

New England's Worst Shipwreck

BY MARC T. GREENE

THERE is no doubt that Captain Hollis H. Blanchard was at fault, but in just what fashion and to what extent has never been determined. He went down with his ship, in company with all the other 176 people on board the Boston-Portland side-wheel steamer *Portland*, on the night before Thanksgiving Day, of the year 1898, in one of the worst storms ever known on the New England coast.

The run from Boston to the Maine metropolis is hardly ninety miles. No mishap had ever before attended it. The *Portland*, though a sidewheeler with narrow hull, and guards extending a couple of yards on either side, was almost a new vessel. She had been built at Bath only half a dozen years before, and it is well-known that in those days "Bath-built" meant the highest standard of ship construction and marine craftsmanship. She was 300 feet long, 42 of beam and 11 of draft. She was, of course, wooden, but her wood was the best quality of seasoned oak. She carried a crew of 68 and on her

last voyage had 108 passengers. Most of them were Maine people with business interests in Boston, going home for Thanksgiving.

The *Portland* left Boston about seven o'clock. An hour before that time John F. Liscomb, General Manager of the Portland Steam Packet Company, owners of the vessel, telephoned Captain Blanchard.

"The weather looks bad up this way, Captain. The reports are that a bad storm is working in from the northeast. The glass is falling. I wouldn't risk it tonight."

At the inquiry, Liscomb said that Captain Blanchard sounded "kind of truculent" when he replied that he had promised to be home for Thanksgiving, that he never yet had missed a trip on the Boston-Portland run and that he "thought he could beat the storm." Anyway, he proposed to try.

Asked if he hadn't the authority to forbid the sailing, Liscomb admitted that he had. But Blanchard was an old and trusted employee, a proven seaman and — incidentally

— a stockholder in the Company. The General Manager “didn’t feel like overriding him.” Yes, the skipper was a stubborn and self-willed man, a typical Yankee master-mariner of the old school, recognizing no authority but his own.

This was borne out by the testimony of men in the Boston office of the Company. The agent there had called the Captain’s attention to the barometer and to the weather reports. The Captain had — the witness hesitated here until pressed by the Commissioners — well, he had as good as told him to go to the devil. Was there anything in the widely disseminated rumor that he had been drinking? Not so far as the agent had noticed.

WHEN the *Portland* left her wharf, the weather bore an ominous aspect. Snow had begun to fall. The wind was rising, shifting from southerly into northeast. The barometer on the wharf had stood at 29.05, a drop since sunset of .45; and it was still dropping. By midnight it was 28.35 in Boston and the wind was fifty miles an hour, with thick snow.

Where was the *Portland* then? Nobody will ever know. On the way down Boston Harbor she had passed the ship *Kennebec*, which had left an hour earlier, returning to her wharf. She was of similar construction to the *Portland*, but smaller and older. Her captain had whistled what he intended to be a warning of

bad weather outside. “We passed the *Portland* not more than fifty yards off,” he testified, “but for all the attention she paid us there might have been nobody on board.” The *Kennebec*’s master added that he was “appalled” to see the other boat standing out into the gathering storm.

Outside the harbor, near the Graves Lighthouse, the steamer *Mount Desert* coming down from Maine and already making heavy weather as she frantically sought shelter, passed the *Portland* about a mile distant, recognizing her only by her lights, since by now it was dense darkness. The *Mount Desert*’s skipper said that she seemed to be “pitching heavily.”

However, she apparently stood on until abreast of Thatcher’s Island Twin Lights, off Cape Ann. She passed, as was the usual custom, between the headland and the Londoner Ledge, a quarter-mile off. Here the Gloucester fishing-schooner *Maud S.*, running for harbor under almost bare poles, sighted her. But at 11 o’clock another Gloucester fisherman, the *Grayling*, also running for port, saw the *Portland* lights twelve miles south-by-east from Thatcher’s. The fisherman’s captain testified that the weather was by then “very heavy,” about the ultimate to which a Gloucester skipper of those days would ever commit himself.

But what was the *Portland* doing south of Cape Ann? It was evident

that she had changed her course. Why? The conclusion of expert opinion was that she was trying to turn in a wide circle against the wind so as to try and make Gloucester harbor. About this time two other Gloucestermen, running in under storm-trysails, sighted her. They were the *Florence E. Stearns* and the *Edgar Randall*. The latter was close enough to the steamer to note that, as Captain Pellier testified, "her super-structure seemed to us already badly damaged. She was taking heavy seas which looked to be breaking clear over her. By this time the squalls were as heavy as sixty miles an hour. It seemed to us as if the *Portland* was done for. But there was nothing we could do about it. We didn't more than just make port ourselves."

Nobody knows how far north the *Portland* got before her ill-advised skipper decided to try and run before the storm. Apparently in the turning she was swept by mountainous seas and, among other damage, suffered the destruction of her rudder and steering-gear. That meant, of course, that she was now entirely at the mercy of the seas and destined to drift before them until they tore her to pieces.

THUS during that terrible night she was blown all the way across Massachusetts Bay until, as the Captain of the Race Point (tip of Cape Cod) Life Saving Station thought, he heard her whistling some

time shortly before daylight the next morning.

How the imagination quails before its vision of that awful night on board the doomed ship as she slowly disintegrated in the storm! It was the worst storm on this coast of the entire nineteenth century and took toll in a single night of no less than 141 vessels, with a loss of life of 465, including those of the *Portland*. Yet there were ships that lived through it. Most notable was the Portland-New York steel ship *Horatio Hall*, 3500 tons, which hove-to from midnight until noon the next day. Captain Albert Bragg stated that it was the worst storm in his experience. "All night it was touch-and-go with us," he said.

But no wooden vessel with narrow hull, wide guards and lofty top-hamper could hope to survive.

During the forenoon of the following day the storm abated somewhat, the snow ceased, and there was sufficient visibility so that the people at the Highland (Cape Cod) Light thought they could discern the shape of a steam vessel some miles off in an easterly direction. Captain Michael F. Hogan, of the Gloucester fisherman *Ruth Martin*, who had been hove-to through the night in a little shelter below Peaked Hill Bar, also thought he saw the *Portland* through the lull. But presently the storm commenced again worse than ever, and so did the snow.

Wreckage began to come ashore

early that evening. The wind held high, around forty miles an hour; it was snowing heavily, and the temperature had fallen to nearly zero.

Immediately the wreckage was identified as from the *Portland*. By midnight it was strewn the sands of the "back side" of Cape Cod from Race Point to Peaked Hill Life Saving Station. It was probable that the *Portland* had begun to break up some distance northeast of Cape Cod and that her shattered hulk had finally grounded on the dreaded Peaked Hill Bar.

EVERY MAN from the life-saving stations along the Cape was by now patrolling the beach, and a guard from the Peaked Hill Station was the first to discover a body, that of George Kenniston, of Boothbay Harbor, Maine.

Curiously enough, other wreckage now began to mingle with that of the *Portland*. Notable among it was some from the New York-Bangor (Maine) iron steamer *Pentagoet*, also lost with all hands in this terrible storm. It was the view of some people that the two had collided, but that was improbable since the *Pentagoet's* course lay a hundred miles off Cape Cod. Two four-masted schooners, the *Addie E. Snow* and the *King Philip*, went down nearer the Cape, and from wreckage drawn up from time to time through the years in fishermen's nets, the theory has been suggested that the *Portland* and the *King Philip* were in collision

some time during that dreadful night.

The loss of the *Portland* in what is still referred to on the northern New England coast as "the *Portland* gale" would, then, appear to be not only New England's worst shipwreck but also New England's greatest marine mystery. For more than half a century there has been speculation, considerable of it in printed form, as to what happened on the doomed vessel from the time when, in obvious desperation, Captain Blanchard tried to turn her about in the hope of making harbor somewhere, or at least of running before the gale. At what time of the fearful night did he make this attempt? How much damage had been done his ship by then? At what time, and where, was her steering gear incapacitated, which left her entirely at the mercy of the storm and so to all intents and purposes lost? When and amid what scenes on board did her company finally realize that there was no hope for them? How did they take the realization, and was there wild panic or did the passengers meet their fate with the calm of most of those on the *Titanic*?

There is no answer and therein lies the mystery. How and when did the end come, and what were the scenes attending it? All that is definitely known or that ever can be known is that the *Portland* set forth, with her 176 passengers and crew, into a tumult of frenzied waters, and that every soul aboard perished.

Courtship in Old Ireland

By F. H. MACARTHUR

THERE WERE curious customs in Ireland two or three hundred years ago. Dueling was at its height, all controversies being settled by force of arms rather than by law. There were even dueling clubs, but stranger even than these was the Abduction Club, an association which was formed in the south of Ireland, whose members bound themselves by an oath to assist each other in carrying off young girls. When a girl was thought worthy of being carried off, the members drew lots or tossed up for her. The members of the club were mostly the younger sons of respectable families who had little or no fortune, however, and greatly desired wealth.

They were called "squireens" and wore red waistcoats lined with narrow lace or fur, tight leather breeches, and top boots. Their agreeable manners made them quite popular with the peasantry, who were always ready and delighted to assist in their perilous enterprises. The forcible abduction of a woman was certainly an outrage, but an outrage so agreeable to the spirit of the time and so congenial to the ardent and romantic character of the people that it was considered an achievement creditable to the man and a matter of exultation to the woman.

In 1707, forcible abduction was made a capital crime. But the law proved ineffective because of a prevailing belief that the offender was not liable to punishment if the woman abducted *him*. Hence the girl in most cases mounted the horse first, and assisted the young fellow to mount behind her.

Nearly always the girl would manage to get word to her sweetheart as to the most convenient time and place for forcibly abducting her. Frequently, when a young lady was carried off really against her consent, by the time the dashing ride was over she was found to be completely reconciled to her abductor, so that prosecutions bore a very small proportion to the number of offenses.

One memorable case was that of Catherine and Anne Kennedy, the daughters of a widow living in the county of Waterford. Catherine was fifteen and Anne fourteen years old. Both were bewitchingly lovely and accomplished girls, and each had been left a fortune of two thousand pounds, a large sum at that time in Ireland.

Garret Byrne was a handsome, dashing, careless, good-tempered young fellow, and a great favorite with the fair sex.

James Strange was also a young