

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WHALE-BOAT MISSING

DECEMBER 6. -- I must have fallen asleep for a few hours, when, at four o'clock in the morning, I was rudely aroused by the roaring of the wind, and could distinguish Curtis's voice as he shouted in the brief intervals between the heavy gusts.

I got up, and holding tightly to the purlin -- for the waves made the masts tremble with their violence -- I tried to look around and below me. The sea was literally raging beneath, and great masses of livid-looking foam were dashing between the masts, which were oscillating terrifically. It was still dark, and I could only faintly distinguish two figures in the stern, whom, by the sound of their voices, that I caught occasionally above the tumult, I made out to be Curtis and the boatswain.

Just at that moment a sailor, who had mounted to the main-top to do something to the rigging, passed close behind me.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The wind has changed," he answered, adding something

which I could not hear distinctly, but which sounded like "dead against us."

Dead against us! then. thought I, the wind had shifted to the southwest, and my last night's forebodings had been correct.

When daylight at length appeared, I found the wind, although not blowing actually from the southwest, had veered round to the northwest, a change which was equally disastrous to us, inasmuch as it was carrying us away from land. Moreover, the ship had sunk considerably during the night, and there were now five feet of water above deck; the side netting had completely disappeared, and the fore-castle and the poop were now all but on a level with the sea, which washed over them incessantly. With all possible expedition Curtis and his crew were laboring away at their raft, but the violence of the swell materially impeded their operations, and it became a matter of doubt as to whether the woodwork would not fall asunder before it could be properly fastened together.

As I watched the men at their work, M. Letourneur, with one arm supporting his son, came out and stood by my side.

"Don't you think this main-top will soon give way?" he

said, as the narrow platform on which we stood creaked and groaned with the swaying of the masts.

Miss Herbey heard his words and pointing toward Mrs. Kear, who was lying prostrate at her feet, asked what we thought ought to be done.

"We can do nothing but stay where we are," I replied.

"No," said Andre, "this is our best refuge; I hope you are not afraid."

"Not for myself," said the young girl quietly, "only for those to whom life is precious."

At a quarter to eight we heard the boatswain calling to the sailors in the bows.

"Ay, ay, sir," said one of the men -- O'Ready, I think.

"Where's the whale-boat?" shouted the boatswain in a loud voice.

"I don't know, sir. Not with us," was the reply.

"She's gone adrift, then!"

And sure enough the whale-boat was no longer hanging from the bowsprit; and in a moment the discovery was made that Mr. Kear, Silas Huntly, and three sailors, -- a Scotchman and two Englishmen, -- were missing. Afraid that the Chancellor would founder before the completion of the raft, Kear and Huntly had plotted together to effect their escape, and had bribed the three sailors to seize the only remaining boat.

This, then, was the black speck that I had seen during the night. The miserable husband had deserted his wife, the faithless captain had abandoned the ship that had once been under his command.

"There are five saved, then," said the boatswain.

"Faith, an it's five lost ye'll be maning," said O'Ready; and the state of the sea fully justified his opinion.

The crew were furious when they heard of the surreptitious flight, and loaded the fugitives with all the invectives they could lay their tongues to. So enraged were they at the dastardly trick of which they had been made the dupes, that if chance should bring the deserters again on board I should be sorry to answer for the consequences.

In accordance with my advice, Mrs. Kear has not been informed of her husband's disappearance. The unhappy lady is wasting away with a fever for which we are powerless to supply a remedy, for the medicine-chest was lost when the ship began to sink. Nevertheless, I do not think we have anything to regret on that score, feeling, as I do, that in a case like Mrs. Kear's, drugs would be of no avail.