

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SQUALL

DECEMBER 21. -- No further disturbance has taken place among the men. For a few hours the fish appeared again, and we caught a great many of them, and stored them away in an empty barrel. This addition to our stock of provisions makes us hope that food, at least, will not fail us.

Usually the nights in the tropics are cool, but to-day, as the evening drew on, the wonted freshness did not return, but the air remained stifling and oppressive, while heavy masses of vapor hung over the water.

There was no moonlight; there would be a new moon at half-past one in the morning, but the night was singularly dark, except for dazzling flashes of summer lightning that from time to time illuminated the horizon far and wide. There was, however, no answering roll of thunder, and the silence of the atmosphere seemed almost awful.

For a couple of hours, in the vain hope of catching a breath of air, Miss Herbey, Andre Letourneur, and I, sat watching the imposing struggle of the electric vapors. The clouds appeared like embattled turrets crested with flame, and the very sailors, coarse-minded men as they were,

seemed struck with the grandeur of the spectacle, and regarded attentively, though with an anxious eye, the preliminary tokens of a coming storm. Until midnight we kept our seats upon the stern of the raft, while the lightning ever and again shed around us a livid glare similar to that produced by adding salt to lighted alcohol.

"Are you afraid of a storm. Miss Herbey?" said Andre to the girl.

"No, Mr. Andre, my feelings are always rather those of awe than of fear," she replied. "I consider a storm one of the sublimest phenomena that we can behold -- don't you think so too?"

"Yes, and especially when the thunder is pealing," he said; "that majestic rolling, far different to the sharp crash of artillery, rises and falls like the long-drawn notes of the grandest music, and I can safely say that the tones of the most accomplished artiste have never moved me like that incomparable voice of nature."

"Rather a deep bass, though," I said, laughing.

"That may be," he answered; "but I wish we might hear it now, for this silent lightning is somewhat unexpressive."

"Never mind that, Andre," I said; "enjoy a storm when it comes, if you like, but pray don't wish for it."

"And why not?" said he; "a storm will bring us wind, you know."

"And water, too," added Miss Herbey, "the water of which we are so seriously in need."

The young people evidently wished to regard the storm from their own point of view, and although I could have opposed plenty of common sense to their poetical sentiments, I said no more, but let them talk on as they pleased for fully an hour.

Meanwhile the sky was becoming quite over-clouded, and after the zodiacal constellations had disappeared in the mists that hung round the horizon, one by one the stars above our heads were veiled in dark rolling masses of vapor, from which every instant there issued forth sheets of electricity that formed a vivid background to the dark gray fragments of cloud that floated beneath.

Sleep, even if we wished it, would have been impossible in that stifling temperature. The lightning increased in

brilliancy and appeared from all quarters of the horizon, each flash covering large arcs, varying from 100 deg. to 150 deg., leaving the atmosphere pervaded by one incessant phosphorescent glow.

The thunder became at length more and more distinct, the reports, if I may use the expression, being "round," rather than rolling. It seemed almost as though the sky were padded with heavy clouds of which the elasticity muffled the sound of the electric bursts.

Hitherto, the sea had been calm, almost stagnant as a pond. Now, however, long undulations took place, which the sailors recognized, all too well, as being the rebound produced by a distant tempest. A ship, in such a case, would have been instantly brought ahull, but no maneuvering could be applied to our raft, which could only drift before the blast.

At one o'clock in the morning one vivid flash, followed, after the interval of a few seconds, by a loud report of thunder, announced that the storm was rapidly approaching. Suddenly the horizon was enveloped in a vaporous fog, and seemed to contract until it was close around us. At the same instant the voice of one of the sailors was heard shouting:

"A squall! a squall!"