

CHAPTER XVIII

WE EXPLORE THE REEF

OCTOBER 31 to November 5. -- Our first proceeding on the morning of the 31st was to make the proposed tour of the reef, which is about a quarter of a mile long. With the aid of our sounding-lines we found that the water was deep, right up to the very rocks, and that no shelving shores prevented us coasting along them. There was not a shadow of doubt as to the rock being of purely volcanic origin, upheaved by some mighty subterranean convulsion. It is formed of blocks of basalt, arranged in perfect order, of which the regular prisms give the whole mass the effect of being one gigantic crystal; and the remarkable transparency of the sea enabled us plainly to observe the curious shafts of the prismatic columns that support the marvelous substructure.

"This is indeed a singular island," said M. Letourneur; "evidently it is of quite recent origin."

"Yes, father," said Andre, "and I should think it has been caused by a phenomenon similar to those which produced the Julia Island, off the coast of Sicily, or the group of the Santorini, in the Grecian Archipelago. One could almost fancy that it had been created expressly for the Chan-

cellor to strand upon."

"It is very certain," I observed, "that some upheaving has lately taken place. This is by no means an unfrequented part of the Atlantic, so that it is not at all likely that it could have escaped the notice of sailors if it had been always in existence; yet it is not marked even in the most modern charts. We must try and explore it thoroughly and give future navigators the benefit of our observations."

"But, perhaps, it will disappear as it came," said Andre.

"You are no doubt aware, Mr. Kazallon, that these volcanic islands sometimes have a very transitory existence. Not impossibly, by the time it gets marked upon the maps it may no longer be here."

"Never mind, my boy," answered his father, "it is better to give warning of a danger that does not exist than overlook one that does. I dare say the sailors will not grumble much, if they don't find a reef where we have marked one."

"No, I dare say not, father," said Andre, "and after all this island is very likely as firm as a continent. However, if it is to disappear, I expect Captain Curtis would be glad to see it take its departure as soon as possible after he has

finished his repairs; it would save him a world of trouble in getting his ship afloat."

"Why, what a fellow you are, Andre!" I said, laughing; "I believe you would like to rule Nature with a magic wand, first of all, you would call up a reef from the depth of the ocean to give the Chancellor time to extinguish her flames, and then you would make it disappear just that the ship might be free again."

Andre smiled; then, in a more serious tone, he expressed his gratitude for the timely help that had been vouchsafed us in our hour of need.

The more we examined the rocks that formed the base of the little island, the more we became convinced that its formation was quite recent. Not a mollusk, not a tuft of seaweed was found clinging to the sides of the rocks; not a germ had the wind carried to its surface, not a bird had taken refuge amid the crags upon its summits. To a lover of natural history, the spot did not yield a single point of interest; the geologist alone would find subject of study in the basaltic mass.

When we reached the southern point of the island I proposed that we should disembark. My companions readily

assented, young Letourneur jocosely observing that if the little island was destined to vanish, it was quite right that it should first be visited by human beings. The boat was accordingly brought alongside, and we set foot upon the reef, and began to ascend the gradual slope that leads to its highest elevation.

The walking was not very rough, and as Andre could get along tolerably well without the assistance of an arm, he led the way, his father and I following close behind. A quarter of an hour sufficed to bring us to the loftiest point in the islet, when we seated ourselves on the basaltic prism that crowned its summit.

Andre took a sketch-book from his pocket, and proceeded to make a drawing of the reef. Scarcely had he completed the outline when his father exclaimed:

"Why, Andre, you have drawn a ham!"

"Something uncommonly like it, I confess," replied Andre. "I think we had better ask Captain Curtis to let us call our island Ham Rock."

"Good," said I; "though sailors will need to keep it at a respectful distance, for they will scarcely find that their

teeth are strong enough to tackle it."

M. Letourneur was quite correct; the outline of the reef as it stood clearly defined against the deep green water resembled nothing so much as a fine York ham, of which the little creek, where the Chancellor had been stranded, corresponded to the hollow place above the knuckle. The tide at this time was low, and the ship now lay heeled over very much to the starboard side, the few points of rock that emerged in the extreme south of the reef plainly marking the narrow passage through which she had been forced before she finally ran aground.

As soon as Andre had finished his sketch we descended by a slope as gradual as that by which we had come up, and made our way toward the west. We had not gone very far when a beautiful grotto, perfect as an architectural structure, arrested our attention. M. Letourneur and Andre, who have visited the Hebrides, pronounced it to be a Fingal's cave in miniature; a Gothic chapel that might form a fit vestibule for the cathedral cave of Staffa. The basaltic rocks had cooled down into the same regular concentric prisms; there was the same dark canopied roof with its interstices filled up with its yellow lutings; the same precision of outline in the prismatic angles, sharp as though chiseled by a sculptor's hand; the same sonorous vibration of the air

across the basaltic rocks, of which the Gaelic poets have feigned that the harps of the Fingal minstrelsy were made. But whereas at Staffa the floor of the cave is always covered with a sheet of water, here the grotto was beyond the reach of all but the highest waves, while the prismatic shafts themselves formed quite a solid pavement.

After remaining nearly an hour in our newly-discovered grotto we returned to the Chancellor, and communicated the result of our explorations to Curtis, who entered the island upon his chart, by the name Andre Letourneur had proposed.

Since its discovery we have not permitted a day to pass without spending some time in our Ham Rock grotto. Curtis has taken an opportunity of visiting it, but he is too preoccupied with other matters to have much interest to spare for the wonders of nature. Falsten, too, came once and examined the character of the rocks, knocking and chipping them about with all the mercilessness of a geologist. Mr. Kear would not trouble himself to leave the ship; and although I asked his wife to join us in one of our excursions she declined, upon the plea that the fatigue, as well as the inconvenience of embarking in the boat, would be more than she could bear.

Miss Herbey, only too thankful to escape even for an hour from her capricious mistress, eagerly accepted M. Letourneur's invitation to pay a visit to the reef, but to her great disappointment Mrs. Kear at first refused point-blank to allow her to leave the ship. I felt intensely annoyed, and resolved to intercede in Miss Herbey's favor; and as I had already rendered that self-indulgent lady sundry services which she though she might probably be glad again to accept, I gained my point, and Miss Herbey has several times been permitted to accompany us across the rocks, where the young girl's delight at her freedom has been a pleasure to behold.

Sometimes we fish along the shore, and then enjoy a luncheon in the grotto, while the basalt columns vibrate like harps to the breeze. This arid reef, little as it is, compared with the cramped limits of the Chancellor's deck is like some vast domain; soon there will be scarcely a stone with which we are not familiar, scarcely a portion of its surface which we have not trodden, and I am sure that when the hour of departure arrives we shall leave it with regret.

In the course of conversation, Andre Letourneur one day happened to say that he believed the island of Staffa belonged to the Macdonald family, who let it for the small sum of L.12 a year.

"I suppose then," said Miss Herbey, "that we should hardly get more than half-a-crown a year for our pet little island."

"I don't think you would get a penny for it. Miss Herbey; but are you thinking of taking a lease?" I said laughing.

"Not at present," she said; then added, with a half-suppressed sigh, "and yet it is a place where I have seemed to know what it is to be really happy."

Andre murmured some expression of assent, and we all felt that there was something touching in the words of the orphaned, friendless girl who had found her long-lost sense of happiness on a lonely rock in the Atlantic.