

CHAPTER XIII

BETWEEN FIRE AND WATER

OCTOBER 24 to 29. -- For the last five days the sea has been very heavy, and although the Chancellor sails with wind and wave in her favor, yet her progress is considerably impeded. Here on board this veritable fire-ship I cannot help contemplating with a longing eye this vast ocean that surrounds us. The water supply should be all we need.

"Why not bore the deck?" I said to Curtis. "Why not admit the water by tons into the hold? What could be the harm? The fire would be quenched; and what would be easier than to pump the water out again?"

"I have already told you, Mr. Kazallon," said Curtis, "that the very moment we admit the air, the flames will rush forth to the very top of the masts. No; we must have courage and patience; we must wait. There is nothing whatever to be done, except to close every aperture."

The fire continued to progress even more rapidly than we had hitherto suspected. The heat gradually drove the passengers nearly all on deck, and the two stern cabins, lighted, as I said, by their windows in the aft-board were the only quarters below that were inhabitable. Of these Mrs. Kear

occupied one, and Curtis reserved the other for Ruby, who, a raving maniac, had to be kept rigidly under restraint. I went down occasionally to see him, but invariably found him in a state of abject terror, uttering horrible shrieks, as though possessed with the idea that he was being scorched by the most excruciating heat.

Once or twice, too, I looked in upon the ex-captain. He was always calm and spoke quite rationally on any subject except his own profession; but in connection with that he prated away the merest nonsense. He suffered greatly, but steadily declined all my offers of attention, and pertinaciously refused to leave his cabin.

To-day, an acrid, nauseating smoke made its way through the panelings that partition off the quarters of the crew. At once Curtis ordered the partition to be enveloped in wet tarpaulin, but the fumes penetrated even this, and filled the whole neighborhood of the ship's bows with a reeking vapor that was positively stifling. As we listened, too, we could hear a dull rumbling sound, but we were as mystified as ever to comprehend where the air could have entered that was evidently fanning the flames. Only too certainly, it was now becoming a question not of days nor even of hours before we must be prepared for the final catastrophe. The sea was still running high, and escape by the boats was

plainly impossible. Fortunately, as I have said, the main-mast and the mizzen are of iron; otherwise the great heat at their base would long ago have brought them down and our chances of safety would have been very much imperiled; but by crowding on sail the Chancellor in the full northeast wind continued to make her way with undiminished speed.

It is now a fortnight since the fire was first discovered, and the proper working of the ship has gradually become a more and more difficult matter. Even with thick shoes any attempt to walk upon deck up to the forecastle was soon impracticable, and the poop, simply because its floor is elevated somewhat above the level of the hold, is now the only available standing-place. Water began to lose its effect upon the scorched and shriveling planks; the resin oozed out from the knots in the wood, the seams burst open, and the tar, melted by the heat, followed the rollings of the vessel, and formed fantastic patterns about the deck.

Then to complete our perplexity, the wind shifted suddenly round to the northwest, whence it blew a perfect hurricane. To no purpose did Curtis do everything in his power to bring the ship ahull; every effort was in vain; the Chancellor could not bear her trysail, so there was nothing to be done but to let her go with the wind, and drift further and further from the land for which we are longing so

eagerly.

To-day, the 29th, the tempest seemed to reach its height; the waves appeared to us mountains high, and dashed the spray most violently across the deck. A boat could not live a moment in such a sea.

Our situation is terrible. We all wait in silence, some few on the forecastle, the great proportion of us on the poop. As for the picrate, for the time we have quite forgotten its existence; indeed it might almost seem as though its explosion would come as a relief, for no catastrophe, however terrible, could far exceed the torture of our suspense.

While he had still the remaining chance, Curtis rescued from the store-room such few provisions as the heat of the compartment allowed him to obtain; and a lot of cases of salt meat and biscuits, a cask of brandy, some barrels of fresh water, together with some sails and wraps, a compass and other instruments are now lying packed in a mass all ready for prompt removal to the boats whenever we shall be obliged to leave the ship.

About eight o'clock in the evening, a noise is heard, distinct even above the raging of the hurricane. The panels of the deck are upheaved, and volumes of black smoke issue up-

ward as if from a safety-valve. A universal consternation seizes one and all; we must leave the volcano which is about to burst beneath our feet. The crew run to Curtis for orders. He hesitates; looks first at the huge and threatening waves; looks then at the boats. The long-boat is there, suspended right along the center of the deck; but it is impossible to approach it now; the yawl, however, hoisted on the starboard side, and the whale-boat suspended aft, are still available. The sailors make frantically for the yawl.

"Stop, stop," shouts Curtis; "do you mean to cut off our last and only chance of safety? Would you launch a boat in such a sea as this?"

A few of them, with Owen at their head, give no heed to what he says. Rushing to the poop, and seizing a cutlass, Curtis shouts again:

"Touch the tackling of the davit, one of you; only touch it, and I'll cleave your skull."

Awed by his determined manner, the men retire, some clambering into the shrouds, while others mount to the very top of the masts.

At eleven o'clock, several loud reports are heard, caused

by the bursting asunder of the partitions of the hold. Clouds of smoke issue from the front, followed by a long tongue of lambent flame that seems to encircle the mizzen-mast. The fire now reaches to the cabin of Mrs. Kear, who, shrieking wildly, is brought on deck by Miss Herbey. A moment more, and Silas Huntly makes his appearance, his face all blackened with the grimy smoke; he bows to Curtis, as he passes, and then proceeds in the calmest manner to mount the aft-shrouds, and installs himself at the very top of the mizzen.

The sight of Huntly recalls to my recollection the prisoner still below, and my first impulse is to rush to the staircase and do what I can to set him free. But the maniac has already eluded his confinement, and with singed hair and his clothes already alight, rushes upon deck. Like a salamander he passes across the burning deck with unscathed feet, and glides through the stifling smoke with unchoked breath. Not a sound escapes his lips.

Another loud report; the long-boat is shivered into fragments; the middle panel bursts the tarpaulin that covered it, and a stream of fire, free at length from the restraint that had held it, rises half-mast high.

"The picrate! the picrate!" shrieks the madman; "we

shall all be blown up! the picrate will blow us all up."

And in an instant, before we can get near him, he has buried himself, through the open hatchway, down into the fiery furnace below.