

CHAPTER XXIII

AN ATTEMPT AT MUTINY

DECEMBER 2 and 3. -- For four hours we have succeeded in keeping the water in the hold to one level; now, however, it is very evident that the time cannot be far distant when the pumps will be quite unequal to their task.

Yesterday Curtis, who does not allow himself a minute's rest, made a personal inspection of the hold. I, with the boatswain and carpenter, accompanied him. After dislodging some of the bales of cotton we could hear a splashing, or rather gurgling sound; but whether the water was entering at the original aperture, or whether it found its way in through a general dislocation of the seams, we were unable to discover. But, whichever might be the case, Curtis determined to try a plan which, by cutting off communication between the interior and exterior of the vessel, might, if only for a few hours, render her hull more water-tight. For this purpose he had some strong, well tarred sails drawn upward by ropes from below the keel, as high as the previous leaking place, and then fastened closely and securely to the side of the hull. The scheme was dubious, and the operation difficult, but for a time it was effectual, and at the close of the day the level of the water had actually been reduced by several inches. The diminution was small enough, but the

consciousness that more water was escaping through the scupper-holes than was finding its way into the hold gave us fresh courage to persevere with our work.

The night was dark, but the captain carried all the sail he could, eager to take every possible advantage of the wind, which was freshening considerably. If he could have sighted a ship he would have made signals of distress, and would not have hesitated to transfer the passengers, and even have allowed the crew to follow, if they were ready to forsake him; for himself his mind was made up -- he should remain on board the Chancellor until she foundered beneath his feet. No sail, however, hove in sight; consequently escape by such means was out of our power.

During the night the canvas covering yielded to the pressure of the waves, and this morning, after taking the sounding, the boatswain could not suppress an oath when he announced, "Six feet of water in the hold!"

The ship, then, was filling once again, and already had sunk considerably below her previous water-line. With aching arms and bleeding hands we worked harder than ever at the pumps, and Curtis makes those who are not pumping form a line and pass buckets, with all the speed they can, from hand to hand.

But all in vain! At half-past eight more water is reported in the hold, and some of the sailors, overcome by despair, refuse to work one minute longer.

The first to abandon his post was Owen, a man whom I have mentioned before as exhibiting something of a mutinous spirit. He is about forty years of age, and altogether unprepossessing in appearance; his face is bare, with the exception of a reddish beard, which terminates in a point; his forehead is furrowed with sinister looking wrinkles, his lips curl inward, and his ears protrude, while his bleared and bloodshot eyes are encircled with thick red rings.

Among the five or six other men who had struck work I noticed Jynxstrop, the cook, who evidently shared all Owen's ill-feelings.

Twice did Curtis order the men back to the pumps, and twice did Owen, acting as spokesman for the rest, refuse; and when Curtis made a step forward as though to approach him, he said savagely:

"I advise you not to touch me," and walked away to the fore-castle.

Curtis descended to his cabin, and almost immediately returned with a loaded revolver in his hand.

For a moment Owen surveyed the captain with a frown of defiance; but at a sign from Jynxstrop he seemed to recollect himself, and, with the remainder of the men, he returned to his work.