

Fifty years ago



“His Wonders to Perform” Miracles at Sea

The series of disasters was strange enough—but even stranger, they seem to have been arranged for one purpose.

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by Harvey Berman

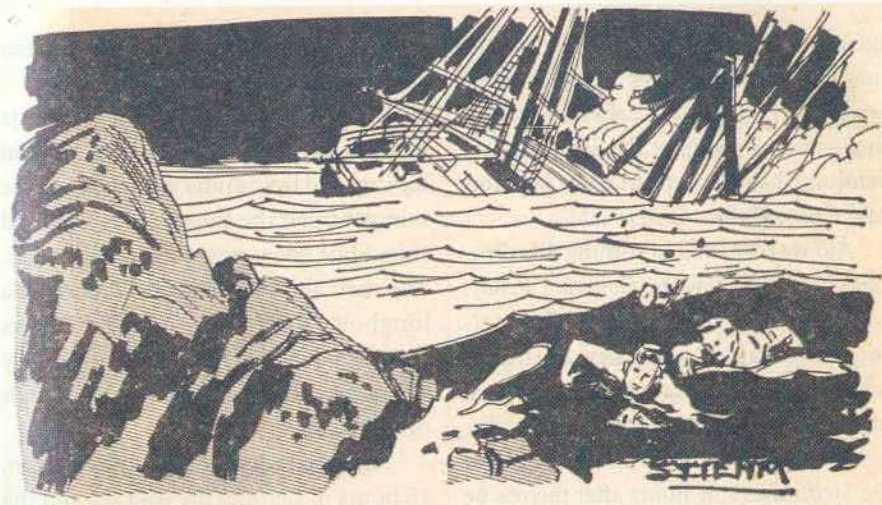
On a blustery October morning in 1829 the schooner *Mermaid* set sail from Sydney, Australia, for Collier Bay on the west coast of the continent. Captain Samuel Nolbrow was at the wheel and there were 18 seamen and three passengers aboard. Rarely have 22 sea-going souls been subjected to greater privations or caught up in a more fantastic chain of events than were these persons. The series of incidents that followed their setting sail defy the imagination and are probably without parallel in the history of man against the sea.

For three days the *Mermaid* followed her course without mishap. The wind was fair. The sky was clear; the glass was steady. Sydney was far astern when Captain Nolbrow went below, as he usually did during the uneventful voyage around

northern Australia, leaving his vessel in charge of his second in command. The crew, for their part—once the skipper had gone to keep company with his “wee little Scotties” contained in a case of good English whiskey purchased just before sailing time—lollered about the deck basking in the sun, and attended to their few duties.

On the fourth day out, however, the wind died down abruptly and an uneasy silence fell over the becalmed *Mermaid*. The quiet and the lack of motion suddenly wrenched a red-nosed Nolbrow out of his stupor and back to the helm of his schooner. On deck he noticed that the barometer was falling and that the sky was a sullen wall of darkness. His crew stood idly by, waiting for whatever was coming.

Shortly before midnight—when the *Mermaid* was in Torres Strait, a treacher-



ous body of water separating Australia and New Guinea and strewn with a thousand and one traps for a ship—the storm hit. High winds ripped through the schooner’s rigging and hurled mammoth waves over her starboard rail. Hard rain beat down relentlessly. Frantically, Nolbrow watched the *Mermaid* being driven toward a ridge of rocks to the north. Desperately he attempted to stave off disaster. Nothing, however, would turn the ship from its storm-driven course, from its rendezvous with destruction.

Three hours after the storm first hit the *Mermaid* struck a coral reef. With a hiss and an impact that rocked the vessel from stem to stern, her bottom was ripped away and the angry sea poured into her hold.

“Abandon ship,” Nolbrow ordered.

Disorganized seamen and passengers hurled themselves over the side and started swimming toward an immense rock jut-

ting out of the water about 200 feet downwind. In the panic and the darkness it seemed certain that the loss of life would be heavy. Yet, later, when the exhausted Captain Nolbrow pulled himself up onto the rock—having been the last to abandon his ship—a count revealed that all 22 persons aboard the *Mermaid* had made it to safety. Incredible but true—not a single life had been lost in the violent sea that had sunk the *Mermaid*.

Three days elapsed before help arrived. Finally, the bark *Swiftsure* hove into view and picked up the *Mermaid*’s survivors. Continuing on her course then, the *Swiftsure* headed west.

But disaster struck for the second time. Passing close to New Guinea, the *Swiftsure* found herself caught up in an overpowering current—a current that was not indicated on any of the excellent charts of the area. And the *Swiftsure* was dashed to pieces

against rocks which jutted out along the coastline. Again the order "abandon ship" was given. This time two crews abandoned ship—the survivors of the ill-fated *Mermaid* and their rescuers from the *Swiftsure*. And again, all aboard were safe.

Aid was not long in coming this time. That very same day the *Governor Ready*, with a crew of 32, sailed over the horizon. The castaways were taken aboard the schooner and the *Governor Ready* clapped on sail and resumed her trip, sailing to disaster even faster than had the *Mermaid* and the *Swiftsure*. Only hours after the rescue the schooner caught fire and three sets of survivors lowered the *Governor Ready's* longboats and rowed for safety. Around them lay hundreds of miles of water—a vast expanse through which few vessels traveled. The outlook was not bright. Nevertheless, by some miracle, the government cutter *Comet* appeared. A storm had blown her off course. Sighting the exhausted seamen she headed for them. By evening all survivors had been taken aboard.

Three ships lay at the bottom of the sea and not a single life had been lost. The crews and passengers of the *Mermaid*, *Swiftsure*, and *Governor Ready* were all aboard the *Comet*, hungry, weary, but alive.

For a week all went well. But the *Mermaid's* crew, believing that they must have a Jonah among them, was strangely silent. The crew of the *Swiftsure* huddled in one corner while the seamen of the *Governor Ready* sat in still another place. The *Comet's* sailors, meanwhile, shunned the company

of all three crews, looking upon their guests with uneasy suspicion.

Their fears, as subsequent events proved, were justified. A sudden storm blew up and by the time the winds and the rain subsided the *Comet* was a doomed ship. Four crews now took to the water. The men aboard the *Comet* launched a longboat, while the other three crews floundered in the violent sea, desperately attempting to keep afloat on odds and ends of wreckage.

Eighteen hours passed in this fashion, 18 hours of fighting the cold sea and the hungry sharks that circled the floundering men. Hope was nearly gone when the packet *Jupiter* came up and rescued the exhausted sailors from what had seemed certain death. When the captains of the four lost vessels checked their men they discovered that for the fourth time all hands had been saved. Somehow, despite four successive disasters, the complete companies of four sunken vessels—every last man of them—were still together, still alive.

Yet, it is hard to believe, the misfortunes of the *Mermaid's* crew and the four crews that had rescued them were not over. Two days from port the *Jupiter* struck a reef and sank. This time the *City Of Leeds* was nearby. A rescue was quickly accomplished and the *City Of Leeds* continued towards her destination.

Now misfortune of another sort appeared. This time a passenger, an elderly Englishwoman, fell gravely ill. Dr. Thomas Sparks, the ship's physician, gave her only

a few hours to live.

During these last hours there was only one thing that the woman wanted. Delirious, she called constantly for her son, a boy she had not seen since he ran away to join the Royal Navy, nearly 15 years before. Finally, coming up on deck, Dr. Sparks cast about for a sailor who would match the age and general appearance of the vanished youth the patient spoke about. He found a perfect substitute among the crew of the *Mermaid*. Thirty years old, tall, with blue eyes and dark hair, the man even had been born in England. Moreover, when asked to help the young man proved willing to deceive the elderly woman so that she might die in peace.

Together, the doctor and the seaman went below. Outside the woman's cabin the physician turned to his accomplice and told him what he must do.

"Listen carefully, lad," he said. "The poor woman's name is Sarah Richley. I want you to pretend that you're her son, Peter. Got that? Remember the name—Peter Richley—don't make a mistake."

The sailor was no longer listening. His face had turned white and he leaned against the wall in the narrow companion-

way. Sparks looked at him in astonishment.

"There, boy, what's the matter?" he asked. "Don't tell me you've lost your stomach for this act of mercy."

The seaman, barely able to talk, whispered, "I needn't repeat the name you gave me, Dr. Sparks. I mean... I mean... that I won't forget it. You see, sir, my name is Peter Richley, and the old woman you say is dying in there must be my mother, that I haven't seen since I left Yorkshire 15 years ago come this Whitsunday."

Thus one good circumstance came of this amazing saga of disaster on the high seas! Fate had brought together Sarah and Peter Richley even though it had sacrificed five vessels to do it. At the same time not a single life had been lost. All of the five captains were cited for valor and advanced in rank. All of the cargo destroyed was covered by insurance. It appears the insurance companies paid for Fate's whim.

Further, the reunion achieved more than the doctor had expected of it. Mrs. Richley was so happy to see her son that her condition immediately took a turn for the better. As a matter of fact, she lived for nearly 20 years more, in a house her long-lost son built for her in Sydney. ★

