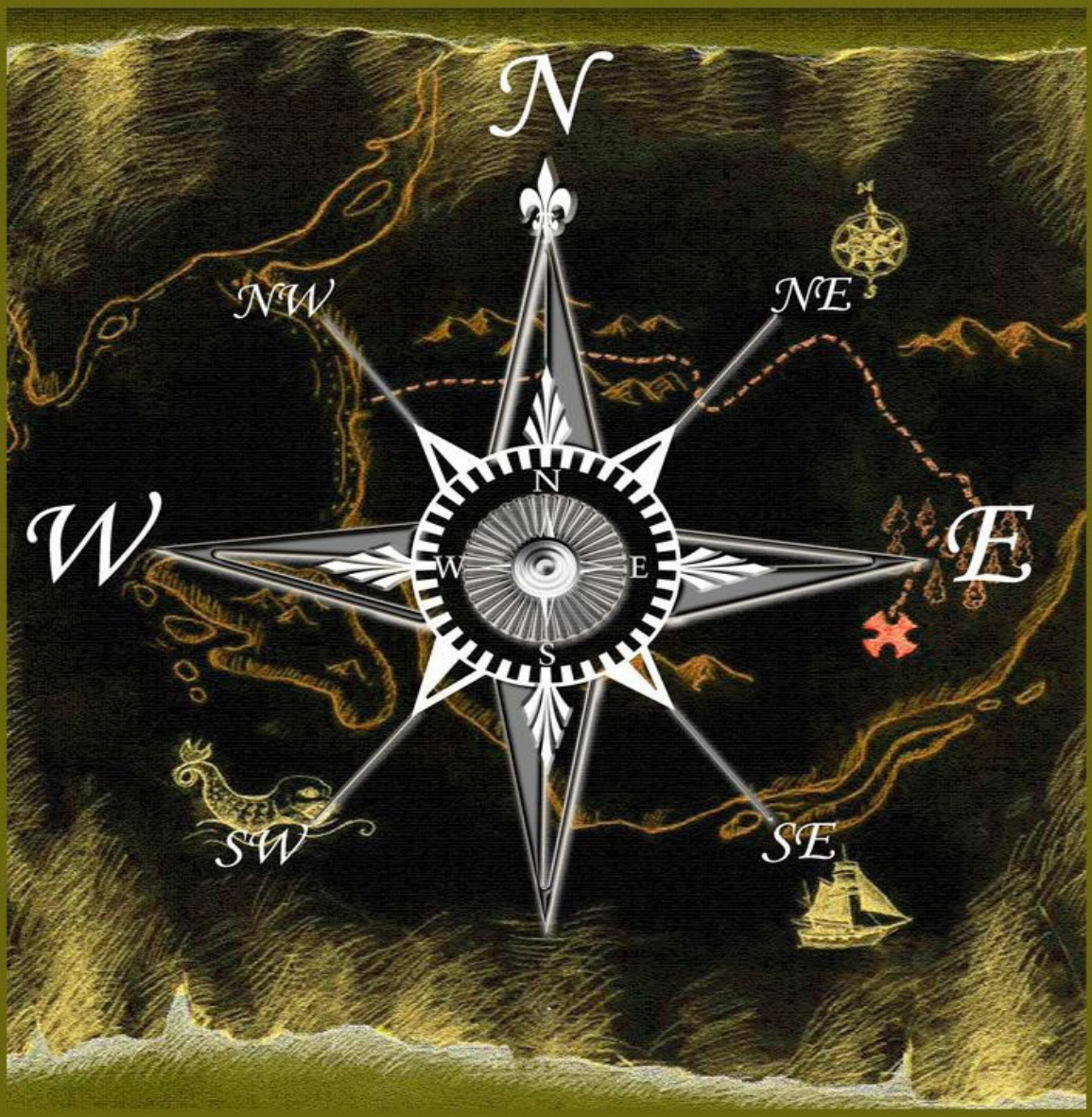
JULES VERNE



THE FUR COUNTRY

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The Fur Country

Jules Verne

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Jules Verne – A Biographical Primer

Jules Verne (1828–1905), French author, was born at Nantes on the 8th of February 1828. After completing his studies at the Nantes lycée, he went to Paris to study for the bar. About 1848, in conjunction with Michel Carré, he wrote librettos for two operettas, and in 1850 his verse comedy, Les Pailles rompues, in which Alexandre Dumas fils had some share, was produced at the Gymnase. For some years his interests alternated between the theatre and the bourse, but some travellers' stories which he wrote for the Musée des Familles seem to have revealed to him the true direction of his talent—the delineation, viz., of delightfully extravagant voyages and adventures to which

cleverly prepared scientific and geographical details lent an air of versimilitude. Something of the kind had been done before, after kindred methods, by Cyrano de Bergerac, by Swift and Defoe, and later by Mayne Reid. But in his own particular application of plausible scientific apparatus Verne undoubtedly struck out a department for himself in the wide literary genre of voyages imaginaires. His first success was obtained with Cinq semaines en ballon, which he wrote for Hetzel's Magazin d'Éducation in 1862, and thenceforward, for a quarter of a century, scarcely a year passed in which Hetzel did not publish one or more of his fantastic stories, illustrated generally by pictures of the most lurid and sensational description. The most successful of these romances include: Voyage au centre de la terre (1864); De la terre à la lune (1865); Vingt mille lieues sous les mers (1869); Les Anglais au pôle nord (1870); and Voyage autour du monde en quatre-vingts jours, which first appeared in Le Temps in 1872. The adaptation of this last (produced with success at the Porte St Martin theatre on the 8th of November 1874) and of another excellent tale, Michael Strogoff (at the Châtelet, 1880), both dramas being written in conjunction with Adolphe d'Ennery, proved the most acceptable of Verne's theatrical pieces. The novels were translated into the various European languages—and some even into Japanese and Arabic—and had an enormous success in England. But after 1877, when he published Hector Servadac, a romance of existence upon a comet, the writer's invention began to show signs of fatigue (his kingdom had been invaded in different directions and at different times times by such writers as R. M. Ballantyne, Rider Haggard and H. G. Wells), and he even committed himself, somewhat unguardedly, to very gloomy predictions as to the future of the novel. Jules Verne's own novels, however, will certainly long continue to delight readers by reason of their

sparkling style, their picturesque verve—apparently inherited directly from Dumas—their amusing and good-natured national caricatures, and the ingenuity with which the love element is either subordinated or completely excluded. M. Verne, who was always extremely popular in society, divided his time for the most part between Paris, his home at Amiens and his yacht. He was a member of the Legion of Honour, and several of his romances were crowned by the French Academy, but he was never enrolled among its members. He died at Amiens on the 24th of March 1905. His brother, Paul Verne, contributed to the Transactions of the French Alpine Club, and wrote an Ascension du Mont Blanc for his brother’s collection of Voyages extraordinaires in 1874.

The Fur Country

Part I

Chapter I

A SOIRÉE AT FORT RELIANCE

On the evening of the 17th March 1859, Captain Craventy gave a fête at Fort Reliance. Our readers must not at once imagine a grand entertainment, such as a court ball, or a musical soirée with a fine orchestra. Captain Craventy's reception was a very simple affair, yet he had spared no pains to give it *éclat*.

In fact, under the auspices of Corporal Joliffe, the large room on the ground-floor was completely transformed. The rough walls, constructed of roughly-hewn trunks of trees piled up horizontally, were still visible, it is true, but their nakedness was disguised by arms and armour, borrowed from the arsenal of the fort, and by an English tent at each corner of the room. Two lamps suspended by chains, like chandeliers, and provided with tin reflectors, relieved the gloomy appearance of the blackened beams of the ceiling, and sufficiently illuminated the misty atmosphere of the room. The narrow windows, some of them mere loop-holes, were so encrusted with hoar-frost, that it was impossible to look through them; but two or three pieces of red bunting, tastily arranged about them, challenged the admiration of all who entered. The floor, of rough joists of wood laid parallel with each other, had been carefully swept by Corporal Joliffe. No sofas, chairs, or other modern furniture, impeded the free circulation of the guests. Wooden benches half fixed against the walls, huge blocks of wood cut with the axe, and two tables with clumsy legs, were all the appliances of luxury the saloon could boast of.

But the partition wall, with a narrow door leading into the next room, was decorated in a style alike costly and picturesque. From the beams hung magnificent furs admirably arranged, the equal of which could not be seen in the more favoured regions of Regent Street or the Perspective-Newski. It seemed as if the whole fauna of the ice-bound North were here represented by their finest skins. The eye wandered from the furs of wolves, grey bears, polar bears, otters, wolverenes, beavers, muskrats, water pole-cats, ermines, and silver foxes; and above this display was an inscription in brilliantly-coloured and artistically shaped cardboard—the motto of the world-famous Hudson's Bay Company—

"PROPELLE CUTUM."

"Really, Corporal Joliffe, you have surpassed yourself!" said Captain Craventy to his subordinate.

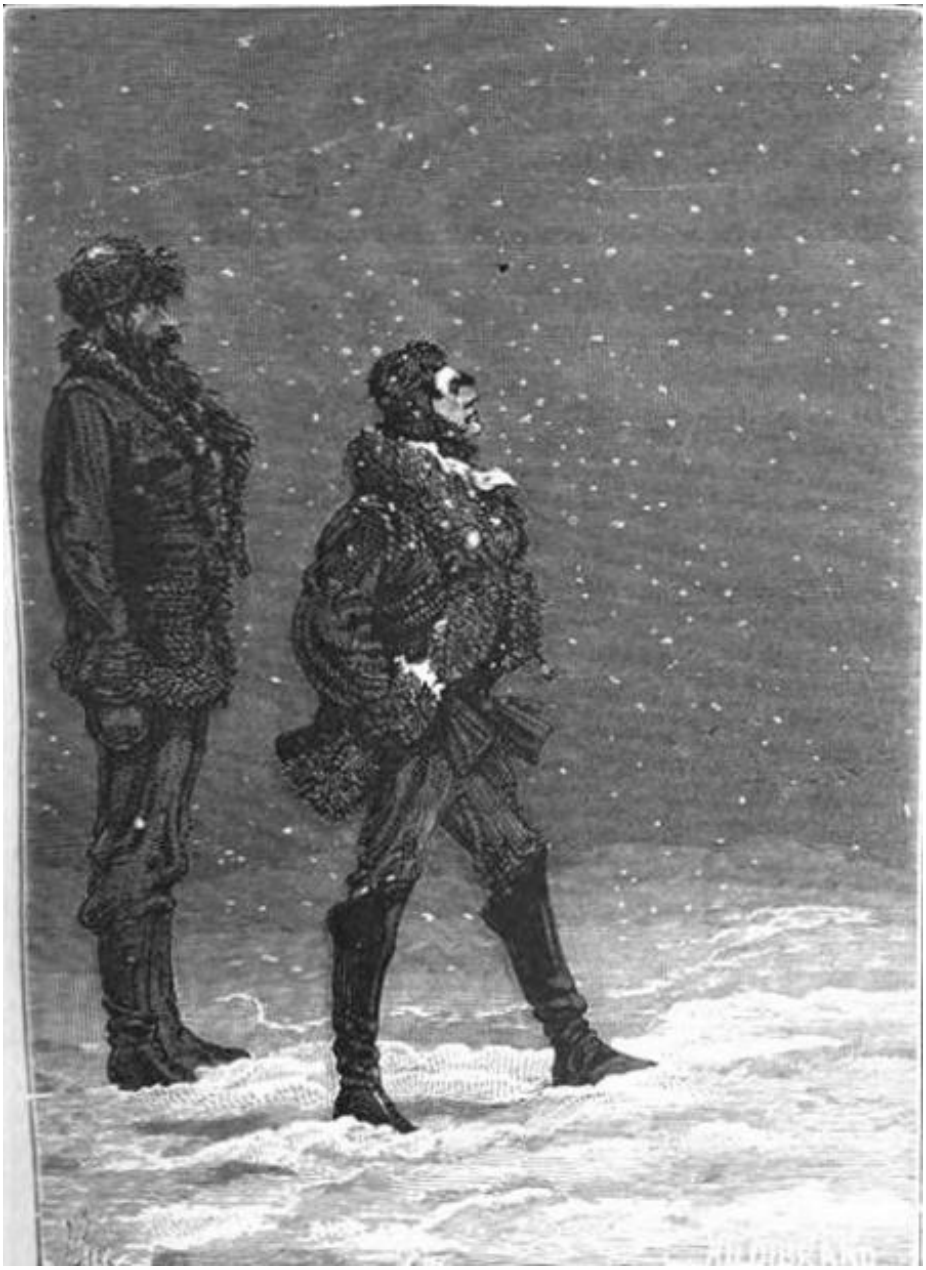
"I think I have, I think I have!" replied the Corporal; "but honour to whom honour is due, Mrs Joliffe deserves part of your commendation; she assisted me in everything."

"A wonderful woman, Corporal."

"Her equal is not to be found, Captain."

An immense brick and earthenware stove occupied the centre of the room, with a huge iron pipe passing from it through the ceiling, and conducting the dense black smoke into the outer air. This stove contained a roaring fire constantly fed with fresh shovelfuls of coal by the stoker, an old soldier specially appointed to the service. Now and then a gust of wind drove back a volume of smoke into the room,

dimming the brightness of the lamps, and adding fresh blackness to the beams of the ceiling, whilst tongues of flame shot forth from the stove. But the guests of Fort Reliance thought little of this slight inconvenience; the stove warmed them, and they could not pay too dearly for its cheering heat, so terribly cold was it outside in the cutting north wind.



The storm could be heard raging without, the snow fell fast, becoming rapidly solid and coating the already frosted window panes with fresh ice. The whistling wind made its way through the cranks and chinks of the doors and windows, and occasionally the rattling noise drowned every other sound. Presently an awful silence ensued. Nature seemed to be taking breath; but suddenly the squall recommenced with terrific fury. The house was shaken to its foundations, the planks cracked, the beams groaned. A stranger less accustomed than the *habitués* of the fort to the war of the elements, would have asked if the end of the world were come. But, with two exceptions, Captain Craventy's guests troubled themselves little about the weather, and if they had been outside they would have felt no more fear than the stormy petrels disporting themselves in the midst of the tempest. Two only of the assembled company did not belong to the ordinary society of the neighbourhood, two women, whom we shall introduce when we have enumerated Captain Craventy's other guests: these were, Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, Sergeant Long, Corporal Joliffe, and his bright active Canadian wife, a certain Mac-Nab and his wife, both Scotch, John Rae, married to an Indian woman of the country, and some sixty soldiers or employés of the Hudson's Bay Company. The neighbouring forts also furnished their contingent of guests, for in these remote lands people look upon each other as neighbours although their homes may be a hundred miles apart. A good many employés or traders came from Fort Providence or Fort Resolution, of the Great Slave Lake district, and even from Fort Chippeway and Fort Liard further south. A rare break like this in the monotony of their secluded lives, in these hyberborean regions, was joyfully welcomed by all the exiles, and even a few Indian chiefs, about a dozen, had accepted Captain Craventy's

invitation. They were not, however, accompanied by their wives, the luckless squaws being still looked upon as little better than slaves. The presence of these natives is accounted for by the fact that they are in constant intercourse with the traders, and supply the greater number of furs which pass through the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company, in exchange for other commodities. They are mostly Chippeway Indians, well grown men with hardy constitutions. Their complexions are of the peculiar reddish black colour always ascribed in Europe to the evil spirits of fairyland. They wear very picturesque cloaks of skins and mantles of fur, with a head-dress of eagle's feathers spread out like a lady's fan, and quivering with every motion of their thick black hair.

Such was the company to whom the Captain was doing the honours of Fort Reliance. There was no dancing for want of music, but the "buffet" admirably supplied the want of the hired musicians of the European balls. On the table rose a pyramidal pudding made by Mrs Joliffe's own hands; it was an immense truncated cone, composed of flour, fat, rein-deer venison, and musk beef. The eggs, milk, and citron prescribed in recipe books were, it is true, wanting, but their absence was atoned for by its huge proportions. Mrs Joliffe served out slice after slice with liberal hands, yet there remained enough and to spare. Piles of sandwiches also figured on the table, in which ship biscuits took the place of thin slices of English bread and butter, and dainty morsels of corned beef that of the ham and stuffed veal of the old world. The sharp teeth of the Chippeway Indians made short work of the tough biscuits; and for drink there was plenty of whisky and gin handed round in little pewter pots, not to speak of a great bowl of punch which was to close the entertainment, and of which the Indians talked long afterwards in their wigwams.

Endless were the compliments paid to the Joliffes that evening, but they deserved them; how zealously they waited on the guests, with what easy grace they distributed the refreshments! They did not need prompting, they anticipated the wishes of each one. The sandwiches were succeeded by slices of the inexhaustible pudding, the pudding by glasses of gin or whisky.

“No, thank you, Mr Joliffe.”

“You are too good, Corporal; but let me have time to breathe.”

“Mrs Joliffe, I assure you, I can eat no more.”

“Corporal Joliffe, I am at your mercy.”

“No more, Mrs Joliffe, no more, thank you!”

Such were the replies met with on every side by the zealous pair, but their powers of persuasion were such that the most reluctant yielded in the end. The quantities of food and drink consumed were really enormous. The hubbub of conversation increased. The soldiery and employés became excited. Here the talk was of hunting, there of trade. What plans were laid for next season! The entire fauna of the Arctic regions would scarcely supply game enough for these enterprising hunters. They already saw bears, foxes, and musk oxen, falling beneath their bullets, and pole-cats by hundreds caught in their traps. Their imagination pictured the costly furs piled up in the magazines of the Company, which was this year to realise hitherto unheard of profits. And whilst the spirits thus freely circulated inflamed the imagination of the Europeans, the large doses of Captain Craventy’s “fire-water” imbibed by the Indians had an opposite effect. Too

proud to show admiration, too cautious to make promises, the taciturn chiefs listened gravely and silently to the babel of voices around them.

The captain enjoying the hurly burly, and pleased to see the poor people, brought back as it were to the civilised world, enjoying themselves so thoroughly, was here, there, and

everywhere, answering all inquiries about the fête with the words—

“Ask Joliffe, ask Joliffe!”

And they asked Joliffe, who had a gracious word for every body.

Some of those employed in the garrison and civil service of Fort Reliance must here receive a few words of special notice, for they were presently to go through experiences of a most terrible nature, which no human perspicacity could possibly have foreseen. Amongst others we must name Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, Sergeant Long, Corporal and Mrs Joliffe, and the two foreign women already alluded to, in whose honour Captain Craventy’s fête was given.

Jaspar Hobson was a man of forty years of age. He was short and slight, with little muscular power; but a force of will which carried him successfully through all trials, and enabled him to rise superior to adverse circumstances. He was “a child of the Company.” His father, Major Hobson, an Irishman from Dublin, who had now been dead for some time, lived for many years at Fort Assiniboin with his wife. There Jaspar Hobson was born. His childhood and youth were spent at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. His father brought him up strictly, and he became a man in self-control and courage whilst yet a boy in years. Jaspar Hobson was no mere hunter, but a soldier, a brave and intelligent officer. During the struggles in Oregon of the Hudson’s Bay Company with the rival companies of the Union, he distinguished himself by his zeal and intrepidity, and rapidly rose to the rank of lieutenant. His well-known merit led to his appointment to the command of an expedition to the north, the aim of which was to explore the northern shores of the Great Bear Lake, and to found a fort

on the confines of the American continent. Jaspar Hobson was to set out on his journey early in April.

If the lieutenant was the type of a good officer, Sergeant Long was that of a good soldier. He was a man of fifty years of age, with a rough beard that looked as if it were made of cocoa-nut fibre. Constitutionally brave, and disposed to obey rather than to command. He had no ambition but to obey the orders he received—never questioning them, however strange they might appear, never reasoning for himself when on duty for the Company—a true machine in uniform; but a perfect machine, never wearing out; ever on the march, yet never showing signs of fatigue. Perhaps Sergeant Long was rather hard upon his men, as he was upon himself. He would not tolerate the slightest infraction of discipline, and mercilessly ordered men into confinement for the slightest neglect, whilst he himself had never been reprimanded. In a word, he was a man born to obey, and this self-annihilation suited his passive temperament. Men such as he are the materials of which a formidable army is formed. They are the arms of the service, obeying a single head. Is not this the only really powerful organisation? The two types of fabulous mythology, Briareus with a hundred arms and Hydra with a hundred heads, well represent the two kinds of armies; and in a conflict between them, which would be victorious? Briareus without a doubt!

We have already made acquaintance with Corporal Joliffe. He was the busy bee of the party, but it was pleasant to hear him humming. He would have made a better major-domo than a soldier; and he was himself aware of this. So he called himself the “Corporal in charge of details,” but he would have lost himself a hundred times amongst these details, had not little Mrs Joliffe guided him with a firm hand. So it came to pass, that Corporal Joliffe obeyed his wife without owning it, doubtless thinking to himself, like

the philosopher Sancho, “a woman’s advice is no such great thing, but he must be a fool who does not listen to it.”

It is now time to say a few words of the two foreign women already alluded to more than once. They were both about forty years old, and one of them well deserved to take first rank amongst celebrated female travellers. The name of Paulina Barnett, the rival of the Pfeiffers, Tinnis, and Haimaires of Hull, has been several times honourably mentioned at the meetings of the Royal Geographical Society. In her journeys up the Brahmaputra, as far as the mountains of Thibet, across an unknown corner of New Holland, from Swan Bay to the Gulf of Carpentaria, Paulina Barnett had given proof of the qualities of a great traveller. She had been a widow for fifteen years, and her passion for travelling led her constantly to explore new lands. She was tall, and her face, framed in long braids of hair, already touched with white, was full of energy. She was near-sighted, and a double eye-glass rested upon her long straight nose, with its mobile nostrils. We must confess that her walk was somewhat masculine, and her whole appearance was suggestive of moral power, rather than of female grace. She was an Englishwoman from Yorkshire, possessed of some fortune, the greater part of which was expended in adventurous expeditions, and some new scheme of exploration had now brought her to Fort Reliance. Having crossed the equinoctial regions, she was doubtless anxious to penetrate to the extreme limits of the hyperborean. Her presence at the fort was an event. The governor of the Company had given her a special letter of recommendation to Captain Craventy, according to which the latter was to do all in his power to forward the design of the celebrated traveller to reach the borders of the Arctic Ocean. A grand enterprise! To follow in the steps of Hearne, Mackenzie, Rae, Franklin, and others. What fatigues, what trials, what dangers would have to be gone

through in the conflict with the terrible elements of the Polar climate! How could a woman dare to venture where so many explorers have drawn back or perished? But the stranger now shut up in Fort Reliance was no ordinary woman; she was Paulina Barnett, a laureate of the Royal Society.

We must add that the celebrated traveller was accompanied by a servant named Madge. This faithful creature was not merely a servant, but a devoted and courageous friend, who lived only for her mistress. A Scotchwoman of the old type, whom a Caleb might have married without loss of dignity. Madge was about five years older than Mrs Barnett, and was tall and strongly built. The two were on the most intimate terms; Paulina looked upon Madge as an elder sister, and Madge treated Paulina as her daughter.

It was in honour of Paulina Barnett that Captain Craventy was this evening treating his employés and the Chippeway Indians. In fact, the lady traveller was to join the expedition of Jaspar Hobson for the exploration of the north. It was for Paulina Barnett that the large saloon of the factory resounded with joyful hurrahs. And it was no wonder that the stove consumed a hundredweight of coal on this memorable evening, for the cold outside was twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit below zero, and Fort Reliance is situated in 61° 47' N. Lat., at least four degrees from the Polar circle.

Chapter II

THE HUDSON’S BAY FUR COMPANY

“Captain Craventy?”

“Mrs Barnett?”

“What do you think of your Lieutenant, Jaspar Hobson?”

“I think he is an officer who will go far.”

“What do you mean by the words, Will go far? Do you mean that he will go beyond the Twenty-fourth parallel?”

Captain Craventy could not help smiling at Mrs Paulina Barnett’s question. They were talking together near the stove, whilst the guests were passing backwards and forwards between the eating and drinking tables.

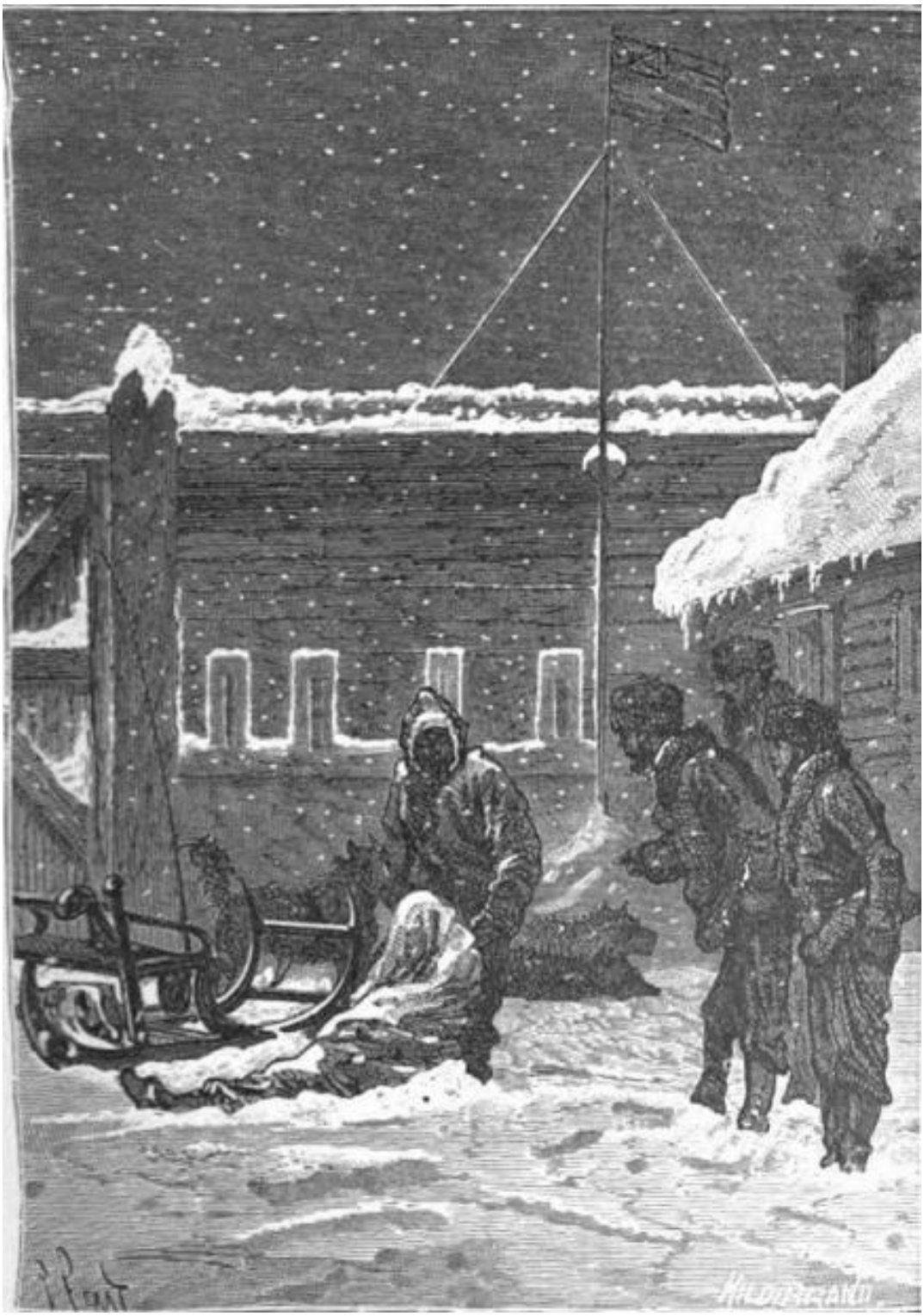
“Madam,” replied the Captain, “all that a man can do, will be done by Jaspar Hobson. The Company has charged him to explore the north of their possessions, and to establish a factory as near as possible to the confines of the American continent, and he will establish it.”

“That is a great responsibility for Lieutenant Hobson!” said the traveller.

“It is, madam, but Jaspar Hobson has never yet drawn back from a task imposed upon him, however formidable it may have appeared.”

“I can quite believe it, Captain,” replied Mrs Barnett, “and we shall now see the Lieutenant at work. But what induces the Company to construct a fort on the shores of the Arctic Ocean?”

“They have a powerful motive, madam,” replied the Captain. “I may add a double motive. At no very distant date, Russia will probably cede her American possessions to the Government of the United States.[1] When this cession has taken place, the Company will find access to the Pacific Ocean extremely difficult, unless the North-west passage discovered by Mc’Clure be practicable. Fresh explorations will decide this, for the Admiralty is about to send a vessel which will coast along the North American continent, from Behring Strait to Coronation Gulf, on the eastern side of which the new fort is to be established. If the enterprise succeed, this point will become an important factory, the centre of the northern fur trade. The transport of furs across the Indian territories involves a vast expenditure of time and money, whereas, if the new route be available, steamers will take them from the new fort to the Pacific Ocean in a few days.”



“That would indeed be an important result of the enterprise, if this North-west passage can really be used,”

replied Mrs Paulina Barnett; “but I think you spoke of a double motive.”

“I did, madam,” said the Captain, “and I alluded to a matter of vital interest to the Company. But I must beg of you to allow me to explain to you in a few words how the present state of things came about, how it is in fact that the very source of the trade of this once flourishing Company is in danger of destruction.”

The Captain then proceeded to give a brief sketch of the history of the famous Hudson’s Bay Company.

In the earliest times men employed the skins and furs of animals as clothing. The fur trade is therefore of very great antiquity. Luxury in dress increased to such an extent, that sumptuary laws were enacted to control too great extravagance, especially in furs, for which there was a positive passion. Vair and the furs of Siberian squirrels were prohibited at the middle of the 12th century.

In 1553 Russia founded several establishments in the northern steppes, and England lost no time in following her example. The trade in sables, ermines, and beavers, was carried on through the agency of the Samoiedes; but during the reign of Elizabeth, a royal decree restricted the use of costly furs to such an extent, that for several years this branch of industry was completely paralysed.

On the 2nd May, 1670, a licence to trade in furs in the Hudson’s Bay Territory was granted to the Company, which numbered several men of high rank amongst its shareholders : the Duke of York, the Duke of Albemarle, the Earl of Shaftesbury, *etc.* Its capital was then only £8420. Private companies were formidable rivals to its success; and French agents, making Canada their headquarters,

ventured on hazardous but most lucrative expeditions. The active competition of these bold hunters threatened the very existence of the infant Company.

The conquest of Canada, however, somewhat lessened the danger of its position. Three years after the taking of Quebec, 1776, the fur trade received a new impulse. English traders became familiar with the difficulties of trade of this kind; they learned the customs of the country, the ways of the Indians and their system of exchange of goods, but for all this the Company as yet made no profits whatever. Moreover, towards 1784 some merchants of Montreal combined to explore the fur country, and founded that powerful North-west Company, which soon became the centre of the fur trade. In 1798 the new Company shipped furs to the value of no less than £120,000, and the existence of the Hudson's Bay Company was again threatened.

We must add, that the North-west Company shrank from no act, however iniquitous, if its interests were at stake. Its agents imposed on their own employés, speculated on the misery of the Indians, robbed them when they had themselves made them drunk, setting at defiance the Act of Parliament forbidding the sale of spirituous liquors on Indian territory; and consequently realising immense profits, in spite of the competition of the various Russian and American companies which had sprung up—the American Fur Company amongst others, founded in 1809, with a capital of a million of dollars, which was carrying on operations on the west of the Rocky Mountains.

The Hudson's Bay Company was probably in greater danger of ruin than any other; but in 1821, after much discussion, a treaty was made, in accordance with which its old rival the North-west Company became amalgamated

with it, the two receiving the common title of “The Hudson’s Bay Fur Company.”

Now the only rival of this important association is the American St Louis Fur Company. The Hudson’s Bay Company has numerous establishments scattered over a domain extending over 3,700,000 square miles. Its principal factories are situated on James Bay, at the mouth of the Severn, in the south, and towards the frontiers of Upper Canada, on Lakes Athapeskow, Winnipeg, Superior, Methye, Buffalo, and near the Colombia, Mackenzie, Saskatchewan, and Assiniboin rivers, *etc.* Fort York, commanding the course of the river Nelson, is the headquarters of the Company, and contains its principal fur depôt. Moreover, in 1842 it took a lease of all the Russian establishments in North America at an annual rent of £40,000, so that it is now working on its own account the vast tracts of country between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean. It has sent out intrepid explorers in every direction: Hearne, towards the Polar Sea, in 1770, to the discovery of the Coppermine River; Franklin, in 1819 to 1822, along 5550 miles of the American coast; Mackenzie, who, after having discovered the river to which he gave his name, reached the shores of the Pacific at 52° 24' N. Lat. The following is a list of the quantities of skins and furs despatched to Europe by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1833-34, which will give an exact idea of the extent of its trade:—

Beavers, 1,074 Skins and young Beavers, 92,288 Musk Rats, 694,092 Badgers, 1,069 Bears, 7,451 Ermines, 491 Foxes, 9,937 Lynxes, 14,255 Sables, 64,490 Polecats, 25,100 Otters, 22,303 Racoons, 713 Swans, 7,918 Wolves, 8,484 Wolverines, 1,571 Such figures ought to bring in a large profit to the Hudson’s Bay Company, but

unfortunately they have not been maintained, and for the last twenty years have been decreasing.

The cause of this decline was the subject of Captain Craventy's explanation to Mrs Paulina Barnett.

"Until 1839, madam," said he, "the Company was in a flourishing condition. In that year the number of furs exported was 2,350,000, but since then the trade has gradually declined, and this number is now reduced by one-half at least."

"But what do you suppose is the cause of this extraordinary decrease in the exportation of furs?" inquired Mrs Barnett.

"The depopulation of the hunting territories, caused by the activity, and, I must add, the want of foresight of the hunters. The game was trapped and killed without mercy. These massacres were conducted in the most reckless and short-sighted fashion. Even females with young and their little ones did not escape. The consequence is, that the animals whose fur is valuable have become extremely rare. The otter has almost entirely disappeared, and is only to be found near the islands of the North Pacific. Small colonies of beavers have taken refuge on the shores of the most distant rivers. It is the same with many other animals, compelled to flee before the invasion of the hunters. The traps, once crowded with game, are now empty. The price of skins is rising just when a great demand exists for furs. Hunters have gone away in disgust, leaving none but the most intrepid and indefatigable, who now penetrate to the very confines of the American continent."

"Yes," said Mrs Paulina Barnett, "the fact of the fur-bearing animals having taken refuge beyond the polar circle, is a

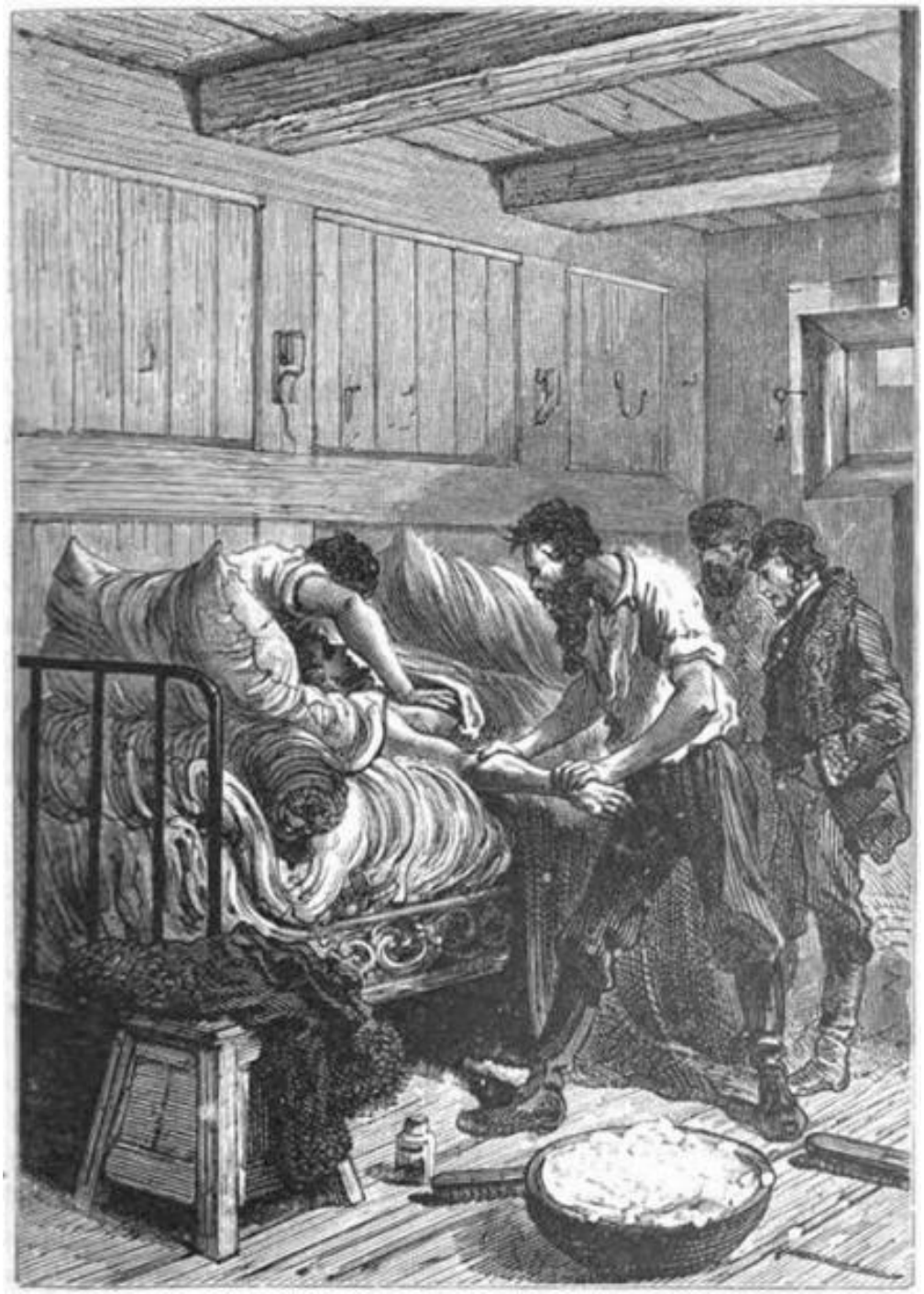
sufficient explanation of the Company's motive in founding a factory on the borders of the Arctic Ocean."

"Not only so, madam," replied the Captain, "the Company is also compelled to seek a more northern centre of operations, for an Act of Parliament has lately greatly reduced its domain."

"And the motive for this reduction?" inquired the traveller.

"A very important question of political economy was involved, madam; one which could not fail greatly to interest the statesmen of Great Britain. In a word, the interests of the Company and those of civilisation are antagonistic. It is to the interest of the Company to keep the territory belonging to it in a wild uncultivated condition. Every attempt at clearing ground was pitilessly put a stop to, as it drove away the wild animals, so that the monopoly enjoyed by the Hudson's Bay Company was detrimental to all agricultural enterprise. All questions not immediately relating to their own particular trade, were relentlessly put aside by the governors of the association. It was this despotic, and, in a certain sense, immoral system, which provoked the measures taken by Parliament, and, in 1837, a commission appointed by the Colonial Secretary decided that it was necessary to annex to Canada all the territories suitable for cultivation, such as the Red River and Saskatchewan districts, and to leave to the Company only that portion of its land which appeared to be incapable of future civilisation. The next year the Company lost the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains, which it held direct from the Colonial Office, and you will now understand, madam, how the agents of the Company, having lost their power over their old territories, are determined before giving up their trade to try to work the little known

countries of the north, and so open a communication with the Pacific by means of the North-west passage.”



Mrs Paulina Barnett was now well informed as to the ulterior projects of the celebrated Company. Captain Craventy had given her a graphic sketch of the situation, and it is probable he would have entered into further details, had not an incident cut short his harangue.

Corporal Joliffe announced in a loud voice that, with Mrs Joliffe's assistance, he was about to mix the punch. This news was received as it deserved. The bowl—or rather, the basin—was filled with the precious liquid. It contained no less than ten pints of coarse rum. Sugar, measured out by Mrs Joliffe, was piled up at the bottom, and on the top floated slices of lemon shrivelled with age. Nothing remained to be done but to light this alcoholic lake, and the Corporal, match in hand, awaited the order of his Captain, as if he were about to spring a mine.

"All right, Joliffe!" at last said Captain Craventy.

The light was applied to the bowl, and in a moment the punch was in flames, whilst the guests applauded and clapped their hands. Ten minutes afterwards, full glasses of the delightful beverage were circulating amongst the guests, fresh bidders for them coming forward in endless succession, like speculators on the Stock Exchange.

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! three cheers for Mrs Barnett! A cheer for the Captain."

In the midst of these joyful shouts cries were heard from outside. Silence immediately fell upon the company assembled.

"Sergeant Long," said the Captain, "go and see what is the matter."

And at his chief’s order, the Sergeant, leaving his glass unfinished, left the room.

Captain Craventy’s prophecy has since been realised.

Chapter III

A SAVANT THAWED

Sergeant Long hastened to the narrow passage from which opened the outer door of the fort, and heard the cries redoubled, and combined with violent blows on the postern gate, surrounded by high walls, which gave access to the court. The Sergeant pushed open the door, and plunging into the snow, already a foot deep; he waded through it, although half-blinded by the cutting sleet, and nipped by the terrible cold.

“What the devil does any one want at this time of night?” exclaimed the Sergeant to himself, as he mechanically removed the heavy bars of the gate; “none but Esquimaux would dare to brave such a temperature as this!”

“Open! open! open!” they shouted from without.

“I am opening,” replied Sergeant Long, who really seemed to be a long time about it.

At last the door swung open, and the Sergeant was almost upset by a sledge, drawn by six dogs, which dashed past him like a flash of lightning. Worthy Sergeant Long only just escaped being crushed, but he got up without a murmur, closed the gate, and returned to the house at his

ordinary pace, that is to say, at the rate of seventy-five strides a minute.

But Captain Craventy, Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, and Corporal Joliffe were already outside, braving the intense cold, and staring at the sledge, white with snow, which had just drawn up in front of them.

A man completely enveloped in furs now descended from it.

“Fort Reliance?;” he inquired.

“The same,” replied the Captain.

“Captain Craventy?”

“Behold him! Who are you?”

“A courier of the Company.”

“Are you alone?”

“No, I bring a traveller.”

“A traveller! And what does he want?”

“He is come to see the moon.”

At this reply, Captain Craventy said to himself the man must be a fool. But there was no time to announce this opinion, for the courier had taken an inert mass from the sledge, a kind of bag covered with snow, and was about to carry it into the house, when the Captain inquired

“What is that bag?”

“It is my traveller,” replied the courier.

“Who is this traveller?”

“The astronomer, Thomas Black.”

“But he is frozen.”

“Well, he must be thawed.”

Thomas Black, carried by the Sergeant, the Corporal, and the courier, now made his entrance into the house of the fort, and was taken to a room on the first floor, the temperature of which was bearable, thanks to a glowing stove. He was laid upon a bed, and the Captain took his hand.

It was literally frozen. The wrappers and furred mantles, in which Thomas Black was rolled up like a parcel requiring care, were removed, and revealed a man of about fifty. He was short and stout, his hair was already touched with grey, his beard was untrimmed, his eyes were closed, and his lips pressed together as if glued to one another. If he breathed at all, it was so slightly that the frost-work on the windows would not have been affected by it. Joliffe undressed him, and turned him rapidly on to his face and back again, with the words—

“Come, come, sir, when do you mean to return to consciousness?”

But the visitor who had arrived in so strange a manner showed no signs of returning life, and Corporal Joliffe could think of no better means to restore the lost vital heat than to give him a bath in the bowl of hot punch.