

## CHAPTER IX

### CURTIS EXPLAINS THE SITUATION

OCTOBER 19. -- Everything, then, is clear. The uneasiness of the crew, their frequent conferences, Owen's mysterious words, the constant scourings of the deck and the oppressive heat of the cabins which had been noticed even by my fellow-passengers, all are explained.

After his grave communication, Curtis remained silent. I shivered with a thrill of horror; a calamity the most terrible that can befall a voyager stared me in the face, and it was some seconds before I could recover sufficient composure to inquire when the fire was first discovered.

"Six days ago," replied the mate.

"Six days ago!" I exclaimed; "why, then, it was that night."

"Yes," he said, interrupting me; "it was the night you heard the disturbance upon deck. The men on watch noticed a slight smoke issuing from the large hatchway and immediately called Captain Huntly and myself. We found beyond all doubt, that the cargo was on fire, and what was worse, that there was no possibility of getting at the seat of

the combustion. What could we do? Why, we took the only precaution that was practicable under the circumstances, and resolved most carefully to exclude every breath of air from penetrating into the hold. For some time I hoped that we had been successful. I thought that the fire was stifled; but during the last three days there is every reason to make us know that it has been gaining strength. Do what we will, the deck gets hotter and hotter, and unless it were kept constantly wet, it would be unbearable to the feet. But I am glad, Mr. Kazallon," he added; "that you have made the discovery. It is better that you should know it." I listened in silence. I was now fully aroused to the gravity of the situation and thoroughly comprehended how we were in the very face of a calamity which it seemed that no human power could avert.

"Do you know what has caused the fire?" I presently inquired.

"It probably arose," he answered, "from the spontaneous combustion of the cotton. The case is rare, but it is far from unknown. Unless the cotton is perfectly dry when it is shipped, its confinement in a damp or ill-ventilated hold will sometimes cause it to ignite; and I have no doubt it is this that has brought about our misfortune."

"But after all," I said, "the cause matters very little.

Is there no remedy? Is there nothing to be done?"

"Nothing, Mr. Kazallon," he said. "As I told you before, we have adopted the only possible measure within our power to check the fire. At one time I thought of knocking a hole in the ship's timbers just on her water-line, and letting in just as much water as the pumps could afterward get rid of again; but we found the combustion was right in the middle of the cargo and that we should be obliged to flood the entire hold before we could get at the right place. That scheme consequently was no good. During the night, I had the deck bored in various places and water poured down through the holes; but that again seemed of no use. There is only one thing that can be done; we must persevere in excluding most carefully every breath of outer air, so that perhaps the conflagration, deprived of oxygen, may smoulder itself out. That is our only hope."

"But, you say the fire is increasing?"

"Yes; and that shows that in spite of all our care there is some aperture which we have not been able to discover, by which, somehow or other, air gets into the hold."

"Have you ever heard of a vessel surviving such cir-

cumstances?" I asked.

"Yes, Mr. Kazallon," said Curtis; "it is not at all an unusual thing for ships laden with cotton to arrive at Liverpool or Havre with a portion of their cargo consumed; and I have myself known more than one captain run into port with his deck scorching his very feet, and who, to save his vessel and the remainder of his freight has been compelled to unload with the utmost expedition. But, in such cases, of course the fire has been more or less under control throughout the voyage; with us, it is increasing day by day, and I tell you I am convinced there is an aperture somewhere which has escaped our notice."

"But would it not be advisable for us to retrace our course, and make for the nearest land?"

"Perhaps it would," he answered. "Walter and I, and the boatswain, are going to talk the matter over seriously with the captain to-day. But, between ourselves, I have taken the responsibility upon myself; I have already changed the tack to the southwest; we are now straight before the wind, and consequently we are sailing toward the coast."

"I need hardly ask," I added; "whether any of the other

passengers are at all aware of the imminent danger in which we are placed."

"None of them," he said; "not in the least; and I hope you will not enlighten them. We don't want terrified women and cowardly men to add to our embarrassment; the crew are under orders to keep a strict silence on the subject. Silence is indispensable."

I promised to keep the matter a profound secret, as I fully entered into Curtis's views as to the absolute necessity for concealment.