

CHAPTER XXI.

AMID THE MISTS.

So this was the sum of all our efforts, trials and disappointments! Not to speak of the destruction of the Halbrane, the expedition had already cost nine lives. From thirty-two men who had embarked on the schooner, our number was reduced to twenty-three: how low was that figure yet to fall?

Between the south pole and antarctic circle lay twenty degrees, and those would have to be cleared in a month or six weeks at the most; if not, the iceberg barrier would be re-formed and closed-up. As for wintering in that part of the antarctic circle, not a man of us could have survived it.

Besides, we had lost all hope of rescuing the survivors of the Jane, and the sole desire of the crew was to escape as quickly as possible from the awful solitudes of the south. Our drift, which had been south, down to the pole, was now north, and, if that direction should continue, perhaps we might be favoured with such good fortune as would make up for all the evil that had befallen us! In any case there was nothing for it but, in familiar phrase, "to let ourselves go."

The mist did not lift during the end, 3rd, and 4th of February, and

it would have been difficult to make out the rate of progress of our iceberg since it had passed the pole. Captain Len Guy, however, and West, considered themselves safe in reckoning it at two hundred and fifty miles.

The current did not seem to have diminished in speed or changed its course. It was now beyond a doubt that we were moving between the two halves of a continent, one on the east, the other on the west, which formed the vast antarctic region. And I thought it was matter of great regret that we could not get aground on one or the other side of this vast strait, whose surface would presently be solidified by the coming of winter.

When I expressed this sentiment to Captain Len Guy, he made me the only logical answer:

“What would you have, Mr. Jeorling? We are powerless. There is nothing to be done, and the persistent fog is the worst part of our ill luck. I no longer know where we are. It is impossible to take an observation, and this befalls us just as the sun is about to disappear for long months.”

“Let me come back to the question of the boat,” said I, “for the last time. Could we not, with the boat--”

“Go on a discovery cruise? Can you think of such a thing? That would be an imprudence I would not commit, even though the crew

would allow me.”

I was on the point of exclaiming: “And what if your brother and your countrymen have found refuge on some spot of the land that undoubtedly lies about us?”

But I restrained myself. Of what avail was it to reawaken our captain’s grief? He, too, must have contemplated this eventuality, and he had not renounced his purpose of further search without being fully convinced of the folly of a last attempt.

During those three days of fog I had not caught sight of Dirk Peters, or rather he had made no attempt to approach, but had remained inflexibly at his post by the boat. Martin Holt’s questions respecting his brother Ned seemed to indicate that his secret was known--at least in part, and the half-breed held himself more than ever aloof, sleeping while the others watched, and watching in their time of sleep. I even wondered whether he regretted having confided in me, and fancied that he had aroused my repugnance by his sad story. If so, he was mistaken; I deeply pitied the poor half-breed.

Nothing could exceed the melancholy monotony of the hours which we passed in the midst of a fog so thick that the wind could not lift its curtain. The position of the iceberg could not be ascertained. It went with the current at a like speed, and had it been motionless there would have been no appreciable difference for us, for the wind

had fallen--at least, so we supposed--and not a breath was stirring. The flame of a torch held up in the air did not flicker. The silence of space was broken only by the clangour of the sea-birds, which came in muffled croaking tones through the stifling atmosphere of vapour. Petrels and albatross swept the top of the iceberg, where they kept a useless watch in their flight. In what direction were those swift-winged creatures--perhaps already driven towards the confines of the arctic region but the approach of winter--bound? We could not tell. One day, the boatswain, who was determined to solve this question if possible, having mounted to the extreme top, not without risk of breaking his neck, came into such violent contact with a *quebranta huesos*--a sort of gigantic petrel measuring twelve feet with spread wings--that he was flung on his back.

“Curse the bird!” he said on his return to the camp, addressing the observation to me. “I have had a narrow escape! A thump, and down I went, sprawling. I saved myself I don’t know how, for I was all but over the side. Those ice ledges, you know, slip through one’s fingers like water. I called out to the bird, ‘Can’t you even look before you, you fool?’ But what was the good of that? The big blunderer did not even beg my pardon!”

In the afternoon of the same day our ears were assailed by a hideous braying from below. Hurliguerly remarked that as there were no asses to treat us to the concert, it must be given by penguins. Hitherto these countless dwellers in the polar regions had not thought proper

to accompany us on our moving island; we had not seen even one, either at the foot of the iceberg or on the drifting packs.

There could be no doubt that they were there in thousands, for the music was unmistakably that of a multitude of performers. Now those birds frequent by choice the edges of the coasts of islands and continents in high latitudes, or the ice-fields in their neighbourhood. Was not their presence an indication that land was near?

I asked Captain Len Guy what he thought of the presence of these birds.

“I think what you think, Mr. Jeorling,” he replied. “Since we have been drifting, none of them have taken refuge on the iceberg, and here they are now in crowds, if we may judge by their deafening cries. From whence do they come? No doubt from land, which is probably near.”

“Is this West’s opinion?”

“Yes, Mr. Jeorling, and you know he is not given to vain imaginations.”

“Certainly not.”

“And then another thing has struck both him and me, which has apparently escaped your attention. It is that the braying of the

penguins is mingled with a sound like the lowing of cattle. Listen and you will readily distinguish it.”

I listened, and, sure enough, the orchestra was more full than I had supposed.

“I hear the lowing plainly,” I said; “there are, then, seals and walrus also in the sea at the base.”

“That is certain, Mr. Jeorling, and I conclude from the fact that those animals--both birds and mammals--very rare since we left Tsalal Island, frequent the waters into which the currents have carried us.”

“Of course, captain, of course. Oh! what a misfortune it is that we should be surrounded by this impenetrable fog!”

“Which prevents us from even getting down to the base of the iceberg! There, no doubt, we should discover whether there are seaweed drifts around us; if that be so, it would be another sign.”

“Why not try, captain?”

“No, no, Mr. Jeorling, that might lead to falls, and I will not permit anybody to leave the camp. If land be there, I imagine our iceberg will strike it before long.”

“And if it does not?”

“If it does not, how are we to make it?”

I thought to myself that the boat might very well be used in the latter case. But Captain Len Guy preferred to wait, and perhaps this was the wiser course under our circumstances.

At eight o'clock that evening the half-condensed mist was so compact that it was difficult to walk through it. The composition of the air seemed to be changed, as though it were passing into a solid state. It was not possible to discern whether the fog had any effect upon the compass. I knew the matter had been studied by meteorologists, and that they believe they may safely affirm that the needle is not affected by this condition of the atmosphere. I will add here that since we had left the South Pole behind no confidence could be placed in the indications of the compass; it had gone wild at the approach to the magnetic pole, to which we were no doubt on the way. Nothing could be known, therefore, concerning the course of the iceberg.

The sun did not set quite below the horizon at this period, yet the waters were wrapped in tolerably deep darkness at nine o'clock in the evening, when the muster of the crew took place.

On this occasion each man as usual answered to his name except Dirk Peters.

The call was repeated in the loudest of Hurliguerly's stentorian tones. No reply.

"Has nobody seen Dirk Peters during the day?" inquired the captain.

"Nobody," answered the boatswain.

"Can anything have happened to him?"

"Don't be afraid," cried the boatswain. "Dirk Peters is in his element, and as much at his ease in the fog as a polar bear. He has got out of one bad scrape; he will get out of a second!"

I let Hurliguerly have his say, knowing well why the half-breed kept out of the way.

That night none of us, I am sure, could sleep. We were smothered in the tents, for lack of oxygen. And we were all more or less under the influence of a strange sort of presentiment, as though our fate were about to change, for better or worse, if indeed it could be worse.

The night wore on without any alarm, and at six o'clock in the morning each of us came out to breathe a more wholesome air.

The state of things was unchanged, the density of the fog was extraordinary. It was, however, found that the barometer had risen, too quickly, it is true, for the rise to be serious. Presently other signs of change became evident. The wind, which was growing colder--a south wind since we had passed beyond the south pole--began to blow a full gale, and the noises from below were heard more distinctly through the space swept by the atmospheric currents.

At nine o'clock the iceberg doffed its cap of vapour quite suddenly, producing an indescribable transformation scene which no fairy's wand could have accomplished in less time or with greater success.

In a few moments, the sky was clear to the extreme verge of the horizon, and the sea reappeared, illumined by the oblique rays of the sun, which now rose only a few degrees above it. A rolling swell of the waves bathed the base of our iceberg in white foam, as it drifted, together with a great multitude of floating mountains under the double action of wind and current, on a course inclining to the nor-'nor'-east.

"Land!"

This cry came from the summit of the moving mountain, and Dirk Peters was revealed to our sight, standing on the outermost block, his hand stretched towards the north.

The half-breed was not mistaken. The land this time--yes!--it was land! Its distant heights, of a blackish hue, rose within three or four miles of us.

86° 12' south latitude.

114° 17' east longitude.

The iceberg was nearly four degrees beyond the antarctic pole, and from the western longitudes that our schooner had followed tracing the course of the Jane, we had passed into the eastern longitudes.