

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM SERDZE-KAMEN TO LJAKOW.

Tudor Brown had evidently heard of the change in the route of the "Alaska." He had reached Behring's Straits before them. But by what means? It seemed almost supernatural, but still the fact remained that he had done so.

Erik was greatly depressed by this information, but he concealed his feelings from his friends. He hurried on the work of transporting the coal, and set out again without losing a moment.

Serdze-Kamen is a long Asiatic-promontory situated nearly a hundred miles to the west of Behring's Straits, and whaling-vessels from the Pacific visit it every year.

The "Alaska" reached there after a voyage of twenty-four hours, and soon in the bay of Koljutschin behind a wall of ice, they discovered the masts of the "Vega," which had been frozen in for nine months.

The barrier which held Nordenskiold captive was not more than ten kilometers in size. After passing around it, the "Alaska" came to anchor in a little creek, where she would be sheltered from the northerly winds. Then Erik with his three friends made their way overland to the

establishment which the "Vega" had made upon the Siberian coast to pass this long winter, and which a column of smoke pointed out to them.

This coast of the Bay of Koljutschin consists of a low and slightly undulating plain. There are no trees, only some dwarf willows, marine grasses and lichens. Summer had already brought forth some plants, which Mr. Malarius recognized as a species which was very common in Norway.

The encampment of the "Vega" consisted of a large store-house for their eatables, which had been made by the orders of Nordenskiöld, in case the pressure of the ice should destroy his ship, which so frequently happens on these dangerous coasts. It was a touching fact that the poor population, although always half starved, and to whom this depot represented incalculable wealth in the shape of food, had respected it, although it was but poorly guarded. The huts of skin of these Tschoutskes were grouped here and there around the station. The most imposing structure was the "Tintinjaranga," or ice-house, which they had especially arranged to use for a magnetic observatory, and where all the necessary apparatus had been placed. It had been built of blocks of ice delicately tinted and cemented together with snow; the roof of planks was covered with cloth.

The voyagers of the "Alaska" were cordially welcomed by the young astronomer, whom they found at the time of their arrival holding a consultation with the man in charge of the store-house. He offered with hearty goodwill to take them on board the "Vega" by the path

which had been cut in the ice in order to keep open the means of communication between the vessel and the land, and a rope attached to stones served as a guide on dark nights. As they walked, he related to them their adventures since they had been unable to send home any dispatches.

After leaving the mouth of the Lena, Nordenskiöld had directed his course toward the islands of New Siberia, which he wished to explore, but finding it almost impossible to approach them, on account of the ice which surrounded them, and the shallowness of the water in that vicinity, he abandoned the idea, and resumed his course toward the east. The "Vega" encountered no great difficulties until the 10th of September, but about that time a continuance of fogs, and freezing nights, compelled her to slacken her speed, besides the darkness necessitated frequented stoppages. It was therefore the 27th of September before she reached Cape Serdze-Kamen. They cast her anchor on a bank of ice, hoping to be able the next day to make the few miles which separated her from Behring's Straits and the free waters of the Pacific. But a north wind set in during the night, and heaped around the vessel great masses of ice. The "Vega" found herself a prisoner for the winter at the time when she had almost accomplished her work.

"It was a great disappointment to us, as you can imagine!" said the young astronomer, "but we soon rallied our forces, and determined to profit by the delay as much as possible, by making scientific investigations. We made the acquaintance of the 'Tschoutskes' of the

neighborhood, whom no traveler has hitherto known well, and we have made a vocabulary of their language, and also gathered together a collection of their arms and utensils. The naturalists of the 'Vega' have also been diligent, and added many new arctic plants to their collection. Lastly, the end of the expedition has been accomplished, since we have doubled Cape Tchelynskin, and traversed the distance between it and the mouth of the Yenisei and of the Lena. Henceforth the north-east passage must become a recognized fact. It would have been more agreeable for us, if we could have effected it in two months, as we so nearly succeeded in doing. But provided we are not blocked in much longer, as the present indications lead us to hope, we will not have much to complain of, and we shall be able to return with the satisfaction of knowing that we have accomplished a useful work."

While listening to their guide with deep interest, the travelers were pursuing their way. They were now near enough to the "Vega" to see that her deck was covered over with a large canvas, and that her sides were protected by lofty masses of snow, and that her smoke-stacks had been carefully preserved from contact with the ice.

The immediate approach to the vessel was still more strange; she was not, as one would have expected, completely incrustated in a bed of ice, but she was suspended, as it were, in a labyrinth of lakes, islands, and canals, between which they had been obliged to throw bridges formed of planks.

"The explanation is very simple," said the young astronomer, in reply to a question from Erik. "All vessels that pass some months surrounded by ice form around them a bed of refuse, consisting principally of coal ashes. This is heavier than snow, and when a thaw begins, the bed around the vessel assumes the aspect which you behold."

The crew of the "Vega," in arctic clothing, with two or three officers, had already seen the visitors whom the astronomer was bringing with him. Their joy was great when they saluted them in Swedish, and when they beheld among them the well-known and popular physiognomy of Dr. Schwaryencrona.

Neither Nordenskiöld nor Captain Palander were on board. They had gone upon a geological excursion into the interior of the country, and expected to be absent five or six days. This was a disappointment to the travelers, who had naturally hoped when they found the "Vega" to present their congratulations to the great explorer.

But this was not their only disappointment.[1]

[Footnote 1: They returned sooner, for on the 18th of July the ice broke up, and after 264 days of captivity the "Vega" resumed her voyage. On the 20th of July she issued from Behring's Straits and set out for Yokohama.]

They had hardly entered the officer's room, when Erik and his friends

were informed that three days before the "Vega" had been visited by an American yacht, or rather by its owner, Mr. Tudor Brown. This gentleman had brought them news of the world beyond their settlement, which was very acceptable, they being confined to the limited neighborhood of the Bay of Koljutschin. He told them what had happened in Europe since their departure--the anxiety that Sweden and indeed all civilized nations felt about their fate, and that the "Alaska" had been sent to search for them. Mr. Tudor Brown came from Vancouver's Island, in the Pacific, and his yacht had been waiting there for him for three months.

"But," exclaimed a young doctor, attached to the expedition, "he told us that he had at first embarked with you, and only left you at Brest, because he doubted whether you would be able to bring the enterprise to a successful termination!"

"He had excellent reasons for doubting it," replied Erik, coolly, but not without a secret tremor.

"His yacht was at Valparaiso and he telegraphed for her to wait for him at Victoria, on the coast of Vancouver," continued the doctor; "then he took the steamer from Liverpool to New York, and the railroad to the Pacific. This explains how he was able to reach here before you."

"Did he tell you why he came?" asked Mr. Bredejord.

"He came to help us, if we stood in need of assistance, and also to

inquire about a strange enough personage, whom I had incidentally mentioned in my correspondence, and in whom Mr. Tudor Brown seemed to take a great interest."

The four visitors exchanged glances.

"Patrick O'Donoghane--was not that the name?" asked Erik.

"Precisely--or at least it is the name which is tattooed on his body, although he pretends it is not his own, but that of a friend. He calls himself Johnny Bowles."

"May I ask if this man is still here?"

"He left us ten months ago. We had at first believed that he might prove useful to us by acting as interpreter between us and the natives of this coast, on account of his apparent knowledge of their language; but we soon discovered that his acquaintance with it was very superficial--confined, in fact, to a few words. Besides, until we came here, we were unable to hold any communications with the natives. This Johnny Bowles, or Patrick O'Donoghane, was lazy, drunken, and undisciplined. His presence on board would only have occasioned trouble for us. We therefore acceded without regret to his request to be landed on the large Island of Ljakow, as we were following the southern coast."

"What! did he go there? But this island is uninhabited!" cried Erik.

"Entirely; but what attracted the man appeared to be the fact that its shores are literally covered by bones, and consequently by fossil ivory. He had conceived the plan of establishing himself there, and of collecting, during the summer months, all the ivory that he could find; then when, in winter, the arm of the sea which connects Ljakow with the continent should be frozen over, to transport in a sleigh this treasure to the Siberian coast, in order to sell it to the Russian traders, who come every year in search of the products of the country."

"Did you tell these facts to Mr. Tudor Brown?" asked Erik.

"Assuredly, he came far enough to seek for them," replied the young doctor, unaware of the deep personal interest that the commander of the "Alaska" took in the answers to the questions which he addressed to him.

The conversation then became more general. They spoke of the comparative facility with which Nordenskiöld had carried out his programme. He had not met with any serious difficulties, and consequently the discovery of the new route would be an advantage to the commerce of the world. "Not," said the officer of the "Vega," "that this path was ever destined to be much frequented, but the voyage of the 'Vega' would prove to the maritime nations of the Atlantic and Pacific that it was possible to hold direct communication with Siberia by water. And nowhere would these nations, notwithstanding the vulgar opinions, find a field as vast and rich."

"Is it not strange," observed Mr. Bredejord, "that they have failed completely during the last three centuries in this attempt that you have now accomplished without difficulty?"

"The singularity is only apparent," answered one of the officers. "We have profited by the experience of our predecessors, an experience often only acquired at the cost of their lives. Professor Nordenskiold has been preparing himself for this supreme effort during the last twenty years, in which he has made eight arctic expeditions. He has patiently studied the problem in all its aspects, and finally succeeded in solving it. Then we have had what our predecessors lacked, a steam vessel especially equipped for this voyage. This has enabled us to accomplish in two months a voyage that it would have taken a sailing vessel two years to do. We have also constantly been able not only to choose, but also to seek out, the most accessible route. We have fled from floating ice and been able to profit by the winds and tides. And still we have been overtaken by winter. How much more difficult it would have been for a mariner who was compelled to wait for favorable winds, and see the summer passing in the meantime."

In such conversation they passed the afternoon, and after accepting their invitation and dining on board the "Vega," they carried back with them to supper on board the "Alaska" all the officers who could be spared from duty. They mutually gave each other all the information and news in their power. Erik took care to inform himself exactly of the

route followed by the "Vega," in order to utilize it for his own profit. After exchanging many good wishes and with the heartfelt desire that they would all soon return in safety to their country, they separated.

The next day at dawn Erik had the "Alaska" steering for the island of Ljakow. As for the "Vega" she had to wait until the breaking up of the ice would permit her to reach the Pacific.

The first part of Erik's task was now accomplished. He had found Nordenskiold. The second still remained to be fulfilled: to find Patrick O'Donoghhan, and see if he could persuade him to disclose his secret. That this secret was an important one they were now all willing to admit, or Tudor Brown would never have committed such a dastardly crime to prevent them from becoming acquainted with it.

Would they be able to reach the Island of Ljakow before him?

It was hardly probable, for he was three days in advance of them: never mind--he would make the attempt.

The "Albatross" might lose her way, or meet with some unforeseen obstacles. As long as there was even a probability of success Erik determined to take the chances.

The weather was now mild and agreeable. Light fogs indicated an open sea, and a speedy breaking of the ice along the Siberian coast where the

"Vega" had been held prisoner so long. Summer was advancing, and the "Alaska" could reasonably count upon at least ten weeks of favorable weather. The experience which they had acquired amongst the American ice had its value and would render this new enterprise comparatively easy. Lastly the north-east passage was the most direct way to return to Sweden, and besides the deep personal interest which induced Erik to take it, he had a truly scientific desire to accomplish in a reverse route the task which Nordenskiöld had fulfilled. If he had succeeded, why should he not be able to do so?--this would be proving practically the experiment of the great navigator.

The wind favored the "Alaska." For ten days it blew almost constantly from the south-east, and enabled them to make from nine to ten knots at least without burning any coal. This was a precious advantage, and besides the wind drove the floating ice toward the north and rendered navigation much less difficult. During these ten days they met with very little floating ice.

On the eleventh day, it is true they had a tempestuous snow storm followed by dense fogs which sensibly retarded the progress of the "Alaska." But on the 29th of July the sun appeared in all its brilliancy, and on the morning of the 2d of August they came in sight of the Island of Ljakow.

Erik gave orders immediately to sail around it in order to see if the "Albatross" was not hidden in some of its creeks. Having done this they

cast anchor in a sandy bottom about three miles from the southern shore. Then he embarked in his boat accompanied by his three friends and six of his sailors. Half an hour later they had reached the island.

Erik had not chosen the southern coast of the island to anchor his vessel without a reason. He had said to himself that Patrick O'Donoghane might have told the truth when he had stated that his object was to collect ivory; but if it was his intention to leave the island at the first opportunity which afforded, he would be sure to establish himself upon a spot where he would have a good view of the sea. He would undoubtedly choose some elevated place, and one as near as possible to the Siberian coast. Besides the necessity of sheltering himself against the polar winds would lead him to establish himself upon the southern coast of the island.

Erik did not pretend that his conclusions were necessarily incontrovertible, but he thought that, in any case, they would suffer no inconvenience from adopting them as the basis of a systematic exploration of the place. The results fully justified his expectations. The travelers had not walked along the shore for an hour, when they perceived on a height, perfectly sheltered by a chain of hills, facing the south, an object which could only be a human habitation. To their extreme surprise this little cottage, which was of a cubical form, was perfectly white, as if it had been covered with plaster. It only lacked green shutters to perfectly resemble a country home near Marseilles, or an American cottage.

After they had climbed the height and approached near to it, they discovered a solution of the mystery. The cottage was not plastered, it was simply built of enormous bones skillfully arranged, which gave it its white color. Strange as the materials were, they were forced to admit that the idea of utilizing them was a natural one; besides there was nothing else available on the island where vegetation was most meagre; but the whole place, even the neighboring hills were covered with bones, which Dr. Schwaryencrona recognized as the remains of wild beasts.