

CHAPTER XIV

EXPEDITION IN SEARCH OF FRANKLIN

On Wednesday, the 23rd of May, the Forward had again taken up her adventurous navigation, cleverly tacking amongst the packs and icebergs. Thanks to steam, that obedient force which so many of our Polar sea navigators have had to do without, she appeared to be playing in the midst of the moving rocks. She seemed to recognise the hand of an experienced master, and like a horse under an able rider, she obeyed the thought of her captain. The temperature rose. At six o'clock in the morning the thermometer marked twenty-six degrees, at six in the evening twenty-nine degrees, and at midnight twenty-five degrees; the wind was lightly blowing from the south-east.

On Thursday, towards three in the morning, the Forward was in sight of Possession Bay, on the coast of America. At the entrance to Lancaster Strait, shortly after, the crew caught a glimpse of Burney Cape. A few Esquimaux pulled off towards the vessel, but Hatteras did not take the trouble to wait for them. The Byam-Martin peaks, which overlook Cape Liverpool, were sighted to the left, and soon disappeared in the evening mists, which also prevented any observation being taken from Cape Hay. This cape is so low that it gets confounded with the ice on the coast, a circumstance which often renders the hydrographic determination of the Polar seas extremely difficult.

Puffins, ducks, and white sea-gulls showed up in very great numbers. The Forward was then in latitude 74 degrees 1 minute, and in longitude 77 degrees 15 minutes. The snowy hoods of the two mountains, Catherine and Elizabeth, rose up above the clouds.

On Friday, at six o'clock, Cape Warender was passed on the right side of the strait, and on the left Admiralty Inlet, a bay that has been little explored by navigators, who are generally in a hurry to sail away west. The sea became rather rough, and the waves often swept the deck of the brig, throwing up pieces of ice. The land on the north coast, with its high table lands almost level, and which reverberated the sun's rays, offered a very curious appearance.

Hatteras wanted to run along the north coast, in order to reach Beechey Island and the entrance to Wellington Channel sooner; but continual icebergs compelled him, to his great annoyance, to follow the southern passes. That was why, on the 26th of May, the Forward was abreast of Cape York in a thick fog interspersed with snow; a very high mountain, almost perpendicular, caused it to be recognised. The weather cleared up a little, and the sun, towards noon, appeared for an instant, allowing a tolerably good observation to be taken; 74 degrees 4 minutes latitude and 84 degrees 23 minutes longitude. The Forward was then at the extremity of Lancaster Strait.

Hatteras pointed out to the doctor on his map the route already taken, and the one he meant to follow. The position of the brig at the time

was very interesting.

"I should like to have been further north," said he, "but no one can do the impossible; see, this is our exact situation."

And the captain pricked his map at a short distance from Cape York.

"We are in the centre of this four-road way, open to every wind, fenced by the outlets of Lancaster Strait, Barrow Strait, Wellington Channel, and Regent's Passage; it is a point that all navigators in these seas have been obliged to come to."

"Well," replied the doctor, "it must have puzzled them greatly; four cross-roads with no sign-posts to tell them which to take. How did Parry, Ross, and Franklin manage?"

"They did not manage at all, they were managed; they had no choice, I can assure you; sometimes Barrow Strait was closed to one of them, and the next year another found it open; sometimes the vessel was irresistibly drawn towards Regent's Passage, so that we have ended by becoming acquainted with these inextricable seas."

"What a singular country!" said the doctor, examining the map. "It is all in pieces, and they seem to have no logical connection. It seems as if the land in the vicinity of the North Pole had been cut up like this on purpose to make access to it more difficult, whilst that in the other hemisphere quietly terminates in tapered-out points

like those of Cape Horn, the Cape of Good Hope, and the Indian Peninsula. Is it the greater rapidity of the equator which has thus modified matters, whilst the land at the extremities, yet fluid from the creation, has not been able to get condensed or agglomerated together, for want of a sufficiently rapid rotation?"

"That must be the case, for everything on earth is logical, and 'nothing is that errs from law,' and God often allows men to discover His laws; make use of His permission, doctor."

"Unfortunately, I shall not be able to take much advantage of it," said the doctor, "but the wind here is something dreadful," added he, muffling himself up as well as he could.

"Yes, we are quite exposed to the north wind, and it is turning us out of our road."

"Anyhow it ought to drive the ice down south, and level a clear road."

"It ought to do so, doctor, but the wind does not always do what it ought. Look, that ice-bank seems impenetrable. Never mind, we will try to reach Griffith Island, sail round Cornwallis Island, and get into Queen's Channel without going by Wellington Channel. Nevertheless I positively desire to touch at Beechey Island in order to renew my coal provision."

"What do you mean?" asked the astonished doctor.

"I mean that, according to orders from the Admiralty, large provisions have been deposited on that island in order to provide for future expeditions, and although Captain McClintock took some in 1859, I assure you that there will be some left for us."

"By-the-bye," said the doctor, "these parts have been explored for the last fifteen years, and since the day when the proof of the loss of Franklin was acquired, the Admiralty has always kept five or six cruisers in these seas. If I am not mistaken, Griffith Island, which I see there on the map, almost in the middle of the cross-roads, has become a general meeting-place for navigators."

"It is so, doctor; and Franklin's unfortunate expedition resulted in making known these distant countries to us."

"That is true, captain, for since 1845 expeditions have been very numerous. It was not until 1848 that we began to be uneasy about the disappearance of the Erebus and the Terror, Franklin's two vessels. It was then that we saw the admiral's old friend, Dr. Richardson, at the age of seventy, go to Canada, and ascend Coppermine River as far as the Polar Sea; and James Ross, commanding the Enterprise and Investigation, set out from Uppernawik in 1848 and arrived at Cape York, where we now are. Every day he threw a tub containing papers into the sea, for the purpose of making known his whereabouts. During the mists he caused the cannon to be fired, and had sky-rockets sent up at night along with Bengal lights, and kept

under sail continually. He wintered in Port Leopold from 1848 to 1849, where he took possession of a great number of white foxes, and caused brass collars, upon which was engraved the indication of the whereabouts of ships and the store depots, to be riveted on their necks. Afterwards they were dispersed in all directions; in the following spring he began to search the coasts of North Somerset on sledges in the midst of dangers and privations from which almost all his men fell ill or lame. He built up cairns in which he inclosed brass cylinders with the necessary memoranda for rallying the lost expedition. While he was away his lieutenant McClure explored the northern coasts of Barrow Strait, but without result. James Ross had under his orders two officers who, later on, were destined to become celebrities--McClure, who cleared the North-West passage, and McClintock, who discovered the remains of Sir John Franklin."

"Yes; they are now two good and brave English captains. You know the history of these seas well, doctor, and you will benefit us by telling us about it. There is always something to be gained by hearing about such daring attempts."

"Well, to finish all I know about James Ross: he tried to reach Melville Island by a more westerly direction, but he nearly lost his two vessels, for he was caught by the ice and driven back into Baffin's Sea."

"Driven back?" repeated Hatteras, contracting his brows; "forced back in spite of himself?"

"Yes, and without having discovered anything," continued the doctor; "and ever since that year, 1850, English vessels have never ceased to plough these seas, and a reward of twenty thousand pounds was offered to any one who might find the crews of the Erebus and Terror. Captains Kellett and Moore had already, in 1848, attempted to get through Behring's Strait. In 1850 and 1851 Captain Austin wintered in Cornwallis Island; Captain Parry, on board the Assistance and the Resolute, explored Wellington Channel; John Ross, the venerable hero of the magnetic pole, set out again with his yacht, the Felix, in search of his friend; the brig Prince Albert went on a first cruise at the expense of Lady Franklin; and, lastly, two American ships, sent out by Grinnell with Captain Haven, were drifted out of Wellington Channel and thrown back into Lancaster Strait. It was during this year that McClintock, who was then Austin's lieutenant, pushed on as far as Melville Island and Cape Dundas, the extreme points attained by Parry in 1819; it was then that he found traces of Franklin's wintering on Beechey Island in 1845."

"Yes," answered Hatteras, "three of his sailors had been buried there--three men more fortunate than the others!"

The doctor nodded in approval of Hatteras's remark, and continued:

"During 1851 and 1852 the Prince Albert went on a second voyage under the French lieutenant, Bellot; he wintered at Batty Bay, in Prince Regent Strait, explored the south-west of Somerset, and

reconnoitred the coast as far as Cape Walker. During that time the Enterprise and the Investigator returned to England and passed under the command of Collinson and McClure for the purpose of rejoining Kellett and Moore in Behring's Straits; whilst Collinson came back to winter at Hong-Kong, McClure made the best of his way onward, and after being obliged to winter three times--from 1850 to '51; from 1851 to '52; and from 1852 to '53--he discovered the North-West passage without learning anything of Franklin's fate. During 1852 and '53 a new expedition composed of three sailing vessels, the Resolute, the Assistance, the North Star, and two steamers, the Pioneer and Intrepid, set sail under the command of Sir Edward Belcher, with Captain Kellett under him; Sir Edward visited Wellington Channel, wintered in Northumberland Bay, and went over the coast, whilst Kellett, pushing on to Bridport in Melville Island, explored, without success, that part of the boreal land. It was at this time that news was spread in England that two ships, abandoned in the midst of icebergs, had been descried near the coast of New Scotland. Lady Franklin immediately had prepared the little screw Isabelle, and Captain Inglefield, after having steamed up Baffin's Bay as far as Victoria Point on the eightieth parallel, came back to Beechey Island no more successful than his predecessors. At the beginning of 1855, Grinnell, an American, fitted up a fresh expedition, and Captain Kane tried to penetrate to the Pole----

"But he didn't do it," cried Hatteras violently; "and what he didn't do we will, with God's help!"

"I know, captain," answered the doctor, "and I mention it because this expedition is of necessity connected with the search for Franklin. But it had no result. I was almost forgetting to tell you that the Admiralty, considering Beechey Island as the general rendezvous of expeditions, charged Captain Inglefield, who then commanded the steamer Phoenix, to transport provisions there in 1853; Inglefield set out with Lieutenant Bellot, and lost the brave officer who for the second time had devoted his services to England; we can have more precise details upon this catastrophe, as our boatswain, Johnson, was witness to the misfortune."

"Lieutenant Bellot was a brave Frenchman," said Hatteras, "and his memory is honoured in England."

"By that time," continued the doctor, "Belcher's fleet began to come back little by little; not all of it, for Sir Edward had been obliged to abandon the Assistance in 1854, as McClure had done with the Investigator in 1853. In the meantime, Dr. Rae, in a letter dated the 29th of July, 1854, and addressed from Repulse Bay, which he had succeeded in reaching through America, sent word that the Esquimaux of King William's Land were in possession of different objects taken from the wrecks of the Erebus and Terror; there was then not the least doubt about the fate of the expedition; the Phoenix, the North Star, and Collinson's vessel then came back to England, leaving the Arctic Seas completely abandoned by English ships. But if the Government seemed to have lost all hope it was not so with Lady Franklin, and with the remnants of her fortune she fitted out

the Fox, commanded by McClintock, who set sail in 1857, and wintered in the quarters where you made your apparition; he reached Beechey Island on the 11th of August, 1858, wintered a second time in Bellot's Strait, began his search again in February, 1859, and on the 6th of May found the document which cleared away all doubt about the fate of the Erebus and the Terror, and returned to England at the end of the year. That is all that has happened for fifteen years in these fateful countries, and since the return of the Fox not a single vessel has returned to attempt success in the midst of these dangerous seas."

"Well," replied Hatteras, "we will attempt it."