

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT POLAR CURRENT

A short time after the flights of birds became more and more numerous. Petrels, puffins, and mates, inhabitants of those desolate quarters, signalled the approach of Greenland. The Forward was rapidly nearing the north, leaving to her leeward a long line of black smoke.

On Tuesday the 17th of April, about eleven o'clock in the morning, the ice-master signalled the first sight of the ice-blink; it was about twenty miles to the N.N.W. This glaring white strip was brilliantly lighted up, in spite of the presence of thick clouds in the neighbouring parts of the sky. Experienced people on board could make no mistake about this phenomenon, and declared, from its whiteness, that the blink was owing to a large ice-field, situated at about thirty miles out of sight, and that it proceeded from the reflection of luminous rays. Towards evening the wind turned round to the south, and became favourable; Shandon put on all sail, and for economy's sake caused the fires to be put out. The Forward, under her topsails and foresails, glided on towards Cape Farewell.

At three o'clock on the 18th they came across the ice-stream, and a white thick line of a glaring colour cut brilliantly the lines of the sea and sky. It was evidently drifting from the eastern coast of Greenland more than from Davis's Straits, for ice generally keeps

to the west coast of Baffin's Sea. An hour afterwards the Forward passed in the midst of isolated portions of the ice-stream, and in the most compact parts, the icebergs, though welded together, obeyed the movements of the swell. The next day the man at the masthead signalled a vessel. It was the Valkirien, a Danish corvette, running alongside the Forward, and making for the bank of Newfoundland. The current of the Strait began to make itself felt, and Shandon had to put on sail to go up it. At this moment the commander, the doctor, James Wall, and Johnson were assembled on the poop examining the direction and strength of the current. The doctor wanted to know if the current existed also in Baffin's Sea.

"Without the least doubt," answered Shandon, "and the sailing vessels have much trouble to stem it."

"Besides there," added Wall, "you meet with it on the eastern coast of America, as well as on the western coast of Greenland."

"There," said the doctor, "that is what gives very singular reason to the seekers of the North-West passage! That current runs about five miles an hour, and it is a little difficult to suppose that it springs from the bottom of a gulf."

"It is so much the more probable, doctor," replied Shandon, "that if this current runs from north to south we find in Behring's Straits a contrary current which runs from south to north, and which must be the origin of this one."

"According to that," replied the doctor, "we must admit that America is totally unconnected with the Polar lands, and that the waters of the Pacific run round the coasts of America into the Atlantic. On the other hand, the greater elevation of the waters of the Pacific gives reason to the supposition that they fall into the European seas."

"But," sharply replied Shandon, "there must be facts to establish that theory, and if there are any," added he with irony, "our universally well-informed doctor ought to know them."

"Well," replied the above-mentioned, with amiable satisfaction, "if it interests you, I can tell you that whales, wounded in Davis's Straits, are caught some time afterwards in the neighbourhood of Tartary with the European harpoon still in their flanks."

"And unless they have been able to double Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope," replied Shandon, "they must necessarily have rounded the septentrional coasts of America--that's what I call indisputable, doctor."

"However, if you were not convinced, my dear fellow," said the doctor, smiling, "I could still produce other facts, such as drift-wood, of which Davis's Straits are full, larch, aspen, and other tropical trees. Now we know that the Gulf Stream hinders those woods from entering the Straits. If, then, they come out of it they can only get in from

Behring's Straits."

"I am convinced, doctor, and I avow that it would be difficult to remain incredulous with you."

"Upon my honour," said Johnson, "there's something that comes just in time to help our discussion. I perceive in the distance a lump of wood of certain dimensions; if the commander permits it we'll haul it in, and ask it the name of its country."

"That's it," said the doctor, "the example after the rule."

Shandon gave the necessary orders; the brig was directed towards the piece of wood signalled, and soon afterwards, not without trouble, the crew hoisted it on deck. It was the trunk of a mahogany tree, gnawed right into the centre by worms, but for which circumstance it would not have floated.

"This is glorious," said the doctor enthusiastically, "for as the currents of the Atlantic could not carry it to Davis's Straits, and as it has not been driven into the Polar basin by the streams of septentrional America, seeing that this tree grew under the Equator, it is evident that it comes in a straight line from Behring; and look here, you see those sea-worms which have eaten it, they belong to a hot-country species."

"It is evident," replied Wall, "that the people who do not believe

in the famous passage are wrong."

"Why, this circumstance alone ought to convince them," said the doctor; "I will just trace you out the itinerary of that mahogany; it has been floated towards the Pacific by some river of the Isthmus of Panama or Guatemala, from thence the current has dragged it along the American coast as far as Behring's Straits, and in spite of everything it was obliged to enter the Polar Seas. It is neither so old nor so soaked that we need fear to assign a recent date to its setting out; it has had the good luck to get clear of the obstacles in that long suite of straits which lead out of Baffin's Bay, and quickly seized by the boreal current came by Davis's Straits to be made prisoner by the Forward to the great joy of Dr. Clawbonny, who asks the commander's permission to keep a sample of it."

"Do so," said Shandon, "but allow me to tell you that you will not be the only proprietor of such a wreck. The Danish governor of the Isle of Disko----"

"On the coast of Greenland," continued the doctor, "possesses a mahogany table made from a trunk fished up under the same circumstances. I know it, but I don't envy him his table, for if it were not for the bother, I should have enough there for a whole bedroom."

During the night, from Wednesday to Thursday, the wind blew with extreme violence, and driftwood was seen more frequently. Nearing

the coast offered many dangers at an epoch in which icebergs were so numerous; the commander caused some of the sails to be furled, and the Forward glided away under her foresail and foremast only. The thermometer sank below freezing-point. Shandon distributed suitable clothing to the crew, a woollen jacket and trousers, a flannel shirt, wadmel stockings, the same as those the Norwegian country-people wear, and a pair of perfectly waterproof sea-boots. As to the captain, he contented himself with his natural fur, and appeared little sensible to the change in the temperature; he had, no doubt, gone through more than one trial of this kind, and besides, a Dane had no right to be difficult. He was seen very little, as he kept himself concealed in the darkest parts of the vessel.

Towards evening the coast of Greenland peeped out through an opening in the fog. The doctor, armed with his glass, could distinguish for an instant a line of peaks, ridged with large blocks of ice; but the fog closed rapidly on this vision, like the curtain of a theatre falling in the most interesting moment of the piece.

On the morning of the 20th of April the Forward was in sight of an iceberg a hundred and fifty feet high, stranded there from time immemorial; the thaws had taken no effect on it, and had respected its strange forms. Snow saw it; James Ross took an exact sketch of it in 1829; and in 1851 the French lieutenant Bellot saw it from the deck of the Prince Albert. Of course the doctor wished to keep a memento of the celebrated mountain, and made a clever sketch of it. It is not surprising that such masses should be stranded and adhere

to the land, for to each foot above water they have two feet below, giving, therefore, to this one about eighty fathoms of depth.

At last, under a temperature which at noon was only 12 degrees, under a snowy and foggy sky, Cape Farewell was perceived. The Forward arrived on the day fixed; if it pleased the unknown captain to come and occupy his position in such diabolical weather he would have no cause to complain.

"There you are, then," said the doctor to himself, "cape so celebrated and so well named! Many have cleared it like us who were destined never to see it again. Is it, then, an eternal adieu said to one's European friends? You have all passed it. Frobisher, Knight, Barlow, Vaughan, Scroggs, Barentz, Hudson, Blossville, Franklin, Crozier, Bellot, never to come back to your domestic hearth, and that cape has been really for you the cape of adieus."

It was about the year 970 that some navigators left Iceland and discovered Greenland. Sebastian Cabot forced his way as far as latitude 56 degrees in 1498. Gaspard and Michel Cotreal, in 1500 and 1502, went as far north as 60 degrees; and Martin Frobisher, in 1576, arrived as far as the bay that bears his name. To John Davis belongs the honour of having discovered the Straits in 1585; and two years later, in a third voyage, that bold navigator and great whaler reached the sixty-third parallel, twenty-seven degrees from the Pole.

Barentz in 1596, Weymouth in 1602, James Hall in 1605 and 1607, Hudson,

whose name was given to that vast bay which hollows out so profoundly the continent of America, James Poole, in 1611, advanced far into the Strait in search of that North-West passage the discovery of which would have considerably shortened the track of communication between the two worlds. Baffin, in 1616, found the Straits of Lancaster in the sea that bears his own name; he was followed, in 1619, by James Munk, and in 1719 by Knight, Barlow, Vaughan, and Scroggs, of whom no news has ever been heard. In 1776 Lieutenant Pickersgill, sent out to meet Captain Cook, who tried to go up Behring's Straits, reached the sixty-eighth degree; the following year Young, for the same purpose, went as far north as Woman's Island.

Afterwards came Captain James Ross, who, in 1818, rounded the coasts of Baffin's Sea, and corrected the hydrographic errors of his predecessors. Lastly, in 1819 and 1820, the celebrated Parry passed through Lancaster Straits, and penetrated, in spite of unnumbered difficulties, as far as Melville Island, and won the prize of 5,000 pounds promised by Act of Parliament to the English sailors who would reach the hundred and seventeenth meridian by a higher latitude than the seventy-seventh parallel.

In 1826 Beechey touched Chamisso Island; James Ross wintered from 1829 to 1833 in Prince Regent Straits, and amongst other important works discovered the magnetic pole. During this time Franklin, by an overland route, traversed the septentrional coasts of America from

the River Mackenzie to Turnagain Point. Captain Back followed in his steps from 1823 to 1835, and these explorations were completed in 1839 by Messrs. Dease and Simpson and Dr. Rae.

Lastly, Sir John Franklin, wishing to discover the North-West passage, left England in 1845 on board the Erebus and the Terror; he penetrated into Baffin's Sea, and since his passage across Disko Island no news had been heard of his expedition.

That disappearance determined the numerous investigations which have brought about the discovery of the passage, and the survey of these Polar continents, with such indented coast lines. The most daring English, French, and American sailors made voyages towards these terrible countries, and, thanks to their efforts, the maps of that country, so difficult to make, figured in the list of the Royal Geographical Society of London. The curious history of these countries was thus presented to the doctor's imagination as he leaned on the rail, and followed with his eyes the long track left by the brig. Thoughts of the bold navigators weighed upon his mind, and he fancied he could perceive under the frozen arches of the icebergs the pale ghosts of those who were no more.