

CHAPTER X

DANGEROUS NAVIGATION

Shandon, Dr. Clawbonny, Johnson, Foker, and Strong, the cook, went on shore in the small boat. The governor, his wife, and five children, all of the Esquimaux race, came politely to meet the visitors. The doctor knew enough Danish to enable him to establish a very agreeable acquaintance with them; besides, Foker, who was interpreter of the expedition, as well as ice-master, knew about twenty words of the Greenland language, and if not ambitious, twenty words will carry you far. The governor was born on the island, and had never left his native country. He did the honours of the town, which is composed of three wooden huts, for himself and the Lutheran minister, of a school, and magazines stored with the produce of wrecks. The remainder consists of snow-huts, the entrance to which is attained by creeping through a hole.

The greater part of the population came down to greet the Forward, and more than one native advanced as far as the middle of the bay in his kayak, fifteen feet long and scarcely two wide. The doctor knew that the word Esquimaux signified raw-fish-eater, and he likewise knew that the name was considered an insult in the country, for which reason he did not fail to address them by the title of Greenlanders, and nevertheless only by the look of their oily sealskin clothing, their boots of the same material, and all their greasy

tainted appearance, it was easy to discover their accustomed food. Like all Ichthyophagans, they were half-eaten up with leprosy; and yet, for all that, were in no worse health.

The Lutheran minister and his wife, with whom the doctor promised himself a private chat, were on a journey towards Proven on the south of Uppernawik; he was therefore reduced to getting information out of the governor. This chief magistrate did not seem to be very learned; a little less and he would have been an ass, a little more and he would have known how to read. The doctor, however, questioned him upon the commercial affairs, the customs and manners of the Esquimaux, and learnt by signs that seals were worth about 40 pounds delivered in Copenhagen, a bearskin forty Danish dollars, a blue foxskin four, and a white one two or three dollars. The doctor also wished, with an eye to completing his personal education, to visit one of the Esquimaux huts; it is almost impossible to imagine of what a learned man who is desirous of knowledge is capable. Happily the opening of those hovels was too narrow, and the enthusiastic fellow was not able to crawl in; it was very lucky for him, for there is nothing more repulsive than that accumulation of things living and dead, seal flesh or Esquimaux flesh, rotten fish and infectious wearing apparel, which constitute a Greenland hovel; no window to revive the unbreathable air, only a hole at the top of the hut, which gives free passage to the smoke, but does not allow the stench to go out.

Foker gave these details to the doctor, who did not curse his corpulence the less for that. He wished to judge for himself about

these emanations, *sui generis*.

"I am sure," said he, "one gets used to it in the long run."

In the long run depicts Dr. Clawbonny in a single phrase. During the ethnographical studies of the worthy doctor, Shandon, according to his instructions, was occupied in procuring means of transport to cross the ice. He had to pay 4 pounds for a sledge and six dogs, and even then he had great difficulty in persuading the natives to part with them. Shandon wanted also to engage Hans Christian, the clever dog-driver, who made one of the party of Captain McClintock's expedition; but, unfortunately, Hans was at that time in Southern Greenland. Then came the grand question, the topic of the day, was there in Uppernawik a European waiting for the passage of the Forward? Did the governor know if any foreigner, an Englishman probably, had settled in those countries? To what epoch could he trace his last relations with whale or other ships? To these questions the governor replied that not one single foreigner had landed on that side of the coast for more than ten months.

Shandon asked for the names of the last whalers seen there; he knew none of them. He was in despair.

"You must acknowledge, doctor, that all this is quite inconceivable. Nothing at Cape Farewell, nothing at Disko Island, nothing at Uppernawik."

"If when we get there you repeat 'Nothing in Melville Bay,' I shall greet you as the only captain of the Forward."

The small boat came back to the brig towards evening, bringing back the visitors. Strong, in order to change the food a little, had procured several dozens of eider-duck eggs, twice as big as hens' eggs, and of greenish colour. It was not much, but the change was refreshing to a crew fed on salted meat. The wind became favourable the next day, but, however, Shandon did not command them to get under sail; he still wished to stay another day, and for conscience' sake to give any human being time to join the Forward. He even caused the 16-pounder to be fired from hour to hour; it thundered out with a great crash amidst the icebergs, but the noise only frightened the swarms of molly-mokes and rotches. During the night several rockets were sent up, but in vain. And thus they were obliged to set sail.

On the 8th of May, at six o'clock in the morning, the Forward under her topsails, foresails, and topgallant, lost sight of the Uppernawik settlement, and the hideous stakes to which were hung seal-guts and deer-paunches. The wind was blowing from the south-east, and the temperature went up to thirty-two degrees. The sun pierced through the fog, and the ice was getting a little loosened under its dissolving action. But the reflection of the white rays produced a sad effect on the eyesight of several of the crew. Wolsten, the gunsmith, Gripper, Clifton, and Bell were struck with snow blindness, a kind of weakness in the eyes very frequent in spring, and which determines, amongst the Esquimaux, numerous cases of blindness. The doctor advised those

who were so afflicted and their companions in general to cover their faces with green gauze, and he was the first to put his own prescription into execution.

The dogs bought by Shandon at Uppernawik were of a rather savage nature, but in the end they became accustomed to the ship; the captain did not take the arrival of these new comrades too much to heart, and he seemed to know their habits. Clifton was not the last to remark the fact that the captain must already have been in communication with his Greenland brethren, as on land they were always famished and reduced by incomplete nourishment; they only thought of recruiting themselves by the diet on board.

On the 9th of May the Forward touched within a few cables' length the most westerly of the Baffin Isles. The doctor noticed several rocks in the bay between the islands and the continent, those called Crimson Cliffs; they were covered over with snow as red as carmine, to which Dr. Kane gives a purely vegetable origin. Clawbonny wanted to consider this phenomenon nearer, but the ice prevented them approaching the coast; although the temperature had a tendency to rise, it was easy enough to see that the icebergs and ice-streams were accumulating to the north of Baffin's Sea. The land offered a very different aspect from that of Uppernawik; immense glaciers were outlined on the horizon against a greyish sky. On the 10th the Forward left Hingston Bay on the right, near to the seventy-fourth degree of latitude. Several hundred miles westward the Lancaster Channel opened out into the sea.

But afterwards that immense extent of water disappeared under enormous fields of ice, upon which hummocks rose up as regularly as a crystallisation of the same substance. Shandon had the steam put on, and up to the 11th of May the Forward wound amongst the sinuous rocks, leaving the print of a track on the sky, caused by the black smoke from her funnels. But new obstacles were soon encountered; the paths were getting closed up in consequence of the incessant displacement of the floating masses; at every minute a failure of water in front of the Forward's prow became imminent, and if she had been nipped it would have been difficult to extricate her. They all knew it, and thought about it.

On board this vessel, without aim or known destination, foolishly seeking to advance towards the north, some symptoms of hesitation were manifested amongst those men, accustomed to an existence of danger; many, forgetting the advantages offered, regretted having ventured so far, and already a certain demoralisation prevailed in their minds, still more increased by Clifton's fears, and the idle talk of two or three of the leaders, such as Pen, Gripper, Warren, and Wolston.

To the uneasiness of the crew were joined overwhelming fatigues, for on the 12th of May the brig was closed in on every side; her steam was powerless, and it was necessary to force a road through the ice-fields. The working of the saws was very difficult in the floes, which measured from six to seven feet in thickness. When two parallel

grooves divided the ice for the length of a hundred feet, they had to break the interior part with hatchets or handspikes; then took place the elongation of the anchors, fixed in a hole by means of a thick auger; afterwards the working of the capstan began, and in this way the vessel was hauled over. The greatest difficulty consisted in driving the smashed pieces under the floes in order to open up a free passage for the ship, and to thrust them away they were compelled to use long iron-spiked poles.

At last, what with the working of the saws, the hauling, the capstan and poles, incessant, dangerous, and forced work, in the midst of fogs or thick snow, the temperature relatively low, ophthalmic suffering and moral uneasiness, all contributed to discourage the crew, and react on the men's imagination. When sailors have an energetic, audacious, and convinced man to do with, who knows what he wants, where he is bound for, and what end he has in view, confidence sustains them in spite of everything. They make one with their chief, feeling strong in his strength, and quiet in his tranquillity; but on the brig it was felt that the commander was not sure of himself, that he hesitated before his unknown end and destination. In spite of his energetic nature, his weakness showed itself in his changing orders, incomplete manoeuvres, stormy reflections, and a thousand details which could not escape the notice of the crew.

Besides, Shandon was not captain of the ship, a sufficient reason for argument about his orders; from argument to a refusal to obey the step is easy. The discontented soon added to their number the

first engineer, who up to now had remained a slave to his duty.

On May 16th, six days after the Forward's arrival at the icebergs, Shandon had not gained two miles northward, and the ice threatened to freeze in the brig till the following season. This was becoming dangerous. Towards eight in the evening Shandon and the doctor, accompanied by Garry, went on a voyage of discovery in the midst of the immense plains; they took care not to go too far away from the vessel, as it was difficult to fix any landmarks in those white solitudes, the aspects of which changed constantly.

The refraction produced strange effects; they still astonished the doctor; where he thought he had only one foot to leap he found it was five or six, or the contrary; and in both cases the result was a fall, if not dangerous, at least painful, on the frozen ice as hard as glass.

Shandon and his two companions went in search of a practicable passage. Three miles from the ship they succeeded, not without trouble, in climbing the iceberg, which was perhaps three hundred feet high.

From this point their view extended over that desolated mass which looked like the ruins of a gigantic town with its beaten-down obelisks, its overthrown steeples and palaces turned upside down all in a lump--in fact, a genuine chaos. The sun threw long oblique rays of a light without warmth, as if heat-absorbing substances were placed between it and that gloomy country. The sea seemed to be frozen to

the remotest limits of view.

"How shall we get through?" exclaimed the doctor.

"I have not the least idea," replied Shandon; "but we will get through, even if we are obliged to employ powder to blow up those mountains, for I certainly won't let that ice shut me up till next spring."

"Nevertheless, such was the fate of the Fox, almost in these same quarters. Never mind," continued the doctor, "we shall get through with a little philosophy. Believe me, that is worth all the engines in the world."

"You must acknowledge," replied Shandon, "that the year doesn't begin under very favourable auspices."

"That is incontestable, and I notice that Baffin's Sea has a tendency to return to the same state in which it was before 1817."

"Then you think, doctor, that the present state of things has not always existed?"

"Yes; from time to time there are vast breakings up which scientific men can scarcely explain; thus, up to 1817 this sea was constantly obstructed, when suddenly an immense cataclysm took place which drove back these icebergs into the ocean, the great part of which were stranded on Newfoundland Bank. From that time Baffin's Bay has been

almost free, and has become the haunt of numerous whalers."

"Then, since that epoch, voyages to the north have been easier?"

"Incomparably so; but for the last few years it has been observed that the bay has a tendency to be closed up again, and according to investigations made by navigators, it may probably be so for a long time--a still greater reason for us to go on as far as possible. Just now we look like people who get into unknown galleries, the doors of which are always shut behind them."

"Do you advise me to back out?" asked Shandon, endeavouring to read the answer in the doctor's eyes.

"I! I have never known how to take a step backward, and should we never return, I say 'Go ahead.' However, I should like to make known to you that if we do anything imprudent, we know very well what we are exposed to."

"Well, Garry, what do you think about it?" asked Shandon of the sailor.

"I? Commander, I should go on; I'm of the same opinion as Mr. Clawbonny; but you do as you please; command, and we will obey."

"They don't all speak like you, Garry," replied Shandon. "They aren't all in an obedient humour! Suppose they were to refuse to execute my orders?"

"Commander," replied Garry coldly, "I have given you my advice because you asked me for it; but you are not obliged to act upon it."

Shandon did not reply; he attentively examined the horizon, and descended with his two companions on to the ice-field.