

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOUND AT LAST

The question of our wintering on the land whereon we had been thrown was settled for us. But, after all, the situation was not changed for those among the nine (now only remaining of the twenty-three) who should not have drawn the lot of departure. Who could speculate upon the chances of the whole nine? Might not all of them have drawn the lot of "stay"? And, when every chance was fully weighed, was that of those who had left us the best? To this question there could be no answer.

When the boat had disappeared, Captain Len Guy and his companions retraced their steps towards the cavern in which we must live for all the time during which we could not go out, in the dread darkness of the antarctic winter. My first thought was of Dirk Peters, who, being wounded, could not follow us when we hurried to the other side of the point.

On reaching the cavern I failed to find the half-breed, Was he severely wounded? Should we have to mourn the death of this man who was as faithful to us as to his "poor Pym"?

"Let us search for him, Mr. Jeorling!" cried the boatswain.

“We will go together,” said the captain. “Dirk Peters would never have forsaken us, and we will not forsake him.”

“Would he come back,” said I, “now that what he thought was known to him and me only has come out?”

I informed my companions of the reason why the name of Ned Holt had been changed to that of Parker in Arthur Pym’s narrative, and of the circumstances under which the half-breed had apprised me of the fact. At the same time I urged every consideration that might exculpate him, dwelling in particular upon the point that if the lot had fallen to Dirk Peters, he would have been the victim of the others’ hunger.

“Dirk Peters confided this secret to you only?” inquired Captain Len Guy.

“To me only, captain.”

“And you have kept it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I cannot understand how it came to the knowledge of Hearne.”

“At first,” I replied, “I thought Hearne might have talked in

his sleep, and that it was by chance Martin Holt learned the secret. After reflection, however, I recalled to mind that when the half-breed related the scene on the Grampus to me, he was in my cabin, and the side sash was raised. I have reason to think that the man at the wheel overheard our conversation. Now that man was Hearne, who, in order to hear it more clearly, let go the wheel, so that the Halbrane lurched--”

“I remember,” said West. “I questioned the fellow sharply, and sent him clown into the hold.”

“Well, then, captain,” I resumed, “it was from that day that Hearne made up to Martin Holt. Hurliguerly called my attention to the fact.”

“Of course he did,” said the boatswain, ”for Hearne, not being capable of managing the boat which he intended to seize, required a master-hand like Holt.”

“And so,” I said, “he kept on urging Holt to question the half-breed concerning his brother’s fate, and you know how Holt came at last to learn the fearful truth. Martin Holt seemed to be stupefied by the revelation. The others dragged him away, and now he is with them!” We were all agreed that things had happened as I supposed, and now the question was, did Dirk Peters, in his present state of mind, mean to absent himself? Would he consent to resume his place among us?

We all left the cavern, and after an hour's search we came in sight of Dirk Peters, whose first impulse was to escape from us. At length, however, Hurliguerly and Francis came up with him. He stood still and made no resistance. I advanced and spoke to him, the others did the same. Captain Len Guy offered him his hand, which he took after a moment's hesitation. Then, without uttering a single word, he returned towards the beach.

From that day no allusion was ever made to the tragic story of the Grampus. Dirk Peters' wound proved to be slight; he merely wrapped a piece of sailcloth round the injured arm, and went off to his work with entire unconcern.

We made all the preparation in our power for a prolonged hibernation. Winter was threatening us. For some days past the sun hardly showed at all through the mists. The temperature fell to 36 degrees and would rise no more, while the solar rays, casting shadows of endless length upon the soil, gave hardly any heat. The captain made us put on warm woollen clothes without waiting for the cold to become more severe.

Icebergs, packs, streams, and drifts came in greater numbers from the south. Some of these struck and stayed upon the coast, which was already heaped up with ice, but the greater number disappeared in the direction of the north-east.

“All these pieces,” said the boatswain, “will go to the closing up of the iceberg wall. If Hearne and his lot of scoundrels are not ahead of them, I imagine they will find the door shut, and as they have no key to open it with--”

“I suppose you think, boatswain, that our case is less desperate than theirs?”

“I do think so, Mr. Jeorling, and I have always thought so. If everything had been done as it was settled, and the lot had fallen to me to go with the boat, I would have given up my turn to one of the others. After all, there is something in feeling dry ground under our feet. I don’t wish the death of anybody, but if Hearne and his friends do not succeed in clearing the iceberg barrier--if they are doomed to pass the winter on the ice, reduced for food to a supply that will only last a few weeks, you know the fate that awaits them!”

“Yes, a fate worse than ours!”

“And besides,” said the boatswain, “even supposing they do reach the Antarctic Circle. If the whalers have already left the fishing-grounds, it is not a laden and overladen craft that will keep the sea until the Australian coasts are in sight.”

This was my own opinion, and also that of the captain and West.

During the following four days, we completed the storage of the whole of our belongings, and made some excursions into the interior of the country, finding "all barren," and not a trace that any landing had ever been made there.

One day, Captain Len Guy proposed that we should give a geographical name to the region whither the iceberg had carried us. It was named Halbrane Land, in memory of our schooner, and we called the strait that separated the two parts of the polar continent the Jane Sound.

Then we took to shooting the penguins which swarmed upon the rocks, and to capturing some of the amphibious animals which frequented the beach. We began to feel the want of fresh meat, and Endicott's cooking rendered seal and walrus flesh quite palatable. Besides, the fat of these creatures would serve, at need, to warm the cavern and feed the cooking-stove. Our most formidable enemy would be the cold, and we must fight it by every means within our power. It remained to be seen whether the amphibia would not forsake Halbrane Land at the approach of winter, and seek a less rigorous climate in lower latitudes. Fortunately there were hundreds of other animals to secure our little company from hunger, and even from thirst, at need. The beach was the home of numbers of galapagos--a kind of turtle so called from an archipelago in the equinoctial sea, where also they abound, and mentioned by Arthur Pym as supplying food to the islanders, It will be remembered that Pym and Peters found three of these galapagos in the native boat which carried them away from Tsalal Island.

The movement of these huge creatures is slow, heavy, and waddling; they have thin necks two feet long, triangular snake-like heads, and can go without food for very long periods.

Arthur Pym has compared the antarctic turtles to dromedaries, because, like those ruminants, they have a pouch just where the neck begins, which contains from two to three gallons of cold fresh water. He relates, before the scene of the lot-drawing, that but for one of these turtles the shipwrecked crew of the *Grampus* must have died of hunger and thirst. If Pym is to be believed, some of the great turtles weigh from twelve to fifteen hundred pounds. Those of Halbrane Land did not go beyond seven or eight hundred pounds, but their flesh was none the less savoury.

On the 19th of February an incident occurred--an incident which those who acknowledge the intervention of Providence in human affairs will recognize as providential.

It was eight o'clock in the morning; the weather was calm; the sky was tolerably clear; the thermometer stood at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit.

We were assembled in the cavern, with the exception of the boatswain, waiting for our breakfast, which Endicott was preparing, and were about to take our places at table, when we heard a call from outside.

The voice was Hurliguerly's, and we hurried out. On seeing us, he cried,--

"Come--come quickly!"

He was standing on a rock at the foot of the hillock above the beach in which Halbrahe Land ended beyond the point, and his right hand was stretched out towards the sea.

"What is it?" asked Captain Len Guy.

"A boat."

"Is it the Halbrane's boat coming back?"

"No, captain--it is not."

Then we perceived a boat, not to be mistaken for that of our schooner in form or dimensions, drifting without oars or paddle, seemingly abandoned to the current.

We had but one idea in common--to seize at any cost upon this derelict craft, which would, perhaps, prove our salvation. But how were we to reach it? how were we to get it in to the point of Halbrane Land?

While we were looking distractedly at the boat and at each other, there came a sudden splash at the end of the hillock, as though a body had fallen into the sea.

It was Dirk Peters, who, having flung off his clothes, had sprung from the top of a rock, and was swimming rapidly towards the boat before we made him out.

We cheered him heartily. I never beheld anything like that swimming. He bounded through the waves like a porpoise, and indeed he possessed the strength and swiftness of one. What might not be expected of such a man!

In a few minutes the half-breed had swum several cables' lengths towards the boat in an oblique direction. We could only see his head like a black speck on the surface of the rolling waves. A period of suspense, of intense watching of the brave swimmer succeeded. Surely, surely he would reach the boat; but must he not be carried away with it? Was it to be believed that even his great strength would enable him, swimming, to tow it to the beach?

"After all, why should there not be oars in the boat?" said the boatswain.

"He has it! He has it! Hurrah, Dirk, hurrah!" shouted Hurliguerly, and Endicott echoed his exultant cheer.

The half-breed had, in fact, reached the boat and raised himself alongside half out of the water. His big, strong hand grasped the side, and at the risk of causing the boat to capsize, he hoisted himself up to the side, stepped over it, and sat down to draw his breath.

Almost instantly a shout reached our ears. It was uttered by Dirk Peters. What had he found? Paddles! It must be so, for we saw him seat himself in the front of the boat, and paddle with all his strength in striving to get out of the current.

“Come along!” said the captain, and, turning the base of the hillock, we all ran along the edge of the beach between the blackish stones that bestrewed it.

After some time, West stopped us. The boat had reached the shelter of a small projection at that place, and it was evident that it would be run ashore there.

When it was within five or six cables' lengths, and the eddy was helping it on, Dirk Peters let go the paddles, stooped towards the after-part of the boat, and then raised himself, holding up an inert body.

An agonized cry from Captain Len Guy rent the air!

“My brother--my brother!”

“He is living! He is living!” shouted Dirk Peters.

A moment later, the boat had touched the beach, and Captain Len Guy held his brother in his arms.

Three of William Guy’s companions lay apparently lifeless in the bottom of the boat.

And these four men were all that remained of the crew of the Jane.