

# Sufferings in Africa

The Incredible True Story of a  
Shipwreck, Enslavement, and  
Survival on the Sahara

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CAPTAIN JAMES RILEY

Over  
1,000,000  
Readers



Introduction by **DEAN KING**,  
author of the bestselling  
*Skeletons on the Sahara*

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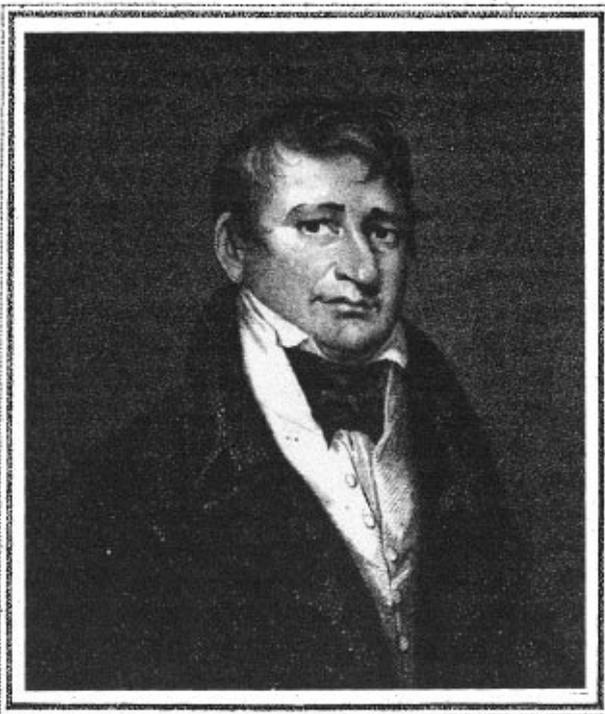
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CAPT. JAMES RILEY.

*Engraved for his Narrative of Sufferings  
and Travels in Africa.*

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# **Sufferings in Africa**

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Survival on the Sahara

**CAPTAIN JAMES RILEY**  
*Introduction by Dean King*



Skyhorse Publishing

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#### NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text for this edition of *Sufferings in Africa* was originally prepared in 1965 from a mid-nineteenth-century edition of Captain Riley's book. Corrections and some minor copyediting changes were made to make the remarkable story more accessible to the modern reader. Several sections at the end of the original work dealing with Captain Riley's observations about Africa were omitted. This edition corrects many of the errors introduced into the text at that time but does not restore the sections after Captain Riley's rescue.

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## INTRODUCTION

Essaouira, Morocco, October 2005. It is twilight, and we are just finishing shooting a dramatic scene on a desolate desert beach. As an Arab cameleer dashes across the dunes with his scimitar poised overhead to strike, the full glowering, burnt-orange African sun silhouettes him and his mount in a vision of solitude and fury. All afternoon a fuming wind has blasted us with sand djinnis, coating every surface. We are ready to go have a whisky in the medina of the nearby walled city to rid our mouths of grit, contemplate the unforgettable image, and plan the next shoot.

Nineteen decades before we arrived in Essaouira, on the coast near Marrakech, the Connecticut merchant brig *Commerce*, under Captain James Riley of Middletown, wrecked on the west coast of Africa south of here, beginning one of the most appalling and—as recounted in Riley’s *Sufferings in Africa*, the volume you now hold in your hands—spellbinding adventures that American citizens have ever endured. After scrambling ashore through stormy seas, the crew of the *Commerce*, a dozen in all, was attacked by fierce natives, whom they believed to be cannibals. The *Commerces*, as the sailors would have been known, escaped in their longboat and spent nine days rowing and bailing in heavy seas. Soaked, scorched, and blistered, their clothes and skin hanging in tatters, reduced to drinking their urine, they crashed ashore again.

That’s when things got bad. Camel-riding nomads, the fierce Oulad Bou Sbaa (though Riley does not name them), captured and enslaved the sailors and drove them relentlessly across dunes and hardpan in a seemingly endless and pointless desert migration. The sailors were fed little, mostly camel milk. Half naked and broiling under the desert sun during the day, they slept outside at night like dogs, where they were strafed by the frigid, sand-bearing harmattan. Under these extreme conditions, some would die beneath the lash. Others, led by Captain Riley, eventually mounted an improbable and hair-raising march back to civilization. To do this, Riley first had to convince an Arab trader from the north to risk everything he owned to buy them and lead the way.

Two of the twelve sailors returned to pen memoirs of the ordeal, both published in 1817. While that of twenty-two-year-old able seaman Archibald Robbins, like Captain Riley’s, was graphic and sensational and went through many printings, the captain’s came first and was literarily superior. Evocative and detailed, curious and introspective, it was profound enough for Abraham Lincoln to list it in his 1860 campaign biography (the only one he authorized and reviewed) with the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Aesop’s Fables*, and biographies of Washington and Jefferson as the books that influenced him during his youth. Henry David Thoreau and James Fenimore Cooper also read and acknowledged Riley.

In its heyday, Riley’s memoir had joined rare company, and it had lost little of its power nearly two centuries later when I discovered the largely forgotten work on a shelf of the New York Yacht Club library. After reading it virtually nonstop and then tracking down Robbins’s account, I was so moved by the suffering and struggles of these Americans enslaved in a foreign land and by the lessons the story offered regarding today’s clash between East and West that I retraced Riley’s route in 2001 and retold the story in the book *Skeletons on the Zahara* (Little, Brown, 2004).

Now I am back in Africa, this time with the History Channel to work on a two-hour special

documentary about Riley's remarkable voyage. On the way to the desolate swath of beach where we film the Arab cameleer, I notice the ruins of what appears to be an old fortress. After our work is done, I ask if we can stop there and check it out.

The ruins lie on the coast looking north to the walled city of Mogadore, or Swearah, as locals call it (Essaouira on today's map). An illustration in *Sufferings* (see page xvi of this edition) shows the square four-towered fortress, where Riley first met William Willshire, the Englishman who paid his ransom. As I explore the place, trying to match Riley's description to what is now left, I recall the emotional meeting between the two men, who came from opposing sides in the only recently ended War of 1812. Willshire, it turned out, did not bear a grudge. A compassionate man, he would risk his own wealth and efforts many times over to help sailors in distress, strangers all, even as it turned out, Americans.

Riley had described the fortress's towers as having green tile roofs. These towers have been reduced by time and the elements nearly to piles of rock and dust, but as I poke around the ruins, I discover several small buildings with faded-green tiles clinging to what is left of the roofs. As I hold one in my hand, a frisson runs through me. In the tile, I feel Captain Riley's presence, for he was a keen observer, a man to whom such details mattered. After traveling eight hundred miles across the desert, reduced in weight from a stout 240 pounds to ninety, his life hanging on the thin thread of a lie that he knew a merchant who would pay his ransom on the spot—he knew no one in Mogadore—he still noted the green tiles.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that Riley noticed ordinary things. He was not a professional explorer or adventurer. He had not set out to prove a theory and was not seeking fame and glory or deliberately putting himself in danger. He was just a merchant captain trying to feed his wife and five children. He was an ordinary man, who found extraordinary powers of fortitude within, making his ordeal all the more poignant.

Meticulously observant though he was, Riley had his doubters. The veracity of his tale was questioned even in its day, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Too many adventure stories we consider classics are dubious, at least partly fabricated (Slavomir Rawicz's *The Long Walk* comes to mind) or filtered through biased lenses (such as Maurice Herzog's *An-napurnd*). One of the first things you notice when you read *Sufferings in Africa* is Riley's candor. Ironically, it was just this quality that created skeptics. He told readers of men who lived on little more than camel milk and even drank camel urine, of men who believed camels to be sacred and their riders specially protected and who pressed the glowing spine of a fire-heated knife to a man's neck to cure him of "moo sickness." Riley reported that he had seen ancients who were hundreds of years old. While this, of course, was not true, a mistake owing to the fierce aging powers of the Saharan wind and sun and to miscommunication, the rest was and still is.

This I can vouch for after my seventeen-day journey on camels and in Land Rovers retracing Riley's route. One of the most telling moments occurred after I fell from a running camel (its gait not called a "rack" for nothing). I hit the ground hard, stunned. My guide, Mohammed el-Arab, camel-jockey instructor, raced back to me. "King," he bellowed, "what's wrong?" Checking my head and ribs to see if anything was amiss, I did not respond. He continued, "Never mind, camels are sacred beasts and those who fall from them are never hurt." While this would be small solace to most Westerners, to me it was more than tonic. It was a revelation, because Riley told almost the same story when he fell from a camel. I could hardly believe that those words of 1815 could echo in 2000. Over and over again, Riley's desert descriptions proved to be accurate. A measure of his success

capturing the ways of the remote desert-dwelling nomads he lived among is the fact that scholars consider him to be the region's first ethnographer and still refer extensively to his account.

A devout Congregationalist, Riley believed that after he and the crew had set out in the longboat to escape attacking natives, God parted the storm-swollen seas and saved their lives. A friend advised him not to make such a bold claim, that it would inspire ridicule from some critics and create room for skeptics to question the rest of his already amazing story. But Riley stuck to his guns.

Riley's religion and faith journey are, in fact, the soul of this story. After surviving the longboat voyage and being captured and stripped naked by camel-riding Arab nomads, Riley and his men, now slaves, were herded together by a well. Desperately thirsty, they plunged their heads into the camel troughs and sucked down the murky water, which ran right through their bodies. They had been reduced about as much as is humanly possible. Only one thing remained to take them down another notch. They were divided up among various families of the tribe, traveling alone or in small groups in a loose confederation. At this point they lost the bond of the ship's crew. They were on their own.

Riley tells us that he cursed his fate "aloud" and "searched for a stone ... to knock out my own brains with." Somehow surviving this moral crisis, he reveals that he then surrendered to the will of God. He realized that he could not survive alone, that even the motivation of saving his cabin boy Horace, the son of a dead friend, was not enough. This was a profound moment for him. And it saved his life.

It is hard for many to understand such an unquestioning faith today, and we wrestle with it as we read the story. At the same time, Riley was not blinded by his faith. He quickly realized that if he and his men were to survive their predicament, it was not through force or resistance that they would do so but only through cooperation with their Islamic counterparts. With an open-mindedness uncharacteristic for his day, even while being despised and abused, he hunted for an ally. He eventually found his man in Sidi Hamet, an Arab trader from the Marrakech area.

When Riley vowed that he knew someone in Mogadore who would pay his ransom, Sidi Hamet took the added precaution of having Riley promise that he could slit his throat if he was lying. Based on this, Sidi Hamet risked all of his and his brother's goods to buy Riley and four of his crew and to transport them across the desert, across endless desiccated plains, through sandstorms, past enemy tribes and a maze of warlord militias. Based on a lie and a death sentence, the relationship began inauspiciously. But these two men of vastly different cultures and religions, nonetheless, set out hoping to survive the formidable challenges and achieve their mutual goals.

It was the lessons learned along the way as the pair—the one a captain and navigator of the sea and the other a caravan leader and navigator of the sands—came to respect and admire one another that raise the caliber of the story to classic status. *Sufferings in Africa* is not just a great adventure or a great lesson in fortitude and survival, it is wider-reaching, more profound, and far more important for today. It is the story of the clash of East and West and the humanity of two men who overcome their differences and great odds to form a bond, to forge a friendship and to work together.

DEAN KIRBY

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## TO THE READER.

THE following Narrative of my misfortunes and sufferings, and my consequent travels and observations in Africa, is submitted to the perusal of a candid and an enlightened public, with much diffidence, particularly as I write without having had the advantages that may be derived from an Academic education, and being quite unskilled in the art of composing for the press. My aim has been merely to record, in plain and unvarnished language, scenes in which I was a principal actor, of real and heart-appalling distresses. The very deep and indelible impression made on my mind by the extraordinary circumstances attending my late shipwreck, and the miserable captivity of myself and my surviving shipmates, and believing that a knowledge of many of these incidents might prove useful and interesting to the world, as well as peculiarly instructive to my sea-faring brethren together with the strong and repeated solicitations of many of my valuable friends, among whom was the honourable James Munroe, Secretary of State, and several distinguished members of Congress, these considerations, together with a view of being enabled by my labours to afford some relief to the surviving sufferers, and the destitute families of that part of my late crew, whose lot it was to perish in Africa, or who are still groaning out the little remains of their existence in the cruel bonds of barbarian slavery, have induced me to undertake the very arduous and difficult task of preparing and publishing a work so large and expensive.

The Narrative up to the time of my redemption, was written entirely from memory, unaided by notes or any journal; but I committed the principal facts to writing in Mogadore, when every circumstance was fresh in my memory, (which is naturally a retentive one,) and I then compared my own recollections with those of my ransomed companions: this was done with a view of showing my friends the unparalleled sufferings I had endured, and not for the particular purpose of making them public by means of the press. It should be remembered by the reader, that the occurrences here recorded, took place out of the common course of a sailor's life; and that each particular event was of a nature calculated to impress itself so powerfully on the mind, as not easily to be effaced. Having previously, in the course of my life, visited and travelled through several foreign countries, my mind was by no means unaccustomed to pay attention to, and make observations on whatever came within the reach of my notice, and for this reason, the strange events of the desert, and the novel objects and scenes which I had an opportunity of witnessing in the country of the Moors, were not suffered to pass without awakening and exercising my curiosity as well as interest, and becoming the subject of careful and habitual reflections.

Respecting my conversations with the Arabs, I have put down what I knew at the time to be the exact meaning, as nearly as I could translate their words and signs combined. I had, previously learned the French and Spanish languages, both by grammar and practice, and had also been accustomed to hear spoken the Russian and different dialects of the German, as well as the Portuguese, Italian, and several other languages; so that my ear had become familiar with their sounds and pronunciation. Perceiving an affinity between the Arabian and Spanish, I soon began to learn the names of common things, in Arabic, and to compare them in my mind with those I had met with in Turkish and other Oriental history. I had no hope of ever being redeemed, unless I could make myself understood, and I therefore took the utmost care to treasure up every word and sentence I heard spoken

by the Arabs, to reflect on their bearing, and to find out their true meaning, by which means, in the course of a very few days, I was enabled to comprehend the general tenor and drift of their ordinary conversation, and to find out the whole meaning of their signs and gestures. My four companions, however, could scarcely comprehend a single word of Arabic, even after they were redeemed.

In regard to the route, and various courses of our travel, I would observe, that after I was purchased by the Arabian merchants, and taken off across the desert; I was suffering under the most excruciating bodily pains as well as the most cruel privations; it will not, therefore, be a matter of wonder, if on this vast, smooth, and trackless desert, I should have mistaken one eastern course for another, or have erred in computing the distances travelled over; for I was frequently in such agony and so weighed down with weariness and despair, that a day seemed to me of endless duration. A long experience of the ocean had before taught me to ascertain the latitude by the apparent height of the polar star above the horizon, so that in this particular, I could not be much mistaken; and the tending of the coast where our boat was driven on shore, proves it must have been near Cape Barbas. After we approached the sea-coast again, I became more attentive to the surrounding objects, as my hopes of being ransomed increased, so that not only the courses, but the distances as I have given them, will agree in all the essential points.

The designs for the engravings were drawn from my own original sketches; (and they were merely rough sketches, for I have no skill in drawing;) they have, however, been executed by artists of considerable repute, and under my own inspection.

In compiling the map, particular care has been taken to consult the best authorities, but I have also considered, at the same time, that the information I received from my old Arabian master was sufficiently correct, and would warrant me in giving full scope to my consequent geographic impressions, in tracing the river Niger to the Atlantic Ocean. Admitting that my idea prove hereafter to be just, and that this river actually discharges its waters with those of the Congo, into the gulf of Guinea, I am of opinion, that not less than one-fourth of the whole distance in a strait line, should be added for its bends and windings, in order to calculate its real length.

While I was at Mogadore, a number of singular and interesting transactions took place such as do not often occur even in that country; and a person might reside there for many years, without having an opportunity of witnessing a repetition of them; yet their authenticity, as well as that of the other circumstances I have related, can be substantiated by many living witnesses,—men of respectability and unquestionable veracity.

My observations on the currents which have heretofore proved fatal to a vast number of vessels, and their crews, on the western coast of Africa, are made with a view to promote the further investigation of this subject, as well as to caution the unwary mariner against their too often disastrous effects.

It gives me sincere pleasure, to acknowledge the services rendered me by my respectable friend Anthony Bleecker, Esquire of New-York, who has, at my request, revised the whole of my manuscript, and suggested some very important explanations. I have been governed, in my corrections, by his advice throughout, which was of a character that can only flow from the most pure and disinterested motives;—his talents, judgment, and erudition, have contributed in a considerable degree, to smooth down the asperities of my unlearned style, and he is preeminently entitled to my warmest thanks.

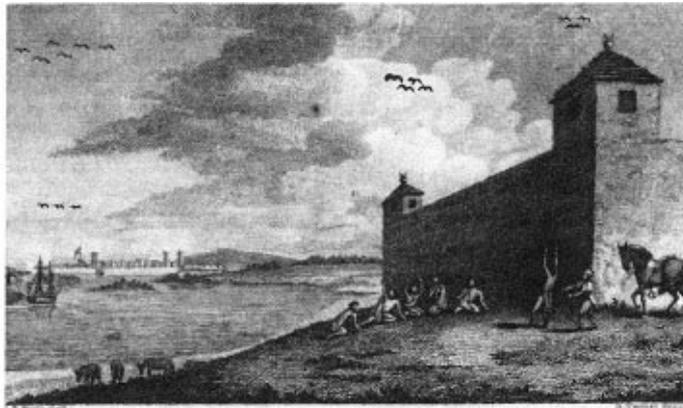
To my very intimate friend, Mr. Josiah Shippey, Jun. of New-York, I am under many obligations—he has separately perused my whole manuscript, with great care and interest, and has suggested many improvements, both in point of diction and grammar;—his highly classical learning, together with his

pious adherence to the true principles of sound morality, and his friendly advice, have been of essential utility, and are highly appreciated.

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With respect to the extraordinary circumstance mentioned in the Narrative, of the sudden subsiding of the surf when we were about committing ourselves to the open sea, in our shattered boat, I am aware that it will be the subject of much comment, and, probably, of some raillery. I was advised by my friend, to suppress this fact, lest those who are not disposed to believe in the particular interposition of Divine Providence, should make use of it as an argument against the correctness of the other parts of my Narrative. This, probably, would have been good policy in me, as a mere author, for I am pretty sure that previous to this signal mercy, I myself would have entertained a suspicion of the veracity of a writer who should have related what to me would have appeared such an improbable occurrence. Sentiments and feelings, however, of a very different kind from any that mere worldly interest could excite, forbid me to suppress or deny what so clearly appeared to me and my companions at the time as the immediate and merciful act of the Almighty, listening to our prayers, and granting our petition at the awful moment when dismay, despair, and death, were pressing close upon us with all the accumulated horrors. My heart still glows with holy gratitude for this mercy, and I will never be ashamed nor afraid to acknowledge and make known to the world, the infinite goodness of my divine Creator and Preserver. "The waters of the sea had well-nigh covered us: the proud waves had well-nigh gone over our soul. Then cried we unto thee, O Lord, and thou didst deliver us out of our distresses. Thou didst send forth thy commandment; and the windy storm ceased, and was turned into a calm."

JAMES RILEY



The Author and his men's first interview with Mr. WELLS, with a distant View of HOGABONE.

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## CERTIFICATES.

CAPTAIN JAMES RILEY has submitted his Narrative to my perusal, and I have read it over with great care and attention. I was his second mate on board the Commerce, and one of his unfortunate companions through, and a sharer in his dreadful sufferings and captivity, on the inhospitable shores and deserts of Africa, and I am astonished to find with what precision the whole of those incidents are related—recalls to my memory all those dismal occurrences and distresses, and I do hereby certify, that the Narrative up to the time of our separation in Mogadore, contains nothing more than a plain statement of facts, and that myself, as well as others of the crew, owe our lives, liberties, and restoration to our country, under God, to his uncommon exertions, fortitude, intelligence, and perseverance, and I hereby request him, as my friend, to publish this my certificate.

AARON R. SAVAGE

*Done at New-York, this 1st day of }  
February, A. D. 1817. }*

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From the Hon. De Witt Clinton.

I have read part of Captain J. Riley's Narrative of his shipwreck on the coast of Africa, and of his travels into the interior of that continent, and I am of opinion that this work, on account of its illustrations of the geography of a country hitherto so little known, and its descriptions of the manners and customs of the inhabitants, will excite great attention, and ought to command public patronage while its affecting details of the extraordinary sufferings of himself and his companions, are calculated, in an uncommon degree, to interest the feelings of the reader. And as Captain Riley is a man of good character and respectable talents, I am persuaded that the utmost confidence may be reposed in the corrections of his Narrative.

DE WITT CLINTON

*Dated in the city of New-York, }  
the 17th December, 1816. }*

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# CONTENTS

## CHAP. I.

*Sketch of the Author's Early Life and Education*

## CHAP. II.

*Voyage of the Commerce*

## CHAP. III.

*Shipwreck*

## CHAP. IV.

*Description of the Natives*

## CHAP. V.

*Seized by Natives*

## CHAP. VI.

*The Frightful Coast of Africa*

## CHAP. VII.

*Slaves!*

## CHAP. VIII.

*Skin and Flesh Roasted*

## CHAP. IX.

*Two Arabian Merchants*

## CHAP. X.

*The Desart of Zahahrah*

## CHAP. XI.

*Arab Hospitality*

## CHAP. XII.

*Mountains of Driving Sand*

## CHAP. XIII.

*Within Sight of the Ocean*

## CHAP. XIV.

*Fear of Robbers*

**CHAP. XV.**

*Black Mountains in the East*

---

**CHAP. XVI.**

*We Are Divided*

**CHAP. XVII**

*Fresh Fish*

**CHAP. XVIII.**

*An Error*

**CHAP. XIX.**

*The Extraordinary Sheick Ali*

**CHAP. XX.**

*A Moor Arrives from Mogadore*

**CHAP. XXI.**

*Ruins of a City*

**CHAP. XXII.**

*Friendship of the Prince*

**CHAP. XXIII.**

*Mr. Willshire*

**CHAP. XXIV.**

*Delirious*

**CHAP. XXV.**

*The Author's Motives*

**CHAP. XXVI.**

*The Face of the African Desart*

# CHAPTER I.

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*A brief sketch of the Author's Life and  
Education up to the month of May, 1815*

I WAS born in the town of Middletown, in the state of Connecticut, on the 27th of October, in the year 1777, during the war between England and America, which terminated in 1783, with the acknowledgment by the mother country of the freedom, sovereignty, and independence of the thirteen United States. My father, Asher Riley, who still lives in the same place, was bred to the farming business, and at an early age married my mother, Rebecca Sage, who is also yet living. I was the fourth child. Owing to an attack of that dangerous disorder, the liver complaint, my father was rendered incapable of attending to his usual employment for several years, during which time, his property, very small at first, was entirely expended; but after his recovery, in 1786, he was enabled, by industry and strict economy, to support his increasing family in a decent manner.

It may not be improper here, before I speak of my education, to give a general idea of what was then termed a common education in Connecticut. This state is divided into counties and towns, and the towns into societies; in each of which societies, the inhabitants, by common consent, and at the common expense, erect a school-house in which to educate their children. If the society is too large for only one school, it is again subdivided into districts, and each district erects a school-house for its own accommodation. This is generally done by a tax levied by them selves, and apportioned according to the property or capacity of each individual. It being for the general good, all cheerfully pay the apportionment. Thus prepared, they hire a teacher to instruct their children in reading and writing, and some of them are taught the fundamental rules of arithmetic. They, for the most part, hire a master teacher for four months in the year, say from October to March, and his compensation (at the time I am speaking of) was from six to ten dollars a month, with his board. In order to obtain his board, I was under the necessity of going to each of his employers' houses in rotation, making his time in each family as equal as possible and in proportion to the number of children therein. In this way all the parents became acquainted with the master or mistress. In the summer one of the best informed girls in the neighbourhood was selected to teach the youngest children. To defray the expense arising from this system, a tax was laid, and every man, whether married or unmarried, with children or without them, was obliged to pay the sum at which he was rated, and in this manner every one contributed for the good of the whole. In each society one or more meeting-houses were established, whose congregations were either Presbyterians or Congregationalists, and a minister (as he is called) regularly ordained and located for a yearly stipend or salary, and generally during life. This was an order and *steady habit*. The minister was considered as the head of the school, as well as of the meeting, and his *like* or *dislike* was equivalent to a law. All the children in each district, whether rich or poor, went to this school: all had an equal right to this kind of country education. To one of these district schools I was sent at the age of four years, where I continued, learning to spell and read, until I was eight years old, when my father's family had increased to seven or eight children, with a fair prospect of more, (which afterwards amounted to thirteen in number.)

Finding it difficult to support us all as he wished, and I having become a stout boy of my age, he placed me with a neighbouring farmer to earn my living, by assisting him in his work. From the age of eight to fourteen years I worked on the land with different farmers in our neighbourhood, who having

received but a very scanty education themselves, conceited, nevertheless, that they were overstocked with learning, as is generally the case with the most ignorant, and in this, their fancied wisdom concluded that much less than they themselves possessed would answer my purpose, as I was but a poor boy ! ! Finding therefore that they would lose my labour during school hours, (for they had always taken great care to keep me fully employed in hard drudgery every moment I was out of school, scarcely allowing me the usual hours of refreshment and sleep,) they kept me from school merely because, as they stated, they could not get along with their work without my help. When my parents remonstrated against such conduct in those who had come under a most solemn agreement to give me a *plenty of schooling*, they were assured "that I was a very forward boy; that I could spell and read as well as any of the boys of my age; that I could repeat whole chapters in the Bible by heart, and knew all the Catechism and Creed, viz. the Presbyterian, which then was, and still is considered, as important in that section of the union called New-England: that I could sing psalms in the *separate meetings* full as well as those who had learned to sing by note, "though indeed he cannot write, (said they) because he has no turn for writing." These representations tended in some measure to allay the anxiety of my parents, who wished me above all things to have a good common country education, they at that time had no prospect of being able to give me any thing better. They had taught me, both by precept and practice, that to be honest, industrious, and prudent; to govern my passions, (which were violent,) to feel for and relieve the distresses of others when in my power; to be mild and affable in my manners, and virtuous in all my actions, was to be happy; and they, generally, had instilled into my youthful mind every good principle.

I had now attained my fifteenth year; was tall, stout, and athletic for my age; and having become tired of hard work on the land, I concluded that the best way to get rid of it, was to go to sea and visit foreign countries. My parents endeavoured to dissuade me from this project, and wished me to learn some mechanical trade; but finding that I could not fix my mind upon any other business, they, with great reluctance, consented to my choice; and I, accordingly, shipped on board a sloop bound to the West Indies. Having no friend to push me forward, no dependence but on my own good conduct and exertions, and being ambitious to gain some distinction in the profession I had chosen, I contrived to acquire some knowledge in the art of navigation, theoretically as well as practically, and at the age of twenty years had passed through the grades of cabin boy, cook, ordinary seaman, seaman, second mate, and chief mate, on board different vessels. I was now six feet and one inch in height, and proportionably strong and athletic, when finding the sphere I then moved in to be too limited for my views and wishes, (it extending only from Connecticut River or New-London to the West Indies, and back again,) I went to New-York, where I was soon appointed to the command of a good vessel, and since that time have continued in similar employment; making voyages in all climates usually visited by American ships; traversing almost every sea, and travelling by land through many of the principal states and empires of the world. For several years I had charge of the cargoes as well as the vessels that sailed in, and had a fair share of prosperity, until the month of January, 1808, when my ship, the *Two Marys* of New-York, was seized by the French, as I took shelter in Belle Isle, in the Bay of Biscay, from some English men of war, being bound for Nantz; and the ship, with her valuable cargo, was confiscated, under the memorable Milan Decree of the 17th December, 1807, founded on the well known Orders in Council, of the 1ith November, of the same year. I remained in France until the ship and cargo were condemned, and did not return to my native country and family, till the latter part of the year 1809, with the loss, it is true, of early all the property I had before acquired, but wiser than I went out; for I had learned to read, write, and speak both the French and Spanish languages; had travelled pretty much all over France, where I had opportunities of witnessing many important

operations in the science of war, calculated to attract my attention to the principles upon which they were founded, and I, at the same time took lessons in the school of adversity, which tended to prepare and discipline my mind for the future hardships I was destined to undergo. I now strove with all my power to stem the tide of misfortune, which began to set in against me with impetuous force. I had become a husband and the father of four children, who looked up to me for support, and I strained every nerve to retrieve my lost fortune, by trading to sea; but it was of no avail; every thing proved adverse, and after an absence of two years to Spain, Portugal, the Brazils, Rio de la Plata, or River Silver, in South America, the West Indies, New-Orleans, &c. I returned home at the commencement of the late war (1812) pennyless. Unarmed commerce on the ocean, my element, was at an end in an honourable way, and I could not obtain a station I wished for in the navy, nor could I obtain the command of a private armed vessel that suited my views, owing to the want of funds; nor would I accept of the command of a vessel and the consignment of a cargo navigated contrary to the laws of war under foreign licences: this I considered would derogate from the character I always wished to support, that of a true friend to my country, (whether in prosperity or adversity,) and a firm supporter of its laws and institutions, which I had proved by long experience in the ways of the world to be as good (at least) as those of any country under heaven. Though the offers that were made me were great and tempting, so that my acceptance of them could scarcely have failed of producing me a handsome fortune, and that in a very short period, yet I remained at home during the whole war, making use of all my faculties to gain a decent subsistence for my family. Soon after the burning of the Capitol and other public and private buildings at the seat of government, by the enemy, in August 1814, when the commanders loudly threatened to destroy every assailable place on the seaboard, I believed the time was near when every arm would be required for the general defence, particularly at the exposed seaport towns; and having enrolled myself in a volunteer company of military exempt artillerymen composed chiefly of masters and mates of vessels and seamen, I had the honour of being chosen the captain. But our services were not needed in the field.

## CHAPTER II.

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*Voyage in the Commerce from Connecticut  
River to New-Orleans*

AFTER the close of the war, in April 1815, being then in my native state, I was employed as master and supercargo of the brig *Commerce* of Hartford, in Connecticut; a vessel nearly new, and well fitted of about two hundred and twenty tons burden, belonging to Messrs. Riley & Brown, Josiah Savage & Co. and Luther Savage, of that city. A light cargo was taken on board, and I shipped a crew, consisting of the following persons, namely; George Williams, chief mate, Aaron R. Savage, second mate, William Porter, Archibald Robbins, Thomas Burns, and James Clark, seamen, Horace Savage, cabin boy, and Richard Deslisle, (a black man) cook. This man had been a servant during the late war under Captain Daniel Ketchum, of the 25th regiment of United States' infantry, who distinguished himself by taking prisoner the English Major-General Rial, at the dreadful battle of Bridgewater in Upper Canada, and by several other heroic achievements.

With this crew I proceeded to sea from the mouth of Connecticut River, on the sixth day of May, 1815, bound for New-Orleans. We continued to steer for the Bahama Islands, as winds and weather permitted, until the twentieth of the same month, when we saw the southernmost part of the island of Abaco, and passing the Hole in the Wall, on the twenty-first, entered on the Grand Bahama Bank to the leeward of the northernmost Berri Islands; from thence, with a fair wind and good breeze, we steered W. S. W. twelve leagues; then S. S. W. about forty leagues, crossing the Bank, in from three to four fathoms water. On the morning of the twenty-second we saw the Orange Key on our starboard beam; altered our course, and ran off the Bank, leaving them on our starboard hand distant one league. The water on this Great Bank, in most places, appears as white as milk, owing to the white sand at the bottom gleaming through it, and is so clear that an object, the size of a dollar, can be easily seen lying on the bottom in four fathom water, in a still time. Having got off the Bank, we steered W. S. W. for the Double-headed Shot Bank, and at meridian found ourselves, by good observations, in the latitude of 24. 30. being nearly that of the Orange Keys. In the afternoon it became nearly calm, but a good breeze springing up, we continued our course all night W. S. W. I remained on deck myself, on a sharp look out for the Double-headed Shot Bank, or Keys, until four o'clock A. M. when judging by our distance we must be far past them, and consequently clear of that danger, I ordered the chief mate, who had charge of the watch, to keep a good look out, on all sides, for land, white water and breakers, and after repeating the same to the people, I went below to take a nap. At about five (then fast daylight) I was awakened by a shock and thought I felt the vessel touch bottom. I sprang on deck, put the helm to starboard, had all hands called in an instant, and saw breakers ahead and to southward close on board; apparently a sound on our right, and land to the northward, at about two leagues distance. The vessel's head was towards the S. W. and she running at the rate of ten miles the hour. I instantly seized the helm, put it hard to port, ordered all sails to be let run, and the anchors cleared away. The vessel touched lightly, three or four times; when I found she was over the reef, let go a second anchor, which brought her up in two and a half fathoms, or fifteen feet of water, which was quite smooth. We now handed all the sails, and lowered down the boat. I went in her with four hands, and sounded out a passage; found plenty of water to leeward of the reef; turned and got under way, and at seven o'clock A. M. was in the open sea again, with a fresh breeze.

This being the first time, in the course of my navigating, that any vessel which I was in had struck the bottom unexpectedly, I own I was so much surprised and shocked, that my whole frame trembled and I could scarcely believe that what had happened was really true, until by comparing the causes and effects of the currents of the Gulph Stream, I was convinced that during the light winds, the day before, when in the Santarem Channel, the vessel had been drifted by the current that runs N. N. W. (and at that time very strong) so far north of the Double-headed Shot Bank; that my course in the night, though the only proper one I could have steered, was such as kept the current on the larboard bow of the vessel, which had horsed her across it sixty miles out of her course in sixteen hours, and would have landed her on the S. W. part of the Carysford Reef in two minutes more, where she must have been totally lost. As so many vessels of all nations who navigate this stream have perished with their cargoes, and oftentimes their crews, I mention this incident to warn the navigator of the danger he is in when his vessel is acted upon by these currents, where no calculation can be depended upon and where nothing but very frequent castings of the lead, and a good look out, can secure him from their too often fatal consequences.

Having settled this point in my own mind, I became tranquil, and we continued to run along the Florida Keys from W. S. W. to West by South, in from thirty to forty fathoms water, about four leagues distant, seeing from one to two leagues within us many rocks and little sandy islands, just above the waters' edge, with a good depth of water all around them, until noon on the 24th, when we doubled the dry Tortugas Islands in ten fathoms, and on the 26th arrived in the Mississippi River, passed Fort St. Philip at Plaquemines the same night, having shown my papers to the commanding officer of that post (as is customary.)

My previous knowledge of the river and the manner of getting up it, enabled me to pass nearly one hundred sail of vessels that were in before me, and by dint of great and continued exertions, to arrive with my vessel before the city of New-Orleans, on the first day of June. Here we discharged our cargo and took another on board, principally on freight, in which I was assisted by Messrs. Talcott and Bowers, respectable merchants in that city. This cargo consisted of tobacco and flour. The two ordinary seamen, Francis Bliss and James Carrington, now wished for a discharge, and received it. I then shipped in their stead John Hogan and James Barrett, both seamen and natives of the state of Massachusetts.

With this crew and cargo we sailed from New-Orleans on the twenty-fourth of June; left the river on the twenty-sixth, and proceeded for Gibraltar, where we arrived on the ninth of August following, and landed our cargo. About the thirteenth the schooner—, Capt. Price of and from New-York, in a short passage, came into the Bay, and the captain on his landing told me he was bound up to Barcelona, and that if I would go on board his vessel, which was then standing off and on in the Bay, he would give me a late New-York Price Current, and some newspapers. I was in great want of a Price Current for my guide in making purchases, and accordingly went on board. The wind blowing strong in, and the vessel far out, I had to take four men with me, namely, James Clark, James Barrett, William Porter and John Hogan. Having received the Price Current, &c. I left the schooner about sunset, when she immediately filled her sails and stood on. As we were busied in stepping the boat's mast to sail back, a toppling sea struck her, and nearly filled her with water; we all jumped instantly overboard, in the hope of preventing her from filling, but she filled immediately. Providentially the captain of the schooner heard me halloo, though at least a mile from us; put his vessel about, came near us, sent his boat, and saved our lives and our boat, which being cleared of water, and it being after dark, we returned safe alongside of the brig by ten o'clock at night. When the boat filled, we were more than

three miles from the Rock, in the Gut, where the current would have set us into the Mediterranean, and we must have inevitably perished before morning, but we were spared, in order to suffer a severe doom, and miseries worse than death, on the barbarous shores of Africa.

We now took on board part of a cargo of brandies and wines, and some dollars, say about two thousand, and an old man named Antonio Michel, a native of New-Orleans, who had previously been wrecked on the island of Teneriffe, and was recommended to my charity by Mr. Gavino, who at that time exercised the functions of American Consul at Gibraltar.

## CHAPTER III.

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*Voyage from Gibraltar towards the Cape  
de Verd Islands, including the shipwreck  
of the brig Commerce on the coast of Africa*

WE set sail from the bay of Gibraltar on the 23d of August, 1815, intending to go by way of the Cape de Verd Islands, to complete the lading of the vessel with salt. We passed Capt Spartel on the morning of the 24th, giving it a birth of from ten to twelve leagues, and steered off to the W. S. W. I intended to make the Canary Islands, and pass between Teneriffe and Palma, having a fair wind; but it being very thick and foggy weather, though we got two observations at noon, neither could be much depended upon. On account of the fog, we saw no land, and found, by good meridian altitudes on the twenty-eighth, that we were in the latitude of 27. 30. N. having differed our latitude by the force of current, one hundred and twenty miles; thus passing the Canaries without seeing any of them. I concluded we must have passed through the intended passage without discovering the land on either side, particularly, as it was in the night, which was very dark, and black as pitch; nor could I believe otherwise from having had a fair wind all the way, and having steered one course ever since we took our departure from Cape Spartel. Soon after we got an observation on the 28th, it became as thick as ever, and the darkness seemed (if possible) to increase. Towards evening I got up my reckoning, and examined it all over, to be sure that I had committed no error, and caused the mates to do the same with theirs. Having thus ascertained that I was correct in calculation, I altered our course to S. W. which ought to have carried us nearly on the course I wished to steer, that is, for the easternmost of the Cape de Verds; but finding the weather becoming more foggy towards night, it being so thick that we could scarcely see the end of the jib-boom, I rounded the vessel to, and sounded with one hundred and twenty fathoms of line, but found no bottom, and continued on our course, still reflecting on what should be the cause of our not seeing land, (as I never had passed near the Canaries before without seeing them, even in thick weather or in the night.) I came to a determination to haul off to the N. W. by the wind at 10 P. M. as I should then be by the log only thirty miles north of Cape Bajador. I concluded on this at nine, and thought my fears had never before so much prevailed over my judgment and my reckoning. I ordered the light sails to be handed, and the steering sail booms to be rigged snug, which was done as fast as it could be by one watch, under the immediate direction of Mr. Savage.

We had just got the men stationed at the braces for hauling off, as the man at helm cried “ten o’clock.” Our try-sail boom was on the starboard side, but ready for jibing; the helm was put to port, dreaming of no danger near. I had been on deck all the evening myself; the vessel was running at the rate of nine or ten knots, with a very strong breeze, and high sea, when the main boom was jibed over and I at that instant heard a roaring; the yards were braced up—all hands were called. I imagined first it was a squall, and was near ordering the sails to be lowered down; but I then discovered breakers foaming at a most dreadful rate under our lee. Hope for a moment flattered me that we could fetch off still, as there were no breakers in view ahead: the anchors were made ready; but these hopes vanished in an instant, as the vessel was carried by a current and a sea directly towards the breakers, and she struck! We let go the best bower anchor; all sails were taken in as fast as possible: surge after surge came thundering on, and drove her in spite of anchors, partly with her head on shore. She struck with

such violence as to start every man from the deck. Knowing there was no possibility of saving her, and that she must very soon bilge and fill with water, I ordered all the provisions we could get at to be brought on deck, in hopes of saving some, and as much water to be drawn from the large casks as possible. We started several quarter casks of wine, and filled them with water. Every man worked as if his life depended upon his present exertions; all were obedient to every order I gave, and seemed perfectly calm;—The vessel was stout and high, as she was only in ballast trim;—The sea combed over her stern and swept her decks; but we managed to get the small boat in on deck, to sling her and keep her from staving. We cut away the bulwark on the larboard side so as to prevent the boat from staving when we should get them out; cleared away the long boat and hung her in tackles, the vessel continuing to strike very heavy, and filling fast. We however, had secured five or six barrels of water and as many of wine,—three barrels of bread, and three or four salted provisions. I had as yet been busily employed, that no pains had been taken to ascertain what distance we were from the land, nor had any of us yet seen it; and in the meantime all the clothing, chests, trunks, &c. were got up, and the books, charts, and sea instruments, were stowed in them, in the hope of their being useful to us in future.

The vessel being now nearly full of water, the surf making a fair breach over her, and fearing she would go to pieces, I prepared a rope, and put it in the small boat, having got a glimpse of the shore, and no great distance, and taking Porter with me, we were lowered down on the larboard or lee side of the vessel, where she broke the violence of the sea, and made it comparatively smooth; we shoved off, but on clearing away from the bow of the vessel, the boat was overwhelmed with a surf, and we were plunged into the foaming surges: we were driven along by the current, aided by what seamen call the undertow, (or recoil of the sea) to the distance of three hundred yards to the westward, covered nearly all the time by the billows, which, following each other in quick succession, scarcely gave us time to catch a breath before we were again literally swallowed by them, till at length we were thrown together with our boat, upon a sandy beach. After taking breath a little, and ridding our stomachs of the salt water that had forced its way into them, my first care was to turn the water out of the boat, and haul her up out of the reach of the surf. We found the rope that was made fast to her still remaining, and this we carried up along the beach, directly to leeward of the wreck, where we fastened it to sticks about the thickness of handspikes, that had drifted on the shore from the vessel, and which we drove into the sand by the help of other pieces of wood. Before leaving the vessel, I had directed that all the chests, trunks, and everything that would float, should be hove overboard: this all hands were busily in doing. The vessel lay about one hundred fathoms from the beach, at high tide. In order to save the crew, a hawser was made fast to the rope we had on shore, one end of which we hauled to us, and made it fast to a number of sticks we had driven into the sand for the purpose. It was then tautened on board the wreck, and made fast. This being done, the long-boat (in order to save the provisions already in her) was lowered down, and two hands steadied her by ropes fastened to the rings in her stem and stern posts over the hawser, so as to slide, keeping her bow to the surf. In this manner they reached the beach, carried on the top of a heavy wave. The boat was stove by the violence of the shock against the beach; but by great exertions we saved the three barrels of bread in her before they were much damaged; and two barrels of salted provisions were also saved. We were now, four of us, on shore, and busied in picking up the clothing and other things which drifted from the vessel, and carrying them up out of the surf. It was by this time daylight, and high water; the vessel careened deep off shore, and we made signs to have the mast cut away, in the hope of easing her, that she might not go to pieces. The masts were accordingly cut away, and fell on her starboard side, making a better lee for a boat alongside the wreck, as they projected considerably beyond her bows. The masts and rigging being gone, the s

breaking very high over the wreck, and nothing left to hold on by, the mates and six men still on board, though secured, as well as they could be, on the bowsprit and in the larboard fore-channel were yet in imminent danger of being washed off by every surge. The long-boat was stove, and being impossible for the small one to live, my great object was now to save the lives of the crew by means of the hawser. I therefore made signs to them to come, one by one, on the hawser, which had been stretched taut for that purpose. John Hogan ventured first, and having pulled off his jacket, took to the hawser, and made for the shore. When he had got clear of the immediate lee of the wreck, every surf buried him, combing many feet above his head; but he still held fast to the rope with a death-like grasp, and as soon as the surf was passed, proceeded on towards the shore, until another surf, more powerful than the former, unclenched his hands, and threw him within our reach; when we laid hold of him and dragged him to the beach; we then rolled him on the sand, until he discharged the salt water from his stomach, and revived. I kept in the water up to my chin, steadying myself by the hawser while the surf passed over me, to catch the others as they approached, and thus, with the assistance of those already on shore, was enabled to save all the rest from a watery grave.

## CHAPTER IV.

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*Description of the natives.—They make war upon the crew, and drive them off to the wreck.*

ALL hands being now landed, our first care was to secure the provisions and water which we had so far saved, knowing it was a barren thirsty land; and we carried the provisions up fifty yards from the waters' edge, where we placed them, and then formed a kind of a tent by means of our oars and two steering sails. I had fondly hoped we should not be discovered by any human beings on this inhospitable shore, but that we should be able to repair our boats, with the materials we might get from the wreck, and by taking advantage of a smooth, (if we should be favoured with one) put to sea where by the help of a compass and other instruments which we had saved, we might possibly find some friendly vessel to save our lives, or reach some of the European settlements down the coast, the Cape de Verd Islands.

Being thus employed, we saw a human figure approach our stuff, such as clothing, which lay scattered along the beach for a mile westward of us. It was a man! He began plundering our clothing, I went towards him with all the signs of peace and friendship I could make, but he was extremely shy and made signs to me to keep my distance, while he all the time seemed intent on plunder. He was unarmed, and I continued to approach him until within ten yards.

He appeared to be about five feet seven or eight inches high, and of a complexion between that of an American Indian and negro. He had about him, to cover his nakedness, a piece of coarse woollen cloth that reached from below his breast nearly to his knees; his hair was long and bushy, resembling a *pitomop*, sticking out every way six or eight inches from his head; his face resembled that of an ourang outang more than a human being; his eyes were red and fiery; his mouth, which stretched nearly from ear to ear, was well lined with sound teeth; and a long curling beard, which depended from his upper lip and chin down upon his breast, gave him altogether a most horrid appearance, and I could not but imagine that those well set teeth were sharpened for the purpose of devouring human flesh! particularly as I conceived I had before seen in different parts of the world, the human face and form in its most hideous and terrific shape. He appeared to be very old, yet fierce and vigorous; he was soon joined by two old women of similar appearance, whom I took to be his wives. These looked a little less frightful, though their two eye-teeth stuck out like hogs' tusks, and their tanned skins hung in loose plaits on their faces and breasts; but their hair was long and braided. A girl of from eighteen to twenty, who was not ugly, and five or six children, of different ages and sexes, from six to sixteen years were also in company. These were entirely naked. They brought with them a good English hammer, with a rope-laniard through a hole in its handle. It had no doubt belonged to some vessel wrecked on that coast. They had also a kind of axe with them, and some long knives slung on their right sides, in a sheath suspended by their necks. They now felt themselves strong, and commenced bold and indiscriminate plundering of every thing they wanted. They broke open trunks, chests, and boxes, and emptied them of their contents, carrying the clothing on their backs upon the sand hills where they spread them out to dry. They emptied the beds of their contents, wanting only the clothes, and were much amused with the flying of the feathers before the wind from my bed. It appeared though they had never before seen such things.

I had an adventure of silk laced veils and silk handkerchiefs, the former of which the man, women and children tied round their heads in the form of turbans; the latter round their legs and arms, though

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