



A Tik and Tok
Adventure



NORTH



'Course, the sailing days are gone. More's the pity. It was a fair fight then, my boy. Sometimes the whale won. Six puny men in a splinter of wood, chucking harpoons like needles. The leviathan, boy. Ever seen one?'

Tik shook his head.

'You don't know what's what in this world, boy, till you've clapped eyes on the whale spouting in the billows by moonlight. Chase it down with five oars, the headsman bellowing and the foam streaming from the bow. "Stand up and let 'im 'ave it!" he cries, and the harpooneer leans into the clumsy cleat and lets fly his iron. It gets fast in the flank of the monster and he ditches the second dart overboard before the line whips it round the crew. The line flies from the tub as the furious whale tears away. "Nantucket sleighride!" the oarsmen holler. "Water on the loggerhead!"'

Tik sipped his water with wide eyes.

'Then it's flukes high as the beast drops into the deep. "Sounding!" the headsman cries. The line disappears tight off the bow chock, down into the ocean. The crew waits. Then the line goes slack and the leviathan breaches. The headsman in the bow stabs with the long lance, the whale goes into its flurry and gives up the ghost.'

The whaler nodded with steely satisfaction. Tik tried to control his excited breathing.

'I don't think we should hunt the whale,' he said quietly. 'They're beautiful creatures. In the pictures. And they don't do us any harm.'

'Ah, but we were alive, boy,' the whaler replied. 'A man's world!'



Tik trudged through the glittering snow and Tok peeked out of his coat, snug as you like. They climbed up a wooded slope and gained a view of a swooping valley and further slopes rising to dawn-blushed peaks.

'Look at that, Tok. What a sight. It's certainly beautiful in the north.'

'Beautiful. And harsh,' Tok corrected.

The mournful howl of a lone wolf completed the snowy grandeur of the scene. High above, an eagle circled in the early light. Far below, a black rider burst out of a stand of firs and galloped pell-mell down the valley.

'Look!' said Tik. 'Magnificent!'

Moments later, a cluster of twenty-six cloaked horsemen followed, brandishing spears and axes, silent but for the drumming of hooves. They looked a fell crew: ragged and gaunt and dark.

Tik and Tok scurried up a tree.

'Fly, rider, fly!' Tik whispered. 'Head for the trees!'

'Why are you on the rider's side?' Tok asked.

'Look at that mob!' said Tik. 'Twenty-six against one!'

'Numbers are not material to the moral case,' said Tok.

Below them the rider's cloak billowed and snapped in the wind and the black horse snorted and sweated as it flashed past the tree. Then came the ragged horde, chasing hard and trailing worms and rags and the smell of the grave. Tik gasped for breath as the pounding of hooves passed by, grew softer and more distant, and was swallowed by the silence of the hills.

'No doubt about that lot,' he shivered.

'Not the sort you'd ask round for tea,' Tok sniffed.





'Clear the road! Clear the road!'

Tik and Tok leapt out of the way just in time as a team of huskies whistled past. They caught a momentary glimpse of the sledger, and wished they hadn't. Perhaps it was a man, but if so he was unlike any man that had ever walked the earth. He looked like a ghastly rag puppet, cobbled together from odds and ends of flesh and skin, his misshapen body huge and stooped. They watched in horror as he sped over the snowfields, his whip cracking harshly.

Tik stood panting with a thumping heart.

'I'm not sure about heading north if he's going there too,' he said shakily.

Moments later a second sledge pulled up. A man with wild hair and icy eyebrows bellowed at them.

'Did it pass? Did it?'

Tik stared wide-eyed, but gave no sign. The man grimaced impatiently and flashed his whip. The dogs sped off and something dropped into the churned snow. Tik bent down and picked up a little box. He slid the lid open and smiled. A company of twenty-six red matches lay side by side like soldiers in bearskins. Tik took one out, struck it and stared into the flame.

'The gift of fire,' he said dreamily.

Tok looked up and saw a great eagle circling high in the sky. Far away, the two sledges, locked in a dreadful chase, disappeared into the trees.

'Does this mean hot cocoa?' Tok asked.

'It means hot everything,' Tik laughed. 'Cocoa, pemmican and toes. And then northward-ho!'



Polar bears appeared from all directions, ambling slowly towards the pole.

'Your kindred,' Ambergris observed plaintively.

'They come for the Meeting,' the bear replied. 'We have much to discuss. As do you.'

The bears formed themselves into a semicircle and bowed gravely to the bear that had borne the crew north.

'Golly,' Tik whispered as they walked away. 'It seems our bear is a big shot.'

'Hail, Emperor!' came a cry from the representatives.

'A bigger shot,' said Tok.

'Pay attention, everyone,' said Tik. 'Tok and I had a reason to go north, and that reason remains. But now there is no north to go to. We must stay here or go south. But where? And what of our companions? Ambergris?'

The penguin shuffled its feet and coloured.

'My very good friends,' it began. 'You have been most kind, and I have delighted in your august company. Whilst I wasn't where I thought I was, I thought I was where I wasn't, and were it not for not thinking that where I was wasn't where I thought it was, I wouldn't have. But may I say, that it is only in the not thinking that where we weren't wasn't, that we can be where we were, when we weren't. This being clear, I must add that my kind are in the far south, and there lies my road. If you would care to accompany me, I could show you the places my parents told me about — the Amery Ice Shelf, Law Station in the Larsemann Hills, and the Amanda Rookery. Ah... even to speak the names tugs hard at the heart. The far south calls. Will you come?'

