

STRAIGHTFORWARD.

CHAPTER VI.



HE uninterrupted prosperity of the exploring party could not continue forever, and the first break came from the weather. Heavy rain fell every night, swelling the river, and increasing the strength of the current to such an extent that, coupled with the drawback of damp wood fuel, the *Dart* could make but little progress. There was danger, too, of her running foul of the trunks of trees swept down the rapids, so that the watch was trebled, and Mr. Crane hardly ever closed an eye till daybreak. He had just given up the command one morning, and the *Dart* was rounding a bend in a shallow part of the stream, when the current caught the little vessel and flung her heavily against a great tree lying in the river bed. The shock was terrific, and at first created great alarm, for the steamer heeled over, first on one side, then on the other, shipping a great deal of water, and upsetting everything, and everyone on board. When the little ship finally settled, it was discovered that she had grounded on a bank of pebbles, and no efforts could get her off till the volume of water increased. Her sides were damaged also, and one of her little boats so knocked about that it would take days to repair. There was nothing for it but to set to work at once, and the sound of the hammer echoed all day from the river banks.

The men held a council among themselves, breaking it up with such grave faces that 'Lisbeth begged Perran to tell her what they feared.

He seldom kept anything from his brave wife, and now he showed her that the water was falling instead of rising.

"And so we cannot get on," she said cheerily. "Well, we must have patience."

"It is not only that, dear," he replied, "but in a few hours I expect we shall lie high and dry, and be able to walk to land without wetting our feet."

"Very handy for getting in the wood," said 'Lisbeth, still uncomprehending. Then it all flashed upon her. "Oh, Perran, I see; if we can get on shore, the natives can get at us; yes, that is serious—still we are prepared, and this tribe does not seem inclined to attack us."

No, that was true. Now and again the *Dart* had passed isolated houses, from which the inmates had fled at the approach of the strange white people; and once it had anchored in front of a village, where Captain Mostyn tried vainly to induce the people to enter on friendly relations with the exploring party. Beyond that nothing had been done, and all were beginning to feel it a hopeless matter to obtain the confidence of these shy savages.

If they discovered the defenceless position of the steamer, however, it might go hardly with the intruders.

"Thank you for telling me, Perran," said 'Lisbeth, "I see it is an anxious time. But still I am not afraid."

Her bright face cheered him. He would use all precautions, and not be afraid either.

That evening there was a dry path between the shore and the vessel, and a very strict guard was kept all night.

It was now a week since the day when the crowd of natives had been dispersed by the sound of Perran's rifle.

"And I don't believe we've made twenty miles since then," said the engineer; "and, what with the current and the bends of the river, not ten as the crow flies. Hello, what's that!"

For the man on the watch had given the danger signal.

In a moment work was suspended, and every man and woman aroused.

"Only a woman," was the report.

"Coming nearer steadily," came next.

"Oh, Perran—oh, Captain Mostyn," cried 'Lisbeth, "please do order all the men to hide, and let only Molly and me be seen. I do so want to make friends; and I dare say if the creature only saw us two women she would not be afraid."

It was not a bad idea. The men were ordered to lie down flat on the deck, and cover themselves with sails or otherwise conceal themselves. Molly was to keep the look-out, and 'Lisbeth meanwhile tried to attract the visitor.

There seemed little difficulty in this, though she approached timidly, glancing behind her occasionally, and evidently in some fear of the white men.

"Missis, she's got a little child by the hand," reported Molly.

"Missis, she's got a baby slung round her neck."

"Missis, it's *our* baby, I do believe."

The three announcements came close one on the other.

Nearer and nearer came the timid savage. She wore nothing but the grass petticoat common to the tribe, but her neck and arms were almost covered with necklaces and bracelets of dog's teeth, crocodiles teeth, and shells. Her hair was short and frizzed out wildly, but her expression was gentle and pleasing.

As Molly had reported, she carried a baby at her back, slung in its net bag; possibly it might be, as Molly declared, the little hero of the canoe.

'Lisbeth once again held out tempting bits of red cotton stuff, shining knives, and looking-glasses to the woman, who at last sat down on