

CHAPTER XXXIII

MUTINY ON THE RAFT

DECEMBER 18 to 20. -- On the 18th the wind freshened a little, but as it blew from the same favorable quarter we did not complain, and only took the precaution of putting an extra support to the mast, so that it should not snap with the tension of the sail. This done, the raft was carried along with something more than its ordinary speed, and left a long line of foam in its wake.

In the afternoon the sky became slightly over-clouded, and the heat consequently less oppressive. The swell made it more difficult for the raft to keep its balance, and we shipped two or three heavy seas; but the carpenter managed to make with some planks a kind of wall about a couple of feet high, which protected us from the direct action of the waves. Our casks of food and water were secured to the raft with double ropes, for we dared not run the risk of their being carried overboard, an accident that would at once have reduced us to the direst distress.

In the course of the day the sailors gathered some of the marine plants known by the name of sargassos, very similar to those we saw in such profusion between the Bermudas and Ham Rock. I advised my companions to

chew the laminary tangles, which they would find contained a saccharine juice, affording considerable relief to their parched lips and throats.

The remainder of the day passed without incident. I should not, however, omit to mention that the frequent conferences held among the sailors, especially between Owen, Burke, Flaypole, Wilson, and Jynxstrop, the negro, aroused some uneasy suspicions in my mind. What was the subject of their conversation I could not discover, for they became silent immediately that a passenger or one of the officers approached them. When I mentioned the matter to Curtis I found he had already noticed these secret interviews, and that they had given him enough concern to make him determined to keep a strict eye upon Jynxstrop and Owen, who, rascals as they were themselves, were evidently trying to disaffect their mates.

On the 19th the heat was again excessive. The sky was cloudless, and as there was not enough wind to fill the sail the raft lay motionless upon the surface of the water. Some of the sailors found a transient alleviation for their thirst by plunging into the sea, but as we were fully aware that the water all around was infested with sharks, none of us was rash enough to follow their example, though if, as seems likely, we remain long becalmed, we shall probably

in time overcome our fears, and feel constrained to indulge ourselves with a bath.

The health of Lieutenant Walter continues to cause us grave anxiety, the young man being weakened by attacks of intermittent fever. Except for the loss of the medicine-chest we might have temporarily reduced this by quinine; but it is only too evident that the poor fellow is consumptive, and that that hopeless malady is making ravages upon him that no medicine could permanently arrest. His sharp, dry cough, his short breathing, his profuse perspirations, more especially in the morning; the pinched-in nose, the hollow cheeks, of which the general pallor is only relieved by a hectic flush, the contracted lips, the too brilliant eye and wasted form -- all bear witness to a slow but sure decay.

To-day, the 20th, the temperature is as high as ever, and the raft still motionless. The rays of the sun penetrate even through the shelter of our tent, where we sit literally gasping with the heat. The impatience with which we awaited the moment when the boatswain should dole out our meager allowance of water, and the eagerness with which those lukewarm drops were swallowed, can only be realized by those who for themselves have endured the agonies of thirst.

Lieutenant Walter suffers more than any of us from the scarcity of water, and I noticed that Miss Herbey reserved almost the whole of her own share for his use. Kind and compassionate as ever, the young girl does all that lies in her power to relieve the poor fellow's sufferings.

"Mr. Kazallon," she said to me this morning, "that young man gets manifestly weaker every day."

"Yes, Miss Herbey," I replied, "and how sorrowful it is that we can do nothing for him, absolutely nothing."

"Hush!" she said, with her wonted consideration, "perhaps he will hear what we are saying."

And then she sat down near the edge of the raft, where, with her head resting on her hands, she remained lost in thought.

An incident sufficiently unpleasant occurred to-day. For nearly an hour Owen, Flaypole, Burke and Jynxstrop had been engaged in close conversation and, although their voices were low, their gestures had betrayed that they were animated by some strong excitement. At the conclusion of the colloquy Owen got up and walked deliberately to the

quarter of the raft that has been reserved for the use of the passengers.

"Where are you off to now, Owen?" said the boatswain.

"That's my business," said the man insolently, and pursued his course.

The boatswain was about to stop him, but before he could interfere Curtis was standing and looking Owen steadily in the face.

"Ah, captain, I've got a word from my mates to say to you," he said, with all the effrontery imaginable.

"Say on, then," said the captain coolly.

"We should like to know about that little keg of brandy. Is it being kept for the porpoises or the officers?"

Finding that he obtained no reply, he went on:

"Look here, captain, what we want is to have our grog served out every morning as usual."

"Then you certainly will not," said the captain.

"What! what!" exclaimed Owen, "don't you mean to let us have our grog?"

"Once and for all, no."

For a moment, with a malicious grin upon his lips, Owen stood confronting the captain; then, as though thinking better of himself, he turned round and rejoined his companions, who were still talking together in an undertone.

When I was afterward discussing the matter with Curtis, I asked him whether he was sure he had done right in refusing the brandy.

"Right!" he cried, "to be sure I have. Allow those men to have brandy! I would throw it all overboard first."