

CHAPTER XIX.

GUNSHOTS.

About two o'clock in the morning Erik and Mr. Hersebom, exhausted with fatigue, laid down side by side between two casks, under the canvas that protected their provisions. Kaas, also, was close to them and kept them warm with his thick fur. They were not long in falling asleep. When they awoke the sun was already high in the heavens, the sky was blue and the sea calm. The immense bank of ice upon which they were floating appeared to be motionless, its movement was so gentle and regular. But along the two edges of it which were nearest to them enormous icebergs were being carried along with frightful rapidity. These gigantic crystals reflected like a prism the solar rays, and they were the most marvelous that Erik had ever beheld.

Mr. Hersebom also, although but little inclined in general, and especially in his present situation, to admire the splendor of Nature in the arctic regions, could not help being impressed with them.

"How beautiful this would look were we on a good ship!" he said, sighing.

"Bah!" answered Erik, with his usual good humor. "On board a ship one must be thinking only how to avoid the icebergs so as not to be crushed

to pieces, whilst on this island of ice we have none of these miseries to worry us."

As this was evidently the view of an optimist, Mr. Hersebom answered with a sad smile. But Erik was determined to take a cheerful view of things.

"Is it not an extraordinary piece of good luck that we have this depot of provisions?" he said. "Our case would, indeed, be a desperate one if we were deprived of everything; but, with twenty casks of biscuits, preserved meats, and, above all, our guns and cartridges, what have we to fear? At the most, we will only have to remain some weeks without seeing any land that we can reach. You see, dear father, that we have happened upon this adventure in the same manner as the crew of the 'Hansa.'"

"Of the 'Hansa'?" asked Mr. Hersebom, with curiosity.

"Yes, a vessel that set out in 1869 for the arctic seas. Part of her crew were left, as we are, on a floating field of ice, while they were occupied in transporting some provisions and coal. The brave men accommodated themselves as well as they could to this new life, and after floating for six months and a half over a distance of several thousand leagues, ended by landing in the arctic regions of North America."

"May we be as fortunate!" said Mr. Hersebom, with a sigh. "But it would be well I think for us to eat something."

"That is also my opinion!" said Erik. "A biscuit and a slice of beef would be very acceptable."

Mr. Hersebom opened two casks to take out what they required for their breakfast, and as soon as his arrangements were completed they did ample justice to the provisions.

"Was the raft of the crew of the 'Hansa' as large as ours?" asked the old fisherman, after ten minutes conscientiously devoted to repairing his strength.

"I think not--ours is considerably larger. The 'Hansa's' became gradually much smaller, so that the unfortunate shipwrecked men were at last compelled to abandon it, for the waves began to dash over them. Fortunately they had a large boat which enabled them, when their island was no longer habitable, to reach another. They did this several times before they at last reached the main-land."

"Ah, I see!" said Mr. Hersebom, "they had a boat--but we have not. Unless we embark in an empty hogshead I do not see how we can ever leave this island of ice."

"We shall see about it when the time comes!" answered Erik. "At the

present moment I think the best thing that we can do is to make a thorough exploration of our domain."

He arose, as did Mr. Hersebom, and they commenced climbing a hill of ice and snow--a hummock is the technical name--in order to obtain a general idea of their island.

They found it from one end to the other lying and floating insensibly upon the polar ocean. But it was very difficult to form a correct estimate either of its size or shape; for a great number of hummocks intercepted their view on all sides. They resolved, however, to walk to the extremity of it. As far as they could judge from the position of the sun, that end of the island which extended toward the west had been detached from the mass of which it had formerly been a part, and was now turning to the north. They therefore supposed that their ice raft was being carried toward the south by the influence of the tide and breeze, and the fact that they no longer saw any trace of the long barriers of ice, which are very extensive in the 78, fully corroborated this hypothesis.

Their island was entirely covered with snow, and upon this snow they saw distinctly here and there at a distance some black spots, which Mr. Hersebom immediately recognized as "ongionks," that is to say, a species of walrus of great size. These walruses doubtless inhabited the caverns and crevasses in the ice, and believing themselves perfectly secure from any attack, were basking in the sunshine.

It took Erik and Mr. Hersebom more than an hour to walk to the extreme end of their island. They had followed closely the eastern side, because that permitted them to explore at the same time both their raft and the sea. Suddenly Kaas, who ran ahead of them, put to flight some of the walruses which they had seen in the distance. They ran toward the border of the field of ice in order to throw themselves into the water. Nothing would have been more easy than to have killed a number of them. But what would have been the use of their doing so, since they could not make a fire to roast their delicate flesh? Erik was occupied about other matters. He carefully examined the ice-field, and found that it was far from being homogeneous. Numerous crevasses and fissures, which seemed to extend in many cases for a long distance, made him fear that a slight shock might divide it into several fragments. It was true that these fragments might in all probability be of considerable size; but the possibility of such an accident made them realize the necessity of keeping as close as possible to their depot of provisions, unless they wished to be deprived of them. Erik resolved to examine carefully their whole domain, and to make his abode on the most massive portion; the one that seemed capable of offering the greatest resistance. He also determined to transport to this spot their depot of provisions.

It was with this resolve that Mr. Hersebom and Erik continued their exploration of the western coast, after resting a few minutes at the northerly point. They were now following that portion of the ice-field where they had attacked the American yacht.

Kaas ran on before them, seeming to enjoy the freshness of the air, and being in his true element on this carpet of snow, which doubtless reminded him of the plains of Greenland.

Suddenly Erik saw him sniff the air and then dart forward like an arrow, and stop barking beside some dark object, which was partially hidden by a mass of ice.

"Another walrus, I suppose!" he said, hurrying forward.

It was not a walrus which lay extended on the snow, and which had so excited Kaas. It was a man, insensible, and covered with blood, whose clothing of skins was assuredly not the dress worn by any seamen of the "Alaska." It reminded Erik of the clothing worn by the man who had passed the winter on the "Vega." He raised the head of the man; it was covered with thick red hair, and it was remarkable that his nose was crushed in like that of a negro.

Erik asked himself whether he was the sport of some illusion.

He opened the man's waistcoat, and bared his chest. It was perhaps as much to ascertain whether his heart still beat as to seek for his name.

He found his name tattooed in blue, on a rudely designed escutcheon.

"Patrick O'Donoghane, 'Cynthia,'" and his heart still beat. The man was

not dead. He had a large wound in his head, another in his shoulder, and on his chest a contusion, which greatly interfered with his respiration.

"He must be carried to our place of shelter, and restored to life," said Erik, to Mr. Hersebom.

And then he added in a low tone as if he was afraid of being overheard.

"It is he, father, whom we have been seeking for such a long time without being able to find him--Patrick O'Donoghane--and see he is almost unable to breathe."

The thought that the secret of his life was known to this bloody object upon which death already appeared to have set his seal, kindled a gloomy flame in Erik's eyes. His adopted father divined his thoughts, and could not help shrugging his shoulders--he seemed to say:

"Of what use would it be to discover it now. The knowledge of all the secrets in the world would be useless to us."

He, however, took the body by the limbs, while Erik lifted him under the arms, and loaded with this burden they resumed their walk.

The motion made the wounded man open his eyes. Soon the pain caused by his wounds was so great that he began to moan and utter confused cries, among which they distinguished the English word "drink!"

They were still some distance from their depot of provisions. Erik, however, stopped and propped the unfortunate man against a hummock, and then put his leathern bottle to his lips.

It was nearly empty, but the mouthful of strong liquor that Patrick O'Donoghane swallowed seemed to restore him to life. He looked around him, heaved a deep sigh and then said:

"Where is Mr. Jones?"

"We found you alone on the ice," answered Erik. "Had you been there long?"

"I do not know!" answered the wounded man, with difficulty. "Give me something more to drink." He swallowed a second mouthful and then he recovered sufficiently to be able to speak.

"When the tempest overtook us the yacht sunk," he explained. "Some of the crew had time to throw themselves into the boats, the rest perished. At the first moment of peril Mr. Jones made a sign for me to go with him into a life-boat, which was suspended in the stern of the yacht and that every one else disdained on account of its small dimensions, but which proved to be safe, as it was impossible to sink it. It is the only one which reached the ice island--all the others were upset before they reached it. We were terribly wounded by the drift ice which the waves

threw into our boat, but at length we were able to draw ourselves beyond their reach and wait for the dawn of day. This morning Mr. Jones left me to go and see if he could kill a walrus, or some sea-bird, in order that we might have something to eat. I have not seen him since!"

"Is Mr. Jones one of the officers of the 'Albatross'?" asked Erik.

"He is the owner and captain of her!" answered O'Donoghlan, in a tone which seemed to express surprise at the question.

"Then Mr. Tudor Brown is not the captain of the 'Albatross'?"

"I don't know," said the wounded man, hesitatingly, seeming to ask himself whether he had been too confidential in speaking as freely as he had done.

Erik did not think it wise to insist on this point. He had too many other questions to ask.

"You see," he said to the Irishman, as he seated himself on the snow beside him, "you refused the other day to come on board of my ship and talk with me, and your refusal has occasioned many disasters. But now that we have met again, let us profit by this opportunity to talk seriously and like rational men. You see you are here on a floating ice-bank, without food, and seriously wounded, incapable by your own efforts of escaping the most cruel death. My adopted father and myself

have all that you need, food, fire-arms, and brandy. We will share with you, and take care of you until you are well again. In return for our care, we only ask you to treat us with a little confidence!"

The Irishman gave Erik an irresolute look in which gratitude seemed to mingle with fear--a look of fearful indecision.

"That depends on the kind of confidence that you ask for?" he said, evasively.

"Oh, you know very well," answered Erik, making an effort to smile, and taking in his hands those of the wounded man. "I told you the other day; you know what I want to find out and what I have come so far to discover. Now, Patrick O'Donoghane, make a little effort and disclose to me this secret which is of so much importance to me, tell me what you know about the infant tied to the buoy. Give me the faintest indication of who I am, so that I may find my family. What do you fear? What danger do you run in satisfying me?"

O'Donoghane did not answer, but seemed to be turning over in his obtuse brain the arguments that Erik had used.

"But," he said at last, with an effort, "if we succeed in getting away from here, and we reach some country where there are judges and courts, you could do me some harm?"

"No, I swear that I would not. I swear it by all that is sacred," said Erik, hotly. "Whatever may be the injuries you have inflicted upon me or upon others, I guarantee that you shall not suffer for them in any way. Besides, there is one fact of which you seem to be ignorant, it is that there is a limit to such matters. When such events have taken place more than twenty years ago, human justice has no longer the right to demand an accounting for them."

"Is that true?" asked Patrick O'Donoghane, distrustfully. "Mr. Jones told me that the 'Alaska' had been sent by the police, and you yourself spoke of a tribunal."

"That was about recent events--an accident that happened to us at the beginning of our journey. You may be sure that Mr. Jones was mocking you, Patrick. Doubtless he has some interest of his own for wishing you not to tell."

"You may be sure of that," said the Irishman, earnestly. "But how did you discover that I was acquainted with this secret?"

"Through Mr. and Mrs. Bowles of the Red Anchor in Brooklyn, who had often heard you speak of the infant tied to the buoy."

"That is true," said the Irishman. He reflected again. "Then you are sure that you were not sent by the police?" he said, at length.

"No--what an absurd idea. I came of my own accord on account of my ardent desire, my thirst, to discover the land of my birth and to find out who my parents were, that is all."

O'Donoghane smiled, proudly:

"Ah, that is what you want to know," he said. "Well, it is true that I can tell you. It is true that I know."

"Tell me--tell me!" cried Erik, seeing that he hesitated. "Tell me and I promise you pardon for all the evil that you have done, and my everlasting gratitude if I am ever in a position to show it!"

The Irishman gave a covetous look at the leathern bottle.

"It makes my throat dry to talk so much," he said, in a faint tone. "I will drink a little more if you are willing to give it to me."

"There is no more here, but we can get some at our depot of provisions. We have two large cases of brandy there," answered Erik, handing the bottle to Mr. Hersebom.

The latter immediately walked away, followed by Kaas.

"They will not be gone long," said the young man, turning toward his companion. "Now, my brave fellow, do not make merchandise of your

confidence. Put yourself in my place. Suppose that during all your life you had been ignorant of the name of your country, and that of your mother, and that at last you found yourself in the presence of a man who knew all about it, and who refused the information which was of such inestimable value to you, and that at the very time when you had saved him, restored him to consciousness and life. I do not ask you to do anything impossible. I do not ask you to criminate yourself if you have anything to reproach yourself with. Give me only an indication, the very slightest. Put me on the track, so that I can find my family; and that is all that I shall ask of you."

"By my faith, I will do you this favor!" said Patrick, evidently moved.

"You know that I was a cabin-boy on board the 'Cynthia'?"

He stopped short.

Erik hung upon his words. Was he at last going to find out the truth? Was he going to solve this enigma and discover the name of his family, the land of his birth? Truly the scene appeared to him almost chimerical. He fastened his eyes upon the wounded man, ready to drink in his words with avidity. For nothing in the world would he have interfered with his recital, neither by interruption nor gesture. He did not even observe that a shadow had appeared behind him. It was the sight of this shadow which had stopped the story of Patrick O'Donoghane.

"Mr. Jones!" he said, in the tone of a school-boy detected in some

flagrant mischief.

Erik turned and saw Tudor Brown coming around a neighboring hummock, where until this moment he had been hidden from their sight.

The exclamation of the Irishman confirmed the suspicion which during the last hour had presented itself to his mind.

Mr. Jones and Tudor Brown were one and the same person.

He had hardly time to make this reflection before two shots were heard.

Tudor Brown raised his gun and shot Patrick O'Donoghane through the heart, who fell backward.

Then before he had time to lower his rifle, Tudor Brown received a bullet in his forehead, and fell forward on his face.

"I did well to come back when I saw suspicious footprints in the snow," said Mr. Hersebom, coming forward, his gun still smoking in his hands.