

DREADFUL NARRATIVE
OF THE LOSS OF THE
KENT EAST INDIAMAN,
BY FIRE.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN, WITH
UPWARDS OF 600 SOULS ON BOARD.



MONTROSE:
PRINTED BY JAMES WATT.

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The activity of the officers and seamen of the Kent appeared to keep ample pace with the gale. Our large sails were speedily taken in or closely reefed, and about 10 o'clock on the morning of the 1st of March, after

THE LOSS OF THE KENT

EAST INDIAMAN.

lines that were run along the deck for this purpose.

The rolling of the ship which was greatly increased by the gale, was such that the Kent, Captain Henry Cobb, a fine new ship of 1350 tons, bound to Bengal and China, left the Downs on the 19th February, with 20 officers, 344 soldiers, 43 women and 66 children, belonging to the 31st regiment with 20 private passengers, and a crew (including officers) of 148 men on board.

With a fine fresh breeze from the north-east, the stately Kent, in bearing down the Channel, speedily passed many a well-known spot on the coast, dear to our remembrance; and on the evening of the 23d we took our last view of happy England, and entered the wide Atlantic, without the expectation of again seeing land until we reached the shores of India.

With slight interruptions of bad weather, we continued to make way until the night of Monday the 28th, when we were suddenly arrested, in lat. 47° 30' long, 10' by a violent gale from the south-west, which gradually increased during the whole of the following morning.

The activity of the officers and seamen of the Kent appeared to keep ample pace with the gale. Our large sails were speedily taken in, or closely reefed; and about 10 o'clock on the morning of the 1st of March, after having struck our top gallant yards, we were lying to, under a triple reefed main top-sail only, with our dead lights in, and with the whole watch of soldiers attached to the life lines, that were run along the deck for this purpose.

The rolling of the ship which was vastly increased by a dead weight of some hundred tons of shot and shells that formed a part of its lading, became so great about half-past eleven or twelve o'clock that our main chains were thrown by every lurch considerably under water; and cleated articles of furniture in the cabins and the cuddy were dashed about with so much noise and violence as to excite the liveliest apprehensions of individual danger.

It was a little before this period that one of the officers of the ship, with the well meant intention of ascertaining that all was fast below, descended with two of the sailors into the hold, where they carried with them, for safety, a light in the patent lantern; and seeing that the lamp burned dimly, the officer took the precaution to hand it up to the orlop deck to be trimmed. Having afterwards discovered one of the spirit casks to be adrift, he sent the sailors for some billets of wood to secure it; but the ship in their absence

having made a heavy lurch, the officer unfortunately dropped the light; and letting go his hold of the cask in his eagerness to recover the lantern, it suddenly stove, and the spirits communicating with the lamp the whole place was instantly in a blaze.

I know not what steps were then taken; but having received the alarming information that the ship was on fire in the after hold, I hastened to the hatchway, whence smoke was slowly ascending, and where Capt. Cobb and other officers were giving orders, which were promptly obeyed by the seamen and troops, who used every exertion by means of the pumps, buckets of water, wet sails, hammocks &c. to extinguish the flames. Finding, however, that the devouring element was rapidly spreading, and that volumes of smoke were issuing from all the four hatchways, Captain Cobb, with ability and decision of character that seemed to increase with the imminence of the danger, resorted to the only alternative now left him, of ordering the lower ports to be opened, for the free admission of the watery element.

These instructions were speedily executed by the united efforts of the troops and seamen but not before some of the sick soldiers, and one woman, and several children, unable to gain the upper deck, had perished. So dense and oppressive was the smoke, that it was with the utmost difficulty we could remain long enough below to fulfil Captain Cobb's wishes; which were no sooner accomplished,

then the sea rushed in with extraordinary
 fury, carrying away in its resistless progress
 to the hold, the largest chests, bulk heads, &c.
 all the upper deck was covered with between
 six and seven hundred human beings, many
 of whom, from previous sickness, were
 forced on the first alarm to flee from below
 in a state of absolute nakedness, and were now
 running about in quest of husbands, children,
 or parents. While some were standing in
 silent resignation, or in stupid insensibility to
 their impending fate, others were yielding
 themselves up to the most frantic despair.
 Some on their knees were earnestly imploring,
 with significant prostrations and in noisy
 supplications, the mercy of Him, whose arm
 they exclaimed, was as length outstretched to
 smite them; others were to be seen hastily
 covering themselves, and performing the
 various external acts required by their peculiar
 persuasion, while a number of the older, and
 stout-hearted soldiers and sailors, sullenly
 took their seats directly over the magazine,
 hoping, as they stated, that by means of the
 explosion which they every instant expected,
 a speedier termination might thereby be put
 to their sufferings.

While we thus lay in a state of physical
 inertion, but when all our mental faculties in
 rapid and painful activity, with the waves
 flashing furiously against the side of our de-
 voted ship, as if in anger with the hostile
 element for not more speedily performing its
 office of destruction, — the binnacle, by one of

these heavy lurches which was driving every-thing moveable from side to side of the vessel, was suddenly wrenched from its fastenings, and all the apparatus of the compass dashed to pieces upon the deck; on which one of the young mates, emphatically regarding it for a moment, cried out with the emotion so natural to a sailor under such circumstances, "What! is the Kent's compass really gone?" leaving the bystanders to form, from that omen, their own conclusions. Mr Thomson, the 4th mate, sent a man to the fore-top, rather with the ardent wish, than the expectation, that some friendly sail might be discovered on the face of the waters. The sailor, on mounting threw his eyes round the horizon for a moment,—a moment of unutterable suspense,—and waving his hat exclaimed, "A sail on the lee bow!" The joyful announcement was received with deep-felt thanksgiving and with three cheers upon deck. Our flags of distress were instantly hoisted, and our minute guns fired: and we bore down under our three top-sails and fore-sail upon the stranger, which afterwards proved to be the Cambria, a small brig of 200 tons burthen—Cook—bound to Vera Cruz having on board 20 or 30 Cornish miners, and others, agents of the Anglo-Mexican Company.

For ten or fifteen minutes we were left in doubt whether the brig perceived our signals, or perceiving them, was disposed to lend us any assistance. From the violence of the gale, it seems, that the reports of our guns

were not heard; but the ascending volumes of smoke from our ship sufficiently announced the dreadful nature of our distress; and we had the satisfaction, after a short period of dark suspense, to see the brig hoist British colours, and crowd all sail to hasten to our relief.

Although it was impossible and would have been improper to repress the rising hopes that were pretty generally diffused amongst us by the unexpected sight of the *Cambria*, yet I confess when I reflected on the long period our ship had been already burning—on the tremendous sea that was running—on the extreme smallness of the brig, and the immense number of human beings to be saved, I could only venture to hope that a few might be spared, but I durst not for a moment contemplate the possibility of my own preservation.

While Captain Cobb, Colonel Fearon, the commandidg officer of the troops, and Major Macgregor of the 31st regiment, were consulting together as the brig was approaching us, on the necessary preparations for getting out the boats, one of the officers asked Major M. in what order it was intended the officers should move off, to which the other replied, "Of course in funeral order;" which injunction was instantly confirmed by Colonel Fearon, who said, "Most undoubtedly, the juniors first—but see that any man is cut down who presumes to enter the boats before the means

of escape are offered to the women and children.

To prevent the rush to the boats as they were being lowered, which, from certain symptoms of impatience manifested both by soldiers and sailors, there was some reason to fear, some of the military officers were stationed over them with drawn swords. But from the firm determination which these exhibited and the great subordination observed with few exceptions by the troops, this proper precaution was afterwards rendered unnecessary.

Arrangements having been considerably made by Captain Cobb for placing in the first boat, previous to letting it down, all the ladies and as many of the soldiers' wives as it could safely contain, they hurriedly wrapt themselves up in whatever articles of clothing could be most conveniently found; and I think about two o'clock a most mournful procession advanced from the after cabins to the starboard cuddy port, outside of which the cutter was suspended. Scarcely a word was uttered—not a scream was heard—even the infants ceased to cry, as if conscious of the unspoken and unspeakable anguish that was at that instant rending the hearts of their parting parents—nor was the silence of voices in any way broken, except in one or two cases where the ladies plaintively entreated permission to be left behind with their husbands. But on being assured that every moment's delay might occasion the sacrifice of a human life,

they successively suffered themselves to be torn from the tender embrace, and with the fortitude which never fails to characterise and adorn their sex, on occasions of overwhelming trial were placed without a murmur in the boat, which was immediately lowered into a sea so tempestuous, as to leave us only "to hope against hope" that it should live in it for a single moment. Twice the cry was heard from those on the chains, that the boat was swamping. But he who enabled the Apostle Peter to walk on the face of the deep, and was graciously attending to the earnest but silent aspirations of these on board, had decreed its safety. The tackle after considerable difficulty, was unhooked—the boat was dextrously cleared from the ship, and after a while was seen from the poop, battling with the billows;—now raised in its progress to the brig, like a speck on the summit, and then disappearing for several seconds, as if engulfed in the horrid vale between them. The *Cambria*, having prudently lain at some distance from the *Kent*, lest she should be involved in her explosion, or exposed to the fire from our guns, which being all shotted, afterwards went off as the flames successively reached them, the men had a considerable way to row; and the success of this first experiment, seeming to be the measure of our future hopes, the movements of this precious boat—incalculably precious, without doubt to the agonized husbands and fathers, immediately connected with it—were watched with intense

anxiety by all on board. In the course of twenty minutes, it was seen alongside the ark of refuge: and the first human being that happened to be admitted, out of the vast assemblage that ultimately found shelter there, was the infant son of Major Macgregor, a child of only a few weeks old, who was caught from his mothers arms, and lifted into the brig by Mr. Thomson, the 4th mate of the Kent.

I have been told by one abundantly capable of judging, that the feeling of oppressive delight, gratitude and praise, experienced by the married officers and soldiers, on being assured of the safety of their wives and children, so entirely abstracted their minds from their own situation, as to render them for a little while afterwards totally insensible either to the storm that beat upon them, or to the active and gathering volcano that threatened every instant to explode under their feet.

It being impossible for the boats, after the first trip, to come alongside the Kent, a plan was adopted for lowering the women and children by ropes from the stern, by tying them two and two together. But from the heaving of the ship, and the extreme difficulty in dropping them at the instant the boat was underneath, many of the poor creatures were unavoidably plunged repeatedly under water: and as much as humanity may rejoice that no woman was eventually lost by this process, yet it was impossible to prevent, as it was deplorable to witness, the great sacrifice of

occasioned of the children,—the same violent means which only reduced the parents to a state of exhaustion or insensibility, having entirely extinguished the vital spark in the feebler frames of the infants that were fastened to them.

Amid the conflicting feelings and dispositions manifested by the numerous actors in this melancholy drama many affecting proofs were elicited of paternal and filial affection, or of disinterested friendship, that seemed to shed a momentary halo around the gloomy scene.

Two or three soldiers, to relieve their wives of a part of their families, sprang into the waters with their children, and perished in their endeavours to save them. One young lady who had resolutely refused to quit her father, whose sense of duty kept him at his post, was near falling a sacrifice to her filial devotion, not having been picked up until she had sunk five or six times. Another individual, who was reduced to the frightful alternative of losing his wife or his children, hastily decided in favour of his duty to the former. His wife was accordingly saved, but his four children, alas! were left to perish. A fine young fellow, a soldier, who had neither wife nor child of his own, but who evinced the greatest solicitude for the safety of those of others, insisted on having three children lashed to him, with whom he plunged into the waters: not being able to reach the boat, he was again drawn into the ship

with his charge, but not before two of the children had expired. One man fell down the hatchway into the flames, and another had his back so completely broken as to have been observed quite doubled fallen overboard. These numerous spectacles of individual loss and suffering were not confined to the entrance upon the perilous voyage between the two ships. One man who fell between the boat and the brig, had his head literally crushed to pieces; and some others were lost in their attempts to ascend the side of the Cambria.

Seeing that the tardy means employed for the escape of all the women and children, necessarily consumed a great deal of time that might be partly devoted to the general preservation, orders were given that along with the females, each of the boats should also admit a certain portion of the soldiers; several of whom, in their impatience to take advantage of this permission, flung themselves overboard, and sunk in their ill-judged and premature efforts for deliverance.

One poor fellow of this number, a very respectable man had actually reached the boat, and was raising his hand to lay hold on the gunnel, when the bow of the boat, by a sudden pitch, struck him on the head and he instantly went down.

There was a peculiarity attending this man's case that deserves notice. His wife to whom he was warmly attached, not having been of

allotted number of women, to accompany the regiment abroad, resolved in her anxiety, to follow her husband, to defeat his arrangements, and accordingly repaired with the detachment to Gravesend where she ingeniously managed, by eluding the vigilance of the sentries, to get on board, and to conceal herself for several days; and although she was discovered, and sent ashore at Deal, she contrived a second time with true feminine perseverance, to get between decks, where she contrived to secret herself until the morning of the fatal disaster.

While the men were thus bent in various ways on self-preservation, one of the sailors, who had taken his post with many others over the magazine, awaiting with great patience the dreaded explosion, at last cried out, as if in ill humour, that his expectations were likely to be disappointed, "Well, if she won't blow up, I'll see if I can't get out of her;" and instantly jumping up, he made the best of his way to one of the boats, which I understand he reached in safety.

I ought to state, that three out of the six boats we originally possessed, were either completely stove or swamped in the course of the day, one of them with men in it, some of whom were seen floating in the water for a moment before they disappeared; and it is suspected that one or two of those who went down, must have sunk under the weight of their spoils, the same individuals having been seen eagerly plundering the cuddy cabins.

As the day was rapidly drawing to a close, and the flames were slowly, but perceptibly, extending, Colonel Fearon and Captain Cobb evinced an increasing anxiety to relieve the remainder of the gallant men under their charge.

To facilitate this object, a rope was suspended from the extremity of the spanker boom, along which the men were recommended to proceed, and thence slide down by the rope into the boats. But as from the great swell in the sea, and the constant heaving of the ship, it was impossible for the boats to preserve their station for a moment; those who adopted this course incurred so great a risk of swinging for some time in the air, and of being plunged under water, or dashed against the sides of the boats underneath, that many of the landsmen continued to throw themselves out of the stern windows on the upper decks, preferring what appeared to me the more precarious chance of reaching the boats by swimming. Rafts made of spars, hencoops, &c. were also ordered to be constructed, for the twofold purpose of forming an intermediate communication with the boats,—a purpose, by the bye, which they very imperfectly answered,—and of serving as a last point of retreat, should the extension of the flames compel us to desert the vessel altogether.

The gradual removal of the officers was at the same time commenced and was marked by

a discipline the most rigid, and intrepidity the most exemplary; none appearing to be influenced by a vain and ostentatious bravery, which in cases of extreme peril, affords rather a presumptive proof of secret timidity than of fortitude, nor any betraying an unmanly or unsoldierlike impatience to quit the ship: but with the becoming deportment of men neither paralyzed by, nor stupidly insensible to, the accumulating dangers that encompassed them, they progressively departed in the different boats with their soldiers. They who happened to proceed first, leaving behind them an example of coolness, that could not be unprofitable to those who followed.

But the finest illustration of their conduct, was displayed in that of their chief, whose ability and invincible presence of mind, under the complicated responsibility and anxiety of a commander, husband, and father, were eminently calculated, throughout the dismal day, to inspire all others with composure and fortitude. Never for a moment did Colonel Fearon seem to forget the authority with which his Sovereign had invested him, nor did any of his officers—as far as my observation went—cease to remember the relative situations in which they were severally placed. Even in the gloomiest moments of that dark season, when the dissolution of every earthly distinction seemed near at hand, the decision and confidence with which orders were issued on the one hand, and the promptitude and re-

pect with which they were obeyed on the other, afforded the best proofs of the stability of the well connected system of discipline established in the 31st regiment.—and the most unquestionable ground for the high and flattering commendations which his Royal Highness the Commander-in-Chief has been pleased to bestow upon it.

As an agreeable proof too, of the subordination and good feeling that governed the poor soldiers in the mid-t of their suffering, I ought to state, that towards evening when the melancholy groups who were passively seated on the poop, exhausted by previous fatigue, anxiety, and fasting, were beginning to experience the pain of intolerable thirst, a box of oranges was accidentally discovered by some of the men, who with a degree of mingled consideration, respect, and affection, that could hardly have been expected at such a moment, refused to partake of the grateful beverage until they had offered a share of it to their officers.

Some of the soldiers near me having casually remarked that the sun was setting, I looked round, and never can I forget the intensity with which I regarded his declining rays. I had previously felt deeply impressed with the conviction that that night the ocean was to be my bed; and had, I imagined, sufficiently realized to my mind, both the last struggles and the consequences of death.

Some time after the shades of night had

enveloped us, I descended to the cuddy in quest of a blanket to shelter me from the increasing cold, and the scene of desolation which here presented itself was melancholy to the extreme. The place which, only a few hours before, had been the seat of kindly intercourse, and social gaiety, was now entirely deserted, save by a few miserable wretches who were either stretched in irrecoverable intoxication on the floor, or prowling about like beasts of prey, in search of plunder. The sofas, drawers, and other articles of furniture the due arrangement of which had cost so much care, were now broken into a thousand pieces, and scattered in confusion around me, while some of the geese and other poultry escaped from their confinement, were cackling about, and a solitary pig, wandering from its sty in the fore-castle, was ranging at large in the undisturbed possession of the Brussels carpet that covered one of the cabins. Glad to retire from a scene so cheerless and affecting, and rendered more dismal by the smoke that was rising up from below, I returned to the poop where I again found Captain Cobb, Colonel Fearon, and the few officers that remained, superintending, with unabated zeal, the removal of the rapidly diminishing sufferers, as the boats successively arrived to carry them off.

As the boats were nearly three quarters of an hour between each trip, which period was necessarily spent by those in the wreck in a

state of fearful inactivity, abundant opportunity was afforded for collecting the sentiments of many of the unhappy men around me, some of whom, after remaining perhaps for a while in silent abstraction, would suddenly burst forth as if awakened from some terrible dream to a still more frightful reality into a long train of loud desponding lamentation, that gradually subsided into its former stillness.

But it was not till the close of this mournful tragedy that backwardness, rather than impatience, to adopt the perilous, and only means of escape that offered, became generally discernible on the part of the unhappy remnant still on board, and that it made it not only imperative on Captain Cobb to re-iterate his threats as well as his entreaties that not an instant should be lost, but seemed to render it expedient for one of the officers of the troops to express his intention of remaining to the last, to limit in the hearing of those around him the period of his own stay.

Captain Cobb, in his immoveable resolution to be the last if possible to quit his ship, and in his generous anxiety for the preservation of every life entrusted to his charge, refused to seek the boat until he again endeavoured to urge those around him, who seemed struck dumb and powerless with dismay. But finding all his entreaties fruitless, and hearing the guns whose tackle was burst asunder by the advancing flames, successively explod-

ing in the hold in which they had fallen, this gallant officer, after having nobly pursued for the preservation of others, a course of exertion that has been rarely equalled either in its duration or difficulty, at last felt it right to provide for his own safety, by laying hold of the topping-lift, or rope that connects the driver boom with the mizen-top, and thereby getting over the heads of the infatuated men who occupied the boom, unable to go either backward or forward, and ultimately dropping himself into the water.

The means of escape, however, did not cease to be presented to the unfortunate individuals above referred to, long after Captain Cobb took his departure,—since one of the boats persevered in keeping its station under the Kent's stern, not only after all exhortation and entreaty with those on board had failed, but until the flames, bursting forth from the cabin windows, rendered it impossible to remain, without inflicting the greatest pain on the individuals who manned it.

Quitting for a moment, the subject of the wreck, I would advert to what in the meantime was taking place on board the *Cambria*. I cannot, however, pretend to give an adequate idea of the feeling of hope or despair, that alternately flowed, like a tide, in the breasts of the unhappy females on board the brig, during the hours of torturing suspense in which many of them were unavoidably held, respecting the fate of their husbands;—feel-

ings which were inconceivably excited, rather than soothed by the idle and erroneous rumours occasionally conveyed to them, regarding the state of the Kent. But still less can I pourtray the alternate pictures of awful joy, and of wild distraction, exhibited by the sufferers, (for both parties for the moment seemed equally to suffer,) as the terrible truth was communicated, that they and their children were indeed left husbandless and fatherless; or as the objects from whom they had feared they were for ever severed, rushed suddenly into their arms.

But these feelings of delight, whatever may have been their intensity, were speedily chastened, and the attention of all arrested, by the last tremendous spectacle of destruction.

After the arrival of the last boat, the flames, which had spread along the upper deck and poop, ascended with the rapidity of lightning to the masts and rigging, forming one general conflagration, that illumined the heavens to an immense distance and was strongly reflected on several objects on board the brig. At last about half-past one o'clock in the morning, the devouring element having communicated with the magazine, the long threatened explosion was seen, and the blazing fragments of the once magnificent Kent were instantly hurried like so many rockets, high into the air.

Shortly afterwards the brig, which had been gradually making sail, was running at the rate of nine or ten miles an hour towards the nearest port.

As little time as possible was lost, after our arrival at Falmouth. In the course of the morning we all prepared, with joyful hearts, to replace our feet on the shores of Old England.

The ladies, always destined to form our vanguard, were the first to disembark.

The sailors and soldiers, cold, wet and almost naked, quickly followed: the whole forming, in their haggard looks, and the endless variety of their costume, an assemblage at once as melancholy and grotesque as it is possible to conceive. So eager did the people appear to be to pour out upon us the full current of their sympathies, that shoes, hats and other articles of urgent necessity, were presented to several of the officers and men before they had even quitted the point of disembarkation. And in the course of the day, many of the officers and soldiers and almost all the females, were partaking, in the houses of private individuals, of the most liberal and needful hospitality.

THE END

WONDERS OF GOD IN THE DEEP.

They that toil upon the deep,

And in vessels light and frail,

O'er the mighty waters sweep,

With the billow and the gale—

Mark what wonders God performs,

When he speaks, and unconfin'd

Rush to battle all his storms,

In the chariots of the wind.

Up to heaven, their bark is whirl'd,

On the mountain of the wave;

Down as suddenly 'tis hurld

To th' abysses of the grave.

To and fro they reel, they roll,

As intoxicate with wine;

Terrors paralyze their soul,

Helm they quit, and hope resign.

Then unto the Lord they cry;

He inclines a gracious ear,

Sends deliverance from on high,

Rescues them from all they fear.

Calm and smooth the surges flow,

And, where deadly lightning ran,

God's own reconciling bow,

Metes the ocean with a span.

O that man would praise the Lord,

For his goodness to his race;

For the wonders of his word,

And the riches of his grace.

The time is short!—the season near,
 When death will us remove,
 To leave our friends, however dear,
 And all we fondly love!

The time is short!—sinners, beware,
 Nor trifle time away;
 The word of "great salvation" hear,
 While it is called to-day.

The time is short!—ye rebels, now
 To Christ the Lord submit;
 To mercy's golden sceptre bow,
 And fall at Jesus' feet.

The time is short!—ye saints rejoice—
 The Lord will quickly come:
 Soon shall ye hear the Bridegroom's voice,
 To call your spirits home.

The time is short!—it swiftly flies—
 The hour is just at hand,
 When we shall mount above the skies,
 And reach Emmanuel's land.