

Barleigh stood at the helm, and in another half minute we were in the midst of the surf.

It required almost superhuman exertions to move the boat through the terrific breakers. The sea appeared to be unwilling to lose its prey. It broke over us in strength so great, and sheets so broad, that it was as if a waterfall or cataract were playing over us. We made a slow and painful progress; now beaten back, now advancing. But, in the end, we were as fortunate as Molesworth: our great open barge, three-fourths full of water, with all its load of human beings, at length rode in a calm sea! As I looked at H—, even drenched, pallid, and exhausted as she was, how deep was my gratitude to God!

## LETTER VIII.

## THE SHIPWRECK CONTINUED.

BEFORE I recommence my narrative, I will give you an extract from H—'s first letter from Campeachy, shortly stating her feelings, and impressions, under so new and trying an event in her life as a shipwreck so perilous as was hers.

*“Campeachy, Jan. 19th, 1849.*

“I HOPE no vague reports of the event which has befallen us, may reach you before you receive our own version of it. Distressing as that event has been, we can never be sufficiently grateful to a merciful Providence for our deliverance, and that of so many others, from a frightful death.

“You cannot expect a clear account of all that has taken place, since I last wrote to you. My mind is still so unsettled, that I hardly know how to write; indeed, till we got ashore here last evening, we were kept in such constant excitement, that

I could scarcely define what I felt. Now that we are *really* safe, the reaction takes place, and I feel this day more depressed than I have been during any part of our late trying scenes. But I will try to be more explicit.

“On Saturday, the 13th, we had beautiful weather, everything wearing the brightest aspect. We had been getting on uncommonly well from the time we left Havana, and we were looking forward to a happy termination of our long passage.

“We knew we were not far from the scene of the dreadful wreck of the Tweed, about two years before, and we were talking in the evening of that event; but we felt so secure ourselves, that I laughed when my father said he would not allow me to read the account of the loss of the Tweed (which he himself had been studying), till we had safely passed the Alacranes. That evening I sat up late on deck, for it was lovely moonlight. I saw the captain, and when I spoke to him, he said, ‘In order to be sure to keep you at a proper distance from the enemy, I have just taken another observation, and it agrees perfectly with the other; so there is not the slightest fear; we shall not be abreast of the Alacranes till after broad daylight.’

“I went down to bed after ten, with as little fear as on any night I had been on board. But although I thus went to sleep, I suddenly awakened up soon after five A.M., still almost dark, to all the horrors of an awful scene. The vessel was then on the rocks. I had only confusedly felt the first shock; but presently I knew, from the unwonted movement of the vessel, and the strange noises overhead, that something fearful must have happened. I got up, and went into my father’s cabin. He was not there; he had gone on deck, having felt the first shock; but soon returning, he told me, what I saw by his agitated manner, that there was little or no hope; in fact, that we might go down at any moment. I must leave you to imagine the state of our feelings at such an instant. After a short time given to each other, we went on deck. Meanwhile the noises and heavings of the vessel were appalling. Every crash we felt seemed likely to prove the last. On deck, I cannot describe the scene which presented itself; you must wait till I can look back more calmly than at present. It was with the greatest difficulty that we could hold on to the rigging, so as not to be pitched overboard. As it was, my poor father had a serious fall, and I

cannot help wondering that he escaped as he did. Orders were now given to lower the boats, and you may fancy our dismay, when we saw one of them knocked to pieces. They succeeded, however, in safely lowering the second; into which we got, with many others, including all the females and children. We remained in the boat what seemed to me a long time; and while thus waiting, the cry of 'a sail!' arose on board the steamer, and then a boat was sent to seek assistance. I cannot describe the feelings which overpowered me throughout the whole scene; I only know, that when the words, 'We are safe!' were pronounced, I hardly understood or believed them.

"The captain behaved in the very best manner throughout: cool and prompt, he retained wonderful presence of mind. All his officers, too, exerted themselves to the very utmost; and another person, who distinguished himself in a manner not to be forgotten by those present, was Lieutenant Molesworth, whom I have mentioned in my other letters."

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*Campeachy, Jan. 25th, 1849.*

IN less than two hours, from the time that Molesworth started, he returned in a canoe, belonging to the brigantine Bella Isabel; and, as soon as he could make himself heard in the distance, he called out, "Land, seven miles off." Then we knew we were all saved indeed; and I am sure no one among us returned a more fervent inward thanksgiving to God than I did, that the bitter cup of death had been so unexpectedly turned from my daughter's lips.

In Molesworth's wake came a decked canoe, of ten or fifteen tons, followed by two smaller ones, to take us all to the island of Perez. So providentially had all things turned out for us, that when the Bella Isabel had actually got her anchor up to return to Campeachy, her master (having gone aloft for a last speculative look-out *for a wreck*) discovered our masts. Had he started, as he intended, half an hour sooner, we should have lost this sole apparently safe opportunity of quitting the little island.

Captain Sturdee exerted himself so strenuously, that by one o'clock we were all ready to start,

carrying some water and provisions with us. He was the last man to leave the Forth—so gallant a ship in the morning, such a wreck now. The mainmast and foremast had been cut away early, so that only the mizenmast and funnel stood. The hold was full of water; but otherwise the tough, well-built ship held together with remarkable tenacity. The bed she had made for her ponderous body, was not less conducive to our personal safety, than, in the sequel, to the general advantage, as you shall see.

The lady passengers, and those protecting them, with some of our foreign and more timid friends, were trans-shipped to the large canoe, San Francisco, commanded by her *patrón*, or skipper, José Jesús Ramirez: the rest were distributed among the ship's boats. We had now to sail over the *baxos*, or rocky shoal of the Alacranes, already mentioned, and having only two or three feet water, our boats often touched and scraped the rocky bottom as we went along. The south-west point of the formidable reef we found was the one directly opposite to that on which the Tweed was lost.

At four P.M., we arrived at the island of Perez, which lies very flat in the water, and has no other

vegetation than a coarse marine grass, with, at one extremity of the island, a large bed of the broad-leaf cactus, called in Mexico *nopál*, growing low, but covered in profusion with its fruit, the prickly pear. The islet itself is about a mile and a half in circumference.

We took the lady passengers direct to the brigantine; and, leaving H— there, I went on shore to assist Captain Sturdee in making arrangements for our getting to Campeachy.

The island presented a curious sight on my landing. About a hundred and twenty people, mostly in very bare costume, gathered round two *ranchos* or huts, belonging to wreckers (and such those who assisted proved to be), both in a state of dilapidation. Her Majesty's mails, and the few other things saved, were deposited in these hovels; while we were meantime scanning the victuals and water which had been brought on shore. No one having eaten anything during the whole day, the cook set to preparing a moderate meal for all. We were at once put on allowance—a pint of water, some very small cabin biscuits, and a portion of *lobscouse* were allotted to us *per diem*. The mouths were many, what we had saved was scanty, and we had yet to look forward

to some days' stay before getting to Campeachy. However, we were contented, declaring one and all that we had never had anything so savoury on board the Forth, as our first meal in the Isla de Perez.

When supper was over, Captain Sturdee intimated his desire to read from our book of Common Prayer, the "Thanksgiving after a Storm." Many circumstances rendered it impossible to call all the sojourners on the island together for this purpose. A number, however, gathered round our late commander, who, with a biscuit barrel for his table, in the smallest hut, an old deal box for his seat, and a candle, held by Mr. Lawrence, drew his Prayer-book from his pocket, and, with earnestness and feeling, went through the Thanksgiving, many passages of which were strikingly applicable to our case, as you will see by reading the service. All seemed to be deeply impressed with the solemn words which fell upon their ears; and I cannot but believe that the same gratitude to God which apparently filled the hearts of those who listened, was felt by many others who that night were about to sleep in safety, in the desert isle, instead of having found, as there had been too great reason to fear, a watery grave!

Captain Sturdee determined to return to the wreck at two o'clock next morning (thus only taking about three hours' rest), with the life and other boats, to endeavour to save something, particularly provisions, of which we stood so much in need. Towards daybreak we could see, even with the naked eye, the mast of our steamer, standing as we had left her.

At eight A.M., Molesworth, at my request, went off to the brigantine, to bring H— on shore; and I found she had spent the night there quite as uncomfortably as we had done on the island.

In truth, when we went to roost, we found our night's lodging in the *ranchos*, far from delectable, and, indeed, it would not be easy for you to picture any thing more grotesque than our *tout ensemble* through the night. Sixty of us had one hovel; the ship's company had the other. I had for my bed one letter-bag, with legs and bodies of various passengers about me, to keep me to my own place. Heat, mosquitos, snoring, hydrogenic pressure, all forced me out about two in the morning, when I found several others already enjoying the *fresco*, and Captain Sturdee and his people preparing to be off.

After the boats started, we roamed in small parties round our little empire, many breakfasting off the prickly pears, quite ripe and juicy, although I cannot say they were much to my taste. Our anxiety, as the day advanced, was to know that our captain and people were all safe; and to see what the boats brought us. With the first arrival therefore from the Forth we were all to be seen lining the shore, while great was the bustle, and not small the delight which ensued. Turkeys, sheep, geese, barrels of biscuit, preserved meats, and a variety of other things were landed. All this stock had been rescued with the utmost difficulty. Captain Sturdee arrived last; and by the evening, the passengers had received in a damaged state, a great part of their luggage, as had the sailors most of their kits.

We were now quite safe for provisions, even should we have a long passage; so on Tuesday morning, the 16th, away went part of our flotilla to save more, if possible, of the passengers' luggage, and to bring a further supply of water.

Captain Sturdee and I had chartered the "Bella Isabel" of course; and having agreed with the Captain that we should all be on board that

night (Tuesday), the former determined to make the best harvest he could during the last day out of the old Forth. He himself remained to prepare the "Bella Isabel" to receive us, and to superintend the stowage of her cargo—a very important work; and Molesworth went off, as a volunteer, in the still anxious expedition of sacking the steamer's hold and cabins. All employed, wrought like slaves, and the consequence was, that a great deal more in the shape of luggage, many additional stores, and an ample supply of water, was obtained from the wreck. The first who returned to us on Tuesday, was Mr. Wilson, our chief officer. He is a remarkably large, portly, tall man, with a round, rosy face, the very picture of good nature. As he neared the shore, he stood erect at his helm, in a red shirt—some gentleman's fine hat, and a huge blanket enveloping his body, thrown cloak-wise over his shoulders. He towered above all the others, and looked a picturesque representation of one of the great Romans, on the first landing in Britain. The other boats followed deeply laden, and it was amusing to observe the eagerness with which

many were now hunting after their missing moveables. Much came in a dreadfully damaged state, and the islet was transformed by degrees into a great drying-green, each proprietor having his own patch of ground. Two or three grumbled, for we *had* two or three disagreeable subjects among us; but the passengers at large bore willing testimony to the immense exertions made to recover our property by Captain Sturdee, and by those under him, really at the risk of their lives.

There was one incident attendant on the wreck which I cannot pass over in silence, for to me it appeared to be little less than *tragical* in its nature. We had on board an English cow which faithfully supplied us all with milk day by day, morning and evening, during our passage. When the Forth was abandoned on Sunday the cow was left in her stall, unconscious (*perhaps*), of her dangerous situation. On Monday, when the boats returned, she was lying quietly in her place, and she was fed by the men. Again she was left on Monday, and once more on Tuesday was found "chewing the cud" philosophically in her stall. Many of us greatly wished that she

should be brought alive on shore, and left with the two men whom the "wreckers" keep on the island, to supply them with milk. But it was found impossible to bring her without some risk of upsetting the boat on getting her into it. So the poor faithful creature was *first milked*, and then killed, and her milk brought on shore with her carcase, which was *eaten* by those who had been so long nourished by her. There was something approaching to cannibalism in this. The milk, I really thankfully record the fact, was never used.