
Saving life at sea

Roper Richard

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LONDON, 1883

SAVING LIFE AT SEA

BY

RICHARD ROPER

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SAVING LIFE AT SEA.

THE number of ships, the aggregate armament, steam power, tonnage, crews, and equipment throughout, that comprise the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom; the number of vessels, and the aggregate power, tonnage, and crews of the English Mercantile Marine, the number of persons it conveys, and the quantities and values of the freights and cargoes it carries to and from all parts of the globe, combine to place England at the head of the maritime nations of the world. The feeling of national pride that this supremacy naturally inspires, is tempered by a sense of humiliation because of wanton waste of human life in connection with it; of culpable neglect on the part of shipowners in failing to supply, and of the responsible authorities in failing to enforce, such provisions and conditions for saving life at sea, in certain emergencies, as passengers and crews may reasonably claim, and as Government authority alone can prescribe and enforce.

The subject of saving endangered life at sea is one that enlists the sympathies of men of all classes and conditions; it commands great and ever-growing interest and attention; its discussion, like "a good maxim, can never be out of place;" reference to the subject in the permanent records of "The Great International Fisheries Exhibition, 1883" is deemed fit and appropriate, in its relation to the important

maritime industry that the Exhibition was organised and carried out to promote. The subject has its bearing on the Fisheries, if not very direct or apparent upon actual fishing craft, certainly upon the vessels that bear home the harvest of the sea from the fishing grounds. In any case, discovery and application of the most trustworthy means of saving life and of reducing the perils of the sea to a minimum, must be an object of universal desire.

The subject offers three divisions for discussion :—

I. The need for extended and improved means for saving life at sea when the ship fails to provide a place of safety.

II. The distinctive qualities and capabilities that such improved means should possess. And,

III. The mode and authority by which such improved means should be applied.

First, then, as to the need for extended and improved means for saving life at sea when the ship fails to afford a place of safety. There is, alas ! a bewildering abundance of heartrending evidence in proof of this need. Narratives of disasters at sea, in which indescribable sufferings and appalling loss of life have been endured and sustained—calamities that have sent their successive quivering thrills of pain throughout the civilised world from its centre to its circumference, rush unwelcome into mind. Even a selection from what may be regarded as typical cases that have occurred within the lifetime of the present generation, even within comparatively few years past, would require more space than can be spared for a bare catalogue of names of ships, and the dates and localities of the disasters. Amongst these would be the *Atlantic*, *Kent*, *President*, *London*, *Royal Charter*, *Schiller*, *Deutschland*, *Northfleet*, *Avalanche*, *Eurydice*, *Princess Alice*, *Waitara*, &c. In little more than

the first month of the current year (1883), as many as three emigrant ships have been engulfed, and numerous other appalling disasters have occurred in various parts of the ocean's domain that have proved conclusively an urgent and clamorous need for extended and improved means for saving life. An endeavour will be made to prove, by a few illustrations, that the means provided are greatly inadequate in extent, and that even to the extent of their limited capacity these fail to warrant trust and to render service in the last extremity.

The general observation may be made, *in limine*, that in an indefinite number of instances vessels of various kinds are allowed, unquestioned and unimpeded, to cast off from quays and ports to commence their voyages or trips with freights of human beings on board, for floating whom, should their ship fail, no provision whatever is made by boats or otherwise. There is not even a pretence of such complete provision made by the owners. In the case of ocean-going steamships, and some passenger and emigrant ships, there *is* a pretence of boat accommodation for passengers in case of need, but it is a pretence, and nothing more. The rows of nicely-painted canvas-covered boats of outward-bound liners ("Jack" probably thinks them lumber and in the way), look very pretty, almost imposing, and are apt to impress with a sense of forethought and a feeling of security; but they are really, in view of possible requirements, a delusion, almost a fraud and a false pretence, and the intending passenger who trusts to such appearances can be but little wiser than the hunted ostrich that hides its head in the sand. The boats provided for ocean-going passenger and emigrant steam or sailing ships, and transports, are never sufficient in numbers and carrying capacity to float more than a fraction of the persons in the ships respectively.

fatality. In addition to this defect of inadequacy in number and capacity, the boats are little better than ghastly "properties" in the terrible dramas enacted when ships are lost by collision, fire, or wreck. The boats should be always, but they seldom are, in perfect condition, readily accessible and available. They are usually treated with contempt and neglect, and as though they would never be wanted.

Delay occurs, and difficulties, sometimes insuperable, present themselves in attempts to lower, launch, and disengage some of the boats; to release others from the chocks by which they are secured, from the tarpaulin under which they are lashed; to clear them one from another, and to empty them of the stores, live stock, &c., that have been placed in them; to find plugs and rowlocks, and to launch them haphazard by a tumble over the bulwarks. Got into the water anyhow, and crowded with a living freight that sinks the boat to the gunwales, the poor little craft, unfit and frail, is often staved in, swamped, or turned keel up on the crest of an angry wave. As providing means of saving life in case of shipwreck, as offering refuge or deliverance, the boat system has utterly failed and hopelessly broken down.

A few illustrations of the inadequacy of life-saving appliances hitherto provided for ships, in anticipation of distress, conclusively prove, we venture to think, the first proposition. The "o'er-true tales" are very sad, but some of them are happily relieved, almost glorified, by the aureola, so to say, with which the heroism of the expiring actors has invested them. The noble and pitiful story of the loss of the *Birkenhead* troopship is now rather old, but

Oft should the tale be told,
E'en when our babes are old,
How calm went those soldiers bold
Down to their death!

The ship had on board, belonging to many different regiments, 13 officers, 9 sergeants, and 466 men ; 20 women and children ; and a crew of 130 officers and men. The ship struck upon a rock near Simon's Bay, South Africa, on the 25th February, 1852. It was a calm starlight night, favourable for floating those on board if they had had readily available anything whereon to float, but they had not. There were boats for a small fraction only of their number, and of these some were so stowed away, as usual, that they could not be got out and put to use. Three boats, however, were lowered, and in these the women and children were calmly rowed off from the fast-sinking ship.

Captain Wright, a survivor, says of the noble fellows left on the wreck, "Every one did as he was directed, and there was not a murmur or a cry among them until the vessel made her final plunge. The officers had their orders, and had them carried out as if the men were embarking and not going to the bottom ; there was only this difference, that I never saw an embarkation carried out with so little noise and confusion." "So died they, heroes and men complete." Many of the gallant fellows fell victims to the ravenous sharks with which the sea swarmed. Land was in sight when the ship struck. Of about 640 souls on board only 97 escaped with their lives.

The loss of the *La Plata* telegraph cable steamship in the Bay of Biscay in 1874, conveys also its distinctive lessons on the subject in hand. The boats that should have contributed benefit and have given some sense of safety, actually increased the danger of the situation, and did mischief on their own account. A heavy sea tore away one of the boats from the davits, and the davits again turned in upon and rent the ship's side, admitting the destroying flood and accelerating the ship's doom. One of the boats was smashed in lowering, another fortunately got clear, and

saved 15 men. The *La Plata* was provided with so-called life-rafts, that were stowed one above another, and duly secured upon the forebridge. When the ship went down the despairing crew were seen clustering round these mocking, maddening, life-preservers (?), struggling frantically, but in vain, to get them out and afloat. Sixty-four men, electricians, engineers, seamen, &c., sank with the life-rafts. Knowledge of the provision on board the *La Plata* of "means for saving life" inspires us both with pity and indignation for those who made the arrangements, and with unfeigned grief for the hapless victims.

The *Singapore*, another wrecked ship, gives this record touching her boats' performances in the hour of need. The ship had seven boats which, with the exception of the gig, were stowed in chocks on the bridge, and covered with canvas. The jolly-boat, with 11 persons, capsized soon after leaving the ship. The majority of the crew and passengers who left in the gig were also drowned. After two hours' momentarily precious time wasted, the attempt to get the lifeboat over the side had to be abandoned. In the case of the collision in the Channel between the *Forest* and the *Avalanche*, two of the three boats that left the *Forest* were swamped, and all who were in them were drowned; the boat that survived left the ship with only three oars, and with no rowlocks or rowing crutches, or plug for the draining-hole in the floor.

There is considerable variety in the horrors that attend the destruction of ships at sea, but an unsatisfactory and depressing uniformity in one feature—the miserably small part the boats perform in mitigating the disasters by saving life. The loss of the *Cospatrick* emigrant ship, burned to the water's edge in mid-ocean, near the end of 1874, was pronounced at the time even a greater disaster than the

loss of the *Kent* East Indiaman. The 500 hopeful human beings speeding their way to begin life again with bright prospects in a new world, were suddenly offered, on the trackless deep, without means of escape, the terrible alternatives of death by fire or water. They could only have had time for a short shrift, and a compendious sentence closes the history of their lives. A message from Madeira curtly announced, "The *Cospatrick* burnt at sea ; only three of the crew saved." Disasters at least equally appalling to this have occurred since that date. In September 1878 the saloon steamboat *Princess Alice* was returning to London at eventide, freighted with 700 men, women, and children, who had been indulging in a day's excursion trip. The pleasure-boat was struck in the river, opposite Woolwich, only a few yards from the river-bank, by a screw-collier, the *Bywell Castle*, and sank immediately, leaving the whole of the men, women, and children, who had covered the entire deck and saloon roofs, struggling in the water. The struggle was short ; the helpless creatures perished miserably, asphyxiated by the loathsome Nephthe, rather than drowned. These citizens of the "greatest city in the world" had their last and fatal bath in the sewage London contributes to its "noble river." They perished miserably—close to the seats of imperial and municipal wisdom and power. The ultimate agent in their destruction enforced upon the victims a hideous substitute for what, under almost any other circumstances, they would have exhibited—beauty, "the rapture of repose."

The owners of the *Princess Alice* made no pretence of providing boats or life-saving appliances. If the great fragile floating shell got cracked or broken, those who trusted to it must scramble out of the Stygian flood as best they