

NARRATIVE OF THE LOSS OF THE SHIP "ELDON."<sup>a</sup>

The inscrutable dispensations of Providence, by which our lives are chequered with such varieties of fortune, will no doubt have their full and sufficient explanation in another and a better world: the veil is not to be removed here, and we can only submit to whatever befalls us—too happy if able to exorcise those virtues which adorn human nature, and mingle with its infirmities some faint traces of its divine origin and its destined immortality.

The destruction of the ship *Eldon* by fire, in the midst of the *Indian Ocean*, at the tempestuous period of the equinox, and upwards of a thousand miles from the nearest attainable land, was a calamity which no ordinary foresight or care could have prevented. The singular preservation of every individual of the crew and passengers, of whom four were females, and one a child of five months, was almost a miraculous instance of what the human frame is capable of enduring, and also of what it is capable of performing when aided by unbroken spirits, good sense, and firm virtuous determination to hope and work to the last. Under the mercy of God, it was solely accomplished by the exemplary conduct of every individual of the party; and the unshaken nerve, self-possession, and skill, of the worthy captain, an English sailor of the true British class—quiet, conciliatory, and kind to his men, when all was well; and firm, active, keen, intelligent, and not to be dispirited, when the occasion required unusual exertion. What might have occurred, had any single individual forgotten his duty, or had the excellent head been unequal to his, would be frightful to contemplate. Happily these evils were spared to the poor sufferers; and their eventful history conveys the instructive lesson of what may be performed by virtuous energy, struggling against all dangers, and overcoming all difficulties, even in their worst form and most strange combinations. It is indeed a lesson which should not be lost; it forms a bright passage in the delineation of character, and in the history of mind; and is an example and beacon for future sufferers, how to hope, and how to labour, that they may not only survive to recite another like history of energy and success, but may deserve and enjoy the approbation of their own consciences, and the admiration and applause of their friends and countrymen.

The *Eldon*, Captain Edward Theaker, sailed from Bombay on the 24th August, 1834, bound to the Cape of Good Hope and London. Her burden was rated under 600 tons admeasurement; but she was actually laden with nearly 1,000 tons of miscellaneous cargo, consisting of Bombay black-wood, ebony; gums, drugs, rice, and cotton; the heavy goods below, and the cottons above, piled up to touching the main-deck, and crowded to the utmost she could stow. Her crew consisted of the captain, three mates, the surgeon, and twenty-eight men and apprentices—total, thirty-three; with thirteen passengers and servants, making forty-six souls. They had experienced light and variable winds; and on the morning of the 27th September were in latitude nine degrees thirty minutes south, and seventy-six degrees east, with fine weather, having that morning found themselves in the south-east trades, to the steady course of which their eventful preservation is to be attributed.

At four o'clock in the morning of the 27th Sept. the officer of the watch reported to the captain that faint lines of smoke were seen occasionally issuing from the fore-hatches; a discovery which does not appear to have occasioned the least apprehension of what was to be the result. A portion of the cotton had been embarked in a wet state, the *Eldon* having loaded in Bombay in the rains; and Captain Theaker appears to have at once adopted and acted on the impression, that it was merely a chemical process in the injured cotton, of damp-rot and self-combustion, and he had heard of such cases, in which the "affected bales" had been promptly discovered and thrown overboard.

The first tier of cotton bales which could be got up were perfectly clean and untouched, and were piled upon the decks; but during this process the smoke was increasing; and at half-past seven, Capt. Theaker

sent to request Major Hart and the passengers to assemble on the quarter-deck, and made them acquainted with the situation of the cargo. No alarm whatever was expressed or felt; his appearance and manners were in no respects altered. A very laborious examination of the cargo was the worst that he apprehended; and his communication with the passengers was to prevent alarm, not to warn them of their danger. So perfectly cool and collected were all parties, that they went to breakfast as quietly as usual; the men, however, were requested by the captain to make the most of the present opportunity, as they had a hard day's work before them, and many hours might elapse ere they could enjoy another "comfortable meal." He little dreamt of the prophetic truth of the warning, which his natural and usual kindness induced him to deliver as the men were proceeding to their food.

After breakfast the fore-hatches were opened, and the cotton removed with great expedition to the deck; but in about an hour and a half, the smoke, which from the first had continued rapidly increasing, became so dense, that the men could no longer work below, and the after-hatches were opened to permit its escape. At this period the captain crept in as far as was practicable, betwixt the hales and lading, in the direction where the smoke issued, and appears to have then first conjectured the extent of the mischief, and its possible consequences. All the hatches were closed down to prevent the current of air; a hole was cut through the deck near the main-mast, and water poured down; and orders were quietly given to prepare the boats, as a precautionary measure, should the worst befall them.

About twelve o'clock, when the boats were partly prepared, the captain resumed the now dangerous task of subduing the fire; the main hatch was first opened, which, on removing its cover of tarpaulin, was discovered to be lift up four inches by the force of the steam. On approaching the fire in this direction, the extent to which it had proceeded, and the length of time it must have been in progress, were ascertained. On attempting to remove the burning bales of cotton, it was found that all the lashings were consumed, and any handling of them only increased the evil by shaking them loose; others again were totally burnt through, and were a mass of tinder, into which the men could thrust their arms unopposed. During this hour, the heat and smoke continued increasing, and the urgent duty of procuring provisions water, and other necessities for the boats, became a painful and hazardous labour. At one o'clock, the female passengers were removed to the boat, again as a precautionary measure, though still encouraged to indulge a hope that the destruction of the vessel might be averted; but though every possible exertion was persisted in, Major Hart exhausted and feeble by long illness, and Captain Hewitt and the other passengers having toiled with the crew throughout, the fire most perceptibly gained a head every moment, burning most intensely near the mainmast, where the main-deck even was now perceived to be on fire; and the heat had become so scorching, that the men were no longer able to work—so that all hope of saving the ship was at last resigned.

The captain in conjunction with Major Hart, now made his arrangements for the boats, apportioning the crews for each; and such was the coolness and precision with which all was provided for, that even arms, as a last resource, should the crew unhappily forget their duty in some future extremity of suffering and privation, and become mutinous and unmanageable, were not forgotten. Major Hart discharged the melancholy duty of ordering the destruction of his favourite horse, which he was taking with him to the Cape; and the live stock, sheep, goats, pigs, turkeys, fowls, geese, and ducks, were humanely thrown overboard, as an easier destruction than by fire. When the boats were adrift from the ship, the sea was covered with these poor creatures, of whom the geese and ducks, by a happy blindness to their fate, were screaming and frantic with joy at being loose on the water, diving, and floating, and flying about in an ecstasy of enjoyment; their appearance formed a strange contrast to the spectacle of human suffering they surrounded.

The risk of explosion, from the fire reaching the

spirits and gunpowder, became now very imminent, and at three o'clock it was impossible to remain in the ship, when all quitted her, the captain himself the last. The first and second mates were appointed to command the two small boats, with a compass, and a crew of nine men to each; the spars and stores for rigging were apportioned, and such arrangements completed as their situation allowed. The captain, third mate, surgeon, and ten men, with the twelve passengers and child, twenty-six souls, were in the long boat, with all the water and provision, except two kegs of water, and about a couple of days consumption of biscuit to each of the small boats, which was all that they could stow with safety; the vessel was light and manageable, and easily sailed around the larger boat; a light was displayed for their guidance by night; they were ordered to keep as close on each quarter as safety would permit, and approached daily for their supply of provisions.

On quitting the ship, her helm was lashed a-lee, and the sails put partially aback to keep her steady; and the poor fugitives on the ocean had a moment of leisure to contemplate the melancholy scene.

The appearance of the burning ship was ably appalling; whilst the mingled feelings of remembered comforts so recently enjoyed, and so unexpectedly and painfully snatched from them, contrasted with bitter forebodings of sufferings and almost certain destruction, must necessarily have filled every heart, and subdued the stoutest spirit into sadness. The captain and passengers, particularly Major Hart, whose loss, by a combination of unfortunate circumstances, was unusually heavy, saw valuable property destroyed, which years of privation and industry would not serve to replace; and even the humblest of the crew lost all they had to lose, and saw, in the future, one common fate for all. The fire soon reached the poop, where its progress, from the airy, open space of the large cabins, was frightfully rapid: the mizen-mast first fell; but the destruction of the sails more particularly presented a singular spectacle, and awful proof of the vast force of fire when in a mass.—The progress of the flame from the heel of the main-sail to the royal head was almost as instantaneous as the flash of gunpowder; it flew upwards with a crackling, whizzing report; the canvass disappeared as if by magic; the ashes and blazing fragments were blown away, and the fires were seen running down the rigging; and in an incredible short space of time, the masts went crashing over the side. All was now a bright blaze, and the vessel finally exploded and disappeared about nine o'clock.

The ship being utterly abandoned, Capt. Theaker's first care was to explain to his fellow-sufferers the plan he proposed to adopt, and his reasons for so doing. The nearest point of land was the island *Diego Garcia*, which was short of 400 miles; but to have gone back into uncertain winds, was to hazard the risk of calms and squally weather, and, on the whole, the longer voyage; whilst to sail towards *Roderigues*, was to use the trade-wind, which, under average circumstances, might be expected to drive them thither in a reasonable time: the distance was calculated to be 1,650 miles.

The moon was in her last quarter; and when night closed upon the sea, the sad feelings of the party defy description. The carpenter, and such as could assist, were busied preparing the rough spars for masts and yards; the sail-maker in shaping sails: all else had to occupy their thoughts with hopes or fears, and to imagine visionary sources of comfort denied by the revolting reality. The mind follows them in their long and dreary pilgrimage over the waters, and sees the glazed eye brighten as the white wing of the distant sea-bird on the skirt of their horizon may have been frequently mistaken for a sail. No false hopes, however, of land deceived them: the cautious foresight of Capt. Theaker had provided every necessary for skilful navigation, and their precise position was regularly and accurately ascertained.

The long boat had appeared sufficiently loaded when quitting the ship; it was only 22 feet long, and 7½ broad, and was in fact, crowded; but on the second day, the jolly-boat, in a pitch against a heavy sea, split open at the bows, and was reported in danger. She was brought alongside; and after a very careful and minute examination by the captain and carpenter, she was found unmanageable: her compass,

<sup>a</sup> Destroyed by fire in the *Indian Ocean*, Sept. 27th, 1834. By Dr. R. Hartley Kennedy, Bombay Presidency.