

CHAPTER XXII

A NEW DANGER

NOVEMBER 24 to December 1. -- Here we were then once more at sea, and although on board a ship of which the stability was very questionable, we had hopes, if the wind continued favorable, of reaching the coast of Guiana in the course of a few days.

Our way was southwest and consequently with the wind, and although Curtis would not crowd on all sail lest the extra speed should have a tendency to spring the leak afresh, the Chancellor made a progress that was quite satisfactory. Life on board began to fall back into its former routine; the feeling of insecurity and the consciousness that we were merely retracing our path doing much, however, to destroy the animated intercourse that would otherwise go on between passenger and passenger.

The first few days passed without any incident worth recording, then on the 29th, the wind shifted to the north, and it became necessary to brace the yards, trim the sails, and take a starboard tack. This made the ship lurch very much on one side, and as Curtis felt that she was laboring far too heavily, he clewed up the top-gallants, prudently reckoning that, under the circumstances, caution was far more impor-

tant than speed.

The night came on dark and foggy. The breeze freshened considerably, and, unfortunately for us, hailed from the northwest. Although we carried no topsails at all, the ship seemed to heel over more than ever. Most of the passengers had retired to their cabins, but all the crew remained on deck, while Curtis never quitted his post upon the poop.

Toward two o'clock in the morning I was myself preparing to go to my cabin, when Burke, one of the sailors who had been down into the hold, came on deck with the cry:

"Two feet of water below."

In an instant Curtis and the boatswain had descended the ladder. The startling news was only too true; the sea-water was entering the hold, but whether the leak had sprung afresh, or whether the caulking in some of the seams was insufficient, it was then impossible to determine; all that could be done was to let the ship go with the wind, and wait for day.

At daybreak they sounded again -- "Three feet of water!" was the report. I glanced at Curtis -- his lips were white, but he had not lost his self-possession. He quietly in-

formed such of the passengers as were already on deck of the new danger that threatened us; it was better that they should know the worst, and the fact could not be long concealed. I told M. Letourneur that I could not help hoping that there might yet be time to reach the land before the last crisis came. Falsten was about to give vent to an expression of despair, but he was soon silenced by Miss Herbey asserting her confidence that all would yet be well.

Curtis at once divided the crew into two sets, and made them work incessantly, turn and turn about, at the pumps. The men applied themselves to their task with resignation rather than with ardor; the labor was hard and scarcely repaid them; the pumps were constantly getting out of order, the valves being choked up by the ashes and bits of cotton that were floating about in the hold, while every moment that was spent in cleaning or repairing them was so much time lost.

Slowly but surely the water continued to rise, and on the following morning the soundings gave five feet for its depth. I noticed that Curtis's brow contracted each time that the boatswain or the lieutenant brought him their report. There was no doubt it was only a question of time, and not for an instant must the efforts for keeping down the level be relaxed. Already the ship had sunk a foot lower in the water,

and as her weight increased she no longer rose buoyantly with the waves, but pitched and rolled considerably.

All yesterday and last night the pumping continued, but still the sea gained upon us. The crew are weary and discouraged, but the second officer and the boatswain set them a fine example of endurance, and the passengers have now begun to take their turn at the pumps.

But all are conscious of toiling almost against hope; we are no longer secured firmly to the solid soil of the Ham Rock reef, but we are floating over an abyss which daily, nay hourly, threatens to swallow us into its depths.