

CHAPTER VIII

FIRE ON BOARD

OCTOBER 15 to October 18. -- The wind is still in the northeast. There is no change in the Chancellor's course, and to an unprejudiced eye all would appear to be going on as usual. But I have an uneasy consciousness that something is not quite right. Why should the hatchways be so hermetically closed as though a mutinous crew was imprisoned between decks? I can not help thinking too that there is something in the sailors so constantly standing in groups and breaking off their talk so suddenly whenever we approach; and several times I have caught the word "hatches" which arrested M. Letourneur's attention on the night of the disturbance.

On the 15th, while I was walking on the forecastle, I overheard one of the sailors, a man named Owen, say to his mates:

"Now I just give you all warning that I am not going to wait until the last minute. Everyone for himself, say I."

"Why, what do you mean to do?" asked Jynxstrop, the cook.

"Pshaw!" said Owen, "do you suppose that longboats were only made for porpoises?"

Something at that moment occurred to interrupt the conversation, and I heard no more. It occurred to me whether there was not some conspiracy among the crew, of which probably Curtis had already detected the symptoms. I am quite aware that some sailors are most rebelliously disposed, and required to be ruled with a rod of iron.

Yesterday and to-day I have observed Curtis remonstrating somewhat vehemently with Captain Huntly, but there is no obvious result arising from their interviews; the captain apparently being bent upon some purpose, of which it is only too manifest that the mate decidedly disapproves.

Captain Huntly is undoubtedly laboring under strong nervous excitement; and M. Letourneur has more than once remarked how silent he has become at meal-times; for although Curtis continually endeavors to start some subject of general interest, yet neither Mr. Falsten, Mr. Kear, nor Mr. Ruby are the men to take it up, and consequently the conversation flags hopelessly, and soon drops. The passengers too are now, with good cause, beginning to murmur at the length of the voyage, and Mr. Kear, who considers that the very elements ought to yield to his convenience, lets

the captain know by his consequential and haughty manner that he holds him responsible for the delay.

During the course of yesterday the mate gave repeated orders for the deck to be watered again and again, and although as a general rule this is a business which is done, once for all, in the early morning, the crew did not utter a word of complaint at the additional work thus imposed upon them. The tarpaulins on the hatches have thus been kept continually wet, so that their close and heavy texture is rendered quite impervious to the air. The Chancellor's pumps afford a copious supply of water, so that I should not suppose that even the daintiest and most luxurious craft belonging to an aristocratic yacht club was ever subject to a more thorough scouring. I tried to reconcile myself to the belief that it was the high temperature of the tropical regions upon which we are entering, that rendered such extra sousing a necessity, and recalled to my recollection how, during the night of the 13th, I had found the atmosphere below deck so stifling, that in spite of the heavy swell I was obliged to open the porthole of my cabin, on the starboard side, to get a breath of air.

This morning at daybreak I went on deck. The sun had scarcely risen, and the air was fresh and cool, in strange contrast to the heat which below the poop had been quite op-

pressive. The sailors as usual were washing the deck. A great sheet of water, supplied continuously by the pumps, was rolling in tiny wavelets, and escaping now to starboard, now to larboard through the scupper-holes. After watching the men for a while as they ran about bare-footed, I could not resist the desire to join them, so taking off my shoes and stockings, I proceeded to dabble in the flowing water.

Great was my amazement to find the deck perfectly hot to my feet! Curtis heard my exclamation of surprise, and before I could put my thoughts into words, said:

"Yes! there is fire on board!"