

## CHAPTER XII.

### SOUTHAMPTON QUAY.

When Augusta opened her eyes again she became conscious of a violent rolling motion that she could not mistake. They were at sea.

She got up, smoothed her hair, and went on deck, to find that she had slept for many hours, for the sun was setting. She went aft to where Mrs. Thomas was sitting near the wheel with little Dick beside her, and after greeting them, turned to watch the sunset. The sight was a beautiful one enough, for the great waves, driven by the westerly wind, which in these latitudes is nearly always blowing half a gale, were rushing past them wild and free, and the sharp spray of their foaming crests struck upon her forehead like a whip. The sun was setting, and the arrows of the dying light flew fast and far across the billowy bosom of the deep. Fast and far they flew from the stormy glory in the west, lighting up the pale surfaces of cloud, and tinging the grey waters of that majestic sea with a lurid hue of blood. They kissed the bellying sails, and seemed to rest upon the vessel's lofty trucks, and then travelled on and away, and away, through the great empyrean of space till they broke and vanished upon the horizon's rounded edge. There behind them--miles behind--Kerguelen Land reared its fierce cliffs against the twilight sky. Clear and desolate they towered in an unutterable solitude, and on their snowy surfaces the sunbeams beat coldly as the warm breath of some human passion beating on

Aphrodite's marble breast.

Augusta gazed upon those drear cliffs that had so nearly proved her monumental pile and shuddered. It was as a hideous dream.

And then the dark and creeping shadows of the night threw their veils around and over them, and they vanished. They were swallowed up in blackness, and she lost sight of them and of the great seas that forever beat and churn about their stony feet; nor except in dreams, did she again set her eyes upon their measureless solitude.

The Night arose in strength and shook a golden dew of stars from the tresses of her streaming clouds, till the wonderful deep heavens sparkled with a myriad gemmy points. The west wind going on his way sung his wild chant amongst the cordage, and rushed among the sails as with a rush of wings. The ship leant over like a maiden shrinking from a kiss, then, shivering, fled away, leaping from billow to billow as they rose and tossed their white arms about her, fain to drag her down and hold her to ocean's heaving breast.

The rigging tautened, and the huge sails flapped in thunder as the Harpoon sped upon her course, and all around was greatness and the present majesty of power. Augusta looked aloft and sighed, she knew not why. The swift blood of youth coursed through her veins, and she rejoiced exceedingly that life and all its possibilities yet lay before her. But a little more of that dreadful place and they would have lain behind. Her

days would have been numbered before she scarce had time to strike a blow in the great human struggle that rages ceaselessly from age to age. The voice of her genius would have been hushed just as its notes began to thrill, and her message would never have been spoken in the world. But now Time was once more before her, and oh! the nearness of Death had taught her the unspeakable value of that one asset on which we can rely--Life. Not, indeed, that life for which so many live--the life led for self, and having for its principle, if not its only end, the gratification of the desires of self; but an altogether higher life--a life devoted to telling that which her keen instinct knew was truth, and, however imperfectly, painting with the pigment of her noble art those visions of beauty which sometimes seemed to rest upon her soul like shadows from the heaven of our hopes.

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Three months have passed--three long months of tossing waters and ever-present winds. The Harpoon, shaping her course for Norfolk, in the United States, had made but a poor passage of it. She got into the south-east trades, and all went well till they made St. Paul's Rocks, where they were detained by the doldrums and variable winds. Afterwards she passed into the north-east trades, and then, further north, met a series of westerly gales, that ultimately drove her to the Azores, just as her crew were getting very short of water and provisions. And here Augusta bid farewell to her friend the Yankee skipper; for the whaler that had saved her life and Dick's, after refitting once more, set sail

upon its almost endless voyage. She stood on the breakwater at Ponta Delgada, and watched the Harpoon drop past. The men recognized her and cheered lustily, and Captain Thomas took off his hat; for the entire ship's company, down to the cabin-boy, were head-over-heels in love with Augusta; and the extraordinary offerings that they had made her on parting, most of them connected in some way or other with that noble animal the whale, sufficed to fill a good-sized packing-case. Augusta waved her handkerchief to them in answer; but she could not see much of them, because her eyes were full of tears. She had had quite enough of the Harpoon, and yet she was loth so say farewell to her; for her days on board had in many respects been restful and happy ones; they had given her space and time to brace herself up before she plunged once more into the struggle of active life. Besides, she had throughout been treated with that unvarying kindness and consideration for which the American people are justly noted in their dealings with all persons in misfortune.

But Augusta was not the only person who with sorrow watched the departure of the Harpoon. First, there was little Dick, who had acquired a fine Yankee drawl, and grown quite half an inch on board of her, and who fairly howled when his particular friend, a remarkably fierce and grisly-looking boatswain, brought him as a parting offering a large whale's tooth, patiently carved by himself with a spirited picture of their rescue on Kerguelen Land. Then there was Mrs. Thomas herself. When they finally reached the island of St. Michael, in the Azores, Augusta had offered to pay fifty pounds, being half of the hundred sovereigns given to her by Mr. Meeson, to Captain Thomas as a passage fee, knowing

that he was by no means overburdened with the goods of this world. But he stoutly declined to touch a farthing, saying that it would be unlucky to take money from a castaway. Augusta as stoutly insisted; and, finally, a compromise was come to. Mrs. Thomas was anxious, being seized with that acute species of home-sickness from which Suffolk people are no more exempt than other folk, to visit the land where she was born and the people midst whom she was bred up. But this she could not well afford to do. Therefore, Augusta's proffered fifty pounds was appropriated to this purpose, and Mrs. Thomas stopped with Augusta at Ponta Delgada, waiting for the London and West India Line Packet to take them to Southampton.

So it came to pass that they stood together on the Ponta Delgada breakwater and together saw the Harpoon sail off towards the setting sun.

Then came a soft dreamy fortnight in the fair island of St. Michael, where nature is ever as a bride, and never reaches the stage of the hard-worked, toil-worn mother, lank and lean with the burden of maternity. The mental act of looking back to this time, in after years, always recalled to Augusta's senses the odor of orange-blossoms, and the sight of the rich pomegranate-bloom blushing the roses down. It was a pleasant time, for the English Consul there most hospitably entertained them--with much more personal enthusiasm, indeed, than he generally considered it necessary to show towards shipwrecked voyagers--a class of people of whom consular representatives abroad must get rather tired with their eternal misfortunes and their perennial want of clothes. Indeed, the only drawback to her enjoyment was that the Consul, a

gallant official, with red hair, equally charmed by her adventures, her literary fame, and her person, showed a decided disposition to fall in love with her, and a red-haired and therefore ardent Consular officer is, under those circumstances, a somewhat alarming personage. But the time went on without anything serious happening; and, at last, one morning after breakfast, a man came running up with the information that the mail was in sight.

And so Augusta took an affectionate farewell of the golden-haired Consul, who gazed at her through his eyeglass, and sighed when he thought of what might have been in the sweet by-and-by; and the ship's bell rang, and the screw began to turn, leaving the Consul still sighing on the horizon; and in due course Augusta and Mrs. Thomas found themselves standing on the quay at Southampton, the centre of an admiring and enthusiastic crowd.

The captain had told the extraordinary tale to the port officials when they boarded the vessel, and on getting ashore the port officials had made haste to tell every living soul they met the wonderful news that two survivors of the ill-fated Kangaroo--the history of whose tragic end had sent a thrill of horror through the English-speaking world--were safe and sound on board the West India boat. Thus, by the time that Augusta, Mrs. Thomas, and Dick were safe on shore, their story, or rather sundry distorted versions of it, was flashing up the wires to the various press agencies, and running through Southampton like wild-fire. Scarcely were their feet set upon the quay, when, with a rush and a bound, wild men, with note-books in their hands, sprang upon them, and beat them down with

a rain of questions. Augusta found it impossible to answer them all at once, so contented herself with saying, "Yes," "Yes," "Yes," to everything, out of which mono-syllable, she afterwards found to her surprise, these fierce and active pressmen contrived to make up a sufficiently moving tale; which included glowing accounts of the horrors of the shipwreck, and, what rather took her aback, a positive statement that she and the sailors had lived for a fortnight upon the broiled remains of Mr. Meeson. One interviewer, being a small man, and, therefore, unable to kick and fight his way through the ring which surrounded Augusta and Mrs. Thomas, seized upon little Dick, and commenced to chirp and snap his fingers at him in the intervals of asking him such questions as he thought suitable to his years.

Dick, dreadfully alarmed, fled with a howl; but this did not prevent a column and a half of matter, headed "The Infant's Tale of Woe," from appearing that very day in a journal noted for the accuracy and unsensational character of its communications. Nor was the army of interviewers the only terror that they had to face. Little girls gave them bouquets; an old lady, whose brain was permeated with the idea that shipwrecked people went about in a condition of undress for much longer than was necessary after the event, arrived with an armful of under-clothing streaming on the breeze; and last, but not least, a tall gentleman, with a beautiful moustache, thrust into Augusta's hand a note hastily written in pencil, which, when opened, proved to be an offer of marriage!

However, at last they found themselves in a first-class carriage, ready to start, or rather starting. The interviewing gentlemen, two of whom had their heads jammed through the window, were forcibly drawn away--still asking questions, by the officials--the tall gentleman with the moustache, who was hovering in the background, smiled a soft farewell, in which modesty struggled visibly with hope, the station-master took off his cap, and in another minute they were rolling out of Southampton Station.

Augusta sank back with a sigh of relief, and then burst out laughing at the thought of the gentleman with the fair moustachios. On the seat opposite to her somebody had thoughtfully placed a number of the day's papers. She took up the first that came to hand and glanced at it idly with the idea of trying to pick up the thread of events. Her eyes fell instantly upon the name of Mr. Gladstone printed all over the sheet in type of varying size, and she sighed. Life on the ocean wave had been perilous and disagreeable enough, but at any rate she had been free from Mr. Gladstone and his doings. Whatever evil might be said of him, he was not an old man of the sea. Turning the paper over impatiently she came upon the reports of the Probate Divorce and Admiralty Division of the High Court. The first report ran thus:--

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BEFORE THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE PRESIDENT.



IN THE MATTER OF MEESON, DECEASED.

This was an application arising out of the loss of R.M.S. Kangaroo, on the eighteenth of December last. It will be remembered that out of about a thousand souls on board that vessel the occupants of one boat only--twenty-five people in all--were saved. Among the drowned was Mr. Meeson, the head of the well-known Birmingham publishing company of Meeson, Addison, and Roscoe, and Co. (Limited), who was at the time on a visit to New Zealand and Australia in connection with the business of the company.

Mr. Fiddlestick, Q.C., who with Mr. Pearl appeared for the applicants (and who was somewhat imperfectly heard), stated that the facts connected with the sinking of the Kangaroo would probably still be so fresh in his Lordship's mind that it would not be necessary for him to detail them, although he had them upon affidavit before him. His Lordship would remember that but one boat-load of people had survived from this, perhaps the most terrible, shipwreck of the generation. Among the drowned was Mr. Meeson; and this application was on behalf of the executors of his will for leave to presume his death. The property which passed under the will was very large indeed; amounting in all, Mr. Fiddlestick understood, to about two millions sterling, which, perhaps, might incline his Lordship to proceed very carefully in allowing probate to issue.

The President: Well--the amount of the property has got nothing to do with the principles on which the Court acts with regard to the

presumption of death, Mr. Fiddlestick.

Quite so, my Lord, and I think that in this case your Lordship will be satisfied that there is no reason why probate should not issue. It is, humanly speaking, impossible that Mr. Meeson can have escaped the general destruction.

The President: Have you any affidavit from anybody who saw Mr. Meeson in the water?

No, my Lord; I have an affidavit from a sailor named Okers, the only man who was picked up in the water after the Kangaroo foundered, which states that he believes that he saw Mr. Meeson spring from the ship into the water, but the affidavit does not carry the matter further. He cannot swear that it was Mr. Meeson.

The President: Well, I think that that will do. The Court is necessarily adverse to allowing the presumption of death, except on evidence of the most satisfactory nature. Still, considering that nearly four months have now passed since the foundering of the Kangaroo under circumstances which make it exceedingly improbable that there were any other survivors, I think that it may fairly presume that Mr. Meeson shared the fate of the other passengers.

Mr. Fiddlestick: The death to be presumed from the 18th of December.

The President: Yes, from the eighteenth.

Mr. Fiddlestick: If your Lordship pleases.

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Augusta put down the paper with a gasp. There was she, safe and sound, with the true last will of Mr. Meeson tattooed upon her; and "probate had issued"--whatever that mysterious formula might mean--to another will, not the real last will. It meant (as she in her ignorance supposed) that her will was no good, that she had endured that abominable tattooing to no purpose, and was, to no purpose, scarred for life.

It was too much; and, in a fit of vexation, she flung the Times out of the window, and cast herself back on the cushion, feeling very much inclined to cry.