THE ADVENTURES OF CAP'M. JIM

MAROONED

By Lorenzo Caricchio

Cap'm Jim was a Lake St Clair sailor. You might say he was the epitome of a Lake St. Clair Sailor. You might say that, but I won't! Because I don't want to incur the wrath of other sailors, either past or present, who might take umbrage if they overheard me comparing this man, who occasionally

used clothesline for halyards, to the vast majority of prudent seamen sailing our Little Great Lake in pursuit of pleasure or profit. They are the kind of sailors who use all of their skill, courage and intelligence to navigate this challenging body of water and return to dock in much the same condition as they left. Cap'm Jim, on the other hand, was proud of the fact that he regularly "blundered-about" the face of Lake St. Clair, be it smiling or frowning, totally unprepared, trusting his fate (and that of his crew - usually me) to what he considered to be the most powerful force in the universe -P.D.L. - Pure Dumb Luck. And if Dumb Luck, Kapok and Duct Tape kept Cap'm Jim's old, nondescript 22 foot sailboat afloat, then only shore lights and sharp eyes kept it on course, because it had none of the modern conveniences of navigation; No Loran, no GPS, no Radar not even a VHF radio. The only concessions to the need for plotting a course were a compass (who's motion damping fluid had evaporated back in the days when yachtsmen wore brass buttoned blue blazers) and a twenty-year-old chart, so creased and faded, so stained with coffee and beer and bourbon, that an untrained eye might, at first glance, mistake it for an early Jackson Pollack painting.

Yeah, Jim was a casual sailor all right. So why did all of his friends call him Captain Jim? Well, they didn't! Actually they called him "Cap'm" Jim, a kind of slurred, verbal shortcut for the appellation of captain, as if spoken while munching a mouthful of beer sodden potato chips. But why bestow any title at all upon this lackadaisical lake sailor? Was it because when he stepped aboard his faded, and tattered old boat, which fit him like a well-worn pea coat, he seemed to magically morph from Joe Cubicle into Barnacle Bill? Or was it because his smiling craggy face, under the gray stubble of beard, under the sweat stained cap with the large red button on it that said, "DAMN THE TORPEDOES", had the cocksure, amused look of a Caribbean Buccaneer? A look that seemed to say, "Har, don’t worry Matey 'tis only adventure and no harm can come of it!" Or perhaps they called him Cap'm Jim just because Jim

sometimes introduced himself as Cap'm Jim. I don't know. I only know that crewing on Cap'm Jim's boat was always an adventure even when it shouldn't have been. For example, take the calm night when Jim decided to explore Buoy HP-1 off of Huron Point.

We were coaxing a quarter of a knot out of the old 22 because Jim would never start the outboard motor unless the wind died entirely for more than an hour or in the event of an emergency, like if we were in danger of running out of beer or gin. So, this evening we were sitting very still on the lee side of the boat, moving only to raise a drink to our lips or to trim the ancient sails, worn spider web thin by years of wind-friction.

The ride was becoming tedious. We had used up our supply of new jokes (even the clean ones) and neither of us was in the mood to argue politics or philosophy. So, I guess, it was inevitable that when Jim saw buoy HP-1 looming off the port bow it would attract him like a buxom babe in a bikini, he just had to get a closer look.

"Take the helm and steer as close to the buoy as you can," He ordered in his quiet affable voice.

"Sure" I answered, “What are we going to do, play slap the buoy with the big buoys?" I was referring to Jim's penchant for sailing directly at the small Cans and Nuns in the Clinton River channel. Then, at the last minute, he would round the boat up to windward while his hand, stretched far out over the leeward gunwale, would pat the buoy as our stern fishtailed to within inches of the floating device's metal surface.

"No" said Jim, "don't sail past it. Try to stall the boat into the wind right in front of it. I've always wanted to get a long, close look at one of these things."

"Are you sure about this Jim? I mean what if I screw up and hit it" I asked.

"Don’t worry about it. Were not going fast enough to do any damage, and anyway, I'll be in the bow to fend off." Jim countered.

Jim was right; in the light air it was a breeze (pun, apologetically, intended) to put the small boat in “irons” with the bow-pulpit mere inches from the hulking green metal object.

"Wow! I never realized how big these things are." Jim yelled back from the bow.

"Yeah or how bright that flashing light is" I answered from my seat in the stern "It's really messing up my night vision. It almost looks like your floating between the boat and the …."

" Yahoooo! Whoa! Holy Shit!"

Jim was on the buoy! He had climbed over the bow-pulpit and stepped onto the broad base of the buoy while holding on to its steel super-structure with one hand and the bow rail of the boat with the other. But his off-center weight had set the whole thing tilting and turning like an amusement park ride, forcing him to let go of the boat. His movements had also shoved the bow of the boat off the wind and it began to sail slowly away from the buoy, Jim was marooned.

"Hang on I'll get back to you." I shouted. It was a reflex, like yelling "I got it!" when chasing an infield pop-up or diving after a fumble on the twenty-yard line; but I wasn't really sure I could make the game winning snag in this case, and, to make matters worse, the wind was picking up.

I sailed off to leeward then jibed the boat back around toward the buoy, slowly trimming in the sails until I was on a hard beat. When I was close by the mark I put the boat head-to-wind and released the Jib and Mainsail sheets, allowing the sails to flutter and slow the boat. Jim leaned way out and tried to grab the bow rail, which set the buoy to pitching and yawing in violent arcs, his buttocks skimming just inches over the water and almost cracking his head against the bow of the boat. It forced him to retract his arm and to concentrate his grip and his weight on the center of his steel island once again, as I sailed off for another approach.

At this point, you are most likely saying to yourself,

"What a couple of jerks. Why didn't Jim just swim to the boat or why not use the engine to maneuver instead of messing around with the sails?" Well, you're probably a pretty smart sailor. You probably have a whole bunch of racing flags and you probably know on which side of the boat to properly fly the Canadian courtesy flag, and you can probably calculate a complementary course in your head while making small talk and mixing a perfect Martini for your guests. But I was new to sailing at the time, still learning the ropes, and, by the way, did I mention that this happened at ten PM in late October? That the air temperature was forty-eight degrees and Jim had on long underwear, two sweaters a down jacket and sea boots? And did I ever say Jim could swim? As for starting the antique outboard engine, which Jim had personally rebuilt several times, occasionally with parts that he, himself, had fabricated…. well let's just say that interfering in the relationship between that motor and Jim would have been tantamount to adultery.

So I began a new, slow, approach but this time I wasn't going to stop the boat. Jim had shouted instructions to me to pass close by to Leeward and he would make a leap for it. I didn't like the idea but it was his boat and his ass on the line so I went along with it. When the boat was two or three feet away Jim launched himself toward it with such force that I thought he would overshoot the deck. But instead, he hit the Bow Pulpit with his chest, his outstretched arms wrapping around the top rail. He hung there a moment, the breath knocked out of him, unable to hoist himself up and loosing his grip, he began to slide down the side of the boat. I abandoned the helm to the winds and clambered over the cabin top and onto the bow just in time to catch one of Jim's arms and a flailing leg and helped him to scramble under the lifelines and on to the deck.

When we were back in the cockpit and had the boat sailing on an even keel again, Jim said, "Well that was moiré excitement than I'd bargained for. I always thought those things were more stable."

I didn't say it at the time but I was beginning to question Jim's mental stability. He was soaking wet from toes to knees and I'm sure that his ribs hurt where they had crunched against the rail, but he was smiling. Dumb Luck had seen him through once more. Nothing was broken on the boat, nor on Jim, we didn't have to call a third party for rescue and the Coast Guard didn't catch him tampering with a navigational aid. Which I understand carries a hefty fine, I mention this incase any of you are foolhardy enough to consider duplicating this stunt.

The rest of the evening was thankfully, uneventful. We had enough wind to sail back to dock before we ran out of beer and Cap'm Jim had kept my fledging interest in sailing alive for another week by turning an otherwise boring light air sail into an excellent adventure. Or as Cap'm Jim would say, it was the kind of sailing that separated the men from the buoys.

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