

WAHNO: THE NORTHERN POLAR CONTINENT.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF WAHNO.

I was soon able to lift myself upon one end and stare at the other. I could see that I was in a small circular hut or tent, woven with split reeds, like a basket, so open as to admit the light through crevices. No one was with me, but I could hear many voices near, and frequent and brilliant flashes of light upon one side of the tent made everything within visible, but were very painful to my eyes. I thought at first the flashes were from a thunder-cloud, but they seemed at times such a variety of colors that I could not account for them in this way, and I was puzzled till I thought of the northern aurora, which I had sometimes seen in the same colors but never before so brilliant. While I was watching their curious play through the crevices of my basket house, several little women entered, one of whom I knew to be a matron of considerable age, from her wrinkles and the dignity and self-possession of her manner, while the younger ones were evidently flattered and somewhat afraid of the giant Providence had thrown upon their care. I made salutations in German, which, as I anticipated, were as strange to them as their words to me. How to make known my wants was not easily contrived. By putting my hands to my mouth as if taking food I soon gave them to understand that I was still hungry, and they brought me several kinds of fruit, all of which appeared to be half dried, and a small sort of bread-fruit, much inferior to that of the tropics, but still satisfying to my hunger. After I had eaten all I thought best, the older lady handed me what looked like a withered apple. The skin was so hard and tough and the general appearance so forbidding that I politely returned it. But the kind old dame saw that I was not familiar with the fruit, so to teach me its use she bit a hole through the rind, and showed me the inside. It was filled with a thick syrup-like pulp which I tasted and found to be very delicious. It was like the jelly flavored with sherry wine, which my Gertrude used to prepare for me, and, smiling my approval of it, I soon disposed of the contents and beckoned for another. It was given with some apparent reluctance, which I soon understood, for I had not finished sucking it when I began to feel quite exhilarated. I afterwards found that the *conce*, as this curious fruit is called, is too excessively sweet to be eaten when ripe, and that it is allowed to remain upon the trees, or rather bushes, till fermentation has given an alcoholic quality to the pulp. In this state the natives count it their choicest fruit, not only as a means of festivity but as a medicine. It is the first instance I have ever seen of the natural production of alcohol, though there may be others not known to me. The *conce* will adhere to its tree till dried to a husk. If not plucked, but taken off at the proper time and laid away, it remains good for many months.

After three days in the little hut, attended by the same women, and seeing no man, I began to feel as if I had the strength to get up, and was eager to go out and see the strange country and people. I also felt an appetite for more substantial and stimulating food than my nurses provided. A piece of salt junk and hard bread would then have been a luxury. My first attempt to rise was a failure, and I resigned myself as well as I could to longer confinement. On the fifth day I succeeded in rising, and crept through the low door of the hut. The scene that met my sight I am unable to describe. It was so unlike anything I had before witnessed in any part of the earth that I lack words to convey a right impression of it. I can only attempt some rough outlines. I was in the midst of a thousand huts or more, like that I had just left, some larger some smaller, and among them, in groups, were thousands of people, so fragile, so ethereal in aspect that I could hardly believe them to be flesh and blood. The average height of the men was about four feet, and of the women two or three inches less. Their features were delicate, their skins almost preternaturally white and transparent, their hair flaxen with a slight golden tint, their eyes blue and tender, but large and singularly expressive, and their bodies so slender and graceful that they lacked but wings to make them birds. Frenchman would have called them a race of perfect blonds. Their bird-like appearance was heightened by the only article of dress worn by them, a girde woven with feathers about their loins, which swayed gracefully as they moved. The girdeles of the women were generally of white feathers; those of the men gray or mottled. The young children were entirely naked. The only ornaments of the women were tufts or wreaths of natural flowers entwined with their hair. I had time to notice these things as the people gathered about me for the news that I was out spread very rapidly through the village, and I was soon conscious of thousands of curious eyes inspecting my person. But they were not the eyes of savages. No eyes could have been more friendly, and those who were nearest me expressed in every possible way their satisfaction at my recovery. I subsequently learned that they had expected me to die, and had kept away from my lodging that they might not disturb my last hours. Some of the children were quite inclined to be familiar, and offered me nuts and flowers. One little girl overcame her distrust sufficiently to permit me to kiss her. The operation was evidently new to these people, for they showed unmistakable surprise at it, and I afterwards saw several of the children trying to repeat the operation, and apparently much amused by it. Their common token of endorsement was a gentle pat upon the cheek or other part of the body. My attention was divided between the people and the scenery, the latter being equally novel with the former, and the people understood and enjoyed my manifest surprise and delight.

Before me rose majestically what seemed a real pillar of fire. It was evidently some miles distance, and rose straight from earth to sky, of a width covering an eight or a tenth of the visible horizon. The pillar was not flame, but it radiated both light and heat. It was sometimes of a bright, steady light throughout; then changed to coruscations and flashes, some of them attended with loud, crackling noises, then melted into beautiful rainbow hues, and separated into cones and shafts that

danced like so many faeries. High up in the air the flames radiated in all directions and were gradually lost in the distance. I had no doubt that the phenomena were electrical, and I felt that I was standing near the source of the beautiful aurora borealis, which I had observed with so much wonder since I entered the Northern Ocean. I also understood how the climate here should be as bland as that of Germany in June, and how animal and vegetable life could thrive as I saw it around me. The sun revolved just above the horizon for nearly the whole day, and indeed its rays gilded the distant mountains in the few hours of partial darkness, or what would have been so but for the constant pillar of fire. At the time I am describing the sun was just passing behind the bright pillar, and half hidden by it, added to the singular beauty of the scene. Upon the opposite horizon rose majestic mountains, along the sides of the loftiest of which, near their summits, were banks of ice or snow, which reflected the dancing flames. Below the mountains was a circle of hills, covered with dark forests; from these the country sloped gradually to where I sat, and thence to the foot of the pillar of flame. This is as it then looked to me. Subsequent explorations revealed other and different features. For the time I was weary in body and mind, and my eyes pained by the irregular light, and, making my silent adieu as best I could, I sought rest and seclusion in the hut.

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