

# An Introduction to Charles Dickens's "The Lost Arctic Voyagers" (1854)

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Led by Sir John Franklin (1786-1847), an expedition to discover a viable North-West Passage between the Atlantic and the Pacific left the port of London in May, 1845. Franklin, who joined the British Navy at the age of fourteen, had participated in the battles of Copenhagen (1801) and Trafalgar (1805) during the Napoleonic Wars and later served as Governor of Tasmania from 1834 to 1845. He is chiefly remembered, however, for his journeys of arctic exploration in 1818 and 1845. During this second expedition Franklin commanded the Royal Navy vessels **Erebus** and **Terror**, and the last communication with Franklin's fleet took place in July 1845. After his ships became locked in the ice of a frozen Victoria Strait in 1846, Franklin froze to death, leaving 105 survivors to attempt a lengthy journey with sledges overland to a Hudson's Bay fort at Back's River.

For three years, nothing further was heard from the lost Franklin expedition. In 1848 searches began in earnest when a reward of £10,000 was posted. In 1848, [Dr. John Rae](#) (1813-98), an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, accompanied Sir John Richardson of the Royal Navy in search of either news, the survivors, or the remains of the polar expedition. In 1853-54, Rae searched King William's Land. In October 1854, Dr. Rae encountered Inuit hunters, from whom he acquired artifacts from the Franklin expedition, who recounted a strange tale of dementia and cannibalism in the Canadian arctic. Rae, concluding that the expedition's members had perished from scurvy and hunger, and had resorted to cannibalism, conveyed the Eskimos' report to the British Admiralty.

Since young Charles Dickens was fascinated by stories of South Sea exploration in general and the Bounty mutiny in particular, probably through his favourite juvenile reading, the **Terrific Register**, it is likely that Dickens had thoroughly [immersed himself](#) in the literature of exploration long before he came to write his two-part article on the Franklin expedition. While he did not accuse of Rae of lying, he totally rejected the notion that these emissaries of European civilisation would have stooped to so barbaric an act, even to preserve themselves. Rather, Dickens attacked the veracity of the Eskimo witnesses, who, he suspected, were embellishing their account to suit their European auditors.

The notion that the Arctic wastes had been so cold as to freeze the capability of someone like Franklin to feel and express his moral sentiments was unacceptable. Attracted in his fiction to embodiments of evil, to destroyers and engorgers, Dickens often located the sources of such depravity in social pressures and deformation. Other times he admitted the insufficiency of such an explanation. He preferred, though, to explain human nature in the terms of eighteenth-century moral philosophy: Human beings are innately good; their goodness resides in their natural moral sentiments (Kaplan, p. 353).

In **Frozen in Time: Unlocking the Secrets of the Franklin Expedition** (1988), Owen Beattie and John Geiger conclude that knife marks on some of the bones provide physical evidence to support the tales of cannibalism which the Inuit told to Dr. John Rae in the spring of 1854:

Fracture lines also indicated that the skull [found at Booth Point, King William's Land] had been forcibly broken; the face, including both jaws and all the teeth, was missing. Evidence that the body had been intentionally dismembered was further supported by the selective parts of the skeleton found: the head, arms, and legs. Besides the face, most of the skeleton was missing, including the twenty-four ribs, sternum (breastbone), all twenty-four vertebrae of the back, the two clavicles (collar bones) and two scapulas (shoulder blades). [p. 59]

Beattie and Geiger believe that the last survivors in the summer of 1848 were attempting to make the 1,500 kilometre trip from the mouth of the Back River to a Hudson's Bay fort on the eastern shore of Great Slave Lake. Exhausted, suffering from lead poisoning in varying degrees, falling prey to symptoms of advanced scurvy, and with few natural food sources available, they hit upon the plan of cannibalizing the trunk of a body, consuming the meatier parts immediately, and carrying the head, arms, and legs as they traveled south across the still ice-covered Simpson Strait.

## Related Materials

- [The Text of Dickens's "The Lost Arctic Voyagers"](#)
- [The Franklin Expedition: 1845-1859](#)
- [The Search for the North-West Passage: 1497-1845](#)
- [Reading and Discussion Questions](#)

## References

Beattie, Owen, and John Geiger. **Frozen in Time: Unlocking the Secrets of the Franklin Expedition.** Place?: 1988.

Dickens, Charles. "The Lost Arctic Voyagers." **Household Words.** (2 and 9 December 1854): -393.

Kaplan, Fred. **Dickens, A Biography.** New York: William Morrow, 1988.

## Dr. John Rae

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This document is annotation to the author's introduction to Charles Dickens's "The Lost Arctic Voyagers" (1854)

Dr. John Rae (1813-93) studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, and in 1833 was hired by the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1846-47 he participated in two exploratory expeditions to the Canadian arctic, and in 1848 he accompanied Sir John Richardson on his search for the lost Franklin expedition. In 1853-54 on an expedition to King William's Land he heard tales from Inuit hunters about the fate of the lost polar explorers, and recovered numerous artifacts.

## References

**Chambers Biographical Dictionary**, ed. Una McGovern. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap, 2003.

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# "The Lost Arctic Voyagers"(1854) by Charles Dickens

[Philip V. Allingham](#), Contributing Editor of the **Victorian Web**, transcribed, edited, annotated, and partially converted to html this two-part article from [Household Words](#); [GPL](#), added links and completed the html.

## Part One.

DR. RAE may be considered to have established, by the mute but solemn testimony of the relics he has brought home, that SIR JOHN FRANKLIN and his party are no more. But, there is one passage in his melancholy report, some examination into the probabilities and improbabilities of which, we hope will tend to the consolation of those who take the nearest and dearest interest in the fate of that unfortunate expedition, by leading to the conclusion that there is no reason whatever to believe, that any of its members prolonged their existence by the dreadful expedient of eating the bodies of their dead companions. Quite apart from the very loose and unreliable nature of the [Esquimaux](#) representations (on which it would be necessary to receive with great caution, even the commonest and most natural occurrence), we believe we shall show, that close analogy and the mass of experience are decidedly against the reception of any such statement, and that it is in highest degree improbable that such men as the officers and crews of the two lost ships would or could, in any extremity of hunger, alleviate the pains of starvation by this horrible means.

Before proceeding to the discussion, we will premise that we find no fault with Dr. Rae, and that we thoroughly acquit him of any trace of blame. He has himself openly explained, that his duty demanded that he should make a faithful report, to the Hudson's Bay Company or the Admiralty, of every circumstance stated to him; that he did so, as he was bound to do, without any reservation; and that his report was made public by Admiralty: not by him. It is quite clear if it were an ill-considered proceeding to disseminate this painful idea on the worst evidence, Dr. Rae is not responsible for it. It is not material to the question that Dr. Rae believes in the alleged cannibalism; he does so merely "on the substance of information obtained at various times and various sources" which is before us all. At the same time, we will most readily concede that he has all the rights to defend his opinion which his high reputation as a skilful and intrepid traveller of great experience in the Arctic Regions -- combined with his manly, conscientious, and modest personal character-- can possibly invest him with. Of the propriety of his immediate return to England with the intelligence he had got together, we are fully convinced. As a man of sense and humanity he perceived that the first and greatest account to which it could be turned, was, the prevention of the useless hazard of valuable lives; and no one could better know in how much hazard all lives are placed that follow Franklin's track, than he who had made eight visits to the Arctic shores. With these remarks we can release Dr. Rae from this inquiry, proud of him as an Englishman, and happy in his safe return home to well-earned rest.

The following is the passage in the report to which we invite attention: "Some of the bodies had been buried (probably those of the first victims of famine); some were in a tent or tents; others under the boat, which had been turned over to form a shelter; and several lay scattered about in different directions. Of those found on the island, one was supposed to have been an officer, as he had a telescope, strapped over his shoulders, and his double-barrelled gun lay underneath him. From the mutilated state of many of the corpses and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource-- cannibalism-- as a means of prolonging existence . . . . None of the Esquimaux with whom I conversed had seen the 'whites,' nor had they ever been at the place where the bodies were found, but had their information from those who had been there, and who had seen the party when travelling."

We have stated our belief that the extreme improbability of this inference as to the last resource, can be rested, first on close analogy, and secondly, on broad general grounds, quite apart from the improbabilities and incoherencies of the Esquimaux evidence; which is itself given, at the very best, at second-hand. More than this, we presume it to have been given at second-hand through an interpreter; and he was, in all probability imperfectly acquainted with the language he translated to the white man. We

believe that few (if any) Esquimaux tribes speak one common dialect; and Franklin's own experience of his interpreters in his former voyage was, that they and the Esquimaux they encountered understood each other "tolerably" [361/362]-- an expression which he frequently uses in his book, with the evident intention of showing that their communication was not altogether satisfactory. But, even making the very large admission that Dr. Rae's interpreter perfectly understood what he was told, there yet remains the question whether he could render it into language of corresponding weight and value. We recommend any reader who does not perceive the difficulty of doing so and the skill required, even when a copious and elegant European language is question, to turn to the accounts of the [trial of Queen Caroline](#), and to observe the constant discussions that arose-- sometimes, very important-- in reference to the worth in English, of words used by the Italian witnesses. There still remains another consideration, and a grave one, which is, that ninety-nine interpreters out of a hundred, whether savage, half-savage, or wholly civilised, interpreting to a person of superior station and attainments, will be under a strong temptation to exaggerate. This temptation will always be strong precisely where the person interpreted to is seen to be the most excited and impressed by what he hears; for, in proportion as he is moved, the interpreter's importance is increased. We have ourself had an opportunity of inquiring whether any part of this awful information, the unsatisfactory result of "various times and various sources," conveyed by gestures. It was so, and gesture described to us as often repeated -- that of the informant setting his mouth his own arm-- would quite as well describe a man having opened one of his veins, and drunk of the stream that flowed from it. If it be inferred that the officer who lay upon his double-barrelled gun, defended his life to the last against ravenous seamen, under the boat or elsewhere, and that he died in so doing, how came his body to be found? That was not eaten, or even mutilated, according to the description. Neither were the bodies, buried in the frozen earth, disturbed; and is it not likely that if any bodies were resorted to as food, those the most removed from recent life and companionship would have been the first? Was there any fuel in that desolate place for cooking "the contents of the kettles"? If none, would the little flame of the spirit-lamp the travellers *may have had* with them, have sufficed for such a purpose? If not, would the kettles been defiled for that purpose at all? "Some of the corpses," Dr. Rae adds, in a letter to the **Times**, "had been sadly mutilated, and had been stripped by those who had the misery to survive them, and who were found wrapped in two or three suits of clothes." Had there been no bears thereabout, to mutilate those bodies; no wolves, no foxes? Most probably the scurvy, known to be the dreadfulest scourge of Europeans in those latitudes, broke out among the party. Virulent as it would inevitably be under such circumstances, it would of itself cause dreadful disfigurement -- woeful mutilation -- but, more than that, it would not only soon annihilate the desire to eat (especially to eat flesh of any kind), but would annihilate the power. Lastly, no man can, with any show of reason, undertake to affirm that this sad remnant of Franklin's gallant band were not set upon and slain by the Esquimaux themselves. It is impossible to form an estimate of the character of any race of savages, from the deferential behaviour to the white man when he is strong. The mistake has been made again and again; and the moment the white man has appeared in the new aspect of being weaker than the savage, the savage has changed and sprung upon him. There are pious persons who, in their practice, with strange inconsistency, claim for every child born to civilisation all innate depravity, and for every savage born to the woods and wilds an innate virtue. We believe every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel; and we have yet to learn what knowledge the white man -- lost, houseless, shipless, apparently forgotten by his race, plainly famine-stricken, weak, frozen, helpless, and dying -- has of the gentleness of Esquimaux nature.

Leaving, as we purposed, this part of the subject with a glance, let us put a suppositious case.

If a little band of British naval officers, educated and trained exactly like the officers of this ill-fated expedition, had, on a former occasion, in command of a party of men vastly inferior to the crews of these two ships, penetrated to the same regions, and been exposed to the rigours of the same climate; if they had undergone such fatigue, exposure, and disaster, that scarcely power remained to them to crawl, and they tottered and fell many times in a journey of a few yards; if they could not bear the contemplation of their "filth and wretchedness, each other's emaciated figures, ghastly countenances, dilated eyeballs, and sepulchral voices"; if they had eaten their shoes, such outer clothes as they could part with and not perish of cold, the scraps of acrid marrow yet remaining in the dried and whitened spines of dead wolves; if they

had wasted away to skeletons, on such fare, and on bits of putrid skin, and bits of hide, and the covers of guns, and pounded bones; if they had passed through all the pangs of famine, had reached that point of starvation where there is little or no pain left, and had descended so far in the valley of the shadow of Death, that they lay down side by side, calmly and even cheerfully awaiting their release from this world; if they had suffered such dire extremity, and yet lay where the bodies of their dead companions lay unburied, within a few paces of them; and yet never dreamed at the last gasp of resorting to this said "last resource;" would it not be strong presumptive evidence against an incoherent Esquimaux story, collected [362/363] at "various times" as it wandered from "various sources"? But, if the leader of that party were the leader of this very party too; if Franklin himself had undergone those dreadful trials, and had been restored to health and strength, and had been--not days and months alone, but years--the Chief of this very expedition, infusing into it, as such a man necessarily must, the force of his character and discipline, patience and fortitude; would there not be a still greater and stronger moral improbability to set against the wild tales of a herd of savages?

Now, this *was* Franklin's case. He passed through the ordeal we have described. He was the Chief of that expedition, and he was the Chief of this. In this, he commanded a body of picked English seamen of the first class; in that he and his three officers had but one English seaman to rely on; the rest of the men being Canadian voyagers and Indians. His **Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea** in 1819-22, is of the most explicit and enthralling in whole literature of Voyage and Travel. The facts are acted and suffered before the reader's eyes, in the descriptions of [FRANKLIN, RICHARDSON, and BACK](#): three of the greatest names in the history of heroic endurance.

See how they gradually sink into the depths of misery.

"I was reduced," says Franklin, long fore the worst came, "almost to skin bone, and, like the rest of the party, suffered from degrees of cold that would I been disregarded whilst in health and vigour." "I set out with the intention of going to Saint Germain, to hasten his operations (making a canoe), but though he was only three quarters of a mile distant, I spent three hours in a vain attempt to reach him, my strength being unequal to the labour of wading through the deep snow; and I returned quite exhausted, and much shaken by the numerous falls I had got. My associates were all in the same debilitated state. The voyagers were somewhat stronger than ourselves, but more indisposed to exertion, on account of their despondency. The sensation of hunger was no longer felt by any of us, yet we were scarcely able to converse upon any other subject than the pleasures of eating. " "We had a small quantity of this weed (tripe de roche, and always the cause of miserable illness to some of them) in the evening, and the rest of our supper was made up of scraps of roasted leather. The distance walked to-day was six miles." "Previous to setting out, the whole party ate the remains of their old shoes, and whatever scraps of leather they had, to strengthen their stomachs for the fatigue of the day's journey. " "Not being able to find any tripe de roche, we drank an infusion of the Labrador tea-plant, and ate a few morsels of burnt leather for supper." "We were unable to raise the tent, and found its weight too great to carry it on; we therefore cut it up, and took a part of the canvass for a cover." Thus growing weaker and weaker every day, they reached, at last, Fort Enterprise, a lonely and desolate hut, where Richardson--then Dr. Richardson, now Sir John--and Hepburn, the English seaman from whom they had been parted, rejoined them. "We were all shocked at beholding the emaciated countenances of the Doctor and Hepburn, as they strongly evidenced their extremely debilitated state. The alteration in our appearance was equally distressing to them, for, since the swellings had subsided, we were little more than skin and bone. The Doctor particularly remarked the sepulchral tone of our voices, which he requested us to make more cheerful, if possible, quite unconscious that his own partook of the same key." "In the afternoon Peltier was so much exhausted, that he sat up with difficulty, and looked piteously; at length he slid from his stool upon the bed, as we supposed to sleep, and in this composed state he remained upwards of two hours without our apprehending any danger. We were then alarmed by hearing a rattling in his throat, and on the Doctor's examining him he was found to be speechless. He died in the course of the night. Semandre sat up the greater part of the day, and even assisted in pounding some bones; but, on witnessing the melancholy state of Peltier, he became very low, and began to complain of cold, and stiffness of the joints. Being

unable to keep up a sufficient fire to warm him, we laid him down, and covered him with several blankets. He did not, however, appear to get better, and I deeply lament to add, he also died before daylight. We removed the bodies of the deceased into the opposite part of the house, but our united strength was inadequate to the task of interring them, or even carrying them down to the river." "The severe shock occasioned by the sudden dissolution of our two companions, rendered us very melancholy: Adam (one of the interpreters) became low and despondent; a change which we lamented the more, as we perceived he had been gaining strength and spirits for the two preceding days. I was particularly distressed by the thought that the labour of collecting wood must now devolve upon Dr. Richardson and Hepburn, and that my debility would disable me from affording them any material assistance; indeed both of them most kindly urged me not to make the attempt. I found it necessary, in their absence, to remain constantly near Adam and to converse with him, in order to prevent his reflecting on our condition, and to keep up his spirits as far as possible. I also lay by his side at night." "The Doctor and Hepburn were getting much weaker, and the limbs of the latter were now greatly swelled. They came into the house frequently in the course of the day to rest themselves, and when once seated were unable to rise without the help of one another, or of a stick. Adam was for the [363/364] ends here.] most part in the same low state as yesterday, but sometimes he surprised us by getting up and walking with an appearance of increased strength. His looks were now wild and ghastly, and his conversation was often incoherent." "I may here remark, that owing to our loss of flesh, the hardness of the floor, from which we were only protected by a blanket, produced soreness over the body, and especially those parts on which the weight rested in lying; yet to turn ourselves for relief was a matter of toil and difficulty. However, during this period, and indeed all along after the acute pains of hunger, which lasted but a short time, had subsided, we generally enjoyed the comfort of a few hours' sleep. The dreams which for the most but not always accompanied it, were usually (though not invariably) of a pleasant character, being very often about the enjoyments of feasting. In the daytime, we fell into the practice of conversing on common and light subjects, although we sometimes discoursed, with seriousness and earnestness, on topics connected with religion. We generally avoided speaking, directly, of our present sufferings, or even of the prospect of relief. I observed, that in proportion as our strength decayed, our minds exhibited symptoms of weakness, evinced by a kind of unreasonable pettishness with each other. Each of us thought the other weaker in intellect than himself, and more in need of advice and assistance. So trifling a circumstance as a change of place, recommended by one as being warmer and more comfortable, and refused by the other from a dread of motion, frequently called forth fretful expressions, which were no sooner uttered than atoned for, to be repeated, perhaps, in the course of a few minutes. The same thing often occurred when we endeavoured to assist each other in carrying wood to the fire: none of us were willing to receive assistance, although the task was disproportioned to our strength. On one of these occasions, Hepburn was so convinced of this waywardness, that he exclaimed, "Dear me, if we are spared to return to England, I wonder if we shall recover our understandings!"

Surely it must be comforting to the relatives and friends of Franklin and his brave companions in later dangers, now at rest, to reflect upon this manly and touching narrative; to consider that at the time it so affectingly describes, and all the weakness which it so truthfully depicts, the bodies of the dead lay within reach, preserved by the cold, but unmutated; and to know it for an established truth, that the sufferers had passed the bitterness of hunger and were then dying passively.

They knew the end they were approaching very well, as Franklin's account of the arrival of their deliverance next day, shows. "Adam had passed a restless night, being disquieted by gloomy apprehensions of approaching death, which we tried in vain to dispel. He was so low in the morning as to be scarcely able to speak. I remained in bed by his side, to cheer him as much as possible. The Doctor and Hepburn went to cut wood. They had hardly begun their labour, when they were amazed at hearing the report of a musket. They could scarcely believe that there was really anyone near, until they heard a shout, and immediately espied three Indians close to the house. Adam and I heard the latter noise, and I was fearful that a part of the house had fallen upon one of my companions; a disaster which had in fact been thought not unlikely. My alarm was only momentary. Dr. Richardson came in to communicate the joyful intelligence that relief had arrived. He and myself immediately addressed thanksgiving to the

throne of mercy for this deliverance, but poor Adam was in so low a state that he could scarce comprehend the information. When the Indians entered, he attempted to rise, but sank down again. But for this seasonable interposition of Providence, his existence must have terminated in a few hours, and that of the rest probably in not many days."

But, in the preceding trials and privation of that expedition, there *was* one man, MICHEL, an [Iroquois](#) hunter, who *did* conceive the horrible idea of subsisting on the bodies of the stragglers, if not of even murdering the weakest with the express design of eating them-- which is pretty certain. This man planned and executed his wolfish devices at a time when Sir John Richardson and Hepburn were afoot with him every day; when, though their sufferings were very great, they had not fallen into the weakened state of mind we have just read of; and when the mere difference between his bodily robustness and the emaciation of the rest of the party-- to say nothing of his mysterious absences and returns-- might have engendered suspicion. Yet, so far off was the unnatural thought of cannibalism from their minds, and from that of Mr. HOOD, another officer who accompanied them-- though they were all then suffering the pangs of hunger, and were sinking every hour-- that no suspicion of the truth dawned upon one of them, until the same hunter shot Mr. Hood dead as he sat by a fire. It was after the commission of that crime, when he had become an object of horror and distrust, and seemed to be going savagely mad, that circumstances began to piece themselves together in the minds of the two survivors, suggesting a guilt so monstrously unlikely to both of them that it had never flashed upon the thoughts of either until they knew the wretch to be a murderer. To be rid of his presence, and freed from the danger they at length perceived it to be fraught with, Sir John Richardson, nobly assuming the responsibility he would not allow a man of common station to bear, shot this devil through the head -- to the infinite joy of all the generations [364/365] of readers who will honour him in his admirable narrative of that transaction.

The words in which Sir John Richardson mentions this Michel, after the earth is rid of him, are extremely important to our purpose, as almost describing the broad, general ground towards which we now approach. "His principles, unsupported by a belief in the divine truths of Christianity, were unable to withstand the pressure of severe distress. His countrymen, the Iroquois, are generally Christians, but he was totally uninstructed and ignorant of the duties inculcated by Christianity; and from his long residence in the Indian country, seems to have imbibed, or retained, the rules of conduct which the southern Indians prescribe to themselves."

Heaven forbid that we, sheltered and fed, and considering this question at our own warm hearth, should audaciously set limits to any extremity of desperate distress! It is in reverence for the brave and enterprising, in admiration for the great spirits who can endure even unto the end, in love for their names, and in tenderness for their memory, that we think of the specks, once ardent men, "scattered about in different directions" on the waste of ice and snow, and plead for their lightest ashes. Our last claim in their behalf and honour, against the vague babble of savages, is, that the instances in which this "last resource" so easily received, has been permitted to interpose between life and death, are few and exceptional; whereas the instances in which the sufferings of hunger have been borne until the pain was past, are very many. Also, and as the citadel of the position, that the better educated the man, the better disciplined the habits, more reflective and religious the tone of thought, the more gigantically improbable the "last resource" becomes.

Beseeking the reader always to bear in mind that the lost Arctic voyagers were carefully selected for the service, and that each was in his condition no doubt far above the average, we will test the Esquimaux kettle-stories by some of the most trying and famous cases of hunger and exposure on record.

This, however, we must reserve for another and concluding chapter next week.

## "The Lost Arctic Voyagers"(1854) by Charles Dickens

### Part Two.

[Note: In the second part of his article on the unlikelihood of the Franklin Expedition's having resorted to cannibalism (as reported by Dr. Rae to the Admiralty), Dickens attempts to make the case that civilised Europeans, especially Englishmen, would sooner have starved to death rather than to have made use of the "last resource." To make his point, Dickens cites a number of extreme cases, "the most trying and famous cases of hunger and exposure on record," beginning with the heroic, 4000-mile voyage by Captain Bligh and a crew of eighteen in an open boat across the Pacific from April through June 1789 after the mutiny on the H. M. S. Bounty. Dickens refers to a total of seventeen ships (including the notorious raft of the Medusa, subject of Theodore Gericault's large-scale painting of 1819) and makes seven literary and historical allusions: to Byron's **Don Juan** (1819-24), Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), Scottish explorer James Bruce (1730-94), Scottish adventurer Mungo Park (1771-1806), Albert Smith's **Ascent of Mont Blanc**, and Sinbad the Sailor in **The Arabian Nights**, which Dickens had so enjoyed as a child.]

WE resume our subject of last week. The account of the sufferings of the wrecked men, in **DON JUAN**, will rise in most minds as our topic presents. It is founded (so far as such a writer as [Lord] BYRON may choose to resort to facts, in aid of what he knows intuitively), on several real cases. [Captain] BLIGH'S undecked boat navigation, after the mutiny of the Bounty; and the wrecks of the Centaur, the Peggy, the Pandora, the Juno, and the Thomas; had been, among other similar narratives, attentively read by the poet.

.....

In the case of the Thomas, the surgeon bled the man to death on whom the lot [the drawing of which among the survivors of the wreck was similar to that in the case of the frigate *Pandora* in the Endeavour Straits] fell, and his remains were eaten ravenously. The details of this shipwreck are not within our reach; but, we confidently assume the crew to have been of an inferior class.

The useful and accomplished SIR JOHN BARROW, remarking that it is but too well established "that men in extreme cases *have destroyed each other* for the sake of appeasing hunger," instances the English ship Nautilus and the French ship the Medusa. Let us look into the circumstances of these two shipwrecks.

The Nautilus, sloop of war, bound England with dispatches from the Dardanelles, struck, one dark and stormy January night, on a coral rock in the Mediterranean, and soon broke up. A number of the crew got upon the rock, which scarcely rose above the water, and was less than four hundred yards long, and not more than two hundred broad. *On the fourth day* -- they having been the meantime hailed by some of their comrades who had got into a small whale-boat which was hanging over the ship's quarter when she struck; and also knowing that boat to have made for some fishermen not far off-- these shipwrecked people ate the body of a young man who had died some hours before; not withstanding that [Sir John Barrow's](#) words would rather imply that they killed some unfortunate person for the purpose. Now, surely after what we have just seen of the extent of human endurance under similar circumstances, we know this to be an exceptional and uncommon case. It may likewise be argued that few of people on the rock can have eaten of this fearful food; for, the survivors were fifty in number, and were not taken off until the sixth day, and the eating of no other body is mentioned, though many persons died.

We come, then, to the wreck of the Medusa, of which there is a lengthened French account by two surviving members of the crew, which was very indifferently translated into English some five and thirty

years ago. She sailed from France for Senegal, in company with three other vessels, and had about two hundred and forty souls on board, including a number of soldiers. She got among shoals and stranded, a fortnight after her departure from Aix Roads. After scenes of tremendous confusion and dismay, the people at length took to the boats, and to a raft made of topmasts, yards, and other stout spars strongly lashed together. After scenes of tremendous confusion and dismay, the people at length took to the boats, and to a raft made of topmasts, yards, and other stout spars strongly lashed together. One hundred and fifty mortals were crammed together on the raft, of whom only fifteen remained to be saved at the end of thirteen days. The raft has become the ship, and may always be understood to be meant when the wreck of the Medusa is in question.

Upon this raft, every conceivable and conceivable horror, possible under the circumstances, took place. It was shamefully deserted by the boats (though the land was within fifteen leagues at that time), and it was so deep in the water that those who clung to it, fore and aft, were always immersed in the sea to their middles, and was only out of the water amidships. It had a pole for a mast, on which the top-gallant sail of the Medusa was hoisted. It rocked and rolled violently with every wave, so that even in the dense crowd it was impossible stand without holding on. Within the first few hours, people were washed off by dozens, flung themselves into the sea, were stifled the press, and, getting entangled among the spars, rolled lifeless to and fro under foot. There was a cask of wine upon it which was secretly broached by the soldiers and sailors, who drank themselves so mad, that they resolved to cut the cords asunder, and send the whole living freight to perdition. They were headed by "an Asiatic, and a soldier in a colonial regiment: of a colossal stature, with short curled hair, an extremely large nose, an enormous mouth, a sallow complexion, and a hideous air." Him, an officer cast into the sea; upon which, his comrades made a charge at the officer, threw him into the sea, and, on his being recovered by their opponents, who launched a barrel to him, tried to cut out his eyes with a penknife. Hereupon, an incessant and infernal combat was fought between the two parties, with sabres, knives, bayonets, nails, and teeth, until the rebels were thinned and cowed, and they were all ferociously wild together. On *the third day*, they "fell upon the dead bodies with which the raft was covered, and cut off pieces, which some instantly devoured. Many did not touch them; almost all the officers were of this number." On the fourth "we dressed some fish (they had fire on the raft) which we devoured with extreme avidity; but, our hunger was so great, and our portion of fish so small, that we added to it some human flesh, which dressing rendered less disgusting; it was this which the officers touched for the first time. From this day we continued to use it; but we could not dress it any more, as we were entirely deprived of the means," through the accidental extinction of their fire, and their having no materials to kindle another. Before the fourth night, the raving mutineers rose again, and were cut down and thrown overboard until only thirty people remained alive upon the raft. On the seventh day, there were only twenty-seven; and twelve of these, being spent and ill, were every one cast [387/388] into the sea by the remainder, who then in an access [sic] of repentance, threw the weapons away too, all but the sabre. After that, "the soldiers and sailors" were eager to devour a butterfly which was seen fluttering on the mast; after that, some of them began to tell the stories of their lives; and thus, with grim joking, and raging thirst and reckless bathing among the sharks which had now begun to follow the raft, and general delirium and fever, they were picked up by a ship: to the number, and after the term of exposure, already mentioned.

Are there any circumstances in this frightful case, to account for its peculiar horrors? Again, the reader shall judge. No discipline worthy of the name had been observed aboard the Medusa from the minute of her weighing anchor. The captain had inexplicably delegated his authority "to a man who did not belong to the staff. He was an ex-officer of the marine, who had just left an English prison, where he had been for ten years." This man held the ship's course against the protest of the officers, who warned him what would come of it. The work of the ship had been so ill done, that even the common manoeuvres necessary to the saving of a boy who fell overboard, had been bungled, and the boy had been needlessly lost. Important signals had been received from one of the ships in company, and neither answered nor reported to the captain. The Medusa had been set afire through negligence. When she struck, desertion of duty, mean evasion, and fierce recrimination, wasted the precious moments. "It is probable that if one of the first officers set the example, order would have been restored; but every one was left to himself." The

most virtuous aspiration of which the soldiers were sensible, was, to fire upon their officers, and failing that, to tear their eyes out and rend them to pieces. The historians compute that there were not in all upon the raft-- before the sick were thrown into the sea-- more than twenty men of decency, education, and purpose enough, even to oppose the maniacs. To crown all, they describe the soldiers as "wretches who were not worthy to wear the French uniform. They were the scum of all countries, the refuse of the prisons, where they had been collected to make up the force. When, for the sake of health, they had been made to bathe in the sea (a ceremony from which some of them had the modesty to endeavour to excuse themselves), the whole crew had had ocular demonstration that it was not upon their breasts these heroes wore the insignia of the exploits which had led to their serving the state in the ports of Toulon, Brest, or Rochefort." And is it with the scourged and branded sweepings of the galleys of France, in their debased condition of eight-and-thirty years ago, that we shall compare the flower of the trained adventurous spirit of the English Navy, raised by [Parry](#), Franklin, Richardson, and Back?

Nearly three hundred years ago, a celebrated case of famine occurred in the *Jacques*, a French ship, homeward bound from Brazil, with forty-five persons on board, of whom twenty-five were the ship's company. She was a crazy old vessel, fit for nothing but firewood, and had been out four months, and was still upon the weary seas far from land, when her whole stock of provisions was exhausted. The very maggots in the dust of the bread-room had been eaten up, and the parrots and monkeys brought from Brazil by the men on board had been killed and eaten, when two of the men died. . . . Yet, this ship drifted to the coast of Brittany, and no "last resource" had ever been appealed to. It is worth remarking that, *after they were saved*, the captain declared he had meant to kill somebody, privately, next day. Whosoever has been placed in circumstances of peril, with companions, will know the infatuated pleasure some imaginations take in enhancing them and and all their remotest possible consequences, after they are escaped from, and will know what value to attach to this declaration.

[There follow three examples of privation from the reigns of Queen Elizabeth through George the Third, but only in the last instance was cannibalism resorted to.]

It appears to us that the influence of great privation upon the lower and least disciplined class of character, is much more bewildering and maddening at sea than on shore. The confined space, the monotonous aspect of the waves, the mournful winds, the monotonous motion, the dead uniformity of colour, the abundance of water that cannot be drunk to quench the raging thirst (which the [Ancient Mariner](#) perceived to be one of his torments)-- these seem to engender a diseased mind with greater quickness and of a worse sort. The conviction on the part of the sufferers that they hear voices calling for them; that they descry ships coming to their aid; that they hear the firing of guns, and see the flash; that they can plunge into the waves without injury, to fetch something or to meet somebody: is not often paralleled among suffering travellers by land. The mirage excepted-- a delusion of the desert, which, has its counterpart upon the sea, not included. under these heads-- we remember nothing of this sort experienced by [BRUCE](#), for instance, or by MUNGO PARK: least of all by Franklin in the memorable book we have quoted. Our comparison of the records of the two kinds of trial, leads us to believe, that even men who might be in danger of the last resources at sea, would be very likely to pine away by degrees, and never come to it, ashore. [391/392]

In his published account of the ascent of Mont Blanc, which is an excellent little book, Mr. ALBERT SMITH describes, with very humorous fidelity, that when he was on by the guides, in a drowsy state when he would have given the world to lie down and go to sleep for ever, he was conscious of being greatly distressed by some difficult and altogether imaginary negotiations respecting a non-existent bedstead; also, by an impression that a familiar friend in London came up with the preposterous intelligence that the King of Prussia objected to the party's advancing, because it was his ground. But, these harmless vagaries are not the question, being commonly experienced in most circumstances where an effort to fix the attention, or exert the body, contends with a strong disposition to sleep. We have been their sport thousands of times, and have passed through a series of most inconsistent and absurd

adventures, while trying hard to follow a short dull story related by some eminent conversationalist after dinner.

No statement of cannibalism, whether on the deep or the dry land, is to be admitted supposititiously, or inferentially, or on any but the most direct and positive evidence: no, not even as occurring among savage people, against whom it was in earlier times too often a pretence for cruelty and plunder. [MR. PRESCOTT](#), in his brilliant history of the Conquest of Mexico, observes of a fact so astonishing as the existence of cannibalism among a people who had attained considerable advancement in the arts and graces of life, that "they did not feed on human flesh merely to gratify a brutish appetite, but in obedience to their religion -- a distinction," he justly says, "worthy of notice." Beside which, it is to be remarked, that many of these feeding practices rest on the authority of narrators who distinctly saw St. James and the Virgin Mary fighting at the head of the troops of Cortes, and possessed, therefore, to say the least, an unusual range of vision. It is curious to consider, with our general impression of the subject--very often derived, we have no doubt from [ROBINSON CRUSOE](#), if the oaks of men's beliefs could be traced back to acorns--how rarely the practice, even among savages has been proved. The word of a savage is not to be taken for it; firstly, because he is a liar: secondly, because he is a boaster; thirdly, because he often talks figuratively; fourthly, because he is given to a superstitious notion that when he tells you he has his enemy in his stomach, you will logically give him credit for having his enemy's valour in his heart. Even the sight of cooked and dis severed human bodies among this or that tattoe'd tribe, is not proof. Such appropriate offerings to their barbarous, wide-mouthed, goggle-eyed gods, savages have been often seen and known to make. And although it may usually be held as a rule, that the fraternity of priests lay eager hands upon everything meant for the gods, it is always possible that these offerings are an exception: as at once investing the idols with an awful character, and the priests with a touch of disinterestedness, whereof their order may occasionally stand in need.

The imaginative people of the East, in the palmy days of its romance -- not very much accustomed to the sea, perhaps, but certainly familiar by experience and tradition with the perils of the desert -- had no notion of the "last resource" among civilised human creatures. In the whole wild circle of Arabian Nights, it is reserved for ghoules, gigantic blacks with one eye, monsters like towers, of enormous bulk and dread aspect, and unclean animals lurking on the seashore, that puffed and blew their way into caves where the dead were interred. Even for [SINBAD the Sailor](#), buried alive, the story-teller found it easier to provide some natural sustenance, in the shape of so many loaves of bread and so much water, let down into the pit with each of the other people buried alive after him (whom he killed with a bone, for he was not nice), than to invent this dismal expedient.

We are brought back to the position almost embodied in the words of Sir John Richardson towards the close of the former chapter. In weighing the probabilities and improbabilities of the "last resource," the foremost question is -- not the nature of the extremity; but, the nature of the men. We submit that the memory of the lost Arctic voyagers is placed, by reason and experience, high above the taint of this so easily-allowed connection; and that the noble conduct and example of such men, and of their own great leader himself, under similar endurances, belies it, and outweighs by the weight of the whole universe the chatter of a gross handful of uncivilised people, with domesticity of blood and blubber. [Utilitarianism](#) will protest "they are dead; why care about this?" Our reply shall be, "Because they ARE dead. therefore we care about this. Because they served their country well, and deserved well of her, and can ask, no more on this earth, for her justice or her loving-kindness; give them both, full measure, pressed down, running over. Because no Franklin can come back, to write the honest story of their woes and resignation, read it tenderly and truly in the book he has left us. Because they lie scattered on those wastes of snow, and are as defenceless against the remembrance of coming generations, as against the elements into which they are resolving, and the winter winds that alone can waft them home, now, impalpable air; therefore cherish them gently, even in the breasts of children. Therefore, teach no one to shudder without reason, at the history of their end. Therefore, [392/393] confide with their own firmness, in their fortitude, their lofty sense of duty, their courage, and their religion.

## Related Materials

- [An Introduction to Dickens's "The Lost Arctic Voyagers"](#)
- [The Franklin Expedition: 1845-1859](#)
- [The Search for the North-West Passage: 1497-1845](#)
- [Reading and Discussion Questions](#)

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