

## CHAPTER XIII.

### ALONG THE FRONT OF THE ICEBERGS.

Although the seas beyond the Polar Circle were wildly tumultuous, it is but just to acknowledge that our navigation had been accomplished so far under exceptional conditions. And what good luck it would be if the Halbrane, in this first fortnight of December, were to find the Weddell route open!

There! I am talking of the Weddell route as though it were a macadamized road, well kept, with mile-stones and "This way to the South Pole" on a signpost!

The numerous wandering masses of ice gave our men no trouble; they were easily avoided. It seemed likely that no real difficulties would arise until the schooner should have to try to make a passage for herself through the icebergs.

Besides, there was no surprise to be feared. The presence of ice was indicated by a yellowish tint in the atmosphere, which the whalers called "blink." This is a phenomenon peculiar to the glacial zones which never deceives the observer.

For five successive days the Halbrane sailed without sustaining any damage, without having, even for a moment, had to fear a collision.

It is true that in proportion as she advanced towards the south the number of icepacks increased and the channels became narrower. On the 14th an observation gave us  $72^{\circ} 37'$  for latitude, our longitude remaining the same, between the forty-second and the forty-third meridian. This was already a point beyond the Antarctic Circle that few navigators had been able to reach. We were at only two degrees lower than Weddell.

The navigation of the schooner naturally became a more delicate matter in the midst of those dim, wan masses soiled with the excreta of birds. Many of them had a leprous look: compared with their already considerable volume, how small our little ship, over whose mast some of the icebergs already towered, must have appeared!

Captain Len Guy admirably combined boldness and prudence in his command of his ship. He never passed to leeward of an iceberg, if the distance did not guarantee the success of any manoeuvre whatsoever that might suddenly become necessary. He was familiar with all the contingencies of ice-navigation, and was not afraid to venture into the midst of these flotillas of drifts and packs. That day he said to me,--

“Mr. Jeorling; this is not the first time that I have tried to penetrate into the Polar Sea, and without success. Well, if I made the attempt to do this when I had nothing but presumption as to the fate of the Jane to go upon, what shall I not do now that presumption is changed into certainty?”

“I understand that, captain, and of course your experience of navigation in these waters must increase our chances of success.”

“Undoubtedly. Nevertheless, all that lies beyond the fixed icebergs is still the unknown for me, as it is for other navigators.”

“The Unknown! No, not absolutely, captain, since we possess the important reports of Weddell, and, I must add, of Arthur Pym also.”

“Yes, I know; they have spoken of the open sea.”

“Do you not believe that such a sea exists?”

“Yes, I do believe that it exists, and for valid reasons. In fact, it is perfectly manifest that these masses, called icebergs and icefields, could not be formed in the ocean itself. It is the tremendous and irresistible action of the surge which detaches them from the continents or islands of the high latitudes. Then the currents carry them into less cold waters, where their edges are worn by the waves, while the temperature disintegrates their bases and their sides, which are subjected to thermometric influences.”

“That seems very plain,” I replied. “Then these masses have come from the icebergs. (1) They clash with them in drifting, sometimes break into the main body, and clear their passage through.

Again, we must not judge the southern by the northern zone. The conditions are not identical. Cook has recorded that he never met the equivalent of the Antarctic ice mountains in the Greenland seas, even at a higher latitude.”

“What is the reason?” I asked.

“No doubt that the influence of the south winds is predominant in the northern regions. Now, those winds do not reach the northern regions until they have been heated in their passage over America, Asia, and Europe, and they contribute to raise the temperature of the atmosphere. The nearest land, ending in the points of the Cape of Good Hope, Patagonia, and Tasmania, does not modify the atmospheric currents.”

“That is an important observation, captain, and it justifies your opinion with regard to an open sea.”

“Yes, open--at least, for ten degrees behind the icebergs. Let us then only get through that obstacle, and our greatest difficulty will have been conquered. You were right in saying that the existence of that open sea has been formally recognized by Weddell.”

“And by Arthur Pym, captain.”

“And by Arthur Pym.”

From the 15th of December the difficulties of navigation increased with the number of the drifting masses. The wind, however, continued to be uniformly favourable, showing no tendency to veer to the south. The breeze freshened now and then, and we had to take in sail. When this occurred we saw the sea foaming along the sides of the ice packs, covering them with spray like the rocks on the coast of a floating island, but without hindering their onward march.

Our crew could not fail to be impressed by the sight of the schooner making her way through these moving masses; the new men among them, at least, for the old hands had seen such manoeuvres before. But they soon became accustomed to it, and took it all for granted.

It was necessary to organize the look-out ahead with the greatest care. West had a cask fixed at the head of the foremast--what is called a crow's-nest--and from thence an unremitting watch was kept.

The 16th was a day of excessive fatigue to the men. The packs and drifts were so close that only very narrow and winding passage-way between them was to be found, so that the working of the ship was more than commonly laborious.

Under these circumstances, none of the men grumbled, but Hunt distinguished himself by his activity. Indeed, he was admitted by Captain Len Guy and the crew to be an incomparable seaman. But there

was something mysterious about him that excited the curiosity of them all.

At this date the Halbrane could not be very far from the icebergs. If she held on in her course in that direction she would certainly reach them before long, and would then have only to seek for a passage. Hitherto, however, the look-out had not been able to make out between the icebergs an unbroken crest of ice beyond the ice-fields.

Constant and minute precautions were indispensable all day on the 16th, for the helm, which was loosened by merciless blows and bumps, was in danger of being unshipped.

The sea mammals had not forsaken these seas. Whales were seen in great numbers, and it was a fairy-like spectacle when several of them spouted simultaneously. With fin-backs and hump-backs, porpoises of colossal size appeared, and these Hearne harpooned cleverly when they came within range. The flesh of these creatures was much relished on board, after Endicott had cooked it in his best manner.

As for the usual Antarctic birds, petrels, pigeons, and cormorants, they passed in screaming flocks, and legions of penguins, ranged along the edges of the icefields, watched the evolutions of the schooner. These penguins are the real inhabitants of these dismal solitudes, and nature could not have created a type more suited to

the desolation of the glacial zone.

On the morning of the 17th the man in the crow's-nest at last signalled the icebergs.

Five or six miles to the south a long dentated crest upreared itself, plainly standing out against the fairly clear sky, and all along it drifted thousands of ice-packs. This motionless barrier stretched before us from the north-west to the south-east, and by merely sailing along it the schooner would still gain some degrees southwards.

When the Halbrane was within three miles of the icebergs, she lay-to in the middle of a wide basin which allowed her complete freedom of movement.

A boat was lowered, and Captain Len Guy got into it, with the boatswain, four sailors at the oars, and one at the helm. The boat was pulled in the direction of the enormous rampart, vain search was made for a channel through which the schooner could have slipped, and after three hours of this fatiguing reconnoitring, the men returned to the ship. Then came a squall of rain and snow which caused the temperature to fall to thirty-six degrees (2°22 C. above zero), and shut out the view of the ice-rampart from us.

During the next twenty-four hours the schooner lay within four miles of the icebergs. To bring her nearer would have been to get among

winding channels from which it might not have been possible to extricate her. Not that Captain Len Guy did not long to do this, in his fear of passing some opening unperceived.

“If I had a consort,” he said, “I would sail closer along the icebergs, and it is a great advantage to be two, when one is on such an enterprise as this! But the Halbrane is alone, and if she were to fail us--”

Even though we approached no nearer to the icebergs than prudence permitted, our ship was exposed to great risk, and West was constantly obliged to change his trim in order to avoid the shock of an icefield.

Fortunately, the wind blew from east to north-nor'-east without variation, and it did not freshen. Had a tempest arisen I know not what would have become of the schooner--yes, though, I do know too well: she would have been lost and all on board of her. In such a case the Halbrane could not have escaped; we must have been flung on the base of the barrier.

After a long examination Captain Len Guy had to renounce the hope of finding a passage through the terrible wall of ice. It remained only to endeavour to reach the south-east point of it. At any rate, by following that course we lost nothing in latitude; and, in fact, on the 18th the observation taken made the seventy-third parallel the position of the Halbrane.



I must repeat, however, that navigation in the Antarctic seas will probably never be accomplished under more felicitous circumstances--the precocity of the summer season, the permanence of the north wind, the temperature forty-nine degrees at the lowest; all this was the best of good-fortune. I need not add that we enjoyed perpetual light, and the whole twenty-four hours round the sun's rays reached us from every point of the horizon.

Two or three times the captain approached within two miles of the icebergs. It was impossible but that the vast mass must have been subjected to climateric influences; ruptures must surely have taken place at some points.

But his search had no result, and we had to fall back into the current from west to east.

I must observe at this point that during all our search we never descried land or the appearance of land out at sea, as indicated on the charts of preceding navigators. These maps are incomplete, no doubt, but sufficiently exact in their main lines. I am aware that ships have often passed over the indicated bearings of land. This, however, was not admissible in the case of Tsalal. If the Jane had been able to reach the islands, it was because that portion of the Antarctic sea was free, and in so "early" a year, we need not fear any obstacle in that direction.

At last, on the 19th, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, a shout from the crow's-nest was heard.

"What is it?" roared West.

"The iceberg wall is split on the south-east."

"What is beyond?" "Nothing in sight."

It took West very little time to reach the point of observation, and we all waited below, how impatiently may be imagined. What if the look-out were mistaken, if some optical delusion?--But West, at all events, would make no mistake.

After ten interminable minutes his clear voice reached us on the deck.

"Open sea!" he cried.

Unanimous cheers made answer.

The schooner's head was put to the south-east, hugging the wind as much as possible.

Two hours later we had doubled the extremity of the ice-barrier, and there lay before our eyes a sparkling sea, entirely open.

(1) The French word is banquise, which means the vast stretch of icebergs farther south than the barrière or ice wall.