

# A Catalogue of Ways to Die at Sea

by John Mark Capps

Pale and sick, Burnett looked up at them. "Is it possible to die on a ship that has just set out? It must be, for I am dying."

Hazlitt put his arm around him. "When I made the passage to and from America, no one died. Be of good cheer."

"I knew a couple of unlucky souls who died on ships, and heard of more," Lovell said.

"That's not helpful," Burnett squeaked.

Quimby's eyes lit up. "Oh, lads, there must be a thousan' ways to die at sea! I've made th' Atlantic passage a good many time; lemme recount some manners of death I've witnessed with mine own eyes."

"Will this take long?" Lovell asked, looking at his pocket watch.

The old sailor's hands swept the horizon. "The number exceeds the countin' that I've seen swept overboard an' drowneded, all attempt at rescue 'avin' failed. And th' ocean roils an' teems with krakens, serpents, squids, sharks, rays, Portugee men o' war, an' other sea monsters that'll gobble a man down, or sting 'im with 'orrible poisons. An angry Leviathan will smash a boat to bits, a fate that befell the frigate *Minerva* four year ago, an' et up th' odd survivor like the fish swallowed Jonah. Aye, an' dozens o' mariners 'ave I seen perish after being stricken down by the diarrhœa, scurvy, cholera, pox, an' the bloody flux. Uncounted good men 'ave starved to death, e'en after eatin' the last piece o' wormy, rotten biscuit that decent folk would toss overboard, that e'en the fish would scorn t' eat. Sailors will die o' thirst, as I witnessed 'board the ship *Bold Maiden*, on course to Brazil, where I saw two poor wretches reduced to drinkin' their piss ere they passed."

"Heavens!" Hazlitt exclaimed. "They drank their own urine?"

“No, they traded an' drank each other's. Aye, an' privation is the least part of it! Maelstroms an' whirl-pools will suck a craft down in a moment. Storms, tempests, waterspouts an' 'urricanes will overwhelm a sea-ship in an eyeblink. Gigantic waves can o'ertake an' engulf a vessel, an' yet worse are the times when ye're becalmed an' the sea is smooth like a lookin' glass, without a breath o' wind to move the sails, as we were in the Sargasso Sea for three weeks.”

“Much as we are now,” observed Lovell.

“E'en some what survive these perils are left castaway on barren islands, an' might meet their ends there in madness an' despondency, if they be not et up by their fellows in acts o' cannibal barbarity. A dozen ships with all their 'ands 'ave been sunk by fires, an' explosions o' powder in their magazines. Other seamen I've known 'ave been murdered by fierce savages in divers parts o' the world, stabbed or speared or clubbed on th' 'ead. Others friendly with aboriginal maidens come away doomed by the French disease in their loins. An' I've seen many a stout lad come by a sad end by misadventure, strangled in the riggin', or brain stove in by a wayward boom. Bled to death, two o' them did, by accident with an awl. Gangrene can set in, e'en in a little wound, an' do for ye just like that. Ordinary 'angin', floggin' and keelhaulin' 'ave claimed the souls o' countless rascals ill-suited to ship's discipline. Come to grief in brawls, insurrections, an' mutinies many are. Aye, an' th' 'azards o' war at sea deserve a sermon in themselves! Death by musket ball an' cutlass may come to a navy man, else cannon ball or grapeshot may take his life or limb or manhood. Aye, an' I 'ave seen pirates o'ertake an' board hapless merchantmen an' put their 'ole crews to the sword, an' passengers, too, sparin' not e'en th' women an' little babies. God witness me, this 'appened to the *Ability*, a ship once I served on. An'—a fearful story!—the company o' 'nother ship, the brig *Samson*, were beguiled by mermaids, an' the ship left adrift to founder on the rocks off La Coruña, an' every man jack o' them were lost.”

“Every man lost?” Lovell scoffed. “Then who told you this? The mermaids?”

“Well, it's what I 'eard. Anyway, there're grim fates 'round ev'ry cape an' bay, an' worse than the seasickness to fear. O' these lads,” Quimby said, looking around at his new crew, “I fear 'alf'll not live to see Bristol again.”

“A fearful catalogue!” Burnett declared, still clinging to the rail.

Quimby gestured towards an ugly old sailor who was sitting nearby and intently picking his nose. “Of th' original ship's company o' the *Salmacis* what I sailed with twelfth year ago, only old Spicy Tom an' your 'umble servant 'ere are left alive, and 'e's more than 'alf daft.”

“Spicy Tom, you say?” Lovell asked.

“'Is name bears explanation—”

“Oh, please, no need, thank you.”

“Well ye passengers stand a better chance, I deem, unless we wreck. Ye can swim, can ye not?”

“We must turn about and return to Bristol!” George Burnett blurted. “I think I have forgotten something.”

Lovell laughed. “Be of good cheer, Burnett! He is only having some sport with you.”

“No cause to cark an' whingle yet,” Quimby said cheerfully. “Plenty o' reasons later.”

Hazlitt took Burnett's arm. “Here, I'll take you below, to a bed. The art of life is to know how to enjoy a little and to endure very much.”

