

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ON A PIECE OF ICE.



PIECE of ice, a jagged triangular strip of ice, measuring one hundred feet at its base, and scarcely five hundred in its greatest extent; and on it twenty-one human beings, some hundred furred animals, a few dogs, and a large bear, which was at this moment crouching at the very edge!

Yes! all the luckless colonists were there. Not one had yet been swallowed up. The last rupture had occurred when they were all in the shed. Thus far fate had spared them, probably that they might all perish together.

A silent sleepless night ensued. No one spoke or moved, for the slightest shake or blow might suffice to break the ice.

No one would touch the salt-meat served round by Mrs Joliffe. What would be the good of eating?

Nearly every one remained in the open air, feeling that it would be better to be drowned in the open sea than in a narrow wooden shed.

The next day, June 5, a shone brightly down upon the heads of the doomed band. All were still silent, and seemed anxious to avoid each other. Many gazed with troubled anxious eyes at the perfect circle of the horizon, of which the miserable little strip of ice formed the centre. But the sea was absolutely deserted—not a sail, not an ice-floe, not an islet! Their own piece of ice was probably the very last floating on the Lehring Sea.

The temperature continued to rise. The wind had gone down, and a terrible calm had set in, a gentle swell heaved the surface of the sea, and the morsel of earth and ice, which was all that was left of Victoria Island, rose and sank without change of position, like a wreck—and what was it but a wreck?

But a wreck, a piece of woodwork, a broken mast, or a few planks, remain floating: they offer some resistance to the waves, they