

THE FROZEN PIKERS

BY W. CLARK RUSSELL, CHAPTER VII. [Continued.]

Who had this man been in life? How had he fallen into this pass? How long had he been dead there, seated as I saw him?

These were speculations not to be resolved by conjecture. On looking at the rock against which he leaned and observing its curvature, it seemed to me that it had formed part of a cave, or of some large, deep hole of ice; and this I was sure must have been the case, for it is certain that, had this body remained long unsheltered, it must have been hidden by the snow.

I concluded then that the unhappy man had been cast away upon this ice whilst it was under bleaker heights than these parallels, and that he had crawled into a hollow, and perished in that melancholy sitting posture. But in what year had his fate come upon him? I had made several voyages into distant places in my time and seen a great variety of people; but I had never met any man habituated as that body. He had the appearance of a Spanish or French cut-throat of the middle of last century, and of earlier times yet, and his large fine hat, handsome cloak and boots, coupled with the villainous cast of his countenance and the frightful appearance of his long hair gave him, rendered him to my notions the completest figure that could be imagined of one of those rogues who earned their living as pirates.

Thinking I might find something on his person to acquaint me with his story or that would furnish me with some idea of the date of his being cast away, I pulled his cloak aside and searched his pockets. His legs were thickly cased in two or three pairs of breeches, the outer pair being of a dark green cloth. He also wore a handsome red waistcoat, laced, and a stout coat of a kind of frieze. In his coat pocket I found a silver tobacco-box, a small glass flask fitted with a silver band and half full of an amber-colored liquor, hard froze, and in his waistcoat pocket a gold watch, shaped like an apple, the back curiously chased and inlaid with jewels of several kinds, forming a small letter M. The hands pointed to twenty minutes after three. A key of a strange shape and a number of seals, trinkets, and the like, were attached to the watch.

These things, together with a knife, a key, a thick plain silver ring, and some Spanish pieces in gold and silver were what I found on this man. There was nothing to tell me who he was nor how long he had been on the island. The searching him was the most disagreeable job I ever undertook in my life. His iron-like rigidity made him seem to resist me, and the swaying of his back against the rock to the motions of my hand was so full of life that twice I quitted him, frightened by it. On touching his naked hand by accident I discovered that the flesh of it moved upon the bones as you pull a glove off and on, I had had enough of him, and walked away feeling sick. If he had companions, and they were like him, I did not want to see them, unless it was that I might satisfy my curiosity as to the time they had been here. I determined, however, on my way back to take his cloak, which would make me a comfortable rug in the boat, and also the watch, flask, and tobacco-box; for if I was drowned they could go to the bottom of the sea, which was their certain destination if I left them in his pocket; and if I came off with them, then the money they would bring me must somewhat lighten the loss of my clothes and property in the brig.

hundred feet. Northwards the range sloped gradually, with such a shelving of its hinder part that I could catch a glimpse of a little space of the blue sea that way. From this I perceived that whatever thickness and surface of ice lay southwards, in the north it was attenuated to the shape of a wedge, so that its extreme breadth where it projected its cape or extremity would not exceed a musket shot.

If I had not seen the tract of dark blue water in the north-east, I might have imagined that this island stretched as far into the east and north as it did in the south and west. And one thing I quickly enough understood: that if I wanted to behold the ocean on the east side of the ice I should have to journey the breadth of the range, which here, where I was, might mean one or five miles, for the blocks and lumps hid the view, and how far out the edge of the cliffs on the other side might be I could not therefore gather. This was not to be dreamt of, and therefore to this extent my climb had been useless.

The wind blew from the west of north, and was an exquisitely frosty wind, despite the quarter whence it came. It swept in moans among the rocks, and there were tones in it that recalled the stormy mutterings we had heard in the blast which came upon the brig before the storm boiled down upon her. But my imagination was now so tight-strung as to be unwholesomely and unreasonably responsive to impulses and influences which at another time I had not noticed. There were a few heavy clouds in the north-east, so steam-like that methought they borrowed their complexion from the snow on the island's cape there. I was pretty sure, however, that there was wind behind them, for if the roll of the ocean did not signify heavy weather near to, then what else it betokened I could not imagine.

I cannot express to you how the very soul within me shrank from putting to sea in the little boat. There was no longer the support of the excitement and terror of escaping from a sinking vessel. I stood upon an island as solid as land, and the very sense of security it imparted rendered the boat an object of terror, and the obligation upon me to launch into yonder mighty space as frightful as a sentence of death. Yet I could not but consider that it would be equally shocking to me to be locked up in this slowly crumbling body of ice—may, tenfold more shocking, and that if I had to choose between the boat and this hideous solitude and pure starvation, I would cheerfully accept fifty times over again the perils of a navigation in my tiny ark.

leant upon the rail with a slight upwards inclination of his head, as though he were in the act of looking fully up to hail me. His posture was even more lifelike than that of the man under the rock, but his garment of snow robbed him of that reality which had startled me in the other; and the instant I saw him I knew him to be dead. He was the only figure visible. The whole body of the vessel was frosted by the snow into the glassy aspect of the spars and rigging, and the sunshine striking down made a beautiful prismatic picture of the silent ship.

She was a very old craft. The snow had moulded itself upon her and enlarged without spoiling her form. I found her age in the structure of her bows, the head-boards of which curved very low round to the top of the stem, forming a kind of well there, the afterpart of which was framed by the forecastle bulkhead, after the fashion of shipbuilding in vogue in the reign of Anne and the first two Georges. Her topmasts were standing, but her jibboom was rigged in. I could find no other evidence of her people having snuggled her for these winter quarters, in which she had been manifestly lying for years and years. I traced the outlines of six small cannons covered with snow, but resting with clean-sculptured forms in their white coats; a considerable piece of ordnance aft, and several petaroses of swivel-pieces upon the after-bulwark rails. Gaits and booms were in their places, and the sails furled upon them. The figuration of the main hatch showed a small square, and there was a companion or hatch-cover abaft the mainmast. There was no trace of a boat. She had a flush or level deck from the well in the bows to a fathom or so past the main shrouds; it was then broken by a short poop-deck, which went in a great spring or rise to the stern, that was after the pink style, very narrow and tall.

Though I write this description coldly, let it not be supposed that I was not violently agitated and astonished almost into the belief that what I beheld was a mere vision, a phenomenon. The sight of the body I examined did not nearly so greatly astound me as the spectacle of this ice-locked schooner. It was easy to account for the presence of a dead man. My own situation, indeed, sufficiently solved the riddle of that corpse. But the ship, perfect in all respects, was like a stroke of magic. She lay with a slight list or inclination to larboard, but on the whole tolerably upright, owing to the compulsion of her bilge. The hollow or ravine that formed her bed went with a sharp incline under her stern to the sea, which was visible from the top of the cliffs here through the split in the rocks. The shelving of the ice put the wash of the ocean at a distance of a few hundred feet from the schooner; but I calculated that the vessel's actual elevation above the water-line, supposing you to measure it with a plummet up and down, did not exceed twenty feet, if so much, the hollow in which she rested being above twenty feet deep.

It was very evident that the schooner had in years gone by got embayed in this ice when it was far to the southward, and had in course of time been built up in it by floating masses. For how old the ice about the poles may be who can tell? In those sunless worlds the frozen continents may well possess the antiquity of the land. And who shall name the monarch who filled the throne of Britain when this vast field broke away from the main and started on its stealthy navigation upwards?

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NORTHERN AND WESTERN RAILWAY. WINTER ARRANGEMENT. CHATHAM TO FREDERICTON, NOV. 28th, until further notice, trains will run on the above Railway, daily, as follows:

Table with 2 columns: CHATHAM TO FREDERICTON and FREDERICTON TO CHATHAM. Includes departure and arrival times for various stations like Blackville, Mactaquac, and Grand Falls.

CHATHAM RAILWAY. WINTER 1888-9. On and after MONDAY, NOV. 26TH, Trains will run on this Railway in connection with the Intercolonial Railway, daily, (Sunday nights excepted) as follows:

Table with 4 columns: LOCAL TIME TABLE, THROUGH TIME TABLE, GOING NORTH, and GOING SOUTH. Lists departure and arrival times for stations like Chatham, Blackville, and Fredericton.

CONNECTIONS. Close connections are made with all passenger Trains both DAY and NIGHT on the Intercolonial.

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