

## CHAPTER XV

### SHIPWRECKED

THE night of the 29th continued. -- It was not yet midnight; the darkness was most profound, and we could see nothing. But was it probable that we had stranded on the coast of America?

Very shortly after the ship had thus come to a stand-still a clanking of chains was heard proceeding from her bows.

"That is well," said Curtis; "Walter and the boatswain have cast both the anchors. Let us hope they will hold."

Then, clinging to the netting, he clambered along the starboard side, on which the ship had heeled, as far as the flames would allow him. He clung to the holdfasts of the shrouds, and in spite of the heavy seas that dashed against the vessel he maintained his position for a considerable time, evidently listening to some sound that had caught his ear in the midst of the tempest. In about a quarter of an hour he returned to the poop.

"Heaven be praised! " he said, "the water is coming in, and perhaps may get the better of the fire."

"True," said I, "but what then?"

"That," he replied, "is a question for bye-and-bye. We can think now only of the present."

Already I fancied that the violence of the flames was somewhat abated, and that the two opposing elements were in fierce contention. Some plank in the ship's side was evidently stove in, admitting free passage for the waves. But how, when the water had mastered the fire, should we be able to master the water? Our natural course would be to use the pumps, but these, in the very midst of the conflagration, were quite unavailable.

For three long hours, in anxious suspense, we watched, and waited. Where we were we could not tell. One thing alone was certain; the tide was ebbing beneath us, and the waves were relaxing in their violence. Once let the fire be extinguished, and then, perhaps, there would be room to hope that the next high tide would set us afloat.

Toward half-past four in the morning the curtain of fire and smoke, which had shut off communication between the two extremities of the ship, became less dense, and we could faintly distinguish that party of the crew who had taken refuge in the fore-castle; and before long, although it was

impracticable to step upon the deck, the lieutenant and the boatswain contrived to clamber over the gunwale, along the rails, and joined Curtis on the poop.

Here they held a consultation, to which I was admitted.

They were all of opinion that nothing could be done until daylight should give us something of an idea of our actual position. If we then found that we were near the shore, we would, weather permitting, endeavor to land, either in the boat or upon a raft. If, on the other hand, no land were in sight, and the Chancellor were ascertained to be stranded on some isolated reef, all we could do would be to get her afloat, and put her into condition for reaching the nearest coast. Curtis told us that it was long since he had been able to take any observation of latitude, but there was no doubt the northwest wind had driven us far to the south; and he thought, as he was ignorant of the existence of any reef in this part of the Atlantic, that it was just possible that we had been driven on to the coast of some portion of South America.

I reminded him that we were in momentary expectation of an explosion, and suggested that it would be advisable to abandon the ship and take refuge on the reef. But he would not hear of such a proceeding, said that the reef would probably be covered at high tide, and persisted in the

original resolution, that no decided action could be taken before the daylight appeared.

I immediately reported this decision of the captain to my fellow-passengers. None of them seemed to realize the new danger to which the Chancellor may be exposed by being cast upon an unknown reef, hundreds of miles it may be from land. All are for the time possessed with one idea, one hope; and that is, that the fire may now be quenched and the explosion averted.

And certainly their hopes seem in a fair way of being fulfilled. Already the raging flames that poured forth from the hatches have given place to dense black smoke, and although occasionally some fiery streaks dart across the dusky fumes, yet they are instantly extinguished. The waves are doing what pumps and buckets could never have effected; by their inundation they are steadily stifling the fire which was as steadily spreading to the whole bulk of the 1,700 bales of cotton.