CHAPTER XXIII

ATTACKED BY ICEBERGS

Hatteras, after seeing to the anchoring of his ship, re-entered his cabin and examined his map attentively. He found himself in latitude 76 degrees 57 minutes and longitude 99 degrees 20 minutes--that is to say, at only three minutes from the 77th parallel. It was at this very spot that Sir Edward Belcher passed his first winter with the Pioneer and the Assistance. It was thence that he organised his sledge and boat excursions. He discovered Table Isle, North Cornwall, Victoria Archipelago, and Belcher Channel. He reached the 78th parallel, and saw that the coast was depressed on the south-east. It seemed to go down to Jones's Strait, the entrance to which lies in Baffin's Bay. But to the north-west, on the contrary, says his report, an open sea lay as far as the eye could reach.

Hatteras considered attentively the white part of the map, which represented the Polar basin free from ice.

"After such testimony as that of Stewart, Penny, and Belcher, I can't have a doubt about it," he said to himself. "They saw it with their own eyes. But if the winter has already frozen it! But no; they made their discoveries at intervals of several years. It exists, and I shall find it! I shall see it."

Hatteras went on to the poop. An intense fog enveloped the Forward; the masthead could scarcely be distinguished from the deck. However, Hatteras called down the ice-master from his crow's nest, and took his place. He wished to profit by the shortest clear interval to examine the north-western horizon. Shandon did not let the occasion slip for saying to the lieutenant:

"Well, Wall, where is the open sea?"

"You were right, Shandon, and we have only six weeks' coal in the hold."

"Perhaps the doctor will find us some scientific fuel to warm us in the place of coal," answered Shandon. "I have heard say you can turn fire to ice; perhaps he'll turn ice to fire." And he entered his cabin, shrugging his shoulders. The next day was the 20th of August, and the fog cleared away for several minutes. They saw Hatteras look eagerly at the horizon, and then come down without speaking; but it was easy to see that his hopes had again been crushed. The Forward weighed anchor, and took up her uncertain march northward. As the Forward began to be weather-worn, the masts were unreeved, for they could no longer rely on the variable wind, and the sails were nearly useless in the winding channels. Large white marks appeared here and there on the sea like oil spots; they presaged an approaching frost; as soon as the breeze dropped the sea began to freeze immediately; but as soon as the wind got up again, the young ice was broken up

and dispersed. Towards evening the thermometer went down to 17 degrees.

When the brig came to a closed-up pass she acted as a battering ram, and ran at full steam against the obstacle, which she sunk. Sometimes they thought she was stopped for good; but an unexpected movement of the streams opened her a new passage, and she took advantage of it boldly. When the brig stopped, the steam which escaped from the safety-pipes was condensed by the cold air and fell in snow on to the deck. Another impediment came in the way; the ice-blocks sometimes got entangled in the paddles, and they were so hard that all the strength of the machine was not sufficient to break them; it was then necessary to back the engine and send men to clear the screws with their handspikes. All this delayed the brig; it lasted thirteen days. The Forward dragged herself painfully along Penny Strait; the crew grumbled, but obeyed: the men saw now that it was impossible to go back. Keeping north was less dangerous than retreating south. They were obliged to think about wintering. The sailors talked together about their present position, and one day they mentioned it to Richard Shandon, who, they knew, was on their side. The second officer forgot his duty as an officer, and allowed them to discuss the authority of the captain before him.

"You say, then, Mr. Shandon, that we can't go back now?" said Gripper.

"No, it's too late now," answered Shandon.

"Then we must think about wintering," said another sailor.

"It's the only thing we can do. They wouldn't believe me."

"Another time," said Pen, who had been released, "we shall believe you."

"But as I am not the master----" replied Shandon.

"Who says you mayn't be?" answered Pen. "John Hatteras may go as far as he likes, but we aren't obliged to follow him."

"You all know what became of the crew that did follow him in his first cruise to Baffin's Sea?" said Gripper.

"And the cruise of the Farewell under him that got lost in the Spitzbergen seas!" said Clifton.

"He was the only man that came back," continued Gripper.

"He and his dog," answered Clifton.

"We won't die for his pleasure," added Pen.

"Nor lose the bounty we've been at so much trouble to earn," cried Clifton. "When we've passed the 78th degree--and we aren't far off it, I know--that will make just the 375 pounds each."

"But," answered Gripper, "shan't we lose it if we go back without the captain?"

"Not if we prove that we were obliged to," answered Clifton.

"But it's the captain----"

"You never mind, Gripper," answered Pen; "we'll have a captain and a good one--that Mr. Shandon knows. When one commander goes mad, folks have done with him, and they take another; don't they, Mr. Shandon?"

Shandon answered evasively that they could reckon upon him, but that they must wait to see what turned up. Difficulties were getting thick round Hatteras, but he was as firm, calm, energetic, and confident as ever. After all, he had done in five months what other navigators had taken two or three years to do! He should be obliged to winter now, but there was nothing to frighten brave sailors in that. Sir John Ross and McClure had passed three successive winters in the Arctic regions. What they had done he could do too!

"If I had only been able to get up Smith Strait at the north of Baffin's Sea, I should be at the Pole by now!" he said to the doctor regretfully.

"Never mind, captain!" answered the doctor, "we shall get at it by the 99th meridian instead of by the 75th; if all roads lead to Rome,

it's more certain still that all meridians lead to the Pole."

On the 31st of August the thermometer marked 13 degrees. The end of the navigable season was approaching; the Forward left Exmouth Island to the starboard, and three days after passed Table Island in the middle of Belcher Channel. At an earlier period it would perhaps have been possible to regain Baffin's Sea by this channel, but it was not to be dreamt of then; this arm of the sea was entirely barricaded by ice; ice-fields extended as far as the eye could reach, and would do so for eight months longer. Happily they could still gain a few minutes further north on the condition of breaking up the ice with huge clubs and petards. Now the temperature was so low, any wind, even a contrary one, was welcome, for in a calm the sea froze in a single night. The Forward could not winter in her present situation, exposed to winds, icebergs, and the drift from the channel; a shelter was the first thing to find; Hatteras hoped to gain the coast of New Cornwall, and to find above Albert Point a bay of refuge sufficiently sheltered. He therefore pursued his course northward with perseverance. But on the 8th an impenetrable ice-bank lay in front of him, and the temperature was at 10 degrees. Hatteras did all he could to force a passage, continually risking his ship and getting out of danger by force of skill. He could be accused of imprudence, want of reflection, folly, blindness, but he was a good sailor, and one of the best! The situation of the Forward became really dangerous; the sea closed up behind her, and in a few hours the ice got so hard that the men could run along it and tow the ship in all security.

Hatteras found he could not get round the obstacle, so he resolved to attack it in front; he used his strongest blasting cylinders of eight to ten pounds of powder; they began by making a hole in the thick of the ice, and filled it with snow, taking care to place the cylinder in a horizontal position, so that a greater portion of the ice might be submitted to the explosion; lastly, they lighted the wick, which was protected by a gutta-percha tube. They worked at the blasting, as they could not saw, for the saws stuck immediately in the ice. Hatteras hoped to pass the next day. But during the night a violent wind raged, and the sea rose under her crust of ice as if shaken by some submarine commotion, and the terrified voice of the pilot was heard crying:

"Look out aft!"

Hatteras turned to the direction indicated, and what he saw by the dim twilight was frightful. A high iceberg, driven back north, was rushing on to the ship with the rapidity of an avalanche.

"All hands on deck!" cried the captain.

The rolling mountain was hardly half a mile off; the blocks of ice were driven about like so many huge grains of sand; the tempest raged with fury.

"There, Mr. Clawbonny," said Johnson to the doctor, "we are in

something like danger now."

"Yes," answered the doctor tranquilly, "it looks frightful enough."

"It's an assault we shall have to repulse," replied the boatswain.

"It looks like a troop of antediluvian animals, those that were supposed to inhabit the Pole. They are trying which shall get here first!"

"Well," added Johnson, "I hope we shan't get one of their spikes into us!"

"It's a siege--let's run to the ramparts!"

And they made haste aft, where the crew, armed with poles, bars of iron, and handspikes, were getting ready to repulse the formidable enemy. The avalanche came nearer, and got bigger by the addition of the blocks of ice which it caught in its passage; Hatteras gave orders to fire the cannon in the bow to break the threatening line. But it arrived and rushed on to the brig; a great crackling noise was heard, and as it struck on the brig's starboard a part of her barricading was broken. Hatteras gave his men orders to keep steady and prepare for the ice. It came along in blocks; some of them weighing several hundredweight came over the ship's side; the smaller ones, thrown up as high as the topsails, fell in little spikes, breaking the shrouds and cutting the rigging. The ship was boarded by these innumerable

enemies, which in a block would have crushed a hundred ships like the Forward. Some of the sailors were badly wounded whilst trying to keep off the ice, and Bolton had his left shoulder torn open. The noise was deafening. Dick barked with rage at this new kind of enemy. The obscurity of the night came to add to the horror of the situation, but did not hide the threatening blocks, their white surface reflected the last gleams of light. Hatteras's orders were heard in the midst of the crew's strange struggle with the icebergs. The ship giving way to the tremendous pressure, bent to the larboard, and the extremity of her mainyard leaned like a buttress against the iceberg and threatened to break her mast.

Hatteras saw the danger; it was a terrible moment; the brig threatened to turn completely over, and the masting might be carried away. An enormous block, as big as the steamer itself, came up alongside her hull; it rose higher and higher on the waves; it was already above the poop; it fell over the Forward. All was lost; it was now upright, higher than the gallant yards, and it shook on its foundation. A cry of terror escaped the crew. Everyone fled to starboard. But at this moment the steamer was lifted completely up, and for a little while she seemed to be suspended in the air, and fell again on to the ice-blocks; then she rolled over till her planks cracked again. After a minute, which appeared a century, she found herself again in her natural element, having been turned over the ice-bank that blocked her passage by the rising of the sea.

"She's cleared the ice-bank!" shouted Johnson, who had rushed to the

fore of the brig.

"Thank God!" answered Hatteras.

The brig was now in the midst of a pond of ice, which hemmed her in on every side, and though her keel was in the water, she could not move; she was immovable, but the ice-field moved for her.

"We are drifting, captain!" cried Johnson.

"We must drift," answered Hatteras; "we can't help ourselves."

When daylight came, it was seen that the brig was drifting rapidly northward, along with a submarine current. The floating mass carried the Forward along with it. In case of accident, when the brig might be thrown on her side, or crushed by the pressure of the ice, Hatteras had a quantity of provisions brought up on deck, along with materials for encamping, the clothes and blankets of the crew. Taking example from Captain McClure under similar circumstances, he caused the brig to be surrounded by a belt of hammocks, filled with air, so as to shield her from the thick of the damage; the ice soon accumulated under a temperature of 7 degrees, and the ship was surrounded by a wall of ice, above which her masts only were to be seen. They navigated thus for seven days; Point Albert, the western extremity of New Cornwall, was sighted on the 10th of September, but soon disappeared; from thence the ice-field drifted east. Where would it take them to? Where should they stop? Who could tell? The crew waited, and the men

folded their arms. At last, on the 15th of September, about three o'clock in the afternoon, the ice-field, stopped, probably, by collision with another field, gave a violent shake to the brig, and stood still. Hatteras found himself out of sight of land in latitude 78 degrees 15 minutes and longitude 95 degrees 35 minutes in the midst of the unknown sea, where geographers have placed the Frozen Pole.