

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CATASTROPHE.

And so these two fair women talked, making plans for the future as though all things endured forever, and all plans were destined to be realized.

But even as they talked, somewhere up in the high heavens the Voice that rules the world spoke a word, and the Messenger of Fate rushed forth to do its bidding. On board the great ship was music and laughter and the sweet voices of singing women; but above it hung a pall of doom. Not the most timid heart dreamed of danger. What danger could there be aboard of that grand ship, which sped across the waves with the lightness and confidence of the swallow? There was naught to fear. A prosperous voyage was drawing to its end, and mothers put their babes to sleep with as sure a heart as though they were on solid English ground. Oh! surely when his overflowing load of sorrows and dire miseries was meted out to man, some gentle Spirit pleaded for him--that he should not have foresight added to the tale, that he should not see the falling knife or hear the water lapping that one day shall entomb him? Or, was it kept back because man, having knowledge, would be man without reason?--for terror would make him mad, and he would end his fears by hurrying their fulfilment! At least, we are blind to the future, and let us be thankful for it.

Presently Lady Holmhurst got up from her chair, and said that she was going to bed, but that, first of all, she must kiss Dick, her little boy,

who slept with his nurse in another cabin. Augusta rose and went with her, and they both kissed the sleeping child, a bonny boy of five, and then they kissed each other and separated for the night.

Some hours afterwards Augusta woke up, feeling very restless. For an hour or more she lay thinking of Mr. Tombey and many other things, and listening to the swift "lap, lap," of the water as it slipped past the vessel's sides, and the occasional tramp of the watch as they set fresh sails. At last her feeling of unrest got too much for her, and she rose and partially, very partially, dressed herself--for in the gloom she could only find her flannel vest and petticoat--twisted her long hair in a coil round her head, put on a hat and a thick ulster that hung upon the door--for they were running into chilly latitudes--and slipped out on deck.

It was getting towards dawn, but the night was still dark. Looking up, Augusta could only just make out the outlines of the huge bellying sails, for the Kangaroo was rushing along before the westerly wind under a full head of steam, and with every inch of her canvas set to ease the screw. There was something very exhilarating about the movement, the freshness of the night, and the wild, sweet song of the wind as it sang amongst the rigging. Augusta turned her face toward it, and, being alone, stretched out her arms as though to catch it. The whole scene awoke some answering greatness in her heart; something that slumbers in the bosom of the higher race of human beings, and only stirs--and then but faintly--when the passions move them, or when nature communes with

her nobler children. She felt that at that moment she could write as she had never written yet. All sorts of beautiful ideas, all sorts of aspirations after that noble calm, and purity of thought and life for which we pray and long, but are not allowed to reach, came flowing into her heart. She almost thought that she could hear her lost Jeannie's voice calling down the gale, and her strong imagination began to paint her hovering like a sea-bird upon white wings high above the mainmast's taper point, and gazing through the darkness into the soul of her she loved. Then, by those faint and imperceptible degrees with which thoughts fade one into another, from Jeannie her thought got round to Eustace Meeson. She wondered if he had ever called at the lodgings at Birmingham after she left? Somehow, she had an idea that he was not altogether indifferent to her; there had been a look in his eyes she did not quite understand. She almost wished now she had sent him a line or a message. Perhaps she would do so from New Zealand. Just then her meditations were interrupted by a step, and, turning round, she found herself face to face with the captain.

"Why, Miss Smithers!" he said, "what on earth are you doing here at this hour?--making up romances?"

"Yes," she answered, laughing, and with perfect truth. "The fact of the matter is, I could not sleep, and so I came on deck; and very pleasant it is!"

"Yes," said the captain, "If you want something to put into your stories

you won't find anything better than this. The Kangaroo is showing her heels, isn't she, Miss Smithers? That's the beauty of her, she can sail as well as steam; and when she has a strong wind like this abaft, it would have to be something very quick that would catch her. I believe that we have been running over seventeen knots an hour ever since midnight. I hope to make Kerguelen Island by seven o'clock to correct my chronometers."

"What is Kerguelen Island?" asked Augusta.

"Oh! it is a desert place where nobody goes, except now and then a whaler to fill up with water. I believe that the astronomers sent an expedition there a few years ago, to observe the transit of Venus: but it was a failure because the weather was so misty--it is nearly always misty there. Well, I must be off, Miss Smithers. Good night; or, rather, good morning."

Before the words were well out of his mouth, there was a wild shout forward--"ship ahead!" Then came an awful yell from a dozen voices--"starboard! Hard-a-starboard, for God's sake."

With a wild leap, like the leap of a man suddenly shot, the captain left her side and rushed on to the bridge. At the same instant the engine-bell rang and the steering-chains began to rattle furiously on the rollers at her feet as the steam steering-gear did its work. Then came another yell--

"It's a whaler!--no lights!" and an answering shriek of terror from some big black object that loomed ahead. Before the echoes had died away, before the great ship could even answer to her helm, there was a crash, such as Augusta had never heard, and a sickening shock, that threw her on her hands and knees on the deck, shaking the iron masts till they trembled as though they were willow wands, and making the huge sails flap and for an instant fly aback. The great vessel, rushing along at her frightful speed of seventeen knots, had plunged into the ship ahead with such hideous energy that she cut her clean in two--cut her in two and passed over her, as though she were a pleasure-boat!

Shriek upon shriek of despair came piercing the gloomy night, and then, as Augusta struggled to her feet, she felt a horrible succession of bumps, accompanied by a crushing, grinding noise. It was the Kangaroo driving right over the remains of the whaler.

In a very few seconds it was done, and looking astern, Augusta could just make out something black that seemed to float for a second or two upon the water, and then disappear into its depths. It was the shattered hull of the whaler.

Then there arose a faint murmuring sound, that grew first into a hum, then into a roar, and then into a clamour that rent the skies, and up from every hatchway and cabin in the great ship, human beings--men, women, and children--came rushing and tumbling, with faces white with

terror--white as their night-gear. Some were absolutely naked, having slipped off their night-dress and had no time to put on anything else; some had put on ulsters and great-coats, others had blankets thrown round them or carried their clothes in their hands. Up they came, hundreds and hundreds of them (for there were a thousand souls on board the Kangaroo), pouring aft like terrified spirits flying from the mouth of Hell, and from them arose such a hideous clamour as few have lived to hear.

Augusta clung to the nettings to let the rush go by, trying to collect her scattered senses and to prevent herself from catching the dreadful contagion of the panic. Being a brave and cool-headed woman, she presently succeeded, and with her returning clearness of vision she realized that she and all on board were in great peril. It was clear that so frightful a collision could not have taken place without injury to their own vessel. Nothing short of an iron-clad ram could have stood such a shock, probably they would founder in a few minutes, and all be drowned. In a few minutes she might be dead! Her heart stood still at the horror of the thought, but once more she recovered herself. Well, after all, life had not been pleasant; and she had nothing to fear from another world, she had done no wrong. Then suddenly she began to think of the others. Where was Lady Holmhurst? and where were the boy and the nurse? Acting upon the impulse she did not stay to realize, she ran to the saloon hatchway. It was fairly clear now, for most of the people were on deck, and she found her way to the child's cabin with but little difficulty. There was a light in it, and the first glance showed her that the nurse had gone; gone, and deserted the child--for there he lay,

asleep, with a smile upon his little round face. The shock had scarcely wakened the boy, and, knowing nothing of ship-wrecks, he had just shut his eyes and gone to sleep again.

"Dick, Dick!" she said, shaking him.

He yawned and sat up, and then threw himself down again saying,

"Dick sleepy."

"Yes, but Dick must wake up, and Auntie" (he called her "auntie") "will take him up on deck to look for Mummy. Won't it be nice to go on deck in the dark."

"Yes," said Dick, with confidence; and Augusta took him on her knee and hurried him into such of his clothes as came handy, as quickly as she could. On the cabin-door was a warm little pea-jacket which the child wore when it was cold. This she put on over his blouse and flannel shirt, and then, by an after-thought, took the two blankets off his bunk and wrapped them round him. At the foot of the nurse's bed was a box of biscuits and some milk. The biscuits she emptied into the pockets of her ulster, and having given the child as much of the milk as he would drink, swallowed the rest herself. Then, pinning a shawl which lay about round her own shoulders, she took up the child and made her way with him on to the deck. At the head of the companion she met Lord Holmhurst himself, rushing down to look after the child.

"I have got him, Lord Holmhurst," she cried; "the nurse has run away. Where is your wife?"

"Bless you," he said fervently; "you are a good girl. Bessie is aft somewhere: I would not let her come. They are trying to keep the people off the boats--they are all mad!"

"Are we sinking?" she asked faintly.

"God knows--ah! here is the captain," pointing to a man who was walking, or rather pushing his way, rapidly towards them through the maddened, screeching mob. Lord Holmhurst caught him by the arm.

"Let me go," he said roughly, trying to shake himself loose. "Oh! it is you, Lord Holmhurst."

"Yes; step in here for one second and tell us the worst. Speak up, man, and let us know all!"

"Very well, Lord Holmhurst, I will. We have run down a whaler of about five hundred tons, which was cruising along under reduced canvas and showing no lights. Our fore compartment is stove right in, bulging out the plates on each side of the cut-water, and loosening the fore bulkhead. The carpenter and his mates are doing their best to shore it up from the inside with balks of timber, but the water is coming in like a mill race, and I fear there are other injuries. All the pumps are at



work, but there's a deal of water, and if the bulkhead goes"--

"We shall go, too," said Lord Holmhurst, calmly. "Well, we must take to the boats. Is that all?"

"In Heaven's name, is that not enough!" said the captain, looking up, so that the light that was fixed in the companion threw his ghastly face into bold relief. "No, Lord Holmhurst, it is not all. The boats will hold something over three hundred people. There are about one thousand souls aboard the Kangaroo, of whom more than three hundred are women and children."

"Therefore the men must drown," said Lord Holmhurst, quietly. "God's will be done!"

"Your Lordship will, of course, take a place in the boats?" said the captain, hurriedly. "I have ordered them to be prepared, and, fortunately, day is breaking. I rely upon you to explain matters to the owners if you escape, and clear my character. The boats must make for Kerguelen Land. It is about seventy miles to the eastward."

"You must give your message to someone else, captain," was the answer; "I shall stay and share the fate of the other men."

There was no pomposity about Lord Holmhurst now--all that had gone--and nothing but the simple gallant nature of the English gentleman remained.

"No, no," said the captain, as they hurried aft, pushing their way through the fear-distracted crowd. "Have you got your revolver?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, keep it handy; you may have to use it presently: they will try and rush the boats."

By this time the grey dawn was slowly breaking, throwing a cold and ghastly light upon the hideous scene of terror. Round about the boats were gathered the officers and some of the crew, doing their best to prepare them for lowering. Indeed, one had already been got away. In it was Lady Holmhurst, who had been thrown there against her will, shrieking for her child and husband, and about a score of women and children, together with half-a-dozen sailors and an officer.

Augusta caught sight of her friend's face in the faint light "Bessie! Bessie! Lady Holmhurst!" she cried, "I have got the boy. It is all right--I have got the boy!"

She heard her, and waved her hand wildly towards her; and then the men in the boat gave way, and in a second it was out of earshot. Just then a tall form seized Augusta by the arm. She looked up: it was Mr. Tombey, and she saw that in his other hand he held a revolver.

"Thank God!" he shouted in her ear, "I have found you! This way--this way, quick!" And he dragged her aft to where two sailors, standing by the davits that supported a small boat, were lowering her to the level of the bulwarks.

"Now then, women!" shouted an officer who was in charge of the operation. Some men made a rush.

"Women first! Women first!"

"I am in no hurry," said Augusta, stepping forward with the trembling child in her arms; and her action for a few seconds produced a calming effect, for the men stopped.

"Come on!" said Mr. Tombey, stooping to lift her over the side, only to be nearly knocked down by a man who made a desperate effort to get into the boat. It was Mr. Meeson, and, recognising him, Mr. Tombey dealt him a blow that sent him spinning back.

"A thousand pounds for a place!" he roared. "Ten thousand pounds for a seat in a boat!" And once more he scrambled up at the bulwarks, trampling down a child as he did so, and was once more thrown back.

Mr. Tombey took Augusta and the child into his strong arms and put her into the boat. As he did so, he kissed her forehead and murmured, "God bless you, good-bye!"

At that instant there was a loud report forward, and the stern of the vessel lifted perceptibly. The bulkhead had given way, and there arose such a yell as surely was seldom heard before. To Augusta's ears it seemed to shape itself into the word "Sinking!"

Up from the bowels of the ship poured the firemen, the appearance of whose blackened faces, lined with white streaks of perspiration, added a new impulse of terror to the panic-stricken throng. Aft they came, accompanied by a crowd of sailors and emigrants.

"Rush the boats," sung out a voice with a strong Irish accent, "or sure we'll be drowned!"

Taking the hint, the maddened mob burst towards the boats like a flood, blaspheming and shrieking as it came. In a moment the women and children who were waiting to take to the boat, in which Augusta and the two sea-men were already, were swept aside, and a determined effort was made to rush it, headed by a great Irishman, the same who had called out.

Augusta saw Mr. Tombey, Lord Holmhurst, who had come up, and the officer lift their pistols, which exploded almost simultaneously, and the Irishman and another man pitched forward on to their hands and knees.

"Never mind the pistols, lads," shouted a voice; "as well be shot as drown. There isn't room for half of us in the boats; come on!" And a

second fearful rush was made, which bore the three gentlemen, firing as they went, right up against the nettings.

"Bill," halloaed the man who was holding on to the foremost tackle, "lower away; we shall be rushed and swamped!"

Bill obeyed with heart and soul, and down sank the boat below the level of the upper decks, just as the mob was getting the mastery. In five seconds more they were hanging close over the water, and whilst they were in this position a man leapt at the boat from the bulwarks. He struck on the thwarts, rolled off into the water, and was no more seen. A lady, the wife of a Colonial Judge, threw her child; Augusta tried to catch it, but missed, and the boy sank and was lost. In another moment the two sailors had shoved off from the ship's side. As they did so, the stern of the Kangaroo lifted right out of the water so that they could see under her rudder-post. Just then, too, with a yell of terror, Mr. Meeson, in whom the elementary principle of self-preservation at all costs was strongly developed, cast himself from the side and fell with a splash within a few feet of the boat. Rising to the surface, he clutched hold of the gunwale, and implored to be taken in.

"Knock the old varmint over the knuckles, Bill," shouted the other man; "he'll upset us!"

"No; no!" cried Augusta, her woman's heart moved at seeing her old enemy in such a case. "There is plenty of room in the boat."

"Hold on then," said the man addressed, whose name was Johnnie; "when we get clear we'll haul you in."

And, the reader may be sure, Mr. Meeson did hold on pretty tight till, after rowing about fifty yards, the two men halted, and proceeded, not without some risk and trouble--for there was a considerable sea running--to hoist Mr. Meeson's large form over the gunwale of the boat.

Meanwhile, the horrors on board the doomed ship were redoubling, as she slowly settled to her watery grave. Forward, the steam fog-horn was going unceasingly, bellowing like a thousand furious bulls; while, now and again, a rocket still shot up through the misty morning air. Round the boats a hideous war was being waged. Augusta saw a great number of men jump into one of the largest life-boats, which was still hanging to the davits, having evidently got the better of those who were attempting to fill it with the women and children. The next second they lowered the after tackle, but, by some hitch or misunderstanding, not the foremost one; with the result that the stern of the boat fell while the bow remained fixed, and every soul in it, some forty or fifty people, was shot out into the water. Another boat was overturned by a sea as it settled on the water. Another one, full of women and children, got to the water all right, but remained fastened to the ship by the bow tackle. When, a couple of minutes afterwards, the Kangaroo went down, nobody had a knife at hand wherewith to cut the rope, and the boat was dragged down with her, and all its occupants drowned. The remaining boats, with the

exception of the one in which Lady Holmhurst was, and which had been got away before the rush began, were never lowered at all, or sank as soon as lowered. It was impossible to lower them owing to the mad behaviour of the panic-stricken crowds, who fought like wild beasts for a place in them. A few gentlemen and sober-headed sailors could do nothing against a mob of frantic creatures, each bent on saving his own life, if it cost the lives of all else on board.

And thus it was exactly twenty minutes from the time that the Kangaroo sank the whaler (for, although these events have taken some time to describe, they did not take long to enact) that her own hour came, and, with the exception of some eight-and-twenty souls, all told, the hour also of every living creature who had taken passage in her.