

CHAPTER XLIII

OWEN'S DEATH

JANUARY 11 to 14. -- Owen's convulsions returned with increased violence, and in the course of the night he expired in terrible agony. His body was thrown overboard almost directly, it had decomposed so rapidly that the flesh had not even consistency enough for any fragments of it to be reserved for the boatswain to use to bait his lines. A plague the man had been to us in his life; in his death he was now of no service!

And now, perhaps still more than ever, did the horror of our situation stare us in the face. There was no doubt that the poisoned barrel had at some time or other contained copperas; but what strange fatality had converted it into a water cask, or what fatality, stranger still, had caused it to be brought on board the raft, was a problem that none could solve. Little, however, did it matter now; the fact was evident -- the barrel was poisoned, and of water we had not a drop.

One and all, we fell into the gloomiest silence. We were too irritable to bear the sound of each other's voices; and it did not require a word -- a mere look or gesture was enough -- to provoke us to anger that was little short of madness.

How it was that we did not all become raving maniacs, I cannot tell.

Throughout the 12th no drop of moisture crossed our lips, and not a cloud arose to warrant the expectation of a passing shower; in the shade, if shade it might be called, the thermometer would have registered at least 100 deg., and perhaps considerably more.

No change next day. The salt water began to chafe my legs, but although the smarting was at times severe, it was an inconvenience to which I gave little heed; others who had suffered from the same trouble had become no worse. Oh! if this water that surrounds us could be reduced to vapor or to ice! its particles of salt extracted, it would be available for drink. But no! we have no appliances, and we must suffer on.

At the risk of being devoured by the sharks, the boatswain and two sailors took a morning bath, and as their plunge seemed to freshen them, I and three of my companions resolved to follow their example. We had never learned to swim, and had to be fastened to the end of a rope and lowered into the water, while Curtis, during the half hour of our bath, kept a sharp lookout to give warning of any danger from approaching sharks. No recommenda-

tion, however, on our part, nor any representation of the benefit we felt we had derived, could induce Miss Herbey to allay her sufferings in the same way.

At about eleven o'clock, the captain came up to me, and whispered in my ear:

"Don't say a word, Mr. Kazallon; I do not want to raise false hopes, but I think I see a ship."

It was as well that the captain had warned me; otherwise, I should have raised an involuntary shout of joy; as it was I had the greatest difficulty in restraining my expressions of delight.

"Look behind to larboard," he continued in an undertone.

Affecting an indifference which I was far from feeling, I cast an anxious glance to that quarter of the horizon of which he spoke, and there, although mine was not a nautical eye, I could plainly distinguish the outline of a ship under sail.

Almost at the same moment the boatswain who happened to be looking in the same direction, raised the cry, "Ship ahoy!"

Whether it was that no one believed it, or whether all energies were exhausted, certain it is that the announcement produced none of the effects that might have been expected. Not a soul exhibited the slightest emotion, and it was only when the boatswain had several times sung out his tidings that all eyes turned to the horizon. There, most undeniably, was the ship, but the question rose at once to the minds of all, and to the lips of many, "Would she see us?"

The sailors immediately began discussing the build of the vessel, and made all sorts of conjectures as to the direction she was taking. Curtis was far more deliberate in his judgment. After examining her attentively for some time, he said, "She is a brig running close upon the wind, on the starboard tack. If she keeps her course for a couple of hours, she will come right athwart our tracks."

A couple of hours! The words sounded to our ears like a couple of centuries. The ship might change her course at any moment; closely trimmed as she was, it was very probable that she was only tacking about to catch the wind, in which case, as soon as she felt a breeze, she would *résumé* her larboard tack and make away again. On the other hand, if she was really sailing with the wind, she would come nearer to us, and there would be good ground for hope.

Meantime, no exertion must be spared, and no means left untried, to make our position known. The brig was about twelve miles to the east of us, so that it was out of the question to think of any cries of ours being overheard; but Curtis gave directions that every possible signal should be made. We had no firearms by which we could attract attention, and nothing else occurred to us beyond hoisting a flag of distress. Miss Herbey's red shawl, as being of a color most distinguishable against the background of sea and sky, was run up to the mast-head, and was caught by the light breeze that just then was ruffling the surface of the water. As a drowning man clutches at a straw, so our hearts bounded with hope every time that our poor flag fluttered in the wind.

For an hour our feelings alternated between hope and despair. The ship was evidently making her way in the direction of the raft, but every now and then she seemed to stop, and then our hearts would almost stand still with agony lest she was going to put about. She carried all her canvas, even to her royals and stay-sails, but her hull was only partially visible above the horizon.

How slowly she advanced! The breeze was very, very feeble, and perhaps soon it would drop altogether! We felt that we would give years of our life to know the result of the

coming hour.

At half past twelve the captain and the boatswain considered that the brig was about nine miles away; she had, therefore, gained only three miles in an hour and a half, and it was doubtful whether the light breeze that had been passing over our heads had reached her at all. I fancied, too, that her sails were no longer filled, but were hanging loose against her masts. Turning to the direction of the wind, I tried to make out some chance of a rising breeze; but no, the waves were calm and torpid, and the little puff of air that had aroused our hopes had died away across the sea.

I stood aft with M. Letourneur, Andre and Miss Herbey, and our glances perpetually wandered from the distant ship to our captain's face. Curtis stood leaning against the mast, with the boatswain by his side; their eyes seemed never for a moment to cease to watch the brig, but their countenances clearly expressed the varying emotions that passed through their minds. Not a word was uttered, nor was the silence broken, until the carpenter exclaimed, in accents of despair:

"She's putting about!"

All started up -- some to their knees, others to their feet.

The boatswain dropped a frightful oath. The ship was

still nine miles away, and at such a distance it was impossible for our signal to be seen; our tiny raft, a mere speck upon the waters, would be lost in the intense irradiation of the sunbeams. If only we could be seen, no doubt all would be well; no captain would have the barbarous inhumanity to leave us to our fate; but there had been no chance; only too well we knew that we had not been within range of sight.

"My friends," said Curtis, "we must make a fire; it is our last and only chance."

Some planks were quickly loosened and thrown into a heap upon the fore part of the raft. They were damp and troublesome to light; but the very dampness made the smoke more dense, and ere long a tall column of dusky fumes was rising straight upward in the air. If darkness should come on before the brig was completely out of view, the flames, we hoped might still be visible. But the hours passed on; the fire died out; and yet no signs of help.

The temper of resignation now deserted me entirely; faith, hope, confidence -- all vanished from my mind, and, like the boatswain, I swore long and loudly. A gentle hand was laid upon my arm, and turning round I saw Miss Herbey with her finger pointing to the sky. I could stand it no longer, but gliding underneath the tent I hid my face in my

hands and wept aloud.

Meanwhile the brig had altered her track, and was moving slowly to the east. Three hours later and the keenest eye could not have discerned her top-sails above the horizon.