

CHAPTER XI.

RESCUED.

Augusta woke up just as the dawn was stealing across the sodden sky. It was the smarting of her shoulders that woke her. She rose, leaving Dick yet asleep, and, remembering the turmoil of the night, hurried to the other hut. It was empty.

She turned and looked about her. About fifteen paces from where she was lay the shell that the two drunkards had used as a cup. Going forward, she picked it up. It still smelt disgustingly of spirits. Evidently the two men had dropped it in the course of their midnight walk, or rather roll. Where had they gone to?

Straight in front of her a rocky promontory ran out fifty paces or more into the waters of the fjord-like bay. She walked along it aimlessly till presently she perceived one of the sailor's hats lying on the ground, or, rather, floating in a pool of water. Clearly they had gone this way. On she went to the point of the little headland, sheer over the water. There was nothing to be seen, not a single vestige of Bill and Johnnie.

Aimlessly enough she leant forward and stared over the rocky wall, and down into the clear water, and then started back with a little cry.

No wonder that she started, for there on the sand, beneath a fathom and a

half of quiet water, lay the bodies of the two ill-fated men. They were locked in each other's arms, and lay as though they were asleep upon that ocean bed. How they came to their end she never knew. Perhaps they quarrelled in their drunken anger and fell over the little cliff; or perhaps they stumbled and fell not knowing whither they were going. Who can say? At any rate, there they were, and there they remained, till the outgoing tide floated them off to join the great army of their companions who had gone down with the Kangaroo. And so Augusta was left alone.

With a heavy heart she returned to the hut, pressed down by the weight of solitude, and the sense that in the midst of so much death she could not hope to escape. There was no human creature left alive in that vast lonely land, except the child and herself, and so far as she could see their fate would soon be as the fate of the others. When she got back to the hut, Dick was awake and was crying for her.

The still, stiff form of Mr. Meeson, stretched out beneath the sail, frightened the little lad, he did not know why. Augusta took him into her arms and kissed him passionately. She loved the child for his own sake; and, besides, he, and he alone, stood between her and utter solitude. Then she took him across to the other hut, which had been vacated by the sailors, for it was impossible to stay in the one with the body, which was too heavy for her to move. In the centre of the sailors' hut stood the cask of rum which had been the cause of their destruction. It was nearly empty now--so light, indeed, that she had no difficulty in rolling it to one side. She cleaned out the place as well as she could, and

returning to where Mr. Meeson's body lay, fetched the bag of biscuits and the roasted eggs, after which they had their breakfast.

Fortunately there was but little rain that morning, so Augusta took Dick out to look for eggs, not because they wanted any more, but in order to employ themselves. Together they climbed up on to a rocky headland, where the flag was flying, and looked out across the troubled ocean. There was nothing in sight so far as the eye could see--nothing but the white wave-horses across which the black cormorants steered their swift, unerring flight. She looked and looked till her heart sank within her.

"Will Mummy soon come in a boat to take Dick away?" asked the child at her side, and then she burst into tears.

When she had recovered herself they set to collecting eggs, an occupation which, notwithstanding the screams and threatened attacks of the birds, delighted Dick greatly. Soon they had as many as she could carry; so they went back to the hut and lit a fire of drift-wood, and roasted some eggs in the hot ashes; she had no pot to boil them in. Thus, one way and another the day wore away, and at last the darkness began to fall over the rugged peaks behind and the wild wilderness of sea before. She put Dick to bed and he went off to sleep. Indeed, it was wonderful to see how well the child bore the hardships through which they were passing. He never had an ache or a pain, or even a cold in the head.

After Dick was asleep Augusta sat, or rather lay, in the dark listening

to the moaning of the wind as it beat upon the shanty and passed away in gusts among the cliffs and mountains beyond. The loneliness was something awful, and together with the thought of what the end of it would probably be, quite broke her spirit down. She knew that the chances of her escape were small indeed. Ships did not often come to this dreadful and uninhabited coast, and if one should happen to put in there, it was exceedingly probable that it would touch at some other point and never see her or her flag. And then in time the end would come. The supply of eggs would fail, and she would be driven to supporting life upon such birds as she could catch, till at last the child sickened and died, and she followed it to that dim land that lies beyond Kerguelen and the world. She prayed that the child might die first. It was awful to think that perhaps it might be the other way about: she might die first, and the child might be left to starve beside her. The morrow would be Christmas Day. Last Christmas Day she had spent with her dead sister at Birmingham. She remembered that they went to church in the morning, and after dinner she had finished correcting the last revises of "Jemima's Vow." Well, it seemed likely that long before another Christmas came she would have gone to join little Jeannie. And then, being a good and religious girl, Augusta rose to her knees and prayed to Heaven with all her heart and soul to rescue them from their terrible position, or, if she was doomed to perish, at least to save the child.

And so the long cold night wore away in thought and vigil, till at last, some two hours before the dawn, she got to sleep. When she opened her eyes again it was broad daylight, and little Dick, who had been awake

some time beside her, was sitting up playing with the shell which Bill and Johnnie had used to drink rum out of. She rose and put the child's things a little to rights, and then, as it was not raining, told him to run outside while she went through the form of dressing by taking off such garments as she had, shaking them, and putting them on again. She was slowly going through this process, and wondering how long it would be before her shoulders ceased to smart from the effects of the tattooing, when Dick came running in without going through the formality of knocking.

"Oh, Auntie! Auntie!" he sang out in high glee, "here's a big ship coming sailing along. Is it Mummy and Daddie coming to fetch Dick?"

Augusta sank back faint with the sudden revulsion of feeling. If there was a ship, they were saved--snatched from the very jaws of death. But perhaps it was the child's fancy. She threw on the body of her dress; and, her long yellow hair--which she had in default of better means been trying to comb out with a bit of wood--streaming behind her, she took the child by the hand, and flew as fast as she could go down the little rocky promontory off which Bill and Johnnie had met their end. Before she got half-way down it, she saw that the child's tale was true--for there, sailing right up the fjord from the open sea, was a large vessel. She was not two hundred yards from where she stood, and her canvas was being rapidly furled preparatory to the anchor being dropped.

Thanking Providence for the sight as she never thanked anything before,

Augusta sped on till she got to the extreme point of the promontory, and stood there waving Dick's little cap towards the vessel, which moved slowly and majestically on, till presently, across the clear water, came the splash of the anchor, followed by the sound of the fierce rattle of the chain through the hawse-pipes. Then there came another sound--the glad sound of human voices cheering. She had been seen.

Five minutes passed, and then she saw a boat lowered and manned. The oars were got out, and presently it was backing water within ten paces of her.

"Go round there," she called, pointing to the little bay, "and I will meet you."

By the time that she had got to the spot the boat was already beached, and a tall, thin, kindly-faced man was addressing her in an unmistakable Yankee accent, "Cast away, Miss?" he said interrogatively.

"Yes," gasped Augusta; "we are the survivors of the Kangaroo, which sank in a collision with a whaler about a week ago."

"Ah!" said the captain, "with a whaler? Then I guess that's where my consort has gone to. She's been missing about a week, and I put in here to see if I could get upon her tracks--also to fill up with water. Well, she was well insured, anyway, and when last we spoke her, she had made a very poor catch. But perhaps, Miss, you will, at your convenience, favour me with a few particulars?"

Accordingly, Augusta sketched the history of their terrible adventure in as few words as possible; and the tale was one that made even the phlegmatic Yankee captain stare. Then she took him, followed by the crew, to the hut where Meeson lay dead, and to the other hut, where she and Dick had slept upon the previous night.

"Wall, Miss," said the captain, whose name was Thomas, "I guess that you and the youngster will be almost ready to vacate these apartments; so, if you please, I will send you off to the ship, the Harpoon--that's her name--of Norfolk, in the United States. You will find her well flavoured with oil, for we are about full to the hatches; but, perhaps, under the circumstances, you will not mind that. Anyway, my Missus, who is aboard--having come the cruise for her health--and who is an Englishwoman like you, will do all she can to make you comfortable. And I tell you what it is, Miss; if I was in any way pious, I should just thank the Almighty that I happened to see that there bit of a flag with my spyglass as I was sailing along the coast at sun-up this morning, for I had no intention of putting in at this creek, but at one twenty miles along. And now, Miss, if you'll go aboard, some of us will stop and just tuck up the dead gentleman as well as we can."

Augusta thanked him from her heart, and, going into the hut, got her hat and the roll of sovereigns which had been Mr. Meeson's, but which he had told her to take, leaving the blankets to be brought by the men.

Then two of the sailors got into the little boat belonging to the Kangaroo, in which Augusta had escaped, and rowed her and Dick away from that hateful shore to where the whaler--a fore-and-aft-schooner--was lying at anchor. As they drew near, she saw the rest of the crew of the Harpoon, among whom was a woman, watching their advent from the deck, who, when she got her foot upon the companion ladder, one and all set up a hearty cheer. In another moment she was on deck--which, notwithstanding its abominable smell of oil, seemed to her the fairest and most delightful place that her eyes had ever rested on--and being almost hugged by Mrs. Thomas, a pleasant-looking woman of about thirty, the daughter of a Suffolk farmer who had emigrated to the States. And then, of course, she had to tell her story all over again; after which she was led off to the cabin occupied by the captain and his wife (and which thenceforth was occupied by Augusta, Mrs. Thomas, and little Dick), the captain shaking down where he could. And here, for the first time for nearly a week, she was able to wash and dress herself properly. And oh, the luxury of it! Nobody knows what the delights of clean linen really mean till he or she has had to dispense with it under circumstances of privation; nor have they the slightest idea of what a difference to one's well-being and comfort is made by the possession or non-possession of an article so common as a comb. Whilst Augusta was still combing out her hair with sighs of delight, Mrs. Thomas knocked at the door and was admitted.

"My! Miss; what beautiful hair you have, now that it is combed out!" she said in admiration; "why, whatever is that upon your shoulders?"

Then Augusta had to tell the tale of the tattooing, which by-the-way, it struck her, it was wise to do so, seeing that she thus secured a witness to the fact, that she was already tattooed on leaving Kerguelen Land, and that the operation had been of such recent infliction that the flesh was still inflamed with it. This was the more necessary as the tattooing was undated.

Mrs. Thomas listened to the story with her mouth open, lost between admiration of Augusta's courage, and regret that her shoulders should have been ruined in that fashion.

"Well, the least that he" (alluding to Eustace) "can do is to marry you after you have spoilt yourself in that fashion for his benefit," said the practical Mrs. Thomas.

"Nonsense! Mrs. Thomas," said Augusta, blushing till the tattoo marks on her shoulders looked like blue lines in a sea of crimson, and stamping her foot with such energy that her hostess jumped.

There was no reason why she should give an innocent remark such a warm reception; but then, as the reader will no doubt have observed, the reluctance that some young women show to talking of the possibility of their marriage to the man they happen to have set their hearts on, is only equalled by the alacrity with which they marry him when the time comes.

Having set Dick and Augusta down to a breakfast of porridge and coffee, which both of them thought delicious, though the fare was really rather coarse, Mrs. Thomas, being unable to restrain her curiosity, rowed off to the land to see the huts and also Mr. Meeson's remains, which, though not a pleasant sight, were undoubtedly an interesting one. With her, too, went most of the crew, bent upon the same errand, and also on obtaining water, of which the Harpoon was short.

As soon as she was left alone, Augusta went back to the cabin, taking Dick with her, and laid down on the berth with a feeling of safety and thankfulness to which she had long been a stranger, where very soon she fell sound asleep.