CHAPTER XV

THE "FORWARD" DRIVEN BACK SOUTH

The weather cleared up towards evening, and land was clearly distinguished between Cape Sepping and Cape Clarence, which runs east, then south, and is joined to the coast on the west by a rather low neck of land. The sea at the entrance to Regent Strait was free from ice, with the exception of an impenetrable ice-bank, a little further than Port Leopold, which threatened to stop the Forward in her north-westerly course. Hatteras was greatly vexed, but he did not show it; he was obliged to have recourse to petards in order to force an entrance to Port Leopold; he reached it on Sunday, the 27th of May; the brig was solidly anchored to the enormous icebergs, which were as upright, hard, and solid as rocks.

The captain, followed by the doctor, Johnson, and his dog Dick, immediately leaped upon the ice, and soon reached land. Dick leaped with joy, for since he had recognised the captain he had become more sociable, keeping his grudge against certain men of the crew for whom his master had no more friendship than he. The port was not then blocked up with ice that the east winds generally heaped up there; the earth, intersected with peaks, offered at their summits graceful undulations of snow. The house and lantern erected by James Ross were still in a tolerable state of preservation; but the provisions seemed to have been ransacked by foxes and bears, the recent traces of which

were easily distinguished. Men, too, had had something to do with the devastation, for a few remains of Esquimaux huts remained upon the shores of the Bay. The six graves inclosing the remains of the six sailors of the Enterprise and the Investigator were recognisable by a slight swelling of the ground; they had been respected both by men and animals. In placing his foot for the first time on boreal land, the doctor experienced much emotion. It is impossible to imagine the feelings with which the heart is assailed at the sight of the remains of houses, tents, huts, and magazines that Nature so marvellously preserves in those cold countries.

"There is that residence," he said to his companions, "which James Ross himself called the Camp of Refuge; if Franklin's expedition had reached this spot, it would have been saved. There is the engine which was abandoned here, and the stove at which the crew of the Prince Albert warmed themselves in 1851. Things have remained just as they were, and any one would think that Captain Kennedy had only left yesterday. Here is the long boat which sheltered him and his for a few days, for this Kennedy, separated from his ship, was in reality saved by Lieutenant Bellot, who braved the October temperature in order to go to his assistance."

"I knew that brave and worthy officer," said Johnson.

Whilst the doctor was examining with all an antiquarian's enthusiasm the vestiges of previous winterings, Hatteras was occupied in piling together the various provisions and articles of fuel, which were only

to be found in very small quantities. The following day was employed in transporting them on board. The doctor, without going too far from the ship, surveyed the country, and took sketches of the most remarkable points of view. The temperature rose by degrees, and the heaped-up snow began to melt. The doctor made an almost complete collection of northern birds, such as gulls, divers, eider-down ducks, which are very much like common ducks, with white breasts and backs, blue bellies, the top of the head blue, and the remainder of the plumage white, shaded with green; several of them had already their breasts stripped of that beautiful down with which the male and female line their nests. The doctor also perceived large seals taking breath on the surface of the ice, but could not shoot one. In his excursions he discovered the high water mark, a stone upon which the following signs are engraved:

(E. I.)
1849,

and which indicate the passage of the Enterprise and Investigator; he pushed forward as far as Cape Clarence to the spot where John and James Ross, in 1833, waited with so much impatience for the breaking up of the ice. The land was strewn with skulls and bones of animals, and traces of Esquimaux habitations could be still distinguished.

The doctor wanted to raise up a cairn on Port Leopold, and deposit in it a note indicating the passage of the Forward, and the aim

of the expedition. But Hatteras would not hear of it; he did not want to leave traces behind of which a competitor might take advantage. In spite of his good motives the doctor was forced to yield to the captain's will. Shandon blamed the captain's obstinacy, which prevented any ships following the trace of the Forward in case of accident. Hatteras would not give way. His lading was finished on Monday night, and he attempted once more to gain the north by breaking open the ice-bank; but after dangerous efforts he was forced to resign himself, and to go down Regent's Channel again; he would not stop at Port Leopold, which, open to-day, might be closed again to-morrow by an unexpected displacement of ice-fields, a very frequent phenomenon in these seas, and which navigators ought particularly to take into consideration.

If Hatteras did not allow his uneasiness to be outwardly perceived, it did not prevent him feeling it inwardly. His desire was to push northward, whilst, on the contrary, he found himself constrained to put back southward. Where should he get to in that case? Should he be obliged to put back to Victoria Harbour, in Boothia Gulf, where Sir John Ross wintered in 1833? Would he find Bellot Strait open at that epoch, and could he ascend Peel Strait by rounding North Somerset? Or, again, should he, like his predecessors, find himself captured during several winters, and be compelled to exhaust his strength and provisions? These fears were fermenting in his brain; he must decide one way or other. He heaved about, and struck out south. The width of Prince Regent's Channel is about the same from Port Leopold to Adelaide Bay. The Forward, more favoured than the ships

which had preceded her, and of which the greater number had required more than a month to descend the channel, even in a more favourable season, made her way rapidly amongst the icebergs; it is true that other ships, with the exception of the Fox, had no steam at their disposal, and had to endure the caprices of an uncertain and often foul wind.

In general the crew showed little wish to push on with the enterprising Hatteras; the men were only too glad to perceive that the vessel was taking a southerly direction. Hatteras would have liked to go on regardless of consequences.

The Forward rushed along under the pressure of her engines, the smoke from which twisted round the shining points of the icebergs; the weather was constantly changing from dry cold to snowy fogs. The brig, which drew little water, sailed along the west coast; Hatteras did not wish to miss the entrance to Bellot Strait, as the only outlet to the Gulf of Boothia on the south was the strait, only partially known to the Fury and the Hecla; if he missed the Bellot Strait, he might be shut up without possibility of egress.

In the evening the Forward was in sight of Elwin Bay, known by its high perpendicular rocks; on the Tuesday morning Batty Bay was sighted, where the Prince Albert anchored for its long wintering on the 10th of September, 1851. The doctor swept the whole coast with his telescope. It was from this point that the expeditions radiated that established the geographical configuration of North Somerset. The

weather was clear, and the profound ravines by which the bay is surrounded could be clearly distinguished.

The doctor and Johnson were perhaps the only beings on board who took any interest in these deserted countries. Hatteras was always intent upon his maps, and said little; his taciturnity increased as the brig got more and more south; he often mounted the poop, and there with folded arms, and eyes lost in vacancy, he stood for hours. His orders, when he gave any, were curt and rough. Shandon kept a cold silence, and kept himself so much aloof by degrees that at last he had no relations with Hatteras except those exacted by the service; James Wall remained devoted to Shandon, and regulated his conduct accordingly. The remainder of the crew waited for something to turn up, ready to take any advantage in their own interest. There was no longer that unity of thought and communion of ideas on board which are so necessary for the accomplishment of anything great, and this Hatteras knew to his sorrow.

During the day two whales were perceived rushing towards the south; a white bear was also seen, and was shot at without any apparent success. The captain knew the value of an hour under the circumstances, and would not allow the animal to be chased.

On Wednesday morning the extremity of Regent's Channel was passed; the angle on the west coast was followed by a deep curve in the land. By consulting his map the doctor recognised the point of Somerset House, or Fury Point.

"There," said he to his habitual companion--"there is the very spot where the first English ship, sent into these seas in 1815, was lost, during the third of Parry's voyages to the Pole; the Fury was so damaged by the ice on her second wintering, that her crew were obliged to desert her and return to England on board her companion ship the Hecla."

"That shows the advantage of having a second ship," answered Johnson. "It is a precaution that Polar navigators ought not to neglect, but Captain Hatteras wasn't the sort of man to trouble himself with another ship."

"Do you think he is imprudent, Johnson?" asked the doctor.

"I? I think nothing, Mr. Clawbonny. Do you see those stakes over there with some rotten tent-rags still hanging to them?"

"Yes; that's where Parry disembarked his provisions from his ship, and, if I remember rightly, the roof of his tent was a topsail."

"Everything must be greatly changed since 1825!"

"Not so much as any one might think. John Ross owed the health and safety of his crew to that fragile habitation in 1829. When the Prince Albert sent an expedition there in 1851, it was still existing; Captain Kennedy had it repaired, nine years ago now. It would be

interesting to visit it, but Hatteras isn't in the humour to stop!"

"I daresay he is right, Mr. Clawbonny; if time is money in England, here it is life, and a day's or even an hour's delay might make all the difference."

During the day of Thursday, the 1st of June, the Forward cut across Creswell Bay; from Fury Point the coast rose towards the north in perpendicular rocks three hundred feet high; it began to get lower towards the south; some snow summits looked like neatly-cut tables, whilst others were shaped like pyramids, and had other strange forms.

The weather grew milder during that day, but was not so clear; land was lost to sight, and the thermometer went up to thirty-two degrees; seafowl fluttered about, the flocks of wild ducks were seen flying north; the crew could divest themselves of some of their garments, and the influence of the Arctic summer began to be felt. Towards evening the Forward doubled Cape Garry at a quarter of a mile from the shore, where the soundings gave from ten to twelve fathoms; from thence she kept near the coast as far as Brentford Bay. It was under this latitude that Bellot Strait was to be met with; a strait the existence of which Sir John Ross did not even guess at during his expedition in 1828; his maps indicated an uninterrupted coast-line, whose irregularities he noted with the utmost care; the entrance to the strait must therefore have been blocked up by ice at the time. It was really discovered by Kennedy in April, 1852, and he gave it the name of his lieutenant, Bellot, as "a just tribute," he said,

"to the important services rendered to our expedition by the French officer."