



The Helmsman of Lake Erie.

We do not know who wrote the subjoined, nor where it first appeared; but we are sure the reader will agree with us that it is a most powerful narrative of a deed that should not be forgotten. In all the qualities of true glory, the "Helmsman of Lake Erie" stands far beyond the crowd of heroes who in blood-stained laurel, fill the niches of fame:—

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 America is so famous; and, as you stand on its shore, and see the green waves dashing in, one after another, you might think that you were looking on 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 for immediate 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 baggage; 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 watering place.

But presently the anchor was hove, the paddles began to turn, the sails were set, and leaving a long track of foam behind her, the Jersey stood westward, and held 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 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 earned to be content with his situation; none could ever say that they had heard him repine at his hard labour 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 often succeeded, to say something for its good. He was known from one end of lake Erie to the other, by the name of honest John Maynard; the secret of his honesty to his neighbours 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 of 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 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, 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 a few moments it seemed as if the flames were subdued.

In the mean time the women on board were clustering around 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 the 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 tain. '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 flung up 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 vessels 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 be no more than a mile from the shore; and boats were even now starting to their assistance.

'John Maynard,' cried the captain.

'Ay, ay, 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 scorched; his blood seemed all 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 creaked in the flame; then he stretched forth the 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, and 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 endeavouring to come forward, and fell overboard, or whether he was suffocated by the dense smoke, his comrades could not tell.—Every soul of the large number of passengers reached the shore in safety; but he to whose martyr spirit they owed their lives was not there, and with throbbing hearts they recollected that the blue waters beyond them had closed over all that remained of the HELMUN OF LAKE ERIE.

Page 4, c. 6 ("A"-version). The Editorial Comment prefacing the sketch was also used verbatim without acknowledgment by *The Norfolk Democrat* (Dedham, Mass.), Nov. 28, 1845, p. 1, c. 2-3.