

CHAPTER IV THE WRECK OF THE "MACQUARIE"

STILL this wearisome voyage dragged on. On the 2d of February, six days from starting, the MACQUARIE had not yet made a nearer acquaintance with the shores of Auckland. The wind was fair, nevertheless, and blew steadily from the southwest; but the currents were against the ship's course, and she scarcely made any way. The heavy, lumpy sea strained her cordage, her timbers creaked, and she labored painfully in the trough of the sea. Her standing rigging was so out of order that it allowed play to the masts, which were violently shaken at every roll of the sea.

Fortunately, Will Halley was not a man in a hurry, and did not use a press of canvas, or his masts would inevitably have come down. John Mangles therefore hoped that the wretched hull would reach port without accident; but it grieved him that his companions should have to suffer so much discomfort from the defective arrangements of the brig.

But neither Lady Helena nor Mary Grant uttered a word of complaint, though the continuous rain obliged them to stay below, where the want of air and the violence of the motion were painfully felt.

They often braved the weather, and went on the poop till driven down again by the force of a sudden squall.

Then they returned to the narrow space, fitter for stowing

cargo than accommodating passengers, especially ladies.

Their friends did their best to amuse them. Paganel tried to beguile the time with his stories, but it was a hopeless case. Their minds were so distracted at this change of route as to be quite unhinged. Much as they had been interested in his dissertation on the Pampas, or Australia, his lectures on New Zealand fell on cold and indifferent ears. Besides, they were going to this new and ill-reputed country without enthusiasm, without conviction, not even of their own free will, but solely at the bidding of destiny.

Of all the passengers on board the MACQUARIE, the most to be pitied was Lord Glenarvan. He was rarely to be seen below. He could not stay in one place. His nervous organization, highly excited, could not submit to confinement between four narrow bulkheads. All day long, even all night, regardless of the torrents of rain and the dashing waves, he stayed on the poop, sometimes leaning on the rail, sometimes walking to and fro in feverish agitation. His eyes wandered ceaselessly over the blank horizon. He scanned it eagerly during every short interval of clear weather. It seemed as if he sought to question the voiceless waters; he longed to tear away the veil of fog and vapor that obscured his view. He could not be resigned, and his features expressed the bitterness of his grief. He was a man of energy, till now happy and powerful, and deprived in a moment of power and happiness. John Mangles bore him company, and endured with him the inclemency of the weather.

On this day Glenarvan looked more anxiously than ever at each point where a break in the mist enabled him to do so. John came up to him and said, "Your Lordship is looking out for land?"

Glenarvan shook his head in dissent.

"And yet," said the young captain, "you must be longing to quit this vessel. We ought to have seen the lights of Auckland thirty-six hours ago."

Glenarvan made no reply. He still looked, and for a moment his glass was pointed toward the horizon to windward.

"The land is not on that side, my Lord," said John Mangles.

"Look more to starboard."

"Why, John?" replied Glenarvan. "I am not looking for the land."

"What then, my Lord?"

"My yacht! the DUNCAN," said Glenarvan, hotly. "It must be here on these coasts, skimming these very waves, playing the vile part of a pirate! It is here, John; I am certain of it, on the track of vessels between Australia and New Zealand; and I have a presentiment that we shall fall in with her."

"God keep us from such a meeting!"

"Why, John?"

"Your Lordship forgets our position. What could we do in this ship if the DUNCAN gave chase. We could not even fly!"

"Fly, John?"

"Yes, my Lord; we should try in vain! We should be taken, delivered up to the mercy of those wretches, and Ben Joyce has shown us that he does not stop at a crime! Our lives would be worth little. We would fight to the death, of course, but after that! Think of Lady Glenarvan; think of Mary Grant!"

"Poor girls!" murmured Glenarvan. "John, my heart is broken; and sometimes despair nearly masters me. I feel as if fresh misfortunes awaited us, and that Heaven itself is against us. It terrifies me!"

"You, my Lord?"

"Not for myself, John, but for those I love--whom you love, also."

"Keep up your heart, my Lord," said the young captain.

"We must not look out for troubles. The MACQUARIE

sails badly, but she makes some way nevertheless. Will Halley is a brute, but I am keeping my eyes open, and if the coast looks dangerous, I will put the ship's head to sea again. So that, on that score, there is little or no danger. But as to getting alongside the DUNCAN! God forbid! And if your Lordship is bent on looking out for her, let it be in order to give her a wide berth."

John Mangles was right. An encounter with the DUNCAN would have been fatal to the MACQUARIE. There was every reason to fear such an engagement in these narrow seas, in which pirates could ply their trade without risk. However, for that day at least, the yacht did not appear, and the sixth night from their departure from Twofold Bay came, without the fears of John Mangles being realized.

But that night was to be a night of terrors. Darkness came on almost suddenly at seven o'clock in the evening; the sky was very threatening. The sailor instinct rose above the stupefaction of the drunkard and roused Will Halley. He left his cabin, rubbed his eyes, and shook his great red head. Then he drew a great deep breath of air, as other people swallow a draught of water to revive themselves. He examined the masts. The wind freshened, and veering a point more to the westward, blew right for the New Zealand coast.

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Will Halley, with many an oath, called his men, tightened his topmast cordage, and made all snug for the night.

John Mangles approved in silence. He had ceased to hold any conversation with the coarse seaman; but neither Glenarvan nor he left the poop. Two hours after a stiff breeze came on.

Will Halley took in the lower reef of his topsails.

The maneuver would have been a difficult job for five men if the MACQUARIE had not carried a double yard, on the American plan. In fact, they had only to lower the upper yard to bring the sail to its smallest size.

Two hours passed; the sea was rising. The MACQUARIE was struck so violently that it seemed as if her keel had touched the rocks. There was no real danger, but the heavy vessel did not rise easily to the waves. By and by the returning waves would break over the deck in great masses. The boat was washed out of the davits by the force of the water.

John Mangles never released his watch. Any other ship would have made no account of a sea like this; but with this heavy craft there was a danger of sinking by the bow, for the deck was filled at every lurch, and the sheet of water not being able to escape quickly by the scuppers, might submerge the ship. It would have been the wisest plan to prepare for emergency by knocking out the bulwarks with an ax to facilitate their escape,

but Halley refused to take this precaution.

But a greater danger was at hand, and one that it was too late to prevent. About half-past eleven, John Mangles and Wilson, who stayed on deck throughout the gale, were suddenly struck by an unusual noise. Their nautical instincts awoke. John seized the sailor's hand.

"The reef!" said he.

"Yes," said Wilson; "the waves breaking on the bank."

"Not more than two cables' length off?"

"At farthest? The land is there!"

John leaned over the side, gazed into the dark water, and called out,

"Wilson, the lead!"

The master, posted forward, seemed to have no idea of his position.

Wilson seized the lead-line, sprang to the fore-chains, and threw the lead; the rope ran out between his fingers, at the third knot the lead stopped.

"Three fathoms," cried Wilson.

"Captain," said John, running to Will Halley, "we are on the breakers."

Whether or not he saw Halley shrug his shoulders is of very little importance. But he hurried to the helm, put it hard down, while Wilson, leaving the line, hauled at the main-topsail brace to bring the ship to the wind. The man who was steering received a smart blow, and could not comprehend the sudden attack.

"Let her go! Let her go!" said the young captain, working her to get away from the reefs.

For half a minute the starboard side of the vessel was turned toward them, and, in spite of the darkness, John could discern a line of foam which moaned and gleamed four fathoms away.

At this moment, Will Halley, comprehending the danger, lost his head. His sailors, hardly sobered, could not understand his orders. His incoherent words, his contradictory orders showed that this stupid sot had quite lost his self-control. He was taken by surprise at the proximity of the land, which was eight miles off, when he thought it was thirty or forty miles off. The currents had thrown him out of his habitual track, and this miserable slave of routine was left quite helpless.

Still the prompt maneuver of John Mangles succeeded in keeping the MACQUARIE off the breakers. But John did not know the position. For anything he could tell he was girdled in by reefs.

The wind blew them strongly toward the east, and at every lurch

they might strike.

In fact, the sound of the reef soon redoubled on the starboard side of the bow. They must luff again. John put the helm down again and brought her up. The breakers increased under the bow of the vessel, and it was necessary to put her about to regain the open sea.

Whether she would be able to go about under shortened sail, and badly trimmed as she was, remained to be seen, but there was nothing else to be done.

"Helm hard down!" cried Mangles to Wilson.

The MACQUARIE began to near the new line of reefs:

in another moment the waves were seen dashing on submerged rocks.

It was a moment of inexpressible anxiety. The spray was luminous, just as if lit up by sudden phosphorescence.

The roaring of the sea was like the voice of those ancient Tritons whom poetic mythology endowed with life.

Wilson and Mulrady hung to the wheel with all their weight.

Some cordage gave way, which endangered the foremast.

It seemed doubtful whether she would go about without further damage.

Suddenly the wind fell and the vessel fell back, and turning her became hopeless. A high wave caught her below, carried her up on the reefs, where she struck with great violence.

The foremast came down with all the fore-rigging. The brig

rose twice, and then lay motionless, heeled over on her port side at an angle of 30 degrees.

The glass of the skylight had been smashed to powder.

The passengers rushed out. But the waves were sweeping the deck from one side to the other, and they dared not stay there.

John Mangles, knowing the ship to be safely lodged in the sand, begged them to return to their own quarters.

"Tell me the truth, John," said Glenarvan, calmly.

"The truth, my Lord, is that we are at a standstill.

Whether the sea will devour us is another question; but we have time to consider."

"It is midnight?"

"Yes, my Lord, and we must wait for the day."

"Can we not lower the boat?"

"In such a sea, and in the dark, it is impossible.

And, besides, where could we land?"

"Well, then, John, let us wait for the daylight."

Will Halley, however, ran up and down the deck like a maniac. His crew had recovered their senses, and now broached a cask of brandy, and began to drink. John foresaw that if they became drunk, terrible scenes would ensue.

The captain could not be relied on to restrain them; the wretched man tore his hair and wrung his hands. His whole thought was his uninsured cargo. "I am ruined! I am lost!" he would cry, as he ran from side to side.

John Mangles did not waste time on him. He armed his two companions, and they all held themselves in readiness to resist the sailors who were filling themselves with brandy, seasoned with fearful blasphemies.

"The first of these wretches that comes near the ladies, I will shoot like a dog," said the Major, quietly.

The sailors doubtless saw that the passengers were determined to hold their own, for after some attempts at pillage, they disappeared to their own quarters. John Mangles thought no more of these drunken rascals, and waited impatiently for the dawn. The ship was now quite motionless. The sea became gradually calmer. The wind fell. The hull would be safe for some hours yet. At daybreak John examined the landing-place; the yawl, which was now their only boat, would carry the crew and the passengers. It would have to make three trips at least, as it could

only hold four.

As he was leaning on the skylight, thinking over the situation of affairs, John Mangles could hear the roaring of the surf.

He tried to pierce the darkness. He wondered how far it was to the land they longed for no less than dreaded.

A reef sometimes extends for miles along the coast.

Could their fragile boat hold out on a long trip?

While John was thus ruminating and longing for a little light from the murky sky, the ladies, relying on him, slept in their little berths. The stationary attitude of the brig insured them some hours of repose. Glenarvan, John, and their companions, no longer disturbed by the noise of the crew who were now wrapped in a drunken sleep, also refreshed themselves by a short nap, and a profound silence reigned on board the ship, herself slumbering peacefully on her bed of sand.

Toward four o'clock the first peep of dawn appeared in the east.

The clouds were dimly defined by the pale light of the dawn.

John returned to the deck. The horizon was veiled with a curtain of fog. Some faint outlines were shadowed in the mist, but at

a considerable height. A slight swell still agitated the sea,

but the more distant waves were undistinguishable in a motionless bank of clouds.

John waited. The light gradually increased, and the horizon acquired

a rosy hue. The curtain slowly rose over the vast watery stage. Black reefs rose out of the waters. Then a line became defined on the belt of foam, and there gleamed a luminous beacon-light point behind a low hill which concealed the scarcely risen sun. There was the land, less than nine miles off.

"Land ho!" cried John Mangles.

His companions, aroused by his voice, rushed to the poop, and gazed in silence at the coast whose outline lay on the horizon. Whether they were received as friends or enemies, that coast must be their refuge.

"Where is Halley?" asked Glenarvan.

"I do not know, my Lord," replied John Mangles.

"Where are the sailors?"

"Invisible, like himself."

"Probably dead drunk, like himself," added McNabbs.

"Let them be called," said Glenarvan, "we cannot leave them on the ship."

Mulrady and Wilson went down to the forecastle, and two minutes after they returned. The place was empty! They then searched between decks, and then the hold. But found no trace of Will Halley nor his sailors.

"What! no one?" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Could they have fallen into the sea?" asked Paganel.

"Everything is possible," replied John Mangles, who was getting uneasy. Then turning toward the stern: "To the boat!" said he.

Wilson and Mulrady followed to launch the yawl. The yawl was gone.