

WHITE ELEPHANT

GRACE TOMKINSON.

THE most amusing thing that can happen to a place is to have a white elephant thrust upon it. When everything else drags, the beast can be counted on to furnish some sort of diversion. Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, knows all about it. That town has had a white elephant since 1812, when a certain Doctor Fletcher discovered on his property a rock carved with strange hieroglyphics. It was the beginning of trouble. From that day Yarmouth has had no peace, with archaeologists, runeologists, historians and curio-hunters disputing over the find. The controversy dies down at times, then breaks out in a fresh eruption. Someone appears with a new theory as to who left an autograph on the piece of gray rock in Yarmouth Harbour, and the discussion is on again.

Yarmouth is one of those conservative old seaports with no fancy whatever for such sudden publicity, or for being made a battle-ground where Spain and Scandinavia may come to blows again on that old matter of the discovery of America—with the Phoenicians, the Micmacs and even the Japanese dragged in. It is the kind of place which has lived too long (it celebrated its one-hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary this year) to be really astonished at anything. It finds the custody of a white elephant a little boring. You might hear the Yarmouth rune-stone discussed with lively interest from one end of the continent to the other. The C. P. R. once shipped it to Norway to be exhibited at a national celebration. But if you came to Yarmouth to see it, you would find it an insignificant-looking, dingy object, reposing in the public Library. If you asked for information, you would be given one printed sheet with a meagre excerpt from the *Yarmouth Herald* of 1884 concerning the stone.

It is not a large rock, though it weighs about four hundred pounds. It has evidently been split, leaving a perfectly clear surface for the characters cut into it with some highly tempered instrument, possibly in the hands of mediaeval sea-kings. Another split at the end of the rock has left a smaller space, on which some thoughtful soul has inscribed in black paint the date 1007 A. D. Until recently the relic, estimated as priceless in some quarters, lay on the floor in the Library hallway. But any suggestion that it might be defaced meets, not illogically, with a laugh in Yarmouth.

If it has contrived to endure the weathering of some nine centuries, it might be expected to stand a little more wear and tear.

The stone remained on the Fletcher property for some years after its discovery. Then it was brought into town, the inscription copied and sent abroad to men of learning, and the work of deciphering it began. Results of this research were disturbingly contradictory; the tablet was a freak of nature, or possibly the toy of some playfully inclined savage; it was undoubtedly the handiwork of Carian sailors in the Phoenician navy; the characters were tracks left by some big pre-historic bard; they were Japanese glyphs or symbols and, read upside down by a Dr. John Campbell, gave: "Peacefully has gone out Kuturade, warrior eminent." (The appearance of old Japanese script on the Atlantic coast was explained by Dr. Campbell's statement that many of the Indian tongues are simply Japanese dialects, though the red men had somehow lost their ancient art of writing them). Kuturade would be an Iriquois chief.

All these solutions of the mystery were very fascinating, but the generally accepted one was that the Icelanders had left this souvenir on one of their visits in the tenth or eleventh century. This was Henry Phillips's idea, submitted in a report before the Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia in 1880. He translated the inscription: "Harko's son addressed the men." Having read it thus, he went back to the old Norse legends, and found that one of the men who came out with Thorfinn Karlsefne in 1007 was named Harki.

The Phillips theory, proving that the Norsemen did land on the shores of Nova Scotia, leaving a literate record of their visit, was received with open arms. Ruins had been found of the Norse colony in Greenland and pseudo-Norse relics on this continent. It was high time something authentic was discovered to verify the rumors of those earliest voyages.

That anything should be needed to verify them, is curious. Our school books may have been to blame. They gave us the idea that the Norse expeditions to this side of the world were a pleasing myth, depending for support on fanciful folk-tales. But the existence of the Greenland colony, established in the same period, with a population at one time (according to Fiske) of fifty thousand people and lasting for a longer time than our present English-speaking occupation of this continent, is an indisputable fact. What makes it absurd to believe that those hardy adventurers could have come a little farther? They had the boats. Their beautiful, open ships, carrying a single square sail, were swifter

and more sea-worthy than the Spanish vessels of the time of Columbus. The largest measured one hundred and fifty feet in the keel, with thirty oars on a side. We are able to get an accurate idea from the Gokstad ship, dug out of Norwegian sands in 1880, of the craft which carried those intrepid mariners over wide, storm-scourged seas.


Iceland in the Middle Ages offered fertile soil for the growth of wealth and culture. It had a rich and extensive literature in prose and verse before Dante had begun to brood, in the streets of Florence, on love and politics and the future life, and before the art of writing had begun to be taken seriously in France or Spain. Its books of history, surviving to-day, are recognized as particularly fine. The story of the early voyages to Vinland and Markland come to us from two of these early vellums, originating in different parts of the island—the Hauks-bók and the Flateyar-bók. The fact that they were written some three centuries after Red Eirik's time makes scholars wary of accepting them as truth. They differ in details, as do the four Gospels, but in the main points they agree. It is believed that the earlier sources from which they were taken were lost, either by fire or in the disastrous eruption of Hecla in 1390 when other valuable vellums are known to have perished. At any rate, the story they tell was common talk in the country long before the Hauks-bók or the Flateyar-bók was written. References to Vinland in Icelandic chronicles before that date are frequent. Wherever it was, Vinland was accepted by the Scandinavian and European world as an actual country, not a mythical isle.

If we go into it, we find it a pretty well established fact that the Norsemen were the first white men to view this new world. Then what accounts for their making so little fuss about their achievement? Possibly their abysmal ignorance of geography. Greenland—or Vinland—to them was some sort of an appendage or peninsula attached to Europe. How could they be expected to realize that they had accidentally stumbled on a new continent? And if they had realized it and broadcast the great news over Europe, what difference would it have made? Before it could have been of much advantage to anyone, instruments of navigation had to be invented. And there would be nothing strange in these mediæval sailors blundering into a new continent and forgetting it. They lived in a world far larger and more awe-inspiring than ours, half-supernatural, half-real. One continent more or less did not matter.

The first *voyageur* to happen on Greenland appears to have been Gunnbjorn, who was driven far off his course by foul weather in 876. Eirik the Red, outlawed for killing a man or two in a brawl,

recalled the old tales of the land Gunnbjorn found, and hurried there to save his skin. Nansen, who should know, calls this expedition of Eirik's the equal of any modern polar exploration, as regards both importance and the way it was carried out. The colony Eirik founded in Greenland, lasting four hundred years, is a thrilling story in itself. From it, quite naturally, adventurous mariners drifted south to newer lands; Bjarni; Red Eirik's son, Lief the Lucky, who spent a winter in Vinland; Lief's brother Thorstein, who died at sea on the way there; and in 1007, Thorfinn Karlsefne, who had married Thorstein's widow Gudrid. His party, consisting of one hundred and sixty men, with women, children and cattle, found Lief's huts and spent three years in the country, trading and battling with the natives (skraelings) till the place grew too hot for them. Gudrid's son, Snorri, born there, was probably the first white child born in North America. The last expedition of that group was in 1011 to cut timber. It came to a most tragic end through a quarrel started by Lief's ill-tempered sister, Freydis.

The story bears too many earmarks of truth to be discredited. But though we may now have the question of Norse discovery quite well settled, we have by no means come to any decision as to where these early explorers landed and wintered. Perhaps there was no serious attempt to colonize Vinland; but the place where Lief put up his first "skin booths" and where, later, little Snorri was born is of the greatest historical importance.

The honour has been ceremoniously pinned on various blushing localities, the Charles River valley, New Hampshire, Maine, all with elaborate attempts at proof. The miles of sandy beaches the explorers saw and called *wonderstrand*, the climate, the flora and fauna they encountered, have been specifically identified, all the way from the Carolinas to Newfoundland. The grape question has been one of the most puzzling. Pages have been filled with solemn dissertations on "the northern limits of the vine." W. A. Munn published a pamphlet placing Vinland in northern Newfoundland, and arguing that the grape of the sagas (*vinber*) is no more than the Oldest Colony's squashberry (high-bush cranberry). Gordon Lewis of Yarmouth is equally confident that the Norsemen referred to Nova Scotia's profusion of blueberries. 

Whatever their grapes were, the southern end of Nova Scotia is accepted as the most likely site of Lief's camp. Dr. Babcock of the Smithsonian Institute narrows it down to somewhere near the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, partly because of the strong tides and

currents described in the sagas. Now Yarmouth County asserts that the Tusket is the river mentioned by the Norsemen:

a place where a frith penetrated far into the country. Off mouth of it was an Island past which ran swift currents....

The Island is identified as Cape Sable Island. And here on the tidal basin into which the river opens are, we are told, the ruins of the old Norse houses—mysterious, ancient cellars which the first English settlers attributed on their arrival to the French. But there was no Acadian settlement here till the exiles began to return after the Expulsion, and the Indians were not given to building cellars. If the East coast of Greenland is strewn with authentic Norse ruins of the same period, why, we are asked, might there not be traces of the sea-kings to be found in Nova Scotia—in Tusket?

Unfortunately there are a good many islands and old cellars along the coast. It all amounts to an interesting supposition, but it does lend colour, if one is not too sceptical, to the theory that Yarmouth's mystery stone may be the missing link between the tenth and twentieth centuries. And the plot thickens. Behind the much discussed slab, now in the Yarmouth Library, loom the shadowy figures of other stones reported to have been seen in the neighborhood. One of them, the Bay View Stone, has been even more baffling than the Fletcher stone. It appeared on the horizon some time in the nineties, bearing an inscription almost identical with the first stone, with the addition of three characters on a lower line. This was exhibited at Bay View, an amusement park across the harbour from Yarmouth, for a time; then it dropped out of sight. Interest in runic stones lagged. When it revived, more recently, students of runeology wrinkled their brows with pondering over what had become of the Bay View stone.

According to local recollections—not easy to unearth, since most of the people directly interested are gone—there never was any mystery about this second stone. It was not meant to be the subject of scientific discussion. The owner of Bay View had the famous Fletcher stone copied, with no intention to play Barnum and fool genially the public. It was, we may suppose, to be an added attraction to the park, and incidentally a tribute to the Norsemen. When scientists became interested, it was hurriedly withdrawn from circulation, perhaps, and stored in the owner's barn. The owner died. The place changed hands. The stone disappeared, not mysteriously. Just now it lies under several feet of concrete in the foundation of the rebuilt barn.

Just how the Bay View stone began to be taken seriously and to appear in scientific discussion is not clear, but in 1913 the *Nova Scotia Historical Society* published an article considering the two Yarmouth stones in detail, with illustrations. Mention was made of other stones rumored to have been seen on the Tusket Islands. Since there is, according to local count, an island in the Tusket for every day in the year, the prospect of finding any of them does not look bright.

The whole thing offers plenty of scope for conjecture, and just now no one can say that the field is neglected. The Yarmouth Public Library is bombarded with letters from all over the continent—particularly the Middle-western States and the prairie provinces—and Norway—asking about the rune-stone. A country superintendent of schools in Prosser, Washington, to meet the demand for information on it in his locality, recently published an illustrated booklet on "The Yarmouth Stone". He offers an entirely new translation (based on photographs of the inscription, for he has never seen the original). For him the message reads clearly:

"Lief to Eirik raises (this monument)."

It seems as likely to be the correct interpretation as the more widely accepted one of Mr. Phillips. It is, in fact, more probable that a marker might be raised to Lief's father than to commemorate someone making a speech—unless speech-making was more rare and more highly appreciated than it is to-day.

When we consider the Yarmouth stone seriously, one of the first questions to be asked is whether genuine rune-stones are to be found anywhere. They can scarcely be called common. One in Norway is particularly interesting to us because its brief inscription mentions Vinland. The long period of settlement in Greenland has so far given us only a few grave-stones and one rock, far up Baffin Bay, discovered in 1824, which reads:

"Eirik Sigvathson, Bjarne Thordarson and Endride Oddson on the Sunday before *gagnag* (April twenty-fifth) erected these cairns and cleared away ice."

Nothing found on this continent can be generally accepted, though a number of false hopes have been aroused, over the Dighton Rock, the Newport Tower and other relics. All these have been found with some certainty to belong to a later period than the Norsemen's. The Kensington stone, unearthed in 1898, under the roots of a popular tree in a Minnesota wood-lot, made quite a

stir, and incidentally strengthened the case of the Yarmouth stone in some quarters, though the characters do not actually resemble each other. The story chiselled on it is a dramatic one:

Eight Swedes and 22 Norwegians on an exploration journey from Vinland through the Western regions. We had a camp by a lake having two rocky islands, one day's journey from this stone. We were out and fished one day. When we came home we found 10 men, red with blood and dead. Ave Maria! Save us from evil! We have ten of our party by the sea to look after our vessels, 14 days journey from this island. Year 1362.

This translation was confirmed by the *Minnesota Historical Society*, but the fact that it was found by a Swedish farmer in a Swedish settlement seemed suspicious. We have no reason to believe that the Norse adventurers, hardy as they were, penetrated to the interior of the continent. The runes on the Kensington stone have been discredited by some runeologists. But as there is no way now of learning all the variations of archaic runes, the stone still has many supporters and supplies a subject for heated debates.

The Yarmouth stone, according to some authorities, does not carry one recognizable rune, but neither has it any likeness to any other known form of writing. It is still as completely baffling an enigma as when Dr. Fletcher found it. But not for lack of widespread attempts to solve it. One of the most ingenious is from a mining engineer in Nevada who writes the Library lengthily and often, demanding exact measurements of the stone "to the thousandth of an inch", with the latitude and longitude of the spot where it was found. He is more convinced in every letter that he is on the point of solving the mystery. The inscription can be "identified with Maya mathematics", and contains a most important message. He may be on the right track, but the long-suffering Library staff, after several attempts to supply him with sufficiently accurate details, have given up in despair. The world may have to wait for the great news till he can take a trip East and examine the relic for himself.

The latest solution comes from a Hungarian historian in Chicago who, after four years of research, concludes that the marks are of Hungarian origin. His theory is that the North American Indian is of Hungarian extraction.

Yarmouth, in the meantime, has the white elephant on her hands, and no very clear idea of what to do about the responsibility. The news that the *Lief Erickson Memorial Association of Wisconsin* was about to make a pilgrimage here to see it, stimulated the

forming of a local branch of that organization. Their ambition is to have a monument erected here to the Icelanders. If Boston and Chicago could commemorate his world-finding performance with statues to Lief Erikson, and Philadelphia was sure enough of his part in the event to put up a statue to Karlsefne, Yarmouth, Lief's supporters argue, might honour the sea-rovers with some sort of a marker.

Whether the runic stone, so called, had anything to do with the discoverers or not is a matter of the vaguest conjecture, but it has become so linked up with them now that it seems hard to disentangle it. Mysteries have a perennial fascination. Hundreds of visitors come into the Yarmouth Library every year to pore over the stone, making drawings and calculations, hazarding guesses as to what it conveys. Their eyes take on a far-away look as they conjure up pictures of romantic viking-ships pushing their prows through the foam of vast uncharted seas. And outside in the sunlight the life of a modern seaport flows on. Storm drums go up or down, great steamers blow hoarsely. Three-masted schooners, fishing-boats, trawlers, tugs, move in and out of the harbour. A rune-stone is a very small matter, after all, in a busy world like this. Nobody is more puzzled than the ordinary man in Yarmouth as to why highly intelligent persons, college professors, curators of museums or even the most ordinary specimen of tourist should go out of the way to look at one.