

HEALTH IN NORTHERN LABRADOR

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TO keep our health, in whatsoever quarter of the globe we may be placed, is a most desirable thing.

Climates and places have their peculiarities; and when we speak of so proverbially cold and distant a shore as Northern Labrador, we may be sure that the health problem there is no simple one. For a man or a woman from a highly civilized country to live healthily in a frozen land, where winter holds sway for nine months out of the twelve, is no small achievement. And yet the man or woman of sound physique who is strong enough to endure the cold, can enjoy good health in Labrador.

By growing cress and lettuces in window-boxes and glass frames, and by toilsome care of the scanty gardens, we got plant food to keep us from scurvy. The ship brought us potatoes in the summer, and we could grow turnips and cabbages; the bleak land gave us berries; we warmed our rooms with brick-built stoves and kept our vegetables from freezing; and so for some months of the winter we had our vitamin supply. True, our teeth came loose a little, and we suffered from nose-bleedings, but we did not lack hard work and fresh air and even sunshine, and so we found "bleak, inhospitable Labrador" not so bad after all.

The reader must forgive this personal note for a beginning; our real theme is the health of the native population; and in writing of Northern Labrador we mean, of course, that stretch of rocky and inhospitable coast upon which the Eskimos have found a home. How that strange people came to their land it is not easy to say; perhaps we shall never be quite sure, for they are a people without a written history. But they call the Greenlanders their brethren; and when shown a picture of an Alaskan family they exclaim "*Ahak Innuit*"—"Behold, Eskimos like ourselves." Whether, as I believe, they have tracked along the North-west passage from some Mongol origin in Asia, or whether they have come to their present home by some other way, the fact remains—the Eskimos are the old aboriginal inhabitants of Northern Labrador.

The health of a people must depend to a great extent on the conditions under which they live, and in Labrador the circumstances are certainly exceptional. Let us picture some of the conditions of Eskimo life.

CLIMATE

To us who live in a temperate zone, life in the climate of Northern Labrador would seem notably hard. The months of midwinter—December to March—are marked by blizzards and gales, and by frosts that almost seem to reach the limit of endurance. My minimum thermometer reached

minus forty, Fahrenheit, night after night; and on occasions the temperature was doubtless lower, though the instrument was not graded to record it. In calm weather even severe cold was not unpleasant, but wind made a vast and trying difference; and on days of gales, when the air was filled with stinging particles of frozen snow, it was almost impossible to stand against the biting wind, and the risk of frost-bite, or of being lost, was great. Even the Eskimos stay within their huts on such days, though mere cold alone has no terrors for them; in ordinary winter weather they travel with their dogs and sledges, they trudge on snow-shoes to their trapping places on the hillsides, they sleep in cold snowhouses or even in the open, and take no harm.

Labrador sees but little summer; snow may fall on any day; rains are frequent, and the Eskimos are often wet to the skin as they go about their summer work of catching cod-fish. There are fine days, warm as an English May; but such days are spoiled by the swarms of gnats which breed in every swamp, and which are ever ready to sting both Eskimos and visitors alike.

HOUSING

In olden days the Eskimos lived in snowhouses in winter, and in tents of skins in the summertime. This way of life suited their habits very well: they could build the snow-house or pitch the tent wherever the hunting or fishing seemed best. No doubt the idea was good from the health point of view, for the snowhouse was a perishable thing, only lasting a few months at the most: if it got too foul for its inmates, it was a simple thing to build a new one. In principle this sounds very well, but in practice, I believe, the Eskimo snow-house was often a very unsavoury and insanitary dwelling indeed.

In these modern days the Labrador Eskimos—with the possible exception of a few of the dwellers in the Chidley neighbourhood—have ceased to use snow-houses as homes, and only build them as shelters on winter journeys. The summer homes are still tents, more often of calico than of skins; while the winter dwellings of to-day are wooden huts, often airy and tidy and clean, though, alas, sometimes ill-kept and ill-smelling. But, at the best, the native system of refuse disposal—the flinging of all waste on the ground in front of the hut or tent—means an unsavoury odour excepting in the frozen winter-time, and a menace to the public health. The dogs, with which each village and camping place swarms, are scavengers, and devour much of the flung-out refuse; but they themselves are not an unmixed boon! The march of civilization has taught the Eskimo to like a fire in his hut; and so the home is apt to be stuffy and warm in the daytime while the stove is alight, and bitterly cold at night when the fire dies down and the family sleeps.

FOOD

Labrador is not a hospitable land for plant life. The ground is under snow for nine months of the year, and the vegetation that struggles above the soil during the short summer is of little value for food.

The Eskimo is a flesh eater; he lives on what he catches by sea or by land: seals, walrus, cod-fish, trout, even shell-fish, and sea-urchins, and a few land animals such as deer, bear, ptarmigan and hares. He is content to do without vegetable foods for the greater part of the year; a few buds and shoots in the springtime, and the ground berries in the autumn, are all that he cares for. Such is the native dietary, mostly flesh food, and mostly eaten without cooking. In later years, partly from scarcity of the natural supplies—the result of increased competition in hunting—and partly from mere imitation, the natives have taken to the use of imported foods, particularly flour and hard biscuit and molasses, though the natural and primitive Eskimo dietary contains no farinaceous foods.

Eskimos drink freely of water; they are also fond of weak tea, which they flavour with molasses. They are protected by law from the use of alcohol, and therefore from the evils which might follow.

HABITS OF LIFE

The Eskimo lives a life of activity and strain. Hunting and fishing, driving dog-teams, long walks on snow-shoes, these form his daily toil; and all, maybe, in the face of storms of rain, or blizzards and bitter cold. Hard work is not the lot of the men only: a woman's life is almost as severe. The housewife spends long hours in the cold or stuffy hut, scraping skins and making boots and clothing, or preparing food; she rears her children, but must be content to take her turn at the rowing of the boat and the catching of the fish, and at much rough work about the house. The Eskimos are a small race; a certain blood-relationship must exist in the villages, and play some part in influencing health and vitality. Personal habits, too, have their influence: promiscuous spitting; heavy smoking of tobacco, in which both men and women indulge; free exchange of pipes, drinking-cups and clothing; all these, added to overcrowding and lack of air in the huts, are things that might well tend to a lowering of vitality or a spreading of disease.

CIVILIZATION

The march of civilization is certainly one of the circumstances of life which will produce a profound influence on native health. The Eskimo is a born imitator; he likes to copy the ways of others; hence his very imitative instinct leads him to wear European clothes instead of his native sealskins, and to replace his diet of raw flesh and blubber with imported foods. But there are other things: contact with outer world has meant

the introduction to the Eskimos of new habits and new diseases ; and though there are obviously ways in which civilization can help a native people, the evil things that march alongside the good are a problem in themselves. Much wise guidance, wise guardianship, will be needed ; otherwise civilization, as it reaches a Nature Folk, is apt to be but a mixed blessing. Such are some of the conditions with which the Eskimos have to contend : let us glance at some of the effects.

The Eskimos seem a hardy folk, well able to endure fatigue and exposure. The crowd that bustles aboard your steamer, if you have the good fortune to visit Northern Labrador, is a sleek, plump, good-looking crowd ; most of the Eskimos that you see are a picture of ruddy health, a bright, alert, interested folk ; they peer into everything, they smile with good humour.

But on closer acquaintance two facts stand out : firstly, their power of resisting disease is low. It seems as though nature had meant them to live a wholesome, open-air life, free from the infectious ills of more civilized and more crowded countries. The dreaded influenza appears to be one of the few diseases to which the race has always been prone, while other complaints such as measles, mumps, chicken-pox, and the fevers, would seem to have reached the Eskimos only by contact with civilization. Be that as it may, it seems to be a fact that if disease arises among the Eskimos of Northern Labrador, it runs a severe course. Whether it be influenza, which is endemic, or whether it be one of the usually mild imported diseases such as chicken-pox and German measles, the form is a virulent one.

My little sledge-driver, Johannes, who could run forty miles in a day beside the dog-sledge—one of the cleverest hunters on the whole coast, and certainly the best builder of snow-houses that ever I saw ; a muscular and hardy little man of middle age—this sturdy little Johannes died of the measles ! Epidemics run riot when they arise in the Labrador villages : whooping-cough broke out in Hopedale some years ago, and quickly everyone was coughing ; some, even aged people, in bed in their homes and desperately ill.

The second fact is this : the Eskimos are not a long-lived race. They age quickly, as though tired and worn by the strain of their hard life and harsh climate. They keep their sleek and healthy look until the forties, but the years that follow are years of decline. Men and women are old at sixty, and very few reach seventy. At no time of life is this seemingly low vitality more seen than in infancy. Eskimo families are usually large : but more than half the children die during their first year.

And what of the future ? Figures seem to tell us that the Eskimos of Labrador are slowly dying out. It is unspeakably sad to think of this ancient and interesting Nature Folk gradually dwindling to extinction ;

but the adverse forces—the low resisting power; the inroads of disease; the gradual lessening of native food supplies; the falling birth-rate; closer in-breeding as the numbers grow smaller—seem almost overwhelming.

What can be done to save the Eskimos? It seems to me that the question is not only one of maintenance of health, but of improvement of stamina; and our efforts to save the Eskimo people must follow both lines. And it seems to me, too, that the Eskimo, if he is to live his natural life of hunting and trapping and fishing in his hard native climate, must remain an Eskimo.

The practical care of this interesting folk has, for the last hundred and fifty years or more, been in the hands of the Moravian missionaries, whose patient work has made the Eskimos a quiet and peaceable folk, able to read and write, and of hard-working and even to some extent thrifty habits. And the missionaries, through all those years, while trying to instil some education and general knowledge and habits of order and cleanliness, have never departed from the policy of keeping the people to their native foods and clothing, for such have proved best suited to the physical needs of the Eskimos. But blubber and seal's flesh are scarcer; there is a harder struggle for life; imported foods are a necessity in these days.

Can the Government conserve some of the resources of Labrador for Eskimo use? Can the Eskimos have privileges for hunting, so as to lay in stocks of their native food at such times as they are able? It is impossible to praise too highly the wisdom of the Government in making strong drink illegal, for the effects of alcoholism would certainly make for the decay of the race. Meanwhile the Mission is doing its best to help the Eskimos to thrive. The people are encouraged to spread and live in small encampments rather than in larger villages; by this means there is better sanitation, especially where the camps are movable ones; there is more air; there is more likelihood of a good catch at the cod-fishing or the seal-hunting; there is less likelihood of epidemics. They are encouraged to use their native supplies, though tided over times of want by the stores of imported foods.

Looking at the problem with the eyes of one who has lived for seven years among these pure-blooded northerners, I feel that the Eskimos have before them a keen struggle for existence, though they may not know it themselves. We are heartened by the latest figures, which show that the births are outnumbering the deaths and the infant survival-rate is improving; and we must hope that time and patience and the growth of knowledge will allow these keen and clever dwellers to increase and prosper on their ice-bound coast.