

command.

## CHAPTER XV.

### BENNET ISLET.

The Halbrane was then within sight of Bennet Islet! The crew urgently needed rest, so the disembarkation was deferred until the following day, and I went back to my cabin.

The night passed without disturbance, and when day came not a craft of any kind was visible on the waters, not a native on the beach.

There were no huts upon the coast, no smoke arose in the distance to indicate that Bennet Islet was inhabited. But William Guy had not found any trace of human beings there, and what I saw of the islet answered to the description given by Arthur Pym. It rose upon a rocky base of about a league in circumference, and was so arid that no vegetation existed on its surface.

“Mr. Jeorling,” said Captain Len Guy, “do you observe a promontory in the direction of the north-east?”

“I observe it, captain.”

“Is it not formed of heaped-up rocks which look like giant bales of cotton?”

“That is so, and just what the narrative describes.”

“Then all we have to do is to land on the promontory, Mr. leoding. Who knows but we may come across some vestige of the crew of the fane, supposing them to have succeeded in escaping from Tsalal Island.”

The speaker was devouring the islet with his eyes. What must his thoughts, his desires, his impatience have been! But there was a man whose gaze was set upon the same point even more fixedly; that man was Hunt.

Before we left the Halbrane Len Guy enjoined the most minute and careful watchfulness upon his lieutenant. This was a charge which West did not need. Our exploration would take only half a day at most. If the boat had not returned in the afternoon a second was to be sent in search of us.

“Look sharp also after our recruits,” added the captain.

“Don’t be uneasy, captain,” replied the lieutenant. “Indeed, since you want four men at the oars you had better take them from among the new ones. That will leave four less troublesome fellows on board.”

This was a good idea, for, under the deplorable influence of Hearne, the discontent of his shipmates from the Falklands was on the increase. The boat being ready, four of the new crew took their

places forward, while Hunt, at his own request, was steersman. Captain Len Guy, the boatswain and myself, all well armed, seated ourselves aft, and we started for the northern point of the islet. In the course of an hour we had doubled the promontory, and come in sight of the little bay whose shores the boats of the fane had touched.

Hunt steered for this bay, gliding with remarkable skill between the rocky points which stuck up here and there. One would have thought he knew his way among them.

We disembarked on a stony coast. The stones were covered with sparse lichen. The tide was already ebbing, leaving uncovered the sandy bottom of a sort of beach strewn with black blocks, resembling big nail-heads.

Two men were left in charge of the boat while we landed amid the rocks, and, accompanied by the other two, Captain Len Guy, the boatswain, Hunt and I proceeded towards the centre, where we found some rising ground, from whence we could see the whole extent of the islet. But there was nothing to be seen on any side, absolutely nothing. On coming down from the slight eminence Hunt went on in front, as it had been agreed that he was to be our guide. We followed him therefore, as he led us towards the southern extremity of the islet. Having reached the point, Hunt looked carefully on all sides of him, then stooped and showed us a piece of half rotten wood lying among the scattered stones.

“I remember!” I exclaimed; “Arthur Pym speaks of a piece of wood with traces of carving on it which appeared to have belonged to the bow of a ship.”

“Among the carving my brother fancied he could trace the design of a tortoise,” added Captain Len Guy.

“Just so,” I replied, “but Arthur Pym pronounced that resemblance doubtful. No matter; the piece of wood is still in the same place that is indicated in the narrative, so we may conclude that since the Jane cast anchor here no other crew has ever set foot upon Bennet Islet. It follows that we should only lose time in looking out for any tokens of another landing. We shall know nothing until we reach Tsalal Island.”

“Yes, Tsalal Island,” replied the captain.

We then retraced our steps in the direction of the bay. In various places we observed fragments of coral reef, and *bêche-de-mer* was so abundant that our schooner might have taken a full cargo of it. Hunt walked on in silence with downcast eyes, until as we were close upon the beach to the east, he, being about ten paces ahead, stopped abruptly, and summoned us to him by a hurried gesture.

In an instant we were by his side. Hunt had evinced no surprise on the subject of the piece of wood first found, but his attitude

changed when he knelt down in front of a worm-eaten plank lying on the sand. He felt it all over with his huge hands, as though he were seeking some tracery on its rough surface whose signification might be intelligible to him. The black paint was hidden under the thick dirt that had accumulated upon it. The plank had probably formed part of a ship's stern, as the boatswain requested us to observe.

"Yes, yes," repeated Captain Len Guy, "it made part of a stern."

Hunt, who still remained kneeling, nodded his big head in assent.

"But," I remarked, "this plank must have been cast upon Bennet Islet from a wreck! The cross-currents must have found it in the open sea, and--"

"If that were so--" cried the captain.

The same thought had occurred to both of us. What was our surprise, indeed our amazement, our unspeakable emotion, when Hunt showed us eight letters cut in the plank, not painted, but hollow and distinctly traceable with the finger.

It was only too easy to recognize the letters of two names, arranged in two lines, thus:

AN

LI.E.PO.L.

The Jane of Liverpool! The schooner commanded by Captain William Guy! What did it matter that time had blurred the other letters? Did not those suffice to tell the name of the ship and the port she belonged to? The Jane of Liverpool!

Captain Len Guy had taken the plank in his hands, and now he pressed his lips to it, while tears fell from his eyes.

It was a fragment of the Jane! I did not utter a word until the captain's emotion had subsided. As for Hunt, I had never seen such a lightning glance from his brilliant hawk-like eyes as he now cast towards the southern horizon.

Captain Len Guy rose.

Hunt, without a word, placed the plank upon his shoulder, and we continued our route.

When we had made the tour of the island, we halted at the place where the boat had been left under the charge of two sailors, and about half-past two in the afternoon we were again on board.

Early on the morning of the 23rd of December the Halbrane put off from Bennet Islet, and we carried away with us new and convincing testimony to the catastrophe which Tsalal Island had witnessed.

During that day, I observed the sea water very attentively, and it seemed to me less deeply blue than Arthur Pym describes it. Nor had we met a single specimen of his monster of the austral fauna, an animal three feet long, six inches high, with four short legs, long coral claws, a silky body, a rat's tail, a cat's head, the hanging ears, blood-red lips and white teeth of a dog. The truth is that I regarded several of these details as "suspect," and entirely due to an over-imaginative temperament.

Seated far aft in the ship, I read Edgar Poe's book with sedulous attention, but I was not unaware of the fact that Hunt, whenever his duties furnished him with an opportunity, observed me pertinaciously, and with looks of singular meaning.

And, in fact, I was re-perusing the end of Chapter XVII., in which Arthur Pym acknowledged his responsibility for the sad and tragic events which were the results of his advice. It was, in fact, he who over-persuaded Captain William Guy, urging him "to profit by so tempting an opportunity of solving the great problem relating to the Antarctic Continent." And, besides, while accepting that responsibility, did he not congratulate himself on having been the instrument of a great discovery, and having aided in some degree to reveal to science one of the most marvellous secrets which had ever claimed its attention?

At six o'clock the sun disappeared behind a thick curtain of mist.

After midnight the breeze freshened, and the Halbrane's progress marked a dozen additional miles.

On the morrow the good ship was less than the third of a degree, that is to say less than twenty miles, from Tsalal Island.

Unfortunately, just after mid-day, the wind fell. Nevertheless, thanks to the current, the Island of Tsalal was signalled at forty-five minutes past six in the evening.

The anchor was cast, a watch was set, with loaded firearms within hand-reach, and boarding-nets ready. The Halbrane ran no risk of being surprised. Too eyes were watching on board--especially those of Hunt, whose gaze never quitted the horizon of that southern zone for an instant.