

CHAPTER XIII

THE PROJECTS OF HATTERAS

The appearance of this bold personage was appreciated in different ways by the crew; part of them completely rallied round him, either from love of money or daring; others submitted because they could not help themselves, reserving their right to protest later on; besides, resistance to such a man seemed, for the present, difficult. Each man went back to his post. The 20th of May fell on a Sunday, and was consequently a day of rest for the crew. A council was held by the captain, composed of the officers, Shandon, Wall, Johnson, and the doctor.

"Gentlemen," said the captain in that voice at the same time soft and imperious which characterised him, "you are aware that I intend to go as far as the Pole. I wish to know your opinion about this enterprise. Shandon, what do you think about it?"

"It is not for me to think, captain," coldly replied Shandon; "I have only to obey."

Hatteras was not surprised at the answer.

"Richard Shandon," continued he, not less coldly, "I beg you will say what you think about our chance of success."

"Very well, captain," answered Shandon, "facts are there, and answer for me; attempts of the same kind up till now have always failed; I hope we shall be more fortunate."

"We shall be. What do you think, gentlemen?"

"As far as I am concerned," replied the doctor, "I consider your plan practicable, as it is certain that some day navigators will attain the boreal Pole. I don't see why the honour should not fall to our lot."

"There are many things in our favour," answered Hatteras; "our measures are taken in consequence, and we shall profit by the experience of those who have gone before us. And thereupon, Shandon, accept my thanks for the care you have taken in fitting out this ship; there are a few evil-disposed fellows amongst the crew that I shall have to bring to reason, but on the whole I have only praises to give you."

Shandon bowed coldly. His position on the Forward, which he thought to command, was a false one. Hatteras understood this, and did not insist further.

"As to you, gentlemen," he continued, turning to Wall and Johnson, "I could not have secured officers more distinguished for courage and experience."

"Well, captain, I'm your man," answered Johnson, "and although your enterprise seems to me rather daring, you may rely upon me till the end."

"And on me too," said James Wall.

"As to you, doctor, I know what you are worth."

"You know more than I do, then," quickly replied the doctor.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Hatteras, "it is well you should learn upon what undeniable facts my pretension to arrive at the Pole is founded. In 1817 the Neptune got up to the north of Spitzbergen, as far as the eighty-second degree. In 1826 the celebrated Parry, after his third voyage to the Polar Seas, started also from Spitzbergen Point, and by the aid of sledge-boats went a hundred and fifty miles northward. In 1852 Captain Inglefield penetrated into Smith's Inlet as far as seventy-eight degrees thirty-five minutes latitude. All these vessels were English, and Englishmen, our countrymen, commanded them." Here Hatteras paused. "I ought to add," he continued, with a constrained look, and as though the words were unable to leave his lips--"I must add that, in 1854, Kane, the American, commanding the brig Advance, went still higher, and that his lieutenant, Morton, going across the ice-fields, hoisted the United States standard on the other side of the eighty-second degree. This said, I shall not return to the subject. Now what remains to be known

is this, that the captains of the Neptune, the Enterprise, the Isabel, and the Advance ascertained that proceeding from the highest latitudes there existed a Polar basin entirely free from ice."

"Free from ice!" exclaimed Shandon, interrupting the captain, "that is impossible!"

"You will notice, Shandon," quietly replied Hatteras, whose eye shone for an instant, "that I quote names and facts as a proof. I may even add that during Captain Parry's station on the border of Wellington Channel, in 1851, his lieutenant, Stewart, also found himself in the presence of open sea, and this peculiarity was confirmed during Sir Edward Beecher's wintering in 1853, in Northumberland Bay, in 76 degrees 52 minutes N. latitude, and 99 degrees 20 minutes longitude. The reports are incontestable, and it would be most unjust not to admit them."

"However, captain," continued Shandon, "those reports are so contradictory."

"You are mistaken, Shandon," cried Dr. Clawbonny. "These reports do not contradict any scientific assertion, the captain will allow me to tell you."

"Go on, doctor," answered Hatteras.

"Well, listen, Shandon; it evidently follows from geographical facts,

and from the study of isotherm lines, that the coldest point of the globe is not at the Pole itself; like the magnetic point, it deviates several degrees from the Pole. The calculations of Brewster, Bergham, and several other natural philosophers show us that in our hemisphere there are two cold Poles; one is situated in Asia at 79 degrees 30 minutes N. latitude, and by 120 degrees E. longitude, and the other in America at 78 degrees N. latitude, and 97 degrees W. longitude. It is with the latter that we have to do, and you see, Shandon, we have met with it at more than twelve degrees below the Pole. Well, why should not the Polar Sea be as equally disengaged from ice as the sixty-sixth parallel is in summer--that is to say, the south of Baffin's Bay?"

"That's what I call well pleaded," replied Johnson. "Mr. Clawbonny speaks upon these matters like a professional man."

"It appears very probable," chimed in James Wall.

"All guess-work," answered Shandon obstinately.

"Well, Shandon," said Hatteras, "let us take into consideration either case; either the sea is free from ice or it is not so, and neither of these suppositions can hinder us from attaining the Pole. If the sea is free the Forward will take us there without trouble; if it is frozen we will attempt the adventure upon our sledges. This, you will allow, is not impracticable. When once our brig has attained the eighty-third degree we shall only have six hundred miles to

traverse before reaching the Pole."

"And what are six hundred miles?" quickly answered the doctor, "when it is known that a Cossack, Alexis Markoff, went over the ice sea along the northern coast of the Russian Empire, in sledges drawn by dogs, for the space of eight hundred miles in twenty-four days?"

"Do you hear that, Shandon?" said Hatteras; "can't Englishmen do as much as a Cossack?"

"Of course they can," cried the impetuous doctor.

"Of course," added the boatswain.

"Well, Shandon?" said the captain.

"I can only repeat what I said before, captain," said Shandon--"I will obey."

"Very good. And now," continued Hatteras, "let us consider our present situation. We are caught by the ice, and it seems to me impossible, for this year at least, to get into Smith's Strait. Well, here, then, this is what I propose."

Hatteras laid open upon the table one of the excellent maps published in 1859 by the order of the Admiralty.

"Be kind enough to follow me. If Smith's Strait is closed up from us, Lancaster Strait, on the west coast of Baffin's Sea, is not. I think we ought to ascend that strait as far as Barrow Strait, and from there sail to Beechey Island; the same track has been gone over a hundred times by sailing vessels; consequently with a screw we can do it easily. Once at Beechey Island we will go north as far as possible, by Wellington Channel, up to the outlet of the creek which joins Wellington's and Queen's Channels, at the very point where the open sea was perceived. It is now only the 20th of May; in a month, if circumstances favour us, we shall have attained that point, and from there we'll drive forward towards the Pole. What do you think about it, gentlemen?"

"It is evidently the only track to follow," replied Johnson.

"Very well, we will take it from to-morrow. I shall let them rest to-day as it is Sunday. Shandon, you will take care that religious service be attended to; it has a beneficial effect on the minds of men, and a sailor above all needs to place confidence in the Almighty."

"It shall be attended to, captain," answered Shandon, who went out with the lieutenant and the boatswain.

"Doctor!" said Hatteras, pointing towards Shandon, "there's a man whose pride is wounded; I can no longer rely upon him."

Early the following day the captain caused the pirogue to be lowered

in order to reconnoitre the icebergs in the vicinity, the breadth of which did not exceed 200 yards. He remarked that through a slow pressure of the ice the basin threatened to become narrower. It became urgent, therefore, to make an aperture to prevent the ship being crushed in a vice of the mountains. By the means employed by John Hatteras, it is easy to observe that he was an energetic man.

He first had steps cut out in the walls of ice, and by their means climbed to the summit of an iceberg. From that point he saw that it was easy for him to cut out a road towards the south-west. By his orders a blasting furnace was hollowed nearly in the heart of the mountain. This work, rapidly put into execution, was terminated by noon on Monday. Hatteras could not rely on his eight or ten pound blasting cylinders, which would have had no effect on such masses as those. They were only sufficient to shatter ice-fields. He therefore had a thousand pounds of powder placed in the blasting furnace, of which the diffusive direction was carefully calculated. This mine was provided with a long wick, bound in gutta-percha, the end of which was outside. The gallery conducting to the mine was filled up with snow and lumps of ice, which the cold of the following night made as hard as granite. The temperature, under the influence of an easterly wind, came down to twelve degrees.

At seven the next morning the Forward was held under steam, ready to profit by the smallest issue. Johnson was charged with setting fire to the wick, which, according to calculation, would burn for half an hour before setting fire to the mine. Johnson had, therefore,

plenty of time to regain the brig; ten minutes after having executed Hatteras's order he was again at his post. The crew remained on deck, for the weather was dry and bright; it had left off snowing.

Hatteras was on the poop, chronometer in hand, counting the minutes; Shandon and the doctor were with him. At eight thirty-five a dull explosion was heard, much less loud than any one would have supposed. The outline of the mountains was changed all at once as if by an earthquake; thick white smoke rose up to a considerable height in the sky, leaving long crevices in the iceberg, the top part of which fell in pieces all round the Forward. But the path was not yet free; large blocks of ice remained suspended above the pass on the adjacent mountains, and there was every reason to fear that they would fall and close up the passage. Hatteras took in the situation at one glance.

"Wolsten!" cried he.

The gunsmith hastened up.

"Yes, captain?" cried he.

"Load the gun in the bow with a triple charge," said Hatteras, "and wad it as hard as possible."

"Are we going to attack the mountain with cannon-balls?" asked the doctor.

"No," answered Hatteras, "that would be useless. No bullet, Wolsten, but a triple charge of powder. Look sharp!"

A few minutes after the gun was loaded.

"What does he mean to do without a bullet?" muttered Shandon between his teeth.

"We shall soon see," answered the doctor.

"Ready, captain!" called out Wolsten.

"All right!" replied Hatteras.

"Brunton!" he called out to the engineer, "a few turns ahead."

Brunton opened the sliders, and the screw being put in movement, the Forward neared the mined mountain.

"Aim at the pass!" cried the captain to the gunsmith. The latter obeyed, and when the brig was only half a cable's length from it, Hatteras called out:

"Fire!"

A formidable report followed his order, and the blocks, shaken by the atmospheric commotion, were suddenly precipitated into the sea;

the disturbance amongst the strata of the air had been sufficient to accomplish this.

"All steam on, Brunton! Straight for the pass, Johnson!"

The latter was at the helm; the brig, driven along by her screw, which turned in the foaming waves, dashed into the middle of the then opened pass; it was time, for scarcely had the Forward cleared the opening than her prison closed up again behind her. It was a thrilling moment, and on board there was only one stout and undisturbed heart--that of the captain. The crew, astonished at the manoeuvre, cried out:

"Hurrah for the captain!"