

CHAPTER IX.

FITTING OUT THE HALBRANE

On the 15th of October, our schooner cast anchor in Port Egmont, on the north of West Falkland. The group is composed of two islands, one the above-named, the other Soledad or East Falkland. Captain Len Guy gave twelve hours' leave to the whole crew. The next day the proceedings were to begin by a careful and minute inspection of the vessel's hull and keel, in view of the contemplated prolonged navigation of the Antarctic seas. That day Captain Len Guy went ashore, to confer with the Governor of the group on the subject of the immediate re-victualling of the schooner. He did not intend to make expense a consideration, because the whole adventure might be wrecked by an unwise economy. Besides I was ready to aid with my purse, as I told him, and I intended that we should be partners in tile cost of this expedition.

James West remained on board all day, according to his custom in the absence of the captain, and was engaged until evening in the inspection of the hold. I did not wish to go ashore until the next day. I should have ample time while we remained in port to explore Port Egmont and its surroundings, and to study the geology and mineralogy of the island. Hurliguerly regarded the opportunity as highly favourable for the renewal of talk with me, and availed himself of it accordingly. He accosted me as follows:

“Accept my sincere compliments, Mr. Jeorling?”

“And wherefore, boatswain?”

“On account of what I have just heard--that you are to come with us to the far end of the Antarctic seas.”

“Oh! not so far, I imagine, and if it is not a matter of going beyond the eighty-fourth parallel--”

“Who can tell,” replied the boatswain, “at all events the Halbrane will make more degrees of latitude than any other ship before her.”

“We shall see.”

“And does that not alarm you, Mr. Jeorling?”

“Not in the very least.”

“Nor us, rest assured. No, no! You see, Mr. Jeorling, our captain is a good one, although he is no talker. You only need to take him the right way! First he gives you the passage to Tristan d’Acunha that he refused you at first, and now he extends it to the pole.”

“The pole is not the question, boatswain.”

“Ah! it will be reached at last, some day.”

“The thing has not yet been done. And, besides, I don’t take much interest in the pole, and have no ambition to conquer it. In any case it is only to Tsalal Island--”

“Tsalal Island, of course. Nevertheless, you will acknowledge that our captain has been very accommodating to you, and--”

“And therefore I am much obliged to him, boatswain, and,” I hastened to add, ”to you also; since it is to your influence I owe my passage.”

“Very likely.” Hurliguerly, a good fellow at bottom, as I afterwards learned, discerned a little touch of irony in my tone; but he did not appear to do so; he was resolved to persevere in his patronage of me. And, indeed, his conversation could not be otherwise than profitable to me, for he was thoroughly acquainted with the Falkland Islands. The result was that on the following day I went ashore adequately prepared to begin my perquisitions. At that period the Falklands were not utilized as they have been since.

It was at a later date that Port Stanley--described by Elisée Réclus, the French geographer, as “ideal”--was discovered. Port Stanley is sheltered at every point of the compass, and could contain all the fleets of Great Britain.

If I had been sailing for the last two months with bandaged eyes, and without knowing whither the Halbrane was bound, and had been asked during the first few hours at our moorings, "Are you in the Falkland Isles or in Norway?" I should have puzzled how to answer the question. For here were coasts forming deep creeks, the steep hills with peaked sides, and the coast-ledges faced with grey rock. Even the seaside climate, exempt from great extremes of cold and heat, is common to the two countries. Besides, the frequent rains of Scandinavia visit Magellan's region in like abundance. Both have dense fogs, and, in spring and autumn, winds so fierce that the very vegetables in the fields are frequently rooted up.

A few walks inland would, however, have sufficed to make me recognize that I was still separated by the equator from the waters of Northern Europe. What had I found to observe in the neighbourhood of Port Egmont after my explorations of the first few days? Nothing but the signs of a sickly vegetation, nowhere arborescent. Here and there a few shrubs grew, in place of the flourishing firs of the Norwegian mountains, and the surface of a spongy soil which sinks and rises under the foot is carpeted with mosses, fungi, and lichens. No! this was not the enticing country where the echoes of the sagas resound, this was not the poetic realm of Wodin and the Valkyries.

On the deep waters of the Falkland Strait, which separates the two principal isles, great masses of extraordinary aquatic vegetation

floated, and the bays of the Archipelago, where whales were already becoming scarce, were frequented by other marine mammals of enormous size--seals, twenty-five feet long by twenty in circumference, and great numbers of sea elephants, wolves, and lions, of proportions no less gigantic. The uproar made by these animals, by the females and their young especially, surpasses description. One would think that herds of cattle were bellowing on the beach. Neither difficulty nor danger attends the capture, or at least the slaughter of the marine beasts. The sealers kill them with a blow of a club when they are lying in the sands on the strand. These are the special features that differentiate Scandinavia from the Falklands, not to speak of the infinite number of birds which rose on my approach, grebe, cormorants, black-headed swans, and above all, tribes of penguins, of which hundreds of thousands are massacred every year.

One day, when the air was filled with a sound of braying, sufficient to deafen one, I asked an old sailor belonging to Port Egmont,--

“Are there asses about here?”

“Sir,” he replied, “those are not asses that you hear, but penguins.”

The asses themselves, had any been there, would have been deceived by the braying of these stupid birds. I pursued my investigations some way to the west of the bay. West Falkland is more extensive than its neighbour, La Soledad, and possesses another fort at the

southern point of Byron's Sound--too far off for me to go there.

I could not estimate the population of the Archipelago even approximately. Probably, it did not then exceed from two to three hundred souls, mostly English, with some Indians, Portuguese, Spaniards, Gauche from the Argentine Pampas, and natives from Tier Del Fuel. On the other hand, the representatives of the ovine and bovine races were to be counted by tens of thousands. More than five hundred thousand sheep yield over four hundred thousand dollars' worth of wool yearly. There are also horned cattle bred on the islands; these seem to have increased in size, while the other quadrupeds, for instance, horses, pigs, and rabbits, have decreased. All these live in a wild state, and the only beast of prey is the dog-fox, a species peculiar to the fauna of the Falklands.

Not without reason has this island been called "a cattle farm." What inexhaustible pastures, what an abundance of that savoury grass, the tussock, does nature lavish on animals there! Australia, though so rich in this respect, does not set a better spread table before her ovine and bovine pensioners.

The Falklands ought to be resorted to for the re-victualling of ships. The groups are of real importance to navigators making for the Strait of Magellan, as well as to those who come to fish in the vicinity of the polar regions.

When the work on the hull was done, West occupied himself with the

masts and the rigging, with the assistance of Martin Holt, our sailing master, who was very clever at this kind of industry.

On the 21st of October, Captain Len Guy said to me: "You shall see, Mr. Jeorling, that nothing will be neglected to ensure the success of our enterprise. Everything that can be foreseen has been foreseen, and if the Halbrane is to perish in some catastrophe, it will be because it is not permitted to human beings to go against the designs of God."

"I have good hopes, captain, as I have already said. Your vessel and her crew are worthy of confidence. But, supposing the expedition should be much prolonged, perhaps the supply of provisions--"

"We shall carry sufficient for two years, and those shall be of good quality. Port Egmont has proved capable of supplying us with everything we require."

"Another question, if you will allow me?"

"Put it, Mr. Jeorling, put it."

"Shall you not need a more numerous crew for the Halbrane?"

Though you have men enough for the working of the ship, suppose you find you have to attack or to defend in the Antarctic waters? Let us not forget that, according to Arthur Pym's narrative, there were thousands of natives on Tsalal Island, and if your brother--if his

companions are prisoners--”

“I hope, Mr. Jeorling, our artillery will protect the Halbrane better than the Jane was protected by her guns. To tell the truth, the crew we have would not be sufficient for an expedition of this kind. I have been arranging for recruiting our forces.”

“Will it be difficult?”

“Yes and no; for the Governor has promised to help me.”

“I surmise, captain, that recruits will have to be attracted by larger pay.”

“Double pay, Mr. Jeorling, and the whole crew must have the same.”

“You know, captain, I am disposed, and, indeed, desirous to contribute to the expenses of the expedition. Will you kindly consider me as your partner?”

“All that shall be arranged, Mr. Jeorling, and I am very grateful to you. The main point is to complete our armament with the least possible delay. We must be ready to clear out in a week.”

The news that the schooner was bound for the Antarctic seas had produced some sensation in the Falklands, at Port Egmont, and in the

ports of La Soledad. At that season a number of unoccupied sailors were there, awaiting the passing of the whaling-ships to offer their services, for which they were very well paid in general. If it had been only for a fishing campaign on the borders of the Polar Circle, between the Sandwich Islands and New Georgia, Captain Len Guy would have merely had to make a selection. But the projected voyage was a very different thing; and only the old sailors of the Halbrane were entirely indifferent to the dangers of such an enterprise, and ready to follow their chief whithersoever it might please him to go.

In reality it was necessary to treble the crew of the schooner. Counting the captain, the mate, the boatswain, the cook and myself, we were thirteen on board. Now, thirty-two or thirty-four men would not be too many for us, and it must be remembered that there were thirty-eight on board the Jane.

In this emergency the Governor exerted himself to the utmost, and thanks to the largely-extra pay that was offered, Captain Len Guy procured his full tale of seamen. Nine recruits signed articles for the duration of the campaign, which could not be fixed beforehand, but was not to extend beyond Tsalal Island.

The crew, counting every man on board except myself, numbered thirty-one, and a thirty-second for whom I bespeak especial attention. On the eve of our departure, Captain Len Guy was accosted at the angle of the port by an individual whom he recognized as a

sailor by his clothes, his walk, and his speech.

This individual said, in a rough and hardly intelligible voice,--

“Captain, I have to make a proposal to you.”

“What is it?”

“Have you still a place?”

“For a sailor?”

“For a sailor.”

“Yes and no.”

“Is it yes?”

“It is yes, if the man suits me.”

“Will you take me?”

“You are a seaman?”

“I have served the sea for twenty-five years?”

“Where?”

“In the Southern Seas,”

“Far?”

“Yes, far, far.”

“Your age?”

“Forty-four years.”

“And you are at Port Egmont?”

“I shall have been there three years, come Christmas.”

“Did you expect to get on a passing whale-ship?”

“No.”

“Then what were you doing here?”

“Nothing, and I did not think of going to sea again.”

“Then why seek a berth?”

“Just an idea. The news of the expedition your schooner is going on was spread. I desire, yes, I desire to take part in it--with

your leave, of course.”

“You are known at Port Egmont?”

“Well known, and I have incurred no reproach since I came here.”

“Very well,” said the captain. “I will make inquiry respecting you.”

“Inquire, captain, and if you say yes, my bag shall be on board this evening.”

“What is your name?”

“Hunt.”

“And you are--?”

“An American.”

This Hunt was a man of short stature, his weather beaten face was brick red, his skin of a yellowish-brown like an Indian's, his body clumsy, his head very large, his legs were bowed, his whole frame denoted exceptional strength, especially the arms, which terminated in huge hands. His grizzled hair resembled a kind of fur.

A particular and anything but prepossessing character was imparted

to the physiognomy of this individual by the extraordinary keenness of his small eyes, his almost lipless mouth, which stretched from ear to ear, and his long teeth, which were dazzlingly white; their enamel being intact, for he had never been attacked by scurvy, the common scourge of seamen in high latitudes.

Hunt had been living in the Falklands for three years; he lived alone on a pension, no one knew from whence this was derived. He was singularly uncommunicative, and passed his time in fishing, by which he might have lived, not only as a matter of sustenance, but as an article of commerce.

The information gained by Captain Len Guy was necessarily incomplete, as it was confined to Hunt's conduct during his residence at Port Egmont. The man did not fight, he did not drink, and he had given many proofs of his Herculean strength. Concerning his past nothing was known, but undoubtedly he had been a sailor. He had said more to Len Guy than he had ever said to anybody; but he kept silence respecting the family to which he belonged, and the place of his birth. This was of no importance; that he should prove to be a good sailor was all we had to think about. Hunt obtained a favourable reply, and came on board that same evening.

On the 27th, in the morning, in the presence of the authorities of the Archipelago, the Halbrane's anchor was lifted, the last good wishes and the final adieus were exchanged, and the schooner took the sea. The same evening Capes Dolphin and Pembroke disappeared in

the mists of the horizon.

Thus began the astonishing adventure undertaken by these brave men, who were driven by a sentiment of humanity towards the most terrible regions of the Antarctic realm.