

THE FROZEN PIRATE.

By W. CLARK RUSSELL. (Continued.) CHAPTER XV. THE PIRATE'S STORY.

It was now time to think of myself. The watch showed the hour to be ten. Whilst my supper was preparing I went on deck to close the hatches to keep the cold out of the cabin, and found the weather changed, the wind having shifted directly into the west, whence it was blowing with a good deal of violence upon the ice.

I closed the fore-hatch, and on stepping ash came to the two bodies, the sight of which brought me to a stand. Since there was life in one, thought I, life may be in these, and I fell as if it would be like murdering them to leave them here for the night. But, said I to myself, after all, these men are certainly inhuman if they are not dead; the cold that freezes on deck cannot be different from the cold that from them below; they'll not be better off in the cabin than here. It will be all the same to them, and tomorrow I shall perhaps have the Frenchman's help to carry them to the furnace and discover if the vital spark is still in them.

So I left them to lie and came away singing a last look round, and then closing the companion-door upon me. The Frenchman, as I may call him, was sleeping very heavily and snoring loudly with the colors and the finery of the lace and buttons of the coat I had piled upon him—and fell into some startling considerations of him. Was it possible, I asked myself, that he could have lain in his strop for fifty years? But why not? For suppose he had been on this ice but a year only, six months—an absurdity in the face of the manifest age of the ship and her furniture—would not six months of frozen life be as marvellous as fifty years? Had he the same aspect when the snow of the ice seized him as he has now? I answered yes, for the current of life having been frozen, his appearance would remain as it was.

At eight o'clock the fire was very low. Nature was working out her own way with this Frenchman, and I determined to let him sleep where he was, and take my chance of the night. At all events he could not alarm me by stirring, for if I heard a movement I should know what it was. So, totering to see the last gleam of the fire extinguished, I took my lantern and went to bed, but not to sleep.

The gale made a great roaring. The ship's stern lay to the gorge, and but for her steadiness I might have supposed myself as there. There was indeed an incessant thunder about my ears often accompanied by the shock of a mass of spray flying into my face, and falling like sacks of stones upon the deck. Once I felt the vessel rock. The movement was extraordinary. It took off my mind from the Frenchman, and filled me with a different sort of alarm altogether, for it was very evident the gale was making the ice break up, and I thought I to myself, if I do not mind my eyes we shall be crushed and buried. But what was to be done? To quit the ship for that piercing flying gale, charged with sleet and hail and foam, was merely to languish for a little and then miserably expire of frost. No, I thought I, if the end is to come let it find me here; and with that I snugged me down amid the coats and cloaks in my cot, and, obstinately holding my eyes closed, ultimately fell asleep.

It was late when I awoke. I lighted the lantern, but upon entering the passage that led to the cabin I observed by my own posture that the schooner had not only heeled, more to leeward, but was further "down by the stern" to the extent of several feet. The noise of the gale was still in the air, and the booming and boiling of the sea was uncommonly loud. I walked straight to the cook-room, and, putting the lantern to the Frenchman, perceived that he was still in a heavy sleep, and that he had lain through the night precisely in the attitude in which I had left him. His face was so muffled that little more than his long hawk's-bill nose was discernible. It was fearfully cold, and I made haste to light the fire. There was still coal enough in the corner to last for the day, and before long the furnace was blazing cheerfully. I went to work to make some broth and fry some ham, and melt a little block of the ruby-colored wine; and whilst that occupied, turning my head a moment to look at the Frenchman, I found him half started up, staring intently at me.

This sudden confrontation threw me into such confusion that I could not speak. He moved his head from side to side, taking in of the scene, with an expression of the most inimitable astonishment painted upon his countenance. He then brought the flat of his hand with a dramatic blow to his forehead, the scar on which showed black as ink to the fire-glow, and sat erect. "Where have I been?" he exclaimed in French.

"English!" he exclaimed in English, "opening his head on one side, and pointing at me with an incredible air of amazement. 'How came you here? You are not of our company! Let me see.'" He struggled with recollection, continuing to stare at me from under his shaggy eyebrows as if I were some frightful vision. "I am a shipwrecked British mariner," said I, "and have been cast away upon this ice, where I found your schooner."

"Has he been interrupted with prodigious vehemence, certainly; we are frozen up—I remember. That sleep should serve my memory for!" He made as if to rise, but sat again. "The cold is numbing; it would weaken a lion. Give me a hot drink, sir."

I filled a pannikin with the melted wine, which he swallowed thirstily. "Mercy!" cried he. "I seem to want life."

Again I filled the pannikin. "Good!" said he, "fetching a sigh as he returned the vessel; 'you are very obliging, sir. If you have food there, we will eat together.'"

I give the substance of his speech, but not his delivery of it, nor is it necessary that I should interpolate my rendering with the French words he used.

The broth being boiled, I gave him a good bowl of it along with a plate of bacon and tongue, some biscuit and a pannikin of hot brandy and water, all which things I put upon his knees as he sat up on the mattress, and to it he fell, making a rare meal. Yet all the while he ate as a man beset with cold, as well he might, starting at me and looking round and round him, and then dropping his knife to strike his brow, as if by that kind of blow he would quicken the activity of memory there.

"There's something wrong," said he presently. "What is it, sir? This is the cook-room. How does it happen that I am lying here?"

I told him exactly how it was, adding that if it had not been for his posture, which obliged me to shaw in order to carry him, he would now be on deck with the others, awaiting the best fact I could give him.

"Who are the others?" asked he. "I know not," said I. "There were four in all, counting yourself: one sits frozen to death on the rocks. I met him first and took this watch from his pocket that I might tell the time." He took the watch in his hands, and asked me to bring the lantern close.

"Ha!" cried he, "this is Mendocino—the captain's! I remember; he took it for the sake of this letter upon it. He lies dead on the rocks! We missed him, but did not know where he had gone." Then, raising his hand and impulsively starting upon the mattress, he cried, whilst he tapped his forehead, "It has come back! I have it! Guinepse, Trentanove and I were in the cabin; he had fallen blind with the glare of the ice—if that was it. We confronted each other. On a sudden he screamed out. I had put my face into my arms, and felt myself dying. His cry aroused me. I looked up, and saw him leaning back from the table with his eyes fixed and horror in his countenance. I was too weak to speak—too languid to rise. I watched him awhile, and then the Frenchman stole over me again, and my head sank, and I remember no more."

He shuddered, and extended the pannikin for more liquor. I filled it with two-thirds of brandy and the rest water, and he sipped it down as if it had been a thimbleful of wine.

"By the holy cross," cried he, but, still in a very wonderful, though, how long have you been here, sir?"

"Three days," I answered. "Three days! and I have been in a stupor all that time—never moving, never breathing?"

"You will have been in a stupor longer than that, I expect," said I. "What is this month?" he cried.

"July," I replied. "July—July!" he muttered. "Impossible! Let me see!" he began to count on his fingers—"we fell in with the ice and got locked in November. We had six months of it; I recollect no more. Six months of it, sir; and suppose the stupor came upon me then, the month at which my memory stops would be April. Yet you call this July; that is to say, four months of oblivion; impossible!"

"What was the year in which you fell in with the ice?" said I.

"The year?" he exclaimed in a voice deep with the wonder this question raised in him; "the year? Why, man what year but centuries hundred and fifty-three?"

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