

CHAPTER XVII

THE FATE OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN

The Forward succeeded in cutting straight across James Ross Strait, but not without difficulty; the crew were obliged to work the saws and use petards, and they were worn out with fatigue. Happily the temperature was bearable, and thirty degrees higher than that experienced by James Ross at the same epoch. The thermometer marked thirty-four degrees.

On Saturday they doubled Cape Felix at the northern extremity of King William's Land, one of the middle-sized isles of the northern seas. The crew there experienced a strong and painful sensation, and many a sad look was turned towards the island as they sailed by the coast. This island had been the theatre of the most terrible tragedy of modern times. Some miles to the west the Erebus and the Terror had been lost for ever. The sailors knew about the attempts made to find Admiral Franklin and the results, but they were ignorant of the affecting details of the catastrophe. While the doctor was following the progress of the ship on his map, several of them, Bell, Bolton, and Simpson, approached and entered into conversation with him. Their comrades, animated by curiosity, soon followed them; while the brig flew along with extreme rapidity, and the coast with its bays, capes, and promontories passed before their eyes like a gigantic panorama.

Hatteras was marching up and down the poop with quick steps. The doctor, on the deck, looked round, and saw himself surrounded by almost the whole crew. He saw how powerful a recital would be in such a situation, and he continued the conversation begun with Johnson as follows:--

"You know how Franklin began, my friends; he was a cabin-boy like Cook and Nelson; after having employed his youth in great maritime expeditions, he resolved in 1845 to launch out in search of the North-West passage; he commanded the Erebus and the Terror, two vessels, already famous, that had just made an Antarctic campaign under James Ross, in 1840. The Erebus, equipped by Franklin, carried a crew of seventy men, officers and sailors, with Fitz-James as captain; Gore and Le Vesconte, lieutenants; Des Voeux, Sargent, and Couch, boatswains; and Stanley as surgeon. The Terror had sixty-eight men, Captain Crozier; Lieutenants Little, Hodgson, and Irving; Horesby and Thomas were the boatswains, and Peddie the surgeon. In the names on the map of the capes, straits, points, and channels, you may read those of these unfortunate men, not one of whom was destined ever again to see his native land. There were a hundred and thirty-eight men in all! We know that Franklin's last letters were addressed from Disko Island, and were dated July 12th, 1845. 'I hope,' he said, 'to get under way to-night for Lancaster Strait.' What happened after his departure from Disko Bay? The captains of two whalers, the Prince of Wales and the Enterprise, perceived the two ships in Melville Bay for the last time, and after that day nothing was heard of them. However, we can follow Franklin in his westerly course: he passed through Lancaster and Barrow Straits, and arrived

at Beechey Island, where he passed the winter of 1845 and '46."

"But how do you know all this?" asked Bell, the carpenter.

"By three tombs which Austin discovered on that island in 1850. Three of Franklin's sailors were buried there, and by a document which was found by Lieutenant Hobson, of the Fox, which bears the date of April 25th, 1848, we know that after their wintering the Erebus and the Terror went up Wellington Strait as far as the seventy-seventh parallel; but instead of continuing their route northwards, which was, probably, not practicable, they returned south."

"And that was their ruin!" said a grave voice. "Safety lay to the north."

Every one turned round. Hatteras, leaning on the rail of the poop, had just uttered that terrible observation.

"There is not a doubt," continued the doctor, "that Franklin's intention was to get back to the American coast; but tempests stopped him, and on the 12th September, 1846, the two ships were seized by the ice, at a few miles from here, to the north-west of Cape Felix; they were dragged along N.N.W. to Victoria Point over there," said the doctor, pointing to a part of the sea. "Now," he continued, "the ships were not abandoned till the 22nd of April, 1848. What happened during these nineteen months? What did the poor unfortunate men do?"

They, doubtless, explored the surrounding land, attempting any chance of safety, for the admiral was an energetic man, and if he did not succeed----"

"Very likely his crew betrayed him," added Hatteras.

The sailors dared not raise their eyes; these words pricked their conscience.

"To end my tale, the fatal document informs us also that John Franklin succumbed to fatigue on the 11th of June, 1847. Honour to his memory!" said the doctor, taking off his hat. His audience imitated him in silence.

"What became of the poor fellows for the next ten months after they had lost their chief? They remained on board their vessels, and only resolved to abandon them in April, 1848; a hundred and five men out of a hundred and thirty-eight were still living; thirty-three were dead! Then Captain Crozier and Captain Fitz-James raised a cairn on Victory Point, and there deposited their last document. See, my friends, we are passing the point now! You can still see the remains of the cairn placed on the extreme point, reached by John Ross in 1831. There is Jane Franklin Cape. There is Franklin Point. There is Le Vesconte Point. There is Erebus Bay, where the boat made out of the debris of one of the vessels was found on a sledge. Silver spoons, provisions in abundance, chocolate, tea, and religious books were found there too. The hundred and five survivors, under Captain

Crozier, started for Great Fish River. Where did they get to? Did they succeed in reaching Hudson's Bay? Did any survive? What became of them after this last departure?"

"I will tell you what became of them," said John Hatteras in a firm voice. "Yes, they did try to reach Hudson's Bay, and they split up into several parties! Yes, they did make for the south! A letter from Dr. Rae in 1854 contained the information that in 1850 the Esquimaux had met on King William's Land a detachment of forty men travelling on the ice, and dragging a boat, thin, emaciated, worn out by fatigue and suffering! Later on they discovered thirty corpses on the continent and five on a neighbouring island, some half-buried, some left without burial, some under a boat turned upside down, others under the remains of a tent; here an officer with his telescope on his shoulder and a loaded gun at his side, further on a boiler with the remnants of a horrible meal! When the Admiralty received these tidings it begged the Hudson's Bay Company to send its most experienced agents to the scene. They descended Back River to its mouth. They visited the islands of Montreal, Maconochie, and Ogle Point. But they discovered nothing. All the poor wretches had died from misery, suffering, and hunger, whilst trying to prolong their existence by the dreadful resource of cannibalism. That is what became of them on the southern route. Well! Do you still wish to march in their footsteps?"

His trembling voice, his passionate gestures and beaming face, produced an indescribable effect. The crew, excited by its emotion

before this fatal land, cried out with one voice: "To the north! To the north!"

"Yes, to the north! Safety and glory lie to the north. Heaven is for us! The wind is changing; the pass is free!"

So saying, Hatteras gave orders to turn the vessel; the sailors went to work with alacrity; the ice streams got clear little by little; the Forward, with all steam on, made for McClintock Channel. Hatteras was right when he counted upon a more open sea; he followed up the supposed route taken by Franklin, sailing along the western coast of Prince of Wales's Land, then pretty well known, whilst the opposite shore is still unknown. It was evident that the breaking up of the ice had taken place in the eastern locks, for this strait appeared entirely free; the Forward made up for lost time; she fled along so quickly that she passed Osborne Bay on the 14th of June, and the extreme points attained by the expeditions of 1851. Icebergs were still numerous, but the sea did not threaten to quit the keel of the Forward.