

A Proposal in the Sea.

We had a very long voyage of it, with the wind dead against us most of the way. I was not myself at all, and felt every day more and more miserable, owing to my increasing love for Margaret Willoughby—my little friend's name. She was the daughter of gentlefolks, who had died suddenly, in debt. To make it worse, I perceived that young Ensign Mauleverer began to fall in love with Margaret at the same time I did, and I was no match for him with his soft palaverings ways. He was always boasting of his riches and family, and I am bound to say his face was pretty enough for all that. But I was determined not to be faint-hearted, and at last got so desperate that I told her how I loved her, and asked her to be my wife the moment we landed. She refused me, but in a way that cut her to the heart. My rival had been beforehand and wrung a promise from the poor girl. I felt he must have done so from the tears she shed. This was a finishing-stroke to all my misery. The vessel was now insupportable to me, so I slunk away like a guilty culprit to the bows where I huddled up on a coil of rope, shuddering at my utter desolation. The night came on and found me in the same position. We were tacking ship to clear Cape Breton—for the last time I hoped—when I heard a voice sing in the clear stillness of the night, "Fire! fire! fire!" I sprang to my feet. There was no mistaking the cry; so terrible was it that the blood seemed to freeze in my veins. I rushed on the quarter-deck, and as the cry came from the ship's stern, I looked that way and immediately saw smoke issuing from her side. I and the mate being near at hand, were the first to rush below into the after cabin. On the way, who should we meet but Ensign Mauleverer, staggering from the state-room, where he had been carousing with his companions—as pale as his shirt. He had grown quite civil all of a sudden, and said, "Good Heavens, Mr. Cherriton! what is the matter?" "The ship is on fire!" I answered. "Come and work like a man, there is no time to stand questioning." The mate, carpenter and I flew to work to cut a way into the hold; but before we could do so, the captain came to tell us that there were great tongues of fire leaping from the scuttle hole, and we were only adding to our danger. We therefore returned and commenced throwing water in the hold, all the male passengers working frantically. Even Ensign Mauleverer tore away like a madman at the buckets, until he was black as a sweep, and his whiskers singed off. In

the confusion the women had been forgot, in the cabin, and their shrieks were loud and piercing. I was afraid to leave my post to go to their assistance, least the people should imagine I had cut for it, and take panic. I said to Mauleverer, "Go and let the women out.—There's your own wife that is to be down there, she's in danger of her life." "Save her yourself, if you like," he answered; "win and wear. I'll have no millstones about my neck." The poor scorched mate took his place, and I rushed to the ladies' cabin. It was as I had feared, and I was not a moment too soon. The cabin was stifling with smoke, and the fire about breaking through. A crowd of women rushed shrieking past in their night clothes, calling on fathers husbands and brothers, and imploring them to save them. I had a guess where Margaret's berth was; and there found her in a swoon. I said nothing, but raised her in my arms, and made my way back on deck. There I found matters worse and worse—every one in wild confusion and terror—the fire making its appearance in different parts aft. Mauleverer came up and tried to pull her from me. I bade him stand off in such a manner that he did not need a second notice. At this moment the second mate and part of the crew were making off in the main-hatch boat, when such a number jumped into her that she was swamped, and all were drowned. When Margaret recovered, I endeavored to speak words of comfort to her, when she said, "Only don't leave me! only let us die together! I can die content if you do not desert me!" "Didn't I vow that I would never while life was in me. The whole of the ship abaft the mizenmast was now in flames, and approaching rapidly the fore-castle, where all were huddled together, awaiting our fearful doom. There was only one chance for any of us—the water—which I whispered to Margaret—where I could keep myself and her afloat for a while, and, by the blessing of God, some ship might see us and come to our rescue. Mauleverer all this time was looking with an idiotic stare. "Save me, Cherriton!" he said, quite deliriously. "Only save me! you are the best swimmer in the world. I will give you two, three, five thousand—." Here I and Margaret plunged into the sea, followed by Mauleverer, moaning "Save me! save me!" while clutching and doing his best to drown us all. "My life is all I want! save it!" We managed to get to a spar, thrown overboard, and a silvery voice whispered, "I care for only one thing—your love!" "Do you mean it, darling?" "Yes—for ever!" We were picked up half an hour afterwards." Here tea was announced.