

CHAPTER XLVII

HOBART HANGS HIMSELF

JANUARY 18. -- After this excitement I awaited the approach of day with a strange anxiety. My conscience told me that Hobart had the right to denounce me in the presence of all my fellow-passengers; yet my alarm was vain. The idea of my proceedings being exposed by him was quite absurd; in a moment he would himself be murdered without pity by the crew, if it should be revealed that, unknown to them, he had been living on some private store which, by clandestine cunning, he had reserved. But, in spite of my anxiety, I had a longing for day to come.

The bit of food that I had thus stolen was very small; but small as it was it had alleviated my hunger; and I was now tortured with remorse, because I had not shared the meager morsel with my fellow-sufferers. Miss Herbey, Andre, his father, all had been forgotten, and from the bottom of my heart I repented of my cruel selfishness.

Meantime the moon rose high in the heavens, and the first streaks of dawn appeared. There is no twilight in these low latitudes, and the full daylight came well nigh at once. I had not closed my eyes since my encounter with the steward, and ever since the first blush of day I had

labored under the impression that I could see some unusual dark mass half way up the mast. But although it again and again caught my eye, it hardly roused my curiosity, and I did not rise from the bundle of sails on which I was lying to ascertain what it really was. But no sooner did the rays of the sun fall upon it than I saw at once that it was the body of a man, attached to a rope, and swinging to and fro with the motion of the raft.

A horrible presentiment carried me to the foot of the mast, and, just as I had guessed, Hobart had hanged himself. I could not for a moment doubt that it was I myself that had impelled him to the suicide. A cry of horror had scarcely escaped my lips, when my fellow-passengers were at my side, and the rope was cut. Then came the sailors. And what was it that made the group gather so eagerly around the body? Was it a humane desire to see whether any sparks of life remained? No, indeed; the corpse was cold, and the limbs were rigid; there was no chance that animation should be restored. What then was it that kept them lingering so close around? It was only too apparent what they were about to do.

But I did not, could not, look. I refused to take part in the horrible repast that was proposed. Neither would Miss Herbey, Andre, nor his father, consent to alleviate

their pangs of hunger by such revolting means. I know nothing for certain as to what Curtis did, and I did not venture to inquire; but of the others, -- Falsten, Dowlas, the boatswain, and all the rest, -- I know that, to assuage their cravings, they consented to reduce themselves to the level of beasts of prey; they were transformed from human beings into ravenous brutes.

The four of us who sickened at the idea of partaking of the horrid meal withdrew to the seclusion of our tent; it was bad enough to hear, without witnessing the appalling operation. But, in truth, I had the greatest difficulty in the world in preventing Andre from rushing out upon the cannibals, and snatching the odious food from their clutches. I represented to him the hopelessness of his attempt, and tried to reconcile him by telling him that if they liked the food they had a right to it. Hobart had not been murdered; he had died by his own hand; and, after all, as the boatswain had once remarked to me, "It was better to eat a dead man than a live one."

Do what I would, however, I could not quiet Andre's feeling of abhorrence; in his disgust and loathing he seemed for the time to have quite forgotten his own sufferings.

Meanwhile, there was no concealing the truth that we

were ourselves dying of starvation, while our eight companions would probably, by their loathsome diet, escape that frightful destiny. Owing to his secret hoard of provisions Hobart had been by far the strongest among us; he had been supported, so that no organic disease had affected his tissues, and really might be said to be in good health when his chagrin drove him to his desperate suicide. But what was I thinking of! whither were my meditations carrying me away? was it not coming to pass that the cannibals were rousing my envy instead of exciting my horror?

Very shortly after this I heard Dowlas talking about the possibility of obtaining salt by evaporating seawater in the sun; "and then," he added, "we can salt down the rest."

The boatswain assented to what the carpenter had said, and probably the suggestion was adopted.

Silence, the most profound, now reigns upon the raft. I presume that nearly all have gone to sleep. One thing I do know, that they are no longer hungry.