

CHAPTER XXXII

THE RETURN

The wind went down about six in the morning, and turning suddenly north cleared the clouds from the sky; the thermometer marked 33 degrees below zero. The first rays of the sun reached the horizon which they would gild a few days later. Hatteras came up to his two dejected companions, and said to them, in a low, sad voice:

"We are still more than sixty miles from the spot indicated by Sir Edward Belcher. We have just enough provisions to allow us to get back to the brig. If we go on any further we shall meet with certain death, and that will do good to no one. We had better retrace our steps."

"That is a sensible resolution, Hatteras," answered the doctor; "I would have followed you as far as you led us, but our health gets daily weaker; we can scarcely put one foot before the other; we ought to go back."

"Is that your opinion too, Bell?" asked Hatteras.

"Yes, captain," answered the carpenter.

"Very well," said Hatteras; "we will take two days' rest. We want

it. The sledge wants mending. I think we had better build ourselves a snow-house, and try to regain a little strength."

After this was settled, our three men set to work with vigour. Bell took the necessary precautions to assure the solidity of the construction, and they soon had a good shelter at the bottom of the ravine where the last halt had taken place. It had cost Hatteras a great effort to interrupt his journey. All their trouble and pain lost! A useless excursion, which one man had paid for with his life. What would become of the crew now that all hope of coal was over? What would Shandon think? Notwithstanding all these painful thoughts, he felt it impossible to go on any further. They began their preparations for the return journey at once. The sledge was mended; it had now only two hundred pounds weight to carry. They mended their clothes, worn-out, torn, soaked with snow, and hardened by the frost; new moccasins and snow-shoes replaced those that were worn out. This work took the whole day of the 29th and the morning of the 30th; the three travellers rested and comforted themselves as well as they could.

During the thirty-six hours passed in the snow-house and on the icebergs of the ravine, the doctor had noticed that Dick's conduct was very strange; he crept smelling about a sort of rising in the ground made by several layers of ice; he kept wagging his tail with impatience, and trying to draw the attention of his master to the spot. The doctor thought that the dog's uneasiness might be caused by the presence of Simpson's body, which he and his companions had

not yet had time to bury. He resolved to put it off no longer, especially as they intended starting early the next morning. Bell and the doctor took their pickaxes and directed their steps towards the lowest part of the ravine; the mound indicated by Dick seemed to be a good spot to place the corpse in; they were obliged to bury it deep to keep it from the bears. They began by removing the layer of soft snow, and then attacked the ice. At the third blow of his pickaxe the doctor broke some hard obstacle; he took out the pieces and saw that it was a glass bottle; Bell discovered a small biscuit-sack with a few crumbs at the bottom.

"Whatever does this mean?" said the doctor.

"I can't think," answered Bell, suspending his work.

They called Hatteras, who came immediately. Dick barked loudly, and began scratching at the ice.

"Perhaps we have found a provision-store," said the doctor.

"It is possible," said Bell.

"Go on," said Hatteras.

Some remains of food were drawn out, and a case a quarter full of pemmican.

"If it is a hiding-place," said Hatteras, "the bears have been before us. See, the provisions are not intact."

"I am afraid so," answered the doctor; "for----"

He was interrupted by a cry from Bell, who had come upon a man's leg, stiffened and frozen.

"A corpse," cried the doctor.

"It is a tomb," answered Hatteras.

When the corpse was disinterred it turned out to be that of a sailor, about thirty years old, perfectly preserved. He wore the clothes of an Arctic navigator. The doctor could not tell how long he had been dead. But after this corpse, Bell discovered a second, that of a man of fifty, bearing the mark of the suffering that had killed him on his face.

"These are not buried bodies," cried the doctor, "the poor fellows were surprised by death just as we find them."

"You are right, Mr. Clawbonny," answered Bell.

"Go on! go on!" said Hatteras.

Bell obeyed tremblingly; for who knew how many human bodies the mound

contained?

"These men have been the victims of the same accident that almost happened to us," said the doctor. "Their snow-house tumbled in. Let us see if any one of them is still alive."

The place was soon cleared, and Bell dug out a third body, that of a man of forty, who had not the cadaverous look of the others. The doctor examined him and thought he recognised some symptoms of existence.

"He is alive!" he cried.

Bell and he carried the body into the snow-house whilst Hatteras, unmoved, contemplated their late habitation. The doctor stripped the resuscitated man and found no trace of a wound on him. He and Bell rubbed him vigorously with oakum steeped in spirits of wine, and they saw signs of returning consciousness; but the unfortunate man was in a state of complete prostration, and could not speak a word. His tongue stuck to his palate as if frozen. The doctor searched his pockets, but they were empty. He left Bell to continue the friction, and rejoined Hatteras. The captain had been down into the depths of the snow-house, and had searched about carefully. He came up holding a half-burnt fragment of a letter. These words were on it:

... tamont

... orpoise

... w York.

"Altamont!" cried the doctor, of the ship Porpoise, of New York."

"An American," said Hatteras.

"I'll save him," said the doctor, "and then we shall know all about it."

He went back to Altamont whilst Hatteras remained pensive. Thanks to his attentions, the doctor succeeded in recalling the unfortunate man to life, but not to feeling; he neither saw, heard, nor spoke, but he lived. The next day Hatteras said to the doctor:

"We must start at once."

"Yes. The sledge is not loaded; we'll put the poor fellow on it and take him to the brig."

"Very well; but we must bury these bodies first."

The two unknown sailors were placed under the ruins of the snow-house again, and Simpson's corpse took Altamont's place. The three travellers buried their companion, and at seven o'clock in the morning they set out again. Two of the Greenland dogs were dead, and Dick offered himself in their place. He pulled with energy.

During the next twenty days the travellers experienced the same incidents as before. But as it was in the month of February they did not meet with the same difficulty from the ice. It was horribly cold, but there was not much wind. The sun reappeared for the first time on the 31st of January, and every day he stopped longer above the horizon. Bell and the doctor were almost blinded and half-lame; the carpenter was obliged to walk upon crutches. Altamont still lived, but he was in a state of complete insensibility. The doctor took great care of him, although he wanted attention himself; he was getting ill with fatigue. Hatteras thought of nothing but his ship. What state should he find it in?

On the 24th of February he stopped all of a sudden. A red light appeared about 300 paces in front, and a column of black smoke went up to the sky.

"Look at that smoke! my ship is burning," said he with a beating heart.

"We are three miles off yet," said Bell; "it can't be the Forward."

"Yes it is," said the doctor; "the mirage makes it seem nearer."

The three men, leaving the sledge to the care of Dick, ran on, and in an hour's time were in sight of the ship. She was burning in the midst of the ice, which melted around her. A hundred steps farther a man met them, wringing his hands before the Forward in flames. It was Johnson. Hatteras ran to him.

"My ship! My ship!" cried he.

"Is that you, captain? Oh, don't come any nearer," said Johnson.

"What is it?" said Hatteras.

"The wretches left forty-eight hours ago, after setting fire to the ship."

"Curse them!" cried Hatteras.

A loud explosion was then heard; the ground trembled; the icebergs fell upon the ice-field; a column of smoke went up into the clouds, and the Forward blew up. The doctor and Bell reached Hatteras, who out of the depths of despair cried:

"The cowards have fled! The strong will succeed! Johnson and Bell, you are courageous. Doctor, you have science. I have faith. To the North Pole! To the North Pole!"

His companions heard these energetic words, and they did them good; but it was a terrible situation for these four men, alone, under the 80th degree of latitude, in the midst of the Polar Regions!

END OF PART I OF THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN HATTERAS

