

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FRED RANSOM'S REFLECTIONS—A SHIP ON FIRE—THE RESCUE OF THE CREW—MUTUAL RECOGNITION.



HE sun had set, but twilight still lingered, as we spread sail and glided swiftly along the shadowy line of Keys. The storm which had raged nearly without intermission, since the fatal night of the 6th of August, had subsided, and a double calm ensued, after the strife of the elements, and the more fearful violence of man. We had reason to look back with satisfaction at the part which we had acted in the events of the last few hours; yet to the retrospection, belonged so much that was painful, that I rejoiced in a change of scene which might disturb the memory of the late pillage and ruthless massacre. I had had enough adventure to satisfy the craving of the most romantic youth. As a consequence,

I experienced a longing to return home, and it was with a joyful feeling that the thought flashed across me, that it was in my present frame of mind, and in no other, that I could honorably do so. By dint of pondering, came the idea of leaving the vessel when she arrived at Key West. Then, for the first time, I realized the strength of the tie which bound me to the captain and his son. On that account, I felt reluctant to go. Yet my father had said, that when I could state that I was cured of my spirit for adventure, I might return home. I was sure that I could say so now. I asked myself whether I ought not to return when I could say this with truth. I had no right to give my father the pain of a prolonged and indefinite separation. The accomplishment of my desire, and his injunction, were reconcilable, and all that opposed them was the anticipated pang of separation from my wrecker friends. I resolved to leave the vessel at Key West.

Ever since the morning after the massacre, my thoughts had taken this turn; but my final determination was not made until the evening upon which we weighed anchor. About nine o'clock, I was alone, reclining on the trunk-cabin, gazing at the stars, and listening to the purling sound of the low waves sweeping past the schooner. The calm influence of night and

solitude inspired a thoughtful mood, and I resolved to encourage it until I had reached a solution of the question which had engaged my mind.

As I ceased communing with myself, my spirits rose. Doubt had vanished. My desire and my duty were in accord. I felt supremely happy. I sprang to my feet, and walked towards the cabin, with the intention of telling my friends of my determination; but, on second thoughts, I concluded to defer telling the news until we reached Key West, for I felt sure that it would grieve them both to know that we must part.

Passing the companion-way, I heard a murmur of conversation. One of the survivors of the massacre was recounting to the captain some of the details of his escape with his family. The children, with their mothers, were retiring to rest, as I judged from the glow of a light behind a blanket which had been hung across the cabin, in order to afford privacy to the female passengers.

Brady was at the helm. I sat down near him, under the lee of the bulwarks. The loquacious fellow instantly took the opportunity to ask me some questions about the killing of the "chafe," and about the events of the night

of the 6th of August, although he knew that the captain allowed no conversation at the helm.

"I will not talk to you, Brady," said I. "It is against orders."

"Did you hear that," said Brady, quickly.

"I tell you, Brady," returned I, "that I will not talk to you. If you go on, I'll be obliged to report you."

"It's a gun, I mane," said Brady. "I heard a gun."

"Nonsense," said I, thinking that his imagination was running upon the Indians. "We are miles away from Indian Key."

"It's a cannon, I mane," said Brady. "There! Do you hear that?"

"No, I did not," said I, rising. "And, moreover, I think that the cannon is in your imagination. But perhaps I could n't hear so well where I was, as you can by the helm."

A short time elapsed, and I was on the point of resuming my seat, when I heard the report of a distant cannon.

"Do n't you hear *that*?" exclaimed Brady.

"You're right," said I. "Captain!" shouted I, calling down the companion-way. "Please come on deck. I hear signal-guns."

The captain sprang up the steps, followed by one of the passengers, and stood beside us.

The sound of the guns came at regular and

frequent intervals, as fast as a single piece of ordnance can be loaded and fired.

"I should judge by the sound," said the captain, "that the vessel must be well off shore, —fifteen miles at least."

Two or three of the male passengers now joined the party, and one of them, who was a sea-captain, agreed with Captain Bowers in his estimate of the distance from our vessel to the vessel in distress.

"It seems to me," he added, "that she must bear about south-southeast from where we are."

Captain Bowers assented.

"She is to the southward, certainly," remarked one of the passengers; "for do n't you observe that the reports have become much louder?"

"She bears about south-southeast," said Captain Bowers, in a confident tone. "I shall keep the schooner on her present course, for awhile; and then try to cross the Reef, through a channel I know. In four or five miles we'll be abreast of her."

When we had sailed about that distance, the correctness of the view expressed, as to the vessel's first bearing from our position, was confirmed, for the sound of the reports came from the eastward.

"All hands stand by to haul in the fore and main sheets," shouted the captain. "Here, you three men, come aft. Luff her up, Brady. Haul away now. Give a pull at the main-peak halliards, men. Trim the jib-sheet. Steady at that, Brady."

The schooner was now close-hauled, and running directly towards the Reef. Before long we passed through the channel, and the reports of the cannon became more and more distinct.

Suddenly, near the horizon, a bright light glowed, encompassing a large ship with a momentary halo.

"She's on fire!" shouted every one on deck. The noise brought up all the crew who were below, as well as those occupants of the cabin who had not retired to rest, and our forward deck was filled with eager gazers.

The glow quickly reappeared, and as suddenly vanished. Again it commenced, shone flickeringly, and died away into utter darkness.

With a quick leap, the light arose once more, increasing in intensity, until the ship became a great bonfire, lighting up the horizon with a dazzling glare.

The darting blaze, amid her masts, devoured her sails, as powder is consumed in the quick breath of its explosion. The sails gone, the blazing hull then lighted the masts, which soon

showed like pillars of fire, until, charred to the core, just before they fell, quick streaks of light coursed up and down them, like the darting of electric sparks. The whole of the forward part of the ship, even to the mizzen-mast, was in flames. It was very evident from the character of the conflagration, that the ship had been for a long time afire in her hold; the hatches had been battened down to exclude the air, and smother the flames, which, although pent up, imperceptibly gained the mastery, and suddenly bursting their bonds, had wrapped the ship in a tornado of flame.

The deck of the *Flying Cloud* was a scene of bustle and preparation. The boats were prepared, so that we could lower them at a moment's notice. The two quarter-boats, with close stowing, could hold a dozen persons besides the oarsmen. The dingy we had lost at Indian Key. We had nothing upon which to depend, except the quarter-boats.

"I've got just two crews of four men each, for the boats," said Captain Bowers to the sea-captain. You take command of one of the boats, and Fred Ransom will take charge of the other. I'll run as close as I dare. Hannibal and I can manage the vessel, with the aid of one or two of the passengers. Take your sta-

tions by the boats, men," shouted the captain. "Hannibal, take the helm."

The men ran up the companion-ladders, and reached the quarter-deck. One of them got into each boat, to unhook the falls as soon as she was lowered, and the others stood by the davits.

The light of the fire was now so vivid, that on our decks, the face of every one shone brightly in the glare. We were ploughing rapidly through the sea, and objects on the ship became at every moment more distinguishable. She drifted, an unmanageable mass, with the flames sweeping from her stem almost to her stern. Near the stern, we could see dark clusters, which we recognized as human beings, trying to escape, on the verge of the taffrail, the blast of the fiery furnace.

The excited shout and rush to the forward-deck, with which all on the deck of the schooner had involuntary greeted the discovery that the mysterious vessel in distress was a ship on fire, had at once given place to brief command, disciplined and prompt obedience. In a minute afterwards, we were standing motionless at our posts. The passengers who had retired, commenced to emerge from the cabin, their scanty dress and excited gestures betokening that the sudden noise had, owing to the scenes through

which they had lately passed, produced in them an alarm little short of a panic.

We were nearing the ship so rapidly, that we could sometimes see a figure separate itself from one of the little knots of human beings, run quickly to and fro, and then again become merged in the dark mass that hung, like swarming bees, close to the taffrail.

The captain luffed the schooner slightly, so as to run to windward of the ship. As we held on our new course, and the ship drifted slowly to leeward, from our new point of view the figures in the groups on the ship's poop began to appear detached. Just after we had changed our course, we thought that the ship's passengers must for the first time have seen our vessel; for a fluctuating movement was perceptible amongst them, and then a shrill sound, like a cry of distress, was faintly borne to our ears.

We were soon within hearing of the agonizing cries of the ship's passengers. The progress of the flames was depriving them of the little space in which they had huddled, cowering on the deck to escape the scorching heat. Objects of various sorts were being hastily thrown overboard, and human forms were seen leaping into the water. Some rushed wildly to and fro,

wringing their hands, stopping abruptly, and then precipitating themselves into the sea.

"Oh, if we could only have arrived a few minutes earlier!" exclaimed I to the sea-captain, who was standing at his post on the other side of the deck. "I am afraid that they will all be lost."

"Never fear," he replied, "the ship must have been afire for a long time, and those things that were thrown overboard, before any one leaped, were prepared for that purpose. The sea is pretty smooth. We may pick most of the people up."

We were now so near that the crackling and roar of the flames were distinctly audible. Only two figures were visible on the ship's poop. They showed like silhouettes* against the background of flame.

The two female figures (for they were in female costume) showed so distinctly, that I could recognize by their respective height and size, that one was a woman, and the other a young and slender girl. They stood poised on the taffrail, clasped each other in a momentary embrace, and then, hand in hand, sprang into the sea.

* A silhouette is a black figure, in which nothing is recognizable except the outline.

I heard the captain's voice shout, "Down with your helm, Hannibal!"

The schooner shot up into the wind's eye, and slowly lost her way, and as soon as the captain dared, he said, "Lower away the boats."

To lower the boats, unhook the falls, shove off from the schooner, point and let fall the oars, and pull in the direction of the place where most of the ship's passengers had leaped into the sea, required but a few seconds. A few more, brought us to the place where, clinging to spars, boxes, barrels, and other articles, so numerous that it was evident that they had been prepared, we found some drowning wretches tossing amid the waves. We dragged them into the boats, working with desperate eagerness, so as to avail ourselves of the bright light of the burning ship, which was rapidly drifting away to leeward. Sometimes, when we had almost given over further search, a faint cry led us to the rescue of some one yet struggling in the water. All at once, I thought of the two female figures that I had seen precipitate themselves from the ship. Neither was in my boat. After taking aboard seven people, I had been for five minutes vainly pulling around in every direction. I bethought me of pulling towards the other boat, to see if they were there. They were not. There was not a

woman nor a girl in either boat. I recollected that they had remained last on the ship. If they were to be found, they were nearer to the ship. I steered along the fiery track of the ship drifting to leeward. I soon heard a shrill cry. Then a louder one came. The light from the burning ship showed a dark object on the crest of a wave. I steered in that direction. I distinguished cries for help. We reached the place, found and dragged into the boat two female figures. One was that of a woman of mature age, the other that of a mere slip of a girl. They were clinging to a spar, and were almost exhausted by their efforts to retain their hold. They must be the persons of whom I was in search, thought I.

I saw the other boat approaching mine, and heard the hail of the sea-captain who was in charge of her. I rowed to meet him, and as we neared each other, he halloed:

"I have the captain of the ship aboard my boat. He wants to make a count, to see who are missing."

The boats ranged up along-side of each other, and the captain of the ship, as soon as he came near, recognizing some of the people in my boat, asked the names of others whom, at the first glance, he could not distinguish. "Are Mrs. and Miss Brenton aboard?" said he.

"There are a woman and a girl in the bottom of the boat," said I. "I don't know their names. They are too much exhausted to speak."

"Then," said the captain of the ship, "all that can be saved, are saved. One man, when the fire was first discovered, became panic-stricken, jumped overboard, and was drowned."

We steered for the schooner, and aided the passengers to reach the deck. I jumped out of my boat, and taking Miss Brenton by the hands, lifted her up to the deck, while one of the men assisted her mother.

Miss Brenton was so exhausted that she tottered. To keep her from falling, I was obliged to encircle her waist with my arm. As I turned, in the act, to address some words of encouragement to her, I for the first time obtained a full view of her face. I was seized with astonishment so great, that I nearly let her fall to the deck.

"Julia!" exclaimed I.

She glanced at me with a startled look, and murmured, "Fred!"

"Fred Ransom!" echoed Mrs. Brenton.

"This is no time for explanations," said I, addressing them. "You are both exhausted. You had better go down, at once, into the cabin."

Saying this, I escorted Julia and her mother to the companion-way, where they were received by two of the lady-passengers.

Some of the ship's crew were accommodated forward. Some remained on deck. The captain of the ship, his three officers, and two of the male passengers, finding how crowded the cabin was, declined to accept a place there. Captain Bowers gave them a change of clothes, and some light bedding, which they spread on deck.

The captain did not attempt to return through the channel across the Reef. When, an hour before, he had passed through it, the urgency of the case admitted of no debate.

We were forced to keep on a course along the outside edge of the Reef, breasting the current of the Gulf Stream.

The ship burned, until, owing to our increasing distance and the waste of material for combustion, she showed like a great live-coal upon the surface of the sea. When day dawned, she was out of sight.

At that time we were still far from Key West. During the latter part of the night, the wind had been extremely fickle, and as the schooner had had to contend with the current of the Gulf Stream, she had not made much way.

It was late in the morning, before Mrs. Brenton and Julia were able to come on deck, owing to the fact that their clothes were in process of drying. The other lady-passengers were not able to replenish their wardrobe, for they themselves were destitute even of a change.

I anxiously looked for the Brentons, and was gratified when, about ten o'clock, they emerged from the cabin. They were both pale and weak, and Mrs. Brenton leaned on her daughter for support.

"Take my arm, Mrs. Brenton," said I, advancing. "The fresh air on deck will revive you."

"It is like a dream," said Mrs. Brenton, half soliloquizing, and half addressing me. "It was only a fortnight ago," added she, in a weak voice, "that I saw your father, and we were talking of the prospect of your return. Julia and I were on our way to join my husband in Valparaiso. What will become of us! I was not able to save even the money which I had in my trunk. For the sake of your father's friendship for my husband, you must stay with us, Fred."

"I will, indeed," I replied. "And I would have done so under any circumstances. I shall not appear to have so much merit now, when I confess that, before I met you, I intended to

return home when this vessel reached Key West. It seems providential that she, of all the wreckers, should have been so fortunate as to save you. The captain and his family are strong friends of mine. I have a little sum of money saved up in Key West, and the moment that we arrive there, you will be provided with what is necessary, and my remaining funds will be sufficient to pay our passage to New York."

"I have, indeed, reason to be grateful," replied Mrs. Brenton.

Julia timidly smiled her thanks.

For half an hour, they walked the deck, and then, being fatigued, returned to the cabin. I seized the opportunity to communicate to the captain my intention of departure, assigning the reasons which I have already given the reader, adding the additional one, of the necessity of my becoming the protector of the Brentons, who were friends of our family.

A shade passed over the captain's face. George said that I could not go; that the Brentons could take passage from Key West for New York, just as well without me as with me.

But the captain checked his son, and turning to me, said:

"I approve of your intention, Fred. The

reason that you first gave me was sufficient. Never forget your wrecker friends, my boy."

"Never!" said I, walking away to conceal my emotion. And I never shall forget them.