

CHAPTER VI

THE SARGASSO SEA

OCTOBER 8 to October 13. -- The wind is blowing hard from the northeast, and the Chancellor, under low-reefed top-sail and fore-sail, and laboring against a heavy sea, has been obliged to be brought ahull. The joists and girders all creak again until one's teeth are set on edge. I am the only passenger not remaining below; but I prefer being on deck notwithstanding the driving rain, fine as dust, which penetrates to the very skin. We have been driven along in this fashion for the best part of two days; the "stiffish breeze" has gradually freshened into "a gale"; the top-gallants have been lowered, and, as I write, the wind is blowing with a velocity of fifty or sixty miles an hour. Although the Chancellor has many good points, her drift is considerable, and we have been carried far to the south; we can only guess at our precise position, as the cloudy atmosphere entirely precludes us from taking the sun's altitude.

All along, throughout this period, my fellow-passengers are totally ignorant of the extraordinary course that we are taking. England lies to the northeast, yet we are sailing directly southeast, and Robert Curtis owns that he is quite bewildered; he cannot comprehend why the captain, ever since

this northeasterly gale has been blowing, should persist in allowing the ship to drive to the south, instead of tacking to the northwest until she gets into better quarters.

I was alone with Robert Curtis to-day upon the poop, and could not help saying to him, "Curtis, is your captain mad?"

"Perhaps, sir, I might be allowed to ask what YOU think upon that matter," was his cautious reply.

"Well, to say the truth," I answered. "I can hardly tell; but I confess there is every now and then a wandering in his eye, and an odd look on his face that I do not like. Have you ever sailed with him before?"

"No; this is our first voyage together. Again last night I spoke to him about the route we were taking, but he only said he knew all about it, and that it was all right."

"What do Lieutenant Walter and your boatswain think of it all?" I inquired.

"Think; why, they think just the same as I do," replied the mate; "but if the captain chooses to take the ship to China we should obey his orders."

"But surely," I exclaimed, "there must be some limit to your obedience! Suppose the man is actually mad, what then?"

"If he should be mad enough, Mr. Kazallon, to bring the vessel into any real danger, I shall know what to do."

With this assurance I am forced to be content. Matters, however, have taken a different turn to what I bargained for when I took my passage on board the Chancellor. The weather has become worse and worse. As I have already said, the ship under her large low-reefed top-sail and fore stay-sail has been brought ahull, that is to say, she copes directly with the wind, by presenting her broad bows to the sea; and so we go on still drift, drift, continually to the south.

How southerly our course has been is very apparent; for upon the night of the 11th we fairly entered upon that portion of the Atlantic which is known as the Sargasso Sea. An extensive tract of water is this, inclosed by the warm current of the Gulf Stream, and thickly covered with the wrack, called by the Spaniards "sargasso," the abundance of which so seriously impeded the progress of Columbus's vessel on his first voyage.

Each morning at daybreak the Atlantic has presented an aspect so remarkable, that at my solicitation, M. Letourneur and his son have ventured upon deck to witness the unusual spectacle. The squally gusts make the metal shrouds vibrate like harp-strings; and unless we were on our guard to keep our clothes wrapped tightly to us, they would have been torn off our backs in shreds. The scene presented to our eyes is one of strangest interest. The sea, carpeted thickly with masses of prolific fucus, is a vast unbroken plain of vegetation, through which the vessel makes her way as a plow. Long strips of seaweed caught up by the wind become entangled in the rigging, and hang between the masts in festoons of verdure; while others, varying from two to three hundred feet in length, twine themselves up to the very mast-head, from whence they float like streaming pennants. For many hours now, the Chancellor has been contending with this formidable accumulation of algae; her masts are circled with hydrophytes; her rigging is wreathed everywhere with creepers, fantastic as the untrammelled tendrils of a vine, and as she works her arduous course, there are times when I can only compare her to an animated grove of verdure making its mysterious way over some illimitable prairie.