



THE NORTH-POLE EXPEDITION: THE "ALERT" SLEDGE PARTY TRAVELLING IN THE 83RD DEGREE OF NORTH LATITUDE; THERMOMETER 60° BELOW ZERO.

SLEDGING TO THE NORTH POLE.

It appears that, instead of land extending far towards the north, as reported by the *Polaris*, Robeson Channel opens directly into the Polar Sea. The *Alert* rounded the north-east point of Grand Land, but, instead of finding a continuous coast-line leading one hundred miles further towards the north, as everyone had expected, found herself on the border of what was evidently a very extensive sea, with impenetrable ice on every side. No harbour being obtainable, the ship was secured as far north as possible inside a sheltering barrier of grounded ice, close to the land, and there she passed the winter. During her stay of eleven months no navigable channel of water permitting further advance to the northward ever presented itself.

Instead of finding an "open Polar Sea," the ice was of most unusual age and thickness, resembling in a marked degree, both in appearance and formation, low floating icebergs rather than ordinary salt-water ice.

It has now been termed the "Sea of Ancient

Ice"—the Palæocrystal or Palæocrucic Sea; and a stranded mass of ice broken away from an ice-floe has been named a floeberg.

Whereas ordinary ice is usually 2 ft. to 10 ft. in thickness, that in the Polar Sea, in consequence of having so few outlets by which to escape to the southward in any appreciable quantity, gradually increases in age and thickness until it measures from 80 ft. to 120 ft., floating with its surface at the lowest part 15 ft. above the water-line.

Strange as it may appear, this extraordinary thickness of the ice saved the ship from being driven on shore; for owing to its great depth of flotation, on nearing the shallow beach it grounded and formed a barrier, inside which the ship was comparatively safe. When two pieces of ordinary ice are driven one against the other and the edges broken up, the crushed pieces are raised by the pressure into a high, long wall-like hedge of ice.

When two of the ancient floes of the Polar Sea meet, the intermediate lighter broken-up ice which may happen to be floating about between alone suffers; it is pressed up between the

two closing masses to a great height, producing a chaotic wilderness of angular blocks of all shapes and sizes, varying in height up to 50 ft. above water, and frequently covering an area upwards of a mile in diameter.

Such an icy road, which was sure to be continuous, destroyed all hope of the Pole itself being reached by sledges. Nevertheless, it was determined by Captain Nares to advance as far as possible, and during the spring of this year a party, headed by Commander Markham and Lieutenant Parr, made a most gallant and determined attempt. They were absent seventy-two days from the ship; and on May 12 succeeded in planting the British flag in latitude 83 deg. 20 min. 26 sec. N. From this position there was no appearance of land to the northward, but, curiously enough, the depth of water was found to be only seventy-two fathoms.

Owing to the extraordinary nature of the pressed-up ice, a roadway had to be formed by pickaxes for nearly half the distance travelled before any advance could be safely made, even with light loads; this rendered it always necessary to drag the sledge-loads forward by instal-

ments, and therefore to journey over the same road several times. The advance was consequently very slow, and only averaged about one mile and a quarter daily—in fact, much the same rate attained by Sir Edward Parry in his somewhat similar attempt during the summer of 1827.

Although the distance made good was only seventy-three miles from the ship, 276 miles were travelled over to accomplish it.

It is quite impossible for any body of men ever to excel the praiseworthy perseverance displayed by this gallant party in their arduous struggle over the roughest and most monotonous road imaginable. Their journey, considering the ever-recurring difficulties, has eclipsed all former ones.

The result of their severe labour proves the utter impracticability of travelling over the Polar Sea to any great distance from land, and also that Baron von Wrangel was perfectly correct in his expressed opinion that, before the North Pole can be reached, it is first necessary to discover a continuous coast-line leading towards it.