

CHAPTER XVI

They Are Becalmed

On the eighth day there was a calm.

It came on by night: so that waking at daybreak, and folding my arms over the gunwale, I looked out upon a scene very hard to describe. The sun was still beneath the horizon; perhaps not yet out of sight from the plains of Paraguay. But the dawn was too strong for the stars; which, one by one, had gone out, like waning lamps after a ball.

Now, as the face of a mirror is a blank, only borrowing character from what it reflects; so in a calm in the Tropics, a colorless sky overhead, the ocean, upon its surface, hardly presents a sign of existence. The deep blue is gone; and the glassy element lies tranced; almost viewless as the air.

But that morning, the two gray firmaments of sky and water seemed collapsed into a vague ellipsis. And alike, the Chamois seemed drifting in the atmosphere as in the sea. Every thing was fused into the calm: sky, air, water, and all. Not a fish was to be seen. The silence was that of a vacuum. No vitality lurked in the air. And this inert blending and brooding of all things seemed gray chaos in conception.

This calm lasted four days and four nights; during which, but a few cat's-paws of wind varied the scene. They were faint as the breath of one dying.

At times the heat was intense. The heavens, at midday, glowing like an ignited coal mine. Our skin curled up like lint; our vision became dim; the brain dizzy.

To our consternation, the water in the breaker became lukewarm, brackish, and slightly putrescent; notwithstanding we kept our spare clothing piled upon the breaker, to shield it from the sun. At last, Jarl enlarged the vent, carefully keeping it exposed. To this precaution, doubtless, we owed more than we then thought. It was now deemed wise to reduce our allowance of water to the smallest modicum consistent with the present preservation of life; strangling all desire for more.

Nor was this all. The upper planking of the boat began to warp; here and there, cracking and splintering. But though we kept it moistened with brine, one of the plank-ends started from its place; and the sharp, sudden sound, breaking the scorching silence, caused us both to spring to our feet. Instantly the sea burst in; but we made shift to secure the rebellious plank with a cord, not having a nail; we then bailed out the boat, nearly half full of water.

On the second day of the calm, we unshipped the mast, to prevent its being pitched out by the occasional rolling of the vast smooth swells now overtaking us. Leagues and leagues away, after its fierce raging, some tempest must have been sending to us its last dying waves. For as a pebble dropped into a pond ruffles it to its marge; so, on all sides, a sea-gale operates as if an asteroid had fallen into the brine; making ringed mountain billows, interminably expanding, instead of ripples.

The great September waves breaking at the base of the Neversink Highlands, far in advance of the swiftest pilot-boat, carry tidings. And full often, they know the last secret of many a stout ship, never heard of from the day she left port. Every wave in my eyes seems a soul.

As there was no steering to be done, Jarl and I sheltered ourselves as well as we could under the awning. And for the first two days, one at a time, and every three or four hours, we dropped overboard for a bath, clinging to the gun-wale; a sharp look-out being kept for prowling sharks. A foot or two below the surface, the water felt cool and refreshing.

On the third day a change came over us. We relinquished bathing, the exertion taxing us too much. Sullenly we laid ourselves down; turned our backs to each other; and were impatient of the slightest casual touch of our persons. What sort of expression my own countenance

wore, I know not; but I hated to look at Jarl's. When I did it was a glare, not a glance. I became more taciturn than he. I can not tell what it was that came over me, but I wished I was alone. I felt that so long as the calm lasted, we were without help; that neither could assist the other; and above all, that for one, the water would hold out longer than for two. I felt no remorse, not the slightest, for these thoughts. It was instinct. Like a desperado giving up the ghost, I desired to gasp by myself.

From being cast away with a brother, good God deliver me!

The four days passed. And on the morning of the fifth, thanks be to Heaven, there came a breeze. Dancingly, mincingly it came, just rippling the sea, until it struck our sails, previously set at the very first token of its advance. At length it slightly freshened; and our poor Chamois seemed raised from the dead.

Beyond expression delightful! Once more we heard the low humming of the sea under our bow, as our boat, like a bird, went singing on its way.

How changed the scene! Overhead, a sweet blue haze, distilling sunlight in drops. And flung abroad over the visible creation was the sun-spangled, azure, rustling robe of the ocean, ermined with wave crests; all else, infinitely blue. Such a cadence of musical sounds! Waves chasing each other, and sporting and frothing in frolicsome foam: painted fish rippling past; and anon the noise of wings as sea-

fowls flew by.

Oh, Ocean, when thou chooseth to smile, more beautiful thou art than
flowery mead or plain!