

CHAPTER VII

VOICES IN THE NIGHT

OCTOBER 14. -- At last we are free from the sea of vegetation, the boisterous gale has moderated into a steady breeze, the sun is shining brightly, the weather is warm and genial, and thus, two reefs in her top-sails, briskly and merrily sails the Chancellor.

Under conditions so favorable, we have been able to take the ship's bearings: our latitude, we find, is 21 deg. 33' N., our longitude, 50 deg. 17' W.

Incomprehensible altogether is the conduct of Captain Huntly. Here we are, already more than ten degrees south of the point from which we started, and yet still we are persistently following a southeasterly course! I cannot bring myself to the conclusion that the man is mad. I have had various conversations with him: he has always spoken rationally and sensibly. He shows no tokens of insanity. Perhaps his case is one of those in which insanity is partial, and where the mania is of a character which extends only to the matters connected with his profession. Yet it is unaccountable.

I can get nothing out of Curtis; he listens coldly when-

ever I allude to the subject, and only repeats what he has said before, that nothing short of an overt act of madness on the part of the captain could induce him to supersede the captain's authority, and that the imminent peril of the ship could alone justify him in taking so decided a measure.

Last evening I went to my cabin about eight o'clock, and after an hour's reading by the light of my cabin-lamp, I retired to my berth and was soon asleep. Some hours later I was aroused by an unaccustomed noise on deck. There were heavy footsteps hurrying to and fro, and the voices of the men were loud and eager, as if the crew were agitated by some strange disturbance. My first impression was, that some tacking had been ordered which rendered it needful to fathom the yards; but the vessel continuing to lie to starboard convinced me that this was not the origin of the commotion. I was curious to know the truth, and made all haste I could to go on deck; but before I was ready, the noise had ceased. I heard Captain Huntly return to his cabin, and accordingly I retired again to my own berth. Whatever may have been the meaning of the maneuver, I cannot tell; it did not seem to result in any improvement in the ship's pace; still it must be owned there was not much wind to speed us along.

At six o'clock this morning I mounted the poop and made

as keen a scrutiny as I could of everything on board. Everything appeared as usual. The Chancellor was running on the larboard tack, and carried low-sails, top-sails, and gallant-sails. Well braced she was; and under a fresh, but not uneasy breeze, was making no less than eleven knots an hour.

Shortly afterward M. Letourneur and Andre came on deck. The young man enjoyed the early morning air, laden with its briny fragrance, and I assisted him to mount the poop. In answer to my inquiry as to whether they had been disturbed by any bustle in the night, Andre replied that he did not wake at all, and had heard nothing.

"I am glad, my boy," said the father, "that you have slept so soundly. I heard the noise of which Mr. Kazallon speaks. It must have been about three o'clock this morning, and it seemed to me as though they were shouting. I thought I heard them say; 'Here, quick, look to the hatches!' but as nobody was called up, I presumed that nothing serious was the matter."

As he spoke I cast my eye at the panel-slides, which fore and aft of the main-mast open into the hold. They seemed to be all close as usual, but I now observed for the first time that they were covered with heavy tarpauling. Wondering

in my own mind what could be the reason for these extra precautions I did not say anything to M. Letourneur, but determined to wait until the mate should come on watch, when he would doubtless give me, I thought, an explanation of the mystery.

The sun rose gloriously, with every promise of a fine dry day. The waning moon was yet above the western horizon, for as it still wants three days to her last quarter she does not set until 10:57 A. M. On consulting my almanac, I find that there will be a new moon on the 24th, and that on that day, little as it may affect us here in mid-ocean, the phenomenon of the high syzyzian tides will take place on the shores of every continent and island.

At the breakfast hour M. Letourneur and Andre went below for a cup of tea, and I remained on the poop alone. As I expected, Curtis appeared, that he might relieve Lieutenant Walter of the watch. I advanced to meet him, but before he even wished me good morning, I saw him cast a quick and searching glance upon the deck, and then, with a slightly contracted brow, proceed to examine the state of the weather and the trim of the sails.

"Where is Captain Huntly?" he said to Walter.

"I have seen nothing of him," answered the lieutenant;
"is there anything fresh up?"

"Nothing whatever," was the curt reply.

They then conversed for a few moments in an undertone, and I could see that Walter by his gesture gave a negative answer to some question which the mate had asked him.

"Send me the boatswain, Walter," said Curtis aloud as the lieutenant moved away.

The boatswain immediately appeared, and another conversation was carried on in whispers. The man repeatedly shook his head as he replied to Curtis's inquiries, and then, in obedience to orders, called the men who were on watch, and made them plentifully water the tarpauling that covered the great hatchway.

Curious to fathom the mystery I went up to Curtis and began to talk with him upon ordinary topics, hoping that he would himself introduce the subject that was uppermost in my mind; finding, however, that he did not allude to it, I asked him point blank:

"What was the matter in the night, Curtis?"

He looked at me steadily, but made no reply.

"What was it?" I repeated. "M. Letourneur and myself were both of us disturbed by a very unusual commotion overhead."

"Oh, a mere nothing," he said at length; "the man at the helm had made a false move, and we had to pipe hands to brace the ship a bit; but it was soon all put to rights. It was nothing, nothing at all."

I said no more; but I can not resist the impression that Robert Curtis has not acted with me in his usual straightforward manner.