

CHAPTER XI.

FROM THE SANDWICH ISLANDS TO THE POLAR CIRCLE.

The Halbrane, singularly favoured by the weather, sighted the New South Orkneys group in six days after she had sailed from the Sandwich Islands. This archipelago was discovered by Palmer, an American, and Bothwell, an Englishman, jointly, in 1821-22. Crossed by the sixty-first parallel, it is comprehended between the forty-fourth and the forty, seventh meridian.

On approaching, we were enabled to observe contorted masses and steep cliffs on the north side, which became less rugged as they neared the coast, at whose edge lay enormous ice-floes, heaped together in formidable confusion; these, before two months should have expired, would be drifted towards the temperate waters. At that season the whaling ships would appear to carry on the taking of the great blowing creatures, while some of their crews would remain on the islands to capture seals and sea-elephants.

In order to avoid the strait, which was encumbered with islets and ice-floes, Captain Len Guy first cast anchor at the south-eastern extremity of Laurie Island, where he passed the day on the 24th; then, having rounded Cape Dundas, he sailed along the southern coast of Coronation Island, where the schooner anchored on the 25th. Our close and careful researches produced no result as regarded the

sailors of the Jane.

The islands and islets were peopled by multitudes of birds. Without taking the penguins into account, those guano-covered rocks were crowded with white pigeons, a species of which I had already seen some specimens. These birds have rather short, conical beaks, and red-rimmed eyelids; they can be knocked over with little difficulty. As for the vegetable kingdom in the New South Orkneys, it is represented only by grey lichen and some scanty seaweeds. Mussels are found in great abundance all along the rocks; of these we procured an ample supply.

The boatswain and his men did not lose the opportunity of killing several dozens of penguins with their sticks, not from a ruthless instinct of destruction, but from the legitimate desire to procure fresh food.

“Their flesh is just as good as chicken, Mr. Jeorling,” said Hurliguerly. “Did you not eat penguin at the Kerguelens?”

“Yes, boatswain, but it was cooked by Arkins.”

“Very well, then; it will be cooked by Endicott here, and you will not know the difference.”

And in fact we in the saloon, like the men in the forecastle, were regaled with penguin, and acknowledged the merits of our excellent

sea-cook.

The Halbrane sailed on the 26th of November, at six o'clock in the morning, heading south. She reascended the forty-third meridian; this we were able to ascertain very exactly by a good observation. This route it was that Weddell and then William Guy had followed, and, provided the schooner did not deflect either to the east or the west, she must inevitably come to Tsalal Island. The difficulties of navigation had to be taken into account, of course.

The wind, continuing to blow steadily from the west, was in our favour, and if the present speed of the Halbrane could be maintained, as I ventured to suggest to Captain Len Guy, the voyage from the South Orkneys to the Polar Circle would be a short one. Beyond, as I knew, we should have to force the gate of the thick barrier of icebergs, or to discover a breach in that ice-fortress.

“So that, in less than a month, captain--” I suggested, tentatively.

“In less than a month I hope to have found the iceless sea which Weddell and Arthur Pym describe so fully, beyond the ice-wall, and thenceforth we need only sail on under ordinary conditions to Bennet Island in the first place, and afterwards to Tsalal Island. Once on that ‘wide open sea,’ what obstacle could arrest or even retard our progress?”

“I can foresee none, captain, so soon as we shall get to the back of the ice-wall. The passage through is the difficult point; it must be our chief source of anxiety and if only the wind holds--”

“It will hold, Mr. Jeorling. All the navigators of the austral seas have been able to ascertain, as I myself have done, the permanence of this wind.”

“That is true, and I rejoice in the assurance, captain. Besides, I acknowledge, without shrinking from the admission, that I am beginning to be superstitious.”

“And why not, Mr. Jeorling? What is there unreasonable in admitting the intervention of a supernatural power in the most ordinary circumstances of life? And we, who sail the Halbrane, should we venture to doubt it? Recall to your mind our meeting with the unfortunate Patterson on our ship’s course, the fragment of ice carried into the waters where we were, and dissolved immediately afterwards. Were not these facts providential? Nay, I go farther still, and am sure that, after having done so much to guide us towards our compatriots, God will not abandon us--”

“I think as you think, captain. No, His intervention is not to be denied, and I do not believe that chance plays the part assigned to it by superficial minds upon the stage of human life. All the facts are united by a mysterious chain.”

“A chain, Mr. Jeorling, whose first link, so far as we are concerned, is Patterson’s ice-block, and whose last will be Tsalal Island. Ah! My brother! my poor brother! Left there for eleven years, with his companions in misery, without being able to entertain the hope that succour ever could reach them! And Patterson carried far away from them, under we know not what conditions, they not knowing what had become of him! If my heart is sick when I think of these catastrophes, Mr. Jeorling, at least it will not fail me unless it be at the moment when my brother throws himself into my arms.”

So then we two were agreed in our trust in Providence. It had been made plain to us in a manifest fashion that God had entrusted us with a mission, and we would do all that might be humanly possible to accomplish it.

The schooner’s crew, I ought to mention, were animated by the like sentiments, and shared the same hopes. I allude to the original seamen who were so devoted to their captain. As for the new ones, they were probably indifferent to the result of the enterprise, provided it should secure the profits promised to them by their engagement.

At least, I was assured by the boatswain that such was the case, but with the exception of Hunt. This man had apparently not been induced to take service by the bribe of high wages or prize money. He was

absolutely silent on that and every other subject.

“If he does not speak to you, boatswain,” I said, “neither does he speak to me.”

“Do you know, Mr. Jeorling, what it is my notion that man has already done?”

“Tell me, Hurliguerly.”

“Well, then, I believe he has gone far, far into the southern seas, let him be as dumb as a fish about it. Why he is dumb is his own affair. But if that sea-hog of a man has not been inside the Antarctic Circle and even the ice wall by a good dozen degrees, may the first sea we ship carry me overboard.”

“From what do you judge, boatswain?”

“From his eyes, Mr. Jeorling, from his eyes. No matter at what moment, let the ship’s head be as it may, those eyes of his are always on the south, open, unwinking, fixed like guns in position.”

Hurliguerly did not exaggerate, and I had already remarked this. To employ an expression of Edgar Poe’s, Hunt had eyes like a falcon’s.

“When he is not on the watch,” resumed the boatswain, “that

savage leans all the time with his elbows on the side, as motionless as he is mute. His right place would be at the end of our bow, where he would do for a figurehead to the Halbrane, and a very ugly one at that! And then, when he is at the helm, Mr. Jeorling, just observe him! His enormous hands clutch the handles as though they were fastened to the wheel; he gazes at the binnacle as though the magnet of the compass were drawing his eyes. I pride myself on being a good steersman, but as for being the equal of Hunt, I'm not! With him, not for an instant does the needle vary from the sailing-line, however rough a lurch she may give. I am sure that if the binnacle lamp were to go out in the night Hunt would not require to relight it. The fire in his eyes would light up the dial and keep him right."

For several days our navigation went on in unbroken monotony, without a single incident, and under favourable conditions. The spring season was advancing, and whales began to make their appearance in large numbers.

In these waters a week would suffice for ships of heavy tonnage to fill their casks with the precious oil. Thus the new men of the crew, and especially the Americans, did not conceal their regret for the captain's indifference in the presence of so many animals worth their weight in gold, and more abundant than they had ever seen whales at that period of the year. The leading malcontent was Hearne, a sealing-master, to whom his companions were ready to listen. He had found it easy to get the upper hand of the other

sailors by his rough manner and the surly audacity that was expressed by his whole personality. Hearne was an American, and forty-five years of age. He was an active, vigorous man, and I could see him in my mind's eye, standing up on his double bowed whaling-boat brandishing the harpoon, darting it into the flank of a whale, and paying out the rope. He must have been fine to see. Granted his passion for this business, I could not be surprised that his discontent showed itself upon occasion. In any case, however, our schooner was not fitted out for fishing, and the implements of whaling were not on board.

One day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, I had gone forward to watch the gambols of a "school" of the huge sea mammals. Hearne was pointing them out to his companions, and muttering in disjointed phrases,--

"There, look there! That's a fin-back! There's another, and another; three of them with their dorsal fins five or six feet high. Just see them swimming between two waves, quietly, making no jumps. Ah! if I had a harpoon, I bet my head that I could send it into one of the four yellow spots they have on their bodies. But there's nothing to be done in this traffic-box; one cannot stretch one's arms. Devil take it! In these seas it is fishing we ought to be at, not--"

Then, stopping short, he swore a few oaths, and cried out, "And that other whale!"

“The one with a hump like a dromedary?” asked a sailor.

“Yes. It is a humpback,” replied Hearne. “Do you make out its wrinkled belly, and also its long dorsal fin? They’re not easy to take, those humpbacks, for they go down into great depths and devour long reaches of your lines. Truly, we deserve that he should give us a switch of his tail on our side, since we don’t send a harpoon into his.”

“Look out! Look out!” shouted the boatswain. This was not to warn us that we were in danger of receiving the formidable stroke of the humpback’s tail which the sealing-master had wished us. No, an enormous blower had come alongside the schooner, and almost on the instant a spout of ill-smelling water was ejected from its blow-hole with a noise like a distant roar of artillery. The whole foredeck to the main hatch was inundated.

“That’s well done!” growled Hearne, shrugging his shoulders, while his companions shook themselves and cursed the humpback.

Besides these two kinds of cetacea we had observed several right-whales, and these are the most usually met with in the southern seas. They have no fins, and their blubber is very thick. The taking of these fat monsters of the deep is not attended with much danger. The right-whales are vigorously pursued in the southern seas, where the little shell fish called “whales’ food”

abound. The whales subsist entirely upon these small crustaceans.

Presently, one of these right-whales, measuring sixty feet in length--that is to say, the animal was the equivalent of a hundred barrels of oil--was seen floating within three cables' lengths of the schooner.

"Yes! that's a right-whale," exclaimed Hearne. "You might tell it by its thick, short spout. See, that one on the port side, like a column of smoke, that's the spout of a right-whale! And all this is passing before our very noses---a dead loss! Why, it's like emptying money-bags into the sea not to fill one's barrels when one can. A nice sort of captain, indeed, to let all this merchandise be lost, and do such wrong to his crew!"

"Hearne," said an imperious voice, "go up to the maintop. You will be more at your ease there to reckon the whales."

"But, sir--"

"No reply, or I'll keep you up there until to-morrow. Come--be off at once."

And as he would have got the worst of an attempt at resistance, the sealing-master obeyed in silence.

The season must have been abnormally advanced, for although we

continued to see a vast number of testaceans, we did not catch sight of a single whaling-ship in all this fishing-ground.

I hasten to state that, although we were not to be tempted by whales, no other fishing was forbidden on board the Halbrane, and our daily bill of fare profited by the boatswain's trawling lines, to the extreme satisfaction of stomachs weary of salt meat. Our lines brought us goby, salmon, cod, mackerel, conger, mullet, and parrot-fish.

The birds which we saw, and which came from every point of the horizon, were those I have already mentioned, petrels, divers, halcyons, and pigeons in countless flocks. I also saw--but beyond aim--a giant petrel; its dimensions were truly astonishing. This was one of those called "quebrantahnesos" by the Spaniards. This bird of the Magellanian waters is very remarkable; its curved and slender wings have a span of from thirteen to fourteen feet, equal to that of the wings of the great albatross. Nor is the latter wanting among these powerful winged creatures; we saw the dusky-plumed albatross of the cold latitudes, sweeping towards the glacial zone.

On the 30th of November, after observation taken at noon, it was found that we had reached $66^{\circ} 23' 3''$ of latitude.

The Halbrane had then crossed the Polar Circle which circumscribes the area of the Antarctic zone.