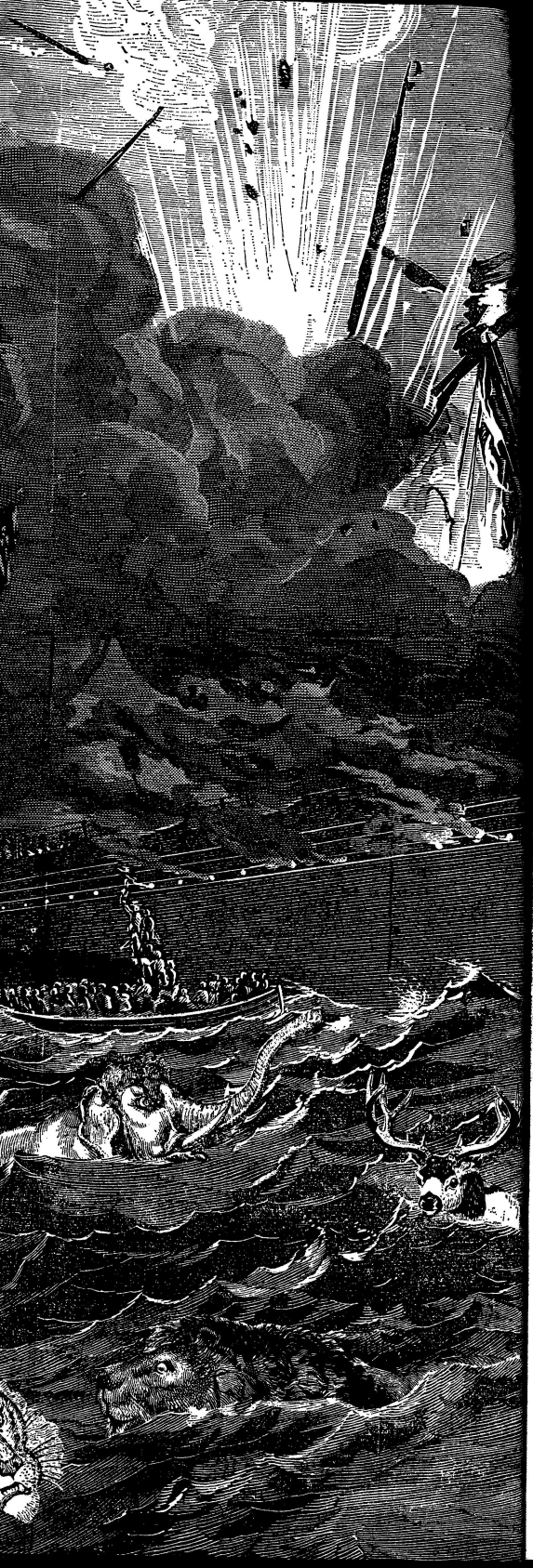


The Wreck of the "Royal Tar"

by JOHN MASON
Courtesy of the Blackington Collection

■ MANY YEARS AGO, MR. ROY COOMBS of Vinalhaven, Maine saw some queer-looking rocks lying on the beach. He picked them up. They were "white stones," four or five inches long, and quite smooth. As he had never seen anything like them before, he put a couple in a candy box and mailed them to Harvard University to see if the professors knew what they were.

He nearly fell off the porch when they came back from Cambridge. The accompanying letter said: "The specimens you sent us are teeth from a hippopotamus."

Mr. Coombs was well aware that hundreds of years ago camels roamed around New England, but a "hippo" on Vinalhaven—well, that was something to talk about.

He took the biggest tooth and carved it into a handle for his favorite knife. When he proudly showed it to an old-timer down on the wharf, the old duffer said, "Pshaw, that's nothin', I know where there's part of an elephant's leg, and a lot of bones that come ashore from the wreck of the *Royal Tar*. She was the circus boat what burned up right off Widder's Island in October of 1836. That's where them teeth come from."

And the old fellow was right. The *Royal Tar* did burn with a circus on board, and the elephant's carcass came ashore later at Brimstone Island. Two of the bones of his front legs were saved by the Islanders. (One was owned by the late Alton H. Blackington.)

The *Royal Tar* was built in St. John, New Brunswick in 1836 at a cost of $50,000. She was one of several sidewheel steamers then running between St. John and Portland, Maine. She was 146 feet long on the keel, 160 feet over-all, had a 24-foot beam, and was listed as 400 tons burden.

Above deck, at the stern, was a canvas-covered pavilion (or tent with a wooden frame), then a big open space amidship. Up near the bow were two tall funny-looking smokestacks with a mast between them. She carried one square sail on that mast and a couple of jibs running to the bowsprit. (The sails were used when the engines failed to make headway against the tide.)

The skipper of the *Royal Tar* was Capt. Thomas Reed, as fine a man as you'd want to sail with. It was criminal the way folks talked about him after the fire. All sorts of lies were told about him, but when the survivors presented him with a purse of $750 in (Continued on page 110)

The Wreck of the "Royal Tar"

(*Continued from page 85*)

gold for his bravery and he was made Harbormaster at St. John, the rumors died down and Captain Reed lived to a ripe old age—loved and respected by everyone.

While many of the old-fashioned superstitions of the sea have long since been chucked overboard, some sailors and skippers still believe that birds, snakes and brass bands are unlucky on a vessel—and to take them aboard on a Friday is nothing but an invitation to disaster.

Captain Reed didn't believe in such foolishness, and on Friday, October 21, 1836, he sailed the *Tar* out of St. John with the biggest and strangest cargo that ever buckled the gangplank of his little sidewheeler.

The whole town turned out that bright October day to watch the brass band of "Dexter's Locomotive Museum" go aboard, followed by "Burgess' World Famed Circus" and "Menagerie of Wild Animals, Birds and Reptiles."

There were red and yellow wagons, and golden cages containing cobras and pythons, two big lions, a spotted leopard, a Bengal tiger, and many smaller animals.

Next came a pair of proud pelicans, a lot of chattering monkeys, six beautiful Arabian horses, two awkward, lumbering camels, and "Mogul," the elephant!

As if this were not enough to tax the capacity of the little *Tar,* there was a very large passenger list and a crew of 21.

All told, there were at least 100 men, women, and children—besides the animals—all jammed into the *Royal Tar* as she headed for Penobscot Bay and Portland that Friday afternoon. Many passengers, moving from New Brunswick to Portland for the winter, did their cooking in the crowded quarters of the steerage.

As the elephant was too big to go below, he was chained out on deck. The other animals, and the birds and snakes, were stored between decks.

After things got settled down, the brass band came out on deck and gave a concert. As the heavily laden steamer sailed slowly down the coast, the music was wafted toward shore where the natives gathered excitedly on the wharves to wave and wish them "Godspeed."

On Sunday, the blue October sky became flecked with mackerel clouds and a raw wind whipped up the sea. The tigers and lions stirred restlessly, and the womenfolk got seasick, what with the rough water and the combined smells of wild animals, and of cabbage being cooked. Who wouldn't?

Captain Reed, kind man that he was, put into Eastport and stayed there until Tuesday, giving the passengers opportunity to go ashore and the animals a chance to exercise.

Tuesday afternoon they sailed again, heading south for Penobscot Bay through choppy seas and a spanking off-shore breeze that soon developed into a first-class gale.

In order to get into the lee of the islands, Captain Reed steered the *Royal Tar* toward Fox Island Thoroughfare and was just abreast of Channel Rock when the assistant engineer burst into the pilot house, white and shaking.

"What's the matter, Marshall? Seasick?"

"No, Captain, it's worse than that. We've got to anchor and fill the boilers."

Captain Reed said, "Well, we'll ease along till eight bells when we'll be close to Vinalhaven, and then we can water up."

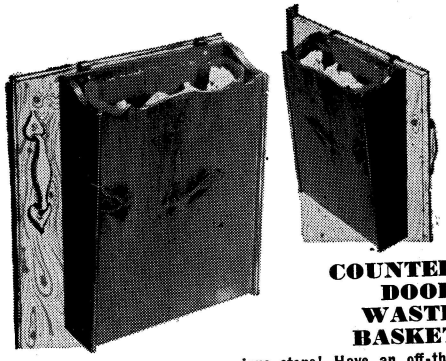
"No! We can't wait that long. We've got to anchor *now*! The boilers are red hot, sir, red hot and smoking!"

Captain Reed looked hard and long at the engineer, finding it hard to believe that the boilers were in such condition. As he turned the *Tar* toward Isle au Haut, he said sharply, "Go back to the engine room, Marshall, and tend to your duties." A few minutes later he gave the order to drop anchor.

After all these years, it's nigh on to impossible to get all the details of what had happened. Most folks agree (from stories told by the survivors) that the night before the chief engineer had been up all night fixing a leak in the boiler. When he turned in, he left his assistant, Mr. Marshall, in charge. This careless officer failed to notice the water was running low and when the alarming condition was brought to his attention he muttered resentfully: "Oh, don't worry about that. We've got water enough."

But they didn't have! And every minute that went by, the water in the glass dropped lower and lower. Why that man didn't report this state of affairs—for which he was responsible—will never be known.

The anchor had barely gone overboard when the dread cry of "Fire" was heard below decks and a puff of creamy brown smoke mushroomed from the companion-



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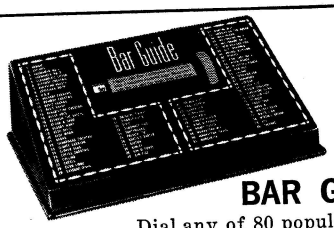

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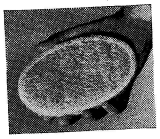

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way, followed by a tongue of flame which licked along the main deck.

When Captain Reed came out of the pilot house and looked down through the iron grating, he saw rolling flames and heard the screams of the passengers and the terrified cries of the wild animals, trapped between the decks.

Choking from the thick smoke, he made his way aft and ordered the frenzied crew to lower the lifeboats, recalling then, to his horror, that three of the boats had been left behind in St. John to make room for the circus wagons and cages.

"Throw the wagons over. They'll float—and those poles and ropes. Man the buckets, men, and get a chain on that elephant. (cough) Hoist the distress flag. Get that longboat overboard."

Through the stifling smoke he saw one of the boats some distance away from the ship. The assistant engineer had taken it and, with several men, was rowing desperately toward Isle au Haut.

Captain Reed took charge of the longboat and picked up those who had jumped overboard at the first flash of fire! He then returned to the ship. Had there been anyone to man the pumping engine or direct the wildly rushing people, many could have been saved. But with the thick smoke swirling around them—and flames pouring from the portholes—and the elephant trumpeting and pulling at his chains and the air filled with cinders and shrieks—it's no wonder that strong men jumped overboard and women tossed their children into the wind-whipped ocean.

When the wind suddenly changed, Captain Reed strode to the stern, cut the cable, and yelled to the quartermaster to hoist the sail. But before he got it up, a hot-air explosion ripped off a forward hatch and the sail went up in flames.

By now the whole mid-section of the *Royal Tar* was burning furiously and, instead of "steaming" to the shore, as Captain Reed had planned, when he slipped the anchor, the *Royal Tar* was now drifting toward the open sea—a hopeless, helpless, burning wreck.

On board, except for the crackle of flames and an occasional cry from the elephant, silence had settled over the circus ship.

Below decks, all of the poor dumb beasts had perished in their twisted cages; above them, separated by the furious fire amidship, a dozen or so passengers huddled at the bow and stern. Cut off from each other by the flames that worked closer and closer, they made ready to drop over the side into the cold waters of Penobscot Bay. Those who jumped first were so numbed by the cold that they sank immediately. A few who waited (and kept their heads) were eventually saved.

One foolish man rolled 500 silver dollars in his stocking and tied it around his waist. Then he lashed his leather trunk to a plank and, with it, dove over the side. The trunk floated—but he went to the bottom like a silver-plated rock.

A young girl with two small children pushed them over the stern. The youngsters managed to cling to a bale of hay and were picked up by Captain Reed in the longboat, but the girl drowned.

H. H. Fuller, manager of the menagerie, stayed on the quarterdeck till his clothes caught fire, then lowered himself over the side with a piece of rope, making one end fast to the tiller chain—and there he hung. Fearing he might weaken and lose his hold, he passed the rope around his waist and over his neck. This nearly cost him his life because other passengers were also hanging onto ropes which burned through, plunging them into the sea. Three of them grabbed the rope Fuller had wound round his neck and nearly choked him.

As there were still women and children on the smoking deck, Captain Reed had his men make a raft from floating timbers and wreckage. When they finally got it alongside the circus ship, they saw "Mogul," the old elephant, silhouetted against the flames with his two front feet firmly planted on the rail.

He must have thought the raft was for him—for just as it grazed the side of the *Royal Tar,* the elephant gave one mighty roar and plunged headlong onto the raft, smashing it to kindling and crushing two of the crew. After swimming around for an hour or so, "Mogul" struck out for land. A week later he washed ashore at Brimstone Island.

Many of the victims were hauled from the water by the crew of the United States Revenue Cutter *Veto,* which sailed through showers of red-hot embers in spite of the fact that she carried a deckload of gunpowder.

The *Royal Tar* blazed far into the night as she drifted by Saddle Back Light, and then she went down. Years ago, I learned that Capt. John G. Snow of Rockland believed he had located part of her hull, off Widow's Island, and I'm wondering if that is the same wreckage that I saw on Widow's several years before that. Come Spring, I hope I can go out there again and take a look. ◆◆

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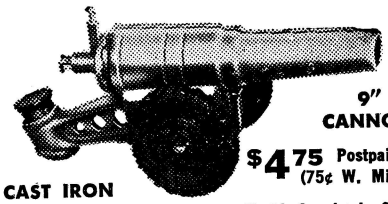

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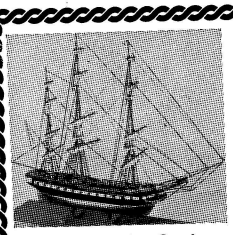

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