

VOYAGE TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

I. Departure from Portsmouth. Fire Aboard Ship

On the twelfth of June in the years 1806, the English vessel *Mercury*, aboard which I served in the quality of secretary, left Portsmouth in order to fish for whales. The crew consisted of fifty sailors, a few cabin boys, a fairly large contingent of fishermen and eight Frenchmen, who had embarked with some cheap goods in order to make a few trades in Greenland. The majority of our fishermen had the same hope, and intended to seek their fortune among the northern savages in case the fishing was not abundant.

During the first weeks the navigation was usual, and even fortunate; but one evening—it was the twenty-ninth of July, when we were in the region of the sixty-fifth degree of latitude—a number of the crew were on deck, occupied in considering the sea where the sun was setting, only to reappear almost immediately,¹ when the captain ran to us, pale and frightened, shouting that everyone must cease maneuvers. The crew-master immediately asked him what misfortune was threatening us. He replied with words that were repeated everywhere fearfully: “Fire in the hold! All hands to the pumps!”

Those terrible words had scarcely been heard than the entire crew hastened to leave the deck and run to where danger summoned us. If the approach of a fire is frightening on land, it is horrible at sea; in the former case, at least, while losing one’s wealth one has the hope of conserving one’s life; but in the latter, when fire breaks out, one is caught between two inevitable deaths. Several of us had already traveled the seas extensively and were to some extent familiar with the perils of the tempest, but none had seen flame conspire with the waves for his doom.

From the fear that dominated all of us, a fatal disorder resulted. Some did not know whether to run away or stand firm, and got in the way instead of being useful; others threw water where it was not necessary; some uttered cries of distress, while others invoked all the saints in paradise and promised to live in a Christian manner if they avoided imminent death.

However, we did not know yet what the source of the trouble was. The captain asked everyone in vain whether they knew anything but no one was able to reply. Finally, a cabin boy declared that he had seen the cook going down into the hold with a candle and that he had come up again inundated with eau-de-vie and without the light.

The cook, questioned, confessed tremulously that he had gone to get a few pints of vinegar; that he had addressed in error a barrel of eau-de-vie; that he had opened it with a hammer-blow that had caused the plug to fall out and that the fire had taken hold without his perceiving it.

“Wretch!” cried the captain. “Your clumsiness is only a peccadillo, but your silence is a crime.” At the same time he ordered water to be poured abundantly on the casks, postponing the punishment until later, if the vessel escaped the flames that were beginning to devour it.

The initial shock of fear had deranged all heads; the sentiment of our conservation succeeded by degrees in reaffirming them somewhat. All arms worked ardently; everyone obeyed the captain in silence. Only a young Manseau² spoke from time to time, while bringing buckets of water, and the fear that gripped him caused him to spout a host of extravagances. His exclamations, which would have been

¹ Author’s note: “It is well-known that daylight at the pole lasts for twenty-four hours.”

² A Manseau (sometimes rendered Manceau nowadays) is a native of Le Mans. The word was best known in 1821 in the context of a popular saying alleging that a Manseau was “a Norman-and-a-half.” More than one contemporary dictionary includes elaborate but inconclusive discussion of exactly which supposed characteristic of Normans the people of Le Mans were being alleged to possess to excess.

amusing in any other circumstances, only attracted insults then and the instruction to shut up. He did so, but everyone started moaning louder than him when we saw that the fire was not going out. There were already several feet of water in the bottom of the ship, however; the casks were floating, but nevertheless burning with the greatest fervor. Soon, the fire spread to a few large barrels of grease and oil, and from then on it took on a more frightful character, since water no longer did anything, so to speak, but aliment it. We were obliged to emerge successively in order not to be choked by the smoke, and the toilers could no longer see what they were doing.

“Friends,” the captain shouted, “there’s no more time to deliberate. Let’s throw the powder into the sea, if we don’t want to be blown up with the ship.”

“Let’s throw the barrels of meat and provisions overboard too,” I added. “We’re in calm water, we can fish them out again later. At least they won’t nourish the flames, and we won’t be reduced to dying of hunger.”

The captain approved the advice I offered. Immediately, we quit the fire in order to empty the powder-store and the larder, while the carpenter and a few sailors made openings in the hull of the vessel with great ax-blows, in order to let in water in greater abundance.

The cruel alternatives of perishing in the flames, being blown sky-high, dying of hunger or at least being drowned had overwhelmed all those of us who were seeing the sea for the first time. A few were lying on the deck, and we passed over their bodies without their feeling anything.

The work made progress, however, and it was lucky that we had hastened to empty the powder-store, because scarcely had the barrels been thrown into the water than fire broke out there. The vessels was unloaded of all its combustible provisions, and the holes the carpenter had made in the hull of the ship introduced water into it with so much rapidity that it soon reached the height of the flames, which were then extinguished almost completely.

Emerging from one terrible danger, however, it was necessary, without losing any time, to extract ourselves from another. Water was master of the ship in its turn, and was beginning to sink it.

We therefore returned to the pumps, and although we were all exhausted by the hard work we had just done, we can say that everyone, with the exception of the Manseau and two young merchants, set their hands to work with an indefatigable ardor.

Alas, it was too late; all the pumps were in play and everyone was employing all his strength, but the water was entering in such large quantities that the ship was sinking an inch per minute.

“We’re sinking, comrades,” a sailor shouted. “We still have the launch; let’s hasten to seek refuge there.”

*II. The Glacial Sea of the North. White bears.
A frightful catastrophe.*

The cries and movement of the crew made us all abandon the pumps. Everyone was thinking of his own particular preservation, and everyone threw themselves in haste into the launch and the two dinghies.

The Manseau and his two companions, whom we had completely forgotten, finally emerged from their lethargy, and hearing the words "launch" and "dinghy" repeated everywhere, ran on to the deck of the ship, which was about to sink, and extended their imploring arms to us. We were too unfortunate to be momentarily insensible to pity; the two dinghies promptly received them, and we were all off the ship when it sank. We even had time to move some way into open water, in order not to be engulfed by the whirlpool formed by the sea as it was engulfed.

It soon disappeared, and after a few minutes, one would have searched in vain for any trace of it on the surface.

Then we drew together, to deliberate as to what we could do. The launch was carrying ninety people, the larger dinghy contained nineteen and the smaller one, on which I found myself with the Manseau, was only laden with four young fishermen. The captain was asked what route it was necessary to take.

"We'll go where providence takes us," he replied. "The most urgent thing is to fish out our food and powder."

We all had weapons; our three vessels were well supplied with axes, pikes and carbines, but we did not have a pound of powder, and nothing to eat. That is why we obeyed the captain's order without question.

The weather was so calm that everything we had thrown into the sea was floating within a short distance. We succeeded in saving several barrels of salted meat, hams, a large number of cheeses, twenty large casks of wine, eighteen of brandy, four tons of vinegar, a little lard, biscuit in abundance and nearly a hundred barrels of powder. The large dinghy also found three baskets full of poultry, which we picked up gladly. With all that, we were well-furnished with lead and bullets; the launch had a large compass and each dinghy possessed a small one. We were therefore able to reassure ourselves that if the weather remained serene, we still had some hope.

It would soon be twenty-four hours, however, that we had been working unrelentingly, and no one had thought of taking any nourishment. The imperious voice of hunger made itself heard as soon as we were able to savor rest. Everyone was disposed to obey it, and although our situation was bleak and troubling, we recovered a little courage and cheerfulness as soon as we were out of danger. The eight Frenchmen who were with us, and who had been a great help in our distress by virtue of their activity and intelligence, drank to the health of England; we replied with toasts to the health of France, and the supper was merrier than we would have dared to hope after such a difficult day. The two dinghies were stuck to the launch, so to speak, and we conversed between vessels.

The Manseau, who had recovered some presence of mind, only made use of it to tell us repeatedly that we had a very philosophical courage. There was indeed a great philosophy in the species of gaiety that dazed us. We were on the edge of the northern Glacial Sea, and if the wind pushed us into the ice-floes, our frail vessels had few resources against the dangers. The cold was already making itself felt extremely sharply, and we could not vanquish it by means of exercise. In truth, Greenland was not very far away, but we were nevertheless not certain of reaching it safely.

Those ideas, and a thousand others, which quickly succeeded with silence the noisy expressions of joy, preoccupied the captain greatly. We therefore began to deliberate again as soon as hunger was appeased.

There were three distinct opinions. Some wanted to retrace our route and end up in Lapland or Sweden; others proposed a return to England. The captain declared that it was shorter, and consequently wiser, to head for Greenland; that we could still do our fishing there, and wait for an English vessel that could return us with less danger to our homeland; that the season was not far advanced and that he knew

of three vessels that were to make the same voyage as us; that they might already be at sea and we would see them before long.

That decision, which seemed most prudent to the captain, would nevertheless have found a few adversaries, if the wind had not declared itself in its favor. It blew from the south-west at sunset, and pushed us toward the coast of Greenland. We therefore decided, without a murmur, to follow the wind and providence.

Advancing northwards, we soon had no more night. The sun remained continuously above the horizon, which it did not warm up. The sea water was so green that it resembled an immense lawn of grass, and the ice-floes we perceived some distance away seemed at first to be flocks of swans. The reflections of sunlight changed their aspect when we got closer, and gave them the appearance of a multicolored city.

The direction of the wind had changed, however; it was now blowing from the south-west and became stronger the further we advanced. A few sailors said, in a sorrowful tone of voice, that it was impossible to reach Greenland and that we were heading directly for Spitzbergen.

That alarming conjecture did not take long to be realized. The wind blew violently and drove us toward the ice. The consternation became general, and I confess, for my part, that I was gripped by an inexpressible dolor when, on casting my gaze around me, I saw nothing in all directions but icebergs of a monstrous girth and height, which collided with one another with a sound like thunder. If the launch came between two of those mountains of ice, everyone trembled lest the wind might push them together and smash the boat into smithereens. Judge by that what fear the frailty of our two dinghies must have given us at every moment!

We were about the seventy-second degree of northern latitude, and it was twenty days since we had lost our ship. The slightest cracking sound, the approach of an icy mass, the whistling of the wind over those floating islands, or the smallest clamor on the part of the sailors gave us all a frisson of fear. The unfortunate Manseau had not opened his mouth for five days except to address lamentable prayers to Heaven and promise God never to go to sea again.

All those perils and fears were only the prelude to the evils that awaited us. On the twenty-second of August, we saw white bears appear on the ice. Three of those animals advanced, half-swimming and half traversing the ice, to meet the launch. The captain ordered the discharge of a few muskets, which astonished them without causing them to flee. After stopping momentarily, they approached again until they were within rifle-range. Their stature was enormous, and they seemed to us to be at least as big as horses, although we were a good quarter of a league away from the launch. The captain's men fired a few bullets, which hit the foremost of the three bears. It uttered a frightful howl, and fled at top speed.

The other two did not imitate it, and ran toward the launch so rapidly that there was scarcely time to take aim at them. But the explosion of the firearms and the wounds they received apparently did not cause them any alarm or any great pain, for they did not turn back. The larger one climbed on to an ice-floe and threw its two forepaws over the side of the launch. While men confronted it with axes and halberds, and its companion was prevented from getting aboard, the oarsmen gave great thrusts in order to draw the launch away from the floe on which the larger bear was resting its hind feet, but it was gripping the boat so firmly that it remained suspended there, and only fell to the sea when it was riddled by wounds. Even then it had the strength to retreat on to the ice, where it uttered frightful howls.

Alas, while we were rejoicing at that victory of sorts, of which we had only been spectators, the most frightful of all catastrophes threw us into despair. The launch, in drawing away from the ice-floes, had stirred up the waves considerably, producing the effect of a current. An icy crag, drawn into the road of sorts that the precipitate flight of the boat had frayed, followed it closely, and drove it against a firmer and less mobile mass.

Within the blink of an eye, the launch was crushed, and all those it carried killed or submerged.

At that frightful spectacle all of us who were in the two dinghies uttered dolorous cries; then, without thinking that we would be engulfed if we received all the unfortunate castaways in our frail vessels, we started rowing with all our might in order to fly to their aid. But a further incident, which seemed to us to be a further misfortune, saved us for the moment from total disaster. The third bear, which had only been

slightly wounded, seeing several sailors swimming, uttered two loud howls, which drew a band of bears over the ice in a matter of minutes. Those animals, which we could not count, immediately dived into the sea and we saw them withdraw again shortly thereafter, each carrying one of our companions.

That diversion stopped us. What help were we going to bring? We were running toward a multitude of enemies, whose prey we would only increase.

The larger dinghy made the decision first, and rowed away from the place of peril at top speed. The weakness of the boat that I was in prevented us from following. We contented ourselves with skirting a chain of ice-floes, which at last spared us the sight of our expiring companions—but their heart-rending screams came to strike our ears.

“Oh God!” cried Edward, one of the four English fishermen who were with me. “Great God, hasten the moment of our death, if its approach has so much horror!”

Those words had scarcely been pronounced when we heard a faint voice exhale a plaint in poor English: “Friends, if you can, in the name of God and expiring humanity, help me!”

At the same time, I perceived, a few brasses away, one of our companions, who had saved himself from the wreck of the launch with the aid of a piece of plank, and whom the cold was beginning to numb. I had the dinghy advance as far as him; he was received aboard with a transport of joy, but he was almost dying. He was given a few glasses of wine in haste. Gradually, he was reanimated, and advised us to draw away.

The person we had just snatched from imminent death was a good-natured French youth by the name of Clairancy.

“Spitzbergen isn’t far away,” he told us, when his senses had warmed up. “We must try to land there. We’ll await there, as best we can, the destiny that Heaven has reserved for us. In any case, the white bears will be less dangerous to us on bare ground than among the ice-floes. Others before us have even spent the winter in these dismal climes. With constancy and courage, we’ll support the evils that we can no longer avoid.”

At that moment we lost sight of the larger dinghy. Each of us bid an interior adieu to the people it bore, convinced that the frail vessel was doomed. However, it was considerably stronger than ours, and we flattered ourselves that we might save ourselves. Thus are men made, and it is for the repose of their existence. The dangers that others are running strike us, but we no more see our own peril than our faults or our errors. Only the consequences open our eyes.

In sum, we found ourselves alone, numbering seven, in the northern Glacial Sea. Our provisions were very slender; we had no more water, and the cold was not making us any less thirsty. A little eau-de-vie and wine, salted meat, biscuit and cheese comprised all our aliments. The sun was declining as we advanced toward autumn and toward the north. Spitzbergen, our bleak hope, did not appear. We did not see the larger dinghy again, and bears showed themselves from time to time a short distance away.

The Manseau was with us. His sadness and despair depressed us, while exciting our pity. He became wan and morose. “Alas,” he kept saying, “our poor comrades are fortunate. They’ve been devoured by the bears, but at least they’re no longer suffering—but when will our torment end?”

By force of reasoning, Clairancy succeeded in rendering him a little courage. He repeated to him over and over that it was no longer a time for despair; that when hope is extinguished, the soul ought to deploy all its strength; that it was unworthy of a man to allow himself to die a thousand times for fear of dying once. Finally, he made him see so clearly that we might still survive that the Manseau recovered a little strength of mind, and ended up accustoming himself, at least as well as us, to the present situation.

I have often noticed those sudden conversions in the French, which one dares not expect in other peoples. That easily-manipulable spirit has caused them to be accused of frivolity and inconsequence, but it would be more just, I think, to attribute that mobility of character to a lively mind, which feels strongly and receives all impressions good or bad. It sometimes serves fortunately to drive them to great deeds; often, they are abused by seduction, but in general, a soul easy to excite, like that of the French, is more valuable to society than the stubbornness of their northern neighbors or the dissimulation of those to the south. Whereas, for the social body and for the government of states, a firm, obstinate, unbreakable soul—an English soul, in sum—is better equipped to forestall great misfortunes.

