

CHAPTER XI

THE DEVIL'S THUMB

During the commander's absence the men had gone through divers works in order to make the ship fit to avoid the pressure of the ice-fields. Pen, Clifton, Gripper, Bolton, and Simpson were occupied in this laborious work; the stoker and the two engineers were even obliged to come to the aid of their comrades, for, from the instant they were not wanted at the engine, they again became sailors, and, as such, they could be employed in all kinds of work on board. But this was not accomplished without a great deal of grumbling.

"I'll tell you what," said Pen, "I've had enough of it, and if in three days the breaking up isn't come, I'll swear to God that I'll chuck up!"

"You'll chuck up?" replied Gripper; "you'd do better to help us to back out. Do you think we are in the humour to winter here till next year?"

"To tell you the truth, it would be a dreary winter," said Plover, "for the ship is exposed from every quarter."

"And who knows," added Brunton, "if even next spring we should find the sea freer than it is now?"

"We aren't talking about next spring," said Pen; "to-day's Thursday; if next Sunday morning the road ain't clear, we'll back out south."

"That's the ticket!" cried Clifton.

"Are you all agreed?" said Pen.

"Yes," answered all his comrades.

"That's right enough," answered Warren, "for if we are obliged to work like this, hauling the ship by the strength of our arms, my advice is to backwater."

"We'll see about that on Sunday," answered Wolsten.

"As soon as I get the order," said Brunton, "I'll soon get my steam up."

"Or we'd manage to get it up ourselves," said Clifton.

"If any of the officers," said Pen, "wants to have the pleasure of wintering here, we'll let him. He can build himself a snow-hut like the Esquimaux."

"Nothing of the kind, Pen," replied Brunton; "we won't leave anybody. You understand that, you others. Besides, I don't think it would be

difficult to persuade the commander; he already seems very uncertain, and if we were quietly to propose it----"

"I don't know that," said Plover; "Richard Shandon is a hard, headstrong man, and we should have to sound him carefully."

"When I think," replied Bolton, with a covetous sigh, "that in a month we might be back in Liverpool; we could soon clear the southern ice-line. The pass in Davis's Straits will be open in the beginning of June, and we shall only have to let ourselves drift into the Atlantic."

"Besides," said the prudent Clifton, "if we bring back the commander with us, acting under his responsibility, our pay and bounty money will be sure; whilst if we return alone it won't be so certain."

"That's certain!" said Plover; "that devil of a Clifton speaks like a book. Let us try to have nothing to explain to the Admiralty; it's much safer to leave no one behind us."

"But if the officers refuse to follow us?" replied Pen, who wished to push his comrades to an extremity.

To such a question they were puzzled to reply.

"We shall see about it when the time comes," replied Bolton; "besides, it would be enough to win Richard Shandon over to our side. We shall

have no difficulty about that."

"Anyhow," said Pen, swearing, "there's something I'll leave here if I get an arm eaten in the attempt."

"Ah! you mean the dog," said Plover.

"Yes, the dog; and before long I'll settle his hash!"

"The more so," replied Clifton, coming back to his favourite theme, "that the dog is the cause of all our misfortunes."

"He's cast an evil spell over us," said Plover.

"It's through him we're in an iceberg," said Gripper.

"He's the cause that we've had more ice against us than has ever been seen at this time of year," said Wolsten.

"He's the cause of my bad eyes," said Brunton.

"He's cut off the gin and brandy," added Pen.

"He's the cause of everything," said the assembly, getting excited.

"And he's captain into the bargain!" cried Clifton.

"Well, captain of ill-luck," said Pen, whose unreasonable fury grew stronger at every word; "you wanted to come here, and here you'll stay."

"But how are we to nap him?" said Plover.

"We've a good opportunity," replied Clifton; "the commander isn't on deck, the lieutenant is asleep in his cabin, and the fog's thick enough to stop Johnson seeing us."

"But where's the dog?" cried Pen.

"He's asleep near the coalhole," replied Clifton, "and if anybody wants----"

"I'll take charge of him," answered Pen furiously.

"Look out, Pen, he's got teeth that could snap an iron bar in two."

"If he moves I'll cut him open," cried Pen, taking his knife in one hand. He bounced in between decks, followed by Warren, who wanted to help him in his undertaking. They quickly came back, carrying the animal in their arms, strongly muzzled, with his paws bound tightly together. They had taken him by surprise whilst he slept, so that the unfortunate dog could not escape them.

"Hurrah for Pen!" cried Plover.

"What do you mean to do with him now you've got him?" asked Clifton.

"Why, drown him, and if ever he gets over it----" replied Pen, with a fearful smile of satisfaction.

About two hundred steps from the vessel there was a seal-hole, a kind of circular crevice cut out by the teeth of that amphibious animal, hollowed out from underneath, and through which the seal comes up to breathe on to the surface of the ice. To keep this aperture from closing up he has to be very careful because the formation of his jaws would not enable him to bore through the hole again from the outside, and in a moment of danger he would fall a prey to his enemies. Pen and Warren directed their steps towards this crevice, and there, in spite of the dog's energetic efforts, he was unmercifully precipitated into the sea. An enormous lump of ice was then placed over the opening, thus closing all possible issue to the poor animal, walled up in a watery prison.

"Good luck to you, captain," cried the brutal sailor.

Shortly afterwards Pen and Warren returned on deck. Johnson had seen nothing of this performance. The fog thickened round about the ship, and snow began to fall with violence. An hour later, Richard Shandon, the doctor, and Garry rejoined the Forward. Shandon had noticed a pass in a north-eastern direction of which he was resolved to take advantage, and gave his orders in consequence. The crew obeyed with

a certain activity, not without hinting to Shandon that it was impossible to go further on, and that they only gave him three more days' obedience. During a part of the night and the following day the working of the saws and the hauling were actively kept up; the Forward gained about two miles further north. On the 18th she was in sight of land, and at five or six cable-lengths from a peculiar peak, called from its strange shape the Devil's Thumb.

It was there that the Prince Albert in 1851, and the Advance with Kane, in 1853, were kept prisoners by the ice for several weeks. The odd form of the Devil's Thumb, the dreary deserts in its vicinity, the vast circus of icebergs--some of them more than three hundred feet high--the cracking of the ice, reproduced by the echo in so sinister a manner, rendered the position of the Forward horribly dreary. Shandon understood the necessity of getting out of it and going further ahead. Twenty-four hours later, according to his estimation, he had been able to clear the fatal coast for about two miles, but this was not enough. Shandon, overwhelmed with fear, and the false situation in which he was placed, lost both courage and energy; in order to obey his instructions and get further north, he had thrown his vessel into an excessively perilous situation. The men were worn out by the hauling; it required more than three hours to hollow out a channel twenty feet long, through ice that was usually from four to five feet thick. The health of the crew threatened to break down. Shandon was astonished at the silence of his men and their unaccustomed obedience, but he feared that it was the calm before the storm. Who can judge, then, of his painful disappointment,

surprise, and despair when he perceived that in consequence of an insensible movement of the ice-field the Forward had, during the night from the 18th to the 19th, lost all the advantage she had gained with so much toil? On the Saturday morning they were once more opposite the ever-threatening Devil's Thumb, and in a still more critical position. The icebergs became more numerous, and drifted by in the fog like phantoms. Shandon was in a state of complete demoralisation, for fright had taken possession of the dauntless man and his crew. Shandon had heard the dog's disappearance spoken about, but dared not punish those who were guilty of it. He feared that a rebellion might be the consequence. The weather was fearful during the whole day; the snow rose up in thick whirlpools, wrapping up the Forward in an impenetrable cloak. Sometimes, under the action of the storm, the fog was torn asunder, and displayed towards land, raised up like a spectre, the Devil's Thumb.

The Forward was anchored to an immense block of ice; it was all that could be done; there was nothing more to attempt; the obscurity became denser, and the man at the helm could not see James Wall, who was on duty in the bow. Shandon withdrew to his cabin, a prey to unremitting uneasiness; the doctor was putting his voyage notes in order; one half the crew remained on deck, the other half stayed in the common cabin. At one moment, when the storm increased in fury, the Devil's Thumb seemed to rise up out of all proportion in the midst of the fog.

"Good God!" cried Simpson, drawing back with fright.

"What the devil's that?" said Foker, and exclamations rose up in every direction.

"It is going to smash us!"

"We are lost!"

"Mr. Wall! Mr. Wall!"

"It's all over with us!"

"Commander! Commander!"

These cries were simultaneously uttered by the men on watch. Wall fled to the quarter-deck, and Shandon, followed by the doctor, rushed on deck to look. In the midst of the fog the Devil's Thumb seemed to have suddenly neared the brig, and seemed to have grown in a most fantastic manner. At its summit rose up a second cone, turned upside down and spindled on its point; its enormous mass threatened to crush the ship, as it was oscillating and ready to fall. It was a most fearful sight; every one instinctively drew back, and several sailors, leaping on to the ice, abandoned the ship.

"Let no one move!" cried the commander in a severe voice. "Every one to his post!"

"How now, my friends? There's nothing to be frightened at!" said the doctor. "There's no danger! Look, commander, look ahead, Mr. Wall; it's only an effect of the mirage, nothing else."

"You are quite right, Mr. Clawbonny," answered Johnson; "those fools were frightened at a shadow."

After the doctor had spoken most of the sailors drew near, and their fear changed to admiration at the wonderful phenomenon, which shortly disappeared from sight.

"They call that a mirage?" said Clifton. "Well, you may believe me that the devil has something to do with it."

"That's certain!" replied Gripper.

But when the fog cleared away it disclosed to the eyes of the commander an immense free and unexpected passage; it seemed to run away from the coast, and he therefore determined to seize such a favourable hazard. Men were placed on each side of the creek, hawsers were lowered down to them, and they began to tow the vessel in a northerly direction. During long hours this work was actively executed in silence. Shandon caused the steam to be got up, in order to take advantage of the fortunate discovery of this channel.

"This," said he to Johnson, "is a most providential hazard, and if we can only get a few miles ahead, we shall probably get to the end

of our misfortunes."

"Brunton! stir up the fires, and as soon as there's enough pressure let me know. In the meantime our men will pluck up their courage--that will be so much gained. They are in a hurry to run away from the Devil's Thumb; we'll take advantage of their good inclinations!"

All at once the progress of the Forward was abruptly arrested.

"What's up?" cried Shandon. "I say, Wall! have we broken our tow-ropes?"

"Not at all, commander," answered Wall, looking over the side. "Hallo! Here are the men coming back again. They are climbing the ship's side as if the devil was at their heels."

"What the deuce can it be?" cried Shandon, rushing forward.

"On board! On board!" cried the terrified sailors.

Shandon looked in a northerly direction, and shuddered in spite of himself. A strange animal, with appalling movements, whose foaming tongue emerged from enormous jaws, was leaping about at a cable's length from the ship. In appearance he seemed to be about twenty feet high, with hair like bristles; he was following up the sailors, whilst his formidable tail, ten feet long, was sweeping the snow and throwing it up in thick whirlwinds. The sight of such a monster riveted the

most daring to the spot.

"It's a bear!" said one.

"It's the Gevaudan beast!"

"It's the lion of the Apocalypse!"

Shandon ran to his cabin for a gun he always kept loaded. The doctor armed himself, and held himself in readiness to fire upon an animal which, by its dimensions, recalled the antediluvian quadrupeds. He neared the ship in immense leaps; Shandon and the doctor fired at the same time, when, suddenly, the report of their firearms, shaking the atmospheric stratum, produced an unexpected effect. The doctor looked attentively, and burst out laughing.

"It's the refraction!" he exclaimed.

"Only the refraction!" repeated Shandon. But a fearful exclamation from the crew interrupted them.

"The dog!" said Clifton.

"The dog, captain!" repeated all his comrades.

"Himself!" cried Pen; "always that cursed brute."

They were not mistaken--it was the dog. Having got loose from his shackles, he had regained the surface by another crevice. At that instant the refraction, through a phenomenon common to these latitudes, caused him to appear under formidable dimensions, which the shaking of the air had dispersed; but the vexatious effect was none the less produced upon the minds of the sailors, who were very little disposed to admit an explanation of the fact by purely physical reasons. The adventure of the Devil's Thumb, the reappearance of the dog under such fantastic circumstances, gave the finishing touch to their mental faculties, and murmurs broke out on all sides.