

CHAPTER VI.—BURNING OF THE ERIE.

A HISTORIC MARINE DISASTER.—TERRIBLE FATALITY ON A STEAMER'S FIRST TRIP.—STORY OF A SURVIVOR STILL LIVING.

Tales of terrible loss of life by shipwreck have in all ages possessed their own peculiar fascination, and many a story, of truth or fiction, in which the horrors of the storm or the fire at sea are depicted, are read again and again with scarcely any diminution in interest. The loss of the *Medusa*, the wreck of the *Grosvenor*, or even the tales of shipwreck of modern times as they appear in the columns of the daily newspaper are first to attract the eye and rivet the attention, and these stories are likely longest to be retained in memory. This is the case with the story of the burning of the steamer *Erie*, of this port, sixty-eight years ago, with the loss of nearly two hundred and fifty souls.

It was a particularly harrowing occurrence because of the lack of facilities for obtaining information, and people of today can imagine the situation when it is appreciated that, after it became known the vessel had burned, it required many long hours to get any particulars—indeed it was not until twenty-four hours after the occurrence that the report of the loss of the *Erie* was confirmed, and then it was only after sending an express rider out from here to proceed as far as to Silver Creek, obtain the facts and then return to Erie, that the details of the awful occurrence became known. The state of suspense and anxiety that prevailed in this city meantime may be imagined, for there were believed to be many Erie people among the passengers and crew.

The *Erie* was a comparatively new vessel at the time of her destruction. She had been built in Erie in 1837 by Thomas G. Colt and Smith I. Jackson, and was one of a number that constituted the finest line of steamers then in existence anywhere. Erie had become a noteworthy ship-building center. It was a result of the building here of Commodore Perry's fleet, in one sense, for the large force of carpenters and other mechanics brought from eastern ports to work on the ships of the American fresh water fleet, did not return when the work on these ships was completed. They remained and many of them became prominent, some as navigators, some as designers and builders

of vessels, some as business men and others as farmers. Many of the ship carpenters were Welsh, and with them the Welsh names, the Richardses, Hentons, Griffiths, Hugheses, Joneses, and such came into the county, and through them was established the settlement in South Harborcreek known to this day as Wales. There were a considerable number, however, who continued to follow their trade, and one of them, Captain Richards, became prominent as a designer and director of vessel construction at Erie.

Steam navigation became established on the great lakes in the twenties, and, following the development along the new lines of navigation, Erie business men became interested in the new departure. The first steamer owned in Erie was the Peacock, bought by Rufus S. Reed, and soon afterwards a sister ship was decided upon and the William Penn was built at Erie, Mr. Reed and others being the owners. Then followed these boats, all owned by Mr. Reed and built at this port; the Pennsylvania, in 1832; the Thomas Jefferson, in 1834; the James Madison, in 1836; and the Missouri, in 1840. The steamer Erie was built here in 1837, and after being operated for four seasons was bought by General Reed, who was then at the head of the steamboat business on the lakes, and was added to the splendid line of steamers that sailed under the Reed colors.

It was in 1841 that the Erie was added to the Reed fleet of steamers, and, before being put into regular service she was given a general overhauling, receiving of course, a thorough renovation in which the paint pot and brush figured prominently. Indeed, the painters had not finished their work when the time came for the advertised departure of the vessel on her first trip as one of the Reed line of steamers, and the painters, still engaged in their work, accompanied the Erie on her run down the lake, which was the first stage of the trip, intending to have their work finished when the boat returned to Erie. The trip as laid out consisted of a run to Buffalo, from which port a trip to Chicago and return was to begin.

It was on Friday, Aug. 6, 1841, at 11 p. m., that the Erie left this port for Buffalo on her ill-fated trip. She lay at Buffalo until Monday, Aug. 9, and at 4:20 p. m., took her departure. She had a large list of passengers, numbering nearly 300, and including many emigrants, Swiss and Germans, bound for the west. There was a fresh breeze from the west, but the boat made excellent progress, and by 8 o'clock in the evening had reached a point off Silver Creek, when there was an explosion, and almost in a flash the entire steamer seemed to be enveloped in flames. A number of demijohns of turpentine and varnish had been left on the boiler deck, and these, becoming overheated, had exploded, the vapor at once bursting into a blaze that seized upon the freshly painted woodwork and the flames spread with

as much rapidity as though fed by gunpowder, and, fanned by the breeze, the boat was instantly a roaring furnace.

Then ensued a scene that defies description. To say that the victims rushed frantically to the side of the boat and, heedless of consequences, threw themselves into the water of the lake; that many were unable even to reach the side but perished miserably in the flames; that many, imprisoned in cabin and state-room, were roasted alive without the ability to stir—to mention any of these general facts cannot give even the faintest idea of the horrors that the awful scene presented. There is preserved the story of one of the passengers who, more fortunate than hundreds of others, was able to effect his escape; who was able at the outbreak of the holocaust to make his way to the forward part of the ship which was for a brief time free from the ravages of the fire. This is his story:

At about 8 o'clock I was sitting in the saloon. Parmelee, the barkeeper, had just made me a punch and we were playing a rubber of whist, when, all at once, we heard a slight explosion, a hissing sound and a cry of "Fire!" So many accidents had occurred and I had so schooled myself to the thought of such an accident that I was comparatively cool and self-possessed. I sprang to the door, followed by Parmelee, and we were met by a mass of scorching flame. I rushed forward, and he followed; but no more. Of the dozen or fifteen in the saloon at that moment not another survived. In a second all that part of the boat nearest to where the flames burst out (the boiler deck) was a roaring furnace, and they must have perished horribly in the saloon, for there was no means of escape.

On going forward I saw in a moment the whole terror of the scene. The flames burst out in immense masses and were driven back by the wind, enveloping in one moment the whole body of the boat. Titus (the captain) sprang to the wheel and headed her for the shore, and the wind now drove the flames into every part of her and she rolled over the sea a mass of fire, for she had been lately painted and her panel work varnished, so that she caught as if dipped in spirits of turpentine.

Then the air was filled with shrieks of agony and despair. The boldest turned pale at that awful moment. I shall never forget the wail of terror that went up from the poor German emigrants who were huddled together on the forward deck. Wives clung to their husbands; mothers frantically pressed their babes to their bosoms; lovers clung madly to each other. One venerable old man, his gray hair streaming in the wind, stood on the bow, and stretching out his bony hands, prayed to God in the language of his fatherland.

But if the scene forward was terrible, that aft was appalling, for the flames were raging in the greatest fury. Some madly rushed into

the fire. Others, yelling like demons, maddened with the flames which were all around them, sprang headlong into the waves. The officers of the boat and the crew were generally cool, and sprang to lower the boats, but these were, every one successively swamped by those who threw themselves into them regardless of the commands and execrations of the sailors and heedless of everything but to seek their own safety.

I tried to act coolly. I kept near the captain, who seemed to take courage from despair, and whose bearing was above all praise. The boat was wearing toward the shore, but the maddened flames now enveloped the wheel house, and in a moment the machinery stopped. The last hope had left us, and a wilder shriek arose on the air.

At this moment the second engineer, the one at the time on duty, who had stood by his machinery as long as it would work, was seen climbing the gallows-head, a black mass with the flames curling about him. To either side he could not go, for it was one mass of fire. He sprang upward, came to the top, for one moment felt madly around him, and then fell back into the flames.

There was no more remaining on board, for the boat now broached round and rolled upon the swelling waves, a mass of fire. I seized upon a settee near me and gave one spring, just as the flames were bursting through the deck where I stood. One moment more and I should have been surrounded by fire. In a second I found myself tossed upon a wave, grasping my frail support with desperate energy. At one moment I saw nothing but the yawning deep and the blackening sky; at the next the flaming mass was before me as the wave pitched me up; and around were my fellow-passengers struggling with the waves, some supported by nothing but their strong arms, every moment growing weaker, while the wild agonizing shrieks of those who were every moment taking their last look at the upper world appalled even the stoutest hearts. And those who were still clinging to the bulwarks, but momentarily dropping with every pitch of the vessel, made such a scene as nightly haunts my dreams, and can never be obliterated while memory remains.

I had been in the water but a short time, though each moment seemed an age, when I heard the voice of Captain Titus, who, the last to leave the vessel, was now in the water, calling out in a firm voice: "Courage! Hold on; help is coming!"

Oh, words of hope! How they cheered us in that hour of gloom! A moment later I saw the lights of a steamboat, and in a short time the hull of the Clinton, which upon seeing the fire, had hastened to our assistance. Her boats were quickly lowered and by the light of the burning vessel they were able to pick up those struggling in the waves and twenty-seven of us were saved from a watery grave. Some were

terribly burned and some in the last stage of exhaustion, but all were profusely thankful for their preservation.

This is the story of a survivor of that famous wreck; of that horrible battle against two terrible elements combined to work destruction and death. It is not, however, a narrative told in the heat of the excitement immediately following the dreadful experience, but is an account given thirty-five years later, when he had had ample time to review the occurrence, and, approaching the subject as coolly and calmly as possible, to describe scenes that any adjectives, even the most extravagant, would seem to be quite inadequate to properly illuminate.

The intelligence of the dreadful disaster reached Erie the next day, and the effect was awful. How many from Erie there were on the boat could not be told, but it was known there were not a few. A large proportion of the crew, all the members of the band, and doubtless many of the passengers belonged here, and the entire village was thrown into a state of terrible apprehension. People were running about, from place to place in the little town; inquiring of everyone met whether any news had been heard; seeking the harbor in hopes some boat had arrived; scanning the offing, trusting to see signs of an approaching vessel. But there was no news to be had. The telegraph was unknown to Erie people; the railroad was yet far in the future, and steamboats on the lake were really few and far between. There was only one avenue of rapid communication; the stage road between Erie and Buffalo. This was at once taken advantage of and swift horses were pressed into service for a rapid ride to Dunkirk or Silver Creek. But the long day passed and a sleepless night succeeded before the messengers returned with a confirmation of the terrible news, and then it was but fragmentary. For days; for weeks, even, the news continued to be received, coming principally from the reports published in the Buffalo papers, where the accounts of the official investigation by the New York state authorities were printed, and where interviews with survivors were obtained. The story presented here today, however, was not one of those early tales; it was written by a survivor who had taken up his abode in Ohio and furnished it to the *Gazette* while I had the honor of having an editorial connection with the "Old Reliable."

Perhaps the best known of those who lost their lives in that disaster were the members of the band. There were ten, and their names, so far as can be ascertained, were: David Sterrett, John Clapp, James Heck, Robert Hughes, a German named Philip, Williams, a cabinet maker, Alexander Lamberton and William Wadsworth, besides two others. Of these Lamberton and Wadsworth were all that were saved. Among the drowned was Purser Gilson. It is believed that not less than thirty from Erie perished in the flames, or in the waves

after being driven off the boat. Mr. Gilson was a brother of Mrs. General Reed, and an uncle of Manager Gilson, of the Majestic Theatre.

A statement of the number of souls aboard at the time of the awful calamity, that was made while the inquiry was in progress, and that no doubt was very nearly accurate, is as follows:

Swiss deck passengers	130
Other deck passengers	60
Cabin passengers	50
Crew	25
Band	10
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Total	275
Saved	33
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Total loss of life	242

The boat was valued at \$75,000 and her cargo at \$20,000, and it was estimated at the time that the emigrants, who were well to do and were going west to take up farms and build homes, had \$180,000 with them, all of which was lost.

There are no records extant of the number of Erie people who were aboard the ill-fated Erie that August day, either as passengers or crew, nor is there a record of the number of Erie people who were saved. But there were some who survived to tell the story of its horrors and among them was James Lafferty, a member of the crew, and by some said to have been a wheelman of the boat. Lafferty lived in Erie with his mother, a charming little woman. He was a mariner, with all the instincts that characterize the calling well developed. During the fearful drama of the burning of the boat he played a conspicuous part, and by his heroism contributed greatly to the assistance of the victims of the awful disaster. Many he helped to escape from the burning ship to the water—many who might have been saved if they but had the necessary presence of mind to make use of the means at hand, for not only did he find a way to get them off the burning wreck but the means for their support, which, unfortunately few had the knowledge, skill or coolness to use, were also provided. As long as the boat had steerage way he stood faithfully at the wheel, and it was when the stoppage of the engines made his services as a steersman no longer of value that he turned his attention to lending aid to the panic-stricken passengers.

In the course of time Mr. Lafferty passed into the period of un-serviceable old age. He had not been prudent in youth, and he was not altogether free from the weaknesses that tradition associates with the sailor's life. In the course of time he took up his abode at the alms house, but upon frequent occasions he made excursions to the

city, and always carried with him his favorite violin, upon which he delighted to play. It was also of some service to him when he found himself in an impecunious financial condition. Let him be not harshly judged if it shall be acknowledged that he was upon each of his city excursions vanquished by his failing, and that the end was a cell in the police station. He was not severely dealt with by the officers, they all knew Jim Lafferty, and, though very much the worse for the celebration he had just passed through, he was respected for what he had been, and his splendid service on that night of terrors was not forgotten. In his slumbers, made as comfortable as circumstances would admit, he was covered with a mantle of charity, and he was never permitted to have the character of vagrant set opposite his name. Long a familiar if not altogether ornamental figure in Erie he was always known as the heroic wheelman of the Erie, who stood at his post in the midst of the roaring flames, holding the ship firmly on its course toward shore, and the fact that his efforts were instrumental in saving many lives probably operated to pardon shortcomings that concerned none directly but himself.

In this connection it is only fair to state that the first magistrate to take account of Jim Lafferty's heroic deeds and apply his record in extenuation of his shortcomings, was Alderman Sam Woods, and the leniency extended then continued to be operative as long as Lafferty's uncertain steps led him cityward and in the direction of temptation. Poor Lafferty died a few years ago. He deserves a monument.

There is another survivor of the ill-fated Erie who still lives in this city, a citizen of the highest respectability and so modest concerning the part he played in that memorable scene that it is only with the greatest reluctance he speaks of it. Mr. A. W. Blila, of West Ninth street, when the Erie went into commission as part of the Reed fleet of steamers on that August day in 1841, was shipped as a call boy to attend upon the wheelmen. He was then 13 years of age, but a sturdy boy and not unfamiliar with the duties of the position he was filling. The crew of the boat were accommodated on the main deck, the engineers having their quarters on the starboard side, abaft the paddle wheels, and the wheelmen on the port side, directly opposite the engineers.

That night Mr. Blila was in the wheelmen's stateroom, preparing for his night's rest, and along with him was Jerome McBride, a wheelman, brother of Dennis McBride, a mate of the Erie. The first intimation Mr. Blila and his mate had of trouble on the boat was an unusual sound, not to be described, so unusual that Mr. Blila remarked it, and asked what it could be.

"Oh, it's nothing," said McBride. "Perhaps they have blown out a boiler head or something of that sort has occurred."

But the noise continued. It was something like a mixture of roaring and crackling with trampling of feet mingled, and again Blila spoke of it; but the sailor tried to quiet the boy, and by assuring him that there could be nothing the matter, urged him to lie down. It was impossible, without investigating, so young Blila went to the door and opening it was confronted with a solid wall of fire. Slamming the door to, he told McBride what he had seen; that the ship was in flames. Then he proposed to break the window and escape through that into the water, but McBride said no.

"We will try another plan," said he.

Then seizing a blanket, he held it spread out in front of him and as high up as possible, and telling the boy to follow close upon his heels, he opened the door and rushed through the flames. There was not a moment to spare, and it seemed as though McBride had, in the second of thought he had given it, completely planned out the escape. But a few feet away the gang plank lay upon the deck. This he seized and threw overboard, telling the boy to jump out and get aboard of it. McBride himself followed but he was fearfully burned and was in excruciating agony. With their hands they paddled away from the vicinity of the burning ship. They were among the very last to be picked up by the boats of the Clinton, which had come to the rescue.

Mr. Blila speaks of the circumstance with reluctance, partly for the reason that, notwithstanding the startling character of that tragic event, so little of the details of the scene can be recalled. As a matter of fact he saw but very little of it. Possibly not more than five seconds of time elapsed between the discovery of the fire and the plunge into the waves. There was no time even for thought and the whole occurrence is scarcely more in the retina of his memory than a troubled dream. So now, when he is asked about the burning of the Erie, he says he remembers so little about it that it is not worth while to repeat it. And yet it is one of the most marvelous of experiences and most miraculous of escapes.

He came through his terrible ordeal unscathed. Far different was it with poor Jerome McBride, who had been the means of saving the call-boy's life. His burns were so severe that he died of them after reaching his home in Erie.