

第三章 竞拍北极地区

Chapter 3 In Which The Arctic Regions Are Sold At Auction To The Highest Bidder



拍卖北极的这一天终于到来，所有人都将目光投向了巴尔的摩拍卖大厅。这里不仅仅汇聚了各国代表，还汇集了各地关注事态进展的民众。他们甚至为哪一个国家会获得北极的所有权而投下赌注，其中以支持英国与支持美国为两个主流。与其他国家不同，美国所派的代表是一位看似粗俗但又十分沉着冷静的鳕鱼商人威廉·福斯特，这也大大出乎了各国的意料。随着拍卖员的一声令下竞拍开始了，以每平方海里十美分起拍，但是这一价钱很快成为历史。丹麦、荷兰、瑞典-挪威、俄罗斯的代表在一轮轮的竞价中将价格抬升到每平方海里八十美分。接下来的时间属于英国和美国的角逐，双方代表以一种镇静而简短的声音不断刷新着价格的记录。当威廉·福斯特报出二百美分的价格时，久悬的拍卖槌终于敲响了，伴随着这一敲击声，美国获得了对北极地区的最终所有权。在拍卖大厅中一边是欧洲各国代表及其支持者沮丧的沉默，一边是美国作为胜利者喧嚣的狂欢，共同构成了具有强烈对比的画面。第二天威廉·福斯特在签署申报文件时，人们惊奇地发现——北极的真实购买者原来是巴比肯公司。



竞拍

Why was this sale on the 3rd of December going to be held in the regular auction hall, where usually only such objects as furniture, utensils, tools, instruments, etc., or art pieces, pictures, medals, and antique objects were sold? Why, so long as it was a piece of realty, was it not sold before a referee or a court of justice appointed for such sales? And why was the aid of a public auctioneer necessary when a part of our globe was going to be sold? How could this piece of the world be compared with any movable object when it was the most fixed thing on the face of the earth? Really, this seemed to be quite illogical, but it was not so, since the whole of the Arctic regions was to be sold in such a way that the contract would be valuable. Did this not indicate that in the opinion of the N.P.P.A. the immovable object in question contained something movable?

This singularity puzzled even the most eminently sagacious minds to be found in the United States. On the other hand, there had been such a sale in the past already. One portion of our planet had been sold in the auction-rooms with the help of a public appraiser to the highest public bidder. And this case had happened in America.

It was some years before, in San Francisco, Cal., an island of the Pacific Ocean, Spencer Island, was sold to the rich William W. Kolderup, who bid \$500,000 in opposition to J.R. Taskinar, of Stockton. This island had cost \$4,000,000. It is true it was an island which had inhabitants, only a few miles away from the coast, with forests, water, productive and solid, with fields and prairies, in condition to be cultivated, and not a vague wild region of water covered with eternal ice, defended by impenetrable icebergs, which very probably nobody would ever live in. It was thought, therefore, that the unknown polar region would never bring so high a price if sold at auction. Nevertheless, on the day of the sale a great many serious and curious people assembled to learn the end of the affair.

The sale could hardly fail to be interesting.

Ever since their arrival in Baltimore the European delegates had found

themselves very much gazed at and always surrounded by many people. Of course they were much interviewed. In view of all this it was only natural that the public of America should have become very much excited. One manner of expressing the public excitement, very characteristic of Americans, was to make bets upon the result, an example which Europe quickly began to follow. Divided as the American citizens were into those of New England, those of the Middle States, Western States, and Eastern States, there was only one wish, and that was for the well-being of their country. But there was still a great deal of uncertainty. It was neither Russia, nor Sweden, nor Norway, nor Denmark, nor Holland, the chances of which they dreaded most. But it was England, with its territorial ambitions, with its only too well-known tendency to swallow everything, and its world-known Bank of England notes. Large sums of money were placed on the result. Bets were made on America and Great Britain, the same as on race-horses, and in almost all cases even money was put up. Some offers were made of 12 and 13½ to 1 on Denmark, Sweden, Holland and Russia, but none would take such an offer.

The sale commenced at 12 o'clock.

Since early in the morning all business had been stopped in the street on account of the large crowd. By telegraph the papers were informed that most of the bets made by Americans had been taken up by the English, and Dean Toodrink immediately posted up a notice to that effect in the auction hall. The nearer the time came the higher grew the excitement. It was reported that the Government of Great Britain had placed large sums of money at the disposition of Major Donellan. "At the office of the Admiralty," observed one of the New York papers, "the Admirals pushed the sale as much as possible, as they hoped to figure conspicuously in the expeditions fitted out." How much truth there was in these stories no one knew. But the most conservative people in Baltimore thought that it was hardly possible that the amount of money at the command of the N.P.P.A. could cover the amount which would be bid by England, and therefore a very strong pressure was put on the Government of the United States at Washington to protect the interests of the society. In all this

excitement the new society was represented by the single person, its agent, William S. Forster, who did not seem to worry at all over all these rumors and seemed quite confident of success.

As the time for the auction drew near the crowd grew larger. Three hours before the sale it was impossible to obtain admission to the auction hall. All the space set apart for the public was so much filled that there was danger that the building would fall in. There was only a small space left empty, surrounded by a railing, which had been reserved for the European delegates. They had just space enough to follow the progress of the sale, and were not even comfortably seated.

They were Eric Baldenak, Boris Karkof Jacques Jansen, Jan Harald, Major Donellan and his secretary, Dean Toodrink. They formed a solid group, standing together like soldiers on a battle-field. And were they not really going to battle for the possession of the North Pole? On the American side apparently nobody was represented. Only the codfish dealer was present and his face had an expression of the most supreme indifference.

He seemed little concerned and appeared to be thinking of his cargo which was to arrive by the next steamer. Where were the capitalists represented by this man, who, perhaps, was going to start millions of dollars rolling? This was such a mystery as to excite public curiosity to the utmost.

No one doubted that Mr. J. T. Maston and Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had something to do with the matter, but what could one guess on? Both were there, lost in the crowd, without any special place, surrounded by some members of the Baltimore Gun Club, friends of Mr. Maston. They seemed to be the least interested spectators in the hall. Mr. William S. Forster even did not seem to recognize them.

The auctioneer began by saying that contrary to the general rule it was impossible to show the article about to be sold. He could not pass from hand to hand the North Pole. Neither could they examine it nor look at it with a magnifying glass or touch it with their fingers to see whether the plating was real or only artificial, or whether it was an antique, which it really was, he said.

It was as old as stone, it was as old as the world, since it dated back to the time the world was made.

If, however, the North Pole was not on the desk of the Public Appraiser, a large chart, clear in view of all interested persons, indicated with marked lines the parts which were going to be sold at auction. Seventeen degrees below the Polar Circle was a red line, clearly seen on the 84th parallel, which marked the section on the globe put up for sale. It appeared that there was only water in this region covered with ice of considerable thickness. But this was the risk of the purchaser. In any case he would not be disappointed in the nature of his merchandise by any misrepresentation.

At 12 o'clock exactly the public auctioneer entered by a little trap-door cut in the boards of the floor and took his place before the desk. His crier, Flint, had already arrived, and was walking up and down as agitated as a bear in a cage. Both were glad at the prospect, as they thought that the sale would run up to an enormous sum and put a large and acceptable percentage in their pockets. Of course the sale would have to be made under the regular, real American rule, "ready cash."

The amount of money, no matter how large it would be, must be raised by the delegates. At this moment a large bell ringing with vigor indicated that the bidding was going to begin. What a solemn moment! Many hearts quivered in that neighborhood. A minor riot spread among the crowd outside and reached into the hall, and Andrew R. Gilmour, the auctioneer, had to wait until quiet was restored. He got up and looked steadily at his assistants. Then he let his eyeglasses fall on his breast and said in as quiet a voice as possible: "Gentlemen, according to the plan of the Federal government, and thanks to the acquiescence given it by the European powers, we will sell a great fixed mass, situated around the North Pole, all that is within the limits of the 84th parallel, continents, waters, bays, islands, icebergs, solid parts or liquid, whatever they may be." Then, turning towards the wall, he said "Look at this chart, which has been outlined according to the latest discoveries. You will see that the surface of this lot contains 407,000 square miles. Therefore, to make the sale easier, it

has been decided that the bids should be made for each square mile. Each cent bid, for instance, will be equal to 407,000 cents and each dollar 407,000 dollars on the total purchase. A little silence, please, gentlemen.”

This request was not superfluous, because the impatience of the public had reached such a degree that the voice of a bidder would hardly be heard. After partial silence had been established, thanks to the industry of the crier, Flint, who roared like a foghorn, Mr. Gilmour resumed as follows: “Before beginning I will mention only one condition of the sale. No matter what changes should happen, either from a geographical or meteorological standpoint, this region after being sold to the highest bidder is absolutely his own beyond any dispute, and the other countries have no right of possession whatever as long as the territory is not outside of the limits of the 84th degree north latitude.” Again was this singular phrase mentioned at a very important moment. Some laughed at it, others considered it very seriously. “The bids are open,” said the public auctioneer in a loud voice, and while his little ivory hammer was rolling in his hand he added in an undertone: “We have offers at 10 cents the square mile. Ten cents or the tenth part of a dollar—this would make an amount of \$40,700 for the whole of this immovable property.” Whether the auctioneer had had such offers or not does not matter, because the bid was covered by Eric Baldenak in the name of the Danish Government. “Twenty cents,” said he.

“Thirty cents,” said Jan Harald, for Sweden-Norway.

“Forty cents,” said Col. Boris Karkof, for Russia.

This represented already a sum of \$162,800 to begin with. The representative of England had not as yet opened his mouth, not even moved his lips, which were pressed tightly together. On the other side Wm. S. Forster kept an impenetrable dumbness. Even at this moment he seemed absorbed in reading a newspaper which contained the shipping arrivals and the financial reports of the markets each day.

“Forty cents per square mile,” repeated Flint, in a voice which resembled a steam whistle, “40 cents.”

The four colleagues of Major Donellan looked at each other. Had they

already exhausted the credit allowed them at the beginning of the bidding? Were they already compelled to be silent?

“Go on, gentlemen,” said the Auctioneer Gilmour, “40 cents. Who goes higher? Forty cents; why, the North Pole is worth much more than that, for it is guaranteed to be made of ice.”

The Danish delegate said 50 cents and the Hollandish delegate promptly outbid him by 10 cents.

Nobody said a word. This 60 cents represented the respectable amount of \$244,200. The lift given by Holland to the sale started a murmur of satisfaction. It seemed that the persons who had nothing in their pockets and nothing to their names were the most interested of all in this contest of dollars.

At the moment Jacques Jansen made his offer Major Donellan looked at his secretary, Dean Toodrink, and, with an almost imperceptible negative sign, kept him silent. Mr. William S. Forster, seeming very much interested in his paper, made some pencil notes. Mr. J.T. Maston, only replied to the smiles of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt with a nod of the head.

“Hurry up, gentlemen; a little life. Don’t let us linger. This is very weak, very slow,” said the auctioneer. “Let me see. Nobody says more. Must I knock down the North Pole at such a price?” and as he spoke his hammer went up and down just like the cross in a priest’s hands when he wishes to bless his people.

“Seventy cents,” said Jan Harald, with a voice which trembled a little.

“Eighty,” immediately responded Col. Boris Karkof.

“Hurry up, 80 cents,” said Flint, whose eyes were burning with excitement.

A gesture of Dean Toodrink made Major Donellan jump up like a spirit. “One hundred cents,” said he with a short and sharp tone, becoming in one who represented Great Britain. That one word made England responsible for \$407,000.

The friends of the bidders for the United Kingdom made a great hurrah, which was repeated like an echo by the outside crowd. The bidders for America looked at each other with disappointment; \$407,000; this was already a very

large figure for such a region as the North Pole; \$407,000 for ice, icebergs, and icefields?

And the man of the N. P. P. A. did not say one word, did not even raise his head. Would he decide to make at last one overwhelming bid? If he wanted to wait until the Danish delegates, those of Sweden, Holland, and Russia had exhausted their credit, it would seem that the proper moment had come. Their faces plainly showed that before the “100 cents” of Major Donellan, they had decided to quit the battlefield. “One hundred cents the square mile,” said the auctioneer for the second time, “One hundred, one hundred, one hundred,” cried out Flint, making a speaking-trumpet of his half-closed hand. “Nobody goes higher?” questioned Auctioneer Gilmour. “Is it heard? Is it understood? No regrets afterwards? We will sell it now.” And he took his position and looking at his clerk, said: “once, twice”—

“One hundred and ten,” very quietly said William S. Forster, without even raising his eyes, after having turned the page of his paper.

“Hip, hip, hip,” shouted the crowd who had put most of the money on America in the bets. Major Donellan was astonished. His long neck turned in all directions and he shrugged his shoulders, while his lips worked with great excitement. He tried to crush this American representative with one look, but without success, but Mr. Forster, cool as a cucumber, did not budge.

“One hundred and forty,” said Major Donellan.

“One hundred and sixty,” said Forster.

“One hundred and eighty,” said the Major, with great excitement.

“One hundred and ninety,” said Forster.

“One hundred and ninety-nine,” roared the delegate of Great Britain. With this he crossed his arms and seemed to defy the United States of America.

One might have heard a mouse run, or a miller fly, or a worm creep. All hearts were beating. A life seemed hanging on the lips of Major Donellan. His head, generally restless, was still now. Dean Toodrink had sat down and was pulling out his hairs one by one. Auctioneer Gilmour let a few moments run by. They seemed as long as centuries. The codfish merchant continued reading his

paper and making pencil figures which had evidently nothing at all to do with the question. Was he also at the end of his credit? Did he intend to make a last offer? Did this amount of 199 cents for each square mile or \$793,000 for the whole of the fixture at sale seem to him to have reached the last limit of absurdity?

“One hundred and ninety-nine cents,” repeated the public auctioneer. “We will sell it,” and his hammer fell on the table before him. “One hundred and ninety-nine,” cried the helper. “Sell it! Sell it!” And every one was looking at the representative of the N.P.P.A.

That surprising gentleman was blowing his nose on a large bandanna handkerchief, which nearly covered his whole face. Mr. J. T. Maston was looking at him intently, and so was Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. It could easily be seen by their anxious faces how much they tried to suppress their violent emotion. Why was Forster hesitating to outbid Major Donellan? As for the imperturbable Forster, he blew his nose a second time, then a third time, with the noise of a real foghorn. But between the second and third blow he said as quietly as possible, with a modest and sweet voice. “Two hundred cents!”

A long shudder went through the hall. Then the American backers began to make such a noise that the very windows trembled. Major Donellan, overwhelmed, ruined, disappointed, had fallen into a seat by the side of Dean Toodrink, who himself was not in a much better condition. Two thousand miles at this price made the enormous sum of \$814,000 and it was apparent that the credit of England did not permit them to overreach it.

“Two hundred cents,” repeated the auctioneer. “Two hundred cents,” said Flint. “Once, twice,” said the auctioneer. “Does anybody go higher?” Major Donellan raised himself by a strong effort and looked wistfully at the other delegates. These only looked back their hope that by his bidding the Arctic region would escape the American bidder and would become the property of the European powers. But this was his last effort. The Major opened his mouth, closed it again, and in his person England sat down on itself. “Hip, hip, hurrah for the United States,” roared the winners for victorious America. And in one

instant the news of the purchase ran all over Baltimore, and by telegraph all over the United States, and by cable all over the Old World. Thus it was that the N.P.P.A. through the agency of William S. Forster, became the proprietor of the Arctic domain, including everything above the eighty-fourth parallel. The next day when Mr. Forster went to make his deposit for his purchase the name he gave was Impey Barbicane and the name of the house was Barbicane & Co.