

The Helmsman of Lake Erie

By Epes Sargent

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Brave fellows, in my day
Have I beheld, —
Brave on the quarter-deck,
Brave in the hour of wreck,
Brave where no hope impelled
And death before them lay.

But if you ask of me,
Who of them all
First to my thought appears,
Bright through the mist of years,
Foremost at memory's call, —
This would my answer be:

John Maynard, he's the first—
Here's to his fame!
He of the Ocean Queen,
He of that fearful scene.
Who out of smoke and flame
On us a saviour burst!

Crowded with passengers
Was our good boat;
Crossing Lake Erie, we
Hardly the shore could see
When came that dreadful note
Which most the heart-blood stirs—

"Fire!" and the captain cried,
"See to it there!
Wheel, ho! Whose hand is on?"
"John Maynard's." "Steady, John!
East-south-east let her tear!"
"Aye, aye, sir!" John replied.

John, a rough sailor-lad—
Why should he stay?
Thrust at by tongues of fire,
There at his post expire?
"Fly, John, at once! Away
Where rescue may be had!

"True, all to God, in thee.
Look now for aid;
Trembling in view of death.
Men, women, hold their breath;
But shall they safe be made
Through the deep agony?"

Swathed round with flame and smoke,
John still held on;
"Only five minutes more,
And we may jump ashore,
Steady!" the captain spoke.
"Steady it is," said John.

"One minute longer, John,
Can you remain?"
"Aye, with God's help I can,"
Quoth the lad, grown to man
In that extreme of pain,
With crown celestial on!

Up, on its wings of flame.
Up drove the keel;
Up to the shelving beach.
Out of the billows' reach.
Where men could leap, and kneel,
All with a glad acclaim.

"Saved! All are saved!" one cries—
"Three hundred saved!
John Maynard — where is he?
Him who the fire-fiend braved!"
"Hush! There, in death he lies!"