

THE FROZEN FIRAR. BY W. CLARK RUSSELL.

I don't design to weary you with a close account of our proceedings. How we opened the maindeck hatch, rigged up tackles, clapping purchases on to the falls, as the captain was hard frozen and immovable; how we hoisted the powder-barrels on deck and then, by tackles on the foreyard, lowered them over the side; how we filled a number of bags which we found in the forecabin with powder; how we measured the cracks in the ice and sawed a couple of spar studding-sails into lengths to serve as beams whereby to poise the barrels and bags; would make but sailor's talk, half of which would be unintelligible and the rest wearisome.

When we went over the side to roll our first barrel of powder to the spot where we meant to lower it, the Frenchman marched up to the figure of Trenton which was near it, and with no more reverence than a boy would show in throwing a stone at a jacksnipe, tumbled him into the chain. He then stepped up to the body of the Portuguese boatwain, dragged him to the same figure, and rolled him into it.

"There!" cried he; "now they are properly buried."

And with this he went coolly on with his work. It blew a small breeze all day from the southwest, the weather keeping fine. It was ten o'clock in the morning when we started on our labour, and the sun had been sunk a few minutes by the time we had rigged the last whip for the lowering and poising of the powder. This left us nothing to do in the morning but light the matches, lower the powder into position, and then withdraw to the schooner and await the issue.

Next morning I went to the cook-room very early and lighted the fire; my companion presently arrived, and we sat down on our morning meal, which being soon over I rose and said, "Let us now see what the gunpowder is going to do for us."

He exclaimed briskly, "Ay, now for the great experiment," and made for the companion-steps with an air of bustle.

The wind as before was in the southwest, blowing with much weight. We got upon the ice, and went to work to fix matches to the barrels and bags, and to sling them by the beams we had contrived ready for lowering when the matches were fired, and this occupied us the best part of two hours. When all was ready I fired the first match, and we lowered the barrel smartly to the scope of line we had settled upon; so with the others, as well as the bags. We then returned to the schooner, the Frenchman breaking into a run and tumbling over the rail in his alarm with the dexterity of a monkey.

Each match was supposed to burn about an hour. It was three or four minutes past the hour and I was looking breathlessly at my watch when the first of the explosions took place. Before the ear could well receive the shock of the blast the whole of the barrels exploded along with some twelve or fourteen parcels. Tassard, who stood beside me, fell on his face, and I believed he had been killed. It was so hellish a thunder that I suppose the blowing up of a first-rate could not make a more frightful roar of noise. A kind of twilight was caused by the rise of the volumes of white smoke out of the ice. The schooner shook with such a convulsion that I was persuaded she had been split. Vast showers of splinters of ice fell as if from the sky, and rained like arrows through the smoke, but if there was any great blocks up where they did not touch the ship. Meanwhile, the other parcels were exploding in their places, sometimes two and three at a time, sending a sort of sickening spasm and throes through the fabric of the vessel, and you heard the most extraordinary grinding noises rising out of the ice all about, as though the mighty rupture of the powder cracked through leagues of the island. I durst not look forth till all the powder had burst, lest I should be struck by some flying piece of ice, but unless the schooner was injured below she was as sound as before, and in the exact same posture, as if adrift in harbour, only that of course her stern lay low with the slope of her bed.

I called to Tassard and he lifted his head.

"Are you hurt?" said I.

"No, no," he answered. "Tis a Spaniard's trick to fling down to a broadside. Body of St. Joseph, what a furious explosion!" and so saying he crawled into the companion and squatted beside me. "What has it done for us?"

"I don't know yet," said I; "but I believe the schooner is uninjured. That was a powerful shock!" I cried, as a half-dozen of bags blew up together in the crevices deep down.

The thunder and tumult of the rending ice accompanied by the heavy explosions of the gunpowder so dulled the hearing that it was difficult to speak. That the mines had accomplished our end was not yet to be known; but there could not be the least doubt that they had not only occasioned tremendous ruptures low down in the ice, but that the volcanic influence was extending far beyond its first effects by making one split produce another, one weak part give way and create other weak places, and so on, all round about us and under our keel, as was clearly to be gathered by the shivering and spasms of the schooner, and by the growls, roars, blasts, and huddle of terrifying sounds which arose from the frozen floor.

It was twenty minutes after the hour at which the mines had been framed to explode when the last parcel burst; but we waited another quarter of an hour to make sure that it was the last, during all which time the growling and roaring noises deep down continued, as if there was a battle of a thousand lions raging in the vaults and hollows underneath. The smoke had been settled away by the wind, and the prospect was clear. We ran below to see to the fire and receive five minutes of heat into our chilled bodies, and then returned to view the scene.

I looked first over the starboard side and saw the great split that had happened in the night torn in places into immense yawns and gulfs by the fall of vast masses of rock out of its sides; but what most delighted me was the hollow sound of washing water. I lifted my hand and listened.

"Tis the swell of the sea flowing into the opening!" I exclaimed.

"That means," said Tassard, "that this side of the block is dislocated from the main."

"Yes," cried I, "And if the powder ahead of the bows has done its work the heave of the ocean will do the rest."

We made our way on to the forecabin over a deep bed of splinters of ice, lying like wood-shavings upon the deck, and I took notice as I walked that every gorgeous crystal pendant that had before adorned the yards, rigging, and spars had been shaken off. I had expected to see a wonderful spectacle of havoc in the ice where the barrels of gunpowder had been poised, but saving many scores of cracks where none was before, and vast ragged gashes in the mouths of the crevices down which the barrels had been lowered, the scene was much as heretofore.

The Frenchman stared and exclaimed, "What has the powder done? I see only a few cracks."

"What it may have done, I don't know," I answered; "but depend on it such heavy charges of powder must have burst to some purpose. The dislocation will be below; and so much the better, for 'tis there the ice must assume asunder if this block is to go free."

He gazed about him, and then rapping out a string of oaths, English, Italian and French, for he swore in all the languages he spoke, which, he once told me, were five, he declared that for his part he considered the powder wasted, that we'd have done as well to fling a hand-grenade into a fissure, that a thousand barrels of powder would be but as a popgun for rending the schooner's bed from the main, and in short, with several insulting looks and a face black with rage and disappointment, gave me very plainly to know that I had not only played the fool myself, but had made a fool of him, and that he was heartily sorry he had ever given himself any trouble to contrive the cursed mines or to assist me in a ridiculous project that might have resulted in blowing the schooner to pieces and ourselves with it.

I glanced at him with a sneer, but took no further notice of his insolence. It was not only that he was contemptible in all respects, a liar, a rogue, a thief, a poltroon, hoary in twenty whiffs of vice, there was something so unearthly about a creature that had been as good as dead for eight-and-forty years, that it was impossible anything he said could affect me as the rancorous tongue of another man would. I feared and hated him because I knew that in intent he was already my assassin; but the mere insolences of so incredible a creature could not find me imperturbable.

And perhaps in the present instance my own disappointment put me into some small posture of sympathy with his passion. Had he asked before the explosions happened what I expected, I don't know that I should have found any answer to make; and yet, though I could not have expressed my expectations, which after all were but hopes, I was bitterly vexed when I looked over the bows and found in the scene nothing that appeared answerable to the uncommon forces we had employed. Nevertheless, I felt sure that my remark to the Frenchman was sound. A great show of upborne rocks and fragments of ice might have satisfied the eye; but the real work of the mines was wanted below; and since the force of the mighty explosion must needs expend itself somewhere, it was absurd to wish to see its effects in a part where its volcanic agency would be of little or no use.

"There is nothing to be seen by staring!" exclaimed the Frenchman presently, speaking very sullenly. "I am hungry and freezing, and shall go below!" And with that he turned his back and made off, growling in his throat as he went.

I got upon the ice and stepped very carefully to the starboard side and looked down the vast split there. The sea in consequence of the slope did not come so far, but I could hear the wash of the water very plainly. It was certain that the valley in which we lay was wholly disconnected from the main ice on this side. I passed to the larboard quarter, and here too were cracks wide and deep enough to satisfy me that its hold was weak. It was forward of the bows where the barrels had been exploded that the ice was thickest and had the firmest grasp; but its surface was violently and heavily cracked by the explosions, and I thought to myself if the fissures below are as numerous there certainly the swell of the sea ought to fetch the whole mass away. But I was now half frozen myself and pining for warmth. It was after one o'clock. The wind was piping freshly, and the great heavy clouds in swarms drove stately across the sky.

"It may blow to-night," thought I; "and if the wind hangs as it is, just such a sea as may do our business will be set running." And thus musing I entered the ship and went below.

(To be continued.)

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NOTICE. John Fotheringham Esq. J. P. is authorized to collect all accounts due to the undersigned in New Brunswick and generally to act for us in clearing our business here.

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