

CHAPTER XXIV

CURTIS RESOLVES TO ABANDON THE SHIP

DECEMBER 4. -- The first attempt at mutiny being thus happily suppressed, it is to be hoped that Curtis will succeed as well in future. An insubordinate crew would render us powerless indeed.

Throughout the night the pumps were kept, without respite, steadily at work, but without producing the least sensible benefit. The ship became so water-logged and heavy that she hardly rose at all to the waves, which consequently often washed over the deck and contributed their part toward aggravating our case. Our situation was rapidly becoming as terrible as it had been when the fire was raging in the midst of us; and the prospect of being swallowed by the devouring billows was no less formidable than that of perishing in the flames.

Curtis kept the men up to the mark, and, willing or unwilling, they had no alternative but to work on as best they might; but in spite of all their efforts, the water perpetually rose, till, at length, the men in the hold who were passing the buckets found themselves immersed up to their waists, and were obliged to come on deck.

This morning, after a somewhat protracted consultation with Walter and the boatswain, Curtis resolved to abandon the ship. The only remaining boat was far too small to hold us all, and it would therefore be necessary to construct a raft that should carry those who could not find room in her. Dowlas, the carpenter, Mr. Falsten, and ten sailors were told off to put the raft in hand, the rest of the crew being ordered to continue their work assiduously at the pumps, until the time came and everything was ready for embarkation.

Hatchet or saw in hand, the carpenter and his assistants made a beginning without delay, by cutting and trimming the spare yards and extra spars to a proper length. These were then lowered into the sea -- which was propitiously calm -- so as to favor the operation (which otherwise would have been very difficult) of lashing them together into a firm framework, about forty feet long and twenty-five feet wide, upon which the platform was to be supported.

I kept my own place steadily at the pumps, and Andre Letourneur worked at my side. I often noticed his father glance at him sorrowfully, as though he wondered what would become of him if he had to struggle with waves to which even the strongest man could hardly fail to succumb. But come what may, his father will never forsake him, and I myself shall not be wanting in rendering him whatever

assistance I can.

Mrs. Kear, who had been for some time in a state of drowsy unconsciousness, was not informed of the immediate danger; but when Miss Herbey, looking somewhat pale with fatigue, paid one of her flying visits to the deck, I warned her to take every precaution for herself, and to be ready for any emergency.

"Thank you, doctor, I am always ready," she cheerfully replied, and returned to her duties below. I saw Andre follow the young girl with his eyes, and a look of melancholy interest passed over his countenance.

Toward eight o'clock in the evening the framework for the raft was almost complete, and the men were lowering empty barrels, which had first been securely bunged, and were lashing them to the woodwork to insure its floating.

Two hours later and suddenly there arose the startling cry, "We are sinking! we are sinking!"

Up to the poop rushed Mr. Kear, followed immediately by Falsten and Miss Herbey, who were bearing the inanimate form of Mrs. Kear. Curtis ran to his cabin, instantly

returning with a chart, a sextant, and a compass in his hand.

The scene that followed will ever be engraven in my memory; the cries of distress, the general confusion, the frantic rush of the sailors toward the raft that was not yet ready to support them, can never be forgotten. The whole period of my life seemed to be concentrated into that terrible moment when the planks bent below my feet and the ocean yawned beneath me.

Some of the sailors had taken their delusive refuge in the shrouds, and I was preparing to follow them when a hand was laid upon my shoulder.. Turning round I beheld M. Letourneur, with tears in his eyes, pointing toward his son. "Yes, my friend," I said, pressing his hand, "we will save him, if possible."

But Curtis had already caught hold of the young man, and was hurrying him to the main-mast shrouds, when the Chancellor, which had been scudding along rapidly with the wind, stopped suddenly, with a violent shock, and began to settle. The sea rose over my ankles, and almost instinctively I clutched at the nearest rope. All at once, when it seemed all over, the ship ceased to sink, and hung motionless in mid-ocean.