

CHAPTER XX.

THE END OF THE VOYAGE.

Erik gave a cry and threw himself on his knees beside Patrick O'Donoghlan, seeking for some sign of life, a ray of hope. But the Irishman was certainly dead this time, and that without revealing his secret.

As for Tudor Brown, one convulsion shook his body, his gun fell from his hands, in which he had tightly held it at the moment of his fall, and he expired without a word.

"Father, what have you done?" cried Erik, bitterly. "Why have you deprived me of the last chance that was left to me of discovering the secret of my birth? Would it not have been better for us to throw ourselves upon this man and take him prisoner?"

"And do you believe that he would have allowed us to do so?" answered Mr. Hersebom. "His second shot was intended for you, you may be sure. I have avenged the murder of this unfortunate man, punished the criminal who attempted to shipwreck us, and who is guilty perhaps of other crimes. Whatever may be the result, I do not regret having done so. Besides of what consequence is the mystery surrounding your birth, my child, to men in our situation? The secret of your birth before long,

without doubt, will be revealed to us by God."

He had hardly finished speaking, when the firing of a cannon was heard, and it was re-echoed by the icebergs. It seemed like a reply to the discouraging words of the old fisherman. It was doubtless a response to the two gunshots which had been fired on their island of ice.

"The cannon of the 'Alaska!' We are saved!" cried Erik, jumping up and climbing a hummock to get a better view of the sea that surrounded them.

He saw nothing at first but the icebergs, driven by the wind and sparkling in the sunshine. But Mr. Hersebom, who had immediately reloaded his gun, fired into the air, and a second discharge from the cannon answered him almost immediately.

Then Erik discovered a thin streak of black smoke toward the west, clearly defined against the blue sky. Gunshots, answered by the cannon, were repeated at intervals of a few minutes, and soon the "Alaska" steamed around an iceberg and made all speed toward the north of the island.

Erik and Mr. Hersebom, weeping for joy, threw themselves into each other's arms. They waved their handkerchiefs and threw their caps into the air, seeking by all means to attract the attention of their friends.

At length the "Alaska" stopped, a boat was lowered, and in twenty

minutes it reached their island.

Who can describe the unbounded joy of Dr. Schwaryencrona, Mr. Bredejord, Mr. Malarius, and Otto when they found them well and safe; for through the long hours of that sad night they had mourned them as lost.

They related all that had befallen them--their fears and despair during the night, their vain appeals, their useless anger. The "Alaska" had been found in the morning to be almost entirely clear of the ice, and they had dislodged what remained with the assistance of their gunpowder. Mr. Bosewitz had taken command, being the second-officer, and had immediately started in search of the floating island, taking the direction in which the wind would carry it. This navigation amidst floating icebergs was the most perilous which the "Alaska" had as yet attempted; but thanks to the excellent training to which the young captain had accustomed his crew, and to the experience which they had acquired in maneuvering the vessel, they passed safely among these moving masses of ice without being crushed by them. The "Alaska" had had the advantage of being able to travel more swiftly than the icebergs, and she had been able to benefit by this circumstance. Kind Providence had willed that her search should not prove fruitless. At nine o'clock in the morning the island had been sighted. They recognized it by its shape, and then the two shots from the guns made them hopeful of finding their two shipwrecked friends.

All their other troubles now appeared to them as insignificant. They had

a long and dangerous voyage before them, which they must accomplish under sail, for their coal was exhausted.

"No," said Erik, "we will not make it under sail. I have another plan. We will permit the ice island to tow us along, as long as she goes toward the south or west. That will spare us incessantly fighting with the icebergs, for our island will chase them ahead of her. Then we can collect here all the combustibles that we will require in order to finish the voyage, when we are ready to resume it."

"What are you talking about?" asked the doctor, laughing. "Is there an oil-well on this island?"

"Not exactly an oil-well," answered Erik, "but what will answer our purpose nearly as well, multitudes of fat walruses. I wish to try an experiment, since we have one furnace especially adapted for burning oil."

They began their labors by performing the last rites of the two dead men. They tied weights to their feet and lowered them into the sea. Then the "Alaska" made fast to the ice bank in such a manner as to follow its movements without sustaining any injury to herself. They were able, with care, to carry on board again the provisions which they had landed, and which it was important for them not to lose. That operation accomplished, they devoted all their energies to the pursuit of the walrus.

Two or three times a day, parties armed with guns and harpoons and accompanied by all their Greenland dogs landed on the ice bank, and surrounded the sleeping monsters at the mouth of their holes. They killed them by firing a ball into their ears, then they cut them up, and placed the lard with which they were filled in their sleighs, and the dogs drew it to the "Alaska." Their hunting was so easy and so productive, that in eight days they had all the lard that they could carry. The "Alaska," still towed by the floating island, was now in the seventy-fourth degree; that is to say, she had passed Nova Zembla.

The ice island was now reduced at least one-half, and cracked by the sun was full of fissures, more or less extensive, evidently ready to go to pieces. Erik resolved not to wait until this happened, and ordering their anchor to be lifted, he sailed away westward.

The lard was immediately utilized in the fire of the "Alaska," and proved an excellent combustible. The only fault was that it choked up the chimney, which necessitated a daily cleaning. As for its odor, that would doubtless have been very disagreeable to southern passengers, but to a crew composed of Swedes and Norwegians, it was only a secondary inconvenience.

Thanks to this supply, the "Alaska" was able to keep up steam during the whole of the remainder of her voyage. She proceeded rapidly, in spite of contrary winds, and arrived on the 5th of September in sight of Cape

North or Norway. They pursued their route with all possible speed, turned the Scandinavian Peninsula, repassed Skager-Rack, and reached the spot from which they had taken their departure.

On the 14th of September they cast anchor before Stockholm, which they had left on the tenth of the preceding February.

Thus, in seven months and four days, the first circumpolar periplus had been accomplished by a navigator of only twenty-two years of age.

This geographical feat, which so promptly completed the great expedition of Nordenskiöld, would soon make a prodigious commotion in the world. But the journals and reviews had not as yet had time to expatiate upon it. The uninitiated were hardly prepared to understand it, and one person, at least, reviewed it with suspicion--this was Kajsa. The supercilious smile with which she listened to the story of their adventures was indescribable.

"Was it sensible to expose yourself to such dangers?" was her only comment.

But the first opportunity that presented itself she did not fail to say to Erik:

"I suppose that now you will do nothing more about this tiresome matter, since the Irishman is dead."

What a difference there was between these cold criticisms and the letters full of sympathy and tenderness that Erik soon received from Noroe.

Vanda told him in what a state of anxiety she and her mother had passed these long months, how the travelers had been ever present in their thoughts, and how happy they were when they heard of their safe return. If the expedition had not accomplished all that Erik hoped, they begged him not to worry himself too much about it. He must know that if he never succeeded in finding his own family he had one in the poor Norwegian village, where he would be tenderly cared for like one of themselves. Would he not soon come and see them, could he not stay with them one little month. It was the sincere desire of his adopted mother and of his little sister Vanda, etc., etc.

The envelope also contained three pretty flowers, gathered on the borders of the fiord, and their perfume seemed to bring back vividly to Erik his gay and careless childhood. Ah, how sweet these loving words were to his poor disappointed heart, and they enabled him to fulfill more easily the concluding duties appertaining to the expedition. He hoped soon to be able to go and tell them all he felt. The voyage of the "Alaska" had equaled in grandeur that of the "Vega." The name of Erik was everywhere associated with the glorious name of Nordenskiöld. The journals had a great deal to say about the new periplus. The ships of all nations anchored at Stockholm united in doing honor to this national

victor. The learned societies came in a body to congratulate the commander and crew of the "Alaska." The public authorities proposed a national recompense for them.

All these praises were painful to Erik. His conscience told him that the principal motive of this expedition on his part had been purely a personal one, and he felt scrupulous about accepting honors which appeared to him greatly exaggerated. He therefore availed himself of the first opportunity to state frankly that he had gone to the polar seas to discover if possible the secret of his birth, and of the shipwreck of the "Cynthia," that he had been unsuccessful in doing so.

The occasion was offered by a reporter of one of the principal newspapers of Stockholm, who presented himself on board of the "Alaska" and solicited the favor of a private interview with the young captain.

The object of this intelligent gazeteer, let us state briefly, was to extract from his victim the outlines of a biography which would cover one hundred lines. He could not have fallen on a subject more willing to submit to vivisection. Erik had been eager to tell the truth, and to proclaim to the world that he did not deserve to be regarded as a second Christopher Columbus. He therefore related unreservedly his story, explaining how he had been picked up at sea by a poor fisherman of Noroe, educated by Mr. Malarius, taken to Stockholm by Dr.

Schwaryencrona; how they had found out that Patrick O'Donoghan probably held the key to the mystery that surrounded him. They discovered that he was on board of the "Vega;" they had gone in search of him. He related

the accident which had induced them to change their route. Erik told all this to convince the world that he was no hero. He told it because he felt ashamed of being so overwhelmed with praises for a performance that only seemed to him natural and right.

During this time the pen of the delighted reporter, Mr. Squirrelius, flew over the paper with stenographic rapidity. The dates, the names, the least details were noted with avidity. Mr. Squirrelius told himself with a beating heart that he had obtained matter not only for one hundred lines, but that he could make five or six hundred out of it. And what a story it would be--more interesting than a novel!

The next day Erik's revelations filled the columns of the most largely circulated newspaper in Stockholm, and indeed in all Sweden. As is usually the case, Erik's sincerity, instead of diminishing his popularity, only increased it, on account of his modesty, and the romantic interest attached to his history. The press and the public seized upon it with avidity. These biographical details were soon translated into all languages, and made the tour of Europe. In this way they reached Paris, and penetrated in the form of a French newspaper into a modest drawing-room on Varennes Street.

There were two persons in this room. One was a lady dressed in black, with white hair, although she still appeared to be young, but her whole appearance betrayed profound sorrow. Seated under a lighted lamp she worked mechanically at some embroidery, which at times fell from her

thin fingers, while her eyes, fixed on vacancy, seemed to be thinking of some overwhelming calamity.

On the other side of the table sat a fine-looking old gentleman, who took the newspaper abstractedly which his servant brought in.

It was Mr. Durrien, the honorary consul-general of the geographical society, the same person who had been at Brest when the "Alaska" reached that place.

This was doubtless the reason why Erik's name attracted his notice, but while reading the article carefully which contained the biography of the young Swedish navigator, he was startled. Then he read it again carefully, and little by little an intense pallor spread over his face, which was always pale. His hands trembled nervously, and his uneasiness became so evident that his companion noticed it.

"Father, are you suffering?" she asked with solicitude.

"I believe it is too warm here--I will go to the library and get some fresh air. It is nothing; it will pass off," answered Mr. Durrien, rising and walking into the adjoining room.

As if by accident, he carried the paper with him.

If his daughter could have read his thoughts, she would have known that

amidst the tumults of hopes and fears that so agitated him was also a determination not to let her eyes rest upon that paper.

A moment later she thought of following him into the library, but she imagined that he wished to be alone, and discreetly yielded to his desire. Besides she was soon reassured by hearing him moving about and opening and closing the window.

At the end of an hour, she decided to look in, and see what Mr. Durrien was doing. She found that he was seated before his desk writing a letter. But she did not see that as he wrote his eyes filled with tears.