CHAPTER XXI

THE DEATH OF BELLOT

The temperature during the days of the 3rd and 4th of July kept up to 57 degrees; this was the highest thermometric point observed during the campaign. But on Thursday, the 5th, the wind turned to the south-east, and was accompanied by violent snow-storms. The thermometer fell during the preceding night to 23 degrees. Hatteras took no notice of the murmurs of the crew, and gave orders to get under way. For the last thirteen days, from Cape Dundas, the Forward had not been able to gain one more degree north, so the party represented by Clifton was no longer satisfied, but wished like Hatteras to get into Wellington Channel, and worked away with a will. The brig had some difficulty in getting under sail; but Hatteras having set his mizensail, his topsails, and his gallantsails during the night, advanced boldly in the midst of fields of ice which the current was drifting south. The crew were tired out with this winding navigation, which kept them constantly at work at the sails. Wellington Channel is not very wide; it is bounded by North Devon on the east and Cornwallis Island on the west; this island was long believed to be a peninsula. It was Sir John Franklin who first sailed round it in 1846, starting west, and coming back to the same point to the north of the channel. The exploration of Wellington Channel was made in 1851 by Captain Penny in the whalers Lady Franklin and Sophia; one of his lieutenants, Stewart, reached Cape Beecher in

latitude 76 degrees 20 minutes, and discovered the open sea--that open sea which was Hatteras's dream!

"What Stewart found I shall find," said he to the doctor; "then I shall be able to set sail to the Pole."

"But aren't you afraid that your crew----"

"My crew!" said Hatteras severely. Then in a low tone--"Poor fellows!" murmured he, to the great astonishment of the doctor. It was the first expression of feeling he had heard the captain deliver.

"No," he repeated with energy, "they must follow me! They shall follow me!"

However, although the Forward had nothing to fear from the collision of the ice-streams, which were still pretty far apart, they made very little progress northward, for contrary winds often forced them to stop. They passed Capes Spencer and Innis slowly, and on Tuesday, the 10th, cleared 75 degrees to the great delight of Clifton. The Forward was then at the very place where the American ships, the Rescue and the Advance, encountered such terrible dangers. Doctor Kane formed part of this expedition; towards the end of September, 1850, these ships got caught in an ice-bank, and were forcibly driven into Lancaster Strait. It was Shandon who related this catastrophe to James Wall before some of the brig's crew.

"The Advance and the Rescue," he said to them, "were so knocked about by the ice, that they were obliged to leave off fires on board; but that did not prevent the temperature sinking 18 degrees below zero. During the whole winter the unfortunate crews were kept prisoners in the ice-bank, ready to abandon their ships at any moment; for three weeks they did not even change their clothes. They floated along in that dreadful situation for more than a thousand miles, when at last they were thrown into the middle of Baffin's Sea."

The effect of this speech upon a crew already badly disposed can be well imagined. During this conversation Johnson was talking to the doctor about an event that had taken place in those very quarters; he asked the doctor to tell him when the brig was in latitude 75 degrees 30 minutes, and when they passed it he cried:

"Yes, it was just there!" in saying which tears filled his eyes.

"You mean that Lieutenant Bellot died there?" said the doctor.

"Yes, Mr. Clawbonny. He was as good and brave a fellow as ever lived! It was upon this very North Devon coast! It was to be, I suppose, but if Captain Pullen had returned on board sooner it would not have happened."

"What do you mean, Johnson?"

"Listen to me, Mr. Clawbonny, and you will see on what a slight thread

existence often hangs. You know that Lieutenant Bellot went his first campaign in search of Franklin in 1850?"

"Yes, on the Prince Albert."

"Well, when he got back to France he obtained permission to embark on board the Phoenix under Captain Inglefield; I was a sailor on board. We came with the Breadalbane to transport provisions to Beechey Island!"

"Those provisions we, unfortunately, did not find. Well?"

"We reached Beechey Island in the beginning of August; on the 10th Captain Inglefield left the Phoenix to rejoin Captain Pullen, who had been separated from his ship, the North Star, for a month. When he came back he thought of sending his Admiralty despatches to Sir Edward Belcher, who was wintering in Wellington Channel. A little while after the departure of our captain, Captain Pullen got back to his ship. Why did he not arrive before the departure of Captain Inglefield? Lieutenant Bellot, fearing that our captain would be long away, and knowing that the Admiralty despatches ought to be sent at once, offered to take them himself. He left the command of the two ships to Captain Pullen, and set out on the 12th of August with a sledge and an indiarubber boat. He took the boatswain of the North Star (Harvey) with him, and three sailors, Madden, David Hook, and me. We supposed that Sir Edward Belcher was to be found in the neighbourhood of Beecher Cape, to the north of the channel; we made

for it with our sledge along the eastern coast. The first day we encamped about three miles from Cape Innis; the next day we stopped on a block of ice about three miles from Cape Bowden. As land lay at about three miles' distance, Lieutenant Bellot resolved to go and encamp there during the night, which was as light as the day; he tried to get to it in his indiarubber canoe; he was twice repulsed by a violent breeze from the south-east; Harvey and Madden attempted the passage in their turn, and were more fortunate; they took a cord with them, and established a communication between the coast and the sledge; three objects were transported by means of the cord, but at the fourth attempt we felt our block of ice move; Mr. Bellot called out to his companions to drop the cord, and we were dragged to a great distance from the coast. The wind blew from the south-east, and it was snowing; but we were not in much danger, and the lieutenant might have come back as we did."

Here Johnson stopped an instant to take a glance at the fatal coast, and continued:

"After our companions were lost to sight we tried to shelter ourselves under the tent of our sledge, but in vain; then, with our knives, we began to cut out a house in the ice. Mr. Bellot helped us for half an hour, and talked to us about the danger of our situation. I told him I was not afraid. 'By God's help,' he answered, 'we shall not lose a hair of our heads.' I asked him what o'clock it was, and he answered, 'About a quarter-past six.' It was a quarter-past six in the morning of Thursday, August 18th. Then Mr. Bellot tied up his

books, and said he would go and see how the ice floated; he had only been gone four minutes when I went round the block of ice to look for him; I saw his stick on the opposite side of a crevice, about five fathoms wide, where the ice was broken, but I could not see him anywhere. I called out, but no one answered. The wind was blowing great guns. I looked all round the block of ice, but found no trace of the poor lieutenant."

"What do you think had become of him?" said the doctor, much moved.

"I think that when Mr. Bellot got out of shelter the wind blew him into the crevice, and, as his greatcoat was buttoned up he could not swim. Oh! Mr. Clawbonny, I never was more grieved in my life! I could not believe it! He was a victim to duty, for it was in order to obey Captain Pullen's instructions that he tried to get to land. He was a good fellow, everybody liked him; even the Esquimaux, when they learnt his fate from Captain Inglefield on his return from Pound Bay, cried while they wept, as I am doing now, 'Poor Bellot! poor Bellot!'"

"But you and your companion, Johnson," said the doctor, "how did you manage to reach land?"

"Oh! we stayed twenty-four hours more on the block of ice, without food or firing; but at last we met with an ice-field; we jumped on to it, and with the help of an oar we fastened ourselves to an iceberg that we could guide like a raft, and we got to land, but without our brave officer."

By the time Johnson had finished his story the Forward had passed the fatal coast, and Johnson lost sight of the place of the painful catastrophe. The next day they left Griffin Bay to the starboard, and, two days after, Capes Grinnell and Helpmann; at last, on the 14th of July, they doubled Osborn Point, and on the 15th the brig anchored in Baring Bay, at the extremity of the channel. Navigation had not been very difficult; Hatteras met with a sea almost as free as that of which Belcher profited to go and winter with the Pioneer and the Assistance as far north as 77 degrees. It was in 1852 and 1853, during his first wintering, for he passed the winter of 1853 to 1854 in Baring Bay, where the Forward was now at anchor. He suffered so much that he was obliged to leave the Assistance in the midst of the ice. Shandon told all these details to the already discontented sailors. Did Hatteras know how he was betrayed by his first officer? It is impossible to say; if he did, he said nothing about it.

At the top of Baring Bay there is a narrow channel which puts Wellington and Queen's Channel into communication with each other. There the rafts of ice lie closely packed. Hatteras tried, in vain, to clear the passes to the north of Hamilton Island; the wind was contrary; five precious days were lost in useless efforts. The temperature still lowered, and, on the 19th of July, fell to 26 degrees; it got higher the following day; but this foretaste of winter made Hatteras afraid of waiting any longer. The wind seemed to be going to keep in the west, and to stop the progress of the ship. However,

he was in a hurry to gain the point where Stewart had met with the open sea. On the 19th he resolved to get into the Channel at any price; the wind blew right on the brig, which might, with her screw, have stood against it, had not Hatteras been obliged to economise his fuel; on the other hand, the Channel was too wide to allow the men to haul the brig along. Hatteras, not considering the men's fatigue, resolved to have recourse to means often employed by whalers under similar circumstances. The men took it in turns to row, so as to push the brig on against the wind. The Forward advanced slowly up the Channel. The men were worn out and murmured loudly. They went on in that manner till the 23rd of July, when they reached Baring Island in Queen's Channel. The wind was still against them. The doctor thought the health of the men much shaken, and perceived the first symptoms of scurvy amongst them; he did all he could to prevent the spread of the wretched malady, and distributed lime-juice to the men.

Hatteras saw that he could no longer count upon his crew; reasoning and kindness were ineffectual, so he resolved to employ severity for the future; he suspected Shandon and Wall, though they dare not speak out openly. Hatteras had the doctor, Johnson, Bell, and Simpson for him; they were devoted to him body and soul; amongst the undecided were Foker, Bolton, Wolsten the gunsmith, and Brunton the first engineer; and they might turn against the captain at any moment; as to Pen, Gripper, Clifton, and Warren, they were in open revolt; they wished to persuade their comrades to force the captain to return to England. Hatteras soon saw that he could not continue to work his ship with such a crew. He remained twenty-four hours at Baring Island

without taking a step forward. The weather grew cooler still, for winter begins to be felt in July in these high latitudes. On the 24th the thermometer fell to 22 degrees. Young ice formed during the night, and if snow fell it would soon be thick enough to bear the weight of a man. The sea began already to have that dirty colour which precedes the formation of the first crystals. Hatteras could not mistake these alarming symptoms; if the channels got blocked up, he should be obliged to winter there at a great distance from the point he had undertaken the voyage in order to reach, without having caught a glimpse of that open sea which his predecessors made out was so near. He resolved, then, to gain several degrees further north, at whatever cost; seeing that he could not employ oars without the rowers were willing, nor sail in a contrary wind, he gave orders to put steam on again.