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HOW I CAME TO WRITE "JOHN MAYNARD"

The ballad of "John Maynard" has been included in so many "Speakers" and collections that I may perhaps be justified in assuming that it is known to the majority of my readers. Many inquiries have been addressed to me and to the editors of periodicals as to whether it is founded on fact or simply invented, like Robert Browning's famous lyric, "How the Good News Was Brought from Ghent to Aix."

To recall the ballad to some who may not be entirely familiar with it, I will quote the first stanza: --

'Twas on Lake Erie's broad expanse
One bright midsummer day,
The gallant steamer "Ocean Queen"
Swept proudly on her way.
Bright faces clustered on the deck
Or, leaning o'er the side,
Watched carelessly the feathery foam
That flecked the rippling tide.

Suddenly a sailor discovers that the steamer is on fire. He carries the terrible news to the captain. A sailor named John Maynard is at the wheel. As the flames make rapid progress it is seen that the only hope of safety is to steer the ship to land. Under the captain's orders John Maynard undertakes the dangerous task. They are within half a mile of the shore.

But half a mile! Yet stay, the flames
No longer slowly creep,
But gather round that helmsman bold
With fierce, impetuous sweep.

"John Maynard!" with an anxious voice
The captain cries once more,
"Stand by the wheel five minutes yet,
And we shall reach the shore."
Through flame and smoke that dauntless heart
Responded firmly still,
Unawed, though face to face with death,
With God's good help I will!"

The flames approach with giant strides,
They scorch his hand and brow;
One arm disabled, seeks his side,
Ah! he is conquered now.

But no, his teeth are firmly set,
He crushes down his pain;
His knee upon the stanchion pressed,
He guides the ship again.

In brief, he succeeds in his task but as the steamer touches shore he sinks in death beside it. He falls a victim to the flames, but the passengers are saved. It will be seen that the story is a striking one.

One Sunday in the summer of 1866, my first year in New York, I attended an afternoon service at the Five Points Mission. It was a children's service, and a few speakers were present to address the children of the mission. One speaker told the story of John Maynard, though I cannot remember in what connection. It was told in a dramatic way, and I was so much impressed that after the service was over I inquired of him where I could find the particulars of the incident. He referred me to a weekly religious paper of recent date in the reading room of the Young Men's Christian Association. The next day I went to the reading room, found the story, and copied it. I learned that it had been used by John B. Gough in one of his popular lectures. That evening in my room in St. Mark's place I sat down immediately after supper and set myself to turning the prose into verse. I adhered as strictly as possible to the language used, including the captain's orders, and did not stop writing till the ballad was complete. The evening was very hot, and I was forced to lay aside my coat, vest, and collar, but I became so much interested that I could not make up my mind to retire till the poem of nearly one hundred lines was finished. The next day I sent it to a juvenile magazine published in Boston. It appeared in an early number, accompanied by an illustration. I think I was paid the munificent sum of three dollars for the ballad. I never expected to hear from it again, but soon it began to be copied, and found its way into the repertory of public readers. Every year it got into some new collection. I think I have seen it in at least a dozen. One student at a Catholic college received a prize of all of Scott's works for declaiming it at an exhibition.

With all these evidences of public favor, I can give no further information of John Maynard than is to be found in the ballad. Probably the only man who could have given any more was John B. Gough, and I have always been sorry that during his life I did not apply to him for such details as he could give. I believe John Maynard to have been a real character, but who he was, where he was born, and when he performed the heroic act which has made his name so widely known I am afraid will never be ascertained.

Natick, Mass.

Horatio Alger, Jr.