

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MUTINY AGAIN

JANUARY 1 to 5. -- More than three months had elapsed since we left Charleston in the Chancellor, and for no less than twenty days had we now been borne along on our raft at the mercy of the wind and waves. Whether we were approaching the American coast, or whether we were drifting farther and farther to sea, it was now impossible to determine, for, in addition to the other disasters caused by the hurricane, the captain's instruments had been hopelessly smashed, and Curtis had no longer any compass by which to direct his course, nor a sextant by which he might make an observation.

Desperate, however, as our condition might be judged, hope did not entirely abandon our hearts, and day after day, hour after hour were our eyes strained toward the far horizon, and many and many a time did our imagination shape out the distant land. But ever and again the illusion vanished; a cloud, a mist, perhaps even a wave, was all that had deceived us; no land, no sail ever broke the gray line that united sea and sky, and our raft remained the center of the wide and dreary waste.

On the 1st of January, we swallowed our last morsel of

biscuit. The first of January! New Year's Day! What a rush of sorrowful recollections overwhelmed our minds! Had we not always associated the opening of another year with new hopes, new plans, and coming joys? And now, where were we? Could we dare to look at one another, and breathe a New Year's greeting?

The boatswain approached me with a peculiar look on his countenance.

"You are surely not going to wish me a happy New Year?" I said.

"No indeed, sir," he replied, "I was only going to wish you well through the first day of it; and that is pretty good assurance on my part, for we have not another crumb to eat."

True as it was, we scarcely realized the fact of there being actually nothing until on the following morning the hour came round for the distribution of the scanty ration, and then, indeed, the truth was forced upon us in a new and startling light. Toward evening I was seized with violent pains in the stomach, accompanied by a constant desire to yawn and gape that was most distressing; but in a couple of hours the extreme agony passed away, and on the 3d I

was surprised to find that I did not suffer more. I felt, it is true, that there was some great void within myself, but the sensation was quite as much moral as physical. My head was so heavy that I could not hold it up; it was swimming with giddiness, as though I were looking over a precipice.

My symptoms were not shared by all my companions, some of whom endured the most frightful tortures. Douglas and the boatswain especially, who were naturally large eaters, uttered involuntary cries of agony, and were obliged to gird themselves tightly with ropes to subdue the excruciating pain that was gnawing their very vitals.

And this was only the second day of our misery! What would we not have given for half, nay, for a quarter of the meager ration which a few days back we deemed so inadequate to supply our wants, and which now, eked out crumb by crumb, might, perhaps, serve for several days? In the streets of a besieged city, dire as the distress may be, some gutter, some rubbish-heap, some corner may yet be found that will furnish a dry bone or a scrap of refuse that may for a moment allay the pangs of hunger; but these bare planks, so many times washed clean by the relentless waves, offer nothing to our eager search, and after every fragment of food that the wind has carried into the interstices has

been scraped out and devoured, our resources are literally at an end.

The nights seem even longer than the days. Sleep, when it comes, brings no relief; it is rather a feverish stupor, broken and disturbed by frightful nightmares. Last night, however, overcome by fatigue, I managed to rest for several hours.

At six o'clock this morning I was roused by the sound of angry voices, and, starting up, I saw Owen and Jynxstrop, with Flaypole, Wilson, Burke, and Sandon, standing in a threatening attitude. They had taken possession of the carpenter's tools, and now, armed with hatchets, chisels, and hammers, they were preparing to attack the captain, the boatswain, and Dowlas. I attached myself in a moment to Curtis's party. Falsten followed my example, and although our knives were the only weapons at our disposal, we were ready to defend ourselves to the very last extremity.

Owen and his men advanced toward us. The miserable wretches were all drunk, for during the night they had knocked a hole in the brandy-barrel, and had recklessly swallowed its contents. What they wanted they scarcely seemed to know, but Owen and Jynxstrop, not quite so much intox-

icated as the rest, seemed to be urging them on to massacre the captain and the officers.

"Down with the captain! Overboard with Curtis! Owen shall take the command!" they shouted from time to time in their drunken fury; and, armed as they were, they appeared completely masters of the situation.

"Now, then, down with your arms!" said Curtis sternly, as he advanced to meet them.

"Overboard with the captain!" howled Owen, as by word and gesture he urged on his accomplices.

Curtis pushed aside the excited rascals, and, walking straight up to Owen, asked him what he wanted.

"What do we want? Why, we want no more captains; we are all equals now."

Poor stupid fool! as though misery and privation had not already reduced us all to the same level.

"Owen," said the captain once again, "down with your arms!"

"Come on, all of you," shouted Owen to his companions, without giving the slightest heed to Curtis's words.

A regular struggle ensued. Owen and Wilson attacked Curtis, who defended himself with a piece of spar; Burke and Flaypole rushed upon Falsten and the boatswain, while I was left to confront the negro Jynxstrop, who attempted to strike me with the hammer which he brandished in his hand. I endeavored to paralyze his movements by pinioning his arms, but the rascal was my superior in muscular strength. After wrestling for a few minutes, I felt that he was getting the mastery over me, when all of a sudden he rolled over on to the platform, dragging me with him. Andre Letourneur had caught hold of one of his legs, and thus saved my life. Jynxstrop dropped his weapon in his fall; I seized it instantly, and was about to cleave the fellow's skull, when I was myself arrested by Andre's hand upon my arm.

By this time the mutineers had been driven back to the forepart of the raft, and Curtis, who had managed to parry the blows which had been aimed at him, had caught hold of a hatchet, with which he was preparing to strike Owen. But Owen made a sidelong movement to avoid the blow, and the weapon caught Wilson full in the chest. The unfortunate man rolled over the side of the raft and instantly disappeared.

"Save him! save him!" shouted the boatswain.

"It's too late; he's dead! " said Dowlas.

"Ah, well! he'll do for --" began the boatswain; but he did not finish his sentence.

Wilson's death, however, put an end to the fray. Flaypole and Burke were lying prostrate in a drunken stupor, and Jynxstrop was soon overpowered, and lashed tightly to the foot of the mast. The carpenter and boatswain seized hold of Owen.

"Now then," said Curtis, as he raised his blood-stained hatchet, "make your peace with God, for you have not a moment to live."

"Oh, you want to eat me, do you?" sneered Owen, with the most hardened effrontery.

But the audacious reply saved his life; Curtis turned as pale as death, the hatchet dropped from his hand, and he went and seated himself moodily on the farthest corner of the raft.