

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE KERGUELEN ISLES TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Never did a voyage begin more prosperously, or a passenger start in better spirits. The interior of the Halbrane corresponded with its exterior. Nothing could exceed the perfect order, the Dutch cleanliness of the vessel. The captain's cabin, and that of the lieutenant, one on the port, the other on the starboard side, were fitted up with a narrow berth, a cupboard anything but capacious, an arm-chair, a fixed table, a lamp hung from the ceiling, various nautical instruments, a barometer, a thermometer, a chronometer, and a sextant in its oaken box. One of the two other cabins was prepared to receive me. It was eight feet in length, five in breadth. I was accustomed to the exigencies of sea life, and could do with its narrow proportions, also with its furniture--a table, a cupboard, a cane-bottomed arm-chair, a washing-stand on an iron pedestal, and a berth to which a less accommodating passenger would doubtless have objected. The passage would be a short one, however, so I took possession of that cabin, which I was to occupy for only four, or at the worst five weeks, with entire content.

The eight men who composed the crew were named respectively Martin Holt, sailing-master; Hardy, Rogers, Drap, Francis, Gratian, Burg, and Stern--sailors all between twenty-five and thirty-five years old--all Englishmen, well trained, and remarkably well disciplined

by a hand of iron.

Let me set it down here at the beginning, the exceptionally able man whom they all obeyed at a word, a gesture, was not the captain of the Halbrane; that man was the second officer, James West, who was then thirty-two years of age.

James West was born on the sea, and had passed his childhood on board a lighter belonging to his father, and on which the whole family lived. All his life he had breathed the salt air of the English Channel, the Atlantic, or the Pacific. He never went ashore except for the needs of his service, whether of the State or of trade. If he had to leave one ship for another he merely shifted his canvas bag to the latter, from which he stirred no more. When he was not sailing in reality he was sailing in imagination. After having been ship's boy, novice, sailor, he became quartermaster, master, and finally lieutenant of the Halbrane, and he had already served for ten years as second in command under Captain Len Guy.

James West was not even ambitious of a higher rise; he did not want to make a fortune; he did not concern himself with the buying or selling of cargoes; but everything connected with that admirable instrument a sailing ship, James West understood to perfection.

The personal appearance of the lieutenant was as follows: middle height, slightly built, all nerves and muscles, strong limbs as agile as those of a gymnast, the true sailor's "look," but of

very unusual far-sightedness and surprising penetration, sunburnt face, hair thick and short, beardless cheeks and chin, regular features, the whole expression denoting energy, courage, and physical strength at their utmost tension.

James West spoke but rarely--only when he was questioned. He gave his orders in a clear voice, not repeating them, but so as to be heard at once, and he was understood. I call attention to this typical officer of the Merchant Marine, who was devoted body and soul to Captain Len Guy as to the schooner Halbrane. He seemed to be one of the essential organs of his ship, and if the Halbrane had a heart it was in James West's breast that it beat.

There is but one more person to be mentioned; the ship's cook--a negro from the African coast named Endicott, thirty years of age, who had held that post for eight years. The boatswain and he were great friends, and indulged in frequent talks.

Life on board was very regular, very simple, and its monotony was not without a certain charm. Sailing is repose in movement, a rocking in a dream, and I did not dislike my isolation. Of course I should have liked to find out why Captain Len Guy had changed his mind with respect to me; but how was this to be done? To question the lieutenant would have been loss of time. Besides, was he in possession of the secrets of his chief? It was no part of his business to be so, and I had observed that he did not occupy himself with anything outside of it. Not ten words were exchanged between

him and me during the two meals which we took in common daily. I must acknowledge, however, that I frequently caught the captain's eyes fixed upon me, as though he longed to question me, as though he had something to learn from me, whereas it was I, on the contrary, who had something to learn from him. But we were both silent.

Had I felt the need of talking to somebody very strongly, I might have resorted to the boatswain, who was always disposed to chatter; but what had he to say that could interest me? He never failed to bid me good morning and good evening in most prolix fashion, but beyond these courtesies I did not feel disposed to go.

The good weather lasted, and on the 18th of August, in the afternoon, the look-out discerned the mountains of the Crozet group. The next day we passed Possession Island, which is inhabited only in the fishing season. At this period the only dwellers there are flocks of penguins, and the birds which whalers call "white pigeons."

The approach to land is always interesting at sea. It occurred to me that Captain Len Guy might take this opportunity of speaking to his passenger; but he did not.

We should see land, that is to say the peaks of Marion and Prince Edward Islands, before arriving at Tristan d'Acunha, but it was there the Halbrane was to take in a fresh supply of water. I concluded therefore that the monotony of our voyage would continue

unbroken to the end. But, on the morning of the 20th of August, to my extreme surprise, Captain Len Guy came on deck, approached me, and said, speaking very low,--

"Sir, I have something to say to you."

"I am ready to hear you, captain."

"I have not spoken until to-day, for I am naturally taciturn."

Here he hesitated again, but after a pause, continued with an effort,--

"Mr. Jeorling, have you tried to discover my reason for changing my mind on the subject of your passage?"

"I have tried, but I have not succeeded, captain. Perhaps, as I am not a compatriot of yours, you--"

"It is precisely because you are an American that I decided in the end to offer you a passage on the Halbrane."

"Because I am an American?"

"Also, because you come from Connecticut."

"I don't understand."

“You will understand if I add that I thought it possible, since you belong to Connecticut, since you have visited Nantucket Island, that you might have known the family of Arthur Gordon Pym.”

“The hero of Edgar Poe’s romance?”

“The same. His narrative was founded upon the manuscript in which the details of that extraordinary and disastrous voyage across the Antarctic Sea was related.”

I thought I must be dreaming when I heard Captain Len Guy’s words. Edgar Poe’s romance was nothing but a fiction, a work of imagination by the most brilliant of our American writers. And here was a sane man treating that fiction as a reality.

I could not answer him. I was asking myself what manner of man was this one with whom I had to deal.

“You have heard my question?” persisted the captain.

“Yes, yes, captain, certainly, but I am not sure that I quite understand.”

“I will put it to you more plainly. I ask you whether in Connecticut you personally knew the Pym family who lived in Nantucket Island? Arthur Pym’s father was one of the principal merchants there, he was a Navy contractor. It was his son who

embarked in the adventures which he related with his own lips to Edgar Poe--”

“Captain! Why, that story is due to the powerful imagination of our great poet. It is a pure invention.”

“So, then, you don’t believe it, Mr. Jeorling?” said the captain, shrugging his shoulders three times.

“Neither I nor any other person believes it, Captain Guy, and you are the first I have heard maintain that it was anything but a mere romance.”

“Listen to me, then, Mr. Jeorling, for although this ‘romance’--as you call it--appeared only last year, it is none the less a reality. Although eleven years have elapsed since the facts occurred, they are none the less true, and we still await the ‘word J of an enigma which will perhaps never be solved.’”

Yes, he was mad; but by good fortune West was there to take his place as commander of the schooner. I had only to listen to him, and as I had read Poe’s romance over and over again, I was curious to hear what the captain had to say about it.

“And now,” he resumed in a sharper tone and with a shake in his voice which denoted a certain amount of nervous irritation, “it is possible that you did not know the Pym family; that you have never

met them either at Providence or at Nantucket--”

“Or elsewhere.”

“Just so! But don’t commit yourself by asserting that the Pym family never existed, that Arthur Gordon is only a fictitious personage, and his voyage an imaginary one! Do you think any man, even your Edgar Poe, could have been capable of inventing, of creating--?”

The increasing vehemence of Captain Len Guy warned me of the necessity of treating his monomania with respect, and accepting all he said without discussion.

“Now,” he proceeded, “please to keep the facts which I am about to state clearly in your mind; there is no disputing about facts. You may deduce any results from them you like. I hope you will not make me regret that I consented to give you a passage on the Halbrane.”

This was an effectual warning, so I made a sign of acquiescence. The matter promised to be curious. He went on,--

“When Edgar Poe’s narrative appeared in 1838, I was at New York. I immediately started for Baltimore, where the writer’s family lived; the grandfather had served as quarter-master-general during the War of Independence. You admit, I suppose, the existence of the

Poe family, although you deny that of the Pym family?”

I said nothing, and the captain continued, with a dark glance at me,--

“I inquired into certain matters relating to Edgar Poe. His abode was pointed out to me and I called at the house. A first disappointment! He had left America, and I could not see him. Unfortunately, being unable to see Edgar Poe, I was unable to refer to Arthur Gordon Pym in the case. That bold pioneer of the Antarctic regions was dead! As the American poet had stated, at the close of the narrative of his adventures, Gordon’s death had already been made known to the public by the daily press.”

What Captain Len Guy said was true; but, in common with all the readers of the romance, I had taken this declaration for an artifice of the novelist. My notion was that, as he either could not or dared not wind up so extraordinary a work of imagination, Poe had given it to be understood that he had not received the last three chapters from Arthur Pym, whose life had ended under sudden and deplorable circumstances which Poe did not make known.

“Then,” continued the captain, “Edgar Poe being absent, Arthur Pym being dead, I had only one thing to do; to find the man who had been the fellow-traveller of Arthur Pym, that Dirk Peters who had followed him to the very verge of the high latitudes, and whence they had both returned--how? This is not known. Did they come back

in company? The narrative does not say, and there are obscure points in that part of it, as in many other places. However, Edgar Poe stated explicitly that Dirk Peters would be able to furnish information relating to the non-communicated chapters, and that he lived at Illinois. I set out at once for Illinois; I arrived at Springfield; I inquired for this man, a half-breed Indian. He lived in the hamlet of Vandalia; I went there, and met with a second disappointment. He was not there, or rather, Mr. Jeorling, he was no longer there. Some years before this Dirk Peters had left Illinois, and even the United States, to go--nobody knows where. But I have talked, at Vandalia with people who had known him, with whom he lived, to whom he related his adventures, but did not explain the final issue. Of that he alone holds the secret.”

What! This Dirk Peters had really existed? He still lived? I was on the point of letting myself be carried away by the statements of the captain of the Halbrane! Yes, another moment, and, in my turn, I should have made a fool of myself. This poor mad fellow imagined that he had gone to Illinois and seen people at Vandalia who had known Dirk Peters, and that the latter had disappeared. No wonder, since he had never existed, save in the brain of the novelist!

Nevertheless I did not want to vex Len Guy, and perhaps drive him still more mad. Accordingly I appeared entirely convinced that he was speaking words of sober seriousness, even when he added,--

“You are aware that in the narrative mention is made by the captain of the schooner on which Arthur Pym had embarked, of a

bottle containing a sealed letter, which was deposited at the foot of one of the Kerguelen peaks?”

“Yes, I recall the incident.”

“Well, then, in one of my latest voyages I sought for the place where that bottle ought to be. I found it and the letter also. That letter stated that the captain and Arthur Pym intended to make every effort to reach the uttermost limits of the Antarctic Sea!”

“You found that bottle?”

“Yes!”

“And the letter?”

“Yes!”

I looked at Captain Len Guy. Like certain monomaniacs he had come to believe in his own inventions. I was on the point of saying to him, “Show me that letter,” but I thought better of it. Was he not capable of having written the letter himself? And then I answered,--

“It is much to be regretted, captain, that you were unable to come across Dirk Peters at Vandalia! He would at least have informed you under what conditions he and Arthur Pym returned from so far. Recollect, now, in the last chapter but one they are both there. Their boat is in front of the thick curtain of white mist; it dashes

into the gulf of the cataract just at the moment when a veiled human form rises. Then there is nothing more; nothing but two blank lines--”

“Decidedly, sir, it is much to be regretted that I could not lay my hand on Dirk Peters! It would have been interesting to learn what was the outcome of these adventures. But, to my mind, it would have been still more interesting to have ascertained the fate of the others.”

“The others?” I exclaimed almost involuntarily. “Of whom do you speak?”

“Of the captain and crew of the English schooner which picked up Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters after the frightful shipwreck of the *Grampus*, and brought them across the Polar Sea to Tsalal Island--”

“Captain,” said I, just as though I entertained no doubt of the authenticity of Edgar Poe’s romance, “is it not the case that all these men perished, some in the attack on the schooner, the others by the infernal device of the natives of Tsalal?”

“Who can tell?” replied the captain in a voice hoarse from emotion. “Who can say but that some of the unfortunate creatures survived, and contrived to escape from the natives?”

“In any case,” I replied, “it would be difficult to admit that

those who had survived could still be living.”

“And why?”

“Because the facts we are discussing are eleven years old.”

“Sir,” replied the captain, “since Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters were able to advance beyond Tsalal Island farther than the eighty-third parallel, since they found means of living in the midst of those Antarctic lands, why should not their companions, if they were not all killed by the natives, if they were so fortunate as to reach the neighbouring islands sighted during the voyage--why should not those unfortunate countrymen of mine have contrived to live there? Why should they not still be there, awaiting their deliverance?”

“Your pity leads you astray, captain,” I replied. “It would be impossible.”

“Impossible, sir! And if a fact, on indisputable evidence, appealed to the whole civilized world; if a material proof of the existence of these unhappy men, imprisoned at the ends of the earth, were furnished, who would venture to meet those who would fain go to their aid with the cry of ‘Impossible!’“

Was it a sentiment of humanity, exaggerated to the point of madness, that had roused the interest of this strange man in those

shipwrecked folk who never had suffered shipwreck, for the good reason that they never had existed?

Captain Len Guy approached me anew, laid his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear,--

“No, sir, no! the last word has not been said concerning the crew of the Jane.”

Then he promptly withdrew.

The Jane was, in Edgar Poe’s romance, the name of the ship which had rescued Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters from the wreck of the Grampus, and Captain Len Guy had now uttered it for the first time. It occurred to me then that Guy was the name of the captain of the Jane, an English ship; but what of that? The captain of the Jane never lived but in the imagination of the novelist, he and the skipper of the Halbrane have nothing in common except a name which is frequently to be found in England. But, on thinking of the similarity, it struck me that the poor captain’s brain had been turned by this very thing. He had conceived the notion that he was of kin to the unfortunate captain of the Jane! And this had brought him to his present state, this was the source of his passionate pity for the fate of the imaginary shipwrecked mariners!

It would have been interesting to discover whether James West was aware of the state of the case, whether his chief had ever talked to

him of the follies he had revealed to me. But this was a delicate question, since it involved the mental condition of Captain Len Guy; and besides, any kind of conversation with the lieutenant was difficult. On the whole I thought it safer to restrain my curiosity. In a few days the schooner would reach Tristan d'Acunha, and I should part with her and her captain for good and all. Never, however, could I lose the recollection that I had actually met and sailed with a man who took the fictions of Edgar Poe's romance for sober fact. Never could I have looked for such an experience!

On the 22nd of August the outline of Prince Edward's Island was sighted, south latitude $46^{\circ} 55'$, and $37^{\circ} 46'$ east longitude.

We were in sight of the island for twelve hours, and then it was lost in the evening mists.

On the following day the Halbrane headed in the direction of the north-west, towards the most northern parallel of the southern hemisphere which she had to attain in the course of that voyage.