

CHAPTER XVII

M. LETOURNEUR IS PESSIMISTIC

OCTOBER 30. -- Once again I talked to M. Letourneur about our situation, and endeavored to animate him with the hope that we should not be detained for long in our present predicament; but he could not be brought to take a very sanguine view of our prospects.

"But surely," I protested, "it will not be difficult to throw overboard a few hundred bales of cotton; two or three days at most will suffice for that."

"Likely enough," he replied, "when the business is once begun; but you must remember, Mr. Kazallon, that the very heart of the cargo is still smoldering, and that it will still be several days before anyone will be able to venture into the hold. Then the leak, too, that has to be caulked; and, unless it is stopped up very effectually, we shall only be doomed most certainly to perish at sea. Don't then, be deceiving yourself; it must be three weeks at least before you can expect to put out to sea. I can only hope meanwhile that the weather will continue propitious; it wouldn't take many storms to knock the Chancellor, shattered as she is, completely into pieces."

Here, then, was the suggestion of a new danger to which we were to be exposed; the fire might be extinguished, the water might be got rid of by the pumps, but, after all, we must be at the mercy of the wind and waves; and, although the rocky island might afford a temporary refuge from the tempest, what was to become of passengers and crew if the vessel should be reduced to a total wreck? I made no remonstrance, however, to this view of our case, but merely asked M. Letourneur if he had confidence in Robert Curtis?

"Perfect confidence," he answered; "and I acknowledge it most gratefully, as a providential circumstance, that Captain Huntly had given him the command in time. Whatever man can do I know that Curtis will not leave undone to extricate us from our dilemma."

Prompted by this conversation with M. Letourneur I took the first opportunity of trying to ascertain from Curtis himself how long he reckoned we should be obliged to remain upon the reef; but he merely replied, that it must depend upon circumstances, and that he hoped the weather would continue favorable. Fortunately the barometer is rising steadily, and there is every sign of a prolonged calm.

Meantime Curtis is taking active measures for totally extinguishing the fire. He is at no great pains to spare the

cargo, and as the bales that lie just above the level of the water are still a-light he has resorted to the expedient of thoroughly saturating the upper layers of the cotton, in order that the combustion may be stifled between the moisture descending from above and that ascending from below. This scheme has brought the pumps once more into requisition. At present the crew are adequate to the task of working them, but I and some of our fellow-passengers are ready to offer our assistance whenever it shall be necessary.

With no immediate demand upon our labor, we are thrown upon our own resources for passing our time. M. Letourneur, Andre, and myself, have frequent conversations; I also devote an hour or two to my diary. Falsten holds little communication with any of us, but remains absorbed in his calculations, and amuses himself by tracing mechanical diagrams with ground-plan, section, elevation, all complete. It would be a happy inspiration if he could invent some mighty engine that could set us all afloat again. Mr. and Mrs. Kear, too, hold themselves aloof from their fellow-passengers, and we are not sorry to be relieved from the necessity of listening to their incessant grumbling; unfortunately, however, they carry off Miss Herbey with them, so that we enjoy little or nothing of the young lady's society. As for Silas Huntly, he has become a complete nonentity; he exists, it is true, but merely, it would seem, to

vegetate.

Hobart, the steward, an obsequious, sly sort of fellow, goes through his routine of duties just as though the vessel were pursuing her ordinary course; and, as usual, is continually falling out with Jynxstrop, the cook, an impudent, ill-favored negro, who interferes with the other sailors in a manner which, I think, ought not to be allowed.

Since it appears likely that we shall have abundance of time on our hands, I have proposed to M. Letourneur and his son that we shall together explore the reef on which we are stranded. It is not very probable that we shall be able to discover much about the origin of this strange accumulation of rocks, yet the attempt will at least occupy us for some hours, and will relieve us from the monotony of our confinement on board. Besides, as the reef is not marked in any of the maps, I could not but believe that it would be rendering a service to hydrography if we were to take an accurate plan of the rocks, of which Curtis could afterward verify the true position by a second observation made with a closer precision than the one he has already taken.

M. Letourneur agrees to my proposal, Curtis has promised to let us have the boat and some sounding-lines, and to allow one of the sailors to accompany us; so to-morrow morning,

we hope to make our little voyage of investigation.