

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CANNON-BALLS.

At the same time that he gave orders to pursue the "Albatross," Erik also desired his men to get the cannon in readiness. The operation took some time, and when they had everything in order the enemy was beyond their reach. Doubtless they had taken advantage of the time occupied by their stoppage to increase their fires, and they were two or three miles ahead. This was not too great a distance for a Gatling gun to carry, but the rolling and speed of the two vessels made it probable that they would miss her; and they thought it better to wait, hoping that the "Alaska" would gain upon the enemy. It soon became evident, however, that the two vessels were equally matched, for the distance between them remained about the same for several hours.

They were obliged to burn an enormous amount of coal--an article which was becoming very scarce on board the "Alaska"--and this would be a heavy loss if they could not succeed in overtaking the "Albatross" before night set in. Erik did not think it right to do this without consulting his crew. He therefore mounted the bridge, and frankly explained to them the position in which he was placed.

"My friends," he said, "you know that I am anxious to seize and deliver up to justice this rascal who attempted to shipwreck our vessel on the

rocks of Sein. But we have hardly coal enough left to last us for six days. Any deviation from our route will compel us to finish our voyage under sail, which may make it very long and toilsome for all of us, and may even cause us to fail in our undertaking. On the other hand, the 'Albatross' counts upon being able to get away from us during the night. To prevent this we must not slacken our speed for a moment, and we must keep her within the range of our electric light. I feel sure, however, that we will eventually overtake her, but it may take us some time to do so. I did not feel willing to continue this pursuit without laying the facts plainly before you, and asking you if you were willing to risk the dangers which may arise for us."

The men consulted together in a low tone, and then commissioned Mr. Hersebom to speak for them:

"We are of opinion that it is the duty of the 'Alaska' to capture this rascal at any sacrifice!" he said, quietly.

"Very well, then, we will do our best to accomplish it," answered Erik.

When he found that he had the confidence of his crew, he did not spare fuel, and in spite of the desperate efforts of Tudor Brown, he could not increase the distance between them. The sun had scarcely set when the electric light of the "Alaska" was brought to bear un pityingly upon the "Albatross," and continued in this position during the night. At day-break the distance between them was still the same, and they were

flying toward the pole. At midday they made a solar observation, and found that they were in 78, 21', 14" of latitude north, by 90 of longitude east.

Floating ice, which they had not encountered for ten or fifteen days, now became very frequent. It was necessary to ward it off, as they had been compelled to do in Baffin's Bay. Erik, feeling sure that they would soon reach fields of ice, was careful to steer obliquely to the right of the "Albatross" so as to bar the way toward the east if she should attempt to change her course, finding her path toward the north obstructed. His foresight was soon rewarded, for in two hours a lofty barrier of ice casts its profile on the horizon. The American yacht immediately steered toward the west, leaving the ice two or three miles on its starboard. The "Alaska" immediately imitated this maneuver, but so obliquely to the left of the "Albatross" as to cut her off if she attempted to sail to the south.

The chase became very exciting. Feeling sure of the course which the "Albatross" would be compelled to take, the "Alaska" tried to push her more toward the ice. The yacht's course becomes more and more wavering, every moment they made some change, at one time steering north at another west. Erik, mounted aloft, watched every movement she made, and thwarted her attempts to escape by appropriate maneuvers. Suddenly she stopped short, swung round and faced the "Alaska." A long white line which was apparent extending westward told the reason of this change. The "Albatross" found herself so close to the ice-banks that she had no

recourse but to turn and face them.

The young captain of the "Alaska" had scarcely time to descend, before some missile whistled past his head. The "Albatross" was armed, and relied upon being able to defend herself.

"I prefer that it should be so, and that he should fire the first shot," said Erik, as he gave orders to return it.

His first attack was not more successful than that of Tudor Brown--for it fell short two or three hundred yards. But the combat was now begun, and the firing became regular. An American projectile cut the large sail yards of the "Alaska," and it fell upon the deck killing two men. A small bomb from the Swedish vessel fell upon the bridge of the "Albatross," and must have made great havoc. Then other projectiles skillfully thrown lodged in various parts of the vessel.

They had been constantly approaching each other, when suddenly a distant rumbling mingled with the roar of artillery, and the crews raising their heads saw that the sky was very black in the east.

Was a storm with its accompanying fog and blinding snow, coming to interpose between the "Albatross" and the "Alaska," to permit Tudor Brown to escape?

This Erik wished to prevent at any price. He resolved to attempt to

board her. Arming his men with sabers, cutlasses, and hatchets, he crowded on all the steam the vessel could carry and rushed toward the "Albatross."

Tudor Brown tried to prevent this. He retreated toward the banks of ice, firing a shot from his cannon every five minutes. But his field of action had now become too limited; between the ice and the "Alaska" he saw that he was lost unless he made a bold attempt to regain the open sea. He attempted this after a few feigned maneuvers to deceive his adversary.

Erik let him do it. Then at the precise moment when the "Albatross" tried to pass the "Alaska," she made a gaping hole in the side of the yacht which stopped her instantly, and rendered her almost unmanageable; then she fell quickly behind and prepared to renew the assault. But the weather, which had become more and more menacing, did not give him time to do this.

The tempest was upon them. A fierce wind from the south-east, accompanied by blinding clouds of snow, which not only raised the waves to a prodigious height, but dashed against the two vessels immense masses of floating ice. It seemed as if they were attacked at all points at once. Erik realized his situation, and saw that he had not a minute to lose in escaping, unless he wished to be hemmed in perhaps permanently. He steered due east, struggling against the wind, the snow, and the dashing ice.

But he was soon obliged to confess that his efforts were fruitless. The tempest raged with such violence that neither the engine of the "Alaska" nor her steel buttress were of much use. Not only did the vessel advance very slowly, but at times she seemed to be fairly driven backward. The snow was so thick that it obscured the sky, blinded the crew, and covered the bridge a foot in depth. The ice driven against the "Alaska" by the fierce wind increased and barred their progress, so that at length they were glad to retreat toward the banks, in the hope of finding some little haven where they could remain until the storm passed over.

The American yacht had disappeared, and after the blow it had received from the "Alaska" they almost doubted if it would be able to resist the tornado.

Their own situation was so perilous that they could only think of their own safety, for every moment it grew worse.

There is nothing more frightful than those arctic tempests, in which all the primitive forces of nature seem to be awakened in order to give the navigator a specimen of the cataclysms of the glacial period. The darkness was profound although it was only five o'clock in the afternoon. The engine had stopped, and they were unable to light their electric light. To the raging of the storm was added the roars of thunder and the tumult made by the floating blocks of ice dashing

against each other. The ice-banks were continually breaking with a noise like the roar of a cannon.

The "Alaska" was soon surrounded by ice. The little harbor in which she had taken refuge was soon completely filled with it, and it commenced to press upon and dash against her sides until she began to crack, and they feared every moment that she would go to pieces.

Erik resolved not to succumb to the storm without a combat with it, and he set the crew to work arranging heavy beams around the vessel so as to weaken the pressure as much as possible, and distribute it over a wider surface. But, although this protected the vessel, it led to an unforeseen result which threatened to be fatal.

The vessel, instead of being suddenly crushed, was lifted out of the water by every movement of the ice, and then fell back again on it with the force of a trip-hammer. At any moment after one of these frightful falls they might be broken up, crushed, buried. To ward off this danger there was only one resource, and this was to re-enforce their barrier by heaping up the drift ice and snow around the vessel to protect her as well as they could.

Everybody set to work with ardor. It was a touching spectacle to see this little handful of men taxing their pygmy muscles to resist the forces of nature--trying with anchors, chains, and planks to fill up the fissures made in the ice and to cover them with snow, so that there

might be a uniformity of motion among the mass. After four or five hours of almost superhuman exertions, and when their strength was exhausted, they were in no less danger, for the storm had increased.

Erik held a consultation with his officers, and it was decided that they should make a depot on the ice-field for their food and ammunition in case the "Alaska" should be unable to resist the powerful shocks to which she was being subjected. At the first moment of danger every man had received provisions enough for eight days, with precise instructions in case of disaster, besides being ordered to keep his gun in his belt even while he was working. The operation of transporting twenty tons of provisions was not easy of accomplishment, but at last it was done and the food was placed about two hundred yards from the ship under a covering of tarred canvas, which was soon covered by the snow with a thick white mantle.

This precaution, having been taken, everybody felt more comfortable as to the result of a shipwreck, and the crew assembled to recruit their strength with a supper supplemented with tea and rum.

Suddenly, in the midst of supper, a more violent shock than any that had as yet agitated the vessel, split the bed of ice and snow around the "Alaska." She was lifted up in the stern with a terrible noise, and then it appeared as if she were plunging head-foremost into an abyss. There was a panic, and every one rushed on deck. Some of the men thought that the moment had come to take refuge on the ice, and without waiting for



the signal of the officers they commenced clambering over the bulwarks.

Four or five of these unfortunate ones managed to leap on a snow-bank. Two others were caught between the masses of floating ice and the beams of the starboard, as the "Alaska" righted herself.

Their cries of pain and the noise of their crushed bones were lost in the storm. There was a lull, and the vessel remained motionless. The lesson which the sailors had been taught was a tragical one. Erik made use of it to enforce on the crew the necessity of each man's retaining his presence of mind, and of waiting for positive orders on all occasions.

"You must understand," he said to his men, "that to leave the ship is a supreme measure, to which we must have recourse only at the last extremity. All our efforts ought to be directed toward saving the 'Alaska.' Deprived of her, our situation will be a very precarious one on the ice. It is only in case of our vessel becoming uninhabitable that we must desert it. In any case such a movement should be made in an orderly manner to avoid disasters. I therefore expect that you will return quietly to your supper, and leave to your superior officers the task of determining what is best to do!"

The firmness with which he spoke had the effect of reassuring the most timid, and they all descended again. Erik then called Mr. Hersebom and asked him to untie his good dog Kaas, and follow him without making any

noise.

"We will go on the field of ice," he said, "and seek for the fugitives and make them return to their duty, which will be better for them than wandering about."

The poor devils were huddled together on the ice, ashamed of their escapade, and at the first summons were only too glad to take the path toward the "Alaska."

Erik and Mr. Hersebom having seen them safely on board, walked as far as their depot of provisions, thinking that another sailor might have taken refuge there. They went all around it but saw no one.

"I have been asking myself the last few moments," said Erik, "if it would not be better to prevent another panic by landing part of the crew?"

"It might be better perhaps," answered the fisherman. "But would not the men who remained on board feel jealous and become demoralized by this measure?"

"That is true," said Erik. "It would be wiser to occupy them up to the last moment in struggling against the tempest, and it is in fact the only chance we have of saving the ship. But since we are on the ice we may as well take advantage of it, and explore it a little. I confess all

these crackings and detonations inspire me with some doubt as to its solidity!"

Erik and his adopted father had not gone more than three hundred feet from their depot of provisions before they were stopped short by a gigantic crevasse which lay open at their feet. To cross it would have required long poles, with which they had neglected to supply themselves. They were therefore compelled to walk beside it obliquely toward the west, in order to see how far it reached.

They found that this crevasse extended for a long distance, so long that after they had walked for half an hour they could not see the end of it. Feeling more secure about the extent of this field of ice upon which they had established their depot of provisions, they turned to retreat their steps.

After they had walked over about half of the distance a new vibration occurred, followed by detonations and tumultuous heavings of ice. They were not greatly disturbed by this, but increased their speed, being anxious to discover whether this shock had had done the "Alaska" any mischief.

The depot was soon reached, then the little haven that sheltered the vessel.

Erik and Mr. Hersebom rubbed their eyes, and asked each other whether

they were dreaming, for the "Alaska" was no longer there.

Their first thought was that she had been swallowed up by the waters. It was only too natural that they should think this after such an evening as they had just passed.

But immediately they were struck by the fact that no débris was visible, and that the little harbor had assumed a new aspect since their departure. The drift ice which the tempest had piled up around the "Alaska" had been broken up, and much of it had drifted away. At the same time Mr. Hersebom mentioned a fact which had not struck him while they were hurrying along, and this was that the wind had changed and was now blowing from the west.

Was it not possible that the storm had carried away the floating ice in which the "Alaska" had become embedded. Yes, evidently it was possible; but it remained for them to discover whether this supposition was true. Without delaying a moment, Erik proceeded to reconnoiter, followed by Mr. Hersebom.

They walked for a long time. Everywhere the drift was floating freely, the waves came and went, but the whole aspect of things around them looked strange and different.

At length Erik stopped. Now he understood what had befallen them. He took Mr. Hersebom's hand and pressed it with both his own.

"Father," said he, in a grave voice, "you are one of those to whom I can only speak the truth. Well, the fact is that this ice-field has split; it has broken away from that which surrounded the 'Alaska,' and we are on an island of ice hundreds of yards long, and carried along by the waters, and at the mercy of the storm."