

# Chapter IX

In May 1859, Captain Leopold McClintock's search expedition, trapped for eight months by ice in Bellot Strait, finally sees an end to the harsh winter. With the return of the sun, McClintock's crew struggles with frostbite and scurvy as they prepare to sled south along King William Land, led by Lieutenant Hobson. Local Esquimaux recount a chilling tale of a group of thirty starved white men, believed to be the last remnants of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition to discover the Northwest Passage, which has been lost since July 1845, with no sign of its crew ever being found.

Hinting at more gruesome discoveries, the Esquimaux detail incidents of cannibalism, including dismembered bodies at campsites and ghastly accounts of boots filled with human flesh. In one disturbing vignette, Hobson contemplates his own fate as he realizes the extremes to which desperation can drive a man.

Upon reaching an area the Europeans called Cape Felix, Hobson discovers remnants of a once-occupied camp, including tents furnished with bearskins and valuable equipment likely left behind in haste. This was not merely a last refuge but appears to have once served as a scientific observatory, suggesting the crew's swift abandonment was rooted in dire circumstances. Continuing southward, Hobson stumbles upon a cairn containing the only known communication from Franklin's expedition — a pair of notes written on Admiralty notepaper.

The first note showcases the expedition's initial confidence, indicating they had wintered in 1846-1847 at Beechey Island and were led by Franklin. However, a second, more ominous note reveals the tragic reality: by April 1848, after enduring two harsh winters, Franklin's expedition had been abandoned, resulting in widespread death within the crew. It mentions Franklin's death in June 1847 and indicates that the expedition had seen the demise of nine officers and fifteen men. Lieutenant Graham Gore is acknowledged to have perished before any overland escape was attempted, leaving the fate of the others uncertain, with history engulfing them as the unforgiving sea does to those it claims.