

CHAPTER XI

THE PASSENGERS DISCOVER THEIR DANGER

WHAT my feelings were I cannot describe; but it was hardly in terror so much as with a kind of resignation that I made my way to Curtis on the forecastle, and made him aware that the alarming character of our situation was now complete, as there was enough explosive matter on board to blow up a mountain. Curtis received the information as coolly as it was delivered, and after I had made him acquainted with all the particulars said, "Not a word of this must be mentioned to anyone else, Mr. Kazallon. Where is Ruby, now?"

"On the poop," I said.

"Will you then come with me, sir?"

Ruby and Falsten were sitting just as I had left them. Curtis walked straight up to Ruby, and asked him whether what he had been told was true.

"Yes, quite true," said Ruby, complacently, thinking that the worst that could befall him would be that he might be convicted of a little smuggling.

I observed that Curtis was obliged for a moment or two to clasp his hands tightly together behind his back to prevent himself from seizing the unfortunate passenger by the throat; but suppressing his indignation, he proceeded quietly, though sternly, to interrogate him about the facts of the case. Ruby only confirmed what I had already told him. With characteristic Anglo-Saxon incautiousness he had brought on board, with the rest of his baggage, a case containing no less than thirty pounds of picrate, and had allowed the explosive matter to be stowed in the hold with as little compunction as a Frenchman would feel in smuggling a single bottle of wine. He had not informed the captain of the dangerous nature of the contents of the package, because he was perfectly aware that he would have been refused permission to bring the package on board.

"Anyway," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "you can't hang me for it; and if the package gives you so much concern, you are quite at liberty to throw it into the sea. My luggage is insured."

I was beside myself with fury; and not being endowed with Curtis's reticence and self-control, before he could interfere to stop me, I cried out:

"You fool! don't you know that there is fire on board?"

In an instant I regretted my words. Most earnestly I wished them unuttered. But it was too late -- their effect upon Ruby was electrical. He was paralyzed with terror; his limbs stiffened convulsively; his eye was dilated; he gasped for breath, and was speechless. All of a sudden he threw up his arms, and, as though he momentarily expected an explosion, he darted down from the poop, and paced frantically up and down the deck, gesticulating like a madman, and shouting:

"Fire on board! Fire! Fire!"

On hearing the outcry, all the crew, supposing that the fire had now in reality broken out, rushed on deck; the rest of the passengers soon joined them, and the scene that ensued was one of the utmost confusion. Mrs. Kear fell down senseless on the deck, and her husband, occupied in looking after himself, left her to the tender mercies of Miss Herbey. Curtis endeavored to silence Ruby's ravings, whilst I, in as few words as I could, made M. Letourneur aware of the extent to which the cargo was on fire. The father's first thought was for Andre, but the young man preserved an admirable composure, and begged his father not to be alarmed, as the danger was not immediate. Meanwhile the sailors had loosened all the tacklings of the long-boat, and were pre-

paring to launch it, when Curtis's voice was heard peremptorily bidding them to desist; he assured them that the fire had made no further progress; that Mr. Ruby had been unduly excited and not conscious of what he had said; and he pledged his word that when the right moment should arrive he would allow them all to leave the ship; but that moment, he said, had not yet come.

At the sound of a voice which they had learned to honor and respect, the crew paused in their operations, and the long-boat remained suspended in its place. Fortunately, even Ruby himself in the midst of his ravings, had not dropped a word about the picrate that had been deposited in the hold; for although the mate had a power over the sailors that Captain Huntly had never possessed, I feel certain that if the true state of the case had been known, nothing on earth would have prevented some of them, in their consternation, from effecting an escape. As it was, only Curtis, Falsten, and myself were cognizant of the terrible secret.

As soon as order was restored, the mate and I joined Falsten on the poop, where he had remained throughout the panic, and where we found him with folded arms, deep in thought, as it might be, solving some hard mechanical problem. He promised, at my request, that he would reveal

nothing of the new danger to which we were exposed through Ruby's imprudence. Curtis himself took the responsibility of informing Captain Huntly of our critical situation.

In order to insure complete secrecy, it was necessary to secure the person of the unhappy Ruby, who, quite beside himself, continued to rave up and down the deck with the incessant cry of "Fire! fire!" Accordingly Curtis gave orders to some of his men to seize him and gag him; and before he could make any resistance the miserable man was captured and safely lodged in confinement in his own cabin.