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978-1-108-07177-2 - Stray Leaves from an Arctic Journal: Or, Eighteen Months in the Polar Regions, in Search of Sir John Franklin's Expedition, in the Years 1850-51
Sherard Osborn

Excerpt

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STRAY LEAVES
FROM
AN ARCTIC JOURNAL.

THE evils attendant on a hurried outfit and departure, as is the usual man-of-war custom, were in no wise mitigated in the case of the Royal Naval Expedition, fitted out at Woolwich, in 1850, to search for Sir John Franklin's Squadron; and a general feeling of joy at our departure prevailed amongst us, when, one fine morning, we broke ground from Greenhithe.

The "Resolute" and "Assistance" had a couple of steamers to attend upon them; whilst we, the "Pioneer" and "Intrepid," screwed and sailed, as requisite to keep company. By dark of the 4th of May, 1850, we all reached an anchorage near Yarmouth; and the first stage of our outward journey was over.

No better proof of the good feeling which animated our crews can be adduced than the unusual

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ARCTIC JOURNAL.

fact of not a man being missing amongst those who had originally entered, — not a desertion had taken place, — not a soul had attempted to quit the vessels, after six months' advance had been paid.

Here and there amongst the seamen a half-sleepy indifference to their work was observable. This I imputed to the reaction after highly sentimental "farewells," in which, like other excesses, Jack delights; the women having, as usual, done all they could, by crying alongside, to make the men believe they were running greater risks than had ever been before undergone by Arctic navigators.

The old seamen's ditty of —

"We sailed by Fairlêe, by Beachêy, and Dungëness,
Until the North Foreland light we did see" —

gives a very good idea of our progress from beacon to lighthouse, and lighthouse to headland, until the lofty coast of Yorkshire sunk under the lee; and by the 8th of May the squadron was making slow progress across the mouth of the Frith of Forth. Hitherto, "all had been pleasant as a marriage bell;" the weather had been fine; and we already calculated our days of arrival at different points, as if the calm was to last for ever. The Cheviot Hills glittered in the west; it was the kind good-bye of our own dear England. Hundreds of white sails

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DEPARTURE.

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dotted a summer sea : all was joyous and sparkling. Scotland greeted us with a rough “nor'-wester,” — and away we went. “Not all the king's horses” could have kept the expedition together.

The “Resolute” and “Assistance,” hauled dead on a wind, under close-reefed topsails, performed a stationary movement, called “pile-driving” by sailors, which, as the pilot suggested, would, if the breeze lasted, carry them to the coast of Holland. The two steam-vessels, under fore-and-aft canvass, drew rapidly away to windward and ahead and in spite of all we could do, a few hours of darkness effectually succeeded in dispersing us. Accident again brought the “Pioneer” in sight of the vessels for a few hours ; but the “Intrepid” found herself in Stromness Harbour, with a degree of celerity which gave rise to a racing disposition on the part of my gallant colleague, “Intrepid,” *versus* “Pioneer,” which it took a great many days of competition to decide.

They who want excitement had better go and beat a vessel up the Pentland Firth, against both wind and tide. I tried it, but shall not repeat the experiment ; and, after a thorough good shaking in the North Sea, was not sorry to find myself at anchor in Stromness.

The very proper and triste sabbath of the North was followed by a busy Monday. The arrival of so

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many gold cap-bands, and profusion of gilt buttons, interfered, I fear materially, with the proper delivery of the morning milk and butter by sundry maidens with golden locks; and the purser's wholesale order for beef threatened to create a famine in the Orkneys. The cheapness of whiskey appeared likely to be the cause of our going to sea with a crew in a lamentable state of drunkenness, and rather prejudiced me against Stromness; but if it had no other redeeming quality, all its faults would be forgotten in the astounding fact that *there* may be found a landlady with moderate prices and really fresh eggs.

As a description of this part of the world is no part of my task, I will pass over our long and crooked walk about Stromness; and the failure of the good folk there to induce us to trust ourselves on their ponies for a ride to Kirkwall, naturally limited our knowledge of the neighbourhood.

Above the town of Stromness rises a conical-shaped hill; it has, I believe, been immortalised by Scott in his "Pirate:" it had yet deeper interest for me, for I was told that up it had toiled dear friends now missing with Franklin. I and a kind shipmate walked out one evening to make our pilgrimage to a spot hallowed by the visit of the gallant and true-hearted that had gone before us—and, as amid wind and drizzle we scrambled up the hill, I pictured to

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STROMNESS.

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myself how, five short years before, those we were now in search of had done the same. Good and gallant Gore! chivalrous Fitz-James! enterprising Fairholme! lion-hearted Hodgson! dear De Vaux! — Oh! that ye knew help was nigh!

We surmounted the hill—the Atlantic was before us, fierce and troubled; afar to seaward the breakers broke and lashed themselves against the firm foundation of the old Head of Hay, which loomed through mist and squall, whilst over head the scream of sea-fowl, flying for shelter, told that the west wind would hold wild revelry that night.

“H. M. S. North Star,” carved on the turf, showed where some of her people had chosen this spot for a record of their visit to Orkney; we did likewise, in honour of our own bonnie craft; and then, strolling homeward, discussed the probable chances of the existence of the said “North Star;” the conclusion arrived at being that there was more cause for anxiety on her account than for Franklin’s Expedition, she having gone out totally unprepared for wintering, and with strict injunctions not to be detained: “l’homme propose, et Dieu dispose.”

I could have hugged the snuffy old postmaster for a packet of letters he gave me. I rushed on board to a cabin which proved, as the First Lord had sagaciously remarked, into how small a space a Lieutenant

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Commanding could be packed ; and, in spite of an unpaid tailor's bill, revelled in sweet and pleasant dreams.

The "Intrepid" and "Pioneer" rejoined the ships at Long-Hope ; and my gallant comrade and I made a neck-and-neck race of it, showing that in steaming, at any rate, there would be little to choose between us ; and, on May 15th, the Arctic squadron weighed, and, passing out of the Pentland Firth, the "Dasher" and "Lightning" cheered us, took our letters, — and the Searching Expedition was alone steering for Greenland. Night threw her mantle around us ; the lonely light of Cape Wrath alone indicating where lay our homes. I like losing sight of Old England by night. It is pleasant to go to rest with a sweet recollection of some quiet scene you have just dwelt upon with delight, the spirit yearning for the excitement and novelty ahead. You rise in the morning, old Ocean is around you : there is, to the seaman, a lullaby, say what they may, in his hoarse song ; and they of the middle watch tell how the friendly light of some distant cape glimmered and danced in the east, until lost in some passing squall.

Now for the North-West ! we exclaimed, — its much talked of dangers, — its chapter of horrors ! As gallant Frobisher says, "it is *still* the only thing left undone, whereby a notable mind might be made famous and remarkable." As it was in Frobisher's day, so it is

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PLAN OF SEARCH.

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now, unless Franklin has accomplished it, and lies beset off Cape Jakan — and why may it not be so?

Whilst the squadron progresses slowly towards Cape Farewell, the ships under topsails, and the steamers under jury-masts and sails, we will take a retrospective view of what is now — 1850 — going to be done for the relief of Franklin.

Capt. Collinson, with two ships, has gone to Behring's Straits with the "Plover" as a *dépôt*, in Kotzebue Sound, to fall back upon in case of disaster. He steers direct for Melville Island, along the coast of North America. Capt. Pullen, having successfully searched the coast from Point Barrow to the Mackenzie River, is endeavouring now to push from thence, in a northerly direction, for Bank's Land. Dr. Rae is to do the same from the Coppermine River. Capt. Penny, a first-rate whaling captain, with two fast brigs, is now ahead of us, hoping to make an early passage across the middle ice of Baffin's Bay. He goes to Jones's Sound and Wellington Channel, to reach the Parry Isles by a northern route.

We go with two sailing ships and two steam vessels, so as to form separate divisions of two vessels each, to examine Barrow's Straits south-westerly to Cape Walker, westerly towards Melville Island, and north-westerly up Wellington Channel. Thus no less

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than eight fine ships flying the pendant, and two land parties are directed, by different routes, on Melville Island. Besides these, an American expedition, fitted out by that prince of merchants, "Mr. Grinnell," leaves shortly for the same destination; and in Lady Franklin's own vessel, the "Prince Albert," as well as a craft under Sir John Ross, we find two more assistants in the plan of search.

And yet, gentle reader, if you turn to the papers of the fall of 1849, you will find some asserting that Sir John Franklin had perished in Baffin's Bay, because Sir James Ross had found nothing of him in Lancaster-Sound! Happily the majority of Englishmen have, however, decided otherwise; and, behold, this noble equipment! this magnificent outlay of men and material!

We will not dwell on the pleasures or annoyances of the cruise across the Atlantic, beyond stating the fact that our bluff-bowed worse-halves, the sailing ships, nigh broke our hearts, as well as our hawsers, in dragging their breakwater frames along in the calms; and that we of the screws found our steam vessels all we could wish, somewhat o'er lively, mayhap, — a frisky tendency to break every breakable article on board. But there was a saucy swagger in them, as they bowled along the hollow of a western sea, which showed they had good blood in them; and we soon felt confident of disappointing those Polar seers,

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THE ATLANTIC. — GREENLAND.

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who had foretold shipwreck and disaster as their fate.

The appearance of numerous sea birds, — the Tern especially, which do not fly far from land, — warned us, on Sunday 26th May, of our fast approach to Greenland, and on the morrow we espied the picturesque shores about Cape Farewell. Which of all the numerous headlands we saw was the identical cape, I do not pretend to say; but we chose, as *our* Cape Farewell, a remarkable-looking peak, with a mass of rock perched like a pillar upon its crest. The temperature began to fall as we advanced, and warmer coats quickly replaced our English clothing.

Distant as we were from Greenland, our view of its southern extremity was fleeting, but sufficient to show that it fully realised in appearance the most striking accumulation of ice and land that the mind could picture, — a land of gaunt famine and misery, but which nevertheless, for some good purpose, it had pleased Providence in a measure to people.

Had we not had an urgent duty to perform, I should have regretted thus hurrying past the land; for there is much to see there. True, Greenland has no deep historical interest, but the North has always had its charm for me. Scandinavia, and her deeds, — the skill and intrepidity of her bold Vikings, — their colonies in Snæland, our Iceland, — their

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discovery of Greenland,—and the legend of the pirate Biarni, who forestalled even the great Columbus in his discovery, — were all associated with the region through which we were now sailing.

Without compass, without chart, full three centuries before the Genoese crossed the Atlantic, the Norsemen, in frail and open barks, braved the dark and angry sea (which was so sorely tossing even our proud vessels); and, unchecked by tempest, by ice, or hardship, penetrated probably as far as we could in the present day. This, and much more, throws a halo of ancient renown around this lonely land; moreover, I had long loved Nature's handiworks, and here assuredly her wonders reward the traveller. Here, methought me of the mighty glacier, creeping on like Time, silently, yet ceaselessly; the deep and picturesque fiord pent up between precipices, huge, bleak, and barren; the iceberg! alone a miracle; then the great central desert of black lava and glittering ice, gloomy and unknown but to the fleet rein-deer, who seeks for shelter in a region at whose horrors the hardy natives tremble; and last, but not least, the ruins of the Scandinavian inhabitants, and the present fast disappearing race of "the Inuit," or Esquimaux. Dullard must he be who sees not abundance here to interest him.

Flirting with the first ice we saw, it soon appeared