

CHAPTER X.

THE OUTSET OF THE ENTERPRISE.

Here was I, then, launched into an adventure which seemed likely to surpass all my former experiences. Who would have believed such a thing of me. But I was under a spell which drew me towards the unknown, that unknown of the polar world whose secrets so many daring pioneers had in vain essayed to penetrate. And this time, who could tell but that the sphinx of the Antarctic regions would speak for the first time to human ears!

The new crew had firstly to apply themselves to learning their several duties, and the old--all fine fellows--aided them in the task. Although Captain Len Guy had not had much choice, he seemed to have been in luck. These sailors, of various nationalities, displayed zeal and good will. They were aware, also, that the mate was a man whom it would not do to vex, for Hurliguerly had given them to understand that West would break any man's head who did not go straight. His chief allowed him full latitude in this respect.

"A latitude," he added, "which is obtained by taking the altitude of the eye with a shut fist."

I recognized my friend the boatswain in the manner of this warning to all whom it might concern.

The new hands took the admonition seriously, and there was no occasion to punish any of them. As for Hunt, while he observed the docility of a true sailor in all his duties, he always kept himself apart, speaking to none, and even slept on the deck, in a corner, rather than occupy a bunk in the fore-castle with the others.

Captain Len Guy's intention was to take the Sandwich Isles for his point of departure towards the south, after having made acquaintance with New Georgia, distant eight hundred miles from the Falklands. Thus the schooner would be in longitude on the route of the Jane.

On the 2nd of November this course brought us to the bearings which certain navigators have assigned to the Aurora Islands, 30° 15' of latitude and 47° 33' of east longitude.

Well, then, notwithstanding the affirmations--which I regarded with suspicion--of the captains of the Aurora in 1762, of the Saint Miguel, in 1769, of the Pearl, in 1779, of the Prinicus and the Dolores, in 1790, of the Atrevida, in 1794, which gave the bearings of the three islands of the group, we did not perceive a single indication of land in the whole of the space traversed by us. It was the same with regard to the alleged islands of the conceited Glass. Not a single little islet was to be seen in the position he had indicated, although the look-out was most carefully kept. It is to be feared that his Excellency the Governor of Tristan d'Acunha will never see his name figuring in geographical nomenclature.

It was now the 6th of November. Our passage promised to be shorter than that of the Jane. We had no need to hurry, however. Our schooner would arrive before the gates of the iceberg wall would be open. For three days the weather caused the working of the ship to be unusually laborious, and the new crew behaved very well; thereupon the boatswain congratulated them. Hurliguerly bore witness that Hunt, for all his awkward and clumsy build, was in himself worth three men.

“A famous recruit,” said he.

“Yes, indeed,” I replied, “and gained just at the last moment.”

“Very true, Mr. Jeorling! But what a face and head he has, that Hunt!”

“I have often met Americans like him in the regions of the Far West,” I answered, “and I should not be surprised if this man had Indian blood in his veins. Do you ever talk with Hunt?”

“Very seldom, Mr. Jeorling. He keeps himself to himself, and away from everybody. And yet, it is not for want of mouth. I never saw anything like his! And his hands! Have you seen his hands? Be on your guard, Mr. Jeorling, if ever he wants to shake hands with you.”

“Fortunately, boatswain, Hunt does not seem to be quarrelsome. He appears to be a quiet man who does not abuse his strength.”

“No--except when he is setting a halyard. Then I am always afraid the pulley will come down and the yard with it.”

Hunt certainly was a strange being, and I could not resist observing him with curiosity, especially as it struck me that he regarded me at times with a curious intentness.

On the 10th of November, at about two in the afternoon, the look-out shouted,--

“Land ahead, starboard!”

An observation had just given $55^{\circ} 7'$ latitude and $41^{\circ} 13'$ longitude. This land could only be the Isle de Saint Pierre--its British names are South Georgia, New Georgia, and King George's Island--and it belongs to the circumpolar regions.

It was discovered by the Frenchman, Barbe, in 1675, before Cook; but, although he came in second, the celebrated navigator gave it the series of names which it still bears.

The schooner took the direction of this island, whose snow-clad heights--formidable masses of ancient rock--rise to an immense

altitude through the yellow fogs of the surrounding space.

New Georgia, situated within five hundred leagues of Magellan Straits, belongs to the administrative domain of the Falklands. The British administration is not represented there by anyone, the island is not inhabited, although it is habitable, at least in the summer season.

On the following day, while the men were gone in search of water, I walked about in the vicinity of the bay. The place was an utter desert, for the period at which sealing is pursued there had not arrived. New Georgia, being exposed to the direct action of the Antarctic polar current, is freely frequented by marine mammals. I saw several droves of these creatures on the rocks, the strand, and within the rock grottoes of the coast. Whole "smalas" of penguins, standing motionless in interminable rows, brayed their protest against the invasion of an intruder--I allude to myself.

Innumerable larks flew over the surface of the waters and the sands; their song awoke my memory of lands more favoured by nature. It is fortunate that these birds do not want branches to perch on; for there does not exist a tree in New Georgia. Here and there I found a few phanerogams, some pale-coloured mosses, and especially tussock grass in such abundance that numerous herds of cattle might be fed upon the island.

On the 12th November the Halbrane sailed once more, and having

doubled Charlotte Point at the extremity of Royal Bay, she headed in the direction of the Sandwich Islands, four hundred miles from thence.

So far we had not encountered floating ice. The reason was that the summer sun had not detached any, either from the icebergs or the southern lands. Later on, the current would draw them to the height of the fiftieth parallel, which, in the southern hemisphere, is that of Paris or Quebec. But we were much impeded by huge banks of fog which frequently shut out the horizon. Nevertheless, as these waters presented no danger, and there was nothing to fear from ice packs or drifting icebergs, the Halbrane was able to pursue her route towards the Sandwich Islands comfortably enough. Great flocks of clangorous birds, breasting the wind and hardly moving their wings, passed us in the midst of the fogs, petrels, divers, halcyons, and albatross, bound landwards, as though to show us the way.

Owing, no doubt, to these mists, we were unable to discern Traversey Island. Captain Len Guy, however, thought some vague streaks of intermittent light which were perceived in the night, between the 14th and 15th, probably proceeded from a volcano which might be that of Traversey, as the crater frequently emits flames.

On the 17th November the schooner reached the Archipelago to which Cook gave the name of Southern Thule in the first instance, as it was the most southern land that had been discovered at that period. He afterwards baptized it Sandwich Isles.

James West repaired to Thule in the large boat, in order to explore the approachable points, while Captain Len Guy and I descended on the Bristol strand.

We found absolutely desolate country; the only inhabitants were melancholy birds of Antarctic species. Mosses and lichens cover the nakedness of an unproductive soil. Behind the beach a few firs rise to a considerable height on the bare hill-sides, from whence great masses occasionally come crashing down with a thundering sound. Awful solitude reigns everywhere. There was nothing to attest the passage of any human being, or the presence of any shipwrecked persons on Bristol Island.

West's exploration at Thule produced a precisely similar result. A few shots fired from our schooner had no effect but to drive away the crowd of petrels and divers, and to startle the rows of stupid penguins on the beach.

While Captain Len Guy and I were walking, I said to him,--

“You know, of course, what Cook's opinion on the subject of the Sandwich group was when he discovered it. At first he believed he had set foot upon a continent. According to him, the mountains of ice carried out of the Antarctic Sea by the drift were detached from that continent. He recognized afterwards that the Sandwiches only formed an Archipelago, but, nevertheless, his belief that a polar

continent farther south exists, remained firm and unchanged.”

“I know that is so, Mr. Jeorling,” replied the captain, “but if such a continent exists, we must conclude that there is a great gap in its coast, and that Weddell and my brother each got in by that gap at six years’ interval. That our great navigator had not the luck to discover this passage is easy to explain; he stopped at the seventy-first parallel! But others found it after Captain Cook, and others will find it again.”

“And we shall be of the number, captain.”

“Yes--with the help of God! Cook did not hesitate to assert that no one would ever venture farther than he had gone, and that the Antarctic lands, if any such existed, would never be seen, but the future will prove that he was mistaken. They have been seen so far as the eighty-fourth degree of latitude--”

“And who knows,” said I, “perhaps beyond that, by Arthur Pym.”

“Perhaps, Mr. Jeorling. It is true that we have not to trouble ourselves about Arthur Pym, since he, at least, and Dirk Peters also, returned to America.”

“But--supposing he did not return?”

“I consider that we have not to face that eventuality,” replied
Captain Len Guy.