

## CHAPTER XXV

### AN OLD FOX

That day the thermometer went down to 3 degrees below zero. The weather was pretty calm, and the cold without breeze was bearable. Hatteras profited by the clearness of the atmosphere to reconnoitre the surrounding plains; he climbed one of the highest icebergs to the north, and could see nothing, as far as his telescope would let him, but ice-fields and icebergs. No land anywhere, but the image of chaos in its saddest aspect. He came back on board trying to calculate the probable duration of his captivity. The hunters, and amongst them the doctor, James Wall, Simpson, Johnson, and Bell, did not fail to supply the ship with fresh meat. Birds had disappeared; they were gone to less rigorous southern climates. The ptarmigans, a sort of partridge, alone stay the winter in these latitudes; they are easily killed, and their great number promised an abundant supply of game. There were plenty of hares, foxes, wolves, ermine, and bears; there were enough for any sportsman, English, French, or Norwegian; but they were difficult to get at, and difficult to distinguish on the white plains from the whiteness of their fur; when the intense cold comes their fur changes colour, and white is their winter colour. The doctor found that this change of fur is not caused by the change of temperature, for it takes place in the month of October, and is simply a precaution of Providence to guard them from the rigour of a boreal winter.

Seals were abundant in all their varieties, and were particularly sought after by the hunters for the sake, not only of their skins, but their fat, which is very warming; besides which, the liver of these animals makes excellent fuel: hundreds of them were to be seen, and two or three miles to the north of the brig the ice was literally perforated all over with the holes these enormous amphibians make; only they smelt the hunters from afar, and many were wounded that escaped by plunging under the ice. However, on the 19th, Simpson managed to catch one at about a hundred yards from the ship; he had taken the precaution to block up its hole of refuge so that it was at the mercy of the hunters. It took several bullets to kill the animal, which measured nine feet in length; its bulldog head, the sixteen teeth in its jaws, its large pectoral fins in the shape of pinions, and its little tail, furnished with another pair of fins, made it a good specimen of the family of dog-hound fish. The doctor, wishing to preserve the head for his natural history collection, and its skin for his future use, had them prepared by a rapid and inexpensive process. He plunged the body of the animal into the hole in the ice, and thousands of little prawns soon ate off all the flesh; in half a day the work was accomplished, and the most skilful of the honourable corporation of Liverpool tanners could not have succeeded better.

As soon as the sun had passed the autumnal equinox--that is to say, on the 23rd of September--winter may be said to begin in the Arctic regions. The sun disappears entirely on the 23rd of October, lighting up with its oblique rays the summits of the frozen mountains. The

doctor wished him a traveller's farewell; he was not going to see him again till February. But obscurity is not complete during this long absence of the sun; the moon comes each month to take its place as well as she can; starlight is very bright, and there is besides frequent aurora borealis, and a refraction peculiar to the snowy horizons; besides, the sun at the very moment of his greatest austral declination, the 21st of December, is still only 13 degrees from the Polar horizon, so that there is twilight for a few hours; only fogs, mists, and snowstorms often plunge these regions into complete obscurity. However, at this epoch the weather was pretty favourable; the partridges and the hares were the only animals that had a right to complain, for the sportsmen did not give them a moment's peace; they set several fox-traps, but the suspicious animals did not let themselves be caught so easily; they would often come and eat the snare by scratching out the snow from under the trap; the doctor wished them at the devil, as he could not get them himself. On the 25th of October the thermometer marked more than 4 degrees below zero. A violent tempest set in; the air was thick with snow, which prevented a ray of light reaching the Forward. During several hours they were very uneasy about Bell and Simpson, who had gone too far whilst hunting; they did not reach the ship till the next day, after having lain for a whole day in their buckskins, whilst the tempest swept the air about them, and buried them under five feet of snow. They were nearly frozen, and the doctor had some trouble to restore their circulation.

The tempest lasted a week without interruption. It was impossible

to stir out. In a single day the temperature varied fifteen and twenty degrees. During their forced idleness each one lived to himself; some slept, others smoked, or talked in whispers, stopping when they saw the doctor or Johnson approach; there was no moral union between the men; they only met for evening prayers, and on Sunday for Divine service. Clifton had counted that once the 78th parallel cleared, his share in the bounty would amount to 375 pounds; he thought that enough, and his ambition did not go beyond. The others were of the same opinion, and only thought of enjoying the fortune acquired at such a price. Hatteras was hardly ever seen. He neither took part in the hunting nor other excursions. He felt no interest in the meteorological phenomena which excited the doctor's admiration. He lived for one idea; it was comprehended in three words--the North Pole. He was constantly looking forward to the moment when the Forward, once more free, would begin her adventurous voyage again.

In short, it was a melancholy life; the brig, made for movement, seemed quite out of place as a stationary dwelling; her original form could not be distinguished amidst the ice and snow that covered her, and she was anything but a lively spectacle. During these unoccupied hours the doctor put his travelling notes in order--the notes from which this history is taken; he was never idle, and the evenness of his humour remained the same, only he was very glad to see the tempest clearing off so as to allow him to set off hunting once more. On the 3rd of November, at six in the morning, with a temperature at 5 degrees below zero, he started, accompanied by Johnson and Bell; the plains of ice were level; the snow, which covered the ground thickly,

solidified by the frost, made the ground good for walking; a dry and keen cold lightened the atmosphere; the moon shone in all her splendour, and threw an astonishing light on all the asperities of the field; their footsteps left marks on the snow, and the moon lighted up their edges, so that they looked like a luminous track behind the hunters whose shadows fell on the ice with astonishing outlines.

The doctor had taken his friend Dick with him; he preferred him to the Greenland dogs to run down the game for a good reason; the latter do not seem to have the scent of their brethren of more temperate climates. Dick ran on and often pointed out the track of a bear, but in spite of his skill the hunters had not even killed a hare after two hours' walking.

"Do you think the game has gone south too?" asked the doctor, halting at the foot of a hummock.

"It looks like it, Mr. Clawbonny," answered the carpenter.

"I don't think so," answered Johnson; "hares, foxes, and bears are accustomed to the climate; I believe the late tempest is the cause of their disappearance; but with the south winds they'll soon come back. Ah! if you said reindeers or musk-oxen it would be a different thing."

"But it appears those, too, are found in troops in Melville Island," replied the doctor; "that is much further south, I grant you; when

Parry wintered there he always had as much game as he wanted."

"We are not so well off," said Bell; "if we could only get plenty of bear's flesh I should not complain."

"Bears are very difficult to get at," answered the doctor; "it seems to me they want civilising."

"Bell talks about the bear's flesh, but we want its fat more than its flesh or its skin," said Johnson.

"You are right, Johnson; you are always thinking about the fuel."

"How can I help thinking about it? I know if we are ever so careful of it we've only enough left for three weeks."

"Yes," replied the doctor, "that is our greatest danger, for we are only at the beginning of November, and February is the coldest month of the year in the Frozen Zone; however, if we can't get bear's grease we can rely on that of the seals."

"Not for long, Mr. Clawbonny," answered Johnson. "They'll soon desert us too; either through cold or fright, they'll soon leave off coming on to the surface of the ice."

"Then we must get at the bears," said the doctor; "they are the most useful animals in these countries: they furnish food, clothes, light,

and fuel. Do you hear, Dick?" continued he, caressing his friend; "we must have a bear, so look out."

Dick, who was smelling the ice as the doctor spoke, started off all at once, quick as an arrow. He barked loudly, and, notwithstanding his distance, the sportsmen heard him distinctly. The extreme distance to which sound is carried in these low temperatures is astonishing; it is only equalled by the brilliancy of the constellations in the boreal sky.

The sportsmen, guided by Dick's barking, rushed on his traces; they had to run about a mile, and arrived quite out of breath, for the lungs are rapidly suffocated in such an atmosphere. Dick was pointing at about fifty paces from an enormous mass at the top of a mound of ice.

"We've got him," said the doctor, taking aim.

"And a fine one," added Bell, imitating the doctor.

"It's a queer bear," said Johnson, waiting to fire after his two companions.

Dick barked furiously. Bell advanced to within twenty feet and fired, but the animal did not seem to be touched. Johnson advanced in his turn, and after taking a careful aim, pulled the trigger.

"What," cried the doctor, "not touched yet? Why, it's that cursed refraction. The bear is at least a thousand paces off."

The three sportsmen ran rapidly towards the animal, whom the firing had not disturbed; he seemed to be enormous, and without calculating the dangers of the attack, they began to rejoice in their conquest. Arrived within reasonable distance they fired again; the bear, mortally wounded, gave a great jump and fell at the foot of the mound. Dick threw himself upon it.

"That bear wasn't difficult to kill," said the doctor.

"Only three shots," added Bell in a tone of disdain, "and he's down."

"It's very singular," said Johnson.

"Unless we arrived at the very moment when it was dying of old age," said the doctor, laughing.

So speaking, the sportsmen reached the foot of the mound, and, to their great stupefaction, they found Dick with his fangs in the body of a white fox.

"Well, I never!" cried Bell.

"We kill a bear and a fox falls," added the doctor.



Johnson did not know what to say.

"Why!" said the doctor, with a roar of laughter, "it's the refraction again!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Clawbonny?" asked the carpenter.

"Why, it deceived us about the size as it did about the distance. It made us see a bear in a fox's skin."

"Well," answered Johnson, "now we've got him, we'll eat him."

Johnson was going to lift the fox on to his shoulders, when he cried like Bell--"Well, I never!"

"What is it?" asked the doctor.

"Look, Mr. Clawbonny--look what the animal's got on its neck; it's a collar, sure enough."

"A collar?" echoed the doctor, leaning over the animal. A half worn-out collar encircled the fox's neck, and the doctor thought he saw something engraved on it; he took it off and examined it.

"That bear is more than twelve years old, my friends," said the doctor; "it's one of James Ross's foxes, and the collar has been round its neck ever since 1848."

"Is it possible?" cried Bell.

"There isn't a doubt about it, and I'm sorry we've shot the poor animal. During his wintering James Ross took a lot of white foxes in his traps, and had brass collars put round their necks on which were engraved the whereabouts of his ships, the Enterprise and the Investigator, and the store magazines. He hoped one of them might fall into the hands of some of the men belonging to Franklin's expedition. The poor animal might have saved the lives of the ship's crews, and it has fallen under our balls."

"Well, we won't eat him," said Johnson, "especially as he's twelve years old. Anyway, we'll keep his skin for curiosity sake." So saying he lifted the animal on his shoulders, and they made their way to the ship, guided by the stars; still their expedition was not quite fruitless: they bagged several brace of ptarmigans. An hour before they reached the Forward, a phenomenon occurred which excited the astonishment of the doctor; it was a very rain of shooting stars; they could be counted by thousands, like rockets in a display of fireworks. They paled the light of the moon, and the admirable spectacle lasted several hours. A like meteor was observed at Greenland by the Moravian brothers in 1799. The doctor passed the whole night watching it, till it ceased, at seven in the morning, amidst the profound silence of the atmosphere.