

CHAPTER IX

NEWS

The Polar circle was cleared at last. On the 30th of April, at midday, the Forward passed abreast of Holsteinborg; picturesque mountains rose up on the eastern horizon. The sea appeared almost free from icebergs, and the few there were could easily be avoided. The wind veered round to the south-east, and the brig, under her mizensail, brigantine, topsails, and her topgallant sail, sailed up Baffin's Sea. It had been a particularly calm day, and the crew were able to take a little rest. Numerous birds were swimming and fluttering about round the vessel; amongst others, the doctor observed some alca-alla, very much like the teal, with black neck, wings and back, and white breast; they plunged with vivacity, and their immersion often lasted forty seconds.

The day would not have been remarkable if the following fact, however extraordinary it may appear, had not occurred on board. At six o'clock in the morning Richard Shandon, re-entering his cabin after having been relieved, found upon the table a letter with this address:

"To the Commander,

"RICHARD SHANDON,

"On board the 'FORWARD,'

"Baffin's Sea."

Shandon could not believe his own eyes, and before reading such a strange epistle he caused the doctor, James Wall and Johnson to be called, and showed them the letter.

"That grows very strange," said Johnson.

"It's delightful!" thought the doctor.

"At last," cried Shandon, "we shall know the secret."

With a quick hand he tore the envelope and read as follows:

"COMMANDER,--The captain of the Forward is pleased with the coolness, skill, and courage that your men, your officers, and yourself have shown on the late occasions, and begs you to give evidence of his gratitude to the crew.

"Have the goodness to take a northerly direction towards Melville Bay, and from thence try and penetrate into Smith's Straits.

"THE CAPTAIN OF THE Forward,

"K. Z.

"Monday, April 30th,

"Abreast of Cape Walsingham."

"Is that all?" cried the doctor.

"That's all," replied Shandon, and the letter fell from his hands.

"Well," said Wall, "this chimerical captain doesn't even mention coming on board, so I conclude that he never will come."

"But how did this letter get here?" said Johnson.

Shandon was silent.

"Mr. Wall is right," replied the doctor, after picking up the letter and turning it over in every direction; "the captain won't come on board for an excellent reason----"

"And what's that?" asked Shandon quickly.

"Because he is here already," replied the doctor simply.

"Already!" said Shandon. "What do you mean?"

"How do you explain the arrival of this letter if such is not the case?"

Johnson nodded his head in sign of approbation.

"It is not possible!" said Shandon energetically. "I know every man of the crew. We should have to believe, in that case, that the captain has been with us ever since we set sail. It is not possible, I tell you. There isn't one of them that I haven't seen for more than two years in Liverpool; doctor, your supposition is inadmissible."

"Then what do you admit, Shandon?"

"Everything but that! I admit that the captain, or one of his men, has profited by the darkness, the fog, or anything you like, in order to slip on board; we are not very far from land; there are Esquimaux kayaks that pass unperceived between the icebergs; someone may have come on board and left the letter; the fog was intense enough to favour their design."

"And to hinder them from seeing the brig," replied the doctor; "if we were not able to perceive an intruder slip on board, how could he have discovered the Forward in the midst of a fog?"

"That is evident," exclaimed Johnson.

"I come back, then," said the doctor, "to my first hypothesis. What do you think about it, Shandon?"

"I think what you please," replied Shandon fiercely, "with the exception of supposing that this man is on board my vessel."

"Perhaps," added Wall, "there may be amongst the crew a man of his who has received instructions from him."

"That's very likely," added the doctor.

"But which man?" asked Shandon. "I tell you I have known all my men a long time."

"Anyhow," replied Johnson, "if this captain shows himself, let him be man or devil, we'll receive him; but we have another piece of information to draw from this letter."

"What's that?" asked Shandon.

"Why, that we are to direct our path not only towards Melville Bay, but again into Smith's Straits."

"You are right," answered the doctor.

"Smith's Straits?" echoed Shandon mechanically.

"It is evident," replied Johnson, "that the destination of the Forward is not to seek a North-West passage, as we shall leave to our left the only track that leads to it--that is to say, Lancaster Straits; that's what forebodes us difficult navigation in unknown seas."

"Yes, Smith's Straits," replied Shandon, "that's the route the American Kane followed in 1853, and at the price of what dangers! For a long time he was thought to be lost in those dreadful latitudes! However, as we must go, go we must. But where? how far? To the Pole?"

"And why not?" cried the doctor.

The idea of such an insane attempt made the boatswain shrug his shoulders.

"After all," resumed James Wall, "to come back to the captain, if he exists, I see nowhere on the coast of Greenland except Disko or Uppernawik where he can be waiting for us; in a few days we shall know what we may depend upon."

"But," asked the doctor of Shandon, "aren't you going to make known the contents of that letter to the crew?"

"With the commander's permission," replied Johnson, "I should do

nothing of the kind."

"And why so?" asked Shandon.

"Because all that mystery tends to discourage the men: they are already very anxious about the fate of our expedition, and if the supernatural side of it is increased it may produce very serious results, and in a critical moment we could not rely upon them. What do you say about it, commander?"

"And you, doctor--what do you think?" asked Shandon.

"I think Johnson's reasoning is just."

"And you, Wall?"

"Unless there's better advice forthcoming, I shall stick to the opinion of these gentlemen."

Shandon reflected seriously during a few minutes, and read the letter over again carefully.

"Gentlemen," said he, "your opinion on this subject is certainly excellent, but I cannot adopt it."

"Why not, Shandon?" asked the doctor.

"Because the instructions of this letter are formal: they command me to give the captain's congratulations to the crew, and up till to-day I have always blindly obeyed his orders in whatever manner they have been transmitted to me, and I cannot----"

"But----" said Johnson, who rightly dreaded the effect of such a communication upon the minds of the sailors.

"My dear Johnson," answered Shandon, "your reasons are excellent, but read--'he begs you to give evidence of his gratitude to the crew.'"

"Act as you think best," replied Johnson, who was besides a very strict observer of discipline. "Are we to muster the crew on deck?"

"Do so," replied Shandon.

The news of a communication having been received from the captain spread like wildfire on deck; the sailors quickly arrived at their post, and the commander read out the contents of the mysterious letter. The reading of it was received in a dead silence; the crew dispersed, a prey to a thousand suppositions. Clifton had heard enough to give himself up to all the wanderings of his superstitious imagination; he attributed a considerable share in this incident to the dog-captain, and when by chance he met him in his passage he never failed to salute him. "I told you the animal could write," he used to say to the sailors. No one said anything in answer to this observation, and even Bell, the carpenter himself, would not have known what to answer.

Nevertheless it was certain to all that, in default of the captain, his spirit or his shadow watched on board; and henceforward the wisest of the crew abstained from exchanging their opinions about him.

On the 1st of May, at noon, they were in 68 degrees latitude and 56 degrees 32 minutes longitude. The temperature was higher and the thermometer marked twenty-five degrees above zero. The doctor was amusing himself with watching the antics of a white bear and two cubs on the brink of a pack that lengthened out the land. Accompanied by Wall and Simpson, he tried to give chase to them by means of the canoe; but the animal, of a rather warlike disposition, rapidly led away its offspring, and consequently the doctor was compelled to renounce following them up.

Chilly Cape was doubled during the night under the influence of a favourable wind, and soon the high mountains of Disko rose in the horizon. Godhavn Bay, the residence of the Governor-General of the Danish Settlements, was left to the right. Shandon did not consider it worth while to stop, and soon outran the Esquimaux pirogues who were endeavouring to reach his ship.

The Island of Disko is also called Whale Island. It was from this point that on the 12th of July, 1845, Sir John Franklin wrote to the Admiralty for the last time. It was also on that island on the 27th of August, 1859, that Captain McClintock set foot on his return, bringing back, alas! proofs too complete of the loss of the expedition.

The coincidence of these two facts were noted by the doctor; that melancholy conjunction was prolific in memories, but soon the heights of Disko disappeared from his view.

There were, at that time, numerous icebergs on the coasts, some of those which the strongest thaws are unable to detach; the continual series of ridges showed themselves under the strangest forms.

The next day, towards three o'clock, they were bearing on to Sanderson Hope to the north-east. Land was left on the starboard at a distance of about fifteen miles; the mountains seemed tinged with a red-coloured bistre. During the evening, several whales of the finners species, which have fins on their backs, came playing about in the midst of the ice-trails, throwing out air and water from their blow-holes. It was during the night between the 3rd and 4th of May that the doctor saw for the first time the sun graze the horizon without dipping his luminous disc into it. Since the 31st of January the days had been getting longer and longer till the sun went down no more. To strangers not accustomed to the persistence of this perpetual light it was a constant subject of astonishment, and even of fatigue; it is almost impossible to understand to what extent obscurity is requisite for the well-being of our eyes. The doctor experienced real pain in getting accustomed to this light, rendered still more acute by the reflection of the sun's rays upon the plains of ice.

On May 5th the Forward headed the seventy-second parallel; two

months later they would have met with numerous whalers under these high latitudes, but at present the straits were not sufficiently open to allow them to penetrate into Baffin's Bay. The following day the brig, after having headed Woman's Island, came in sight of Uppernawik, the most northerly settlement that Denmark possesses on these coasts.