

CHAPTER XXIX

ACROSS THE ICE

The little troop descended towards the south-east. Simpson drove the sledge. Dick helped him with zeal, and did not seem astonished at the new occupation of his companions. Hatteras and the doctor walked behind, whilst Bell went on in front, sounding the ice with his iron-tipped stick. The rising of the thermometer indicated approaching snow; it soon fell in thick flakes, and made the journey difficult for the travellers; it made them deviate from the straight line, and obliged them to walk slower; but, on an average, they made three miles an hour. The surface of the ice was unequal, and the sledge was often in danger of being overturned, but by great care it was kept upright.

Hatteras and his companions were clothed in skins more useful than elegant. Their heads and faces were covered with hoods, their mouths, eyes, and noses alone coming into contact with the air. If they had not been exposed the breath would have frozen their coverings, and they would have been obliged to take them off with the help of an axe--an awkward way of undressing. The interminable plain kept on with fatiguing monotony; icebergs of uniform aspect and hummocks whose irregularity ended by seeming always the same; blocks cast in the same mould, and icebergs between which tortuous valleys wound. The travellers spoke little, and marched on, compass in hand. It is

painful to open one's mouth in such an atmosphere; sharp icicles form immediately between one's lips, and the breath is not warm enough to melt them. Bell's steps were marked in the soft ground, and they followed them attentively, certain of being able to go where he had been before.

Numerous traces of bears and foxes crossed their path, but not an animal was seen that day. It would have been dangerous and useless to hunt them, as the sledge was sufficiently freighted. Generally in this sort of excursion travellers leave provision-stores along their route; they place them in hiding-places of snow, out of reach of animals; unload during the journey, and take up the provisions on their return. But Hatteras could not venture to do this on moveable ice-fields, and the uncertainty of the route made the return the same way exceedingly problematic. At noon Hatteras caused his little troop to halt under shelter of an ice-wall. Their breakfast consisted of pemmican and boiling tea; the latter beverage comforted the cold wayfarers. They set out again after an hour's rest. The first day they walked about twenty miles, and in the evening both men and dogs were exhausted. However, notwithstanding their fatigue, they were obliged to construct a snow-house in which to pass the night. It took about an hour and a half to build. Bell showed himself very skilful. The ice-blocks were cut out and placed above one another in the form of a dome; a large block at the top made the vault. Snow served for mortar and filled up the chinks. It soon hardened and made a single block of the entire structure. It was reached by a narrow opening, through which the doctor squeezed himself painfully, and the others

followed him. The supper was rapidly prepared with spirits of wine. The interior temperature of the snow-house was bearable, as the wind which raged outside could not penetrate. When their repast, which was always the same, was over, they began to think of sleep. A mackintosh was spread over the floor and kept them from the damp. Their stockings and shoes were dried by the portable grate, and then three of the travellers wrapped themselves up in their blankets, leaving the fourth to keep watch; he watched over the common safety, and prevented the opening getting blocked up, for if it did they would be buried alive.

Dick shared the snow-house; the other dogs remained outside, and after their supper they squatted down in the snow, which made them a blanket. The men were tired out with their day's walk, and soon slept. The doctor took his turn on guard at three o'clock in the morning. There was a tempest during the night, the gusts of which thickened the walls of the snow-house. The next day, at six o'clock, they set out again on their monotonous march. The temperature lowered several degrees, and hardened the ground so that walking was easier. They often met with mounds or cairns something like the Esquimaux hiding-places. The doctor had one demolished, and found nothing but a block of ice.

"What did you expect, Clawbonny?" said Hatteras. "Are we not the first men who have set foot here?"

"It's very likely we are, but who knows?" answered the doctor.

"I do not want to lose my time in useless search," continued the captain; "I want to be quick back to my ship, even if we don't find the fuel."

"I believe we are certain of doing that," said the doctor.

"I often wish I had not left the Forward," said Hatteras; "a captain's place is on board."

"Johnson is there."

"Yes; but--well, we must make haste, that's all."

The procession marched along rapidly; Simpson excited the dogs by calling to them; in consequence of a phosphorescent phenomenon they seemed to be running on a ground in flames, and the sledges seemed to raise a dust of sparks. The doctor went on in front to examine the state of the snow, but all at once he disappeared. Bell, who was nearest to him, ran up.

"Well, Mr. Clawbonny," he called out in anxiety, "where are you?"

"Doctor!" called the captain.

"Here, in a hole," answered a reassuring voice; "throw me a cord, and I shall soon be on the surface of the globe again."

They threw a cord to the doctor, who was at the bottom of a hole about ten feet deep; he fastened it round his waist, and his companions hauled him up with difficulty.

"Are you hurt?" asked Hatteras.

"Not a bit," answered the doctor, shaking his kind face, all covered with snow.

"But how did you tumble down there?"

"Oh, it was the refraction's fault," he answered laughing. "I thought I was stepping across about a foot's distance, and I fell into a hole ten feet deep! I never shall get used to it. It will teach us to sound every step before we advance. Ears hear and eyes see all topsy-turvy in this enchanted spot."

"Can you go on?" asked the captain.

"Oh, yes; the little fall has done me more good than harm."

In the evening the travellers had marched twenty-five miles; they were worn out, but it did not prevent the doctor climbing up an iceberg while the snow-house was being built. The full moon shone with extraordinary brilliancy in the clearest sky; the stars were singularly bright; from the top of the iceberg the view stretched over an immense plain, bristling with icebergs; they were of all sizes

and shapes, and made the field look like a vast cemetery, in which twenty generations slept the sleep of death. Notwithstanding the cold, the doctor remained a long time in contemplation of the spectacle, and his companions had much trouble to get him away; but they were obliged to think of rest; the snow-hut was ready; the four companions burrowed into it like moles, and soon slept the sleep of the just.

The next day and the following ones passed without any particular incident; the journey was easy or difficult according to the weather; when it was cold and clear they wore their moccasins and advanced rapidly, when damp and penetrating, their snow-shoes, and made little way. They reached thus the 15th of January; the moon was in her last quarter, and was only visible for a short time; the sun, though still hidden below the horizon, gave six hours of a sort of twilight, not sufficient to see the way by; they were obliged to stake it out according to the direction given by the compass. Bell led the way; Hatteras marched in a straight line behind him; then Simpson and the doctor, taking it in turns, so as only to see Hatteras, and keep in a straight line. But notwithstanding all their precautions, they deviated sometimes thirty or forty degrees; they were then obliged to stake it out again. On Sunday, the 15th of January, Hatteras considered he had made a hundred miles to the south; the morning was consecrated to the mending of different articles of clothing and encampment; divine service was not forgotten. They set out again at noon; the temperature was cold, the thermometer marked only 32 degrees below zero in a very clear atmosphere.

All at once, without warning of any kind, a vapour rose from the ground in a complete state of congelation, reaching a height of about ninety feet, and remaining stationary; they could not see a foot before them; it clung to their clothing, and bristled it with ice. Our travellers, surprised by the frost-rime, had all the same idea--that of getting near one another. They called out, "Bell!" "Simpson!" "This way, doctor!" "Where are you, captain?" But no answers were heard; the vapour did not conduct sound. They all fired as a sign of rallying. But if the sound of the voice appeared too weak, the detonation of the firearms was too strong, for it was echoed in all directions, and produced a confused rumble without appreciable direction. Each acted then according to his instincts. Hatteras stopped, folded his arms, and waited. Simpson contented himself with stopping his sledge. Bell retraced his steps, feeling the traces with his hands. The doctor ran hither and thither, bumping against the icebergs, falling down, getting up, and losing himself more and more. At the end of five minutes he said:

"I can't go on like this! What a queer climate! It changes too suddenly, and the icicles are cutting my face. Captain! I say, captain!"

But he obtained no answer; he discharged his gun, and notwithstanding his thick gloves, burnt his hand with the trigger. During this operation he thought he saw a confused mass moving at a few steps from him.

"At last!" said he. "Hatteras! Bell! Simpson! Is it you? Answer, do!"

A hollow growl was the only answer.

"Whatever is that?" thought the doctor. The mass approached, and its outline was more distinctly seen. "Why, it's a bear!" thought the terrified doctor. It was a bear, lost too in the frost-rime, passing within a few steps of the men of whose existence it was ignorant. The doctor saw its enormous paws beating the air, and did not like the situation. He jumped back and the mass disappeared like a phantom. The doctor felt the ground rising under his feet; climbing on all-fours he got to the top of a block, then another, feeling the end with his stick. "It's an iceberg!" he said to himself: "if I get to the top I shall be saved." So saying he climbed to a height of about eighty feet; his head was higher than the frozen fog, of which he could clearly see the top. As he looked round he saw the heads of his three companions emerging from the dense fluid.

"Hatteras!"

"Doctor!"

"Bell!"

"Simpson!"

The four names were all shouted at the same time; the sky, lightened by a magnificent halo, threw pale rays which coloured the frost-rime

like clouds, and the summits of the icebergs seemed to emerge from liquid silver. The travellers found themselves circumscribed by a circle less than a hundred feet in diameter. Thanks to the purity of the upper layers of air, they could hear each other distinctly, and could talk from the top of their icebergs. After the first shots they had all thought the best thing they could do was to climb.

"The sledge!" cried the captain.

"It's eighty feet below us," answered Simpson.

"In what condition?"

"In good condition."

"What about the bear?" asked the doctor.

"What bear?" asked Bell.

"The bear that nearly broke my head," answered the doctor.

"If there is a bear we must go down," said Hatteras.

"If we do we shall get lost again," said the doctor.

"And our dogs?" said Hatteras.

At this moment Dick's bark was heard through the fog.

"That's Dick," said Hatteras; "there's something up; I shall go down."

Growls and barks were heard in a fearful chorus. In the fog it sounded like an immense humming in a wadded room. Some struggle was evidently going on.

"Dick! Dick!" cried the captain, re-entering the frost-rime.

"Wait a minute, Hatteras; I believe the fog is clearing off," called out the doctor. So it was, but lowering like the waters of a pond that is being emptied; it seemed to enter the ground from whence it sprang; the shining summits of the icebergs grew above it; others, submerged till then, came out like new islands; by an optical illusion the travellers seemed to be mounting with their icebergs above the fog. Soon the top of the sledge appeared, then the dogs, then about thirty other animals, then enormous moving masses, and Dick jumping about in and out of the fog.

"Foxes!" cried Bell.

"Bears!" shouted the doctor. "Five!"

"Our dogs! Our provisions!" cried Simpson. A band of foxes and bears had attacked the sledge, and were making havoc with the provisions. The instinct of pillage made them agree; the dogs barked furiously,

but the herd took no notice, and the scene of destruction was lamentable.

"Fire!" cried the captain, discharging his gun. His companions imitated him. Upon hearing the quadruple detonation the bears raised their heads, and with a comical growl gave the signal for departure; they went faster than a horse could gallop, and, followed by the herd of foxes, soon disappeared amongst the northern icebergs.