CHAPTER XVI

SILAS HUNTLY RESCUED FROM THE WAVES

OCTOBER 30. -- At the first gleam of daylight we eagerly scanned the southern and western horizons, but the morning mists limited our view. Land was nowhere to be seen. The tide was now almost at its lowest ebb, and the color of the few peaks of rock that jutted up around us showed that the reef on which we had stranded was of basaltic formation. There were now only about six feet of water around the Chancellor, though with a full freight she draws about fifteen. It was remarkable how far she had been carried on to the shelf of rock, but the number of times that she had touched the bottom before she finally ran aground left us no doubt that she had been lifted up and borne along on the top of an enormous wave. She now lies with her stern considerably higher than her bows, a position which renders walking upon the deck anything but an easy matter, moreover as the tide receded she heeled over so much to larboard that at one time Curtis feared she would altogether capsize; that fear, however, since the tide has reached its lowest mark, has happily proved groundless.

At six o'clock some violent blows were felt against the ship's side, and at the same time a voice was distinguished, shouting loudly, "Curtis! Curtis!" Following the direc-

tion of the cries we saw that the broken mizzen-mast was being washed against the vessel, and in the dusky morning twilight we could make out the figure of a man clinging to the rigging. Curtis, at the peril of his life, hastened to bring the man on board. It proved to be none other than Silas Huntly, who, after being carried overboard with the mast, had thus, almost by a miracle, escaped a watery grave. Without a word of thanks to his deliverer, the ex-captain, passive, like an automaton, passed on and took his seat in the most secluded corner of the poop. The broken mizzen may, perhaps, be of service to us at some future time, and with that idea it has been rescued from the waves and lashed securely to the stern.

By this time it was light enough to see for a distance of three miles round; but as yet nothing could be discerned to make us think that we were near a coast. The line of breakers ran for about a mile from southwest to northeast, and two hundred fathoms to the north of the ship an irregular mass of rocks formed a small islet. This islet rose about fifty feet above the sea, and was consequently above the level of the highest tides; while a sort of causeway, available at low water, would enable us to reach the island, if necessity required. But there the reef ended; beyond it the sea again resumed its somber hue, betokening deep water. In all probability, then, this was a solitary shoal,

unattached to a shore, and the gloom of a bitter disappointment began to weigh upon our spirits.

In another hour the mists had totally disappeared, and it was broad daylight. I and M. Letourneur stood watching Curtis as he continued eagerly to scan the western horizon. Astonishment was written on his countenance; to him it appeared perfectly incredible that, after our course for so long had been due south from the Bermudas, no land should be in sight. But not a speck, however minute, broke the clearly-defined line that joined sea and sky. After a time Curtis made his way along the netting to the shrouds, and swung himself quickly up to the top of the mainmast. For several minutes he remained there examining the open space around, then seizing one of the backstays he glided down and rejoined us on the poop.

"No land in sight," he said, in answer to our eager looks.

At this point Mr. Kear interposed, and in a gruff, ill-tempered tone, asked Curtis where we were. Curtis replied that he did not know.

"You don't know, sir? Then all I can say is that you ought to know!" exclaimed the petroleum merchant.

"That may be, sir; but at present I am as ignorant of our whereabouts as you are yourself," said Curtis.

"Well," said Mr. Kear, "just please to know that I don't want to stay forever on your everlasting ship, so I beg you will make haste and start off again."

Curtis condescended to make no other reply than a shrug of the shoulders, and turning away he informed M. Letourneur and myself that if the sun came out he intended to take its altitude and find out to what part of the ocean we had been driven.

His next care was to distribute preserved meat and biscuit among the passengers and crew already half fainting with hunger and fatigue, and then he set to work to devise measures for setting the ship afloat.

The conflagration was greatly abated; no flames now appeared, and although some black smoke still issued from the interior, yet its volume was far less than before. The first step was to discover how much water had entered the hold. The deck was still too hot to walk upon; but after two hours' irrigation the boards became sufficiently cool for the boatswain to proceed to take some soundings, and he shortly afterward announced that there were five feet of

water below. This the captain determined should not be pumped out at present, as he wanted it thoroughly to do its duty before he got rid of it.

The next subject for consideration was whether it would be advisable to abandon the vessel, and to take refuge on the reef. Curtis thought not; and the lieutenant and the boatswain agreed with him. The chances of an explosion were greatly diminished, as it had been ascertained that the water had reached that part of the hold in which Ruby's luggage had been deposited; while, on the other hand, in the event of rough weather, our position even upon the most elevated points of rock might be very critical. It was accordingly resolved that both passengers and crew were safest on board.

Acting upon this decision we proceeded to make a kind of encampment on the poop, and a few mattresses that were rescued uninjured have been given up for the use of the two ladies. Such of the crew as had saved their hammocks have been told to place them under the forecastle where they would have to stow themselves as best they could, their ordinary quarters being absolutely uninhabitable.

Fortunately, although the store-room has been considerably exposed to the heat, its contents are not very seriously

damaged, and all the barrels of water and the greater part of the provisions are quite intact. The stock of spare sails, which had been packed away in front, is also free from injury. The wind has dropped considerably since the early morning, and the swell in the sea is far less heavy. On the whole our spirits are reviving and we begin to think we may yet find a way out of our troubles.

M. Letourneur, his son, and I, have just had a long conversation about the ship's officers. We consider their conduct, under the late trying circumstances, to have been most exemplary, and their courage, energy, and endurance to have been beyond all praise. Lieutenant Walter, the boatswain, and Dowlas the carpenter have all alike distinguished themselves, and made us feel that they are men to be relied on. As for Curtis, words can scarcely be found to express our admiration of his character; he is the same as he has ever been, the very life of his crew, cheering them on by word or gesture; finding an expedient for every difficulty, and always foremost in every action.

The tide turned at seven this morning, and by eleven all the rocks were submerged, none of them being visible except the cluster of those which formed the rim of a small and almost circular basin from 230 to 300 feet in diameter, in the north angle of which the ship is lying. As the tide

rose the white breakers disappeared, and the sea, fortunately for the Chancellor, was pretty calm; otherwise the dashing of the waves against her sides, as she lies motionless, might have been attended by serious consequences.

As might be supposed, the height of the water in the hold increased with the tide from five feet to nine; but this was rather a matter of congratulation, inasmuch as it sufficed to inundate another layer of cotton.

At half-past eleven the sun, which had been behind the clouds since ten o'clock, broke forth brightly. The captain, who had already in the morning been able to calculate an horary angle, now prepared to take the meridian altitude, and succeeded at midday in making his observation most satisfactorily. After retiring for a short time to calculate the result, he returned to the poop and announced that we are in lat. 18 deg. 5' N. and long. 45 deg. 53' W., but that the reef on which we are aground is not marked on the charts. The only explanation that can be given for the omission is that the islet must be of recent formation, and has been caused by some subterranean volcanic disturbance. But whatever may be the solution of the mystery, here we are 800 miles from land; for such, on consulting the map, we find to be the actual distance to the coast of Guiana, which is the nearest shore. Such is the position to which we have been

brought, in the first place, by Huntly's senseless obstinacy, and, secondly, by the furious northwest gale.

Yet, after all, the captain's communication does not dishearten us. As I said before, our spirits are reviving. We have escaped the peril of fire; the fear of explosion is past and gone: and oblivious of the fact that the ship with a hold full of water is only too likely to founder when she puts out to sea, we feel a confidence in the future that forbids us to despond.

Meanwhile Curtis prepares to do all that common sense demands. He proposes, when the fire is quite extinguished, to throw overboard the whole, or the greater portion of the cargo, including, of course, the picrate; he will next plug up the leak, and then, with a lightened ship, he will take advantage of the first high tide to quit the reef as speedily as possible.