

Chapter IX

Chapter IX unfolds in May 1859, as Captain Leopold McClintock's expedition, which had endured eight months of entrapment by the ice in Bellot Strait, finally sees the harsh winter come to an end. With the return of the sun, McClintock and his crew, already weakened by frostbite and scurvy, prepare to venture south across King William Land. Led by Lieutenant Hobson, they begin the arduous journey, with the desperate need to find supplies and ensure their survival weighing heavily on them. Along the way, the crew encounters local Esquimaux who recount a chilling and harrowing tale of a group of thirty starving white men. These men, they believe, are the last remnants of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition, which had set out in July 1845 in an effort to discover the Northwest Passage, only for the entire crew to disappear mysteriously, never to be found.

The Esquimaux's account is unsettling, hinting at grim discoveries of cannibalism and the tragic circumstances the expedition's survivors faced. They describe finding dismembered bodies at campsites and boots filled with human flesh, giving a chilling insight into the lengths to which the men had gone in their struggle to survive. In one particularly disturbing moment, Hobson contemplates his own fate as he reflects on the brutal extremes to which desperation can drive a person when pushed to the edge. The chilling realization begins to dawn on him that the same fate that befell Franklin's men could easily befall him and his crew if they aren't careful. This macabre narrative adds to the tension and fear, as the crew presses on, each step closer to the edge of their own survival, and Hobson becomes consumed by the thought of the inevitable dangers that lie ahead.

Upon reaching Cape Felix, Hobson and his crew make a grim discovery: the remnants of a camp that had been hastily abandoned. This camp, which had once been occupied, contains tents draped in bearskins and valuable scientific equipment, all

likely left behind in the rush to escape. The abandoned site appears to have been more than just a temporary refuge; it was once a well-established scientific observatory, further evidence of the crew's once-thriving efforts. This discovery paints a stark picture of the circumstances surrounding the expedition's final days, suggesting that the crew's departure was not due to ordinary conditions, but rather forced by an extreme situation that left them with no other choice but to abandon their work and flee. Hobson continues southward, his sense of urgency growing as he uncovers a cairn that holds an even more significant discovery: the only known communication from Franklin's expedition—a pair of notes written on Admiralty notepaper.

The first note, found amidst the cairn's contents, reveals the initial optimism of the expedition's crew. The message suggests that the crew had spent the winter of 1846-1847 at Beechey Island under Franklin's leadership, still hopeful about their mission. This note is a stark contrast to the later, more somber communication, reflecting the hope and confidence they once had before the trials of the journey took their toll. However, the second note reveals a far grimmer reality. It describes how, by April 1848, after enduring two harsh winters, Franklin's expedition had been abandoned in a desperate attempt to save what remained of the crew. The note reveals that Franklin died in June 1847, and by that time, nine officers and fifteen men had already perished. The note also mentions the death of Lieutenant Graham Gore, who died before the crew could attempt any overland escape. The tragic fate of the remaining men is left uncertain, as the sea claimed them one by one, and their story faded into history, engulfed by the cold and unforgiving waters that had swallowed their lives.

These revelations leave Hobson and his crew grappling with the horror of what they have discovered. The tragic end of Franklin's expedition serves as a somber reminder of the harshness of their environment and the ultimate cost of ambition and exploration. The remnants of Franklin's ill-fated crew, left to rot in the icy wilderness, stand as a testament to the fragility of human life in the face of nature's unyielding forces. As Hobson contemplates the devastation, the sense of loss and hopelessness grows, making it clear that while they may survive their journey, they will never

escape the shadows of the past. The weight of history, intertwined with the cold, haunting remnants of the past, will continue to linger as they move forward in search of answers, uncertain about what else they might uncover along the way.

