

## CHAPTER XII

### CURTIS BECOMES CAPTAIN

OCTOBER 22. -- Curtis has told the captain everything; for he persists in ostensibly recognizing him as his superior officer, and refuses to conceal from him our true situation. Captain Huntly received the communication in perfect silence, and merely passing his hand across his forehead as though to banish some distressing thought, re-entered his cabin without a word.

Curtis, Lieutenant Walter, Falsten, and myself have been discussing the chances of our safety, and I am surprised to find with how much composure we can all survey our anxious predicament.

"There is no doubt," said Curtis, "that we must abandon all hope of arresting the fire; the heat toward the bow has already become well-nigh unbearable, and the time must come when the flames will find a vent through the deck. If the sea is calm enough for us to make use of the boats, well and good; we shall of course get quit of the ship as quietly as we can; if, on the other hand the weather should be adverse, or the wind be boisterous, we must stick to our place, and contend with the flames to the very last; perhaps, after all, we shall fare far better with the fire as a declared

enemy than as a hidden one."

Falsten and I agreed with what he said, and I pointed out to him that he had quite overlooked the fact of there being thirty pounds of explosive matter in the hold.

"No," he gravely replied, "I have not forgotten it, but it is a circumstance of which I do not trust myself to think. I dare not run the risk of admitting air into the hold by going down to search for the powder, and yet I know not at what moment it may explode. No; it is a matter that I cannot take at all into my reckoning; it must remain in higher hands than mine."

We bowed our heads in a silence which was solemn. In the present state of the weather, immediate flight was, we knew, impossible.

After considerable pause, Mr. Falsten, as calmly as though he were delivering some philosophic dogma, quietly observed:

"The explosion, if I may use the formula of science, is not necessary, but contingent."

"But tell me, Mr. Falsten," I asked, "is it possible for

picrate of potash to ignite without concussion?"

"Certainly it is," replied the engineer. "Under ordinary circumstances, picrate of potash although not MORE inflammable than common powder, yet possesses the SAME degree of inflammability."

We now prepared to go on deck. As we left the saloon, in which we had been sitting, Curtis seized my hand.

"Oh, Mr. Kazallon," he exclaimed, "if you only knew the bitterness of the agony I feel at seeing this fine vessel doomed to be devoured by flames, and at being so powerless to save her." Then quickly recovering himself, he continued:

"But I am forgetting myself; you, if no other, must know what I am suffering. It is all over now," he said more cheerfully.

"Is our condition quite desperate?" I asked.

"It is just this," he answered deliberately, "we are over a mine, and already the match has been applied to the train. How long that train may be, 'tis not for me to say."

And with these words he left me.

The other passengers, in common with the crew, are still in entire ignorance of the extremity of peril to which we are exposed, although they are all aware that there is fire in the hold. As soon as the fact was announced, Mr. Kear, after communicating to Curtis his instructions that he thought he should have the fire immediately extinguished, and intimating that he held him responsible for all contingencies that might happen, retired to his cabin, where he has remained ever since, fully occupied in collecting and packing together the more cherished articles of his property and without the semblance of a care or a thought for his unfortunate wife, whose condition, in spite of her ludicrous complaints, was truly pitiable. Miss Herbey, however, is unrelaxing in her attentions, and the unremitting diligence with which she fulfills her offices of duty, commands my highest admiration.

OCTOBER 23. -- This morning, Captain Huntly sent for Curtis into his cabin, and the mate has since made me acquainted with what passed between them.

"Curtis," began the captain, his haggard eye betraying only too plainly some mental derangement, "I am a sailor, am I not?"

"Certainly, captain," was the prompt acquiescence of the

mate.

"I do not know how it is," continued the captain, "but I seem bewildered; I can not recollect anything. Are we not bound for Liverpool? Ah! yes! of course. And have we kept a northeasterly direction since we left?"

"No, sir, according to your orders we have been sailing southeast, and here we are in the tropics."

"And what is the name of the ship?"

"The Chancellor, sir."

"Yes, yes, the Chancellor, so it is. Well, Curtis, I really can't take her back to the north. I hate the sea, the very sight of it makes me ill, I would much rather not leave my cabin."

Curtis went on to tell me how he had tried to persuade him that with a little time and care he would soon recover his indisposition, and feel himself again; but the captain had interrupted him by saying:

"Well, well; we shall see by-and-by; but for the present you must take this for my positive order; you must, from

this time, at once take the command of the ship, and act just as if I were not on board. Under present circumstances, I can do nothing. My brain is all in a whirl, you can not tell what I am suffering;" and the unfortunate man pressed both his hands convulsively against his forehead.

"I weighed the matter carefully for a moment," added Curtis, "and seeing what his condition too truly was, I acquiesced in all that he required and withdrew, promising him that all his orders should be obeyed."

After hearing these particulars, I could not help remarking how fortunate it was that the captain had resigned of his own accord, for although he might not be actually insane, it was very evident that his brain was in a very morbid condition.

"I succeeded him at a very critical moment," said Curtis thoughtfully; "but I shall endeavor to do my duty."

A short time afterward he sent for his boatswain and ordered him to assemble the crew at the foot of the main-mast. As soon as the men were together, he addressed them very calmly, but very firmly.

"My men," he said, "I have to tell you that Captain

Huntly, on account of the dangerous situation in which circumstances have placed us, and for other reasons known to myself, has thought right to resign his command to me.

From this time forward, I am captain of this vessel."

Thus quietly and simply was the change effected, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that the Chancellor is now under the command of a conscientious, energetic man, who will shirk nothing that he believes to be for our common good. M. Letourneur, Andre, Mr. Falsten, and myself immediately offered him our best wishes, in which Lieutenant Walter and the boatswain most cordially joined.

The ship still holds her course southwest, and Curtis crowds on all sail and makes as speedily as possible for the nearest of the Lesser Antilles.