

CHAPTER XLVI

MY FAST IS BROKEN

JANUARY 17. -- As a natural consequence of the alleviation of our thirst, the pangs of hunger returned more violently than ever. Although we had no bait, and even if we had we could not use it for want of a whirl, we could not help asking whether no possible means could be devised for securing one out of the many sharks that were still perpetually swarming about the raft. Armed with knives, like the Indians in the pearl fisheries, was it not practicable to attack the monsters in their own element? Curtis expressed his willingness personally to make the attempt, but so numerous were the sharks that we would not for one moment hear of his risking his life in a venture of which the danger was as great as the success was doubtful.

By plunging into the sea, or by gnawing at a piece of metal, we could always, or at least often, do something that cheated us into believing that we were mitigating the pains of thirst; but with hunger it was different. The prospect, too, of rain seemed hopeful, while for getting food there appeared no chance; and, as we knew that nothing could compensate for the lack of nutritive matter, we were soon all cast down again. Shocking to confess, it would be untrue to deny that we surveyed each other with the eye

of an eager longing; and I need hardly explain to what a degree of savageness the one idea that haunted us had reduced our feelings.

Ever since the storm-cloud brought us the too transient shower the sky has been tolerably clear, and although at that time the wind had slightly freshened, it has since dropped, and the sail hangs idly against our mast. Except for the trifling relief it brings by modifying the temperature, we care little now for any breeze. Ignorant as we are as to what quarter of the Atlantic we have been carried by the currents, it matters very little to us from what direction the wind may blow if only it would bring, in rain or dew, the moisture of which we are so dreadfully in need.

My brain is haunted by most horrible nightmares; not that I suppose I am in anyway more distressed than my companions, who are lying in their usual places, vainly endeavoring to forget their sufferings in sleep.

After a time I fell into a restless, dreamy doze. I was neither asleep nor awake. How long I remained in that state of stupor I could hardly say, but at length a strange sensation brought me to myself. Was I dreaming, or was there not really some unaccustomed odor floating in the air? My nostrils became distended, and I could scarcely

suppress a cry of astonishment; but some instinct kept me quiet, and I laid myself down again with the puzzled sensation sometimes experienced when we have forgotten a word or name. Only a few minutes, however, had elapsed before another still more savory puff induced me to take several long inhalations. Suddenly, the truth seemed to flash across my mind. "Surely," I muttered to myself, "this must be cooked meat that I can smell."

Again and again I sniffed, and became more convinced than ever that my senses were not deceiving me. But from what part of the raft could the smell proceed? I rose to my knees, and having satisfied myself that the odor came from the front, I crept stealthily as a cat under the sails and between the spars in that direction. Following the promptings of my scent, rather than my vision, like a bloodhound in track of his prey. I searched everywhere I could, now finding, now losing, the smell according to my change of position, or the dropping of the wind. At length I got the true scent, once for all, so that I could go straight to the object for which I was in search.

Approaching the starboard angle of the raft, I came to the conclusion that the smell that had thus keenly excited my cravings was the smell of smoked bacon; the membranes of my tongue almost bristled with the intenseness of

my longing.

Crawling along a little farther, under a thick roll of sail-cloth, I was not long in securing my prize. Forcing my arm below the roll, I felt my hand in contact with something wrapped up in paper. I clutched it up, and carried it off to a place where I could examine it by the help of the light of the moon that had now made its appearance above the horizon. I almost shrieked for joy. It was a piece of bacon. True, it did not weigh many ounces, but small as it was it would suffice to alleviate the pangs of hunger for one day at least. I was just on the point of raising it to my mouth, when a hand was laid upon my arm. It was only by a most determined effort that I kept myself from screaming out. One instant more, and I found myself face to face with Hobart.

In a moment I understood all. Plainly this rascal Hobart had saved some provisions from the wreck, upon which he had been subsisting ever since. The steward had provided for himself, while all around him were dying of starvation. Detestable wretch! This accounts for the inconsistency of his well-to-do looks and his pitiable groans. Vile hypocrite!

Yet why, it struck me, should I complain? Was not I

reaping the benefit of that secret store that he, for himself, had saved?

But Hobart had no idea of allowing me the peaceable possession of what he held to be his own. He made a dash at the fragment of bacon, and seemed determined to wrest it from my grasp. We struggled with each other, but although our wrestling was very violent, it was very noiseless.

We were both of us aware that it was absolutely necessary that not one of those on board should know anything at all about the prize for which we were contending. Nor was my own determination lessened by hearing him groan out that it was his last, his only morsel. "His!" I thought; "it shall be mine now!"

And still careful that no noise of commotion should arise, I threw him on his back, and grasping his throat so that he gurgled again, I held him down until, in rapid mouthfuls, I had swallowed the last scrap of the food for which we had fought so hard.

I released my prisoner, and quietly crept back to my own quarters.

And not a soul is aware that I have broken my fast!