

CHAPTER XII.

BETWEEN THE POLAR CIRCLE AND THE ICE WALL.

Since the Halbrane has passed beyond the imaginary curve drawn at twenty-three and a half degrees from the Pole, it seems as though she had entered a new region, "that region of Desolation and Silence," as Edgar Poe says; that magic person of splendour and glory in which the Eleanora's singer longed to be shut up to all eternity; that immense ocean of light ineffable.

It is my belief--to return to less fanciful hypotheses--that the Antarctic region, with a superficies of more than five millions of square miles, has remained what our spheroid was during the glacial period. In the summer, the southern zone, as we all know, enjoys perpetual day, owing to the rays projected by the orb of light above its horizon in his spiral ascent. Then, so soon as he has disappeared, the long night sets in, a night which is frequently illumined by the polar aurora or Northern Lights.

It was then in the season of light that our schooner was about to sail in these formidable regions. The permanent brightness would not fail us before we should have reached Tsalal Island, where we felt no doubt of finding the men of the Jane.

When Captain Len Guy, West, and the old sailors of the crew learned

that the schooner had cleared the sixty-sixth parallel of latitude, their rough and sunburnt faces shone with satisfaction. The next day, Hurliguerly accosted me on the deck with a broad smile and a cheerful manner.

“So then, Mr. Jeorling,” said he, “we’ve left the famous ‘Circle’ behind us!”

“Not far enough, boatswain, not far enough!”

“Oh, that will come! But I am disappointed.”

“In what way?”

“Because we have not done what is usual on board ships on crossing the Line!”

“You regret that?”

“Certainly I do, and the Halbrane might have been allowed the ceremony of a southern baptism.”

“A baptism? And whom would you have baptized, boatswain, seeing that all our men, like yourself, have already sailed beyond this parallel?”

“We! Oh, yes! But you! Oh, no, Mr. Jeorling. And why, may I ask,

should not that ceremony be performed in your honour?”

“True, boatswain; this is the first time in the course of my travels that I have been in so high a latitude.”

“And you should have been rewarded by a baptism, Mr. Jeorling. Yes, indeed, but without any big fuss--no drum and trumpet about it, and leaving out old Father Neptune with his masquerade. If you would permit me to baptize you--”

“So be it, Hurliguerly,” said I, putting my hand into my pocket.

“Baptize as you please. Here is something to drink my health with at the nearest tavern.”

“Then that will be Bennet Islet or Tsalal Island, provided there are any taverns in those savage islands, and any Atkinses to keep them.”

“Tell me, boatswain--I always get back to Hunt--does he seem so much pleased to have passed the Polar Circle as the Halbrane’s old sailors are?”

“Who knows? There’s nothing to be got out of him one way or another. But, as I have said before, if he has not already made acquaintance with the ice-barrier.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Everything and nothing, Mr. Jeorling. One feels these things; one doesn’t think them. Hunt is an old sea-dog, who has carried his canvas bag into every corner of the world.”

The boatswain’s opinion was mine also, and some inexplicable presentiment made me observe Hunt constantly, for he occupied a large share of my thoughts.

Early in December the wind showed a north-west tendency, and that was not good for us, but we would have no serious right to complain so long as it did not blow due south-west. In the latter case the schooner would have been thrown out of her course, or at least she would have had a struggle to keep in it, and it was better for us, in short, not to stray from the meridian which we had followed since our departure from the New South Orkneys. Captain Len Guy was made anxious by this alteration in the wind, and besides, the speed of the Halbrane was manifestly lessened, for the breeze began to soften on the 4th, and in the middle of the night it died away.

In the morning the sails hung motionless and shrivelled along the masts. Although not a breath reached us, and the surface of the ocean was unruffled, the schooner was rocked from side to side by the long oscillations of the swell coming from the west.

“The sea feels something,” said Captain Len Guy to me, “and there must be rough weather on that side,” he added, pointing

westward.

“The horizon is misty,” I replied; “but perhaps the sun towards noon--”

“The sun has no strength in this latitude, Mr. Jeorling, not even in summer. Jem!”

West came up to us.

“What do you think of the sky?”

“I do not think well of it. We must be ready for anything and everything, captain.”

“Has not the look-out given warning of the first drifting ice?”

I asked.

“Yes,” replied Captain Len Guy, “and if we get near the icebergs the damage will not be to them. Therefore, if prudence demands that we should go either to the east or to the west, we shall resign ourselves, but only in case of absolute necessity.”

The watch had made no mistake. In the afternoon we sighted masses, islets they might be called, of ice, drifting slowly southward, but these were not yet of considerable extent or altitude. These packs were easy to avoid; they could not interfere with the sailing of the

Halbrane. But, although the wind had hitherto permitted her to keep on her course, she was not advancing, and it was exceedingly disagreeable to be rolling about in a rough and hollow sea which struck our ship's sides most unpleasantly.

About two o'clock it was blowing a hurricane from all the points of the compass. The schooner was terribly knocked about, and the boatswain had the deck cleared of everything that was movable by her rolling and pitching.

Fortunately, the cargo could not be displaced, the stowage having been effected with perfect forecast of nautical eventualities. We had not to dread the fate of the *Grampus*, which was lost owing to negligence in her lading. It will be remembered that the brig turned bottom upwards, and that Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters remained for several days crouching on its keel.

Besides, the schooner's pumps did not give a drop of water; the ship was perfectly sound in every part, owing to the efficient repairs that had been done during our stay at the Falklands. The temperature had fallen rapidly, and hail, rain, and snow thickened and darkened the air. At ten o'clock in the evening--I must use this word, although the sun remained always above the horizon--the tempest increased, and the captain and his lieutenant, almost unable to hear each other's voices amid the elemental strife, communicated mostly by gestures, which is as good a mode as speech between sailors.

I could not make up my mind to retire to my cabin, and, seeking the shelter of the roundhouse, I remained on deck, observing the weather phenomena, and the skill, certainty, celerity, and effect with which the crew carried out the orders of the captain and West. It was a strange and terrible experience for a landsman, even one who had seen so much of the sea and seamanship as I had. At the moment of a certain difficult manoeuvre, four men had to climb to the crossbars of the fore-mast in order to reef the mainsail. The first who sprang to the ratlines was Hunt. The second was Martin Holt; Burry and one of the recruits followed them. I could not have believed that any man could display such skill and agility as Hunt's. His hands and feet hardly caught the ratlines. Having reached the crossbars first, he stretched himself on the ropes to the end of the yard, while Holt went to the other end, and the two recruits remained in the middle.

While the men were working, and the tempest was raging round us, a terrific lurch of the ship to starboard under the stroke of a mountainous wave, flung everything on the deck into wild confusion, and the sea rushed in through the scupper-holes. I was knocked down, and for some moments was unable to rise.

So great had been the incline of the schooner that the end of the yard of the mainsail was plunged three or four feet into the crest of a wave. When it emerged Martin Holt, who had been astride on it, had disappeared. A cry was heard, uttered by the sailing-master, whose arm could be seen wildly waving amid the whiteness of the

foam. The sailors rushed to the side and flung out one a rope, another a cask, a third a spar--in short, any object of which Martin Holt might lay hold. At the moment when I struggled up to my feet I caught sight of a massive substance which cleft the air and vanished in the whirl of the waves.

Was this a second accident? No! it was a voluntary action, a deed of self-sacrifice. Having finished his task, Hunt had thrown himself into the sea, that he might save Martin Holt.

“Two men overboard!”

Yes, two--one to save the other. And were they not about to perish together?

The two heads rose to the foaming surface of the water.

Hunt was swimming vigorously, cutting through the waves, and was nearing Martin Holt.

“They are lost! both lost!” exclaimed the captain. “The boat, West, the boat!”

“If you give the order to lower it,” answered West, “I will be the first to get into it, although at the risk of my life. But I must have the order.”

In unspeakable suspense the ship's crew and myself had witnessed this scene. None thought of the position of the Halbrane, which was sufficiently dangerous; all eyes were fixed upon the terrible waves. Now fresh cries, the frantic cheers of the crew, rose above the roar of the elements. Hunt had reached the drowning man just as he sank out of sight, had seized hold of him, and was supporting him with his left arm, while Holt, incapable of movement, swayed helplessly about like a weed. With the other arm Hunt was swimming bravely and making way towards the schooner.

A minute, which seemed endless, passed. The two men, the one dragging the other, were hardly to be distinguished in the midst of the surging waves.

At last Hunt reached the schooner, and caught one of the lines hanging over the side.

In a minute Hunt and Martin Holt were hoisted on board; the latter was laid down at the foot of the foremast, and the former was quite ready to go to his work. Holt was speedily restored by the aid of vigorous rubbing; his senses came back, and he opened his eyes.

"Martin Holt," said Captain Len Guy, who was leaning over him, "you have been brought back from very far--"

"Yes, yes, captain," answered Holt, as he looked about him with a searching gaze, "but who saved me?"

“Hunt,” cried the boatswain, “Hunt risked his life for you.”

As the latter was hanging back, Hurliguerly pushed him towards Martin Holt, whose eyes expressed the liveliest gratitude.

“Hunt,” said he, “you have saved me. But for you I should have been lost. I thank you.”

Hunt made no reply.

“Hunt,” resumed Captain Len Guy, “don’t you hear?”

The man seemed not to have heard.

“Hunt,” said Martin Holt again, “come near to me. I thank you. I want to shake hands with you.”

And he held out his right hand. Hunt stepped back a few paces, shaking his head with the air of a man who did not want so many compliments for a thing so simple, and quietly walked forward to join his shipmates, who were working vigorously under the orders of West.

Decidedly, this man was a hero in courage and self-devotion; but equally decidedly he was a being impervious to impressions, and not on that day either was the boatswain destined to know “the colour

of his words!”

For three whole days, the 6th, 7th, and 8th of December, the tempest raged in these waters, accompanied by snow storms which perceptibly lowered the temperature. It is needless to say that Captain Len Guy proved himself a true seaman, that James West had an eye to everything, that the crew seconded them loyally, and that Hunt was always foremost when there was work to be done or danger to be incurred.

In truth, I do not know how to give an idea of this man! What a difference there was between him and most of the sailors recruited at the Falklands, and especially between him and Hearne, the sealing-master! They obeyed, no doubt, for such a master as James West gets himself obeyed, whether with good or ill will. But behind backs what complaints were made, what recriminations were exchanged I All this, I feared, was of evil presage for the future.

Martin Holt had been able to resume his duties very soon, and he fulfilled them with hearty good-will. He knew the business of a sailor right well, and was the only man on board who could compete with Hunt in handiness and zeal.

“Well, Holt,” said I to him one day when he was talking with the boatswain, “what terms are you on with that queer fellow Hunt now? Since the salvage affair, is he a little more communicative?”

“No, Mr. Jeorling, and I think he even tries to avoid me.”

“To avoid you?”

“Well, he did so before, for that matter.”

“Yes, indeed, that is true,” added Hurliguerly; “I have made the same remark more than once.”

“Then he keeps aloof from you, Holt, as from the others?”

“From me more than from the others.”

“What is the meaning of that?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Jeorling.”

I was surprised at what the two men had said, but a little observation convinced me that Hunt actually did avoid every occasion of coming in contact with Martin Holt. Did he not think that he had a right to Holt’s gratitude although the latter owed his life to him? This man’s conduct was certainly very strange.

In the early morning of the 9th the wind showed a tendency to change in the direction of the east, which would mean more manageable weather for us. And, in fact, although the sea still remained rough, at about two in the morning it became feasible to put on more sail without risk, and thus the Halbrane regained the course from which

she had been driven by the prolonged tempest.

In that portion of the Antarctic sea the ice-packs were more numerous, and there was reason to believe that the tempest, by hastening the smash-up, had broken the barrier of the iceberg wall towards the east.