this was going to help me, and I got hold of several of my half dry rugs and made a sleeping place.

But I could not sleep, even if my teeth had stopped chattering, for a new and perfectly idiotic idea possessed me. It came from a recollection of John Ronaldson's parting words. What had he said about the Black Silkie—the Finn who came out of the deep and hunkered on this skerry? Raving mania! But on that lost island in the darkening night with icy tides lapping about me was any horror beyond belief?

Still the sheer idiocy of the idea compelled a reaction. I took hold of my wits with both hands and cursed myself for a fool. I could even reason about my folly. I knew what was wrong with me. I was suffering from *panic*—a physical affection produced by natural causes explicable, though as yet not fully explained.

Two friends of mine had once been afflicted with it, one in a lonely glen in the Jotunheim so that he ran for ten miles over stony hills till he found a *saeter* and human companionship; the other in a Bavarian forest, where both he and his guide tore for hours through the thicket till they dropped like logs beside a highroad.

This reflection enabled me to take a pull on myself and to think a little ahead. If my troubles were physical, then there would be no shame in looking for the speediest cure. Without further delay I must leave this God forgotten place.

The flare was all right, for it had been on the highest point of the island, and John had covered it with a peat. With one of my few remaining matches I lighted the oily waste, and a great smoky flame leapt to heaven.

If the half dark had been eery, this sudden brightness was eerier. For a moment the glare gave me confidence, but as I looked at the circle of moving water evilly lit up, all my terrors returned . . . How long would it take for John to reach me? They would see it at once at Sgurravoe—they would be on the lookout for it— John would not waste time, for he had tried to dissuade me from coming. An hour, two hours at the most . . .

I found I could not take my eyes from the waters. They seemed to flow from the north in a strong stream, black as the heart of the elder ice, irresistible as fate, cruel as hell. There seemed to be uncouth shapes swimming in them, which were more than the flickering shadows from the flare. Something portentous might at any moment come down that river of death.

And then my knees gave under me and my heart shrank like a pea, for I saw that the something had come.

It drew itself heavily out of the sea, wallowed for a second, and then raised its head and, from a distance of five yards, looked me blindly in the face. The flare was fast dying down, but even so at that short range it cast a strong light, and the eyes of the awful thing seemed to be dazed by it.

I saw a great dark head like a bull's—an old face wrinkled as if in pain—a gleam of enormous broken teeth—a dripping beard—all formed on other lines than God has made mortal creatures. And on the right of the throat was a huge scarlet gash. The thing seemed to be moaning, and then from it came a sound—whether of anguish or wrath I cannot tell—but it seemed to me the cry of a tortured fiend.

That was enough for me. I pitched forward in a swoon, hitting my head on a stone, and in that condition three hours later John Ronaldson found me.

THEY put me to bed at Sgurravoe with hot bottles, and the doctor from Voss next day patched up my head and gave me a sleeping draught. He declared that there was little the matter with me, except shock from exposure, and promised to set me on my feet in a week.

For three days I was as miserable as a man could be, and did my best to work myself into a fever. I had said not a word about my experience, and left my rescuers to believe that my only troubles were cold and hunger and that I had lighted the flare because I had lost the boat. But during these days I was in a critical state. I knew that there was nothing wrong with my body, but I was gravely concerned about my mind.

For this was my difficulty. If that awful thing was a mere figment of my brain, then I had better be certified at once as a lunatic. No sane man could get into such a state as to see such portents with the certainty with which I had seen that creature come out of the night. If, on the other hand, the thing was a real presence, then I had looked on something outside natural law, and my intellectual world was broken in pieces.

I was a scientist, and a scientist can not admit the supernatural. If with my eyes I had beheld the monster in which Adam of Bremen believed, which holy men had exorcised, which even the shrewd Norlanders shuddered at as the Black Silkie, then I must burn my books and revise my creed. I might take to poetry or theosophy, but I would never be much good again at science.

On the third afternoon I was trying to doze, and with shut eyes fighting off the pictures which tormented my brain. John Ronaldson and the farmer of Sgurravoe were talking at the kitchen door. The latter asked some question, and John replied:

"Aye, it was a walrus and nae mistake. It cam ashore at Gloop Ness and Sandy Fraser hae gotten the skin of it. It was deid when he found it, but no' long deid. The puir beast would drift south on some floe, and it was sair hurt, for Sandy said it had a hole in its throat ye could put your nieve in. There hasna been a walrus come to Una since my grandfather's day."

I turned my face to the wall and composed myself to sleep. For now I knew that I was sane, and need not forswear science.