

'The plugs out!' said I, hardly able to believe my ears: 'for what purpose?'

'Ax no questions, Mr. Alfred,' replied my informant. 'I cōly know this—one of the sailors whispered to me, he did: 'Old Sam you've been my shipmate, so I'll tell you this: keep your weather-eye open, and in case of anything happening"—he didn't say what—"jump into the starboard boat and be coxswain." I give the office to you—for old days sake, Mr. Alfred.'

'But Gregg?' returned I bewildered.

'Gregg would not leave much of the roof on my skull if he guessed what I've been saying,' rejoined the old man. 'Now I must go about my duty; but hark ye, Mr. Alfred, if you think what I tell you all moonshine, and that we are cracking on for no reason, just"—dropping his voice—"go and look at the steam-gauge!" and he was gone.

I stood for a few minutes with my brain in a perfect whirl of conflicting thoughts. The repeated warnings which I had received, the ominous signs that mischief of some kind was brewing, which had attended my voyage in the *Proserpine*, crowded in upon me with a force that compelled conviction. Gregg was a bold and unscrupulous man, as I well knew, and that it might well be that his designs were of a nature to harmonize with his own character; but then what could be his object in this instance? and why had Mr. Harman been so strangely imprudent as to confide his valuable property, to say nothing of himself and his only child, to such a vessel commanded by such a captain? To explain these incongruities seemed hopeless.

'Whereabouts are we?' I asked of one of the crew, just relieved of his spell of work as helmsman.

'Half-way between Natchez and the Grande Coupee, he made answer. 'The light you see on the west bank is Three Island Point, and we shall sight Calumet Island and St. Anthony village in half an hour or less, at our rate of going; that's about it, mister.'

I went down to the cabin, and consulted a chart of the Mississippi, on a large scale, that hung on the panelled wall. Yes, there were the places named; while between the Point and Calumet Island a jagged line of dots indicated the Banc des Moines, a dangerous shoal, the scene of many a catastrophe, and which had gained its name, tradition averred, from the drowning of a boat load of missionary monks in the reign of Louis XIV.

I quitted the cabin and hurried at once to examine the steam-gauge; but it had been broken, 'by accident,' as a scowling boatman in a red shirt gruffly assured me. No doubt it had been deemed expedient to prevent that useful register of the pressure at which the steam was applied from being readily accessible to prying eyes. My next care was to visit the boats. That to starboard was, as Sam had correctly stated, in perfect order, the oars shipped, and ready for instant use. The others were littered with miscellaneous objects, huddled together with seeming carelessness; and by the dim light I found it no easy matter to verify the information which had been given me. At last, however, by groping with my ungloved hand among the rubbish, I succeeded in ascertaining that the old sailor had told the truth. *The Plugs were out.* My worst suspicions were thus confirmed. I was face to face with base cruel treachery, and all our lives hung as it were by a thread. A tumult of feelings assailed me, and I grew hot and cold by turns, as the cruel truth forced itself upon me; but it was no unmanly fear that I