

## CHAPTER XLII

### OXIDE OF COPPER POISONING

JANUARY 9 and 10. -- On the 9th the wind dropped, and there was a dead calm; not a ripple disturbed the surface of the long undulations as they rose and fell beneath us; and if it were not for the slight current which is carrying us we know not whither, the raft would be absolutely stationary.

The heat was intolerable; our thirst more intolerable still; and now it was that for the first time I fully realized how the insufficiency of drink could cause torture more unendurable than the pangs of hunger. Mouth, throat, pharynx, all alike were parched and dry, every gland becoming hard as horn under the action of the hot air we breathed. At my urgent solicitation, the captain was for once induced to double our allowance of water; and this relaxation of the ordinary rule enabled us to attempt to slake our thirst four times in the day, instead of only twice. I use the word "attempt" advisedly; for the water at the bottom of the barrel though kept covered by a sail, became so warm that it was perfectly flat and unrefreshing.

It was a most trying day, and the sailors relapsed into a condition of deep despondency. The moon was nearly full, but when she rose the breeze did not return. Continuance

of high temperature in daytime is a sure proof that we have been carried far to the south, and here, on this illimitable ocean, we have long ceased even to look for land; it might almost seem as though this globe of ours had veritably become a liquid sphere!

To-day we are still becalmed, and the temperature is as high as ever. The air is heated like a furnace, and the sun scorches like fire. The torments of famine are all forgotten; our thoughts are concentrated with fevered expectation upon the longed-for moment when Curtis shall dole out the scanty measure of lukewarm water that makes up our ration. Oh for one good draught, even if it should exhaust the whole supply! At least, it seems as if we then could die in peace!

About noon we were startled by sharp cries of agony, and looking round, I saw Owen writhing in the most horrible convulsions. I went toward him, for, detestable as his conduct had been, common humanity prompted me to see whether I could afford him any relief. But before I reached him, a shout from Flaypole arrested my attention. The man was up in the mast, and with great excitement pointing to the east.

"A ship! A ship!" he cried.

In an instant all were on their feet. Even Owen stopped his cries and stood erect. It was quite true that in the direction indicated by Flaypole there was a white speck visible upon the horizon. But did it move? Would the sailors with their keen vision pronounce it to be a sail? A silence the most profound fell upon us all. I glanced at Curtis as he stood with folded arms intently gazing at the distant point. His brow was furrowed, and he contracted every feature, as with half-closed eyes he concentrated his power of vision upon that one faint spot in the far off horizon.

But at length he dropped his arms and shook his head. I looked again, but the spot was no longer there. If it were a ship, that ship had disappeared; but probably it had been a mere reflection, or, more likely still, only the crest of some curling wave.

A deep dejection followed this phantom ray of hope. All returned to their accustomed places. Curtis alone remained motionless, but his eye no longer scanned the distant view.

Owen now began to shriek more wildly than ever. He presented truly a most melancholy sight; he writhed with the most hideous contortions, and had all the appearance of suffering from tetanus. His throat was contracted by repeated spasms, his tongue was parched, his body swollen, and

his pulse, though feeble, was rapid and irregular. The poor wretch's symptoms were precisely such as to lead us to suspect that he had taken some corrosive poison. Of course it was quite out of our power to administer any antidote; all that we could devise was to make him swallow something that might act as an emetic. I asked Curtis for a little of the lukewarm water. As the contents of the broken barrel were now exhausted, the captain, in order to comply with my request, was about to tap the other barrel, when Owen started suddenly to his knees, and with a wild, unearthly shriek, exclaimed:

"No! no! no! of that water I will not touch a drop."

I supposed he did not understand what we were going to do, and endeavored to explain; but all in vain; he persisted in refusing to taste the water in the second barrel. I then tried to induce vomiting by tickling his uvula, and he brought off some bluish secretion from his stomach, the character of which confirmed our previous suspicions -- that he had been poisoned by oxide of copper. We now felt convinced that any effort on our part to save him would be of no avail. The vomiting, however, had for the time relieved him, and he was able to speak.

Curtis and I both implored him to let us know what he

had taken to bring about consequences so serious. His reply fell upon us as a startling blow.

The ill-fated wretch had stolen several pints of water from the barrel that had been untouched, and that water had poisoned him!