



SHIPWRECK!:
“Narrative of the Life
and Extreme Sufferings
of Barnabas Downs, Jun.” (1786)

The subject of shipwrecks has been a mainstay of literature, tracing at least as far back as the Middle Kingdom in ancient Egypt. Jonah nearly became the cause of one. They play no small part in the epics of Homer and Virgil. One actual and historical occurrence of an abandoned ship figures prominently in the story of St. Paul. They are availed of by Boccaccio, Ariosto, and Shakespeare; while (as all know) Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver owe their fame to foundering vessels that left them castaways.

The first most conspicuous accounts of a shipwreck in (North) American literature were Jaspas Dean’s “A Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Nottingham Galley, in Her Voyage from England to Boston, with an account of the Miraculous Escape of the Captain and his Crew on a Rock, called Boone-Island; the Hardships They Endured There, and Their Happy Deliverance” (1711),¹ and Cotton Mather’s “Instructions to the Living, from the Condition of the Dead. A Brief Relation of Remarkables in the Shipwreck of Above One Hundred Pirates, who were Cast Away in the Ship *Whido*, on the Coast of New-England, April 26, 1717. And in the Death of Six, who After a Fair Trial at Boston, were Convicted & Condemned, Octob. 2, and Executed Novemb. 15, 1717. With some Account of the Discourse Had with Them on the Way to Their Execution, and a Sermon Preached on Their Occasion” (1717).

A few others appeared subsequently in the 18th century, with one of the best of these true life tales of the sea being “A brief and remarkable NARRATIVE of the LIFE And extreme Sufferings of Barnabas Downs, Jun.,² who was among the Number of those who escaped Death on board the Privateer Brig Arnold, James Magee, Commander, which was cast away near Plymouth-Harbour, in a most terrible Snow-Storm, December 26, 1778, when more than Sixty Persons were frozen to Death.—Containing also a particular Account of said Shipwreck;” which we reproduce here in full. Doubtless one of the things which renders stories of ships succumbing to wind and waves such an attraction is that someone survived to tell of the frightening calamity; combined with a reader’s feeling his or herself safe and secure at home having only to read about it. Downs’ narrative is a singularly good instance of such; made no less effectively so thanks to his humble and straightforward yet emotionally charged presentation.

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PREFACE

*To the READER, into whose Hands this Narrative may fall; especially my Seafaring Brethren.*

FRIENDS,

When any remarkable circumstances take place in a man’s life, he feels commonly a disposition to communicate them to the world: If they have been deliverances from great and signal dangers, he will make this communication from a principle of gratitude to the BEING who hath protected and preserved

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<sup>1</sup> This appeared in and as part of Cotton Mather’s “Compassions Called For. An Essay of Profitable Reflections on Miserable Spectacles, etc.” (1711). Owing evidently to its popularity, Dean’s narrative was reprinted several times, beginning in 1727.

<sup>2</sup> Also spelled “Downes.”

him; He will wish to engage others to be thankful on his behalf; and a knowledge of the kindness of a Heaven to him may lead others to trust in GOD, when they are brought into like distress and danger. By these motives the Subject of the following pages hopes he is influenced in publishing them to the world; which is all the apology that may be expected from the Publick's distressed Friend,

Barn. Downes, Jun.

Barnstable, September 10, 1786

*The Author gratefully acknowledges himself indebted to a Reverend Gentleman in Boston for his kindness in correcting the following sheets.*

#### NARRATIVE, &C.

I was born in *Barnstable* in *New-England*, October 2, 1757, of credible Parents, whom I served as an obedient Son, I hope, until the commencement of the late war called me from my home, and led me to exchange the occupation of a Husbandman, to which I was bred, for the more dangerous employment of a Soldier. In this capacity I served my Country's campaigns, and know not that my behaviour was censured by my officers.

After having returned for a time to the Farming-Business, I concluded to try my fortune at sea: I entered accordingly on board the schooner *Bunker-Hill*, Captain *Isaac Cobb*, Commander, on a privateering voyage: But we had not been out more than 6 days before we were taken by the brig *Hope*, one *Brown*, Commander, and carried into Halifax. We were committed to jail and kept very short: Then I was taken with the small-pox, thro' which GOD safely carried me when destitute of the necessaries of life, and under great pressure of mind. But after my being recovered so far as to be returned to the jail from the hospital, in consequence of my having nothing but a small allowance of salt provisions, which were next to poison for a sick person, I was taken with a violent fever, which returned me to the gates of the grave. No person who hath not experienced it can imagine how gloomy and distressing it is to be under such circumstances: To be far distant from our dearest Friends; to be among persons who are not only without any concern for us, or interest in our fate, but who are our professed enemies, and not governed even by the common principles of humanity, is a case truly melancholy. In this situation I was attacked with a bleeding of the nose, (to which I had before been subject) which brought me to the very borders of eternity!

After this I was, by the smiles of heaven recovered and restored, by a cartel, with 400 of my Countrymen to our own homes. How welcome they were to us, and how pleasant it was to me to see the faces of my Friends again, any one may imagine more easily than I can describe!

But tho' I had been so unsuccessful in my first attempt at sea, I could resist the inclination I had to try once more what Providence would do for me: I left my native place, went to *Boston*, and entered on board the brig *Arnold*, *James Magee*, Commander. I well remember I felt an unusual dejection when I entered on this undertaking, and tho' I pretend not to say that this foreboded the misfortune I was to meet with in this fatal vessel, yet I have often reflected upon it since with a degree of admiration.

While the brig lay in the harbour, I attempted with some other hands to go on board another vessel in a small boat, but the wind suddenly rising we were in danger of being drowned; the boat run on *Governor's-Island*, and we were obliged to stay there 24 hours before we could get off. Providence preserved my life in this danger, in order that I might live thro' greater, and testify to his loving kindness and mercy.

On December 24, 1778, Capt. *Magee* sailed from *Boston*: We had been at sea but a few hours, when a most terrible gale of a wind arose, so that the water was almost nee deep on the leeward side of the quarter-deck. We continued in the Bay that day and the night following, but on the next day we got into *Plymouth*. The wind was abated, but the cold was severe and intense beyond description. We came to anchor a little below *Beach-Point*, in the Harbour of *Plymouth*.

On Saturday, December 26, about 6 o'clock in the morning, from the violent motion of the sea, the brig struck the bottom as tho' it would drive her keel in. As there was not depth of water enough to work the vessel in the place where we lay, and we saw a heavy storm coming on, our Commander thought it best

to cut our cables and let her drive, which was immediately done. The storm increased very fast, so that we were obliged to cut away the main-mast, and we drifted upon an hard flat a little to the westward of *Beach-Point*.

This was early on Saturday morning, and we now laboured hard in throwing over our wood and getting our guns off the decks into the hold, but the vessel began to leak very fast, and with every motion of the sea she struck the bottom as tho' she would split in pieces. We kept 2 pumps going, but could not gain upon the water. The storm now increased to a most prodigious degree: It snowed so thick that we could see but a very little way from the brig, and the cold was extreme; we continued hard at work all day without eating or drinking anything scarcely, having but little appetite with the prospect of death continually before our eyes.

Until now we had hopes of escape, but just before night we looked into the hold and saw the casks floating about; this drove us to despair, and we forsook the pumps without a ray of hope but from the immediate interposition of divine Providence. Many of the people now began to pray, and I went into the cabin [sic] and sat upon one of the gun-carriages. I had not been there long before I saw chests floating about, and perceived that the tide was flowing on us very fast; by direction of the Capt. All left the cabin and came upon the quarter-deck.

It is not possible to describe my sensations at this period; death appeared inevitable, and we waited every moment for it approach! Even now when I recollect my feelings it is difficult to steady my pen! And indeed I had ground enough for my apprehensions, for we had not been long upon the quarter-deck before the water upon the main-deck was even with it. Our fore-mast was still standing, which caused the vessel to roll very much, but when we had cut that away she lay stiller. The brig now lay sunk; the tide was flowing fast and the sea broke very heavy over us. We were all upon the quarter-deck, and the water came in upon us ankle [sic] deep.

There was a sail in the netting upon the windward-quarter, which we contrived to lash over us, but there were so many under it that we should have been stifled for want of breath, if we had not cut places to let in the air. The tide was then about at its height but the storm did not abate. There was nothing to be heard around but screeches, groans and deep lamentations for themselves and their families, and earnest cries to GOD for mercy and relief!

There was such a croud [sic] upon the quarter-deck we could not stand up without treading upon one another. Being in a struggle I was thrown down and trampled upon as if the breath would be crowded out of my body: However I soon recovered my feet and trampled upon others in my turn; for the immediate regard which every man had to his own life prevented him from attending to the distresses of his neighbors!

Struggling in this manner and trying to clear ourselves from those who fell down had pulled off most of our shoes, and the wet and cold soon froze our feet. Nature could not sustain it no longer and the people began to die all around me. Capt. *John Russell* of *Barnstable* was the first of those with whom I was acquainted that died, but many others soon followed him. Fatigue and distress, added to the extreme cold and despair of relief, put a period to the lives of great numbers. Those who were able to stand were obliged to huddle up close together, and breathe in each other's faces to preserve them from freezing to death, while their comrades were dying around them all night. In the morning a most awful sight presented itself to us; 60 of our Comrades lay dead across each other, and but 2 of my Townsmen were among the living!

On Lord's-Day, Dec. 27, the storm abated and the sun appeared clear, but the severe cold still continued. We saw *Plymouth* and a number of people coming along the shore for our relief: We could discern them push off two boats and make an hard trial to come to us, but the harbour was so full of ice they could not reach us: We saw them return and it gave us an inexpressible shock. The elevation which their appearance gave us tended to sink us lower. Our situation was very gloomy; we had little to support nature except run; no shoes on our feet, and very much frozen; the Heavens was our only covering!

I retained my sense about 2 o'clock on Lord's-Day, but was then deprived of them and lay on the quarter-deck until the next day, when a boat got to us in order to carry the living ashore, which amounted

only to 3, When they were looking around to collect the survivors, they at first supposed me to be dead, but seeing one of my eye-lids move they took me up and laying me in the boat carried me ashore.

I was carried to Mr. *Bartlet's* tavern; whose kindness to me I would thus publicly acknowledge, and hope I shall always remember with gratitude. My clothes were first cut off of me and I was put into cold water<sup>3</sup> in order to take out the frost. I was then placed in bed and having my teeth forced open had some cordials poured down my throat, but I have no remembrance of any of these transactions, for I lay perfectly senseless until 2 o'clock on Monday, when my senses came to me at once. My eyes were not open, but I heard the voices of persons talking around me, and the first idea which struck me was that I was still on board the brig, but that a boat come to our relief. I soon however opened my eyes and was informed of what had happened and where I was.

I recovered gradually, but was obliged to pass thro' the painful operation of having some of my limbs seperated [sic] from my body: But after all these distresses, I am still among the living to praise GOD! Let my spared life be devoted to his service, and may I ever be mindful of his benefits.

*Names of the Deceas'd belonging to Barnstable.*

*Capt. John Russell, Barn. Lothrop [or Lathrop], Daniel Hall, Tho. Casley [?], Eben. Bacon, Jasey [?] Garitt, John Berry, Barnabas Howes, Stephen Bacon, Jon. Lothrop, Boston, a Negro Man.*

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*The SHIPWRECK: A Hymn of Praise.*

*Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy water-spouts: All they waves and they billows are gone over me.—Yet the LORD hath shewn his loving kindness in the day-time. In the night my song shall be with him, and my prayer unto the GOD of my life.—When I remember these things I pour out my soul in me, with the voice of joy and praise. David.*

WHEN mountain billows o'er me roll,  
I poured out my trouble soul;  
When waves of adverse fortune meet,  
Thou prov'd a guide unto my feet.  
2. My song shall always be on GOD,  
I'm sav'd by his uplifted rod;  
My utmost search shall be to know  
The LORD who sav'd from frost and snow.  
3. LORD may I fear thee all my days,  
Thy mercies claim my highest praise;  
For in the time of deep despair,  
Preserv'd I was by heav'nly care.  
4. The LORD is good to those who call  
On Him, and do depend for all;  
In adverse fate if we depend  
On God, he will deliv'rance send.  
5. In deep distress and trouble sore,  
When surging billows round me roar,  
Altho' he slay me, yet I'll trust  
On God, my Saviour, who is just.  
6. Not only trust but I will call  
On HIM, who is the LORD of all;  
My day-song shall in thee accord,  
And in the night I'll praise the LORD.  
7. Thy goodness and thy tender care  
Reliev'd me when in deep despair;

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<sup>3</sup> [Edit. Note. Note cold water, rather than warm or hot water. James Fenimore Cooper, in chapter XXIII of his 1849 novel *The Sea Lions*, advocates using cold water to daily wash with or bathe in for purposes of *keeping warm* in arctic temperatures.]

Thy gracious and thy friendly Crook  
I will record in this my Book.

8. Had it not been for thy controul,  
The deep would swallow up my soul;  
Tho' frost me of my feet deprive,  
Yet will I praise thee I'm alive.

9. Alive to praise thee, O my GOD,  
Tho' chast'ned with afflicting rod;  
But should my sins been marked well,  
My soul would have been sent to Hell.

10. But blessed be his holy Hand,  
I am return'd to native land;  
Tho' sickness did my spirits waste,  
Thy flowing mercy do I taste.

11. My kindred and my Friends so dear,  
Trust in the LORD and always fear  
Him who can save, if you rely  
On ONE who rules above the sky.

12. Lo, SEAMEN, one and all attend,  
Look well to what I here have pen'd;  
Let me intreat you not to swear,  
But live in GOD's most holy fear.

13. He will vouchsafe when danger's nigh,  
To help if on HIM you rely;  
Tho' storms arise on raging main,  
He'll bring thee safe to Friends again.

14. I say to all trust in the LORD,  
He will your grottos always guard,  
From tempests dire and sickness sore;  
Your basket fill, and bless your store.<sup>4</sup>

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*For Lee's Legion on Face Book:*

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<sup>4</sup> [Edit. Note. This piece is followed in the original text by "A HYMN. By another Author," but omitted here.]