

FINDING THE POLE

BY JULES VERNE

It is a dreary affair to live near the pole, for there is no going out for many long months, and nothing to break the weary monotony. The day after the hunting excursion was dark and snowy, and Clawbonny could find no occupation except polishing up the ice walls of the hut, and emptying out the snow which drifted into the long passage leading to the inner door. The "Snow-House" stood out well, defying storm and tempest. The snow only increased the thickness of the walls.

They could do nothing but wait. It wasn't time to try to build a boat. The men were compelled to spend the greater part of the days in complete idleness. Hatteras lolled on his bed absorbed in thought. Altamont smoked or dozed, and the doctor took care not to disturb either of them, for he was in perpetual fear of a quarrel.

At meal time he always led the conversation away from irritating topics. He gave them dissertations on history, geography or meteorology, handling his subject in an easy, though philosophical manner, drawing lessons from the most trivial incidents.

His inexhaustible memory was never at a loss for fact or illustration, while his good humor and geniality made him the life and soul of the little company. He was implicitly trusted by all, even by Hatteras, who cherished a deep affection for him.

On the twenty-sixth of April, during the night, there was a sudden change in the weather. The thermometer fell several degrees, and the inmates of Doctor's House could hardly keep themselves warm even in their beds. Altamont had charge of the stove, and he found it needed careful replenishing to preserve the temperature at 50 degrees above zero.

This increase of cold betokened the coming end of the stormy weather, and the doctor hailed it gladly as the harbinger of his favorite hunting and exploring expeditions.

He rose early next morning, and with the others climbed up to the top of a hill nearby. Soon he found numerous traces of animals on all sides, and this within a circle of two miles of Fort Providence.

After gazing attentively at these traces of some minutes, the hunters looked at each other silently, and then the doctor exclaimed:

"Well, these are plain enough, I think."

"Ay, only too plain," added Bell, "bears have been here!"

"First-rate game!" said Altamont. "There's only one fault about it."

"What is that?" asked Bell.

"Too much of it."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this—there are distinct traces of five bears, and five bears are rather too much for five men."

"Are you sure?" said Clawbonny.

"Look and see for yourself. Here is one footprint, and there is another quite different. These claws are far wider apart than

those, and see here, again, that paw belongs to a much smaller bear. I tell you, if you look carefully, you will see the marks of all five different bears distinctly."

"You're right," said Bell, after a close inspection.

"If that's the case, then," said the doctor, "we must be careful, for these animals are starving after the severe winter, and they might be extremely dangerous to men."

"You think they have discovered our presence here?"

"No doubt of it, otherwise why should these footprints be in a circle round our fort?" said Bell.

"You're right," said the doctor, "and, what more, it is certain that they have been here last night."

"And other nights before that," replied Altamont.

"Well, we can easily find out if they come tonight," said Altamont.

"How?"

"By effacing all the marks in a given place. Tomorrow if we find fresh ones, it will be evident that they are after us."

The three hunters set to work then, and scraped the snow over till all the footprints were obliterated for a considerable distance.

Next morning at early dawn, Hatteras and his companions, well armed, went out to reconnoiter the state of the snow. They found the same identical footmarks, but somewhat nearer. Evidently the enemy was bent on the siege of Fort Providence.

"But where can they be?" said Bell.

"Behind the icebergs watching us," replied the doctor. "Don't let us expose ourselves imprudently."

"What about going hunting, then?" asked Altamont.

"We must put it off for a day or two, I think, and rub out the marks again, and see if they are here tomorrow."

The doctor's advice was followed, and they entrenched themselves in the fort. The lighthouse was taken down, as it was not of actual use meantime, and might help to attract the bears. Each took it in turn to keep watch on the upper plateau.

The day passed without a sign of the enemy's existence, and the next morning, when they hurried out to examine the snow, judge they found it wholly untouched!

"Capital!" exclaimed Altamont. "The bears are put off the scent; they have no perseverance, and have grown tired waiting for us. They are off, and a good riddance. Now let us start for a day's hunting."

"Softly, softly," said the doctor; "I am not so sure they have gone. I think we had better wait one day more. It is evident the bears have not been here last night, at least, on this side; but still!"

"Well, let us go round the plateau, and see how things stand," said the impatient Altamont.

"All right," said Clawbonny. "Come along."

A way they went, but no trace of the enemy was discoverable for two miles.

"Now, then, can't we go hunting?" said Altamont.

"Wait till tomorrow," urged the doctor again.

The American was unwilling to delay, but yielded at last, and returned to the fort.

As on the preceding night, each man took his hour's watch on the upper plateau. When it came to Altamont's turn, and he had gone out to relieve Bell, Hatteras called his old companions round him. The doctor left his desk and Johnson his cooking, and hastened to their captain's side.

"My friends," he said, "let us take advantage of the American's absence to talk business. There are things which cannot concern him, and with which I do not choose him to meddle."

Johnson and Clawbonny looked

at each other, wondering what the captain was driving at.

"I wish," he continued, "to talk with you about our plans for the future."

"All right; talk away, while we are alone," said the doctor.

"In a month, or six weeks at the outside, we can leave here. Have you thought of what we had better do this summer?"

"Have you, captain?" asked Johnson.

"Have I? Not an hour of my life passes without revolving in my mind one cherished purpose. I suppose not a man among you intends to retrace his steps?"

No one replied, and Hatteras went on to say:

"For my own part, even if I must go alone, I will push on to the north pole. Never were men so near it before, for we are not more than 360 miles distant at most; and I will not lose such an opportunity without making every attempt to reach it. Even though it be impossible. What are your views, doctor?"

"Your own, Hatteras."

"And yours, Johnson?"

"Like the doctor's."

"And yours, Bell?"

"Captain," replied the carpenter, "it is true we have neither wives nor children awaiting us in England, but, after all, it is one's country—one's native land! Have you no thoughts of returning home?"

"We can return after we have discovered the pole quite as well as before; vetter, even. Our difficulties will not increase, for as we near the pole we get away from the point of greatest cold. We have fuel and provisions enough. There is nothing to stop us, and we should be culpable, in my opinion, if we allowed ourselves to abandon the project."

"Very well, captain; I'll go along with you."

"That's right; I never doubted you," said Hatteras. "We shall succeed, and England will have all the glory."

"But there is an American among us!" said Johnson. "I know it!" he said sternly. "We can't leave him behind," added the doctor.

"No, we can't," repeated Hatteras almost mechanically. "And he will be sure to go, too."

"He will be sure to go, too; but who will command?"

"You, captain."

"And if you all obey my orders, will the Yankee refuse?"

"I shouldn't think so; but suppose he should, what then?"

"He and I must fight it out."

The three Englishmen looked at Hatteras, but said nothing. Then the doctor asked how they were to go.

"By the coast, as far as possible," was the reply.

"But what if we find open water, as is likely enough?"

"Well, we'll go across it."

"But we have no boat."

Hatteras did not answer, and looked embarrassed.

"Perhaps," suggested Bell, "we might make a ship out of some of the planks of the Porpoise."

"Never!" exclaimed Hatteras, vehemently.

"Never!" said Johnson. The doctor shook his head. He understood the feeling of the captain.

"Never!" reiterated Hatteras. "A boat made out of an American ship would be an American!"

"But, captain," began Johnson.

The doctor made a sign to the old boatswain not to press the subject further.

This ended the day, and the night passed without disturbance. The bears had evidently disappeared.

(Continued Tomorrow.)

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