

## Chapter 10

### The First Horror

King William Island, 1847

The blizzard raged for a full six days, while temperatures fell so far that the mercury in the thermometers solidified, and exposed flesh froze in minutes. It was impossible to step onto the ship's deck, let alone venture far over the ice. Ice crystals, blown in the teeth of a ferocious gale like shot from a gun, cut frozen skin to shreds. Snow often reduced visibility to less than an arm's length, buried the poles marking our paths across the ice and built up on the windward side of *Erebus's* hull so high that it was possible to step over the rail onto firm drifts. The gale ripped the canvas shelters off the ships' open decks and snapped *Terror's* foremast like a matchstick.

Waves of pressure, driven by wind and tide, rolled through the ice, thrusting great slabs of it into the air with terrifying screams. One launched itself skyward to the height of our foremast, and only scant yards away. While we huddled in fear that it would crash down upon us, it proved a

blessing, remaining stationary and giving *Erebus* some protection from the incessant gale. Even the reinforced hulls of the ships creaked and groaned in protest. So many seams opened in *Terror's* sides that the pumps had to be kept going continually. Preparations were made to abandon the ship.

As the storm drove on relentlessly, day after day, concern grew for those not on board ships and with inadequate protection against such vicious weather. On the sixth day, the blizzard ceased as suddenly as it had begun and the days turned mild and calm, as if nature had exhausted herself in the fury of the storm and needed rest. A new trail was blazed to Cape Felix, where the magnetic camp was found to be destroyed and the frozen bodies of Lieutenant Fairholme and Mate Edward Couch were discovered nearby, huddled together with the shreds of their canvas tent around them.

The discovery of their bodies emphasized the dire plight of the sixteen men of the exploration parties. On top of Sir John's loss, it was almost more than we could bear. Mr. Fitzjames got us busy organizing relief parties to scour King William Island for Gore and Little.

I petitioned Mr. Fitzjames ceaselessly to allow me to accompany him on one of the searches. Eventually he agreed, I think because I had worked

on the sled design with Mr. Gore. Two sleds — one from *Erebus* and one from *Terror* — made their way to Cape Felix. We moved down the coast to Victory Point without finding any sign of our companions, so we established a camp while the sled from *Terror* returned to the ships to ferry more supplies ashore.

With a much-lightened sled, Mr. Fitzjames led four of us south at a fast pace. The going was easy as the June weather remained mild. We had 24 hours of daylight, and the flat land had not allowed the recent blizzard to form the snow into deep drifts. We had been travelling for some 10 hours, with only one break for rest and food, when Mr. Fitzjames, who was leading and some distance in front, stopped and shouted at us to throw off our harnesses, leave the sled and hurry forward.

We came upon a tragic scene. Six ragged, skeletal figures staggered towards us. It was an image from a nightmare, only made more unbelievable by occurring in bright sunshine.

Lieutenant Little led the pitiful group. He collapsed weeping into Mr. Fitzjames's arms. The rest of us rushed forward to help the others. All were in the last extremity of exhaustion. Their faces were blackened by frostbite and dirt; they hardly had the strength to stand. One man was so snow-blind

from the glare of the sun on the white land that he had to be helped along by a companion.

We slowly made our way back to the sled, where we lit our crude stove and warmed some water for weak tea. Mr. Fitzjames ordered the wooden box sides from the sled to be broken up to build a fair-sized fire. The warmth and the sight of the flickering orange flames, combined with the lukewarm tea, biscuits and the simple knowledge of being rescued, enlivened the men remarkably. Haltingly, Mr. Little told their terrible story.

“The journey down the east coast went well,” he began in a cracked voice that we all had to lean closer to hear. “It was hard work, but the weather was fine and we made good time. We managed to map the coast — proving that King William Island *is indeed* an island, distinctly separated from Boothia.” A frown creased Mr. Little’s forehead and he looked around in confusion. “I marked it on the chart,” he said.

“Remember, sir,” one of the men added. I recognized him as the marine, Joseph Healey — William Braine’s friend. He was one of Mr. Gore’s party. “We had to abandon the charts in the blizzard.”

“Oh, yes,” Little nodded, although he seemed rather uncertain, “so we did. A shame, because we mapped the coast.”

“Yes, mapping is important,” Mr. Fitzjames said gently. “Did you meet up with Mr. Gore at Cape Herschel then?”

“Yes. Yes.” Mr. Little appeared encouraged and sipped his tea through cracked and blistered lips. “Mr. Gore’s party awaited us at Cape Herschel. That was on . . .” Again the puzzled frown.

“The eleventh of June,” Healey offered. He seemed the fittest of all.

“We celebrated,” Mr. Little went on. “Mr. Gore had completed the Northwest Passage — forged the last link between Ross’s Victory Point and Simpson and Dease’s Cape Herschel. Mr. Gore will be famous.”

Mr. Little’s news should have had us cheering wildly — our great goal was achieved. But at such a frightful cost. And then the date struck me. How strange that the Passage had been completed on the very day of Sir John’s death.

Eventually Mr. Little continued. “We were all tired from our exertions, and food was short. Mr. Des Voeux was injured.”

“He slipped while hauling and a sled runner crushed his leg, sir.” Healey filled in Mr. Little’s silence. “Two days before we reached Cape Herschel. That’s why we were still there when Mr. Little arrived. Mr. Des Voeux’s leg was broke bad.”

“Very bad,” Mr. Little mumbled. “We moved as much of the supplies as we could onto our sled and strapped Mr. Des Voeux onto the other one. Mr. Gore was to take four men and travel fast with the light sled to get our injured companion back to the ships as fast as possible. We were to follow with the heavier load and the extra two men.”

“Then the storm hit.” Healey spoke when Mr. Little once more stopped talking. “We set up camp. It was crowded and we had scarce food, but we were more worried about Mr. Gore’s party. They didn’t have much with them. On the third day, the storm appeared to ease, so Mr. Hornby took three men and went to find Mr. Gore. I’m afraid we’ve not seen him since.”

“But we found Mr. Gore,” Mr. Little said distantly. “Dead though. All dead.”

He drifted into silence once more and Healey took up the story. “They must have kept travelling in the blizzard,” Healey said. “Not much choice, I suppose. The men were all together on a ridge, still harnessed to the sled, with Mr. Des Voeux on top. Frozen.”

We all sat silently, staring at the flames before us. It was a tragedy we could barely comprehend. What should have been an inspiring triumph was a disaster that had cost the lives of ten men.

“If you are recovered enough,” Mr. Fitzjames said eventually, “we must head back to the ships. I shall send out a party to bring in Mr. Gore and the others and to search for Mr. Hornby.”

“Yes,” Mr. Little said. “I must report all to Sir John.”

“Mr. Crozier is in command now,” Mr. Fitzjames told him. “I’m sorry to have to tell you that Sir John died on the day before the blizzard set in.”

The men stared in silence. Even after what they had gone through, the news of Sir John’s death was still powerful enough to shock them.

“How . . . How can we go on?” Mr. Little asked.

“Mr. Crozier will lead us,” Mr. Fitzjames answered. “We shall take the ships through the Northwest Passage for Sir John.”

The others nodded, but I did not see much conviction.

We reached the ships two days later and told our tragic tale. Mr. Gore and his companions’ bodies were recovered. Mr. Hornby and his men were never found. In but a short while, we had gone from a successful expedition full of hope, to a leaderless, sadly depleted crew. The land that we had been exploring with such enthusiasm had become a cruel enemy, seemingly bent on our destruction.

Four days after we returned, Mr. Little sank into delirium, raving about home and talking to our dead companions as if they stood beside him. The following night he died.