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978-1-108-07514-5 - Narrative of an Expedition to the East Coast of Greenland: Sent by Order of the King of Denmark, in Search of the Lost Colonies, Under the Command of Captain W. A. Graah of the Danish Royal Navy  
 Wilhelm August Graah Translated by George Gordon Macdougall

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION.

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THE object of the expedition which is the subject of the following pages, was to explore the East coast of Greenland, a country that, for several centuries, has excited the curiosity alike of learned and unlearned. This coast was believed to have been inhabited, of old, by a flourishing colony of Icelanders, of whom some traces, it was supposed, might be still discoverable, and between whom and the inhabitants of Iceland and Norway, as well as, though less frequently, those of England and Holland, a regular intercourse was kept up until towards the close of the fourteenth century, when it ceased, and a deep mystery settled over the colony and its fate.

Before, however, I proceed to relate the few interesting incidents of my voyage, I conceive it fitting briefly to recapitulate the early history of this ancient colony, the supposed causes of its destruction, and the various attempts that have been made with a view to its re-discovery from the earliest to the present times.

The first colonization of Greenland dates from the year 983, and is mentioned in our old chronicles as follows:—towards the beginning of the tenth century, an Icelander, or Norwegian, named Gunbiörn, son of Ulf Krake, having been driven by a storm to a considerable distance west of Iceland, discovered some skerries\*, to which he gave his name, and subsequently an extensive country, with intelligence of which he returned to Iceland. Some time afterwards, one Erik Raude, or the Red, fell under cognizance of the Thornæs Ting in Iceland, and was sentenced to banishment for the crime of manslaughter. Fitting out a ship, he announced to his friends that he purposed going in quest of the land which Gunbiörn had discovered, and promised, if his search should prove successful, to return. He set sail, accordingly, from Sneefieldsjökell in Iceland towards the West, a course which brought him to the East coast of Greenland. He then proceeded to the south, along the shore, looking for some habitable spot, doubled, and sailed to the west of a promontory which he called Hvarf†, and came to an island named after him Eriksey (Erik's island), where he passed the first winter. He employed himself hereupon three years in exploring the coasts, at the

\* By this nearly obsolete word I understand rocks but slightly elevated above the level of the sea, though capable of serving as places of temporary refuge. The Danish word is *Skær*.—*Trans.*

† The word *Hvarf* means a *place of turning*, a circumstance sufficing of itself to prove that it was not on the East coast that Erik settled.

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expiration of which time he returned to Iceland, and made so favourable a report of the newly-discovered land, which he called Greenland, that, on his return thither the year following, no fewer than twenty-five vessels freighted with colonists accompanied him, of which number, meanwhile, but half eventually reached their destination, the rest either putting back, or perishing in the ice.

After the lapse of fourteen years from the date of Erik Raude's first settlement in Greenland, his son Leif *hin heppne* (i. e. the happy) went to Norway, where, by command of king Olaf Tryggvason, he was instructed in the principles of the Christian religion, and whence, the year after, he was sent back to Greenland by that monarch, attended by a priest, who baptized Erik and all his followers. After this, a number of other Icelanders went to Greenland, and the country by degrees was settled, wherever habitable. Of the character and aspect of the land, the old accounts extant are very various, and even contradictory. The description of it given in the *Kong-Skugg-Siö* (the Royal Mirror) is meanwhile, in all likelihood, the most to be depended on, and corresponds closely with what we know to be fact with regard to the West coast of Greenland. It is there stated, that the greater part of the country is covered with ice, but a small portion of it along the shore being habitable, and that grain could not grow there to maturity, so that the majority of the inhabitants had never seen it, or knew what bread was; but that, on the other hand, the country abounded in good pasturage, and the people subsisted by raising cattle, and by the chase of the rein-deer, bear, walrus, and seal. The population was estimated at about a third of the amount assigned a bishopric. The navigation to it is described as attended with much peril, from the seas about it being constantly blocked up with ice, for which reason, those who purpose sailing thither from Iceland, are advised to shape a course to the S.W. and W., until they passed the said ice, which is more abundant, it is stated, in the direction of N. and N.E. from the land, than to the South or West\*. From the old chorographies† that have come down to us, we know that the inhabited districts were called, respectively, the East and West Bygd, and the uninhabitable tracts between them Ubygds‡. The distance between these Bygds is differently given, Biörn Johnsen states it to have been a six-days' journey in a row-boat, which may be estimated at about 200 geographical miles; Ivar Bardsen, twelve *Vikur Siouar*, or twelve (Icelandic nautical) miles,

\* This likewise serves to prove that the ancient colony was seated on the *West* coast of Greenland; for had it been upon the East, mention would scarcely have been made of ice in the West.

† Biörn Johnsen's *Greenland Annals*, and another from the fourteenth century, ascribed to Ivar Bardsen, of which afterwards.

‡ The word "Bygd" signifies an *inhabited place*, "Ubygd" one that is *uninhabitable*, or, at least, *uninhabited*.

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—about seventy-two geographical miles. In the West Bygd were four churches, and ninety (or, according to others, 110) farms; in the East Bygd, one cathedral, eleven churches, 190 farms, two towns (Garda and Alba), three royal demesnes (Foss, Tiodhillstadr, and Brattahlid, where the *Lagmand*, or justiciary, resided), and three or four monasteries, in the grounds of one of which (the monastery of St. Thomas) is said to have been a spring of boiling water, which, by means of pipes, was conducted into all the chambers of the building, as well as to the gardens, making these last so fertile as to yield the most delightful fruits and flowers. It is, meanwhile, to be observed, that neither Alba nor the monastery of St. Thomas are spoken of in the old Icelandic writings,—a fact which justifies the inference, that they existed but in the fictions of the fourteenth century. This Bygd had, further, a south-western aspect, and its southernmost point was Herjolf's-naze, situate between Hvarf and Hvidsœrk, which probably were two promontories.

One of the first achievements of the Greenland colonists was the discovery of North America by Leif in the year 1001. The tracts of country there discovered were called Helluland, Markland, and Viinland; great uncertainty, however, prevails with regard to their situation, Viinland being, in fact, the only one of them concerning which we have any positive information, it being susceptible of proof that it formed part of the present territory of the United States\*.

Leif's grandson, Sokke, having summoned his countrymen together at a place called Brattahlid, and represented to them that regard to their own credit, as well as to religion, required that the country should be provided with a bishop of its own, his proposition met with unanimous assent, and in compliance with the general wish, a learned priest, named Arnold, was, in 1121, elected, and, by the archbishop of Lund, consecrated first bishop of Greenland. A number of distinguished individuals, Icelanders and Norwegians, accompanied him to his diocese. One of them, named Asbiörn, was driven by a storm to the uninhabited parts of the coast, and none knew what had become of him, until a Greenlander, by name Sigurd, came by accident to the spot, and found two ships,—one a total wreck, the other susceptible of repair, with a quantity of goods in it, and, hard by, a house filled with dead bodies. The latter vessel he caused to be repaired, and conveyed it to the bishop, who made a present of it to the church, giving the goods to Sigurd. Some time after, one Aussur, a

\* It is stated by one of the ancient writers, that there was a more equal division of day and night in Viinland than in Iceland or Greenland, the sun being above the horizon there, upon the shortest day, from *Dagmaal* to *Eikt*. Now, as we know that by *Dagmaal* was formerly meant half-past seven o'clock A.M., and by *Eikt* half-past four o'clock P.M., it follows that the length of the shortest day at Viinland was nine hours, which gives the latitude of 41°.

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nephew of the unfortunate Asbiörn, came to Greenland, and demanded restitution of his uncle's property, which being refused him, he privily did such damage to the vessel as rendered it unfit for use, and departed to another place, where he prevailed upon the crews of two Norwegian ships that he fell in with to espouse his cause, and aid him to take vengeance for the wrongs he conceived himself to have sustained. Accompanied by his new allies, he returned accordingly to Gardar, the residence of the bishop, but was not long there before he was murdered by Einar, Sokke's son, on whom the bishop, in the mean while, had inflicted punishment, in consequence of his having suffered, contrary to his oath, the property of the church (the ship in question) to be injured. Aussur's partisans immediately avenged his death by slaying Einar, upon which a battle was fought between the Greenlanders and Norwegians, and many fell on either side. The aged Sokke, Einar's father, was desirous of prosecuting the feud, and attacking with his followers the Norwegian ships; he was, however, prevailed upon to enter into compromise with the slayers of his son,—he submitting to pay a mulct to Aussur's party, the number of their slain exceeding by one that of his own, and they agreeing to quit the country without delay, and never to return to it. The story presents a curious picture of the state of society in Greenland in those days.

Of the history of the Greenland colonies subsequently to this period we have no regular, continuous accounts\*. The country was governed by Icelandic laws, and had its own bishops (Holberg numbers seventeen of them, from first to last) who were suffragans, at first of the archbishop of Lund, but subsequently of the archbishop of Trondhiem. It had, it would appear, no military force, nor any trade, except, perhaps, in the beginning, in bottoms of its own. It is, indeed, on record, that one Asmund Kastrandatzi came to Iceland, in 1189, in a vessel whose planks and timbers were fastened and lashed together with pegs and the sinews of animals,—that is to say, in a vessel built in Greenland. He perished, however, on his way back, the following year. In 1349, or, as others say, 1379, when Alf was bishop, a sudden descent was made on the West Bygd by the Esquimaux, or, as the Icelanders called them, Skrællings, the aborigines of the country, who, it is related, killed eighteen Greenlanders of the Icelandic race, and carried away two boys captive. As soon as intelligence of the event had reached the East Bygd, Ivar Bere, or Bardsen, who is believed to have officiated as lay-superintendent of the diocese, was sent with succours to the sister colony. He found, however, on arriving there, not a human being left, but merely a

\* All the accounts extant concerning Greenland, with much new matter, will be found embodied in Professors Magnussen and Rafn's work, "The Historical Monuments of Greenland," now in the press.

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few cattle, which he took on board of his vessels, and sailed home with; and with this concludes all that has been handed down to us relative to the West Bygd.

With regard to the other, or East Bygd, we know that intercourse with it was kept up until towards the close of the fourteenth century, though the colony may not have been visited regularly every year, which it is evident, indeed, it was not, from the instructions given to the bishop Hendrick, on proceeding thither in 1388, to deposit the proceeds of the royal taxes, collected in the years when no vessel from the mother-country came to Greenland, at a given place.

The last bishop, or *officialis*, was, according to Torfæus, Andreas (properly Endride Andreason). He received his appointment in the year 1406, but whether he ever went to Greenland, or not, has been a matter of great uncertainty, until very lately, when Professor Finn Magnussen discovered authentic proof of his having actually officiated there, three years afterwards, at a marriage, from which the professor himself, and several other learned Icelanders, deduce their pedigree. From this date, however, all intercourse with Greenland ceased, the cause of which was, probably, Queen Margaret and King Erik's having laid a prohibition on its trade, which was considered a royal monopoly, and the proceeds devoted to the maintenance of the royal household, and of their successors being prevented from prosecuting it themselves by the wars in which they were perpetually involved. There is meanwhile one document extant, which throws some light upon the subsequent fate of the abandoned colonists; a letter of Pope Nicholas the Fifth to the bishops of Skalholt and Holum, discovered by Professor Mallet, some few years since, in the Papal Archives. I am induced to transcribe it here, by reason as well of its being little known, notwithstanding its having frequently appeared in print, as of its importance to the matter here in hand. The letter is dated in 1448, and (as given by Paul Egede) runs thus:—

“ In regard to my beloved children born in, and inhabiting the island of Greenland, which is said to be situate at the farthest limits of the Great Ocean, north of the kingdom of Norway, and in the see of Trondhiem, their pitiable complaints have reached our ears, and awakened our compassion, seeing that they have, for a period of near six hundred years\*, maintained, in firm and inviolate subjection to the authority and ordinances of the Apostolic Chair, the Christian faith established among them by the preaching of their renowned teacher King Olaf, as well as, actuated

\* Were this correct, the inhabitants of Greenland must have been Christians as early as the year 848; but, in point of fact, Christianity was not introduced by King Olaf into Norway itself until towards the close of the tenth century. It is, meanwhile, remarkable enough that there is a papal bull extant, in which the Greenlanders are mentioned as having been Christians ever since the year 835. Its authenticity on this point, however, is questioned by many.

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by a pious zeal for the interests of religion, erected many churches, and, among others, a cathedral, in that island, where religious service was diligently performed, until, about thirty years ago, some heathen foreigners from the neighbouring coasts came against them with a fleet, fell upon them furiously, laid waste the country and its holy buildings with fire and sword, sparing nothing, throughout the whole island of Greenland, but the small parishes, said to be situated a long way off, and which they were prevented from reaching by the mountains and precipices intervening, and carried away into captivity the wretched inhabitants of both sexes, particularly such of them as they considered to be strong of body, and able to endure the labours of perpetual slavery; and whereas, as their complaints inform us further, many of them have, in lapse of time, returned from said captivity, and having, here and there, restored the desolated places, are desirous of re-establishing the worship of God upon its ancient footing, but, by reason of the calamities suffered by them as aforesaid, have found it hitherto impossible to do so, they, so far from being able to provide for the maintenance of clerical and secular authorities, being themselves in want of the absolute necessaries of life, so that, during this whole period of thirty years, they have been without the consolation of a bishop's presence, and without the service of priests, save when, in their longing after divine worship, they have undertaken tedious journeys to the settlements which the fury of the barbarians had spared: whereas we have cognizance of all this, we do empower and command you, brethren, being, as we are informed, the bishops whose sees are nearest the said island, after consulting with your metropolitan, if the distance between you and him permit, to nominate and send to them some fit and proper person as their bishop."

It appears from this document, that a hostile fleet made a descent upon the colony about the year 1418, and that the invaders killed or carried off into captivity a number of the inhabitants, and laid waste their buildings; but also, on the other hand, that some parishes escaped their fury, and that many of those made captive subsequently returned home. What became eventually of this remnant of the colony is to us a mystery; probably they were either fallen upon and exterminated, like their brethren of the West Bygd, by the Skrællings, or, as an ancient book expresses it,—“When their priests and bishops died, and were succeeded by no new ones, they lost what little knowledge they once possessed of God's word:”—that is, they became heathens, and adopted the manners and customs of the Esquimaux; or, perhaps, they may have quitted the country when they perceived that none cared more to trade with them, for without trade it was impossible for them to exist there, as we learn from the Kong-Skugg-Siö, which says—“All that is necessary to the

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support and maintenance of the colony they are obliged to buy from other countries, both iron and tar, and the timber with which to build their houses.”

The fleet of which the above missive of Pope Nicholas makes mention, is conjectured by Eggers to have been that of a warlike prince named Zichmni; but it is a very doubtful matter, if such a person as Zichmni ever existed, and, if he did, his history closed with the year 1394. I will venture, in lieu of this, to substitute another hypothesis. It seems to have been customary in England, whenever that country was ravaged by the pestilence called *the black death*, to carry off (for the purpose, probably, of supplying the loss of population) the inhabitants of those countries of the North that it had spared. Complaints against this procedure are known to have been made repeatedly in the reigns of Margaret and her successor; and, in the year 1433, a treaty was concluded between Denmark and England, wherein it was expressly stipulated, that “with regard to all those persons who have been carried away forcibly from Iceland, Finmark, Helgeland, and other places, and are still detained in his dominions, his Majesty of England shall take measures to the end that they may be set at liberty, receive payment for their services, and return to their homes, whereof proclamation shall be made throughout all England within a year and a day from the date of this instrument.” Now, as the above letter of Pope Nicholas to the Icelandic bishops states that many of the individuals carried away from Greenland into captivity, had actually returned, it is a very natural inference that this may have happened in consequence of the very treaty here referred to, in which case the hostile fleet spoken of must have been an English one. What tends to confirm me in this opinion is, that Pope Eugenius the Fourth did, in this very year 1433, nominate one Bartholomew bishop of Greenland.

A long time now elapsed, during which Greenland would seem to have been totally forgotten. The attention of the celebrated Archbishop Walkendorff was, however, at length attracted to it. He collected all the ancient accounts concerning it, consulted the oldest of his contemporaries as to what they remembered to have heard about the trade to Greenland (for there then lived none who had been there themselves), drew up a chart for the use of mariners navigating those seas, and submitted to the government a proposition for the re-discovery of the lost colony, and the re-establishment of trade with it, offering to bear the expenses of the enterprise, on condition of enjoying a monopoly of the trade for ten years. It is not unlikely that his proposition would have been adopted, and the certainty been long ago arrived at,—that there never was, in fact, a colony settled on the East coast, had he not incurred the enmity of the then all-powerful Sigbrit. He fell, however, into disgrace, and died at Rome. It is principally on

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the information compiled by him that their opinion rests, who have placed, not only the East Bygd, but the West Bygd likewise, on the East coast of Greenland, an opinion entertained by Walkendorff himself, and which it was very natural that he and his contemporaries should entertain, as Davis' Straits were not as yet discovered, and as they had a very false idea of the configuration of the land, concerning which, in fact, they knew but little more than that it was the land nearest Iceland to the West, and that Erik Raude, when he discovered it, had sailed from Iceland in that direction.

Christian the Third repealed the law interdicting trade with Greenland, and despatched several ships in quest of it, but without success. During the reign of Frederick the Second, in the year 1578, one Mogens Heinson, or Henningson, was sent out with the same intent. He came in sight of the East coast of Greenland, but failing, though he held on for a considerable time, and had even the benefit of a favourable wind, to draw nearer to it, he was seized with a panic, and returned home, giving out that a magnet, hid in the depths of ocean, had hindered his further progress. He would have gone nearer the mark had he laid the blame on the current. Another expedition, despatched by the same monarch, is said to have actually reached its destination, but this is all we know concerning it.

It would have been strange had so patriotic a monarch as Christian the Fourth neglected to do his part towards the re-discovery of Greenland. He despatched, accordingly, in 1605, Admiral Godske Lindenow, in command of three ships, to perform this duty. One of these vessels had been intrusted to one James Hall, an Englishman, who, separating from his consorts on the way, steered for Davis' Straits, "South-west from Iceland," says Holberg, "like the Icelanders of old." Lindenow, on the contrary, steered for the East coast. When he drew near the land, the natives came on board his ships, and gave bear and seal-skins in exchange for articles of steel and iron. He did not, however, set foot on shore, but, after a delay of three days, weighed anchor and put to sea, carrying off with him two of the natives, a procedure which so enraged the rest, that they bombarded the vessel, as she sailed away, with stones and arrows. In what latitude it was that Lindenow thus reached the coast, we know not. Hall, in the mean while, had landed on the West coast, and seized there four of the natives, who, however, made so desperate a resistance, that he found it necessary to put one of them to death, in order to intimidate the rest, who thereupon quietly submitted to be conveyed on board. Their countrymen, meanwhile, assembled about the ship, apparently with the intent of preventing its departure. They were dispersed, however, by a discharge of musketry and cannon, and the ship sailed with the three captives. It is stated, and if



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true is a remarkable fact, that they bore no resemblance in manners, dress, or language, to those whom Lindenow brought home with him.

The following year Lindenow once more set out, with five ships under his command, taking with him the three natives whom Hall had kidnapped at Davis' Straits,—a circumstance from which we may infer that there seemed more likelihood of discovering traces of the lost colony in the vicinity of the country whence they came than where he himself had seized his prisoners. Lindenow, indeed, steered on this occasion straight for Davis' Straits, without attempting to make the East coast. Four of his vessels reached their destination; but the natives showed signs of hostility, and seemed determined to prevent his landing, and he was not inhuman enough to make use of his cannon to their destruction. One only of his people obtained permission to go on shore. He had hoped by means of presents to conciliate the natives; but scarcely had he set foot on shore, when they rushed upon him, and cut him to pieces with their knives made of the horn of the narwhal. Lindenow, on this, returned to Denmark, without having accomplished the object of his mission.

Notwithstanding the failure of these attempts, the king was unwilling to relinquish the hope of re-discovering the colony, and commissioned, therefore, Carsten Rikardsen, in 1607, to make a third attempt. It is not known to which side of Greenland Rikardsen directed his course. Certain it is, however, that he reached it no where, the ice, which stretched many miles out to sea, effectually barring his approach.

The object of Jens Munk's expedition, in 1619, was, strictly, the discovery of a North-West Passage. He appears, however, to have touched at Greenland, and to have communicated with its natives; for it is stated that, in the fervour of their gratitude, they fell on their knees to his crew, and kissed and embraced one of his sailors who had black hair and a flat nose like themselves,—a mode of expressing gratitude, however, which is by no means characteristic of the Greenlanders. The strait to which Munk, on this occasion, gave the name of Christian's Sound was probably that which divides the island of Sermesok from the mainland. His wintering at Hudson's Bay is described as terrible. His people were attacked by scurvy, and the entire crews of both his vessels (sixty-four in number) perished miserably, two only excepted, with whom he returned home the following year. Another expedition with which Munk was charged was not eventually carried into effect, as, after taking leave of the king, he suddenly fell ill, and died\*. In 1636, the Chancellor Früs, having

\* It is said that the king had, on this occasion, reproached him with his conduct on his former voyage, and, on his replying somewhat too boldly, struck him with his cane; an indignity which Munk took so much to heart, that he actually died in consequence.

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been informed that some English mariners had discovered gold in Greenland, sent two vessels thither for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of the report. They returned with some specimens of iron pyrites, thus verifying the proverb which asserts that "all is not gold that glisters."

The voyages of David Danel, in the reign of Frederick the Third, are of importance, not as throwing any light whatever on the site of the old colonies, but as furnishing some data relative to the East coast. They were made under the auspices of the intendant of finance Möller, who had obtained the exclusive privilege of fitting out expeditions in quest of the old colonies, and a monopoly of their trade, if found, for thirty years, a privilege, however, which, as it yielded him no profit, he relinquished at the expiration of three. The first of these voyages took place in 1652. Danel sailed on this occasion North about Iceland, and, on the 2nd of June, discovered a part of the East coast of Greenland, which he took to be the Herjolf's-naze mentioned in the old accounts of the East Bygd, and, the day after, in lat.  $64^{\circ} 50'$ , two islands, which he named the White Saddle (*Hvid-Sadlen*)\*, and the Dismasted Ship. Up to the 15th he kept the East coast constantly in sight, distant from about eight to sixty miles; but as the ice prevented him from getting nearer to it, he determined on running into Davis' Straits, where, at several points, he met, and traded, with the natives. A promontory in lat.  $67^{\circ}$  received from him the name of Cape Queen Amelia, as another on the East coast, in lat.  $65\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ , had previously that of Cape King Frederick. On his way home Danel again attempted to reach the East coast. On the 23rd of July he discovered a fiord in about lat.  $61^{\circ}$ , and the ship's log states that "they would have run into it the next day, the sea along the shore being free of ice, had not the night closed in so suddenly†." Subsequently they came to within four miles' distance of the shore, but without being able to effect a landing.

The year following Danel set sail once more, and proceeded, in the first place, as far north as lat.  $73^{\circ}$ , in pursuit, probably, of the whale fishery. From thence he sailed West round Iceland, and came, at several points, in sight of the East coast of Greenland, but, on account of the ice, was unable to get near it. His last voyage, which took place in 1654, was only to Davis' Straits,

\* In a MS. of the year 1688 which Professor Finn Magnussen has discovered in the Arne-Magnæan collection, occurs, among other views of the East coast, one of this island, which there is called *Hvid's-adel*. The MS. treats exclusively of Greenland, and is the work of one Henry Schacht. It is not unlikely that, by this island, Danel may have meant the *Hvidsærk* of the ancients.

† There is some mystery about this entry in Danel's journal which we cannot penetrate; for, first, it appears from the same log that the vessel, the day previous, was still a long way from the land; and, secondly, there is no night in lat.  $61^{\circ}$  upon the 22d of June, or, at least, no darkness sufficient to have prevented her running in.