

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHORTEST ROUTE.

Night was closing in when Erik summoned his three friends and counselors to hold a serious consultation.

"I have reflected a great deal," he said to them, "upon the circumstances which have made our voyage memorable since we left Stockholm. I have been forced to arrive at one conclusion, which is that we must expect to meet with obstacles or accidents during our voyage. Perhaps they may befall us at Gibraltar or at Malta. If we are not destroyed, it appears to me certain that we shall be delayed. In that case we can not reach Behring's Straits during the summer, which is the only season when it is practicable to navigate the polar sea!"

"That is also the conclusion which I formed some time ago," declared Mr. Bredejord: "but I kept it to myself, as I did not wish to dampen your hopes, my dear boy. But I am sure that we must give up the idea of reaching Behring's Strait in three months!"

"That is also my opinion," said the doctor.

Mr. Malarius on his part indicated by a motion of his head that he agreed with them all.

"Well!" said Erik, "having settled that point, what line of conduct now remains for us to adopt?"

"There is one right course which it is our duty to take," answered Mr. Bredejord, "it is to renounce an enterprise which we see clearly is impracticable and return to Stockholm. You understand this fact, my child, and I congratulate you upon being able to look the situation calmly in the face!"

"You pay me a compliment which I can not accept," said Erik smiling, "for I do not merit it. No--I have no thoughts of abandoning the expedition, for I am far from regarding it as impracticable. I only think that it is best for us all to baffle the machinations of that scoundrel who is lying in wait for us, and the first thing to do is to change our route."

"Such a change would only complicate our difficulties," replied the doctor, "since we have adopted the shortest one. If it would be difficult to reach Behring's Straits by the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, it would be impossible by the Cape of Good Hope, or Cape Horn, for either of these routes would necessarily take five or six months."

"There is another way which would shorten our voyage, instead of lengthening it, and where we would be sure not to meet Tudor Brown," said Erik.

"Another way?" answered Dr. Schwaryencrona; "upon my word I do not know of any unless you are thinking of the way of Panama. But it is not yet practicable for vessels, and it will not be yet for several years."

"I am not thinking of Panama, nor of Cape Horn, nor of the Cape of Good Hope," answered the young captain of the "Alaska." "The route I propose is the only one by which we can reach Behring's Strait in three months: it is to go by way of the Arctic Ocean, the north-west passage."

Then seeing that his friends were stupefied by this unexpected announcement, Erik proceeded to develop his plans.

"The north-west passage now is no longer what it was formerly, frightful to navigators--it is intermittent, since it is only open for eight or ten weeks every year, but it is now well known, marked out upon excellent charts, and frequented by hundreds of whaling-vessels. It is rarely taken by any vessel going from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, I must admit. Most of them who enter it from either side only traverse it partially. It might even happen, if circumstances were not favorable, that we might find the passage closed, or that it might not be open at the precise time when we desired to enter it. It is a risk that one must take. But I think there are many reasons to make us hopeful of success if we take this route, whilst as far as I can see there is none, if we take any of the others. This being the state of affairs, I think it is our duty--a duty which we owe to those who have fitted out the

expedition--to take the shortest way of reaching Behring's Strait. An ordinary vessel equipped for navigating tropical waters might hesitate before deciding upon such a course, but with a vessel like the 'Alaska' fitted out especially for polar navigation, we need not hesitate. For my part I declare that I will not return to Stockholm before having attempted to find Nordenskiöld."

Erik's reasoning was so sound that nobody tried to contradict it.

What objections could the doctor, Mr. Bredejord, and Mr. Malarius raise?

They saw the difficulties which beset the new plan. But it was possible that these difficulties might not prove insurmountable, whilst, if they pursued any other course, they must abandon all hopes of success. Besides, they did not hesitate to agree with Erik that it would be more glorious, in any case, to make the attempt, than to return to Stockholm and acknowledge themselves conquered.

"I see but one serious objection, for my part," said Dr. Schwaryencrona, after he had remained for a few moments lost in reflection. "It is the difficulty of procuring coal in the arctic regions. For without coal, adieu to the possibility of making the north-west passage, and of profiting by the time, often very short, during which it is practicable."

"I have foreseen this difficulty, which is in fact the only one,"

answered Erik, "and I do not think it is insurmountable. In place of going to Malta or Gibraltar, where we might doubtless expect new machinations on the part of Tudor Brown, I propose that we go to London; from there I can send, by transatlantic cable, a dispatch to a house in Montreal, to send without delay a boat loaded with coal to wait for us in Baffin's Bay, and to a house in San Francisco to send to Behring's Strait. We have the necessary funds at our disposal, and, besides, we will not require as much as we would have done if we had gone by the way of Asia, for our new route is a much shorter one. It is useless for us to reach Baffin's Bay before the end of May, and we can not hope to reach Behring's Strait before the end of June. Our correspondents in Montreal and San Francisco will therefore have plenty of time to execute our orders, which will be covered by funds deposited with bankers in London. This accomplished, we shall only have to find out whether the north-west passage is practicable, and that evidently depends upon ourselves. But, if we find the passage closed, at least we shall have the consolation of knowing that we have neglected nothing that could have insured our success."

"It is evident!" said Mr. Malarius, "that your arguments are unanswerable!"

"Gently, gently," said Mr. Bredejord. "Do not let us go too fast. I have another objection. Do you think, my dear Erik, that the 'Alaska' can pass unnoticed through these waters? No, it is not possible. The newspapers would mention our arrival. The telegraph companies would make

it known. Tudor Brown would know it. He would know that we had changed our plans. What would prevent him from altering his? Do you think, for example, that it would be very difficult to prevent our boat with coals from reaching us?--and without it we could do nothing!"

"That is true," answered Erik, "and it proves that we must think of everything. We must not go to London. We must put into Lisbon as if we were en route to Gibraltar and Suez. Then one of us must go incognito to Madrid, and without explaining why, or for whom it is intended, must open telegraphic communications with Montreal and San Francisco, to order the supply of coal. The crews of these boats must not know for whom the coal is destined, but remain at designated points at the disposition of a captain who will carry an order to them previously agreed upon!"

"A perfect arrangement. It will be almost impossible for Tudor Brown to track us."

"You mean to track me, for I hope that you do not think of accompanying me to these arctic regions," said Erik.

"Indeed that is my intention!" answered the doctor. "It shall not be said that that rascal, Tudor Brown, made me turn back!"

"Nor me either," cried Mr. Bredejord and Mr. Malarius together.

The young captain tried to combat this resolution, and explained to his friends the dangers and monotony of the voyage which they proposed to take with him. But he could not alter their decision. The perils which they had already encountered, made them feel it a duty to keep together; for the only way of rendering such a voyage acceptable to them all was not to separate. Every precaution had been taken to protect the persons on board the "Alaska" from suffering unduly from cold; and neither Swedes nor Norwegians fear frost.

Erik was obliged to yield to their wishes, only stipulating that their change of route should not be made known to the crew of the vessel.

The first part of their voyage was quickly accomplished.

On the 2d of April the "Alaska" reached Lisbon. Before the newspapers had given notice of their arrival, Mr. Bredejord had gone to Madrid, and by means of a banking-house opened communications with two large firms, one in Montreal and one in San Francisco.

He had arranged to have two boat-loads of coal sent to two designated points, and had given the sign by which Erik was to make himself known.

This sign was the words found upon him when he was discovered floating, tied to the buoy of the "Cynthia," "Semper idem."

Finally these arrangements having all been happily concluded, on the 9th

of April Mr. Bredejord returned to Lisbon, and the "Alaska" resumed her voyage.

On the twenty-fifth of the same month, having crossed the Atlantic and reached Montreal, where they took in coal, and Erik was assured that his orders had been punctually fulfilled, they left the waters of the St. Lawrence and Straits of Belle Isle, which separate Labrador from Newfoundland. On the 10th of May they reached the coast of Greenland and found the vessel with their coal, it having arrived before them.

Erik knew very well that at this early date it would be useless to attempt to force his way through the Arctic Ocean, which was still firmly frozen over the largest part of his route. But he counted upon obtaining on these shores, which were much frequented by whaling-vessels, precise information as to the best charts, and he was not mistaken. He was also able to buy, although at a high price, a dozen dogs, who with Kaas could draw their sledges if necessary.

Among the Danish stations on the coast of Greenland, he found Godhaven, which is only a poor village, and is used as a depot by dealers in oil and the furs of the country. At this time of the year the cold is not more severe than at Stockholm or Noroe. But Erik and his friends beheld with surprise the great difference between the two countries, both situated at the same distance from the pole. Godhaven is in precisely the same latitude as Bergen. But whilst the southern port of Norway is in April covered with green forests and fruit trees, and even cultivated

vines trained upon trellises above green meadows, Greenland is still in May covered with ice and snow, without a tree to enliven the monotony. The shape of the Norwegian coast, deeply indented by forests and sheltered by chains of islands, which contribute almost as much as the warmth of the Gulf Stream to raise the temperature of the country. Greenland, on the contrary, has a low regular coast and receives the full shock of the cold blasts from the pole, consequently she is enveloped almost to the middle of the island by fields of ice several feet in thickness.

They spent fifteen days in the harbor and then the "Alaska" mounted Davis' Straits, and keeping along the coast of Greenland, gained the polar sea.

On the 28th of May for the first time they encountered floating ice in 70 15' of north latitude, with a temperature two degrees below zero. These first icebergs, it is true, were in a crumbling condition, rapidly breaking up into small fragments. But soon they became more dense, and frequently they had to break their way through them. Navigation, although difficult, was not as yet dangerous. By a thousand signs they perceived, however, that they were in a new world. All objects at a little distance appeared to be colorless, and almost without form; the eye could find no place to repose in this perpetually changing horizon, which every minute assumed a new aspect.

"Who can describe," says an eye-witness, "these melancholy surroundings,

the roaring of the waves beating beneath the floating ice, the singular noise made by the snow as it falls suddenly into the abyss of waters? Who can imagine the beauty of the cascades which gush out on all sides, the sea of foam produced by their fall, the fright of the sea-birds who, having fallen asleep on a pyramid of ice, suddenly find their resting-place overturned and themselves obliged to fly to some other spot? And in the morning, when the sun bursts through the fog, at first only a little of the blue sky is visible, but it gradually widens, until the view is only limited by the horizon."

These spectacles, presented by the polar sea, Erik and his friends were able to contemplate at their leisure as they left the coast of Greenland, to which they had kept close until they had reached Uppernavik. Then they sailed westward across Baffin's Bay. Here navigation became more difficult, for this sea is the ordinary course of the polar icebergs which are drawn in by the innumerable currents which traverse it. Sometimes they found their course checked by insurmountable barriers of ice, which it was impossible to break, and therefore they were compelled to turn aside. The "Alaska" was obliged continually to break her way through immense fields of ice. Sometimes a tempest of snow assailed them which covered the deck and the masts with a thick coat. Sometimes they were assailed by ice dashed over them by the wind, which threatened to sink the vessel by its weight. Sometimes they found themselves in a sort of lake, surrounded on all sides by fields of ice apparently firm and impassable, and from which they had great difficulty to extricate themselves and gain the open sea. Then they had to exercise

great vigilance to escape some enormous iceberg sailing down from the north with incredible swiftness, a frightful mass, which could have crushed the "Alaska" like a walnut. But a greater danger still was the submarine ice, which could injure her and act like a battering-ram.

The "Alaska" lost her two large boats. One must experience the dangers which polar navigation presents at every moment to have any just appreciation of them.

After one or two weeks of such experience the most intrepid crew become exhausted, and repose is necessary for them.

Sometimes, although surrounded by all these dangers, they made rapid progress; at others they made scarcely any; but at length, on the 11th of June, they came in sight of land again, and cast anchor at the entrance to Lancaster Sound.

Erik had expected to be obliged to wait some days before being able to enter the sound; but, to his surprise and joy, he found it open, at least at the entrance. He entered resolutely, but only to find the next day his passage impeded by ice, which held them prisoners for three days; but, thanks to the violent currents which sweep through this Arctic canal, he at last was able to free his vessel and continue his route as the whalers of Godhaven had told him he would be able to do.

On the seventeenth he arrived at Barrow's Straits, and made all the

speed he could; but on the nineteenth, as he was about to enter Melville Sound, he was again blocked in by the ice.

At first he patiently accepted the situation, waiting for it to break up; but day succeeded to day and still this did not happen.

There were, however, many sources of amusement open to the voyagers. They were near the coast and supplied with everything that could render their life comfortable in that latitude. They could take sleigh-rides and see in the distance the whales enjoying their diversions. The summer solstice was approaching. Since the fifteenth the occupants of the "Alaska" had beheld a new and astonishing spectacle, even for Norwegians and the natives of southern Sweden; it was the sun at midnight touching the horizon without disappearing and then mounting again in the sky. In these high latitudes and desolate coasts the star of day describes in twenty-four hours a complete circle in space. The light, it is true, is pale and languishing, objects lose their perfect shape, and all nature has a shadowy appearance. One realizes profoundly how far he is removed from the world, and how near he is to the pole. The cold, however, was not extreme. The temperature did not fall more than four or five degrees below zero, and the air was sometimes so mild that they could hardly believe that they were in the center of the arctic zone.

But those novel surrounding were not sufficient to satisfy Erik, or make him lose sight of the supreme object which had brought them there. He had not come to herbalize like Mr. Malarius, who returned every evening

more and more delighted with his explorations, both of the country and of its unknown plants, which he added to his collection; nor to enjoy with Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord the novelty of the sights which nature offered to them in these polar regions. He wanted to find Nordenskiold and Patrick O'Donoghane--to fulfill a sacred duty while he discovered, perhaps, the secret of his birth. This was why he sought untiringly to break the circle of ice which hemmed them in. He made excursions with his sleigh and on his snow-shoes, reconnoitered in every direction for ten days, but it was all in vain. At the west, as well as the north and east, the banks of ice remained firm.

It was the 20th of June, and they were still far from the Siberian Sea.

Must he confess himself vanquished? Erik could not make up his mind to do this. Repeated soundings had revealed that under the ice there was a swift current running toward Franklin's Strait, that is to say toward the south; he told himself that some effort might suffice to break up the ice, and he resolved to attempt it.

For the length of seven marine miles he had hollowed in the ice a series of chambers, and in each of them was placed a kilogramme of dynamite. These were connected by a copper wire inclosed in gutta percha.

On the 30th of June, at eight o'clock in the morning, Erik from the deck of the "Alaska" pressed the button of the electrical machine, and a formidable explosion took place. The field of ice shook and trembled,

and clouds of frightened sea-birds hovered around uttering discordant cries. When silence was restored, a long black train cut into innumerable fissures met their anxious gaze. The explosion of the terrible agent had broken up the ice field. There was, so to speak, a moment of hesitation, and then the ice acted as if it had only been waiting for some signal to move. Cracking in all parts it yielded to the action of the current, and they beheld here and there whole continents, as it were, gradually moving away from them. Some portions, however, were more slow to move; they seemed to be protesting against such violence. The next day the passage was clear, and the "Alaska" rekindled her fires.

Erik and his dynamite had done what it would probably have taken the pale arctic sun a month longer to accomplish.

On the 2d of July, the expedition arrived at Banks' Straits; on the fourth, she issued from the Arctic Sea properly speaking. From this time the route was open notwithstanding icebergs, fogs, and snow-storms. On the twelfth, the "Alaska" doubled Ice Cape; on the thirteenth, Cape Lisburne, and on the fourteenth she entered the Gulf of Kotzebue to the north of Behring's Straits and found there, according to instructions, the boat loaded with coal which had been sent from San Francisco.

Thus in two months and sixteen days they had accomplished the programme arranged by Erik before they left the coast of France.

The "Alaska" had hardly ceased to move, when Erik rushed into a small boat and hurried off to accost the officer who had charge of the boat loaded with coal.

"Semper idem!" said he, as he approached.

"Lisbon!" answered the Yankee.

"How long have you been waiting here for me?"

"Five weeks--we left San Francisco one month after the arrival of your dispatch."

"Have you heard any news of Nordenskiöld?"

"At San Francisco they had not received any reliable information about him. But since I have been here I have spoken to several captains of whaling-vessels, who said that they had heard from the natives of Serdze-Kamen that an European vessel had been frozen in by the ice for nine or ten months; they thought it was the 'Vega.'"

"Indeed!" said Erik, with a joy which we can easily understand. "And do you believe that it has not yet succeeded in getting through the straits?"

"I am sure of it--not a vessel has passed us for the last five weeks,

which I have not seen and spoken to."

"God be praised--our troubles will not be without recompense, if we succeed in finding Nordenskiöld."

"You will not be the first who has done so!" said the Yankee, with an ironical smile--"an American yacht has preceded you. It passed here three days ago, and like you was inquiring for Nordenskiöld."

"An American yacht?" repeated Erik, half stupefied.

"Yes--the 'Albatross,' Captain Tudor Brown, from Vancouver's Island. I told him what I had heard, and he immediately started for Cape Serdze-Kamen."