

"Probably by spontaneous combustion of the cotton."

"Does that often happen?"

"Not often, but sometimes. When the cotton is very dry at the time of putting it on board, combustion may take place spontaneously at the bottom of a damp hold which it is difficult to ventilate. I am very sure that this is the sole cause of the fire now raging."

"Of what importance is the cause after all?"

I reply; "is there anything to be done, Mr. Curtis?"

"No," he says; "I have already told you that we have taken every precaution possible. I have thought of tapping the ship at her water-line, so as to introduce a certain quantity of water, which the pumps would soon exhaust afterwards; but we have discovered that the fire has spread to the middle layers of the cargo, and the whole hold must be inundated to put it out. However, I have had holes pierced in the deck at certain points, and water is poured into these during the night; but this is insufficient. No, there is really but one thing to do—what is always done in similar cases—and that is, to attempt to stifle the fire, by closing every issue to the outer air, and to force the fire, for want of oxygen, to go out of itself."

"And it is constantly increasing?"

"Yes, and that proves that the air is getting into the hold through some opening, which, with all our diligence, we are unable to find."

"Are any instances known of ships having been saved under circumstances like these?"

"Undoubtedly. It is not unusual for ships loaded with cotton to reach Liverpool or Havre with a portion of their cargo burned. But in such cases the fire had been put out, or at least confined during the voyage. I have known more than one captain who has thus arrived in port, with the deck scorching under his feet. The unloading was done rapidly, and the undamaged portion of the cargo was saved at the same time with the ship. In our case it is different; for I know but too well that the fire, instead of being checked, makes fresh progress every day. There must, therefore, be a hole somewhere, which has escaped our search, and through which the air enters to stimulate the fire."

"Might we not return on our path, and gain the nearest land?"

"Perhaps; and that is just what Walter, the boatswain, and I have been discussing with the captain this very day. I will tell you, Mr. Kazallon, that I have already taken it upon myself to change the route followed so far, and we now have the wind behind us, and are running south-westward, that is, towards the coast."

"The passengers know nothing of the danger which menaces them?"

"Nothing; and I beg of you to keep secret all I have told you. Our difficulty must not be increased by the terror of women, or of pusillanimous men. The crew has also received orders to say nothing."

I understand the importance of the mate's caution, and promise him absolute secrecy.

October 20 and 21. The Chancellor continues on her way, with all the sail on that her masts can support. Sometimes the gallant-masts bend until they almost break, but Curtis is on the watch. Stationed near the rudder wheel, he will not leave the helmsman to himself. By slight yaws and lurches, skilfully managed, he yields to the breeze when the safety of the ship is threatened, and the Chancellor loses nothing of her speed under the hand that guides her.

During the 20th of October all the passengers have ascended to the poop. They have evidently noticed the strange height of the temperature below deck; but not suspecting the truth, they do not trouble themselves about it. Besides, their feet, comfortably shod, have not felt the heat which penetrates the planks of the deck, despite the water which is almost continuously sprinkled upon it. The working of the pumps should provoke some astonishment on their part, it would seem; but it does not. Most of them, stretched out on the benches, yield to the rocking caused by the rolling of the ship, in a state of perfect serenity. M. Letourneur alone has betrayed surprise at the very unusual zeal for cleanliness betrayed by the crew. He says a few words to me about this, and I reply in an indifferent tone. This Frenchman is a man of energetic character, and I might safely confide the truth to him; but I have promised Curtis to keep silent, and so I say nothing.

Then, when I give myself over to reflections concerning the results of the catastrophe which threatens, my heart is oppressed. There are twenty-eight of us on board—twenty-eight victims, perhaps—to whom the flames will soon not leave a single plank!

On the next day, the 21st of October, the situation is the same. The voyage continues, in the eyes of the passengers, under the ordinary conditions, and nothing is changed in the routine of the life on board.

The progress of the fire, however, does not betray itself outside, and this is a good sign. The openings have been so tightly sealed up, that not a whiff of smoke betrays the conflagration below. Perhaps it may be possible to concentrate the fire in the hold, and, perhaps, in short, from want of air, it will go out of itself, or will be so stifled as not to extend to the whole of the cargo. This is Curtis's hope, and, by his extreme precaution, he has even had the orifice of the pumps plugged up; for the pipe, extending to the bottom of the hold, might give passage to a few whiffs of air.

May heaven come to our aid, for surely we cannot help ourselves! This day would have passed without any incident, if chance had not led me to hear a conversation, which apprized me that our situation, already so serious, is becoming terrible.

The reader may judge of this from what follows.

I was sitting on the poop, where two of the passengers were talking in a low voice, not suspecting that their words would reach my ear. These were the engineer, Falsten, and the merchant, Ruby, who often conversed together.