CHAPTER VII

DAVIS'S STRAITS

During that day the Forward cut out an easy road amongst the half-broken ice; the wind was good, but the temperature very low; the currents of air blowing across the ice-fields brought with them their penetrating cold. The night required the severest attention; the floating icebergs drew together in that narrow pass; a hundred at once were often counted on the horizon; they broke off from the elevated coasts under the teeth of the grinding waves and the influence of the spring season, in order to go and melt or to be swallowed up in the depths of the ocean. Long rafts of wood, with which it was necessary to escape collision, kept the crew on the alert; the crow's nest was put in its place on the mizenmast; it consisted of a cask, in which the ice-master was partly hidden to protect him from the cold winds while he kept watch over the sea and the icebergs in view, and from which he signalled danger and sometimes gave orders to the crew. The nights were short; the sun had reappeared since the 31st of January in consequence of the refraction, and seemed to get higher and higher above the horizon. But the snow impeded the view, and if it did not cause complete obscurity it rendered navigation laborious.

On the 21st of April Desolation Cape appeared in the midst of thick mists; the crew were tired out with the constant strain on their

energies rendered necessary ever since they had got amongst the icebergs; the sailors had not had a minute's rest; it was soon necessary to have recourse to steam to cut a way through the heaped-up blocks. The doctor and Johnson were talking together on the stern, whilst Shandon was snatching a few hours' sleep in his cabin. Clawbonny was getting information from the old sailor, whose numerous voyages had given him an interesting and sensible education. The doctor felt much friendship for him, and the boatswain repaid it with interest.

"You see, Mr. Clawbonny," Johnson used to say, "this country is not like all others; they call it Greenland, but there are very few weeks in the year when it justifies its name."

"Who knows if in the tenth century this land did not justify its name?" added the doctor. "More than one revolution of this kind has been produced upon our globe, and I daresay I should astonish you if I were to tell you that according to Icelandic chronicles two thousand villages flourished upon this continent about eight or nine hundred years ago."

"You would so much astonish me, Mr. Clawbonny, that I should have some difficulty in believing you, for it is a miserable country."

"However miserable it may be, it still offers a sufficient retreat to its inhabitants, and even to civilised Europeans."

"Without doubt! We met men at Disko and Uppernawik who consented to live in such climates; but my ideas upon the matter were that they lived there by compulsion and not by choice."

"I daresay you are right, though men get accustomed to everything, and the Greenlanders do not appear to me so unfortunate as the workmen of our large towns; they may be unfortunate, but they are certainly not unhappy. I say unhappy, but the word does not translate my thought, for if these people have not the comforts of temperate countries, they are formed for a rude climate, and find pleasures in it which we are not able to conceive."

"I suppose we must think so, as Heaven is just. Many, many voyages have brought me upon these coasts, and my heart always shrinks at the sight of these wretched solitudes; but they ought to have cheered up these capes, promontories, and bays with more engaging names, for Farewell Cape and Desolation Cape are not names made to attract navigators."

"I have also remarked that," replied the doctor, "but these names have a geographical interest that we must not overlook. They describe the adventures of those who gave them those names. Next to the names of Davis, Baffin, Hudson, Ross, Parry, Franklin, and Bellot, if I meet with Cape Desolation I soon find Mercy Bay; Cape Providence is a companion to Port Anxiety; Repulsion Bay brings me back to Cape Eden, and leaving Turnagain Point I take refuge in Refuge Bay. I have there under my eyes an unceasing succession of perils, misfortunes,

obstacles, successes, despairs, and issues, mixed with great names of my country, and, like a series of old-fashioned medals, that nomenclature retraces in my mind the whole history of these seas."

"You are quite right, Mr. Clawbonny, and I hope we shall meet with more Success Bays than Despair Capes in our voyage."

"I hope so too, Johnson; but, I say, is the crew come round a little from its terrors?"

"Yes, a little; but since we got into the Straits they have begun to talk about the fantastic captain; more than one of them expected to see him appear at the extremity of Greenland; but between you and me, doctor, doesn't it astonish you a little too?"

"It does indeed, Johnson."

"Do you believe in the captain's existence?"

"Of course I do."

"But what can be his reasons for acting in that manner?"

"If I really must tell you the whole of my thoughts, Johnson, I believe that the captain wished to entice the crew far enough out to prevent them being able to come back. Now if he had been on board when we started they would all have wanted to know our destination, and he

might have been embarrassed."

"But why so?"

"Suppose he should wish to attempt some superhuman enterprise, and to penetrate where others have never been able to reach, do you believe if the crew knew it they would ever have enlisted? As it is, having got so far, going farther becomes a necessity."

"That's very probable, Mr. Clawbonny. I have known more than one intrepid adventurer whose name alone was a terror, and who would never have found any one to accompany him in his perilous expeditions----"

"Excepting me," ventured the doctor.

"And me, after you," answered Johnson, "and to follow you; I can venture to affirm that our captain is amongst the number of such adventurers. No matter, we shall soon see; I suppose the unknown will come as captain on board from the coast of Uppernawik or Melville Bay, and will tell us at last where it is his good pleasure to conduct the ship."

"I am of your opinion, Johnson, but the difficulty will be to get as far as Melville Bay. See how the icebergs encircle us from every point! They scarcely leave a passage for the Forward. Just examine that immense plain over there."

"The whalers call that in our language an ice-field, that is to say a continued surface of ice the limits of which cannot be perceived."

"And on that side, that broken field, those long pieces of ice more or less joined at their edges?"

"That is a pack; if it was of a circular form we should call it a patch; and, if the form was longer, a stream."

"And there, those floating icebergs?"

"Those are drift-ice; if they were a little higher they would be icebergs or hills; their contact with vessels is dangerous, and must be carefully avoided. Here, look over there: on that ice-field there is a protuberance produced by the pressure of the icebergs; we call that a hummock; if that protuberance was submerged to its base we should call it a calf. It was very necessary to give names to all those forms in order to recognise them."

"It is truly a marvellous spectacle!" exclaimed the doctor, contemplating the wonders of the Boreal Seas; "there is a field for the imagination in such pictures!"

"Yes," answered Johnson, "ice often takes fantastic shapes, and our men are not behindhand in explaining them according to their own notions."

"Isn't that assemblage of ice-blocks admirable? Doesn't it look like a foreign town, an Eastern town, with its minarets and mosques under the pale glare of the moon? Further on there is a long series of Gothic vaults, reminding one of Henry the Seventh's chapel or the Houses of Parliament."

"They would be houses and towns very dangerous to inhabit, and we must not sail too close to them. Some of those minarets yonder totter on their base, and the least of them would crush a vessel like the Forward."

"And yet sailors dared to venture into these seas before they had steam at their command! How ever could a sailing vessel be steered amongst these moving rocks?"

"Nevertheless, it has been accomplished, Mr. Clawbonny. When the wind became contrary--and that has happened to me more than once--we quietly anchored to one of those blocks, and we drifted more or less with it and waited for a favourable moment to set sail again. I must acknowledge that such a manner of voyaging required months, whilst with a little good fortune we shall only want a few days."

"It seems to me," said the doctor, "that the temperature has a tendency to get lower."

"That would be a pity," answered Johnson, "for a thaw is necessary to break up these masses and drive them away into the Atlantic; besides,

they are more numerous in Davis's Straits, for the sea gets narrower between Capes Walsingham and Holsteinborg; but on the other side of the 67th degree we shall find the seas more navigable during the months of May and June."

"Yes; but first of all we must get to the other side."

"Yes, we must get there, Mr. Clawbonny. In June and July we should have found an open passage, like the whalers do, but our orders were precise; we were to be here in April. I am very much mistaken if our captain has not his reasons for getting us out here so early."

The doctor was right in stating that the temperature was lowering; the thermometer at noon only indicated 6 degrees, and a north-west breeze was getting up, which, although it cleared the sky, assisted the current in precipitating the floating masses of ice into the path of the Forward. All of them did not obey the same impulsion, and it was not uncommon to encounter some of the highest masses drifting in an opposite direction, seized at their base by an undercurrent.

It is easy to understand the difficulties of this kind of navigation; the engineers had not a minute's rest; the engines were worked from the deck by means of levers, which opened, stopped, and reversed them according to the orders of the officers on watch. Sometimes the brig had to hasten through an opening in the ice-fields, sometimes to struggle against the swiftness of an iceberg which threatened to close the only practicable issue, or, again, some block, suddenly

overthrown, compelled the brig to back quickly so as not to be crushed to pieces. This mass of ice, carried along, broken up and amalgamated by the northern current, crushed up the passage, and if seized by the frost would oppose an impassable barrier to the passage of the Forward.

Birds were found in innumerable quantities on these coasts, petrels and other sea-birds fluttered about here and there with deafening cries, a great number of big-headed, short-necked sea-gulls were amongst them; they spread out their long wings and braved in their play the snow whipped by the hurricane. This animation of the winged tribe made the landscape more lively.

Numerous pieces of wood were floating to leeway, clashing with noise; a few enormous, bloated-headed sharks approached the vessel, but there was no question of chasing them, although Simpson, the harpooner, was longing to have a hit at them. Towards evening several seals made their appearance, nose above water, swimming between the blocks.

On the 22nd the temperature again lowered; the Forward put on all steam to catch the favourable passes: the wind was decidedly fixed in the north-west; all sails were furled.

During that day, which was Sunday, the sailors had little to do. After the reading of Divine service, which was conducted by Shandon, the crew gave chase to sea-birds, of which they caught a great number. They were suitably prepared according to the doctor's method, and

furnished an agreeable increase of provisions to the tables of the officers and crew.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the Forward had attained Thin de Sael, Sukkertop Mountain; the sea was very rough; from time to time a vast and inopportune fog fell from the grey sky; however, at noon an exact observation could be taken. The vessel was in 65 degrees 20 minutes latitude by 54 degrees 22 minutes longitude. It was necessary to attain two degrees more in order to meet with freer and more favourable navigation.

During the three following days, the 24th, 25th, and 26th of April, the Forward had a continual struggle with the ice; the working of the machines became very fatiguing. The steam was turned off quickly or got up again at a moment's notice, and escaped whistling from its valves. During the thick mist the nearing of icebergs was only known by dull thundering produced by the avalanches; the brig was instantly veered; it ran the risk of being crushed against the heaps of fresh-water ice, remarkable for its crystal transparency, and as hard as a rock.

Richard Shandon never missed completing his provision of water by embarking several tons of ice every day. The doctor could not accustom himself to the optical delusions that refraction produces on these coasts. An iceberg sometimes appeared to him like a small white lump within reach, when it was at least at ten or twelve miles' distance. He endeavoured to accustom his eyesight to this singular phenomenon,

so that he might be able to correct its errors rapidly.

At last the crew were completely worn out by their labours in hauling the vessel alongside of the ice-fields and by keeping it free from the most menacing blocks by the aid of long perches. Nevertheless, the Forward was still held back in the impassable limits of the Polar Circle on Friday, the 27th of April.