

POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL & EAGLE.

BY PLATT & SCHRAM.

Journal, Vol. 61. - - - Eagle, Vol. 18.

AT \$2 00 PER ANNUM.

VOLUME 2.—NEW SERIES.

POUGHKEEPSIE, SATURDAY MORNING, JULY 19, 1845.

NUMBER 81.

The Helmsman of Lake Erie.

It was on a pleasant May morning that a steamer 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 America is so famous; and, as you stand on its shore, and see the green waves dashing in one after another, you might well think that you were looking at the great 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 immediate sailing, was at her mainmast-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; car-drivers jangling for a larger fare; and all the various kinds of bustle and confusion that attend the departure of a packet from a watering-place.

But presently the anchor was heaved, 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 conversation on politics; some sat apart, and calculated 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 middle of the lake, stood southwards; 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 repine at his hard labor and scanty pay. He had, in the worst times, 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, to say or do 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 captain, coming up from his cabin, cried to a sailor: "Dick Fletcher, what's all that smoke I see coming 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 disappeared beneath the deck, when up he came again with much greater speed.

"The hold's on fire, Sir," he said to the captain, who by this time was 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 vessel 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 passed and repassed: they were filled from the lake, they flew along a line of ready hands, were dashed 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 subdued.

In the meantime the women on board were clustering round John Maynard, the only man unemployed who was capable of answering their questions. "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 shore?" The helmsman answered as well as he could.—"There was no boat: it had been left at Buffalo to be mended: they might be seven miles from shore: they would probably be in in forty minutes: 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 talking, and a little more praying, it would be the better for us, and none the worse for the boat."

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

"West-sou'-west, Sir," answered Maynard.

"Keep her sou' and by west," cried the captain. "We must go on shore anywhere."

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 hold was soon on fire. Then long wreaths of smoke began to find their way through the skylight; 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 slung 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 engineers 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 waistcoats, 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 on 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 muscles cracked 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, and 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 were 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 everything, escaped.

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

The *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle*: "Published every Saturday." "The Helmsman of Lake Erie: page 1, column 6.

A-version with no B-version deletions. Three B-version usages: a) "heaved" [B] instead of "hove" [A]; b) "stood southwards" [B] instead of "stood southward" [A]; c) "worst times" [B] instead of "worst time" [A]. Whereas the *Maine Cultivator* uses "muscles creaked," the *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle* uses "muscles cracked."

Located on August 9, 2011, the 170th Anniversary of the Erie Tragedy