

THE FROZEN PIKE.

BY W. CLARK RUSSELL.

CHAPTER XVI.

[Continued.]

I HEAR OF A GREAT TREASURE.

I lighted a pipe and sat pondering his story a little while. There was no doubt he had given me the exact truth so far as his relation of it went. As it was certain that the *Boa del Dragon* (as she was called) had been fixed in the ice for hard upon fifty years, the conclusion I formed was that she had been blown by some hundreds of leagues further south than the point to which the *Laughing Mary* had been driven; and that this ice in which she was entangled was not then drifting northwards, but was in the grasp of some polar current that trended it south-easterly; that in due course it was carried to the Antarctic main of ice, where it lay compacted; after which, through stress of weather or by the agency of a particular temperature, a great mass of it broke away and started on that northward course which bore it of late magnitude take when they are ruptured from the frozen continent.

This theory may be disputed, but it matters not. My business is to relate what befell me; if I do my share honestly the candid reader will not, I believe, quarrel with me for not being able to explain everything as I go along.

While Monsieur Jules Tassard snored I thought on the situation. Now that I had a companion should I be able to escape from this horrid position? He had spoken of chests of silver—where was the treasure? In the run? There might be booty enough in the hold to make a great man, a fine gentleman of the world. It would be a noble ending to an amazing adventure to come off with as much money as would render me independent for life, and enable me to turn my back for ever upon the hardest calling to which the destiny of man can wed him.

I wished to see how the schooner lay and what change had befallen the ice in the night, and went on deck. It was blowing a whole gale of wind from the north-west. The schooner lay with a list of about fifteen degrees and her bows high cocked. I looked over the stern and saw that the ice had sunk there, and that there were twenty great and yawning seams where I had before noticed but one. A vast block of ice had fallen on the starboard side, and lay so close on the quarter that I could have sprung on to it. No other marked changes were observable, but there were a hundred sounds to assure me that neither the sea nor the gale was wholly wasting its strength upon this crystal territory, and that if I thought proper to climb the slope and expose myself to the wind, I should behold a face of ice somewhat different from what I had before gazed upon.

But the bitter cold held me back and I stepped into the cabin, and going to the cook-room, found Tassard still heavily sleeping. The coal in the corner was low, and as it wanted an hour of dinner-time I took the lantern and a bucket and went into the forepeak, and after several journeys stocked up a good provision of coal in the corner. I made noise enough, but Tassard slept on.

The going into the forepeak had put my mind upon the treasure, which as I had gathered from the Frenchman's narrative, was somewhere hidden in the schooner—in the run, as I doubted not; I mean in the hold, under the lazarette, for you will recollect that, being weary and half-perished with the cold, I had turned my back on that dark part after having looked into the powder-room. All the time I was fetching the coal and dressing the dinner my imagination was on fire with fancies of the treasure in this ship. What, then, was the treasure in the run, if indeed it were there?

I was mechanically stirring the saucepan full of broth I had prepared, lost in these golden thoughts, when the Frenchman suddenly sat up on his mattress.

"Ha!" cried he, sniffing vigorously, "I smell something good—something I am ready for. There is no physis like sleep, and with that he stretched out his arms with a great yawn, then rose very agilely, kicking the clothes and mattress on one side and bringing a bench close to the furnace. "What time is it, sir?"

"Something after twelve by the captain's watch," said I, pulling it out and looking at it. "But 'tis guesswork time."

"The captain's watch?" cried he, with a short laugh. "You are modest, Mr. —"

"Paul Rodney," said I, seeing he stopped for my name.

"Yes, modest, Mr. Paul Rodney. That watch is yours, sir; and you mean it shall be yours."

"Well, Mr. Tassard," said I, colouring in spite of myself, though he could not witness the change in such a light as that, "I felt this pocket it was bound to go to the bottom ultimately, and—"

"Bah!" he interrupted, with a violent flourish of the hand. "Let us leave the schooner, if possible; there will be more than one doubt for your pocket, more than one doubt for your purse. Meanwhile, to dinner! My stupor has converted me into an empty-headed, and it will take me a fortnight of hard eating to feel that I have broken my fast."

With a blow of the chopper he struck off a lump of the frozen wine, and then fell to eating perhaps as a man might be expected to eat who had not had a meal for eight-and-forty years.

"There are two of your companions on deck," said I.

He started.

"Frozen," I continued; "they'll be the bodies of Trentanove and Joam Barros!"

He nodded.

"There is no reason why they should be dead than you were. It is true that Barros has been on deck whilst you have been below; but after you pass a certain degree of cold fiercer rigours cannot signify."

"What do you propose?" said he, looking at me oddly.

"Why, that we should bring them to

the fire and rub them, and bring them to life we can."

"Why?"

I was staggered by his indifference, for I had believed he would have shown himself very eager to restore his old companions and shipmates to life. I was searching for an answer to his strange inquiry, "Why," when he proceeded—

"First of all, my friend Trentanove was stone blind, and Barros nearly blind. Unless you could return them their sight with their life they would curse you for disturbing them. Better the blackness of death than the blackness of life."

"There is the body of the captain," said I.

He grinned.

"Let them sleep," said he. "Do you know that they are cutthroats, who would reward your kindness with the point of their sword? Of all desperate villains I never met the like of Barros. He loved blood even better than money. He'd quench his thirst before an engagement with gunpowder mixed in brandy. I once saw him choke a man—but he is very well—leave him to his repose."

In the glow of the fire he looked uncommonly sardonic and wild, with his long beard, bald head, flowing hair, shaggy brows, and little cunning eyes, which seemed in their smallness to share in his grin, and yet did not; and though to be sure he was some one to talk to and to make plans with for his escape, yet I felt that if he were to fall into a stupor again it would not be my hands that should chafe him into being.

"You knew those men in life," said I. "If the others are of the same pattern as the Portuguese, by all means let them lie frozen."

"But, my friend," said he, calling me *mon ami*, which I translate, "that's not it either. Do you know the value of the booty in this schooner?"

I answered, "No, how was I to know it? I had met with nothing but wearing apparel, and some pieces of money, and a few watches in the forecastle."

He knit his brows with a fierce suspicious gleam in his eyes.

"But you have searched the vessel?" he cried.

"I have searched, as you call it—that is, I have crawled through the hold as far as the powder-room."

"And further aft?"

"No, not further aft."

His countenance cleared.

"You scared me," said he, fetching a deep breath. "I was afraid that some one had been beforehand with us. But it is not conceivable. No! we shall look for it presently, and we shall find it!"

"Find what, Mr. Tassard?" said I.

He held up the fingers of his right hand. "One, two, three, four, five—five chests of plate and money; one, two, three—three cases of virgin silver in ingots; one chest of gold ingots; one case of jewellery. In all—"

he paused to enter into a calculation, moving his lips briskly as he whispered to himself—"between ninety and one hundred thousand pounds of your English money."

I stifled the amazement his words excited, and said coldly, "You must have met with some rich ships."

"We did well," he answered. My memory is good—he counted afresh on his fingers—"ten cases in all. Fortune is a strange weapon, Mr. Rodney. Who would think of finding her lodged on an iceberg? Now bring those others up there to life, and you make us five. What would follow, think you? What but this?"

He raised his beard and stroked his throat with the sharp of his hand.

Then, swallowing a great draught of brandy, he rose and stopped to listen.

"It is blowing hard," said he; "the harder the better. I want to see this island knocked into bits. Every sea is as good as a pickaxe. Hark! there are those cracking noises I used to hear before I fell into a stupor. Where do you sleep?"

I told him.

"My berth is the third," said he. "I wish to smoke, and will fetch my pipe."

He took the lantern and went aft, acting as if he had left that berth an hour ago, and I understood in the face of this ready recollection of his memory how impossible it would be ever to make him believe he had been practically lifeless since the year 1753. When he returned he had on a hairy cap, with large covers for the ears, and a big flap behind that fell to below his collar, and was almost as long as his hair. He wanted but a couple of muskets and an umbrella to closely resemble Robinson Crusoe, as he is made to figure in most of the cuts I have seen. He produced a pipe of the Dutch pattern, with a bowl carved into a death's head, and great enough to hold a cake of tobacco. The skull might have been a child's for size, and though it was dyed with tobacco juice and the top blackened with the live coals which had been held to it, it was so finely carved that it looked very ghastly and terribly real in his hand as he sat puffing at it.

He eyed me steadfastly whilst he smoked, as if critically taking stock of me, and presently said, "The devil hath an odd way of ordering matters. What particular merit have I that I should have been the one hit upon by you to-day? Had you brought any one of the others to, he would have advised you against reviving me, and I should have passed out of my frosty sleep into death as quietly, say, and as painlessly, as that puff of smoke melts into clear air."

"Then perhaps you do not think you are obliged by my awakening you to life?" said I.

"Yes my friend, I am much obliged," said he with vivacity. "Any fool can die. To live is the true business of life. Mark what you do; you make me know tobacco again, you enable me to eat and drink, and these things are pleasures which were denied me in that cabin there. You recall me to the enjoyment of my gains, nay, of more—of my own and the gains of our company. You make me, as you make yourself, a rich man; the world opens before me anew, and very brilliantly—to be sure, I am

obliged."

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He flourished his pipe, and it was like the flight of Death through the fire-fintured air.

"That must come. We are two—Yesterday you were one, and I can understand your despair. But these arms—stipor has not wasted so much as the dark line of a finger-nail of muscle. You, too, are no girl. Courage! between us we shall manage. How long is it since you sailed from England?"

"We sailed last month a year from the Thames for Calico."

"And what is the news?" said he, taking a pannikin of wine from the oven and sipping it. "Last year! The twelve years since I was in Paris and three years since we had news from Europe."

News! thought I; to tell this man the news, as he calls it, would oblige me to travel over fifty years of history.

"Why, Mr. Tassard," said I, there's plenty of things happening, you know, for Europe's full of kings and queens, and two or more of them are nearly always at loggerheads; but sailors—merchants like myself—hear little of what goes on. We know the name of our own sovereign and what wages sailors are getting; that's about it, sir. In fact, at this moment I could tell you more about Chili and Peru than England and France."

"Is there war between our nations?" he asked.

"Yes," said I.

"Ha!" he cried, "I doubt if this time you will come off so easily. You have good men in Hawke and Anson; but Jouguere and St. George, hey? and Macdon, Celler, Letendier?"

He shook his head knowingly, and an air of complacency, that would be indecipherable but for the word French, overspread his face. I knew the name of Jouguere as an admiral who had fought us in 1748 or thereabouts; of the others I had never heard. But I held my peace, which I suppose he put down to good manners, for he changed the subject and told me a story of an action between this schooner and a French Indianman. I will not repeat it; it was mere butchery, with features of diabolic cruelty; but what affected me more violently than the horrors of the narrative was his cool and his easy recital of his own and the deeds of his companions. You saw that he had no more conscience in him than the death's head he puffed at, and that his idea of there was no true greatness to be met with out of enormity. Well, thought I, as I stepped to the corner for some coal, if I was afraid of this creature when he was dead, to what condition of mind shall I be reduced by his being alive!

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