

TANGIWAI DISASTER

Lucky Girl's Miraculous Escape

A graphic story was told by one of the survivors of the Tangiwai Railway disaster, Miss Joan Karam, who was one of the first to be mentioned over the radio on the list of those rescued on the tragic night of December 24th.

Thus ran the headlines in the local newspapers but the stories told by the various survivors were vastly different; here is my own version.

The lights went out about 10 p.m. and everyone in our carriage was asleep. The train was somewhere between Waiouru and Taihape, the time about 10.30, when I woke to the realisation that the train was off the rails; lurching and rattling horribly over a very rough surface. From that moment I lost touch completely with everybody else and seemed to be absolutely alone through what followed. Mechanically, I began to pray.

I thought; 'We're off the rails. Any moment we shall dash into a cliff. The carriages will pile up on one another and we shall all be crushed to death.' The noise and vibration was terrific. By this time I was shouting at the top of my voice and I suppose everyone else was doing the same; I do not recollect hearing any other voices; I must have been half out of my mind. After being rattled violently like a pebble in a bottle I was dumped into space with unbelievable violence. Then I felt the splash of cold water through a window and sensed that I was being battered about by large solid objects then wedged tightly between various obstacles as the water mounted rapidly to my waist then my neck till I was gasping for breath.

I was thinking; 'We're being dragged into the sea; we're all going to be drowned; will the engine never stop. Very soon the water will be over our heads.' And it *was*.

I must have floated free of whatever it was that had trapped me and I came to the top and breathed. There was not much air. My head was bumping on the ceiling light. I felt that we were still moving rapidly through the water. I turned up my face for a last breath of air before suffocation. Then I knew the air was clearer and wind was blowing across my face. Miraculously the water had stopped rising within 6 inches of the roof. I said my act of contrition trying to make it as perfect as I could. The water was still up to my neck. I said an act of contrition for all the other passengers, asking God to forgive us our trespasses. Something hard was pressed against my neck and reaching up I grabbed the bar of the luggage rack with was supporting me and continued to keep my head above water. My legs were still entangled with floating objects. I began to shout for my sister whom I was sure would escape as I had done. Even at this stage I began to think what a good story we would have to tell when we got home. It was of course pitch dark and there was an awful sound around me of rushing water. Both blinded and deafened, I started to feel around me with hands and feet. Two or three feet under the water I grabbed a hand with a wrist watch on. 'Madeline.' I thought, and pulled. When the head came above water I supported it under the chin shouting at the top of my voice; but there was no response. When the person began to come to life I heard her say, 'My poor

boyfriend; Where is my boyfriend?’ and she began to let go of me. ‘Here,’ I said, ‘You has better hold on to this bar in the roof or you will be washed away. I have lost my sister.’ Suddenly a thought struck me as I spat out a mouthful of sand. ‘It’s not salt water.’ I cried. We’re not in the sea. We must be in a river. It’s not the train which is moving through the water it’s the water which is flowing swiftly through the train.’ Looking over [the] surface of the water I could see lights and they appeared to be a long way off; I was looking out the end of the carriage which had been cut clean in half. That was how the air got in to us and the lights. We held on, for our lives, the two of us, deafened by the roar of the waters all but carried away by their onward rush. Our teeth began to chatter and our bones to ache. There must have been ice in that water. I could feel the back of seats and various objects beneath my feet, both hard and soft, and something that felt like human flesh. It was sickening.

I shouted once again in my companion’s ear, ‘Are you all right?’ then, ‘Madeline. Madeline. Madeline.’ But there was no reply. ‘Are you hurt?’ I asked the other girl. She said she had no bones broken and I told the same. ‘Can you see anyone else?’ I asked. ‘We might be able to rescue somebody.’ But we were all alone. Our hair was hanging into our eyes and mud. Mud. Something occurred to me and I shouted aloud, ‘we must be close to the bank because the water is filled with mud and sand. Can you taste it? We might be able to save ourselves. My eyes are full of sand. My ears are full of it. The water is like ice, I can’t stand it much longer. Why doesn’t someone come to help us? They must know by now what has happened. There are lights moving on the other side of the river. They are coming. Keep hanging on. Help. Help.’

By this time the water level had gone a very little and a faint light reflected over the water found its way into our broken compartment and I began to make what search I could for other possible survivors, groping my way round by clinging on to the walls, but there was not much to be seen or felt. There was no luggage left and no net in the rack; except in the corner behind the men’s toilet where a grey suitcase remained, barely discernable in the gloom, above us. This side of the carriage was now uppermost; I had been sitting in the other side. Here and there the corners of seats protruding from the water now caught my eye. Our only way of escape lay in getting out the end of carriage which meant being washed away downstream by the flood. It was terrifying. ‘Jesus, mercy; Mary, help.’ I prayed. We could not hold on much longer. The strain was too much and our poor strength was fast giving out. I began to feel a sharp pain in middle of my back and knew that very soon I would lose the use of my legs and then the rest of my body would become paralysed. ‘What’s your name?’ I bawled. ‘Anne --’ she replied, ‘I got on at Palmerston N. with my boyfriend.’ ‘I came up from Wellington with my sister,’ I said, ‘Mine’s Joan.’ ‘Pray.’ I said. ‘That won’t do any good.’ she replied. ‘Yes it will.’ I insisted. ‘It’s the only thing. It’s no use shouting for help. The river makes too much noise. They can’t hear us. We are can hardly hear each other.’

It was then that I noticed the third window from the corner had no pane. ‘I’m going out that window.’ I said. ‘I will be back in a minute.’ I put her into the corner where the current was less dangerous and fought my way to the window. ‘We shall not die like rats in a trap.’ I said. Taking hold of the window on either side with my last remaining strength I struggled to draw myself up out of the water. Hooking my elbows outside the opening I gradually dragged my legs up and thrust them out of the window. I was on the outside of the floating carriage. A feeling of elation came over me and I knew how a ship-wrecked sailor feels when he crawls out of a sunken vessel. I knew how the

captain feels when he goes down with the ship. I thought what a good yarn I would have to tell when I was safely through the adventure. At least I would not be drowned. Thrusting my head back into the broken window I called to Anne to come out and hauled her up to where I was perched.

There we sat in the biting wind like two drowned rats and took stock of the situation. Across the water on the other side of the river the rest of the train stood high above on what was left of the bridge; all the lights were on in the carriages and the banks of the river below were faintly illuminated. Dark figures hurried to and fro across the lights and I knew they were pulling dripping figures out of the water. I hoped my sister was among them. A search light swung to and fro in our direction describing an arc across the wreck on our side of the river; but they couldn't have made out much from that distance. On our side torches were moving in the dark some distance down the river and I guessed they were making [a] slow and laborious search along the waste-strewn banks, helping survivors up the steep incline; we would be the last to be rescued. Tearing off my under-skirt I wrung it out and twisting it into a roll tied it securely around my waist. This stopped the pain somewhat and enabled me to get up and crawl over the carriage calling out to other possible survivors, but I got no reply although I searched the wreck and peered down onto the sand. Then we crossed over to the engine as it lay between us and the shore puffing and hissing like some monster caught in a trap. It was warm beneath our feet and I stood upright here and waved hopefully but our shouts could not have been heard. After five minutes our feet began to burn and we scrambled back on to a huge section of the bridge looking for another way of escape. At the end of this structure which stood about 10 feet above the sand was another piece of concrete embedded in the bank with a space of a few feet between. In our weakened condition we dared not make the jump in the dark for fear of missing our footing and dropping into the swirling current below; so there we sat on the brink of the chasm stamping our feet and clapping our hands to get back the circulation and calling at intervals, help. Help. Help.

It must have been twenty minutes before two men finally got to us and hauled us across the gap to safety, one helping us up the tree-clad slope while the other went back with a torch to search the wreck. I told him where to look, giving him a brief description of the scene and hurrying after the other two as quickly as I could in the dark. As I was able to manage alone I went ahead and held the torch while we scrambled through barbed wire fences and ditches where the yellow mud from the receding flood still lay in ankle deep pools. One thoughtful woman had bought a flask of brandy and gave us all a nip. I walked about in my mud and rags making inquiries from the police and others as to the fate of my sister but nobody gave me any satisfaction. Anne had disappeared in the dark; most of the others had already been taken to hospital and when there appeared to be no more survivors coming in, the Doctor left the scene in his car taking me and another woman who had just lost her husband and two babies; I did what I could to console her. She said three Maori boys had pushed her through a window and swum with her to the bank. By this time it was after midnight of Christmas Eve and I was surprised to see that my watch was still going. 'It's Our Lord's birthday,' I said. 'Merry Christmas,' but no one replied, they evidently thought I was a bit mad.

Arrived at the hospital in Raetihi, about half-past-twelve we were handed over to an army of nurses, who, taking possession of the mud-covered, half-naked, shivering, creatures from the wreck, rushed them to bed with hot-water bags and steaming cups of

tea. As I was not quite incapacitated I walked in unassisted and asked for a hot bath and the busy nurse was pleased to turn on the water and throw me a nightgown and towel as she hurried away to wash the more unfortunate. As I shed my few remaining garments and climbed into the hot water I was saying a De Profundis for those who were missing as I knew many of them would never be as lucky as I had been. Still, they said that most of the passengers had gone to Waiouru Hospital so I hoped that my sister had been taken with them. There were only nine of us in Raetihi. Anne was not among them. I heard long afterwards that she had been taken to a nearby house where she stayed until she regained her memory after two days; it would have been better if she had stayed with me.

A few hours later they brought a woman on a stretcher and dumped her mud and all on to the bed next to mine. 'Hadn't you better give her a bath first?' I suggested, remembering how much better I had felt after mine. 'Tut, tut,' said the supervising Sister, 'you are not running this hospital.' I found out that she had been picked up two hours later on the river banks buried in sand with only her hand and head above ground. She was praying for a quick death when they found her; the last survivor to be picked up alive. The two men who rescued her carried her on their backs all the way to the hospital as the ambulances had gone. Her injuries were far worse than mine and she was not expected to live that night but she had a strong constitution and plenty of courage and later on we were able to compare notes. She was the third survivor from our carriage. It was just a coincidence that she came into the same ward as me. When the priest came around the next morning she asked for the last sacraments as she had been near to death and I was glad to be able to receive holy communion too. This was on the morning of Boxing Day. Christmas Day passed slowly and the nurses did not give us much information although I could not help making constant inquiries. They must have thought I was suffering too much from shock to be told the truth and caused me more worry by keeping it from me. They had found my sister on Saturday morning and my parents with many other frantic relations had to go to the Waiouru Army Hospital to identify the body. The confusion must have been indescribable. It was the worst Christmas anybody had ever had. A Maori boy came into my ward and said he had rescued me. 'It wasn't me. What carriage were you in?' I asked. 'The first,' he replied. 'I was in the third,' I said. 'There was only one girl with me. I rescued myself.'

As I was only suffering from bruises according to the Doctor's report, I had not much difficulty in persuading them to let me out of hospital on Sunday morning as I wanted to get home for my sister's funeral on Tuesday. Severe bruises of the lower back and thighs, they told me. I felt a lot worse than that and asked for an X-ray before I left but was told that this was unnecessary, so I was driven by ambulance as far as Raurima where a car picked me up and we drove another 28 miles on to home.

It was ascertained about a month later that I had sustained a compression fracture of the third lumbar vertebra and the bones on the right side, being the cause of all the pain in the back and legs. By the time they had started and finished X-raying me I was better and there was no need for me to wear the corset they finally provided me with. My daily attendance at a chiropractor was the only thing that helped me over this trying time.

The horror of that incident still comes back to me at nights and every time I get on a train I have only to shut my eyes for a minute and I remember.