

CHAPTER XIX

A WHALE IN SIGHT

Melville Bay, though easily navigable, was not free from ice; ice-fields lay as far as the utmost limits of the horizon; a few icebergs appeared here and there, but they were immovable, as if anchored in the midst of the frozen fields. The Forward, with all steam on, followed the wide passes where it was easy to work her. The wind changed frequently from one point of the compass to another. The variability of the wind in the Arctic Seas is a remarkable fact; sometimes a dead calm is followed in a few minutes by a violent tempest, as the Forward found to her cost on the 23rd of June in the midst of the immense bay. The more constant winds blow from off the ice-bank on to the open sea, and are intensely cold. On that day the thermometer fell several degrees; the wind veered round to the south, and violent gusts, sweeping over the ice-fields, brought a thick snow along with them. Hatteras immediately caused the sails that helped the screw to be furled, but not quickly enough to prevent his little foresail being carried away in the twinkling of an eye. Hatteras worked his ship with the greatest composure, and did not leave the deck during the tempest; he was obliged to fly before the weather and to turn westward. The wind raised up enormous waves, in the midst of which blocks of ice balanced themselves; these blocks were of all sizes and shapes, and had been struck off the surrounding ice-fields; the brig was tossed about like a child's plaything, and morsels of the

packs were thrown over her hull; at one instant she was lying perpendicularly along the side of a liquid mountain; her steel prow concentrated the light, and shone like a melting metal bar; at another she was down an abyss, plunging her head into whirlwinds of snow, whilst her screws, out of the water, turned in space with a sinister noise, striking the air with their paddles. Rain mixed with the snow and fell in torrents.

The doctor could not miss such an occasion of getting wet to the skin; he remained on deck, a prey to that emotional admiration which a scientific man must necessarily feel during such a spectacle. His nearest neighbour could not have heard him speak, so he said nothing and watched; but whilst watching he was witness to an odd phenomenon, peculiar to hyperborean regions. The tempest was confined to a restricted area, and only extended for about three or four miles; the wind that passes over ice-fields loses much of its strength and cannot carry its violence far out; the doctor perceived from time to time, through an opening in the tempest, a calm sky and a quiet sea beyond some ice-fields. The Forward would therefore only have to take advantage of some channels left by the ice to find a peaceful navigation again, but she ran the risk of being thrown on to one of the moving banks which followed the movement of the swell. However, in a few hours Hatteras succeeded in getting his ship into a calm sea, whilst the violence of the hurricane spent itself at a few cables' length from the Forward. Melville Bay no longer presented the same aspect; under the influence of the winds and the waves a great number of icebergs, detached from the coast, floated northward, running

against one another in every direction. There were several hundreds of them, but the bay is very wide, and the brig easily avoided them. The spectacle of these floating masses was magnificent; they seemed to be having a grand race for it on the open sea. The doctor was getting quite excited with watching them, when the harpooner, Simpson, came up and made him look at the changing tints in the sea; they varied from a deep blue to olive green; long stripes stretched north and south in such decided lines that the eye could follow each shade out of sight. Sometimes a transparent sheet of water would follow a perfectly opaque sheet.

"Well, Mr. Clawbonny, what do you think of that?" said Simpson.

"I am of the same opinion as the whaler Scoresby on the nature of the different coloured waters; blue water has no animalculae, and green water is full of them. Scoresby has made several experiments on this subject, and I think he is right."

"Well, sir, I know something else about the colours in the sea, and if I were a whaler I should be precious glad to see them."

"But I don't see any whales," answered the doctor.

"You won't be long before you do, though, I can tell you. A whaler is lucky when he meets with those green stripes under this latitude."

"Why?" asked the doctor, who always liked to get information from

anybody who understood what they were talking about.

"Because whales are always found in great quantities in green water."

"What's the reason of that?"

"Because they find plenty of food in them."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I've seen it a hundred times, at least, in Baffin Sea; why shouldn't it be the same in Melville Bay? Besides, look there, Mr. Clawbonny," added Simpson, leaning over the barricading.

"Why any one would think it was the wake of a ship!"

"It is an oily substance that the whale leaves behind. The animal can't be far off!"

The atmosphere was impregnated with a strong oily odour, and the doctor attentively watched the surface of the water. The prediction of the harpooner was soon accomplished. Foker called out from the masthead--

"A whale alee!"

All looks turned to the direction indicated. A small spout was

perceived coming up out of the sea about a mile from the brig.

"There she spouts!" cried Simpson, who knew what that meant.

"She has disappeared!" answered the doctor.

"Oh, we could find her again easily enough if necessary!" said Simpson, with an accent of regret. To his great astonishment, and although no one dared ask for it, Hatteras gave orders to man the whaler. Johnson went aft to the stern, while Simpson, harpoon in hand, stood in the bow. They could not prevent the doctor joining the expedition. The sea was pretty calm. The whaler soon got off, and in ten minutes was a mile from the brig. The whale had taken in another provision of air, and had plunged again; but she soon returned to the surface and spouted out that mixture of gas and mucus that escapes from her air-holes.

"There! There!" said Simpson, pointing to a spot about eight hundred yards from the boat. It was soon alongside the animal, and as they had seen her from the brig too, she came nearer, keeping little steam on. The enormous cetacean disappeared and reappeared as the waves rose and fell, showing its black back like a rock in open sea. Whales do not swim quickly unless they are pursued, and this one only rocked itself in the waves. The boat silently approached along the green water; its opacity prevented the animal seeing the enemy. It is always an agitating spectacle when a fragile boat attacks one of these monsters; this one was about 130 feet long, and it is not rare, between

the 72nd and the 80th degree, to meet with whales more than 180 feet long. Ancient writers have described animals more than 700 feet long, but they drew upon their imagination for their facts. The boat soon neared the whale; on a sign from Simpson the men rested on their oars, and brandishing his harpoon, the experienced sailor threw it with all his strength; it went deep into the thick covering of fat. The wounded whale struck the sea with its tail and plunged. The four oars were immediately raised perpendicularly; the cord fastened to the harpoon, and attached to the bow, rolled rapidly out and dragged the boat along, steered cleverly by Johnson.

The whale got away from the brig and made for the moving icebergs; she kept on for more than half-an-hour; they were obliged to wet the cord fastened to the harpoon to prevent it catching fire by rubbing against the boat. When the whale seemed to be going along a little more slowly, the cord was pulled in little by little and rolled up; the whale soon reappeared on the surface of the sea, which she beat with her formidable tail: veritable waterspouts fell in a violent rain on to the boat. It was getting nearer. Simpson had seized a long lance, and was preparing to give close battle to the animal, when all at once the whale glided into a pass between two mountainous icebergs. The pursuit then became really dangerous.

"The devil!" said Johnson.

"Go ahead," cried Simpson; "we've got her!"

"But we can't follow her into the icebergs!" said Johnson, steering steadily.

"Yes we can!" cried Simpson.

"No, no!" cried some of the sailors.

"Yes, yes!" said others.

During the discussion the whale had got between two floating mountains which the swell was bringing close together. The boat was being dragged into this dangerous part when Johnson rushed to the fore, an axe in his hand, and cut the cord. He was just in time; the two mountains came together with a tremendous crash, crushing the unfortunate animal.

"The whale's lost!" cried Simpson.

"But we are saved!" answered Johnson.

"Well," said the doctor, who had not moved, "that was worth seeing!"

The crushing force of these ice-mountains is enormous. The whale was victim to an accident that often happens in these seas. Scoresby relates that in the course of a single summer thirty whales perished in the same way in Baffin's Sea; he saw a three-master flattened in a minute between two immense walls of ice. Other vessels were split

through, as if with a lance, by pointed icicles a hundred feet long, meeting through the planks. A few minutes afterwards the boat hailed the brig, and was soon in its accustomed place on deck.

"It is a lesson for those who are imprudent enough to adventure into the channels amongst the ice!" said Shandon in a loud voice.