

## CHAPTER XXVII

### CHRISTMAS

There was then a movement of despair. The thought of death, and death from cold, appeared in all its horror; the last piece of coal burnt away as quickly as the rest, and the temperature of the room lowered sensibly. But Johnson went to fetch some lumps of the new fuel which the marine animals had furnished him with, and he stuffed it into the stove; he added some oakum, impregnated with frozen oil, and soon obtained enough heat. The smell of the grease was abominable, but how could they get rid of it? They were obliged to get used to it. Johnson agreed that his expedient left much to wish for, and would have no success in a Liverpool house.

"However," added he, "the smell may have one good result."

"What's that?" asked the carpenter.

"It will attract the bears; they are very fond of the stink."

"And what do we want with bears?" added Bell.

"You know, Bell, we can't depend on the seals; they've disappeared for a good while to come; if the bears don't come to be turned into fuel too, I don't know what will become of us."

"There would be only one thing left; but I don't see how----"

"The captain would never consent; but perhaps we shall be obliged."

Johnson shook his head sadly, and fell into a silent reverie, which Bell did not interrupt. He knew that their stock of grease would not last more than a week with the strictest economy.

The boatswain was not mistaken. Several bears, attracted by the fetid exhalations, were signalled to the windward; the healthy men gave chase to them, but they are extraordinarily quick, and did not allow themselves to be approached, and the most skilful shots could not touch them. The ship's crew was seriously menaced with death from cold; it was impossible to resist such a temperature more than forty-eight hours, and every one feared the end of the fuel. The dreaded moment arrived at three o'clock p.m. on the 20th of December. The fire went out; the sailors looked at each other with haggard eyes. Hatteras remained immovable in his corner. The doctor as usual marched up and down in agitation; he was at his wits' end. The temperature of the room fell suddenly to 7 degrees below zero. But if the doctor did not know what to do, some of the others did. Shandon, calm and resolute, and Pen with anger in his eyes, and two or three of their comrades, who could still walk, went up to Hatteras.

"Captain!" said Shandon.

Hatteras, absorbed in thought, did not hear him.

"Captain!" repeated Shandon, touching his hand.

Hatteras drew himself up.

"What is it?" he said.

"Our fire is out!"

"What then?" answered Hatteras.

"If you mean to kill us with cold, you had better say so," said Shandon ironically.

"I mean," said Hatteras gravely, "to require every man to do his duty to the end."

"There's something higher than duty, captain--there's the right to one's own preservation. I repeat that the fire is out, and if it is not relighted, not one of us will be alive in two days."

"I have no fuel," answered Hatteras, with a hollow voice.

"Very well," cried Pen violently, "if you have no fuel, we must take it where we can!"

Hatteras grew pale with anger.

"Where?" said he.

"On board," answered the sailor insolently.

"On board!" echoed the captain, his fists closed, his eyes sparkling.

He had seized an axe, and he now raised it over Pen's head.

"Wretch!" he cried.

The doctor rushed between the captain and Pen; the axe fell to the ground, its sharp edge sinking into the flooring. Johnson, Bell, and Simpson were grouped round Hatteras, and appeared determined to give him their support. But lamentable and plaintive voices came from the beds.

"Some fire! Give us some fire!" cried the poor fellows.

Hatteras made an effort, and said calmly:

"If we destroy the brig, how shall we get back to England?"

"We might burn some of the rigging and the gunwale, sir," said Johnson.

"Besides, we should still have the boats left," answered Shandon;

"and we could build a smaller vessel with the remains of the old one!"

"Never!" answered Hatteras.

"But----" began several sailors, raising their voices.

"We have a great quantity of spirits of wine," answered Hatteras;

"burn that to the last drop."

"Ah, we didn't think of that!" said Johnson, with affected cheerfulness, and by the help of large wicks steeped in spirits he succeeded in raising the temperature a few degrees.

During the days that followed this melancholy scene the wind went round to the south, and the thermometer went up. Some of the men could leave the vessel during the least damp part of the day; but ophthalmia and scurvy kept the greater number on board; besides, neither fishing nor hunting was practicable. But it was only a short respite from the dreadful cold, and on the 25th, after an unexpected change in the wind, the mercury again froze; they were then obliged to have recourse to the spirits of wine thermometer, which never freezes. The doctor found, to his horror, that it marked 66 degrees below zero; men had never been able to support such a temperature. The ice spread itself in long tarnished mirrors on the floor; a thick fog invaded the common room; the damp fell in thick snow; they could no longer see one another; the extremities became blue as the heat of the body left them; a circle of iron seemed to be clasping their heads, and

made them nearly delirious. A still more fearful symptom was that their tongues could no longer articulate a word.

From the day they had threatened to burn his ship, Hatteras paced the deck for hours. He was guarding his treasures; the wood of the ship was his own flesh, and whoever cut a piece off cut off one of his limbs. He was armed, and mounted guard, insensible to the cold, the snow, and the ice, which stiffened his garments and enveloped him in granite armour. His faithful Dick accompanied him, and seemed to understand why he was there.

However, on Christmas Day he went down to the common room. The doctor, taking advantage of what energy he had left, went straight to him, and said--

"Hatteras, we shall all die if we get no fuel."

"Never!" said Hatteras, knowing what was coming.

"We must," said the doctor gently.

"Never!" repeated Hatteras with more emphasis still. "I will never consent! They can disobey me if they like!"

Johnson and Bell took advantage of the half-permission, and rushed on deck. Hatteras heard the wood crack under the axe. He wept. What a Christmas Day for Englishmen was that on board the *Forward*! The

thought of the great difference between their position and that of the happy English families who rejoiced in their roast beef, plum pudding, and mince pies added another pang to the miseries of the unfortunate crew. However, the fire put a little hope and confidence into the men; the boiling of coffee and tea did them good, and the next week passed less miserably, ending the dreadful year 1860; its early winter had defeated all Hatteras's plans.

On the 1st of January, 1861, the doctor made a discovery. It was not quite so cold, and he had resumed his interrupted studies; he was reading Sir Edward Belcher's account of his expedition to the Polar Seas; all at once a passage struck him; he read it again and again. It was where Sir Edward Belcher relates that after reaching the extremity of Queen's Channel he had discovered important traces of the passage and residence of men. "They were," said he, "very superior habitations to those which might be attributed to the wandering Esquimaux. The walls had foundations, the floors of the interior had been covered with a thick layer of fine gravel, and were paved. Reindeer, seal, and walrus bones were seen in great quantities. We found some coal." At the last words the doctor was struck with an idea; he carried the book to Hatteras and showed him the passage.

"They could not have found coal on this deserted coast," said Hatteras; "it is not possible!"

"Why should we doubt what Belcher says? He would not have recorded such a fact unless he had been certain and had seen it with his own

eyes."

"And what then, doctor?"

"We aren't a hundred miles from the coast where Belcher saw the coal, and what is a hundred miles' excursion? Nothing. Longer ones than that have often been made across the ice."

"We will go," said Hatteras.

Johnson was immediately told of their resolution, of which he strongly approved; he told his companions about it: some were glad, others indifferent.

"Coal on these coasts!" said Wall, stretched on his bed of pain.

"Let them go," answered Shandon mysteriously.

But before Hatteras began his preparations for the journey, he wished to be exactly certain of the *Forward's* position. He was obliged to be mathematically accurate as to her whereabouts, because of finding her again. His task was very difficult; he went upon deck and took at different moments several lunar distances and the meridian heights of the principal stars. These observations were hard to make, for the glass and mirrors of the instrument were covered with ice from Hatteras's breath; he burnt his eyelashes more than once by touching the brass of the glasses. However, he obtained exact bases

for his calculations, and came down to make them in the room. When his work was over, he raised his head in astonishment, took his map, pricked it, and looked at the doctor.

"What is it?" asked the latter.

"In what latitude were we at the beginning of our wintering?"

"We were in latitude 78 degrees 15 minutes, by longitude 95 degrees 35 minutes; exactly at the Frozen Pole."

"Well," said Hatteras, in a low tone, "our ice-field has been drifting! We are two degrees farther north and farther west, and three hundred miles at least from your store of coal!"

"And those poor fellows don't know," said the doctor.

"Hush!" said Hatteras, putting his finger on his lips.