

CHAPTER XXXIX

A FATHER'S LOVE

JANUARY 5 and 6. -- The whole scene made a deep impression on our minds, and Owen's speech coming as a sort of climax, brought before us our misery with a force that was well-nigh overwhelming.

As soon as I recovered my composure, I did not forget to thank Andre Letourneur for the act of intervention that had saved my life.

"Do you thank me for that, Mr. Kazallon?" he said; "it has only served to prolong your misery."

"Never mind, M. Letourneur," said Miss Herbey; "you did your duty."

Enfeebled and emaciated as the young girl is, her sense of duty never deserts her; and although her torn and bedraggled garments float dejectedly about her body, she never utters a word of complaint, and never loses courage.

"Mr. Kazallon," she said to me, "do you think we are fated to die of hunger?"

"Yes, Miss Herbey, I do," I replied, in a hard, cold tone.

"How long do you suppose we have to live?" she asked again.

"I cannot say; perhaps we shall linger on longer than we imagine."

"The strongest constitutions suffer the most, do they not?" she said.

"Yes; but they have one consolation -- they die the soonest," I replied, coldly.

Had every spark of humanity died out of my breast, that I thus brought the girl face to face with the terrible truth, without a word of hope or comfort? The eyes of Andre and his father, dilated with hunger, were fixed upon me, and I saw reproach and astonishment written in their faces.

Afterward, when we were quite alone, Miss Herbey asked me if I would grant her a favor.

"Certainly, Miss Herbey; anything you like to ask," I replied; and this time my manner was kinder and more genial.

"Mr. Kazallon," she said, "I am weaker than you, and shall probably die first. Promise me that, if I do, you will throw me into the sea!"

"Oh, Miss Herbey," I began, "it was very wrong of me to speak to you as I did!"

"No, no," she replied, half smiling; "you were quite right. But it is a weakness of mine; I don't mind what they do with me as long as I am alive, but when I am dead --" She stopped and shuddered. "Oh, promise me that you will throw me into the sea!"

I gave her the melancholy promise, which she acknowledged by pressing my hand feebly with her emaciated fingers.

Another night passed away. At times my sufferings were so intense that cries of agony involuntarily escaped my lips; then I became calmer, and sank into a kind of lethargy. When I awoke, I was surprised to find my companions still alive.

The one of our party who seems to bear his privations the best is Hobart the steward, a man with whom hitherto I have had very little to do. He is small, with a fawning

expression remarkable for its indecision, and has a smile which is incessantly playing round his lips; he goes about with his eyes half closed, as though he wished to conceal his thoughts, and there is something altogether false and hypocritical about his whole demeanor. I cannot say that he bears his privations without a murmur, for he sighs and moans incessantly; but, with it all, I cannot but think that there is a want of genuineness in his manner, and that the privation has not really told upon him as much as it has upon the rest of us. I have my suspicions about the man, and intend to watch him carefully.

To-day, the 6th, M. Letourneur drew me aside to the stern of the raft, saying he had a secret to communicate, but that he wished neither to be seen nor heard speaking to me. I withdrew with him to the larboard corner of the raft, and, as it was growing dusk, nobody observed what we were doing.

"Mr. Kazallon," M. Letourneur began, in a low voice, "Andre is dying of hunger; he is growing weaker and weaker, and oh! I cannot, will not, see him die!"

He spoke passionately, almost fiercely, and I fully understood his feelings. Taking his hand, I tried to reassure him.

"We will not despair yet," I said; "perhaps some pass-

ing ship --"

"Ship!" he cried, impatiently, "don't try to console me with empty commonplaces; you know as well as I do that there is no chance of falling in with a passing ship." Then, breaking off suddenly, he asked: "How long is it since my son and all of you have had anything to eat?"

Astonished at his question, I replied that it was now four days since the biscuit had failed.

"Four days," he repeated; "well, then, it is eight since I have tasted anything. I have been saving my share for my son."

Tears rushed to my eyes; for a few moments I was unable to speak, and could only once more grasp his hand in silence.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked, at length.

"Hush! not so loud; someone will hear us," he said, lowering his voice; "I want you to offer it to Andre as though it came from yourself. He would not accept it from me; he would think I had been depriving myself for him. Let me implore you to do me this service; and for your trouble," -- and here he gently stroked my hand -- "for your trouble you

shall have a morsel for yourself."

I trembled like a child as I listened to the poor father's words; and my heart was ready to burst when I felt a tiny piece of biscuit slipped into my hand.

"Give it him," M. Letourneur went on under his breath, "give it him; but do not let anyone see you; the monsters would murder you if they knew it! This is only for to-day; I will give you some more to-morrow."

The poor fellow did not trust me -- and well he might not -- for I had the greatest difficulty to withstand the temptation to carry the biscuit to my mouth. But I resisted the impulse, and those alone who have suffered like me can know what the effort was.

Night came on with the rapidity peculiar to these low latitudes, and I glided gently up to Andre, and slipped the piece of biscuit into his hand as "a present from myself."

The young man clutched at it eagerly.

"But my father?" he said, inquiringly.

I assured him that his father and I had each had our

share, and that he must eat this now, and perhaps I should be able to bring him some more another time. Andre asked no more questions, and eagerly devoured the morsel of food.

So this evening at least, notwithstanding M. Letourneur's offer, I have tasted nothing.