

Eyewitness Account of John Millar's Exploits onboard the Schomberg

I, as an eyewitness, submit the following "plain, unvarnished tale" without entrenching on the duties of the committee appointed to have the matter brought before the proper tribunal for investigation. Not having been on deck for some time before the alarm was first given, the first I heard of it was whilst lying in my berth, from some person knocking quietly but perseveringly at several cabin doors. This I believe to have been Mr Millar, as on listening more attentively I heard Mr Walker, repeat his name, as if scarcely conscious, which I thought odd. Presently I overheard his lady say "We must get up and dress; as if any other person than Mr Millar had called us, I would have paid no attention to them, there must be danger when he has called us." Presently on going into the passage communicating with our several state-rooms, I met Mr Millar with a child clinging to his back and one under each arm, which he deposited on the carpet of the ladies' saloon, being a deck higher than the state-rooms. Time after time was he seen quietly going about from cabin to cabin, consoling one, quieting another, dressing a third. He presently appeared on deck with an infant, which I was told was Mr. Hawker's, (the son of Admiral Hawker) of Adelaide, in his arms, nursing as industriously as if he had been a well-practised nursery-maid. Just then, about eleven p.m., or a few minutes after, certainly not more than fifteen, the ship struck, the moon shining bright and clear, the coast and breakers ahead distinctly seen, towards which we were evidently driving apace, and as each succeeding wave lifted the afterpart of our mighty ship with her ponderous cargo of some thousands of tons, from the rocky bed which was destined to be her grave, she labored heavily, striking on the bottom with each receding wave, setting her own bell to ring her knell. The general cry was "To the boats, to the boats," and on several persons crowding round the captain and begging him to have them launched, he issued orders to have them lowered; but when the first one was down, fear seemed to pervade one and all as to who should be the first to enter so small a thing, called, I believe, a "dingy." In this extremity Mr Millar volunteered if Captain Forbes would let him have two good rowers, seamen, that he and Mr Dixon, also a passenger, would peril their lives to save the hundreds on board, by (if at all possible) reconnoitering the coast during the night, and choosing the safest landing-place, if any, and set the bush immediately opposite on fire, to mark the spot, and signal us when and where to land in the live-boat. This was accepted by Captain Forbes, and Millar, with all presence of mind, ordered blue lights, fusees, life buoy, &c., to be brought him, when he manfully jumped on the bulwarks, to descend the ship's side turning suddenly round, as if a thought had struck him, he grasped the Captain by the hand, shook it heartily, saying, loud enough to be heard by all round, 'Forbes, stand by your ship, it may be that I shall not be spared to return, but remember that I have a wife and family at home, see them on your return to Europe.' He could say no more, the brave fellow's heart evidently filled, as did those of all around.

He sprang into the boat, telling the others to follow him; but as the oars were being handed down, one of the seamen caught one somewhat awkwardly when the top got fixed under the ship's timbers, and at the moment, a wave suddenly raising the boat like a cork on the water, she rushed on the oar, driving it through her side two yards or more. Millar

attempted to drive it on or pull it out, neither of which was he strong enough to accomplish, until he had the assistance of two others, when the water rushed fearfully in, and we expected every moment to see the boat disappear with all in her; but his presence of mind never failed him, he took a handkerchief and caulked the hole, and ordered the boat to be shoved off, every eye straining after them, and every heart, offering up its silent prayer for their preservation.

Immediately after, the life-boats were lowered amidst the screaming of women, children, and nerveless men too; they were soon filled, awaiting the signal off shore from Millar and his gallant band, but no light appeared, no rocket ascended, or blue lights burned, and just as dismay was pictured on the countenances of all, the boat was seen returning, and ultimately came as close as safety permitted under the star board quarter. Millar's voice was heard amidst the roar of the surf, calling out for Forbes. When every voice became still, he gave a rapid description of the rocky iron-bound coast which he had examined for two miles east and west, the sandy beach, some half-mile in extent, the rolling wave after wave, the recoil of which would most certainly swamp even life boats in their back surge, if attempted during the night, and that he would earnestly recommend the passengers and seamen to stick by the ship until daylight, when it would be low water, as the tide was evidently receding, when a rope could be passed ashore with the first man having a life buoy about him, thus making provision for all being dragged through the surf. He further stated that, if they would but abide by his directions and advice, in all human probability no life would be lost, but that if they then persisted, three-fourths must inevitably perish.

All agreeing to abide by the advice given, all regaining the ship, the boat once more was shoved off towards the beach that they might watch a favorable opportunity for landing. They had scarcely gone two hundred yards from the ship's side when she returned, some of the men asserting (contrary to Mr Millar's opinion) that a light which they had observed on a dark headland was a lighthouse. Captain Forbes and many on the ship's poop agreed that it must be, and a question arose whether it was Cape Otway light, but very distant. Signal guns were fired and rockets sent up to no purpose; but after some time it was plainly seen to be a star.

Just as the day dawned, after a hopeless and trying night, the chief officer observed what he supposed to be ascending smoke, as if from a far-off steamer, between the wreck and the rising sun. On its being pointed out every eye was strained from the crowded bulwarks, the poop, the masthead, and at last the joyful tidings ran from mouth to mouth that it certainly was a steamer. Captain Forbes immediately ordered the signal guns to be fired, rockets sent up, blue lights to be a burned, and the flag of distress to be hoisted, everything that could be thought of in fact, to attract the attention of what then could be distinctly seen by all to be a steamer, at least ten miles or more from us. Some time elapsed before it could be distinctly asserted that she was bearing down on us; and when so, the captain ordered Mr Laurie, the second officer, to choose a picked crew from the best men in the ship, and man a lifeboat to meet her, and announce our precarious situation.

Some time after Laurie left, Millar and his crew from the shore were seen approaching the ship; they too had discovered the approach of the steamer, and seeing that in all human probability an immediate landing would not be required, he proposed to row the captain to the steamer, lest he might be required; twas well thought of, and Forbes availed himself of the suggestion, slid down a rope from the stern into the dingy and pushed off. On meeting the lifeboat on its way back to the ship, it was considered advisable that the captain should board the steamer; and, seeing that the sea was running pretty strong at the time, it was thought safest to go in the lifeboat, seeing that Millar's crew was fatigued by being at sea all night, whilst the others were fresh men. Forbes managed to get from one boat to the other and proceeded on, whilst Millar returned to the ship, boarding her, and announcing the steamer to be the Queen, Captain Doran, on her passage from Melbourne to Portland Bay, and that the passengers were to prepare themselves to board her; Doran agreeing to take off as many as his ship would hold, the remainder, if any, to land on the beach where pointed out by Millar.

On Captain Forbes's return the lifeboat at once began to fill, but would it be believed, with the strongest and ablest in their struggle for life, leaving the women and children to their fate. I, seeing this struggle, being myself an invalid, went to Mr Millar, then just come on board, wet, cold, and hungry. He advised me to the captain; I did so, but might have saved my pains; he paid no more attention than if life was valueless. Returning to Mr Millar, he at once went to Captain Forbes, stating that rather than the boat should be swamped by mismanagement, he would again volunteer to see all the women and children into them, provided he had the choice of men to assist him. This, I must say to the credit of Captain Forbes, he at once granted, going amidships and placing Mr Millar in authority, telling all to obey his orders as if his own.

Millar immediately placed four able-bodied seamen under the charge of Mr Somerville, the fifth mate, at the foot of the ladder ascending the bulwarks on the starboard side. He addressed a few words to the struggling multitude, the purport of which was that he came there to save the women and children first without distinction, and the first man who attempted to go down to the boats, he would pitch overboard, without respect to persons; that he himself was but a passenger like themselves, but he would fearlessly carry out his duty. He requested Mr Kerr, the chief mate, to take his stand at the foot of the ladder, near the gunwale of the lifeboats, and that he would pass all safe down to him in succession. He requested fathers of families to have the women and children marshalled in readiness, and not to attempt to save a single article of luggage, and so commenced our deliverance with a well planned system, showing what a brave and determined man can accomplish even in a trying moment. The boats were thus filled and refilled on returning from the Queen, and as the labor increased he seemed imbued with additional strength, as if for the occasion, taking them in rapid succession, swinging them down one after the other with a powerful grasp. Never but once did I see that man lose his temper, though not his self-possession.

A tall and very powerful young man, some six feet high, a Hercules in proportions, attempted to pass, and succeeded in passing the guard and down the ladder outside the ship's side, until he came abreast of Millar, whose eyes seemed to glare on him like a tiger,

and he seized him by the throat, when a struggle ensued, and no man could at the moment get down to his assistance. Millar, however, having the courage, the people above cheered him, and the fellow cowered under him, making the best of his way up again, quiet as a lamb. I have since seen this fellow in Melbourne, who owned to me that he had done wrong, but that life was as sweet to him as others.

On all the females being safe, he called out for the fathers of families, then the brothers, lastly the single men, until the ship was entirely cleared, about 450 souls, of all save seamen, and a few who volunteered to remain with Mr Millar until next day.

What passed in the ship after I left in the Queen I know not, but I cannot help reflecting how much more than the world seems to understand depends on single individuals. We see in this catastrophe just happened on our own shores that which might have made hundreds weep, and left desolate many hearths, had it not been for the well-directed energy of one brave man showing a fearless example to those around him. Let it be understood we disgrace ourselves by forgetting him.

As we steamed away, casting a last glance at the noble ship as she lay powerless, like a chained leviathan of the deep, after ploughing the stormy ocean as a thing of life, for fifteen thousand miles, the hearts of all on board must have felt sad though thankful for their individual preservation and that of their companions in misfortune.

There lay the finest model that ever left the shores of maritime England, mistress of the seas, a ship, the largest merchant vessel in the world, worth £60,000; and with a cargo probably the most valuable ever shipped to the Australian colonies, said to amount to a quarter of a million of money, and though the loss to the enterprising owners may not be great, as I hope it may not, in a financial point of view, being covered by insurance probably to the full amount, yet it must be owned that the entire loss of such a ship is a great national loss, and to be regretted as such both here and in the mother country.

Mr Editor, I fear I have extended these few remarks to a greater length than will be acceptable to you, and rather than make this any longer at present, I will with your leave resume them on a further opportunity, when I may perhaps cast a little light on the early days and other events of our voyage.

I am, Sir, Yours very truly,

A HEAVY SUFFERER,

[We have been obliged to condense the foregoing letter slightly. Ed. Age.]