

CHAPTER XXII.

IN CAMP.

A little after noon, the iceberg was within a mile of the land.

After their dinner, the crew climbed up to the topmost block, on which Dirk Peters was stationed. On our approach the half-breed descended the opposite slope and when I reached the top he was no longer to be seen.

The land on the north evidently formed a continent or island of considerable extent. On the west there was a sharply projecting cape, surmounted by a sloping height which resembled an enormous seal's head on the side view; then beyond that was a wide stretch of sea. On the east the land was prolonged out of sight.

Each one of us took in the position. It depended on the current-whether it would carry the iceberg into an eddy which might drive it on the coast, or continue to drift it towards the north.

Which was the more admissible hypothesis?

Captain Len Guy, West, Hurliguerly, and I talked over the matter, while the crew discussed it among themselves. Finally, it was agreed that the current tended rather to carry the iceberg towards the northern point of land.

“After all,” said Captain Len Guy, “if it is habitable during the months of the summer season, it does not look like being inhabited, since we cannot descry a human being on the shore.”

“Let us bear in mind, captain,” said I, “that the iceberg is not calculated to attract attention as the Halbrane would have done.”

“Evidently, Mr. Jeorling; and the natives, if there were any, would have been collected on the beach to see the Halbrane already.”

“We must not conclude, captain, because we do not see any natives--”

“Certainly not, Mr. Jeorling; but you will agree with me that the aspect of this land is very unlike that of Tsalal Island when the fane reached it; there is nothing here but desolation and barrenness.”

“I acknowledge that--barrenness and desolation, that is all. Nevertheless, I want to ask you whether it is your intention to go ashore, captain?”

“With the boat?”

“With the boat, should the current carry cur iceberg away from the land.”

“We have not an hour to lose, Mr. Jeorling, and the delay of a few hours might condemn us to a cruel winter stay, if we arrived too late at the iceberg barrier.”

“And, considering the distance, we are not too soon,” observed West.

“I grant it,” I replied, still persisting. “But, to leave this land behind us without ever having set foot on it, without having made sure that it does not preserve the traces of an encampment, if your brother, captain--his companions--”

Captain Len Guy shook his head. How could the castaways have supported life in this desolate region for several months?

Besides, the British flag was hoisted on the summit of the iceberg, and William Guy would have recognized it and come down to the shore had he been living.

No one. No one.

At this moment, West, who had been observing certain points of approach, said,--

“Let us wait a little before we come to a decision. In less than an hour we shall be able to decide. Our speed is slackening, it seems to me, and it is possible that an eddy may bring us back obliquely to the coast.”

“That is my opinion too,” said the boatswain, “and if our floating machine is not stationary, it is nearly so. It seems to be turning round.”

West and Hurliguerly were not mistaken. For some reason or other the iceberg was getting out of the course which it had followed continuously. A giratory movement had succeeded to that of drifting, owing to the action of an eddy which set towards the coast.

Besides, several ice-mountains, in front of us, had just run aground on the edge of the shore. It was, then, useless to discuss whether we should take to the boat or not. According as we approached, the desolation of the land became more and more apparent, and the prospect of enduring six months' wintering there would have appalled the stoutest hearts.

At five in the afternoon, the iceberg plunged into a deep rift in the coast ending in a long point on the right, and there stuck fast.

“On shore! On shore!” burst from every man, like a single exclamation, and the men were already hurrying down the slope of the iceberg, when West commanded:

“Wait for orders!”

Some hesitation was shown--especially on the part of Hearne and several of his comrades. Then the instinct of discipline prevailed, and finally the whole crew ranged themselves around Captain Len Guy. It was not necessary to lower the boat, the iceberg being in contact with the point.

The captain, the boatswain, and myself, preceding the others, were the first to quit the camp; ours were the first human feet to tread this virgin and volcanic soil.

We walked for twenty minutes on rough land, strewn with rocks of igneous origin, solidified lava, dusty slag, and grey ashes, but without enough clay to grow even the hardiest plants.

With some risk and difficulty, Captain Len Guy, the boatswain, and I succeeded in climbing the hill; this exploit occupied a whole hour. Although evening had now come, it brought no darkness in its train. From the top of the hill we could see over an extent of from thirty to forty miles, and this was what we saw.

Behind us lay the open sea, laden with floating masses; a great number of these had recently heaped themselves up against the beach and rendered it almost inaccessible.

On the west was a strip of hilly land, which extended beyond our sight, and was washed on its east side by a boundless sea. It was evident that we had been carried by the drift through a strait.

Ah! if we had only had our Halbrane! But our sole possession was a frail craft barely capable of containing a dozen men, and we were twenty-three!

There was nothing for it but to go down to the shore again, to carry the tents to the beach, and take measures in view of a winter sojourn under the terrible conditions imposed upon us by circumstances.

On our return to the coast the boatswain discovered several caverns in the granitic cliffs, sufficiently spacious to house us all and afford storage for the cargo of the Halbrane. Whatever might be our ultimate decision, we could not do better than place our material and instal ourselves in this opportune shelter.

After we had reascended the slopes of the iceberg and reached our camp, Captain Len Guy had the men mustered. The only missing man was Dirk Peters, who had decidedly isolated himself from the crew. There was nothing to fear from him, however; he would be with the faithful against the mutinous, and under all circumstances we might count upon him. When the circle had been formed, Captain Len Guy spoke, without allowing any sign of discouragement to appear, and explained the position with the utmost frankness and lucidity, stating in the

first place that it was absolutely necessary to lower the cargo to the coast and stow it away in one of the caverns. Concerning the vital question of food, he stated that the supply of flour, preserved meat, and dried vegetables would suffice for the winter, however prolonged, and on that of fuel he was satisfied that we should not want for coal, provided it was not wasted; and it would be possible to economize it, as the hibernating waifs might brave the cold of the polar zone under a covering of snow and a roof of ice.

Was the captain's tone of security feigned? I did not think so, especially as West approved of what he said.

A third question raised by Hearne remained, and was well calculated to arouse jealousy and anger among the crew. It was the question of the use to be made of the only craft remaining to us. Ought the boat to be kept for the needs of our hibernation, or used to enable us to return to the iceberg barrier?

Captain Len Guy would not pronounce upon this; he desired to postpone the decision for twenty-four or forty-eight hours. The boat, carrying the provisions necessary for such a voyage, could not accommodate more than eleven or, at the outside, twelve men. If the departure of the boat were agreed to, then its passengers must be selected by lot. The captain proceeded to state that neither West, the boatswain, I, nor he would claim any privilege, but would submit to the fortune of the lot with all the others. Both Martin Holt and

Hardy were perfectly capable of taking the boat to the fishing-grounds, where the whalers would still be found.

Then, those to whom the lot should fall were not to forget their comrades, left to winter on the eighty-sixth parallel, and were to send a ship to take them off at the return of summer.

All this was said in a tone as calm as it was firm. I must do Captain Len Guy the justice to say that he rose to the occasion.

When he had concluded--without any interruption even from Hearne--no one made a remark. There was, indeed, none to be made, since, in the given case, lots were to be drawn under conditions of perfect equality.

The hour of rest having arrived, each man entered the camp, partook of the supper prepared by Endicott, and went to sleep for the last time under the tents.

Dirk Peters had not reappeared, and I sought for him in vain.

On the following day, the 7th of February, everybody set to work early with a will. The boat was let down with all due precaution to the base of the iceberg, and drawn up by the men on a little sandy beach out of reach of the water. It was in perfectly good condition, and thoroughly serviceable.

The boatswain then set to work on the former contents of the Halbrane, furniture, bedding, sails, clothing, instruments, and utensils. Stowed away in a cabin, these things would no longer be exposed to the knocking about and damage of the iceberg. The cases containing preserved food and the casks of spirits were rapidly carried ashore.

I worked with the captain and West at this onerous task, and Dirk Peters also turned up and lent the valuable assistance of his great strength, but he did not utter a word to anyone.

Our occupation continual on the 8th, 9th, and 10th February, and our task was finished in the afternoon of the 10th. The cargo was safely stowed in the interior of a large grotto, with access to it by a narrow opening. We were to inhabit the adjoining grotto, and Endicott set up his kitchen in the latter, on the advice of the boatswain. Thus we should profit by the heat of the stove, which was to cook our food and warm the cavern during the long days, or rather the long nights of the austral winter.

During the process of housing and storing, I observed nothing to arouse suspicion in the bearing of Hearne and the Falklands men. Nevertheless, the half-breed was kept on guard at the boat, which might easily have been seized upon the beach.

Hurliguerly, who observed his comrades closely, appeared less anxious.

On that same evening Captain Len Guy, having reassembled his people, stated that the question should be discussed on the morrow, adding that, if it were decided in the affirmative, lots should be drawn immediately. No reply was made.

It was late, and half dark outside, for at this date the sun was on the edge of the horizon, and would very soon disappear below it.

I had been asleep for some hours when I was awakened by a great shouting at a short distance. I sprang up instantly and darted out of the cavern, simultaneously with the captain and West, who had also been suddenly aroused from sleep.

“The boat! the boat!” cried West.

The boat was no longer in its place--that place so jealously guarded by Dirk Peters.

After they had pushed the boat into the sea, three men had got into it with bales and casks, while ten others strove to control the half-breed.

Hearne was there, and Martin Holt also; the latter, it seemed to me, was not interfering.

These wretches, then, intended to depart before the lots were drawn;

they meant to forsake us. They had succeeded in surprising Dirk Peters, and they would have killed him, had he not fought hard for life.

In the face of this mutiny, knowing our inferiority of numbers, and not knowing whether he might count on all the old crew, Captain Len Guy re-entered the cavern with West in order to procure arms. Hearne and his accomplices were armed.

I was about to follow them when the following words arrested my steps.

The half-breed, overpowered by numbers, had been knocked down, and at this moment Martin Holt, in gratitude to the man who saved his life, was rushing to his aid, but Hearne called out to him,--

“Leave the fellow alone, and come with us!”

Martin Holt hesitated.

“Yes, leave him alone, I say; leave Dirk Peters, the assassin of your brother, alone.”

“The assassin of my brolher!”

“Your brother, killed on board the Grampus--”

“Killed! by Dirk Peters?”

“Yes! Killed and eaten--eaten--eaten!” repeated Hearne, who pronounced the hateful worms with a kind of howl.

And then, at a sign from Hearne, two of his comrades seized Martin Holt and dragged him into the boat. Hearne was instantly followed by all those whom he had induced to join in this criminal deed.

At that moment Dirk Peters rose from the ground, and sprang upon one of the Falklands men as he was in the act of stepping on the platform of the boat, lifted him up bodily, hurled him round his head and dashed his brains out against a rock.

In an instant the half-breed fell, shot in the shoulder by a bullet from Hearne’s pistol, and the boat was pushed off.

Then Captain Len Guy and West came out of the cavern--the whole scene had passed in less than a minute--and ran down to the point, which they reached together with the boatswain, Hardy, Francis, and Stern.

The boat, which was drawn by the current, was already some distance off, and the tide was falling rapidly.

West shouldered his gun and fired; a sailor dropped into the bottom

of the boat. A second shot, fired by Captain Len Guy, grazed Hearne's breast, and the ball was lost among the ice-blocks at the moment when the boat disappeared behind the iceberg.

The only thing for us to do was to cross to the other side of the point. The current would carry the wretches thither, no doubt, before it bore them northward. If they passed within range, and if a second shot should hit Hearne, either killing or wounding him, his companions might perhaps decide on coming back to us.

A quarter of an hour elapsed. When the boat appeared at the other side of the point, it was so far off that our bullets could not reach it. Hearne had already had the sail set, and the boat, impelled by wind and current jointly, was soon no more than a white speck on the face of the waters, and speedily disappeared.