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# Unbelievable but True

## *Or did somebody rouse Davy Jones' anger?*

Way back in the 1820's, the main means of communication in and around Australia were small inter-land schooners. The waters they sailed were relatively uncharted. Such charts as were available were frequently chock-a-block with inaccuracies. It took a great deal of courage to navigate the Southwest Pacific for at any moment an unknown reef might reach up and rip the bottom from an unwary ship.

As might be expected, sea stories from the area abound. Many are harrowing tales. A few are even funny. There's one in particular though that makes the reader think somebody made Davy Jones angry.

One fine day in October 1829, the schooner *Mermaid*, Samuel Nilbrow, master, departed from Sydney, New South Wales, with cargo and a crew of 17 men. Her destination—Raffles Bay via Torres Strait. While in the Strait, a hazardous current-swept bit of water between Australia and New Guinea, she hit one of the many reefs there and was lost.

All hands managed to get away safely to a nearby rock. For three days they held to their precarious perch, living on rainwater, barnacles, ship's biscuits, and a few shellfish

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that clung to the rocks. Their trial ended the third day when the bark *Swiftsure* hove in sight and picked them up. Or did it end?

The *Swiftsure* failed to live up to her name. She was neither swift nor sure. Two days later she went aground on a reef close aboard one of the area's many small islands. She too was a total loss. The 18 men from the *Mermaid* and all 14 from the *Swiftsure* swam ashore and prepared for a stay.

Rescue eventually arrived. The schooner *Governor Ready* bound for Papua, passed near the island, saw the castaways' signal and picked up the 32 survivors. But Davy Jones's anger was still far from appeased. The *Governor Ready* had only resumed her voyage for a short time when he struck once again. The vessel caught fire. Within a matter of a few hours, she was beyond saving.

Taking to the boats, the three sets of survivors, now totaling 64, including three captains, drifted on the frequently far from pacific Pacific Ocean. Along came another windjammer, the cutter *Comet*. She picked them up, but they were not safe for long. The little *Comet* ran into a fierce storm and went down. Once again the 64 plus 21 from the latest victim took to the boats.

For some 18 hours the growing number of survivors, now totaling 85, drifted before another ship hove in sight. She was the *Jupiter*, bound for Western Australia. The 85 from "the sea" plus the rescue ship's 38 men, including her captain, crowded her well beyond capacity. Even the curse came aboard. Before she could reach land, she too struck a reef, tore out her bottom and was lost. Now 123 men were clinging to some slippery rocks, trying desperately to stay alive.

Then Father Neptune probably took a hand. Calling Davy Jones to his court, he must have said, "Enough, remove your curse. I will send them a ship."

The *City of Leeds*, a passenger schooner with 100 passengers aboard, sighted the survivors, picked them up.

She eventually made port—escaped the fate of the other five.

But the strange story does not end here. Aboard the *City of Leeds* when she picked up the 123 castaways, was an elderly woman desperately ill. In a coma, raving about a son she hadn't seen for ten years, nobody thought the woman would survive. As it turned out, her son was among the *Mermaid* survivors. Suddenly awaking from her coma, she saw him; subsequently she recovered to live for another 18 years.

The workings of fate are indeed strange. Five related disasters without loss of life, even a miracle that saved a life! Was it fate? Was it destiny? Or was Father Neptune trying to make some amends for his frequently recalcitrant subject Davy Jones who must have been angry with the *Mermaid* and her crew who started it all.



*Her son was among the Mermaid's survivors.*