

CHAPTER XXXV

TWO SAILORS WASHED OVERBOARD

DECEMBER 21, night. -- The boatswain rushed to the halliards that supported the sail, and instantly lowered the yard; not a moment too soon, for with the speed of an arrow the squall was upon us, and if it had not been for the sailor's timely warning we must all have been knocked down and probably precipitated into the sea; as it was, our tent on the back of the raft was carried away.

The raft itself, however, being so nearly level with the water, had little peril to encounter from the actual wind; but from the mighty waves now raised by the hurricane we had everything to dread. At first the waves had been crushed and flattened as it were by the pressure of the air, but now, as though strengthened by the reaction, they rose with the utmost fury. The raft followed the motions of the increasing swell, and was tossed up and down, to and fro, and from side to side with the most violent oscillations.

"Lash yourselves tight," cried the boatswain, as he threw us some ropes; and in a few moments with Curtis's assistance, M. Letourneur, and Andre, Falsten and myself were fastened so firmly to the raft, that nothing but its total disruption could carry us away. Miss Herbey was bound by

a rope passed round her waist to one of the uprights that had supported our tent, and by the glare of the lightning I could see that her countenance was as serene and composed as ever.

Then the storm began to rage indeed. Flash followed flash, peal followed peal in quick succession. Our eyes were blinded, our ears deafened, with the roar and glare. The clouds above, the ocean beneath, seemed verily to have taken fire, and several times I saw forked lightnings dart upward from the crest of the waves, and mingle with those that radiated from the fiery vault above. A strong odor of sulphur pervaded the air, but though thunderbolts fell thick around us, not one touched our raft.

By two o'clock the storm had reached its height. The hurricane had increased, and the heavy waves, heated to a strange heat by the general temperature, dashed over us until we were drenched to the skin. Curtis, Dowlas, the boatswain, and the sailors did what they could to strengthen the raft with additional ropes. M. Letourneur placed himself in front of Andre, to shelter him from the waves. Miss Herbey stood upright and motionless as a statue.

Soon dense masses of lurid clouds came rolling up, and a crackling, like the rattle of musketry, resounded through

the air. This was produced by a series of electrical concussions, in which volleys of hailstones were discharged from the cloud-batteries above. In fact, as the storm-sheet came in contact with a current of cold air, hail was formed with great rapidity, and hailstones, large as nuts, came pelt-
ing down, making the platform of the raft re-echo with a metallic ring.

For about half an hour the meteoric shower continued to descend, and during that time the wind slightly abated in violence; but after having shifted from quarter to quarter, it once more blew with all its former fury. The shrouds were broken, but happily the mast, already bending almost double, was removed by the men from its socket before it should be snapped short off.. One gust caught away the tiller, which went adrift beyond all power of recovery, and the same blast blew down several of the planks that formed the low parapet on the larboard side, so that the waves dashed in without hindrance through the breach.

The carpenter and his mates tried to repair the damage, but, tossed from wave to wave, the raft was inclined to an angle of more than forty-five degrees, making it impossible for them to keep their footing, and rolling one over another, they were thrown down by the violent shocks. Why they were not altogether carried away, why we were not all

hurled into the sea, was to me a mystery. Even if the cords that bound us should retain their hold, it seemed perfectly incredible that the raft itself should not be overturned, so that we should be carried down and stifled in the seething waters.

At last, toward three in the morning, when the hurricane seemed to be raging more fiercely than ever, the raft, caught up on the crest of an enormous wave, stood literally perpendicularly on its edge. For an instant, by the illumination of the lightning, we beheld ourselves raised to an incomprehensible height above the foaming breakers. Cries of terror escaped our lips. All must be over now! But no; another moment, and the raft had resumed its horizontal position. Safe, indeed, we were, but the tremendous upheaval was not without its melancholy consequences.

The cords that secured the cases of provisions had burst asunder. One case rolled overboard, and the side of one of the water-barrels was staved in, so that the water which it contained was rapidly escaping. Two of the sailors rushed forward to rescue the case of preserved meat; but one of them caught his foot between the planks of the platform, and, unable to disengage it, the poor fellow stood uttering cries of distress.

I tried to go to his assistance, and had already untied the cord that was around me; but I was too late.

Another heavy sea dashed over us, and by the light of a dazzling flash I saw the unhappy man, although he had managed without assistance to disengage his foot, washed overboard before it was in my power to get near him. His companion had also disappeared.

The same ponderous wave laid me prostrate on the platform, and as my head came in collision with the corner of a spar, for a time I lost all consciousness.