CHAPTER VI.

AN OCEAN WAIF.

The navigation of the Halbrane went on prosperously with the help of the sea and the wind. In fifteen days, if this state of things lasted, she might reach Tristan d'Acunha. Captain Len Guy left the working of the ship to James West, and well might he do so; there was nothing to fear with such a seaman as he.

"Our lieutenant has not his match afloat," said Hurliguerly to me one day. "He ought to be in command of a flag-ship."

"Indeed," I replied, "he seems to be a true son of the sea."

"And then, our Halbrane, what a craft! Congratulate yourself, Mr. Jeorling, and congratulate yourself also that I succeeded in bringing the captain to change his mind about you."

"If it was you who obtained that result, boatswain, I thank you heartily."

"And so you ought, for he was plaguily against it, was our captain, in spite of all old man Atkins could say. But I managed to make him hear reason."

“I shan’t forget it, boatswain, I shan’t forget it, since, thanks to your intervention, instead of moping at Kerguelen. I hope shortly to get within sight of Tristan d’Acunha.”

“In a few days, Mr. Jeorling. Only think, sir, according to what I hear tell, they are making ships in England and America with machines in their insides, and wheels which they use as a duck uses its paddles. All right, we shall know what’s the good of them when they come into use. My notion is, however, that those ships will never be able to fight with a fine frigate sailing with a fresh breeze.”

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It was the 3rd of September. If nothing occurred to delay us, our schooner would be in sight of port in three days. The chief island of the group is visible on clear days at a great distance.

That day, between ten and eleven o’clock in the morning, I was walking backwards and forwards on the deck, on the windward side. We were sliding smoothly over the surface of an undulating sea. The Halbrane resembled an enormous bird, one of the gigantic albatross kind described by Arthur Pym--which had spread its sail-like wings, and was carrying a whole ship’s crew towards space.

James West was looking out through his glasses to starboard at an object floating two or three miles away, and several sailors,

hanging over the side, were also curiously observing it.

I went forward and looked attentively at the object. It was an irregularly formed mass about twelve yards in length, and in the middle of it there appeared a shining lump.

“That is no whale,” said Martin Holt, the sailing-master. “It would have blown once or twice since we have been looking at it.”

“Certainly!” assented Hardy. “Perhaps it is the carcase of some deserted ship.”

“May the devil send it to the bottom!” cried Roger. “It would be a bad job to come up against it in the dark; it might send us down before we could know what had happened.”

“I believe you,” added Drap, “and these derelicts are more dangerous than a rock, for they are now here and again there, and there’s no avoiding them.”

Hurliguerly came up at this moment and planted his elbows on the bulwark, alongside of mine.

“What do you think of it, boatswain?” I asked.

“It is my opinion, Mr. Jeorling,” replied the boatswain, “that what we see there is neither a blower nor a wreck, but merely a lump

of ice."

"Hurliguerly is right," said James West; "it is a lump of ice,
a piece of an iceberg which the currents have carried hither."

"What?" said I, "to the forty-fifth parallel?"

"Yes, sir," answered West, "that has occurred, and the ice
sometimes gets up as high as the Cape, if we are to take the word of
a French navigator, Captain Blosseville, who met one at this height
in 1828."

"Then this mass will melt before long," I observed, feeling not
a little surprised that West had honoured me by so lengthy a reply.

"It must indeed be dissolved in great part already," he
continued, "and what we see is the remains of a mountain of ice
which must have weighed millions of tons."

Captain Len Guy now appeared, and perceiving the group of sailors
around West, he came forward. A few words were exchanged in a low
tone between the captain and the lieutenant, and the latter passed
his glass to the former, who turned it upon the floating object, now
at least a mile nearer to us.

"It is ice," said he, "and it is lucky that it is dissolving.
The Halbrane might have come to serious grief by collision with it

in the night."

I was struck by the fixity of his gaze upon the object, whose nature he had so promptly declared: he continued to contemplate it for several minutes, and I guessed what was passing in the mind of the man under the obsession of a fixed idea. This fragment of ice, torn from the southern icebergs, came from those waters wherein his thoughts continually ranged. He wanted to see it more near, perhaps at close quarters, it might be to take away some bits of it. At an order from West the schooner was directed towards the floating mass; presently we were within two cables'-length, and I could examine it.

The mound in the center was melting rapidly; before the end of the day nothing would remain of the fragment of ice which had been carried by the currents so high up as the forty-fifth parallel.

Captain Len Guy gazed at it steadily, but he now needed no glass, and presently we all began to distinguish a second object which little by little detached itself from the mass, according as the melting process went on--a black shape, stretched on the white ice.

What was our surprise, mingled with horror, when we saw first an arm, then a leg, then a trunk, then a head appear, forming a human body, not in a state of nakedness, but clothed in dark garments.

For a moment I even thought that the limbs moved, that the hands

were stretched towards us.

The crew uttered a simultaneous cry. No! this body was not moving, but it was slowly slipping off the icy surface.

I looked at Captain Len Guy. His face was as livid as that of the corpse that had drifted down from the far latitudes of the austral zone. What could be done was done to recover the body of the unfortunate man, and who can tell whether a faint breath of life did not animate it even then? In any case his pockets might perhaps contain some document that would enable his identity to be established. Then, accompanied by a last prayer, those human remains should be committed to the depths of the ocean, the cemetery of sailors who die at sea.

A boat Was let down. I followed it with my eyes as it neared the side of the ice fragment eaten by the waves.

Hurliguerly set foot upon a spot which still offered some resistance. Gratian got out after him, while Francis kept the boat fast by the chain. The two crept along the ice until they reached the corpse, then drew it to them by the arms and legs and so got it into the boat. A few strokes of the oars and the boatswain had rejoined the schooner. The corpse, completely frozen, having been laid at the foot of the mizen mast, Captain Len Guy approached and examined it long and closely, as though he sought to recognize it.

It was the corpse of a sailor, dressed in coarse stuff, woollen trousers and a patched jersey; a belt encircled his waist twice. His death had evidently occurred some months previously, probably very soon after the unfortunate man had been carried away by the drift. He was about forty, with slightly grizzled hair, a mere skeleton covered with skin. He must have suffered agonies of hunger.

Captain Len Guy lifted up the hair, which had been preserved by the cold, raised the head, gazed upon the scaled eyelids, and finally said with a sort of sob,--

“Patterson! Patterson!”

“Patterson?” I exclaimed.

The name, common as it was, touched some chord in my memory. When had I heard it uttered? Had I read it anywhere?

At this moment, James West, on a hint from the boatswain, searched the pockets of the dead man, and took out of them a knife, some string, an empty tobacco box, and lastly a leather pocket-book furnished with a metallic pencil.

“Give me that,” said the captain. Some of the leaves were covered with writing, almost entirely effaced by the damp. He found, however, some words on the last page which were still legible, and my emotion may be imagined when I heard him read aloud in a

trembling voice: “The Jane . . . Tsalal island . . . by eighty-three . . . There . . . eleven years . . . Captain . . . five sailors surviving . . . Hasten to bring them aid.”

And under these lines was a name, a signature, the name of Patterson!

Then I remembered! Patterson was the second officer of the Jane, the mate of that schooner which had picked up Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters on the wreck of the Grampus, the Jane having reached Tsalal Island; the Jane which was attacked by natives and blown up in the midst of those waters.

So then it was all true? Edgar Poe’s work was that of an historian, not a writer of romance? Arthur Gordon Pym’s journal had actually been confided to him! Direct relations had been established between them! Arthur Pym existed, or rather he had existed, he was a real being! And he had died, by a sudden and deplorable death under circumstances not revealed before he had completed the narrative of his extraordinary voyage. And what parallel had he reached on leaving Tsalal Island with his companion, Dirk Peters, and how had both of them been restored to their native land, America?

I thought my head was turning, that I was going mad--I who accused Captain Guy of being insane! No! I had not heard aright! I had misunderstood! This was a mere phantom of my fancy!

And yet, how was I to reject the evidence found on the body of the mate of the Jane, that Patterson whose words were supported by ascertained dates? And above all, how could I retain a doubt, after James West, who was the most self-possessed among us, had succeeded in deciphering the following fragments of sentences:--

“Drifting since the 3rd of June north of Tsalal Island…Still there…Captain William Guy and five of the men of the Jane--the piece of ice I am on is drifting across the iceberg…food will soon fail me…Since the 13th of June…my last resources exhausted…to-day…16th of June . . . I am going to die.”

So then for nearly three months Patterson’s body had lain on the surface of this ice-waif which we had met on our way from the Kerguelens to Tristan d’Acunha! Ah! why had we not saved the mate of the Jane!

I had to yield to evidence. Captain Len Guy, who knew Patterson, had recognized him in this frozen corpse! It was indeed he who accompanied the captain of the Jane when he had interred that bottle, containing the letter which I had refused to believe authentic, at the Kerguelens. Yes! for eleven years, the survivors of the English schooner had been cast away there without any hope of succour.

Len Guy turned to me and said, “Do you believe--now?”

“I believe,” said I, falteringly; “but Captain William Guy of the Jane, and Captain Len Guy of the Halbrane--”

“Are brothers!” he cried in a loud voice, which was heard by all the crew.

Then we turned our eyes once more to the place where the lump of ice had been floating; but the double influence of the solar rays and the waters in this latitude had produced its effect, no trace of the dead man’s last refuge remained on the surface of the sea.