

THE FROZEN PIKAR

BY W. CLARK RUSSELL. CHAPTER VII.

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 the ice 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 breaker heights than these parallels, and that he had crawled into a hollow, and perished in that melancholic sitting posture. But in what year had this poor fellow been cast away? I 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 countryman, and of earlier times yet, and his large fine hat, hands, cloak and boots, coupled with the villainous cast of his countenance and the frightful appearance of his long hair gave him, rendered down upon her. But my imagination, in the complete figure that I had 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 time he had been cast away, I pulled his cloak aside and searched his pockets. His legs were thickly clad in two or three pairs of breeches, the outer pair being of a dark green cloth. He also wore a handsome red waist-coat, lined with 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 oval, 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 enough of him, and walked away feeling sick. In places where 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 but go to the bottom of the sea, whereas 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.

I pushed onwards, stepping warily and probing cautiously at every step, and earnestly peering about me, for after such a sight as that dead man I was never to know what new wonder I might stumble upon. About a quarter of a mile on my left—that is, on my left whilst I kept my face to the slope—there was the appearance of a ravine not discernible from where the boat lay. When I was within twenty feet of the summit of the cliff, the activity continuing gentle to the very brow, but much broken, as I have said, I noticed this hollow, and more particularly a small collection of ice-forms, not nearly so large as the other groups of this kind, but most dainty and lovely nevertheless. They showed as the heads of trees might to my ascent, and when I got a little higher I observed that they were formed upon the higher side of the hollow, as though the convulsion which had wrought that chasm had tossed up those exquisite caprices of ice. However, I was too eager to view the prospect from the top of the cliff to suffer my admiration to detain me; in a few minutes I had gained the brow, and, clambering on to a mass of rock, I sent my gaze around.

CHAPTER VIII. THE FROZEN SCHOONER.

I found myself on the summit of a kind of table-land; vast bodies of ice, every block weighing hundreds and perhaps thousands of tons lay scattered over it, yet for the space of a mile or so the character was that of flatness. Southwards the range went upwards to a coastal front of some hundred feet, with a huddle of peaks and strange configurations behind soaring to an elevation of some two feet or three 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, to 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 off the edge of the cliffs on the other side might be I could not tell. This was not to be dreamt of, and therefore to this extent I lay climb had been useless.

The wind blew from the west of north, and was an exquisitely frosty wind, despite the quarter of the middle of last century, and of earlier times yet, and his large fine hat, hands, cloak and boots, coupled with the villainous cast of his countenance and the frightful appearance of his long hair gave him, rendered down upon her. But my imagination, in the complete figure that I had imagined of one of those rogues who earned their living as pirates.

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learned upon the rail with a slight upward's 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 garments of snowy whiteness and the 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 fore-castle bulkhead, after the fashion of shipbuilding 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 manifested lying in 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 pieces of swivel-guns upon the after-bulkhead rails. Glads and boots were in their places, and the sails furled upon the rigging. The figure-head of the main hatch showed a small square, and there was a companion or hatch-cover about the mainmast. There was no trace of the crew. She had a flush or level deck from the side 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 illusion, or a vision of a sign 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 the 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 bow was equally 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 bow was equally perfect in all respects, was like a stroke of magic.

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. I concluded, unless worlds the frozen continents may well possess the antiquity of the land. And who shall name the monarch who filled this vast field broken away from the main and started on its stealthy navigation sunwards?

It was whilst looking at this that my eye traced, a little distance beyond the front of a ship's spars and rigging. Through the labyrinth of the ice outlines I clearly made out two masts, with two square yards at the foremast; the rigging perfect so far as it went, for the figurehead showed no more than half the height of the masts, the lower parts being apparently hidden behind the edge of the hollow. I have said that this coast to the north abounded in many groups of beautiful fantastic shapes, suggesting a great variety of objects, as the forms of clouds do, but nothing perfect; but here now was something in ice that could not have been completed, more symmetrical, more faultlessly proportioned had it been the work of the artist. I walked close to it and a little way around so as to obtain a clearer view, and then getting a fair sight of the appearance I halted again, transfixed with amazement.

The fabric appeared as if formed of frosted glass. The masts had a good rake, and with a sea-man's eye I took notice of the furniture, observing the shrouds, stays, backstays, braces to be perfect. Nay, as though the spirit artist of this fragile glittering pagoda had resolved to omit no detail to complete the illusion, there stood a vane at the mast-head, shining like a tongue of ice against the soft blue of the sky. Come, thought I, recovering from my wonder, there is more in this than it is possible for me to guess by staring from a distance; go, striking my pole into the snow, I made carefully towards the edge of the hollow.

The gradual unfolding of the picture prepared my mind for what I could not see till the brink was reached; then, looking down, I beheld a schooner-rigged vessel lying in a sort of cradle of ice, stern-on to the sea. A man bulked out with frozen snow, so as to make his shape as gross as a bear, leant upon the rail with a slight upward's 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 garments of snowy whiteness and the 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.

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