

CHAPTER LV

FRESH WATER

JANUARY 27. -- I did not close my eyes all night, and was keenly alive to the faintest sounds, and every ripple of the water, and every murmur of the waves, broke distinctly on my ear. One thing I noticed and accepted as a happy omen; not a single shark now lingered round the raft. The waning moon rose at a quarter to one, and through the feeble glimmer which she cast across the ocean, many and many a time I fancied I caught sight of the longed-for sail, lying only a few cables'-lengths away.

But when morning came, the sun rose once again upon a desert ocean, and my hopes began to fade. Neither ship nor shore had appeared, and as the shocking hour of execution drew near, my dreams of deliverance melted away; I shuddered in my very soul as I was brought face to face with the stern reality. I dared not look upon the victim, and whenever his eyes, so full of calmness and resignation, met my own, I turned away my head. I felt choked with horror, and my brain reeled as though I were intoxicated.

It was now six o'clock, and all hope had vanished from my breast; my heart beat rapidly, and a cold sweat of agony

broke out all over me. Curtis and the boatswain stood by the mast attentively scanning the horizon. The boatswain's countenance was terrible to look upon; one could see that although he would not forestall the hour, he was determined not to wait a moment after it arrived. As for the captain, it was impossible to tell what really passed within his mind; his face was livid, and his whole existence seemed concentrated in the exercise of his power of vision. The sailors were crawling about the platform, with their eyes gleaming, like the wild beasts ready to pounce upon their devoted prey.

I could no longer keep my place, and glided along to the front of the raft. The boatswain was still standing intent on his watch, but all of a sudden, in a voice that made me start, he shouted:

"Now then, time's up!" and followed by Dowlas, Burke, Flaypole, and Sandon, ran to the back of the raft. As Dowlas seized the hatchet convulsively, Miss Herbey could not suppress a cry of terror. Andre started to his feet.

"What are you going to do to my father?" he asked in accents choked with emotion.

"My boy," said M. Letourneur, "the lot has fallen upon me, and I must die!"

"Never!" shrieked Andre, throwing his arms about his father. "They shall kill me first. It was I who threw Hobart's body into the sea, and it is I who ought to die!" But the words of the unhappy youth had no other effect than to increase the fury of the men who were so staunchly bent upon their bloody purpose.

"Come, come, no more fuss," said Dowlas, as he tore the young man away from his father's embrace.

Andre fell upon his back, in which position two of the sailors held him down so tightly that he could not move, while Burke and Sandon carried off their victim to the front.

All this had taken place much more rapidly than I have been able to describe it. I was transfixed with horror, and much as I wished to throw myself between M. Letourneur and his executioners, I seemed to be rooted to the spot where I was standing.

Meantime the sailors had been taking off some of M. Letourneur's clothes, and his neck and shoulders were already bare.

"Stop a moment!" he said in a tone in which was the ring of indomitable courage. "Stop! I don't want to deprive you of your ration; but I suppose you will not require to eat the whole of me to-day."

The sailors, taken back by his suggestion, stared at him with amazement.

"There are ten of you," he went on. "My two arms will give you each a meal; cut them off for to-day, and tomorrow you shall have the rest of me."

"Agreed!" cried Dowlas; and as M. Letourneur held out his bare arms, quick as lightning the carpenter raised his hatchet.

Curtis and I could bear this scene no longer; while we were alive to prevent it, this butchery should not be permitted, and we rushed forward simultaneously to snatch the victim from his murderers. A furious struggle ensued, and in the midst of the melee, I was seized by one of the sailors, and hurled violently into the sea.

Closing my lips, I tried to die of suffocation in the water; but in spite of myself, my mouth opened, and a few drops trickled down my throat.

Merciful Heaven! the water was fresh!