

CHAPTER XLV

OUR THIRST RELIEVED

JANUARY 16. -- If the crew of any passing vessel had caught sight of us as we lay still and inanimate upon our sail-cloth, they would scarcely, at first sight, have hesitated to pronounce us dead.

My sufferings were terrible; tongue, lips, and throat were so parched and swollen that if food had been at hand I question whether I could have swallowed it. So exasperated were the feelings of us all, however, that we glanced at each other with looks as savage as though we were about to slaughter and without delay eat up one another.

The heat was aggravated by the atmosphere being somewhat stormy. Heavy vapors gathered on the horizon, and there was a look as if it were raining all around. Longing eyes and gasping mouths turned involuntarily toward the clouds, and M. Letourneur, on bended knee, was raising his hands, as it might be in supplication to the relentless skies.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. I listened for distant rumblings which might announce an approaching

storm, but although the vapors had obstructed the sun's rays, they no longer presented the appearance of being charged with electricity. Thus our prognostications ended in disappointment; the clouds, which in the early morning had been marked by the distinctness of their outline, had melted one into another and assumed an uniform dull gray tint; in fact, we were enveloped in an ordinary fog. But was it not still possible that this fog might turn to rain?

Happily this hope was destined to be realized; for in a very short time, Dowlas, with a shout of delight, declared that rain was actually coming; and sure enough, not half a mile from the raft, the dark parallel streaks against the sky testified that there at least rain was falling. I fancied I could see the drops rebounding from the surface of the water. The wind was fresh and bringing the cloud right on toward us, yet we could not suppress our trepidation lest it should exhaust itself before it reached us.

But no; very soon large heavy drops began to fall, and the storm-cloud, passing over our heads, was outpouring its contents upon us. The shower, however, was very transient; already a bright streak of light along the horizon marked the limit of the cloud and warned us that we must be quick to make the most of what it had to give us. Curtis had placed the broken barrel in the position that was most

exposed, and every sail was spread out to the fullest extent our dimensions would allow.

We all laid ourselves down flat upon our backs and kept our mouths wide open. The rain splashed into my face, wetted my lips, and trickled down my throat. Never can I describe the ecstasy with which I imbibed that renovating moisture. The parched and swollen glands relaxed, I breathed afresh, and my whole being seemed revived with a strange and requickened life.

The rain lasted about twenty minutes, when the cloud, only half exhausted, passed quite away from over us.

We grasped each other's hands as we rose from the platform on which we had been lying, and mutual congratulations, mingled with gratitude, poured forth from our long silent lips. Hope, however evanescent it might be, for the moment had returned, and we yielded to the expectation that, ere long, other and more abundant clouds might come and replenish our store.

The next consideration was how to preserve and economize what little had been collected by the barrel, or imbibed by the outspread sails. It was found that only a few pints of rain-water had fallen into the barrel; to this small

quantity the sailors were about to add what they could by wringing out the saturated sails, when Curtis made them desist from their intention.

"Stop, stop!" he said "we must wait a moment; we must see whether this water from the sails is drinkable."

I looked at him in amazement. Why should not this be as drinkable as the other? He squeezed a few drops out of one of the folds of a sail into a tin pot, and put it to his lips. To my surprise, he rejected it immediately, and upon tasting it for myself I found it not merely brackish, but briny as the sea itself. The fact was that the canvas had been so long exposed to the action of the waves, that it had become thoroughly impregnated by salt, which of course was taken up again by the water that fell upon it. Disappointed we were; but with several pints of water in our possession, we were not only contented for the present, but sanguine in our prospect for the future.