

CHAPTER X

PICRATE OF POTASH ON BOARD

OCTOBER 20 and 21. -- The Chancellor is now crowded with all the canvas she can carry, and at times her topmasts threaten to snap with the pressure. But Curtis is ever on the alert; he never leaves his post beside the man at the helm, and without compromising the safety of the vessel, he contrives, by tacking to the breeze, to urge her on at her utmost speed.

All day long on the 20th the passengers were assembled on the poop. Evidently they found the heat of the cabins painfully oppressive, and most of them lay stretched upon benches and quietly enjoyed the gentle rolling of the vessel. The increasing heat of the deck did not reveal itself to their well-shod feet, and the constant scouring of the boards did not excite any suspicion in their torpid minds. M. Letourneur, it is true, did express his surprise that the crew of an ordinary merchant vessel should be distinguished by such extraordinary cleanliness; but as I replied to him in a very casual tone, he passed no further remark. I could not help regretting that I had given Curtis my pledge of silence, and longed intensely to communicate the melancholy secret to the energetic Frenchman; for at times when I reflect upon the eight-and-twenty victims who may probably,

only too soon, be a prey to the relentless flames, my heart seems ready to burst.

The important consultation between captain, mate, lieutenant and boatswain has taken place. Curtis has confided the result to me. He says that Huntly, the captain, is completely demoralized; he has lost all power and energy; and practically leaves the command of the ship to him. It is now certain the fire is beyond control, and that sooner or later it will burst out in full violence. The temperature of the crew's quarters has already become almost unbearable. One solitary hope remains; it is that we may reach the shore before the final catastrophe occurs. The Lesser Antilles are the nearest land; and although they are some five or six hundred miles away, if the wind remains northeast there is yet a chance of reaching them in time.

Carrying royals and studding-sails, the Chancellor during the last four-and-twenty hours has held a steady course. M. Letourneur is the only one of all the passengers who has remarked the change of tack; Curtis, however, has set all speculation on his part at rest by telling him that he wanted to get ahead of the wind, and that he was tacking to the west to catch a favorable current.

To-day, the 21st, all has gone on as usual; and as far as

the observation of the passengers has reached, the ordinary routine has been undisturbed. Curtis indulges the hope even yet that by excluding the air the fire may be stifled before it ignites the general cargo; he has hermetically closed every accessible aperture, and has even taken the precaution of plugging the orifices of the pumps, under the impression that their suction-tubes, running as they do to the bottom of the hold, may possibly be channels for conveying some molecules of air. Altogether, he considers it a good sign that the combustion has not betrayed itself by some external issue of smoke.

The day would have passed without any incident worth recording, if I had not chanced to overhear a fragment of a conversation which demonstrated that our situation, hitherto precarious enough, had now become most appalling.

As I was sitting on the poop, two of my fellow-passengers, Falsten, the engineer, and Ruby, the merchant, whom I had observed to be often in company, were engaged in conversation almost close to me. What they said was evidently not intended for my hearing, but my attention was directed toward them by some very emphatic gestures of dissatisfaction on the part of Falsten, and I could not forbear listening to what followed.

"Preposterous! shameful!" exclaimed Falsten; "nothing could be more imprudent."

"Pooh! pooh!" replied Ruby, "it's all right; it is not the first time I have done it."

"But don't you know that any shock at any time might cause an explosion?"

"Oh, it's all properly secured," said Ruby, "tight enough; I have no fears on that score, Mr. Falsten."

"But why," asked Falsten, "did you not inform the captain?"

"Just because if I had informed him, he would not have taken the case on board."

The wind dropped for a few seconds; and for a brief interval I could not catch what passed; but I could see that Falsten continued to remonstrate, while Ruby answered by shrugging his shoulders. At length I heard Falsten say.

"Well, at any rate, the captain must be informed of this, and the package shall be thrown overboard. I don't want to be blown up."

I started. To what could the engineer be alluding? Evidently he had not the remotest suspicion that the cargo was already on fire. In another moment the words "picrate of potash" brought me to my feet, and with an involuntary impulse I rushed up to Ruby, and seized him by the shoulder.

"Is there picrate of potash on board?" I almost shrieked.

"Yes," said Falsten, "a case containing thirty pounds."

"Where is it?" I cried.

"Down in the hold, with the cargo."