

The Philadelphia Inquirer.

VOL. 129.—NO. 169.

PHILADELPHIA, SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 17, 1893—TWENTY-EIGHT PAGES.

FIVE CENTS.

The Last of the "Mascot"

A REMINISCENCE

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The surf could be heard dashing against the iron-bound coast in a hollow, booming roar, though the shore itself was completely hidden from view.

In fact, the fog had thickened so much that there was not a spot on the little catboat, *Mascot*, that was not covered with beads of the condensed vapor.

Altogether, it was a rather nasty day for a craft of the little *Mascot's* age and size to be out buffeting the swells of old Lake Erie, 20 miles from home, with only a terribly lazy dry card compass to steer by, that might have been used aboard the *Lawrence* by Commodore Perry in 1812, by all the magnetic strength that remained in its poor poles.. Yet our little vessel made fair weather of it, with two reefs tied down in her canvas. Her boom was well topped up to clear the big fellows, and, as we perched ourselves on the windward rail, Fred at the tiller, I at the sheet, we felt pretty certain we could get in behind the piers without carrying anything away, if the breeze did not freshen much more or draw around ahead.

Those were delightful days. I have never, and I am pretty certain Fred has never, so keenly enjoyed roughing it in these later years as we did in those summer months when we used to neglect study for a thrash to windward up or down the lake, in our crazy little 16-foot clinker cat, or put out for a cruise of a few days, only returning when our provisions were exhausted and the fish absolutely refused to bite.

I know that if we were forced to sound the pumps as often nowadays as was absolutely necessary then to keep our little craft afloat, we should do no small amount of grumbling. I am sure, too, that we would think twice before going out of sight of land in such a dry-rotted little coffin.

But I must not blackguard the poor diminutive craft. She served us faithfully. The boat seems almost human. The memory now of her seems to be the memory of a friend of my younger days who has passed away.

But to return to the accident, or incidents which I started out to recount.

When the little *Mascot* had struggled through the crest of an unusually long sea and started down its steep slope with a rush. Fred suddenly pointed off over the water a trifle to starboard of the course we were steering.

“What does that look like to you?” he exclaimed. “There now it grows plainer!”

I looked in the direction he designated. “Why. It’s a smack! —or the *Wanderer*! I sang back, naming a schooner yacht, then a new boat, that had been lost two summers ago near that very spot.

But, by that time, the darkish splotch ahead in the fog resolved itself into quite clear outlines; for we must have been approaching it at the rate of five knots an hour, even under the pressure of the small rag of canvas the double reef left in our sail.

We saw at once that the little schooner was not from our harbor, and furthermore, that she was in distress.

Her ensign was “flying union down,” at the peak of her closely reefed mainsail; there was only and splintered end of fore-topmast showing above the foremast-cap, while three sailors were working desperately at the pumps. In size she was about sixty feet on her waterline. She was a very handsome little craft.

She was steering a course almost directly toward us.

When we approached quite near, she was brought up into the wind and laid to.

“Cat ahoy! how far is Erie Harbor?” a young fellow in glistening oilskins hailed us from her quarter.

“We’ll come alongside,” shouted Fred.

“Clank! clank! clank!” their pump-brakes were sounding, while the ensign was snapping desperately in its unpleasantly significant position,

Some of the lighter canvas-jibs and balloon sails were drawn down under the keel of the little schooner and brought up on either side in a way that made her look, for all the world, like a bandaged human being. But we could give her hardly more than a hasty glance. It required all our skill to keep the *Mascot* right side up, not to speak of coaxing her up toward the disabled schooner.

“Great Scott, they’d have to make a circuit round the earth to reach Erie if they keep on the course they’re steering,” sang out Fred to me. “Now! old man!”

He put the tiller hard over as he shouted, and our little cat came up into the wind like a shot. I feared her canvas would go out of her as it slatted and threshed before she took the wind on the other bow.

“We’re on our way to Erie,” Fred sang out to the young fellow in oilskins. You’re heading the wrong way – it’s dead astern of you.”

“We’ll give you a hundred dollars to pilot us in,” was the prompt response.

Well! our eyes fairly stuck out at the offer.

A hundred dollars seemed to be a perfect mint of money to us. We would have considered a proposition to sail around the globe in our little boat for that.

Yet we knew very well that the service required of us was not an easy one to perform. For by the way the clear water was pouring from the yacht’s pumps, it was very evident that the dash for the harbor would be a bold one without any time to spare for lying off and on, seeing just how the piers and breakers stood.

“I don’t suppose there’s time enough to waste even to sail on ahead and have them follow us in,” exclaimed Fred, thoughtfully.

“Allowing that we can hit the channel the first time,” I suggested, dubiously.

“But we must help ‘em in, and get that hundred dollars,” my chum declared.

“You bet,” I answered.

“The weather may clear up a bit,” hallooed Fred, hopefully, in my ear; though it was very evident that it was growing decidedly worse just then. The continuous rumble of the surf against the bleak shore sounded anything but reassuring. The seas were rising every hour and the atmosphere was almost the color and thickness of an old U. S. A. blanket.

But Fred was a boy of whom I was justifiably proud. He was not long in making up his mind as to the manner of action necessary.

“Throw us a line strong enough to tow the cat, we’ll come aboard,” he shouted.

Then he ran the *Mascot* up as near the *Witch* – we read her name on her transom – as he dared. I stood ready to catch the line that was speedily sent flying towards us.

Made fast to the light line, was a heavier one, which I ran through the ring-bolt in the *Mascot*’s stem and then bent onto the mast.

We had one canvas down in a jiffy, and gained the *Witch* by the cable. I recollect Mr. Hoskinson, her owner, regarded us somewhat dubiously, and a companion complained to another of the party quite audibly, and with some skepticism, that we were nothing but “two infants,” and that it was luck for us that they had found us.

But what Fred lacked in size more than made up in assurance.

I always had an admiration for Fred's self-reliance. When he quietly took the wheel from the unresisting hands of the helmsman and let the yacht fall off a bit, in order that she might gain sufficient headway before bringing her about. I was proud of him.

His cool assumption of authority rather reassured her owner and the others, too.

Yet, to pilot the leaking yacht into port safely was to be the crucial test for that gallant young man, and I know that my chum realized it.

Mr. Frank Hoskinson explained in a word how the yacht had sprung the leak.

The party had been lying behind Bluff Bar, at Long Point, Canada, for a day or two's fishing. On starting to cross the lake, to stop at Erie, they had had their fore-topmast carried away in the first part of that afternoon's storm.

Before the broken spar could be cut adrift, it had struck the planking a blow that had started the leak. Then to top the unfortunate occurrence and make it really dangerous, one of the pump breaks had given out and they had missed Erie in the thick fog.

Furthermore, night was then only about four hours distant.

"The water had been slowly, but surely gaining," Mr Hoskinson said in conclusion, "making it a question of reaching a harbor inside of three or four hours, now, or putting off in the boats, and I don't suppose we could strike a place along the shore where we could land once in a thousand times, such a day as this."

"There are only six places in the forty-five mile stretch between Erie and Dunkirk," said Fred, positively. "Have you got a lead line?" he asked.

He had them cast the lead and let him look at the tallow placed in its base to bring up a sample of the bottom.

"Six fathoms – gravel and clay, so far, so good," he exclaimed, as soberly as some old shellback "smelling" his way in around Cape Cod. "You might ease off the sheets a bit fore and aft."

The order was complied with. The little schooner's bow fell off a point or two, and she began to hiss through the seas at a good pace, considering that she had three feet and a half or more of water in her hold and was done up like a pudding with the light canvas.

The bonnet was off her staysail, and she had her foresail reefed down as closely as her mainsail. As the tangle of her rigging had been mostly straightened out, she made a comparatively safe appearance.

But though she did so nicely, Fred was secretly as nervous as her owner and his party, if not, indeed, more so – as he afterwards confided to me. Presque Isle harbor is not an easy port to make in comparatively clear weather, not to speak of doing it on such a day as that, when a slight miscalculation might land one's craft on top of the low breakwater or the long piers.

And during all the time the “clank! clank! clank!” of the pumps sounded above even the breaking water at the bow of the pitching, reeling yacht in anything but a cheerful way.

When the patent log registered ten knots sailed, Fred drew me towards him.

“The last cast brought up some brick dust and clay from the bass-ground off Four Mile Creek, in five fathoms,” he exclaimed excitedly. “Go forward and listen for the fog-bell. I'm keeping her west by south, and so far, so good. I guess we'll get her in O.K.”

Barrels of green water were coming aboard, and the lee bulwarks were hidden from time to time in the white smother. The deck sloped like a roof. I had some difficulty in forcing my way forward.

Clinging to a soaking wet fore-shroud I waited to hear the “clang” of the bell on the pier end.

By this time the tallow in the end of the lead began to bring up sand, which meant that we were fast nearing the peninsula which forms the natural harbor at Erie.

I began to grow nervous.

The atmosphere was just as opaque as before, and the leak as fast becoming worse.

But still I had considerable confidence in my chum.

Then suddenly the dull stroke of the fog-bell came across the water. I have never heard Patti sing a sweeter note than that sounded to my straining ear that afternoon.

The reddish brown object that we shortly glided by, and nearly over, was still more welcome. It told us our exact position down to a nicety. It was the big can-buoy which marked the outer end of the dredged channel which led between the piers, and which had to be rounded on the “starboard hand” by vessels coming up or down the lake and entering the harbor.

Fred hardly changed our course so much as the fraction of a point.

Then, as we staggered in over the seas, in our almost water-logged condition, the beacon tower, its pier and the clanging bell came in view. They seemed like spectres, in the heavy atmosphere. The madly tumbling waves broke completely over the long pier.

For a moment or two the little *Witch* labored severely, as she plunged into the chop and cross-sea at the pier-ends.

But her canvas pulled her through it splendidly; and we were soon in unbroken water.

Past Keeper Clark's little white house and the larger picturesque building of the United States Life Saving Service we went.

Rounding the inner range light, Fred beached the *Witch* in smooth water and on the soft sandy bottom of Misery Bay.

His job of piloting was done, and I could see him breathe a sigh of relief. The yachtsman who had alluded to Fred as the "infant," patted him on the back approvingly, with any amount of praise – and my chum deserved it all. He had richly earned the hundred dollars.

But when we came back to look over the stern, for the *Mascot*, and bring her alongside, in order to sail over to the city—we found her missing.

Fred looked at me—I looked at Fred. Then we drew in the frayed and broken hemp cable sorrowfully.

The *Mascot's* loss, however, was no doubt a blessing in disguise. I tremble now when I think of the times we tempted Providence on the lake in the little butter-bottom. Mr. Hoskinson was so generous as to add her cost to the sum of Fred's hire as pilot, when, on a later scouring of the beach, down the shore, disclosed only a bit of her transom, with the novice-painted name upon it, of

"MASCOT, ERIE."