

CHAPTER ONE



I WAS ON A FRENCH STEAMER bound from Havre to New York, when I had a peculiar experience in the way of a shipwreck. On a dark and foggy night, when we were about three days out, our vessel collided with a derelict — a great, heavy, helpless mass, as dull and colorless as the darkness in which she was enveloped. We struck her almost head on, and her stump of a bowsprit was driven into our port bow with such tremendous violence that a great hole—nobody knew of what dimensions—was made in our vessel.

The collision occurred about two hours before daylight, and the frightened passengers who crowded the upper deck were soon informed by the officers that it would be necessary to take to the boats, for the vessel was rapidly settling by the head. Now, of course, all was hurry and confusion. The captain endeavored to assure his passengers that there were boats enough to carry every soul on board, and that there was time enough for them to embark quietly and in order. But as the French people did not understand him when he spoke in English, and as the Americans did not readily comprehend what he said in French, his exhortations were of little avail. With such of their possessions as they could carry, the people crowded into the boats as soon as they were ready, and sometimes before they were ready; and while there

was not exactly a panic on board, each man seemed to be inspired with the idea that his safety, and that of his family, if he had one, depended upon precipitate individual action.

I was a young man, traveling alone, and while I was as anxious as anyone to be saved from the sinking vessel, I was not a coward, and I could not thrust myself into a boat when there were women and children behind me who had not yet been provided with places. There were men who did this, and several times I felt inclined to knock one of the poltroons overboard. The deck was well lighted, the steamer was settling slowly, and there was no excuse for the dastardly proceedings which were going on about me. It was not long, however, before almost all of the passengers were safely embarked, and I was preparing to get into a boat which was nearly filled with the officers and crew, when I was touched on the shoulder, and turning, I saw a gentleman whose acquaintance I had made soon after the steamer had left Havre. His name was Crowder. He was a middle-aged man, a New Yorker, intelligent and of a social disposition, and I had found him a very pleasant companion. To my amazement, I perceived that he was smoking a cigar.

“If I were you,” said he, “I would not go in that boat. It is horribly crowded, and the captain and second officer have yet to find places in it.”

“That’s all the more reason,” said I, “why we should hurry. I am not going to push myself ahead of women and children, but I’ve just as much right to be saved as the captain has, and if there are any vacant places, let us get them as soon as possible.”

Crowder now put his hand on my shoulder as if to restrain me. “Safety!” said he. “You needn’t trouble yourself about safety. You are just as safe where you are as you could possibly be in one of those boats. If they are not picked up soon,—and they may float

about for days, — their sufferings and discomforts will be very great. There is a shameful want of accommodation in the way of boats.”

“But, my dear sir,” said I, “I can’t stop here to talk about that. They are calling for the captain now.”

“Oh, he’s in no hurry,” said my companion. “He’s collecting his papers, I suppose, and he knows his vessel will not sink under him while he is doing it. I’m not going in that boat; I haven’t the least idea of such a thing. It will be odiously crowded, and I assure you, sir, that if the sea should be rough that boat will be dangerous. Even now she is overloaded.”

I looked at the man in amazement. He had spoken earnestly, but he was as calm as if we were standing on a sidewalk, and he endeavoring to dissuade me from boarding an overcrowded street-car. Before I could say anything he spoke again.

“I am going to remain on this ship. She is a hundred times safer than any of those boats. I have had a great deal of experience in regard to vessels and ocean navigation, and it will be a long time before this vessel sinks, if she ever sinks of her own accord. She’s just as likely to float as that derelict we ran into. The steam is nearly out of her boilers by this time, and nothing is likely to happen to her. I wish you would stay with me. Here we will be safe, with plenty of room, and plenty to eat and drink. When it is daylight we will hoist a flag of distress, which will be much more likely to be seen than anything that can flutter from those little boats. If you have noticed, sir, the inclination of this deck is not greater now than it was half an hour ago. That proves that our bow has settled down to about as far as it is going; hence, I think it quite likely that the water has entered only a few of the forward compartments.”

The man spoke so confidently that his words made quite an

impression upon me. I knew that it very often happens that a wreck floats for a long time, and the boat from which the men were now frantically shouting for the captain would certainly be dangerously crowded.

“Stay with me,” said Mr. Crowder, “and I assure you, with as much reason as any man can assure any other man of anything in this world, that you will be perfectly safe. This steamer is not going to sink.”

There were rapid footsteps, and I saw the captain and his second officer approaching.

“Step back here,” said Mr. Crowder, pulling me by the coat. “Don’t let them see us. They may drag us on board that confounded boat. Keep quiet, sir, and let them get off. They think they are the last on board.”

Involuntarily I obeyed him, and we stood in the shadow of the great funnel. The captain had reached the rail.

“Is everyone in the boats?” he shouted, in French and in English. “Is everyone in the boats? I am going to leave the vessel.” I made a start as if to rush toward him, but Crowder held me by the arm.

“Don’t you do it,” he whispered very earnestly. “I have the greatest possible desire to save you. Stay where you are, and you will be all right. That overloaded boat may capsize in half an hour.”

I could not help it; I believed him. My own judgment seemed suddenly to rise up and ask me why I should leave the solid deck of the steamer for that perilous little boat.

I need say but little more in regard to this shipwreck. When the fog lifted, about ten o’clock in the morning, we could see no signs of any of the boats. A mile or so away lay the dull, black line of the derelict, as if she were some savage beast who had bitten and torn



“ ‘DON’T YOU DO IT.’ ”

us, and was now sullenly waiting to see us die of the wound. We hoisted a flag, union down, and then we went below to get some breakfast. Mr. Crowder knew all about the ship, and where to find everything. He told me he had made so many voyages that he felt almost as much at home on sea as on land. We made ourselves comfortable all day, and at night we went to our rooms, and I slept fairly well, although there was a very disagreeable slant to my berth. The next day, early in the afternoon, our signal of distress was seen by a tramp steamer on her way to New York, and we were taken off.

We cruised about for many hours in the direction the boats had probably taken, and the next day we picked up two of them in a sorry condition, the occupants having suffered many hardships and privations. We never had news of the captain's boat, but the others were rescued by a sailing-vessel going eastward.

Before we reached New York, Mr. Crowder had made me promise that I would spend a few days with him at his home in that city. His family was small, he told me,—a wife, and a daughter about six,—and he wanted me to know them. Naturally we had become great friends. Very likely the man had saved my life, and he had done it without any act of heroism or daring, but simply by impressing me with the fact that his judgment was better than mine. I am apt to object to people of superior judgment, but Mr. Crowder was an exception to the ordinary superior person. From the way he talked it was plain that he had had much experience of various sorts, and that he had greatly advantaged thereby; but he gave himself no airs on this account, and there was nothing patronizing about him. If I were able to tell him anything he did not know—and I frequently was,—he was very glad to hear it.

Moreover, Mr. Crowder was a very good man to look at. He was

certainly over fifty, and his closely trimmed hair was white, but he had a fresh and florid complexion. He was tall and well made, fashionably dressed, and had an erect and somewhat military carriage. He was fond of talking, and seemed fond of me, and these points in his disposition attracted me very much.

My relatives were few, they lived in the West, and I never had had a friend whose company was so agreeable to me as that of Mr. Crowder.

Mr. Crowder's residence was a handsome house in the upper part of the city. His wife was a slender lady, scarcely half his age, with a sweet and interesting face, and was attired plainly but tastefully. In general appearance she seemed to be the opposite of her husband in every way. She had suffered a week of anxiety, and was so rejoiced at having her husband again that when I met her, some hours after Crowder had reached the house, her glorified face seemed like that of an angel. But there was nothing demonstrative about her. Even in her great joy she was as quiet as a dove, and I was not surprised when her husband afterward told me that she was a Quaker.

I was entertained very handsomely by the Crowders. I spent several days with them, and although they were so happy to see each other, they made it very plain that they were also happy to have me with them, he because he liked me, she because he liked me.

On the day before my intended departure, Mr. Crowder and I were smoking, after dinner, in his study. He had been speaking of people and things that he had seen in various parts of the world, but after a time he became a little abstracted, and allowed me to do most of the talking.

"You must excuse me," he said suddenly, when I had repeated a question; "you must not think me willingly inattentive, but I was



“ HIS WIFE WAS A SLENDER LADY.”

