

CHAPTER LI

FLAYPOLE BECOMES DELIRIOUS

JANUARY 24. -- I have inquired more than once of Curtis if he has the faintest idea to what quarter of the Atlantic we have drifted, and each time he has been unable to give me a decided answer, though from his general observation of the direction of the wind and currents he imagines that we have been carried westward, that is to say, toward the land.

To-day the breeze has dropped entirely, but the heavy swell is still upon the sea, and is an unquestionable sign that a tempest has been raging at no great distance. The raft labors hard against the waves, and Curtis, Falsten, and the boatswain, employ the little energy that remains to them in strengthening the joints. Why do they give themselves such trouble? Why not let the few frail planks part asunder, and allow the ocean to terminate our miserable existence? Certain it seems that our sufferings must have reached their utmost limit, and nothing could exceed the torture that we are enduring. The sky pours down upon us a heat like that of molten lead, and the sweat that saturates the tattered clothes that hang about our bodies goes far to aggravate the agonies of our thirst. No words of mine can describe this dire distress; these sufferings are beyond human

estimate.

Even bathing, the only means of refreshment that we possessed, has now become impossible, for ever since Jynxstrop's death the sharks have hung about the raft in shoals.

To-day I tried to gain a few drops of fresh water by evaporation, but even with the exercise of the greatest patience, it was with the utmost difficulty that I obtained enough to moisten a little scrap of linen; and the only kettle that we had was so old and battered, that it would not bear the fire, so that I was obliged to give up the attempt in despair.

Falsten is now almost exhausted, and if he survives us at all, it can only be for a few days. Whenever I raised my head I always failed to see him, but he was probably lying sheltered somewhere beneath the sails. Curtis was the only man who remained on his feet, but with indomitable pluck he continued to stand on the front of the raft, waiting, watching, hoping. To look at him, with his unflagging energy, almost tempted me to imagine that he did well to hope, but I dared not entertain one sanguine thought, and there I lay, waiting, nay, longing for death.

How many hours passed away thus I cannot tell, but after

a time a loud peal of laughter burst upon my ear. Someone else, then, was going mad, I thought; but the idea did not rouse me in the least. The laughter was repeated with greater vehemence, but I never raised my head. Presently I caught a few incoherent words.

"Fields, fields, gardens and trees! Look, there's an inn under the trees! Quick, quick! brandy, gin, water! a guinea a drop! I'll pay for it! I've lots of money! lots! lots!"

Poor deluded wretch! I thought again; the wealth of a nation could not buy a drop of water here. There was silence for a minute, when all of a sudden I heard the shout of "Land! land!"

The words acted upon me like an electric shock, and, with a frantic effort, I started to my feet. No land, indeed, was visible, but Flaypole, laughing, singing, and gesticulating, was raging up and down the raft. Sight, taste, and hearing -- all were gone; but the cerebral derangement supplied their place, and in imagination the maniac was conversing with absent friends, inviting them into the George Inn at Cardiff, offering them gin, whiskey, and, above all, water! Stumbling at every step, and singing in a cracked, discordant voice, he staggered about among us like an intoxicated man. With the loss of his senses all his sufferings had vanished,

and his thirst was appeased. It was hard not to wish to be a partaker of his hallucination.

Dowlas, Falsten, and the boatswain, seemed to think that the unfortunate wretch would, like Jynxstrop, put an end to himself by leaping into the sea; but, determined this time to preserve the body, that it might serve a better purpose than merely feeding the sharks, they rose and followed the madman everywhere he went, keeping a strict eye upon his every movement.

But the matter did not end as they expected. As though he were really intoxicated by the stimulants of which he had been raving, Flaypole at last sank down in a heap in a corner of the raft, where he lay lost in a heavy slumber.