

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE DEATH OF SIMPSON

The travellers went on their weary way, each thinking of the discovery they had just made. Hatteras frowned with uneasiness.

"What can the Porpoise be?" he asked himself. "Is it a ship? and if so, what was it doing so near the Pole?"

At this thought he shivered, but not from the cold. The doctor and Bell only thought of the result their discovery might have for others or for themselves. But the difficulties and obstacles in their way soon made them oblivious to everything but their own preservation.

Simpson's condition grew worse; the doctor saw that death was near. He could do nothing, and was suffering cruelly on his own account from a painful ophthalmia which might bring on blindness if neglected. The twilight gave them enough light to hurt the eyes when reflected by the snow; it was difficult to guard against the reflection, for the spectacle-glasses got covered with a layer of opaque ice which obstructed the view, and when so much care was necessary for the dangers of the route, it was important to see clearly; however, the doctor and Bell took it in turns to cover their eyes or to guide the sledge. The soil was volcanic, and by its inequalities made it very

difficult to draw the sledge, the frame of which was getting worn out. Another difficulty was the effect of the uniform brilliancy of the snow; the ground seemed to fall beneath the feet of the travellers, and they experienced the same sensation as that of the rolling of a ship; they could not get accustomed to it, and it made them sleepy, and they often walked on half in a dream. Then some unexpected shock, fall, or obstacle would wake them up from their inertia, which afterwards took possession of them again.

On the 25th of January they began to descend, and their dangers increased. The least slip might send them down a precipice, and there they would have been infallibly lost. Towards evening an extremely violent tempest swept the snow-clad summits; they were obliged to lie down on the ground, and the temperature was so low that they were in danger of being frozen to death. Bell, with the help of Hatteras, built a snow-house, in which the poor fellows took shelter; there they partook of a little pemmican and warm tea; there were only a few gallons of spirits of wine left, and they were obliged to use them to quench their thirst, as they could not take snow in its natural state; it must be melted. In temperate countries, where the temperature scarcely falls below freezing point, it is not injurious; but above the Polar circle it gets so cold that it cannot be touched more than a red-hot iron; there is such a difference of temperature that its absorption produces suffocation. The Esquimaux would rather suffer the greatest torments than slake their thirst with snow.

The doctor took his turn to watch at three o'clock in the morning,

when the tempest was at its height; he was leaning in a corner of the snow-house, when a lamentable groan from Simpson drew his attention; he rose to go to him, and struck his head against the roof; without thinking of the accident he began to rub Simpson's swollen limbs; after about a quarter of an hour he got up again, and bumped his head again, although he was kneeling then.

"That's very queer," he said to himself.

He lifted his hand above his head, and felt that the roof was lowering.

"Good God!" he cried; "Hatteras! Bell!"

His cries awoke his companions, who got up quickly, and bumped themselves too; the darkness was thick.

"The roof is falling in!" cried the doctor.

They all rushed out, dragging Simpson with them; they had no sooner left their dangerous retreat, than it fell in with a great noise.

The poor fellows were obliged to take refuge under the tent covering, which was soon covered with a thick layer of snow, which, as a bad conductor, prevented the travellers being frozen alive. The tempest continued all through the night. When Bell harnessed the dogs the next morning he found that some of them had begun to eat their leather harness, and that two of them were very ill, and could not go much further. However, the caravan set out again; there only remained sixty

miles to go. On the 26th, Bell, who went on in front, called out suddenly to his companions. They ran up to him, and he pointed to a gun leaning against an iceberg.

"A gun!" cried the doctor.

Hatteras took it; it was loaded and in good condition.

"The men from the Porpoise can't be far off," said the doctor.

Hatteras remarked that the gun was of American manufacture, and his hands crisped the frozen barrel. He gave orders to continue the march, and they kept on down the mountain slope. Simpson seemed deprived of all feeling; he had no longer the strength to complain. The tempest kept on, and the sledge proceeded more and more slowly; they scarcely made a few miles in twenty-four hours, and in spite of the strictest economy, the provisions rapidly diminished; but as long as they had enough for the return journey, Hatteras kept on.

On the 27th they found a sextant half-buried in the snow, then a leather bottle; the latter contained brandy, or rather a lump of ice, with a ball of snow in the middle, which represented the spirit; it could not be used. It was evident that they were following in the steps of some poor shipwrecked fellows who, like them, had taken the only practicable route. The doctor looked carefully round for other cairns, but in vain. Sad thoughts came into his mind; he could not help thinking that it would be a good thing not to meet with their

predecessors; what could he and his companions do for them? They wanted help themselves; their clothes were in rags, and they had not enough to eat. If their predecessors were numerous they would all die of hunger. Hatteras seemed to wish to avoid them, and could he be blamed? But these men might be their fellow-countrymen, and, however slight might be the chance of saving them, ought they not to try it? He asked Bell what he thought about it, but the poor fellow's heart was hardened by his own suffering, and he did not answer. Clawbonny dared not question Hatteras, so he left it to Providence.

In the evening of the 27th, Simpson appeared to be at the last extremity; his limbs were already stiff and frozen; his difficult breathing formed a sort of mist round his head, and convulsive movements announced that his last hour was come. The expression of his face was terrible, desperate, and he threw looks of powerless anger towards the captain. He accused him silently, and Hatteras avoided him and became more taciturn and wrapped up in himself than ever. The following night was frightful; the tempest redoubled in violence; the tent was thrown down three times, and the snowdrifts buried the poor fellows, blinded them, froze them, and wounded them with the sharp icicles struck off the surrounding icebergs. The dogs howled lamentably. Simpson lay exposed to the cruel atmosphere. Bell succeeded in getting up the tent again, which, though it did not protect them from the cold, kept out the snow. But a more violent gust blew it down a fourth time, and dragged it along in its fury.

"Oh, we can't bear it any longer!" cried Bell.

"Courage, man, courage!" answered the doctor, clinging to him in order to prevent themselves rolling down a ravine. Simpson's death-rattle was heard. All at once, with a last effort, he raised himself up and shook his fist at Hatteras, who was looking at him fixedly, then gave a fearful cry, and fell back dead in the midst of his unfinished threat.

"He is dead!" cried the doctor.

"Dead!" repeated Bell.

Hatteras advanced towards the corpse, but was driven back by a gust of wind.

Poor Simpson was the first victim to the murderous climate, the first to pay with his life the unreasonable obstinacy of the captain. The dead man had called Hatteras an assassin, but he did not bend beneath the accusation. A single tear escaped from his eyes and froze on his pale cheek. The doctor and Bell looked at him with a sort of terror. Leaning on his stick, he looked like the genius of the North, upright in the midst of the whirlwind, and frightful in his immobility.

He remained standing thus till the first dawn of twilight, bold, tenacious, indomitable, and seemed to defy the tempest that roared round him.