

## CHAPTER XXV.

“WE WERE THE FIRST.”

Two days later not one of the survivors from the two schooners, the Jane and the Halbrane, remained upon any coast of the Antarctic region.

On the 21st of February, at six o'clock in the morning, the boat, with us all (we numbered thirteen) in it, left the little creek and doubled the point of Halbrane Land. On the previous day we had fully and finally debated the question of our departure, with the understanding that if it were settled in the affirmative, we should start without delay.

The captain of the fane was for an immediate departure, and Captain Len Guy was not opposed to it. I willingly sided with them, and West was of a similar opinion. The boatswain was inclined to oppose us. He considered it imprudent to give up a certainty for the uncertain, and he was backed by Endicott, who would in any case say “ditto” to his “Mr. Burke.” However, when the time came, Hurliguerly conformed to the view of the majority with a good grace, and declared himself quite ready to set out, since we were all of that way of thinking.

Our boat was one of those in use in the Tsalal Archipelago for

plying between the islands. We knew, from the narrative of Arthur Pym, that these boats are of two kinds, one resembling rafts or flat boats, the other strongly-built pirogues. Our boat was of the former kind, forty feet long, six feet in width, and worked by several paddles.

We called our little craft the Paracura, after a fish which abounds in these waters. A rough image of that denizen of the southern deep was cut upon the gunwale.

Needless to say that the greater part of the cargo of the Halbrane was left in our cavern, fully protected from the weather, at the disposal of any shipwrecked people who might chance to be thrown on the coast of Halbrane Land. The boatswain had planted a spar on the top of this slope to attract attention. But, our two schooners notwithstanding, what vessel would ever venture into such latitudes?

Nota Bene.--We were just thirteen--the fatal number. Perfectly good relations subsisted among us. We had no longer to dread the rebellion of a Hearne. (How often we speculated upon the fate of those whom he had beguiled!)

At seven o'clock, the extreme point of Halbrahe Land lay five miles behind us, and in the evening we gradually lost sight of the heights that varied that part of the coast.

I desire to lay special stress on the fact that not a single scrap

of iron entered into the construction of this boat, not so much as a nail or a bolt, for that metal was entirely unknown to the Tsalal islanders. The planks were bound together by a sort of liana, or creeping-plant, and caulked with moss steeped in pitch, which was turned by contact with the sea-water to a substance as hard as metal.

I have nothing special to record during the week that succeeded our departure. The breeze blew steadily from the south, and we did not meet with any unfavourable current between the banks of the Jane Sound.

During those first eight days, the Paracuts, by paddling when the wind fell, had kept up the speed that was indispensable for our reaching the Pacific Ocean within a short time.

The desolate aspect of the land remained the same, while the strait was already visited by floating drifts, packs of one to two hundred feet in length, some oblong, others circular, and also by icebergs which our boat passed easily. We were made anxious, however, by the fact that these masses were proceeding towards the iceberg barrier, for would they not close the passages, which ought to be still open at this time?

I shall mention here that in proportion as Dirk Peters was carried farther and farther from the places wherein no trace of his poor Pym had been found, he was more silent than ever, and no longer even answered me when I addressed him.

It must not be forgotten that since our iceberg had passed beyond the south pole, we were in the zone of eastern longitudes counted from the zero of Greenwich to the hundred and eightieth degree. All hope must therefore be abandoned of our either touching at the Falklands, or finding whaling-ships in the waters of the Sandwich Islands, the South Orkneys, or South Georgia.

Our voyage proceeded under unaltered conditions for ten days. Our little craft was perfectly sea-worthy. The two captains and West fully appreciated its soundness, although, as I have previously said, not a scrap of iron had a place in its construction. It had not once been necessary to repair its seams, so staunch were they. To be sure, the sea was smooth, its long, rolling waves were hardly ruffled on their surface.

On the loth of March, with the same longitude the observation gave  $7^{\circ} 13'$  for latitude. The speed of the Paracuta had then been thirty miles in each twenty-four hours. If this rate of progress could be maintained for three weeks, there was every chance of our finding the passes open, and being able to get round the iceberg barrier; also that the whaling-ships would not yet have left the fishing-grounds.

The sun was on the verge of the horizon, and the time was approaching when the Antarctic region would be shrouded in polar night. Fortunately, in re-ascending towards the north we were

getting into waters from whence light was not yet banished. Then did we witness a phenomenon as extraordinary as any of those described by Arthur Pym. For three or four hours, sparks, accompanied by a sharp noise, shot out of our fingers' ends, our hair, and our beards. There was an electric snowstorm, with great flakes falling loosely, and the contact produced this strange luminosity. The sea rose so suddenly and tumbled about so wildly that the Paracuta was several times in danger of being swallowed up by the waves, but we got through the mystic-seeming tempest all safe and sound.

Nevertheless, space was thenceforth but imperfectly lighted. Frequent mists came up and bounded our outlook to a few cable-lengths. Extreme watchfulness and caution were necessary to avoid collision with the floating masses of ice, which were travelling more slowly than the Paracuta.

It is also to be noted that, on the southern side, the sky was frequently lighted up by the broad and brilliant rays of the polar aurora.

The temperature fell very perceptibly, and no longer rose above twenty-three degrees.

Forty-eight hours later Captain Len Guy and his brother succeeded with great difficulty in taking an approximate observation, with the following results of their calculations:

Latitude: 75° 17' south.

Latitude: 118° 3' east.

At this date, therefore (12th March), the Paracuta was distant from the waters of the Antarctic Circle only four hundred miles.

During the night a thick fog came on, with a subsidence of the breeze. This was to be regretted, for it increased the risk of collision with the floating ice. Of course fog could not be a surprise to us, being where we were, but what did surprise us was the gradually increasing speed of our boat, although the falling of the wind ought to have lessened it.

This increase of speed could not be due to the current for we were going more quickly than it.

This state of things lasted until morning, without our being able to account for what was happening, when at about ten o'clock the mist began to disperse in the low zones. The coast on the west reappeared--a rocky coast, without a mountainous background; the Paracuta was following its line.

And then, no more than a quarter of a mile away, we beheld a huge mound, reared above the plain to a height of three hundred feet, with a circumference of from two to three hundred feet. In its strange form this great mound resembled an enormous sphinx; the body upright, the paws stretched out, crouching in the attitude of the

winged monster which Grecian Mythology has placed upon the way to Thebes.

Was this a living animal, a gigantic monster, a mastodon a thousand times the size of those enormous elephants of the polar seas whose remains are still found in the ice? In our frame of mind we might have believed that it was such a creature, and believed also that the mastodon was about to hurl itself on our little craft and crush it to atoms.

After a few moments of unreasoning and unreasonable fright, we recognized that the strange object was only a great mound, singularly shaped, and that the mist had just rolled off its head, leaving it to stand out and confront us.

Ah! that sphinx! I remembered, at sight of it, that on the night when the iceberg was overturned and the Halbrane was carried away, I had dreamed of a fabulous animal of this kind, seated at the pole of the world, and from whom Edgar Poe could only wrest its secrets.

But our attention was to be attracted, our surprise, even our alarm, was evoked soon by phenomena still more strange than the mysterious earth form upon which the mist-curtain had been raised so suddenly.

I have said that the speed of the Paracuta was gradually increasing; now it was excessive, that of the current remaining inferior to it. Now, of a sudden, the grapnel that had belonged to the Halbrane, and

was in the bow of the boat, flew out of its socket as though drawn by an irresistible power, and the rope that held it was strained to breaking point. It seemed to tow us, as it grazed the surface of the water towards the shore.

“What’s the matter?” cried William Guy. “Cut away, boatswain, cut away!” shouted West, “or we shall be dragged against the rocks.”

Hurliguerly hurried to the bow of the Paracuta to cut away the rope. Of a sudden the knife he held was snatched out of his hand, the rope broke, and the grapnel, like a projectile, shot off in the direction of the sphinx.

At the same moment, all the articles on board the boat that were made of iron or steel--cooking utensils, arms, Endicott’s stove, our knives, which were torn from our pockets--took flight after a similar fashion in the same direction, while the boat, quickening its course, brought up against the beach.

What was happening? In order to explain these inexplicable things, were we not obliged to acknowledge that we had come into the region of those wonders which I attributed to the hallucinations of Arthur Pym?

No! These were physical facts which we had just witnessed, and not imaginary phenomena!



We had, however, no time for reflection, and immediately upon our landing, our attention was turned in another direction by the sight of a boat lying wrecked upon the sand.

“The Halbrane’s boat!” cried Hurliguerly. It was indeed the boat which Hearne had stolen, and it was simply smashed to pieces; in a word, only the formless wreckage of a craft which has been flung against rocks by the sea, remained.

We observed immediately that all the ironwork of the boat had disappeared, down to the hinges of the rudder. Not one trace of the metal existed.

What could be the meaning of this?

A loud call from West brought us to a little strip of beach on the right of our stranded boat.

Three corpses lay upon the stony soil, that of Hearne, that of Martin Holt, and that of one of the Falklands men.

Of the thirteen who had gone with the sealing-master, there remained only these three, who had evidently been dead some days.

What had become of the ten missing men? Had their bodies been carried out to sea?

We searched all along the coast, into the creeks, and between the outlying rocks, but in vain. Nothing was to be found, no traces of a camp, not even the vestiges of a landing.

“Their boat,” said William Guy, “must have been struck by a drifting iceberg. The rest of Hearne’s companions have been drowned, and only these three bodies have come ashore, lifeless.”

“But,” asked the boatswain, “how is the state the boat is in to be explained?”

“And especially,” added West, “the disappearance of all the iron?”

“Indeed,” said I, “it looks as though every bit had been violently torn off.”

Leaving the Paracuta in the charge of two men, we again took our way to the interior, in order to extend our search over a wider expanse.

As we were approaching the huge mound the mist cleared away, and the form stood out with greater distinctness. It was, as I have said, almost that of a sphinx, a dusky-hued sphinx, as though the matter which composed it had been oxidized by the inclemency of the polar climate.

And then a possibility flashed into my mind, an hypothesis which explained these astonishing phenomena.

“Ah!” I exclaimed, “a loadstone! that is it! A magnet with prodigious power of attraction!”

I was understood, and in an instant the final catastrophe, to which Hearne and his companions were victims, was explained with terrible clearness.

The Antarctic Sphinx was simply a colossal magnet. Under the influence of that magnet the iron bands of the Halbrane’s boat had been torn out and projected as though by the action of a catapult. This was the occult force that had irresistibly attracted everything made of iron on the Paracuta. And the boat itself would have shared the fate of the Halbrane’s boat had a single bit of that metal been employed in its construction. Was it, then, the proximity of the magnetic pole that produced such effects?

At first we entertained this idea, but on reflection we rejected it.

At the place where the magnetic meridians cross, the only phenomenon produced is the vertical position of the magnetic needle in two similar points of the terrestrial globe. This phenomenon, already proved by observations made on the spot, must be identical in the Antarctic regions.

Thus, then, there did exist a magnet of prodigious intensity in the zone of attraction which we had entered. Under our eyes one of those surprising effects which had hitherto been classed among fables was actually produced.

The following appeared to me to be the true explanation.

The Trade-winds bring a constant succession of clouds or mists in which immense quantities of electricity not completely exhausted by storms, are stored. Hence there exists a formidable accumulation of electric fluid at the poles, and it flows towards the land in a permanent stream.

From this cause come the northern and southern auroras, whose luminous splendours shine above the horizon, especially during the long polar night, and are visible even in the temperate zones when they attain their maximum of culmination.

These continuous currents at the poles, which bewilder our compasses, must possess an extraordinary influence. And it would suffice that a block of iron should be subjected to their action for it to be changed into a magnet of power proportioned to the intensity of the current, to the number of turns of the electric helix, and to the square root of the diameter of the block of magnetized iron. Thus, then, the bulk of the sphinx which upreared its mystic form upon this outer edge of the southern lands might be calculated by thousands of cubic yards.

Now, in order that the current should circulate around it and make a magnet of it by induction, what was required? Nothing but a metallic lode, whose innumerable windings through the bowels of the soil should be connected subterraneously at the base of the block.

It seemed to me also that the place of this block ought to be in the magnetic axis, as a sort of gigantic calamite, from whence the imponderable fluid whose currents made an inexhaustible accumulator set up at the confines of the world should issue. Our compass could not have enabled us to determine whether the marvel before our eyes really was at the magnetic pole of the southern regions. All I can say is, that its needle staggered about, helpless and useless. And in fact the exact location of the Antarctic Sphinx mattered little in respect of the constitution of that artificial loadstone, and the manner in which the clouds and metallic lode supplied its attractive power.

In this very plausible fashion I was led to explain the phenomenon by instinct. It could not be doubted that we were in the vicinity of a magnet which produced these terrible but strictly natural effects by its attraction.

I communicated my idea to my companions, and they regarded this explanation as conclusive, in presence of the physical facts of which we were the actual witnesses.

“We shall incur no risk by going to the foot of the mound, I suppose,” said Captain Len Guy.

“None,” I replied.

“There--yes--here!”

I could not describe the impression those three words made upon us. Edgar Poe would have said that they were three cries from the depths of the under world.

It was Dirk Peters who had spoken, and his body was stretched out in the direction of the sphinx, as though it had been turned to iron and was attracted by the magnet.

Then he sped swiftly towards the sphinx-like mound, and his companions followed him over rough ground strewn with volcanic remains of all sorts.

The monster grew larger as we neared it, but lost none of its mythological shape. Alone on that vast plain it produced a sense of awe. And--but this could only have been a delusion--we seemed to be drawn towards it by the force of its magnetic attraction.

On arriving at the base of the mound, we found there the various articles on which the magnet had exerted its power; arms, utensils, the grapnel of the Paracuta, all adhering to the sides of the

monster. There also were the iron relics of the Halbrane's boat, all her utensils, arms, and fittings, even to the nails and the iron portions of the rudder.

There was no possibility of regaining possession of any of these things. Even had they not adhered to the loadstone rock at too great a height to be reached, they adhered to it too closely to be detached. Hurliguerly was infuriated by the impossibility of recovering his knife, which he recognized at fifty feet above his head, and cried as he shook his clenched fist at the imperturbable monster,--

"Thief of a sphinx!"

Of course the things which had belonged to the Halbrane's boat and the Paracuta's were the only articles that adorned the mighty sides of the lonely mystic form. Never had any ship reached such a latitude of the Antarctic Sea. Hearne and his accomplices, Captain Len Guy and his companions, were the first who had trodden this point of the southern continent. And any vessel that might have approached this colossal magnet must have incurred certain destruction. Our schooner must have perished, even as its boat had been dashed into a shapeless wreck.

West now reminded us that it was imprudent to prolong our stay upon this Land of the Sphinx--a name to be retained. Time pressed, and a few days' delay would have entailed our wintering at the foot of

the ice-barrier.

The order to return to the beach had just been given, when the voice of the half-breed was again heard, as he cried out:

“There! There! There!”

We followed the sounds to the back of the monster’s right paw, and we found Dirk Peters on his knees, with his hands stretched out before an almost naked corpse, which had been preserved intact by the cold of these regions, and was as rigid as iron. The head was bent, a white beard hung down to the waist, the nails of the feet and hands were like claws.

How had this corpse been fixed to the side of the mound at six feet above the ground?

Across the body, held in place by its cross-belt, we saw the twisted barrel of a musket, half-eaten by rust.

“Pym-my poor Pym!” groaned Dirk Peters.

He tried to rise, that he might approach and kiss the ossified corpse. But his knees bent under him, a strangled sob seemed to rend his throat, with a terrible spasm his faithful heart broke, and the half-breed fell back--dead!



The story was easy to read. After their separation, the boat had carried Arthur Pym through these Antarctic regions! Like us, once he had passed beyond the south pole, he came into the zone of the monster! And there, while his boat was swept along on the northern current, he was seized by the magnetic fluid before he could get rid of the gun which was slung over his shoulder, and hurled against the fatal loadstone Sphinx of the Ice-realm.

Now the faithful half-breed rests under the clay of the Land of the Antarctic Mystery, by the side of his "poor Pym," that hero whose strange adventures found a chronicler no less strange in the great American poet!