

CHAPTER VIII.

KERGUELEN LAND.

As soon as Mr. Meeson, saved from drowning by her intervention, lay gasping at the bottom of the boat, Augusta, overcome by a momentary faintness, let her head fall forward on to the bundle of blankets in which she had wrapped up the child she had rescued, and who, too terrified to speak or cry, stared about him with wide-opened and frightened eyes. When she lifted it, a few seconds later, a ray from the rising sun had pierced the mist, and striking full on the sinking ship, as, her stern well out of the water and her bow well under it, she rolled sullenly to and fro in the trough of the heavy sea, seemed to wrap her from hull to truck in wild and stormy light.

"She's going!--by George, she's going!" said the seaman Johnnie; and as he said it the mighty ship slowly reared herself up on end. Slowly--very slowly, amidst the hideous and despairing shrieks of the doomed wretches on board of her, she lifted her stern higher and higher, and plunged her bows deeper and deeper. They shrieked, they cried to Heaven for help; but Heaven heeded them not, for man's agony cannot avert man's doom. Now, for a space, she was standing almost upright upon the water, out of which about a hundred feet of her vast length towered like some monstrous ocean growth, whilst men fell from her in showers, like flies benumbed by frost, down into the churning foam beneath. Then suddenly, with a swift

and awful rush, with a rending sound of breaking spars, a loud explosion of her boilers, and a smothered boom of bursting bulkheads, she plunged down into the measureless deeps, and was seen no more forever.

The water closed in over where she had been, boiling and foaming and sucking down all things in the wake of her last journey, while the steam and prisoned air came up in huge hissing jets and bubbles that exploded into spray on the surface.

The men groaned, the child stared stupified, and Augusta cried out, "Oh! oh!" like one in pain.

"Row back!" she gasped, "row back and see if we cannot pick some of them up."

"No! no!" shouted Meeson; "they will sink the boat!"

"Taint much use anyway," said Johnnie. "I doubt that precious few of them will come up again. They have gone too deep!"

However, they got the boat's head round again--slowly enough, Augusta thought--and as they did so they heard a feeble cry or two. But by the time that they had reached the spot where the Kangaroo went down, there was no living creature to be seen; nothing but the wash of the great waves, over which the mist once more closed thick and heavy as a pall. They shouted, and once they heard a faint answer, and rowed towards it;

but when they got to the spot whence the sound seemed to proceed, they could see nothing except some wreckage. They were all dead, their agony was done, their cries no more ascended to the pitiless heavens; and wind, and sky, and sea were just as they had been.

"Oh, my God! my God!" wept Augusta, clinging to the thwarts of the tossing boat.

"One boat got away--where is it?" asked Mr. Meeson, who, a wet and wretched figure, was huddled up in the stern-sheets, as he rolled his wild eyes round striving to pierce the curtain of the mist.

"There's something," said Johnnie, pointing through a fog-dog in the mist, that seemed to grow denser rather than otherwise as the light increased, at a round, boat-like object that had suddenly appeared to the starboard of them.

They rowed up to it; it was a boat, but empty and floating bottom upwards. Closer examination showed that it was the cutter, which, when full of women and children, had been fastened to the vessel and dragged down with her as she sank. At a certain depth the pressure of the water had been too great and had torn the ring in the bow bodily out of her, so that she returned to the surface. But those in her did not return--at least, not yet. Once more, two or three days hence, they would arise from the watery depths and look upon the skies with eyes that could not see, and then vanish for ever.

Turning from this awful and most moving sight, they rowed slowly through quantities of floating wreckage--barrels, hencoops (in one of these they found two drowned fowls, which they secured), and many other articles, such as oars and wicker deck-chairs--and began to shout vigorously in the hope of attracting the attention of the survivors in the other boat, which they imagined could not be far off. Their efforts, however, proved fruitless, owing to the thickness of the fog; and in the considerable sea which was running it was impossible to see more than twenty yards or so. Also, what between the wind, and the wash and turmoil of the water, the sound of their voices did not travel far. The ocean is a large place, and a rowing-boat is easily lost sight of upon its furrowed surface; therefore it is not wonderful that, although the two boats were at the moment within half a mile of each other, they never met, and each took its separate course in the hope of escaping the fate of the vessel. The boat in which were Lady Holmhurst and some twenty other passengers, together with the second officer and a crew of six men, after seeing the Kangaroo sink and picking up one survivor, shaped a course for Kerguelen Land, believing that they, and they alone, remained to tell the tale of that awful shipwreck. And here it may be convenient to state that before nightfall they were picked up by a sealing-whaler, that sailed with them to Albany, on the coast of Australia. Thence an account of the disaster, which, as the reader will remember, created a deep impression, was telegraphed home, and thence, in due course, the widowed Lady Holmhurst and most of the other women who escaped were taken back to England.

To return to our heroine and Mr. Meeson.

The occupants of the little boat sat looking at each other with white scared faces, till at last the man called Johnnie, who, by-the-way, was not a far from a very amiable cast of countenance, possibly owing to the fact that his nose was knocked almost flat against the side of his face, swore violently, and said "It was no good stopping there all the etceteraed day." Thereupon Bill, who was a more jovial-looking man, remarked "that he, Johnnie, was etceteraed well right, so they had better hoist the fore-sail."

At this point Augusta interposed, and told them that the captain, just as the vessel came into collision, had informed her that he was making Kerguelen Land, which was not more than sixty or seventy miles away. They had a compass in the boat, and they knew the course the Kangaroo was steering when she sank. Accordingly, without wasting further time, they got as much sail up as the little boat could carry in the stiff breeze, and ran nearly due east before the steady westerly wind. All day long they ran across the misty ocean, the little boat behaving splendidly, without sighting any living thing, till, at last, the night closed in again. There was, fortunately, a bag of biscuits in the boat, and a breaker of water; also there was, unfortunately, a breaker of rum, from which the two sailors, Bill and Johnnie, were already taking quite as much as was good for them. Consequently, though they were cold and wet with the spray, they had not to face the added horrors of starvation and thirst. At sundown, they shortened sail considerably, only leaving enough

canvas up to keep the boat ahead of the sea.

Somehow the long night wore away. Augusta scarcely closed her eyes; but little Dick slept like a top upon her bosom, sheltered by her arms and the blanket from the cold and penetrating spray. In the bottom of the boat lay Mr. Meeson, to whom Augusta, pitying his condition--for he was shivering dreadfully--had given the other blanket, keeping nothing for herself except the woollen shawl.

At last, however, there came a faint glow in the east, and the daylight began to break over the stormy sea. Augusta turned her head and stared through the mist.

"What is that?" she said, in a voice trembling with excitement, to the sailor Bill, who was taking his turn at the tiller; and she pointed to a dark mass that loomed up almost over them.

The man looked, and then looked again; and then hallowed out joyfully, "Land--land ahead!"

Up struggled Mr. Meeson on to his knees--his legs were so stiff that he could not stand--and began to stare wildly about him.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Where is it? Is it New Zealand? If ever I get there, I'll stop there. I'll never get on a ship again!"

"New Zealand!" growled the sailor. "Are you a fool? It's Kerguelen Land, that's what it is--where it rains all day, and nobody lives--not even a nigger. It's like enough that you'll stop there, though; for I don't reckon that anybody will come to take you off in a hurry."

Mr. Meeson collapsed with a groan, and a few minutes afterwards the sun rose, while the mist grew less and less till at last it almost disappeared, revealing a grand panorama to the occupants of the boat. For before them was line upon line of jagged and lofty peaks, stretching as far as the eye could reach, gradually melting in the distance into the cold white gleam of snow. Bill slightly altered the boat's course to the southward, and, sailing round a point, she came into comparatively calm water. Then, due north of them, running into the land, they saw the mouth of a great fjord, bounded on each side by towering mountain banks, so steep as to be almost precipitous, around whose lofty sides thousands of sea fowl wheeled, awaking the echoes with their clamour. Right into this beautiful fjord they sailed, past a line of flat rocks on which sat huge fantastic monsters that the sailors said were sea-lions, along the line of beetling cliff, till they came to a spot where the shore, on which grew a rank, sodden-looking grass, shelved gently up from the water's edge to the frowning and precipitous background. And here, to their huge delight, they discovered two huts roughly built of old ship's timbers, placed within a score of yards of each other, and a distance of some fifty paces from the water's edge.

"Well, there's a house, anyway," said the flat-nosed Johnnie, "though it

don't look as though it had paid rates and taxes lately."

"Let us land, and get out of this horrible boat," said Mr. Meeson, feebly: a proposition that Augusta seconded heartily enough. Accordingly, the sail was lowered, and, getting out the oars, the two sailors rowed the boat into a little, natural harbour that opened out of the main creek, and in ten minutes her occupants were once more stretching their legs upon dry land; that is, if any land in Kerguelen Island, that region of perpetual wet, could be said to be dry.

Their first care was to go up to the huts and examine them, with a result that could scarcely be called encouraging. The huts had been built some years--whether by the expedition which, in 1874, came thither to observe the transit of Venus, or by former parties of shipwrecked mariners, they never discovered--and were now in a state of ruin. Mosses and lichens grew plentifully upon the beams, and even on the floor; while great holes in the roof let in the wet, which lay in little slimy puddles beneath. Still, with all their drawbacks, they were decidedly better than the open beach; a very short experience of which, in that inclement climate, would certainly have killed them; and they thankfully decided to make the best of them. Accordingly, the smaller of the two huts was given up to Augusta and the boy Dick, while Mr. Meeson and the sailors took possession of the large one. Their next task was to move up their scanty belongings (the boat having first been carefully beached), and to clean out the huts and make them as habitable as possible by stretching the sails of the boat on the damp floors and covering up the holes in the roof as best they could

with stones and bits of board from the bottom of the boat. The weather was, fortunately, dry, and as they all (with the exception of Mr. Meeson, who seemed to be quite prostrated) worked with a will, not excepting Master Dick--who toddled backwards and forwards after Augusta in high glee at finding himself on terra firma--and by midday everything that could be done was done. Then they made a fire of some drift-wood--for, fortunately, they had a few matches--and Augusta cooked the two fowls they had got out of the floating hen-coop as well as circumstances would allow--which, as a matter of fact, was not very well--and they had dinner, of which they all stood sadly in need.

After dinner they reckoned up their resources. Of water there was an ample supply, for not far from the huts a stream ran down into the fjord. For food they had the best part of a bag of biscuits weighing about a hundred pounds. Also there was the cask of rum, which the men had moved into their own hut. But that was not all, for there were plenty of shellfish about if they could find means to cook them, while the rocks around were covered with hundreds of penguins, including specimens of the great "King penguin," which only required to be knocked on the head. There was, therefore, little fear of their perishing of starvation, as sometimes happens to ship wrecked people. Indeed, immediately after dinner, the two sailors went out and returned with as many birds' eggs--mostly penguin--as they could carry in their hats. Scarcely had they got in, however, when the rain, which is the prevailing characteristic of these latitudes, set in, in the most pitiless fashion; and soon the great mountains with which they were surrounded, and those

before them, were wrapped in dense veils of fleecy vapour. Hour after hour the rain fell without ceasing, penetrating through their miserable roof, and falling--drop, drip, drop--upon the sodden floor. Augusta sat by herself in the smaller hut, doing what she could to amuse little Dick by telling him stories. Nobody knows how hard she found it to have to invent stories when she was thus overwhelmed with misfortune; but it was the only way of keeping the poor child from crying, as the sense of cold and misery forced itself into his little heart. So she told him about Robinson Crusoe, and then she told him that they were playing at being Robinson Crusoe, to which the child very sensibly replied that he did not at all like the game, and wanted his mamma.

And meanwhile it grew darker and colder and damper hour by hour, till at last the light went out, and left her with nothing to keep her company but the moaning wind, the falling rain, and the wild cries of the sea-birds when something disturbed them from their rest. The child was asleep at last, wrapped up in a blanket and one of the smaller sails; and Augusta, feeling quite worn out with solitude and the pressure of heavy thoughts, began to think that the best thing she could do would be to try to follow his example, when suddenly there came a knock at the boards which served for a door to the shanty.

"Who is it?" she cried, with a start.

"Me--Mr. Meeson," answered a voice. "Can I come in?"

"Yes; if you like," said Augusta, sharply, though in her heart she was really glad to see him, or, rather, to hear him, for it was too dark to see anything. It is wonderful how, under the pressure of a great calamity, we forget our quarrels and our spites, and are ready to jump at the prospect of the human companionship of our deadliest enemy. And "the moral of that is," as the White Queen says, that as we are all night and day face to face with the last dread calamity--Death--we should throughout our lives behave as though we saw the present shadow of his hand. But that will never happen in the world while human nature is human nature--and when will it become anything else?

"Put up the door again," said Augusta, when, from a rather rawer rush of air than usual, she gathered that her visitor was within the hut.

Mr. Meeson obeyed, groaning audibly. "Those two brutes are getting drunk," he said, "swallowing down rum by the gallon. I have come because I could not stop with them any longer--and I am so ill, Miss Smithers, so ill! I believe that I am going to die. Sometimes I feel as though all the marrow in my bones were ice, and--and--at others just as though somebody were shoving a red-hot wire up them. Can't you do anything for me?"

"I don't see what is to be done," answered Augusta, gently, for the man's misery touched her in spite of her dislike for him. "You had better lie down and try to go to sleep."

"To sleep!" he moaned; "how can I sleep? My blanket is wringing wet

and my clothes are damp," and he fairly broke down and began to groan and sob.

"Try and go to sleep," urged Augusta again.

He made no answer, but by degrees he grew quieter, overwhelmed, perhaps, by the solemn presence of the darkness. Augusta laid her head against the biscuit-bag, and at last sank into blissful oblivion; for to the young, sleep is a constant friend. Once or twice she woke, but only to drop off again; and when she finally opened her eyes it was quite light and the rain had ceased.

Her first care was for little Dick, who had slept soundly throughout the night and appeared to be none the worse. She took him outside the hut and washed his face and hands in the stream and then sat him down to a breakfast of biscuit. As she returned she met the two sailors, who, although they were now fairly sober, bore upon their faces the marks of a fearful debauch. Evidently they had been drinking heavily. She drew herself up and looked at them, and they slunk past her in silence.

Then she returned to the hut. Mr. Meeson was sitting up when she entered, and the bright light from the open door fell full upon his face. His appearance fairly shocked her. The heavy cheeks had fallen in, there were great purple rings round his hollow eyes, and his whole aspect was one of a man in the last stage of illness.

"I have had such a night" he said, "Oh, Heaven! such a night! I don't believe that I shall live through another."

"Nonsense!" said Augusta, "eat some biscuit and you will feel better."

He took a piece of the biscuit which she gave him, and attempted to swallow it, but could not.

"It is no use," he said; "I am a dying man. Sitting in those wet clothes in the boat has finished me."

And Augusta, looking at his face, could not but believe him.