

## CHAPTER XIV.

### ON THE ROCKS.

The "Alaska" had been thrown upon the rocks with such violence that she remained perfectly motionless, and the situation did not appear to be immediately dangerous for her crew and passengers. The waves, encountering this unusual obstacle, beat over the deck, and covered everything with their spray; but the sea was not rough enough to make this state of affairs dangerous. If the weather did not change, day would break without any further disaster. Erik saw this at a glance. He had naturally taken command of the vessel, as he was the first officer. Having given orders to close the port-holes and scuttles carefully, and to throw tarred cloths over all openings, in case the sea should become rougher, he descended to the bottom of the hold, in company with the master carpenter. There he saw with great satisfaction that no water had entered. The exterior covering of the "Alaska" had protected her, and the precaution which they had taken against polar icebergs had proved very efficacious against the rocky coast; in fact the engine had stopped at once, being disarranged by the frightful shock, but it had produced no explosion, and they had, therefore, no vital damage to deplore. Erik resolved to wait for daybreak, and then disembark his passengers if it should prove necessary.

He, therefore, contented himself with firing a cannon to ask aid from

the inhabitants of the Island of Sein, and with dispatching his small steam launch to L'Orient.

He said to himself, that at no place would they find the means of repairing their damages so promptly and well as at this great maritime arsenal of Western France.

Thus in this glooming hour when every one on board believed that their chances were irretrievably lost, he already began to feel hopeful, or rather he was one of those courageous souls who know no discouragement and never confess themselves vanquished.

"If we can only get the 'Alaska' off these rocks, everything may yet go well with us," he said.

But he was careful not to express this hope to the others, who would doubtless have considered it chimerical. He only told them when he returned from his visit to the hold that they were in no danger at present, and that there was plenty of time for them to receive aid.

Then he ordered a distribution of tea and rum to all the crew.

This sufficed to put these children of a larger growth in a good humor, and their little steam-boat was speedily launched.

Some rockets from the light-house of Sein soon announced that aid was

coming to the assistance of the shipwrecked vessel. Red lights now became visible, and voices hailed them. They answered that they had been shipwrecked upon the rocks surrounding Sein.

It was a full hour before the boat could reach them. The breakers were so strong that the attempt was perilous. But at length six men succeeded in seizing a small cable, and hoisting themselves on board of the "Alaska."

They were six rude fishermen of Sein--strong, intrepid fellows--and it was not the first time they had gone to the assistance of shipwrecked mariners. They fully approved of the idea of sending to L'Orient for assistance, for their little port could not offer the necessary resources. It was agreed that two of them should depart in the little steamer with Mr. Hersebom and Otto, as soon as the moon arose above the horizon. While they were waiting for it to do so, they gave some account of the place where they were shipwrecked.

The rocks extend in a westerly direction for nine miles beyond the Island of Sein. They are divided into two parts, which are called the Pont du Sein and the Basse Froid.

The Pont du Sein is about four miles long, and a mile and a half wide. It is composed of a succession of high rocks, which form a chain above the waters. The Basse Froid extends beyond the Pont du Sein for five miles, and is two thirds of a mile wide; it consist of a great number of

rocks of about an equal height, which can be seen at a great distance. The principal rocks are the Cornengen, Schomeur, Cornoc-ar-Goulet-Bas-ven, Madiou and Ar-men. These are the least dangerous, because they can be seen. The number and irregularity of their points under the water are not fully known, for the sea beats over them with extreme violence, the force of the current is very strong, and they are the scene of many shipwrecks. Light-houses have been erected on the Island of Sein and at Bec-du-Raze, so that these rocks can be seen and avoided by vessels coming from the west, but they are very dangerous for vessels coming from the south. Unfortunately there is no rock or small island at the extreme end where a signal could be placed, and the turbulence of the waters will not permit a floating one to be placed there. Therefore it was resolved to build a light-house on the rock Ar-men, which is three miles from the extreme point. This work is so extremely difficult that although it was commenced in 1867, twelve years later, in 1879, it was only half built. They say that during the latter year it was only possible to work for eight hours, although the workmen were always ready to seize a favorable moment. The light-house therefore was not yet completed at the time when the "Alaska" met with her disaster. But this did not suffice to explain how, after leaving Brest, they had been run into such peril. Erik promised himself that he would solve this difficulty as soon as the little steam-boat had been dispatched for aid. This departure was easily effected, the moon having soon made its appearance. The young captain then appointed the night watch, and sent the rest of the crew to bed, then he descended to the captain's room.

Mr. Bredejord, Mr. Malarius, and the doctor were keeping watch beside the corpse. They arose as soon as they saw Erik.

"My poor child, what is the cause of this sad state of things? How did it happen?" asked the doctor.

"It is inexplicable," answered the young man, looking at the chart which lay open upon the table. "I felt instinctively that we were out of our route, and I said so; but in my estimation we are at least three miles from the light-house; and all the seamen agree with me," he added, designating a spot with his finger on the map--and you see no danger is indicated--no sand-banks or rocks. This coloring indicates deep water. It is inconceivable how the mistake can have occurred. We can not suppose that a chart of the British Admiralty can be at fault, for it is a region well known to mariners, as it has been minutely explored for centuries!"

"Is it not possible to make a mistake as to our position? Could not one light be mistaken for another?" asked Mr. Bredejord.

"That is scarcely possible in a voyage as short as ours has been since we left Brest," said Erik. "Remember that we have not lost sight of land for a moment, and that we have been passing from one point to another. We can only suppose that one of the lights indicated on the chart has not been lighted or that some supplementary light has been added--in a word, we must imagine what is highly improbable. Our course

has been so regular, the soundings have been so carefully made, that it seems impossible that we could have mistaken our route, and yet the fact remains that we are on the rocks, when we ought to have been some distance out to sea."

"But how is it going to end? That is what I want to know," cried the doctor.

"We shall soon see," answered Erik, "if the maritime authorities show any eagerness to come to our assistance. For the present the best thing that every one can do is to go quietly to bed, since we are as secure as if we were at anchor in some quiet bay."

The young commander did not add that it was his intention to keep watch while his friends slept.

Nevertheless this is what he did for the remainder of the night, sometimes promenading the deck and encouraging the men, sometimes descending for a few minutes to the saloon.

As day commenced to dawn he had the satisfaction of perceiving that the waves visibly receded, and if they continued to do so the "Alaska" would be left almost on dry rocks. This gave him hope of being able speedily to determine the extent of the damage which the vessel had received, and, in fact, toward seven o'clock they were able to proceed with this examination.

They found that three points of the rocks had pierced the "Alaska," and held her firmly on her rocky bed. The direction in which she lay, slightly inclined to the north, which was contrary to her course, showed that the commands given by Erik to back the vessel had saved her, and also rendered the shock, when she struck, less severe. The engine had been reversed some seconds before she touched, and she had been carried on the reef by the remainder of her previous speed, and by the force of the current. Doubtless but for this she would have gone to pieces. Besides, the waves having continued to break against her all night in the same direction, had helped to keep her in her place instead of fixing her more firmly on the rocks, which would have happened if the wind had changed. So, after all, there was a favorable view to take of the disaster. The question now was how to get the vessel off before the wind should change, and reverse these favorable conditions.

Erik resolved not to lose a moment. Immediately after breakfast he set all his men to work. He hoped that when the tow-boat should arrive, which he had sent for from L'Orient, it might be possible at high tide to disengage the "Alaska."

We can therefore imagine that the young captain waited impatiently for the first trace of smoke upon the horizon.

All turned out as he desired. The water remained calm and peaceful. Toward noon the boat arrived.

Erik, with his staff, received the mariners with due honors.

"But explain to me," said the captain of the tow-boat, "how you came to cast your vessel on these rocks after leaving Brest?"

"This chart will explain it," said Erik. "It does not point out any such danger."

The French officer examined the chart with curiosity at first, and then he looked stupefied.

"In fact the Basse-Froide is not marked down, nor the point of Sein," he cried. "What unparalleled negligence. Why, even the position of the light-house is not correctly marked. I am more and more surprised. This is a chart of the British Admiralty. I should say that some one has taken pleasure in making it as deceitful and perfidious as possible. Navigators of olden times frequently played such tricks upon their rivals. I should never have believed such traditions would be imitated in England."

"Are you sure that this is an English chart?" asked Mr. Bredejord. "For myself I suspect that the chart is the work of a rascal, and has been placed with criminal intentions among the charts of the 'Alaska.'"

"By Tudor Brown!" cried Erik, impetuously. "That evening when we dined

with the authorities at Brest he entered the captain's room upon the pretense of examining the charts. Oh, the infamous wretch! This then is the reason that he did not come on board again!"

"It appears to be only too evident that he is the culprit," said Dr. Schwaryencrona. "But such a dastardly action betrays such an abyss of iniquity. What motive could he have for committing such a crime?"

"What was his motive in coming to Stockholm, expressly to tell you that Patrick O'Donoghane was dead?" answered Mr. Bredejord. "For what purpose did he subscribe twenty thousand kroners for the voyage of the 'Alaska,' when it was doubtful if she would ever make the journey? Why did he embark with us to leave us at Brest? I think we must be blind indeed if we do not see in these facts a chain of evidence as logical as it is frightful. What interest has Tudor Brown in all this? I do not know. But this interest must be very strong, very powerful, to induce him to have recourse to such means to prevent our journey; for I am convinced now that it was he who caused the accident which detained us at Brest, and it was he who led us upon these rocks, where he expected we would all lose our lives."

"It seems difficult, however, to believe that he could have foreseen the route that Captain Marsilas would choose!" objected Mr. Malarias. "Why did he not indicate this route by altering the chart? After delaying us for three days, he felt certain that the captain would take the shortest way. The latter, believing that the waters were safe around Sein, was

thrown upon the rocks."

"It is true," said Erik; "but the proof that the result of his maneuvers was uncertain lies in the fact that I insisted, before Captain Marsilas, that we ought still to keep to the west."

"But who knows whether he has not prepared other charts to lead us astray, in case this one failed to do so?" said Mr. Bredejord.

"That is easily determined," answered Erik, who went and brought all the charts and maps that were in the case.

The first one which they opened was that of Corunna, and at a glance the French officer pointed out two or three grave errors. The second was that of Cape Vincent. It was the same.

The third was that of Gibraltar. Here the errors were apparent to every eye. A more thorough examination would have been superfluous, as it was impossible to doubt any longer. If the "Alaska" had not been shipwrecked on the Island of Sein, this fate would surely have awaited her before she could have reached Malta.

A careful examination of the charts revealed the means which had been employed to effect these changes. They were undoubtedly English charts, but they had been partly effaced by some chemical process, and then retouched so as to indicate false routes among the true ones. They had

been recolored so skillfully that only a very slight difference in the tints could be perceived after the most careful scrutiny.

But there was one circumstance which betrayed the criminal intentions with which they had been placed on board the "Alaska." All the charts belonging to the vessel bore the seal of the secretary of the Swedish navy. The forger had foreseen that they would not be examined too minutely, and had hoped that by following them they would all come to a watery grave.

These successive discoveries had produced consternation in the breasts of all who were present.

Erik was the first to break the silence which had succeeded the conversation.

"Poor Captain Marsilas!" he said, in a trembling voice, "he has suffered for us all. But since we have escaped almost by a miracle the fate which was prepared for us, let us run no more risks. The tide is rising, and it may be possible to draw the 'Alaska' off the rocks. If you are willing, gentlemen, we will go and commence operations without delay."

He spoke with simple authority and a modest dignity, with which the feeling of responsibility had already inspired him.

To see a young man of his age invested with the command of a ship under

such circumstances, and for such a hazardous expedition, was certainly an unforeseen occurrence. But he felt that he was equal to the performance of all his duties. He knew that he could rely upon himself and upon his crew, and these thoughts transfigured him. The youth of yesterday was a man to-day. The spirit of a hero burned in his eyes. He rose superior to the calamity which had befallen them. His ability impressed all who approached him. Even the doctor and Mr. Bredejord submitted to him like the others.

The operation of preparing for their morning's work proved easier than they had hoped.

Lifted by the rising waters, the vessel only required a slight force to take her off the rocks. A few hours of hard work were sufficient to accomplish this, and the "Alaska" was once more afloat, strained indeed, and weighed down by the water which made its way into some of her compartments, and with her engine silent, but manageable.

All the crew, who were assembled on the deck, watched anxiously the result of these efforts, and a loud hurrah greeted the deliverance of the "Alaska."

The Frenchmen replied to this joyful cry with similar acclamations. It was now three o'clock in the afternoon. Above the horizon the beautiful February sun inundated the calm sparkling sea with floods of sunshine, which fell also on the rocks of the Basse-Froide, as if to efface all

remembrance of the drama which had been enacted there the previous night.

That same evening the "Alaska" had been safely towed into the harbor of L'Orient.

The next day the French maritime authorities, with the utmost courtesy, authorized the necessary repairs to be made without delay. The damage which the vessel had sustained was not serious, but that of the machinery was more complicated, although not irremediable. Necessarily it would take some time to render her seaworthy, but nowhere in the world, as Erik had foreseen, could this be accomplished so speedily as at this port, which possessed such immense resources for naval construction. The house of Gainard, Norris & Co., undertook to make the repairs in three weeks. It was now the 23d of February; on the 16th of March they would be able to resume their voyage, and this time with good charts.

That would leave three months and a half for them to reach Behring's Strait by the end of June. It was not impossible to do this, although the time was very limited. Erik would not hear of abandoning the enterprise. He feared only one thing, and that was being compelled to do so. Therefore he refused to send to Stockholm a report of the shipwreck, and he would not make a formal complaint against the presumed author of the attempt to shipwreck them for fear of being delayed by legal proceedings, yet he had his fears that this might encourage Tudor Brown

to throw some new obstacle in the way of the "Alaska." This is what Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord asked each other as they were playing at whist with Mr. Malarius, in the little sitting-room of the hotel to which they had gone after arriving at L'Orient.

As for Mr. Bredejord, he had no doubts about the matter.

A rascal like Tudor Brown, if he knew of the failure of his scheme--and how could any one doubt that he was acquainted with this fact?--would not hesitate to renew the attempt.

To believe that they would ever succeed in reaching Behring's Strait was therefore more than self-delusion--it was foolishness. Mr. Bredejord did not know what steps Tudor Brown would take to prevent this, but he felt certain that he would find some means of doing so. Dr. Schwaryencrona was inclined to the same opinion, and even Mr. Malarius could not think of anything very reassuring to say. The games of whist were therefore not very lively, and the long strolls that the three friends took were not very gay.

Their principal occupation was to watch the erection of the mausoleum which they were building for poor Captain Marsilas, whose funeral obsequies had been attended by the entire population of L'Orient.

The sight of this funeral monument was not calculated to raise the spirits of the survivors of the "Alaska."

But when they joined Erik again their hopes revived. His resolution was unshakable, his activity untiring, he was so bent upon overcoming all obstacles, so certain of success, that it was impossible for them to express, or even to preserve, less heroic sentiments.

They had a new proof of the malignity of Tudor Brown, and that he still was pursuing them.

On the 14th of March, Erik saw that the work upon the machinery was almost finished. They only had to adjust the pumps, and that was to be done the next day.

But in the night, between the 14th and 15th, the body of the pump disappeared from the workshop of the Messrs. Gainard, Norris & Co.

It was impossible to find it.

How had it been taken away--who had done it?

After investigation they were unable to discover.

However, it would take ten days more to replace it, and that would make it the 25th of March before the "Alaska" could leave L'Orient.

It was a singular fact, but this incident affected Erik's spirits more

than the shipwreck had done. He saw in it a sure sign of a persistent desire to prevent the voyage of the "Alaska."

But these efforts only redoubled his ardor, and he determined that nothing should be wanting on his part to bring the expedition to a successful termination.

These ten days of delay were almost exclusively occupied by him in considering the question in all its aspects. The more he studied, the more he became convinced that he could not reach Behring's Straits in three months, for they had suffered a detention of forty days since they had left Stockholm, and to persist would only be to court failure and perhaps some irremediable disaster.

This conclusion did not stop him, but it only led him to think that some modification of their original plans was indispensable.

He took care, however, to say nothing, rightly judging that secrecy was the first condition of victory. He contented himself with watching more closely than ever the work of repairing the vessel.

But his companions thought that they perceived that he was less eager to set out.

They therefore concluded that he saw that the enterprise was impracticable, which they had also believed for some time.

But they were mistaken.

On the 25th of March, at midday, the repairs of the "Alaska" were completed, and she was once more afloat in the harbor of L'Orient.