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978-1-108-07147-5 - The Land of Desolation: Being a Personal Narrative of
Adventure in Greenland

Isaac Israel Hayes

Excerpt

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THE
LAND OF DESOLATION.

PART THE FIRST.

RUINS.

CHAPTER I.

ICE AND BREAKERS.

ON a gloomy night in the month of July, 1585, the ship 'Sunshine,' of fifty tons, 'fitted out,' as the old chronicles inform us, 'by divers opulent merchants of London, for the discovery of a north-west passage, came, in a thick and heavy mist, to a place where there was a mighty roaring as of waves dashing on a rocky shore.' The captain of this ship was brave old John Davis, who, when he had discovered his perilous situation, put off in a boat, and thereby discovered that his ship was 'embayed in fields and hills of ice, the crashing together of which made the fearful sounds that he had heard.' The ship drifted helplessly through the night, and when the morning dawned, 'the people saw the tops of mountains white with snow, and of a sugar-loaf shape, standing above the clouds; while at their base the land was deformed and rocky, and the shore was everywhere beset with ice, which made such irksome noise that the land was called "The Land of Desolation."'

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On a gloomy night in the month of July, 1869, the ship 'Panther,' of three hundred and fifty tons, fitted out for a summer voyage by a party in pursuit of pleasure, came in like manner, through a thick and heavy mist, to a place where there was a mighty roaring as of waves dashing on a rocky shore. The captain of this ship was John Bartlett, who, when he had discovered his perilous situation, put off in a boat, and returned with the knowledge that the 'Panther,' like the 'Sunshine' of old, was embayed in 'fields and hills of ice,' the crashing together of which made the fearful sounds that he had heard; and then, when the morning dawned, 'the people saw the tops of mountains white with snow, and of a sugar-loaf shape, standing above the clouds; while at their base the land was deformed and rocky,' and the shore was everywhere beset with ice, which made such 'irksome noise,' that the people knew their ship had drifted to the self-same spot where the 'Sunshine' had drifted nearly three hundred years before, and that the land before them was Davis's 'Land of Desolation.'

A mysterious land to them, and one around which clung many marvellous associations. Its legends had been the wonder of their boyhood; its grandeur was now their admiration. They had heard of it as a land of fable; tradition had peopled it with dwarfs and giants; history recorded that a race of men once occupied it whose fleets of ships traversed the waters in which their own vessel was now so grievously beset, bearing merchandise to hamlets of peace and plenty. Their eyes naturally sought a spot whereon to locate the home of this ancient people; but nothing could they discover save sterile rocks and desert wastes of ice. They saw dark cliffs which rose threateningly above them abruptly from

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the sea, and beyond these their eye wandered away into the interior, which the snows of centuries had converted into a vast plain of desolate whiteness. Returning from this limitless perspective, the eye fell upon the troubled waters. There were no signs of life anywhere: desolation frowned on every side. Yet the spectacle was sublime; and, as if to render that sublimity the more complete, there was added soon an aspect of the terrible. This came in the form of a gale of wind, which speedily rose to a tempest. Rain, hail, and snow swept down upon the ship, and every distant object was hidden except when the storm-curtain was occasionally rent asunder, and a mountain peak was exposed, with the clouds breaking against its sides. The creaking and groaning ice was around them everywhere, and an occasional iceberg of enormous magnitude broke through the gloom, and, while moving on through the angry and troubled waters, received with cold indifference the fierce lashings of the sea.

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CHAPTER II.

FREE FROM DANGER.

I WAS a passenger on board the 'Panther,' and shared with my companions the emotions which the Land of Desolation first inspired.

Under ordinary circumstances, there can be no more comfortable situation on board a ship than that of passenger. You are not expected to know any thing, and, if wise, you will not want to know any thing. You are content to trust to the captain, who is presumed to be quite competent to look to the safety of his ship, and therefore to your own. So far as human ingenuity can possibly be exercised to escape danger, his, you are sure, will be, and you trust to him as to a superior being—at least you know he has all the interest at stake that you have, and something more; for the handling of a ship in a storm is like the manœuvring of troops on the field of battle; success brings glory to the commander, and the acquisition of it is perhaps all the more precious that it is not shared with anybody.

In our case there was a still further motive to confidence. Our captain owned one-half the ship, which was a Newfoundland screw-steamer, and was built unusually strong. Besides this, we had confidence in his judgment, which was the next best thing to confidence in his caution; and then, to crown all, he was a thoroughly

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good fellow. To quote the gentleman who devoted himself to the duties of sagaman for the cruise, 'A roaring, tearing, jolly tar was he, as ever boxed the compass on the sea.' During the eight days occupied in coming over from St. John's, we had all conceived a high opinion of his qualities. He might be sometimes a little rash and venturesome, but rashness, as everybody knows, is a safer quality than timidity; and we bore in recollection the old saying, 'Nothing venture, nothing have.' We might, perhaps, have found a little fault with him at first for having run us in so close to the Land of Desolation without halting for daylight and better weather; but then we all knew that to 'heave to' was something which the captain had a great horror of, and he spoke of heaving to with such constant disrespect that the people generally had conceived the idea that it was a peculiarly terrible thing to indulge in. It seemed, therefore, that we were all right, and must necessarily escape shipwreck, even when the peril appeared greatest—when, for instance, we found ourselves threatened with an island rock on the one side, and an island of ice on the other, in a sea white with foam, and breaking everywhere so wildly that the captain's trumpet-voice could scarce be heard above the tumult.

The worst of it was, we did not know within fifty miles of where we were. 'There,' said the captain, triumphantly, with his outspread hand upon the chart of Baffin's Bay, covering at least ten thousand square miles of land and sea, 'There's where we are!' It was certain, at all events, that we had drifted within a line of skerries, for the waves broke on all sides, and where the rocks did not keep us from going, the ice did.

We had made the land with the intention of seeking a

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modern fishing-station of Danes and Esquimaux, which we knew to lie somewhere on that part of the coast; but where we could not even guess. As well seek charity in a bigot as hunt for a harbour in such weather, on a coast where there are neither lighthouses nor pilots.

Yet we knew that human beings might be started somewhere if we only *could* free ourselves from our uncomfortable predicament, and the storm only *would* hold up. But it would not and did not until after we had, without exactly knowing how it came about, at length found ourselves in the open sea, and had given the Land of Desolation a wide berth.

The weather clearing finally, the 'Panther' was pointed for a promising opening in the belt of ice which beset the shore; and now, without much risk or difficulty, we got behind a cluster of islands not far from the mainland, and a good way to the south of where we had been so much troubled.

Here there was no ice at all, and we began to look up the fishing-town. First of all the signal-gun was fired, and the 'Panther' whistled her loudest. This woke the echoes, and started some sea-gulls, but nothing more. Then we crept cautiously along, passing island after island, the 'Panther' whistling constantly and the guns firing occasionally.

Presently we saw something dark moving upon the water, which appeared to have the body of a beast, and the head and shoulders of a man. It might be a marine centaur! who could tell? In fact, we rather expected to see some such monsters long before; and if the sea had been alive with them, we would not have been, I think, much surprised.

'Hi! hi!' was the first greeting of this strange-looking

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creature, with a voice that sounded very human ; ‘Hi ! hi !’ and afterwards he shouted, ‘Me Julianashaab pilot!’ an announcement which greatly delighted us, even if the pilot did come in such very questionable shape.

He was not long in arriving alongside, and then, after getting the bight of a rope under each end of him, we hauled him in on deck, whereupon the head and shoulders speedily shook themselves out from the body, and our marine centaur stood forth with the proper complement of legs to show his affinity to man.

To see a pilot shed himself thus is not to increase one’s confidence in him. And then his looks were by no means prepossessing. A broad face that was all cheeks, except what was mouth, with the least speck of a nose, and nothing to mention in the way of eyes, might be a curious study for a naturalist, but was hardly the sort of thing one seems to stand in need of when he seeks a harbour along a very ugly coast. And then his body was all covered with hair, and was all wet, as if he had just risen from the bottom of the sea. Besides, he smelt fishy. Yet this was clearly the best we could do if we ever meant to get into port, and, disregarding his unprepossessing appearance, the captain called him aft and ordered him to point out Julianashaab.

‘Eh, tyma!’ he answered ; and off he started for the bridge, and off soon started the ‘Panther’ under his direction.

Julianashaab we found to be no easy port to make, even with a marine centaur for a pilot. The ‘Panther’ was twisted and turned about so much among the islands, and our pilot spoke so strangely, and made so many strange gestures, that he fairly turned the captain’s head. The captain would indeed hardly believe that we were

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going anywhere at all, but were, on the contrary, whirling about for the temporary amusement of this creature whom we had fished up out of salt water.

The fact is, Julianashaab is some twenty miles from the sea, on the bank of a very long and tortuous frith or fiord, which is studded with islands. Difficult of access at all times, it is peculiarly so in July, for then the ice from the Spitzbergen side of Greenland comes drifting down with the great polar current, a branch of which sweeps around Cape Farewell into Davis's Strait and Baffin's Bay, and proceeds north for a while before it is deflected to the westward to join the ice-incumbered stream that chills the region of Labrador, and bathes the coast of America even to the Floridas. Cape Farewell is in latitude $59^{\circ} 49'$, and Julianashaab lies some eighty miles to the north and west of it; that is to say, in latitude $60^{\circ} 44'$, or $5^{\circ} 48'$ south of the Arctic circle. It is not, therefore, much nearer the North Pole than St. Petersburg, Russia, though in a very different climate.

It was fortunate that we secured even this strange pilot when we did, else we should have lain outside all the night; for there was a night, even although it was scarce deserving the name. When one can plainly see to read by the light of the sun as late as ten o'clock P.M., there is not much of a night to boast of. There was a faint twilight even at midnight, and to this was added the light of the moon, which threw its brightness on the summits of the snow-clad mountains, and trailed its silvery splendours away over the rippled waters of the fiord.

The scene as we passed on was most impressive. There is indeed in a still arctic night, whether in the winter or summer, a sublimity which one does not feel in a

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night elsewhere. We passed through many groups of icebergs, and in the moonlight their shapes, at all times full of strange suggestions, were converted into objects of the most fantastic description. The faces and forms of men and beasts were fashioned there in the light and shadow of the night, occasionally with wonderful distinctness. As we passed on, we were sometimes in the cold shelter of a cliff, while the icebergs before us glittered in a full blaze of light, as if they were mammoth gems; again we would pass so near a berg that it seemed but awaiting an opportunity to topple over upon and overwhelm us; and all the while no sounds disturbed the air but the monotonous pulsations of the steamer and the hollow gurgle of the waves of her making as they broke within the icy caves.

At length our pilot told us we were approaching our destination, and as the light of day began to replace the brightness of the moon, he whirled the 'Panther' into a little bight, and a few rude habitations, a flag-staff, and the belfry of a little mission church, appeared before us on a dark rocky hill-side.

'Julianashaab!' said our pilot, pointing to it with as much pride and satisfaction as if he were overlooking the finest city of the world. Poor man, he knew no better! He little dreamed how miserable was his lot to be only a Julianashaaber, and dwell in peace! For this was indeed his home. He had gone down the fiord hunting seals and to gather the eggs of wildfowl upon the islands, and when he saw the 'Panther' he had just begun his work.

Down went the anchor with its usual rush and rattle, and immediately the rocks were alive with people, who, aroused from their peaceful slumbers by the strange noise,

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sallied forth as suddenly as the witches from Kirk Al-
way. Looking forward to a closer scrutiny of them when
the day had fully come, we sought our bunks, and, ex-
hausted with the excitement of the night and the con-
stant exposure of the past few days, we turned in to sleep
the sleep of weariness.