

## CHAPTER XXVI

### MR. KEAR MAKES A BUSINESS DEAL

DECEMBER 5. -- The day was very hot. December in latitude 16 deg. N. is a summer month, and unless a breeze should rise to temper the burning sun, we might expect to suffer from an oppressive heat.

The sea still remained very rough, and as the heavy waves broke over the ship as though she were a reef, the foam flew up to the very top-masts, and our clothes were perpetually drenched by the spray.

The Chancellor's hull is three-fourths immersed; besides the three masts and the bowsprit, to which the whale-boat was suspended, the poop and the forecastle are the only portions that now are visible; and as the intervening section of the deck is quite below the water, these appear to be connected only by the framework of the netting that runs along the vessel's sides. Communication between the top-masts is extremely difficult, and would be absolutely precluded, were it not that the sailors, with practiced dexterity, manage to hoist themselves about by means of the stays. For the passengers, cowering on their narrow and unstable platform, the spectacle of the raging sea below was truly terrific; every wave that dashed over the ship shook the masts till

they trembled again, and one could venture scarcely to look or to think lest he should be tempted to cast himself into the vast abyss.

Meanwhile, the crew worked away with all their remaining vigor at the second raft, for which the top-gallants and yards were all obliged to be employed; the planks, too, which were continually being loosened and broken away by the violence of the waves from the partitions of the ship, were rescued before they had drifted out of reach, and were brought into use. The symptoms of the ship foundering did not appear to be immediate; so that Curtis insisted upon the raft being made with proper care to insure its strength; we were still several hundred miles from the coast of Guiana, and for so long a voyage it was indispensable to have a structure of considerable solidity. The reasonableness of this was self-apparent, and as the crew had recovered their assurance they spared no pains to accomplish their work effectually.

Of all the number, there was but one, an Irishman, named O'Ready, who seemed to question the utility of all their toil. He shook his head with an oracular gravity. He is an oldish man, not less than sixty, with his hair and beard bleached with the storms of many travels. As I was making my way toward the poop, he came up to me and began talking.

"And why, bedad, I'd like to know, why is it that they'll all be afther lavin' the ship?"

He turned his quid with the most serene composure, and continued:

"And isn't it me myself that's been wrecked nine times already? and sure, poor fools are they that ever have put their trust in rafts or boats; sure and they found a wathery grave. Nay, nay; while the ould ship lasts, let's stick to her, says I."

Having thus unburdened his mind he relapsed into silence, and soon went away.

About three o'clock I noticed that Mr. Kear and Silas Huntly were holding an animated conversation in the fore-top. The petroleum merchant had evidently some difficulty in bringing the ex-captain round to his opinion, for I saw him several times shake his head as he gave long and scrutinizing looks at the sea and sky. In less than an hour afterward I saw Huntly let himself down by the forestays and clamber along to the fore-castle, where he joined the group of sailors, and I lost sight of him.

I attached little importance to the incident, and shortly afterward joined the party in the main-top, where we continued talking for some hours. The heat was intense, and if it had not been for the shelter afforded by the sail-tent, would have been unbearable. At five o'clock we took as refreshment some dried meat and biscuit, each individual being also allowed half a glass of water. Mrs. Kear prostrate with fever, could not touch a mouthful; and nothing could be done by Miss Herbey to relieve her, beyond occasionally moistening her parched lips. The unfortunate lady suffers greatly, and sometimes I am inclined to think that she will succumb to the exposure and privation. Not once had her husband troubled himself about her; but when shortly afterward I heard him hail some of the sailors on the fore-castle and ask them to help him down from the foretop, I began to think that the selfish fellow was coming to join his wife.

At first the sailors took no notice of his request, but on his repeating it with the promise of paying them handsomely for their services, two of them, Burke and Sandon, swung themselves along the netting into the shrouds, and were soon at his side.

A long discussion ensued. The men evidently were asking more than Mr. Kear was inclined to give, and at one time it seemed as though the negotiation would fall through

altogether. But at length the bargain was struck, and I saw Mr. Kear take a bundle of paper dollars from his waistcoat pocket, and hand a number of them over to one of the men. The man counted them carefully, and from the time it took him, I should think that he could not have pocketed anything less than a hundred dollars.

The next business was to get Mr. Kear down from the foretop, and Burke and Sandon proceeded to tie a rope round his waist, which they afterward fastened to the forestay; then, in a way which provoked shouts of laughter from their mates, they gave the unfortunate man a shove, and sent him rolling down like a bundle of dirty clothes on to the fore-castle.

I was quite mistaken as to his object. Mr. Kear had no intention of looking after his wife, but remained by the side of Silas Huntly until the gathering darkness hid them both from view.

As night drew on, the wind grew calmer, but the sea remained very rough. The moon had been up ever since four in the afternoon, though she only appeared at rare intervals between the clouds. Some long lines of vapor on the horizon were tinged with a rosy glare that foreboded a strong breeze for the morrow, and all felt anxious to know from

which quarter the breeze would come, for any but a north-easter would bear the frail raft on which we were to embark far away from land.

About eight o'clock in the evening, Curtis mounted to the main-top, but he seemed preoccupied and anxious, and did not speak to anyone. He remained for a quarter of an hour, then after silently pressing my hand, he returned to his old post.

I laid myself down in the narrow space at my disposal, and tried to sleep; but my mind was filled with strange forebodings, and sleep was impossible. The very calmness of the atmosphere was oppressive; scarcely a breath of air vibrated through the metal rigging, and yet the sea rose with a heavy swell as though it felt the warnings of a coming tempest.

All at once, at about eleven o'clock, the moon burst brightly forth through a rift in the clouds, and the waves sparkled again as if illuminated by a submarine glimmer. I start up and look around me. Is it merely imagination? or do I really see a black speck floating, on the dazzling whiteness of the waters, a speck that cannot be a rock, because it rises and falls with the heaving motion of the billows? But the moon once again becomes overclouded; the sea is

darkened, and I return to my uneasy couch close to the larboard shrouds.