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978-1-108-04825-5 - The Great Frozen Land: (Bolshaia Zemelskija Tundra): Narrative of a Winter Journey Across the Tundras and a Sojourn Among the Samoyads

Edited by Frederick George Jackson and Arthur Montefiore

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

CAMPING AT HABAROVA

The "Ice-blink"—Meeting the ice—The Yugorski Schar—Landing at Habarova—Plans for the winter—Samoyad and Tundra—Habarova—Life of the Tundra—Settling in—Camp kit—Useful stores—Reindeer meat.

LAST August, after an interval of seven years, I again found myself in Arctic seas. On the former occasion I had gone westward and spent some six months in Greenland waters: now I was travelling to the east, crossing Barents Sea, and making for that narrow strait which divides the Novaia Zemlian archipelago from the double continent of Asia and Europe, and unites the ice-laden Kara Sea with the more temperate waters named after the gallant Dutch navigator.

Once again I was looking away to the northward for the first sign of ice, and on the 25th, when in 70° 35' N. lat. and 48° E. long., the "ice-blink" became visible. Above the horizon there was spread upon the sky a map of the ice-fields that lay below upon the sea. There one could trace the wide unbroken

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stretches of floe-ice — as yet beyond the view — in masses of yellowish-white, and the winding “lanes” of open water in broad veins of dark blue. To many an Arctic traveller this “ice-blink” map has been the means of his escape from an ice-capped sea, but on this occasion to us, who were sailing in a comparatively low latitude, it was merely the indication of the ice-floes lying in our route; floes which we knew, unless our luck was to be bad, were neither so thick nor so packed as to be difficult to navigate.

This harbinger of the ice cannot lie, and on the following morning, away to the northward and windward, we saw the actual sea-scape as it had been mirrored the previous day: long, low fields of ice, the greater part of which would not be more than six feet above the sea, with here and there the turning lanes of open water, and here and there the open patches of blue sea, with a few white blocks of erratic ice floating quietly in their midst, as swans upon a pool. The sun, which now was nearly always with us, gleamed for a little while and called out all the light and colour which lie latent in Arctic scenery, and then there came with sudden swiftness from the north a succession of heavy snow squalls, piling on the deck deep drifts of snow, and making what we could see of the world around us, drear indeed. The rigging stood as a network of white leading upward into the dense mist, which rolled down upon us, wave

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after wave, as the sea might break upon the shore. Yet in all the world I know no climate so swift to change as that of the Polar regions, and by noon the sun had overmastered snow and mist and was shining upon us with so unclouded a face that the sea was sparkling as if it were liquid light, and the ice-glare became so strong as to try the eyes. Deeper and deeper seemed the blue of the water which lapped the sharp edges of the floes, and more and more beautiful the crystal masses which in an infinity of form and with an endless variety of light and shade drew out of the north and the east, and lay silent on the sea around us.

The ship in which I had taken my passage was the s.s. *Orestes*, and she formed one of a small fleet of vessels which, under the command of Captain Joseph Wiggins, was making for the river Yenisei, and intending there to discharge their cargoes. Our convoy was the *Blencathra*, belonging to Mr. F. Leybourne Popham, and at one time well known as the *Pandora*, and the Arctic yacht of that distinguished explorer, Sir Allen Young. A third vessel was the *Minusinsk*, and accompanying her were three Russian boats, manned by Russian crews, but under the supreme command of Mr. Popham's skipper, Captain Wiggins. The voyage, on which I was merely a passenger as far as the Yugorski Schar, was not so successful as a commercial enterprise as it might have been, but this must be attributed less to the navigation

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of the Kara Sea and great Yenisei River than to the inadequate arrangements for discharging cargo. Indeed, in favourable years, the Kara Sea presents no insuperable difficulty to the navigator on his outward voyage.

On the evening of the 26th we came within sight of Waigatz Island. Here lay the land which had allured me—the Holy Isle of the Samoyads, standing between the ancient “Samoedia” and the lofty islands of Novaia Zemlia. Here I had come, hoping to do something serviceable, and following in the steps of those early voyagers of the sixteenth century. It was with the deepest interest that I ascended the rigging and climbed into the Crow’s Nest, and from that advantageous position—just below the “truck” of the mainmast—looked round the wider horizon I had now obtained.

Owing to the wind being from the north-east, and thus blowing off the land of Novaia Zemlia, the sea was smooth. Away to the northward, the sky above the Waigatz Straits showed a strong ice-blink, and told us that there was but little hope of the *Orestes* passing through those Straits in order to land me, as I had hoped, on the south island of Novaia Zemlia. Moreover, as the ice reached right inshore along the western coast of Waigatz, considerable difficulty would have been experienced in even attempting to reach the mouth of the Straits.

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Early in the morning of 27th August we ran into the small bay at the south-west extremity of Waigatz Island and at the entrance to Pet's Straits, or, as it is more frequently called nowadays, the Yugorski Schar.¹ A good deal of fairly heavy ice, not packed but consisting of isolated lumps, was coming through the Straits, and for a while it looked as if the iron steamer would encounter serious difficulty in making the passage. But the *Blencathra*, wooden and very strong, pushed up the channel to reconnoitre, and before long returned

¹ Yugorski Schar means simply the Strait of Yugoria or Ugoria. Arthur Pet, on the 19th of July 1580, entered and passed through the Strait for the first time, and on the strength of this the Yugorski Schar is frequently referred to and was at one time generally called "Pet's Strait." As to the word Schar, its meaning is confined to the true strait between sea and sea, except in the case of the Kostin Schar, which, as a mere arm of the sea, should, according to Lutke (p. 245), be called Kostin Salma. Yet in the days of its baptism this was really thought to be a true Schar. In all probability the word Schar, as several other words used in this region, has a Finnish origin, and Dr. Beke, in his edition of *Barents' Voyages* (2nd edition, p. 31), suggests Spenser (although he calls him "Spencer") as exhibiting an affinity:—

Upon that shore he spyéd Atin stand,
There by his maister left, when late he far'd
In Phaedria's flitt barck over that per'lous shard.

Faerie Queene, II. vi. 38.

In De Veer's account of Barents' second voyage (1595), the following interesting note appears relating to the entrance into the Yugorski Schar: "Then we sailed vnder 70 degrees, vntill we came to the Wey-gates, most part through broken ice; and when we got to Wey-gates, wee cast out our lead, and for a long time found 13 and 14 fadome, soft ground mixed with blacke shels; not long after that wee cast out the lead and found 10 fadome deepe, the wind being north,

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with the favourable news that the Straits themselves, right through to the Kara Sea, were practically free from ice.

We had sighted the wooden Russian gunboat *Nayesdnik* lying at anchor south-west of Waigatz, and shortly after the return of the *Blencathra* Captain Pell, her commander, came on board and dined with us. He was good enough to overhaul my Russian vocabulary and write out the Russian alphabet for me. Later on, her lieutenant—Dobrotvorski by name—also boarded us. Apparently he was a capital fellow, but we could

and we forced to hold stily aloofe, in regard of the great quantity of ice, till about midnight; then we were forced to wind north ward because of certaine rocks that lay on the south side of Wey-gates, right before vs about a mile and a halfe, hauing 10 fadome deepe; then wee changed our coarse, and sailed west north-west for the space of 4 glasses, after that we wound about againe east and east and by south, and so entred into Wey-gates, and as wee went in, we cast out the lead, and found 7 fadome deepe, little more or lesse, till the 19 of August; and then the sunne being south-east we entered into the Wey-gates, in the road, the wind being north.

“The right chanell between the Image Point and the Samuters land was full of ice, so that it was not well to be past through, and so we went into the road, which we called the Trayen Bay, because we found store of trayen-oyle there; this is a good bay for the course of the ice, and good almost for all windes, and we may saile so farre into it as we will at 4, 5, and 6 fadome, good anchor-ground: on the east it is deepe water.”

In the foregoing passage the word “shels” is *Stipkens*, and may be translated spots or specks—possibly micaceous debris is meant. The mile and a half is Dutch measurement, and would equal six miles English. “4 glasses” would be equivalent to two hours, the glass used being a halfhour glass. “Samuters land” is the land of the Samoyads.

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not carry on much conversation, as he did not know English. But, on the other hand, he could speak French and German, while, in consequence of having neglected those departments of knowledge when at school, I was unable to do more than what I believe the average Englishman usually achieves on such occasions. Fortunately he found in Miss Helen Peel, who was on board the *Blencathra*, a lady quite capable of exchanging conversational amenities in the French and German tongues. As a matter of fact, it was neither French nor German in which I was just then interested, but Russian and Samoyad, and, encouraged by the help in the former which I had just received from the captain of the Russian gunboat, I forthwith began to practise upon Tiger, a Russian Lapp whom we had on board the *Orestes*. I fear it must be recorded that he gazed at me as if I had sworn at him vehemently.

I should like to mention here that by the kind offices of the captain of the Russian gunboat we were able to send letters home. These were posted at Arkhangel, and arrived a full month after there had been any reasonable expectation of hearing of us.

On 28th August the weather was so foggy that we could not proceed, so we spent the day with our new Russian friends. Among other things I learnt from them was that there is generally a Russian or two on Goose Land. The Russian Government makes a point of maintaining a few Russians there, partly for

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the purpose of recording meteorological observations, but more particularly with a view to retaining Novaia Zemlia as a Russian country. Deaths from scurvy frequently occur, and consequently new settlers replace the old with rapidity. Nowhere else on Novaia Zemlia is there a permanent colony of Europeans; but the Samoyads who live there may also be found, but in smaller numbers, at the entrance to the Matotchkin Schar. In the summer, however, Russian fishermen as well as Samoyads penetrate the rivers of Goose Land in search of salmon.

On the 29th of August the fog lifted, and early in the morning we steamed to Habarova, where we landed, and found that in addition to a large number of Samoyads there were four Russian traders of the peasant class and a priest. Accommodation, of course, was of the most primitive type, and I was even fortunate in being able to get room for myself and my traps in the log-house of the priest. Captain Wiggins, Mr. Leybourne Popham, Mr. and Mrs. James, and Miss Helen Peel accompanied me on shore; but we had hardly landed when Captain Wiggins thought he could see signs of the ice drifting towards the ship, and, nervous about her safety, he returned at full speed, taking the whole party with him. Immediately the *Blencathra* and *Orestes* were reached, they weighed anchor and steamed up the Yugorski Schar.

A somewhat difficult problem now faced me, and

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candidly I was in a bit of a fix. We had landed in a very hurried manner, and my things had been put ashore before I had time to check them. On going through the packages I found that some of my most useful provisions had been left in the ship, and that by some carelessness on the part of those who had the duty of bringing them ashore, all my butter and cheese had gone on to the Yenisei with the *Orestes*. Moreover, the bargain which Captain Wiggins, who knew a little bad Russian, was going to make on my behalf with the Russians and Samoyads never came to maturity, for in the middle of the palaver he had seen the ice drifting, and hurried away. So with a very slight knowledge of Russian, and with absolutely none of Samoyad, I had to make a bargain with these people if I would carry out either one or both parts of my intended journey.

When I left England it was with the intention of penetrating—to some distance northward—the interior of the southern island of Novaia Zemlia, and afterwards of returning south to Habarova. Thence I hoped to go by land or by water to the Yalmal Peninsula.

The interior of Novaia Zemlia and that of the Yalmal Peninsula are entirely unknown: upon the maps they are blanks; of their configuration people really have no idea, and at their flora and fauna we can only guess from observations upon the coast. It was not, however, as a naturalist that I intended to

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work, and here lies the reason for selecting the winter season for my travels—the fact that it would afford the severest test for my equipment. This test I had elected to apply with one object, namely, to ascertain the best possible equipment for the expedition it was my great desire to take to Franz Josef Land in the following year. Any one who should go to Novaia Zemlia, or cross Yalmal in summer, would probably be rewarded by many interesting discoveries in their topography and geology, flora and fauna; but as I wished to expose my foods, clothing, sledges, and other apparatus to the rigorous test of an Arctic winter, it was obvious that I must be content with general results of a geographical and meteorological character. Of the heights and valleys, of the ranges and plains, the glaciers and rivers, the peaks and passes, the temperature and winds, I might hope to gain some interesting and useful knowledge, while at the same time utilising my experience chiefly with a view to my equipment for Franz Josef Land. Such a journey held out and might have afforded discoveries of no common interest, and I greatly regret that, owing to the timidity of the Samoyads, my plans should have been baffled in both directions. It is true that the timidity was rational—with regard, at any rate, to the Novaia Zemlia journey—for their wretched boats or *lodkas* were fragile things with only three or four inches of freeboard, and utterly unfit to cross the