

# Commercial Advertiser

BUFFALO

FRIDAY EVENING, SEPT. 13, 1945

THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE.—The story un-  
this head in today's paper will recall to the recol-  
lection of many readers the heroic self-sacrificing  
devotion of McBRIDE, the Helmsman of the Erie,  
who, during the awful burning of that boat, remain-  
ed at his post until nearly consumed by the flames  
and when further effort was unavailing. The story  
is well told, but by one more familiar with the nav-  
igation of the ocean than that of the lakes. Boats do  
not ride at anchor off Buffalo.

## The Helmsman of Lake Erie.

It was on a pleasant May morning that a steam  
vessel was riding at anchor, opposite the town of  
Buffalo, on Lake Erie. You know, I dare say,  
that Erie is one of those sea-lakes for which Amer-  
ica is so famous; and, as you stand on its shore,  
and see the green waves dashing in one after another,  
you might well think you were looking at the  
green ocean itself. The Jersey—for that was the  
name of the steamer—was dressed out with many  
bright flags; the Blue Peter, the signal of imme-  
diate sailing, was at her main-mast head; porters  
were hurrying along the narrow quay that juts out  
into the lake; boatmen quarrelling with each other  
for passengers; travellers hurrying backwards  
and forwards to look for their luggage; friends  
shaking hands and bidding each other farewell;  
idlers lounging about, with their hands in their  
pockets; cab drivers jangling for a larger fare;  
and all the various kinds of bustle and confusion  
that attend the departure of a packet from a water-  
ing place.

But presently the anchor was hove, the paddles  
began to turn, the sails were set, and, leaving a  
broad track of foam behind her, the Jersey stood  
westward, and held on her course for the town of  
Erie. It was a bright-blue day; and, as hour  
after hour went by, some mingled in the busy con-  
versation on politics; some sat apart, and calcu-  
lated the gains of the shop or the counting-house;  
some were wrapped up in the book with which  
they were engaged; and one or two, with whom  
time seemed to hang heavily, composed themselves  
to sleep. In short, one and all were like men  
who thought that, let danger come to them when  
it might, at least it would not be that day.

It drew towards four in the afternoon, and the  
steamer which had hitherto been keeping the mid-  
dle of the lake, stood southward; Erie, the place  
to which it was bound, lying on the southern side.  
Old John Maynard was at the wheel; a bluff,  
weather-beaten sailor, tanned by many a burning  
summer day, and by many a winter tempest. He  
had truly learnt to be content with his situation;  
none could ever say that they had heard him re-  
pine at his hard labor and scanty pay. He had,  
in the worst time, a cheerful word and a kind look  
for those with whom he was thrown; cast often  
enough into bad company, he tried, at least, and  
generally succeeded, in saying or doing something  
for its good. He was known, from one end of  
Lake Erie to the other, by the name of honest John  
Maynard, and the secret of his honesty to his  
neighbors was his love of God.

The land was about ten miles off, when the cap-  
tain coming up from his cabin, cried to a sailor,  
"Dick Fletcher, what's all that smoke I see com-  
ing out from the hold?"

"It's from the engine-room, sir, I guess," said  
the man.

"Down with you, then, and let me know."

The sailor began descending the ladder by which  
you go to the hold; but scarcely had he disappear-  
ed beneath the deck, when he came up with much  
greater speed.

"The hold's on fire, sir," he said to the captain,  
who was by this time standing close to him.

The captain rushed down and found the account  
too true. Some sparks had fallen on a bundle of  
tow; no one had seen the accident; and now not  
only much of the luggage, but the sides of the ves-  
sel were in a smouldering flame.

All hands passengers as well as sailors, were  
called together, and two lines being made, one on  
each side of the hold, buckets of water were pass-  
ed and repassed; they were filled from the lake,  
and flew along a line of ready hands, were dash-  
ed hissing on the burning mass, and then passed  
on to the other side to be refilled. For some  
few moments it seemed as if the flames were sub-  
dued.

In the meantime the women on board were clus-  
tering round John Maynard, the only man unem-  
ployed who was capable of answering their ques-  
tions. "How far is it to land?" "How long  
shall we be getting in?" "Is it very deep?"

"Is there no boat?" "Can they see us from the  
shore?" The helmsman answered as well as he  
could. There was no boat; it had been left at Buf-  
falo to be mended; they might be seven miles from  
the shore; they would probably be in in forty min-  
utes; he could not tell how far the fire had reached.  
"But, to speak the truth," he added, "we are all  
in great danger; and I think if there were less talk-  
ing and a little more praying, it would be the bet-  
ter for us, and none the worse for the boat!"

"How's her head?" shouted the captain.

"West sou'west," answered Maynard.

"Keep her sou' and by west," cried the captain.  
"We must go ashore any where."

It happened that a draft of wind drove back the  
flames, which soon began to blaze up more furiously  
against the saloon; and the partition betwixt it  
and the whole was soon on fire. Then long  
wreaths of smoke began to find their way through  
the sky-light; and the captain seeing this, ordered  
all the women forward. The engineer put on his  
utmost steam; the American flag was run up, and  
reversed in token of distress; water was flung over  
the sails, to make them hold the wind. And still  
John Maynard stood by the wheel, though now he  
was cut off by a sheet of smoke and flame, from the  
ship's crew.

Greater and greater grew the heat! the engin-  
eers fled from the engine room; the passengers  
were clustering round the vessel's bow, the sailors  
were sawing planks on which to lash the women;  
the boldest were throwing off their coats and waist-  
coats, and preparing for one long struggle for life.  
And still the coast grew plainer and plainer; the  
paddles, as yet, worked well; they could not be  
more than a mile from the shore; and boats were  
even now starting to their assistance.

"John Maynard!" cried the captain.

"Aye, aye, Sir!" said John.

"Could you hold out five minutes longer?"

"I'll try, sir."

And he did try; the flames came nearer and  
nearer; a sheet of smoke would sometimes almost  
suffocate him; his hair was singed; his blood  
seemed on fire with the great heat. Crouching as  
far back as he could, he held the wheel firmly with  
his left hand, till the flesh shrivelled, and the mus-  
cle creaked in the flame; and then he stretched  
forth his right, and bore the agony without a scream  
or a groan. It was enough for him that he heard  
the cheer of the sailors to the approaching boats;  
the cry of the captain, "the women first, then  
every man for himself, and God for us all." And  
they were the last sounds that he heard. How he  
perished was not known, whether dizzied by the  
smoke, he lost his footing in endeavoring to come  
forward, and fell overboard, or whether he was  
suffocated by the dense smoke, his comrades could  
not tell. At the moment the vessel struck, the  
boats were at her side; the passengers, sailors,  
and captain leaped into them, or swam for their  
lives; all, save he to whom they owed every thing,  
escaped.

He had died the death of a Christian hero—I  
had almost said, of a martyr; his spirit was com-  
mended into his Father's hands, and his body sleeps  
in peace by the green side of Lake Erie.