

TOILER OF THE SEA

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On the 4th of December, 1830, his Majesty's frigate THETIS of forty six guns, and with a complement of about 300 men, sailed from Rio de Janeiro homeward bound to England, having on board gold and silver bars, and other treasures of various descriptions, amounting in value to about 810,000 dollars; the greater part of which she had brought around from the Pacific to Rio where she received a small additional quantity. Because of light winds, a thick fog and a strong contrary tide she was unable to make her departure from Raza Island, which is situated at the outer entrance of the harbor, until half past one o'clock on the morning of the 5th. The wind being from the south-eastward at that time, she stood out to sea on the larboard tack to get an offing; and at seven o'clock they wore ship and stood on the starboard tack and with a fair wind were soon doing an estimated ten knots. At four that afternoon the ship was considered to be abreast of Cape Frio, twenty four miles distant, the course was changed

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to northeast by east, all sail was set, and the ship was logging ten and one half knots with every expectation of a speedy voyage home.

¶ Later the dog watch had been relieved and the officer in charge of the first watch made the rounds of the deck checking and instructing the watch and, had just returned to the quarter deck, when the lookout on the cathead called out, "Breakers under the bow!" which was immediately followed by the shout, "Rocks above the masthead!" In an instant the bowsprit came with a tremendous crash in contact with the lofty perpendicular cliffs of Cape Frio, and was broken off just above the ship's figurehead; the yardarms also pressing against the cliffs. Another surge of the seas brought the foremast crashing against the mainmast which in turn crashed and carried away the mizzen; thus all three masts fell fore and aft on board the ship killing and injuring many of the crew. ¶ In the space of a few moments, the ship was reduced from the grandeur of a free sailing vessel winging its way homeward, to a helpless and unmanageable hulk.

The water being very deep near the cliffs the THETIS did not strike bottom but continued to pound itself along the overreaching rugged rocks. The pumps were started immediately but it was soon evident that all hope of saving the ship was at an end, and the preservation of life became the only object of the crew's efforts.

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At the part of the cliff where the THETIS now lay, there was a shelving projecting rock about twenty five feet above the sea, which presented a point at which there was a prospect of landing, and here a part of the crew made the attempt by leaping; about forty of them succeeded, but others less agile, or less strong, failed, and falling between the ship and the rocks, were drowned or crushed to death. The mastless vessel, now completely at the mercy of the wind and waves, bumped and crashed along the cliffs for about a third of a mile and then suddenly drifted into a small cove, where she was soon impaled on the rocky bottom against which she began to grind.

The members of the crew who had successfully scrambled to the cliff, followed the lurching and crashing vessel to the cove and after hours of heartbreaking efforts managed to get a line secured to the beach from the THETIS by which means the remaining members of the crew were drawn ashore.

A quick muster revealed that only twenty eight persons had perished, which, considering the whole of the circumstances, was quite remarkable. Ironically enough, a glance at the chart of the scene of the wreck shows that had the THETIS been a few hundred yards to the eastward on her course she would have been well clear!

One can ~~also~~ well imagine the line of questioning which might have been conducted by a court of inquiry or courtmartial in the case of the aforementioned officer of the deck, particularly as to

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why he was personally instructing and checking the watch and lookouts! Whether or not the log was saved was not indicated in the narrative of the THETIS' loss, but an entry, if any, showing the allowance made for current and drift at the time of the change of course at 4 o'clock would have also been an important element in the questioning.

On the 10th day of December, 1830, intelligence of the loss of the THETIS reached Rear Admiral, Sir Thomas Baker, Commander in Chief, South American Station, then at Rio de Janeiro. He immediately proceeded to Cape Frio with a small squadron and, after several days examination of the wreck, left a guard vessel there and returned to Rio.

At about this point there appears in this narrative a character straight from Victor Hugo's, 'Les Travailleurs de la Mer', but forty years or more before that classic was authored, Captain Thomas Dickinson, R.N., Commanding Officer of his Majesty's sloop of war, LIGHTENING, had arrived in Rio the day after the THETIS sailed. Of course a few days later he learned of the disaster

Upon the return of the Commander in Chief, Dickinson learned that although several naval vessels had visited the wreckage, no plans in connection with salvage operations had been developed. He quickly applied to Admiral Baker for assignment of his vessel to the salvage of the THETIS, and, by persistent submission of operation plans, finally received the assignment. He spent the next few weeks in trying to locate a diving bell, pumps, air hose and other salvage gear in Rio

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de Janeiro but was unable to locate a single piece of equipment. Left entirely to his own resources, he managed to obtain two two-ton water tanks from one of the squadron vessels and, by promising them a share of the salvage, persuaded two civilian mechanics to undertake the conversion of the tanks into a diving bell.

Captain Dickinson describes his diving bell: "One side of a two ton tank (four feet square) was taken out, another was divided into halves, from one of which halves the side was also taken out, and it was then rivetted to the bottom of the former, thus forming a cubicle vessel six feet in height by four feet in breadth each way, and open at the bottom; around the upper square or head, bars of iron two inches broad and a quarter of inch thick were rivetted, and others were placed down each side of the corners from the head to the lower edge, which was also strengthened in the same manner as the head. On the upper part of the inside were rivetted numerous hooks for the purpose of suspending the various implements for boring rocks, digging etc. It was lighted by six patented illuminators, two at the top and two at each side; and this rendered it so light that a person might see to read at a depth of many fathoms." (1)

Dickinson's air pump was fashioned from, "That excellent invention, Fisher's watering apparatus, for a trifling alteration in the force pump rendered it a powerful air pump." (2) His air hose was fashioned from water hoses which were parcelled with new tarred canvas and served with spun yarn.

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improvised

Captain Dickinson, with his/salvage equipment and a few volunteer hands from the squadron on board, sailed for Cape Frio on the 24th of January, 1831, and arrived at the harbor of Cape Frio on the 30th. Inasmuch as the distance was only seventy miles his statement that he encountered northeast head winds appears to be well founded.

In his discussions with the Commander in Chief and other members of the small squadron who had visited and examined the wreck, Dickinson was lead to believe that the bulk of the wreck remained above water and many of his advanced salvage plans were based on this supposition. Imagine his surprise and disappointment when, on the morning after his arrival at Cape Frio, he climbed to the summit overlooking the little cove and could see no sign of the wreckage except for a few spars and masts which had been collected by the crew of the guard ship! ^H The cove or inlet in which the THETIS sank was formed by rugged and almost perpendicular cliffs from 80 to 195 feet high on the northwest, northeast and southeast sides and consequently exposed to the whole force of the South Atlantic ocean on the southwest. It extended about 100 fathoms inward from the sea and was about 90 fathoms broad.

Captain Dickinson immediately set about preparing a camp from which to base his salvage operations. Small sails and spars for constructing shelters and storehouses were sent ashore. In setting up this camp Dickinson was ever mindful of his responsibility as a naval officer and that his vessel was an important unit of the South American squadron. He required that each spar, sail, box of stored ^{of} and other

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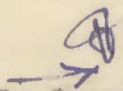
equipment be marked ^{as} ~~in~~ to its proper position on the sloop and he estimated that, in an emergency, the LIGHTENING could get underway within four hours notice.

From his first descriptive knowledge of the cove he had planned on spanning a cable across the cove over the wreck and suspending his diving bell therefrom. However he found that the suspension points for the cable would be more than 120 fathoms apart. The flexibility of such a long cable coupled with the effect of the seas would undoubtedly cause very great oscillations of the diving bell. ~~of~~ ^H Dickinson relinquished this first plan and decided on erecting a derrick on the side of the cliff from which to suspend the diving bell. From the last known position of the wreck it was estimated that a derrick 120 feet long would be required and that it would have to be stepped on the rocks about 50 feet above the water's edge. Therefore on the 3rd of February, 1831 a large portion of the crew was set to work on the construction of the derrick and preparing platforms on the cliff for the main purchases, guy topping lifts and various other guys and lifts with anchorages for same. ^H The timber from the adjoining forests was found to be too green and heavy so it was necessary to fabricate the derrick from the fragments of spars saved from the wreck. The derrick boom was eventually composed of; "twenty two pieces united by a great number of dowels and bolts, thirty four ^{hoops} ~~hoops~~ and numerous woodings of four inch rope." (3)

In the meantime the launches had commenced creeping operations and on the 9th of February brought up the THETIS' rudder and other objects. This and subsequent recoveries afforded positive proof that the wreck was broken up and scattered over the cove. However this method of recovery could only result in bringing up scattered pieces of superstructure. Dickinson therefore determined on a project of working a diving bell from a boat; and he stated, "On the 16th we set to work to construct a small bell out of a one ton tank and the remains of the two ton tank which had been cut to make the large bell; it was very similar to the one already described. A launch was fitted with a davit stepped on the keel, supported by a spur, on each side resting on the transom: it projected over the stern at a sufficient angle to ^{admit} ~~permit~~ of the bell when suspended above the water hanging clear of the boat, and was of a height to allow of a small boat passing under the bell for the men to enter and get out. To relieve the stern in a measure from the great weight of the bell, a short strong mast was stepped in the usual place, and steering forward; from its head to the head of the davit was a span, which set up with two thimbles and a lanyard, and the whole was supported by a strong stay from the mast head to the stem of the boat, and two shrouds on a side leaning forward. The bell purchase was the LIGHTENING'S jear blocks, and six parts of four inch rope led completely around the boat through four leading blocks, one on each bow and quarter, and thus admitted of thirty men to work at it independently of those who attended the air pumps, hoses, and signal lines. There was also a preventer runner and tackle fitted to heave the bell in the event of the purchase giving away." (4)

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The launch and small diving bell were completed on the 2nd of March and they underwent a first trial in quiet water at a depth of four and a half fathoms where two men remained comfortably for half an hour. The tests were successfully concluded by shifting position several times to test the purchases and lifts.

Then came many weeks of alternate searching the bottom and waiting out periods of rough weather. As various portions of the wreck were discovered they would be buoyed for future more careful searchings only to have rough weather set up and destroy the buoys as well as shift the wreckage and cover it with sand and rocks. In the meantime work continued on the derrick. It was now determined that it must be lengthened to 158 feet and that it must be stepped near the water's edge instead of 50 feet up the face of the cliff.

At last, on the 31st of March, they were rewarded with the first bit of treasure. Before eleven o'clock that morning the divers had sent up about 3000 dollars mixed in sand and rock. This fired the enthusiasm of the crew so high that they volunteered to work through the night. By ingenious use of large flares carried in the launches, the divers were able to see well enough to work, and by two o'clock the following morning there had been recovered; 6326 dollars, 36 pounds ⁵10 ounces of Plata pins*, 5 pounds 4 ounces of old silver, 243 pounds 8 ounces of silver in bars, and 4 pounds 8 ounces of gold. They continued after a short period of rest and recovered upwards of 4000 more dollars when a dangerous sea came up and they were hard pressed to escape from the cove which became rough at

* Cones of raw silver from the crude South American smelters.

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the slightest sea because of the turbulence effected by the recoil of the seas from the perpendicular cliffs.

The derrick was completed on the 7th of April and launched for towing to its proposed site in the cove. What had been calculated to be a simple towing and erecting project turned out to be a nightmare of frustration. Shortly after launching it was discovered that the woodings and guys stretched and changed tension so radically that the entire derrick had to be overhauled. It was not until the 6th of May that the derrick was stepped into place. Even after the guys and purchases had been set up, it was found that constant changes had to be made in the rigging to overcome the shrinkage and stretching caused by alternate hot sunshiny, and cold rainy days. On the 18th the diving platform with its bell and air pump crews was thoroughly tested. The derrick boom was swung from side to side and the platform lowered and raised several times very successfully but no actual search was made for treasure.

^{as} Disaster struck that night in the form of a fresh to strong gale! All rigging was secured and made taut and a watch was set on the derrick overnight. By two o'clock in the morning of the 19th heavy spray was striking the diving platform which was two blocks high above the stepping base. This spray and the surging of the seas caused all of the gear to stretch again and finally a heavy sea

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wildly struck the/swinging platform and plunged it, the diving bell and the air pump gear into the broiling sea. Shortly afterward another huge sea swept the entire derrick in shattered pieces from its foundation; utterly destroying the fruits of nearly four months hard labor in a few moments. Many days were spent ^t in creeping operations and in the use of the small bell and launch but it was not until the 27th of May that they recovered the large bell and all air pump gear. ⁹ Dickinson then gave up all plans of utilizing a derrick and began to convert a larger launch to accommodate the large bell but he had no more than started this conversion when a sudden gale came up during operations with the small bell and it too was sunk and lost for many days.

However, during the months of April and May the small diving bell had been constantly at work except during heavy weather and the daily journal reveals that they recovered on an average of 3800 dollars as well as a few pounds of silver and gold per working day. The most successful day, May 17th, they recovered 14,650 dollars, 401 pounds of bar silver and 432 pounds of Plata pina !

Presumably the thrilling excitement of bringing up canvas buckets containing slimy, grit-embedded bits of treasure was influential to some extent in keeping high the spirits of this enterprising crew. Their life in the temporary canvas and grass shelters was anything ^u but comfortable. Mosquitoes, flies, jiggers, ants, and many other pests bothered them day and night.

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Soon after the camp was set up it was visited by a giant constrictor snake, "fully 3 fathoms long and with a girth as great as the LIGHTENING's bower cable." (5) Thereafter they were constantly plagued by these monsters and hundreds of them were killed during their sojourn on the island. Persistent reports by members of the crew that there were tigers near the camp led Dickinson to personally conduct a hunt for these creatures. It developed, much to the relief of all hands, that the reportedly awesome beasts were capivari, a large, harmless beaver-like animal which frequently reaches the weight of 100 pounds!

Fever, catarrh, rheumatism, dysentery, and ulcers or yaws caused by the bites of jiggers continued to plague all hands but the salvage work continued whenever the weather permitted with about the same average recovery per working day until late July. At this time there were indications of a revolution brewing in Rio de Janeiro and Captain Dickinson, being one of the senior naval officers on the South American Station, was recalled with his vessel. His earlier precautions were fruitful for he was able to depart the morning after he received orders. He departed with all except three young officers and twelve hands with whom he left instructions to carefully watch and protect the public stores and equipment. The men left behind were those of the crew in the best of health. Late in August, matters having quieted down in Rio, Dickinson and his crew, much refreshed by their sojourn away from the pest ridden camp, returned to Cape Frio. ^{There} they found the men

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who had remained, in a bad physical state so Dickinson ordered them to the LIGHTENING to remain on board until they had recovered.

During the month's cessation of operations the launches and diving gear had deteriorated to some extent and a few days of overhaul were required before salvaging could be resumed. The idea of the suspension cable rigged across the cove was again revived and, after a difficult task of providing secure anchorages in the rocky cliffs, a few attempts were made to operate the large bell suspended from that cable. They were successful in recovering several large pieces of wreckage and in removing large rocks and debris but no treasure was recovered by this method and the use of the bell from the launch was resumed.

Captain Dickinson set aside the 21st of October, the anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, as a holiday but the weather being exceedingly favorable and the recovery of treasure averaging good, the holiday was postponed until the 26th when bad weather set in. All hands regaled themselves with a feast of barbequed pork. As Dickinson wrote in his journal, "The day was passed in fun and frolic; cheerfulness and festivity pervaded every one, and our Gracious Sovereign never had his health drunk with three more loyal or hearty cheers than were given by the crew of the LIGHTENING at Cape Frio on that occasion." (6)

November and December 1831 passed with good daily recovery averages when the weather permitted operation of the launch and bell. In addition to the treasure, the divers were daily recovering guns,

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anchors, chain cables and other valuable material. The month of January however was so rough that only one day, late in the month, was suitable for diving and that was a profitless day for only 1 dollar was recovered ! February was also very boisterous and on the few days that diving was possible there was very little treasure recovered although a considerable amount of heavy gear from the wreck was brought up.

On the 6th of March, 1832, Captain Dickinson was surprised by the arrival of his Majesty's sloop ALGERINE with orders from the Commander in Chief to resign the charge of the salvage operations to Commander, the Hon. J. F. F. de Roos of that sloop. Dickinson wrote in his journal, "I could not but feel this a most mortifying circumstance. I had been the only person who had come forward to attempt the recovery of the large property which was considered to be irretrievably lost; I had devised the whole of the methods by which a very large portion of ^{it} was recovered, and in giving effect to them I had endured peril, sickness, toil, and privation, during a period of more than a year, to the injury of my constitution; and the work was now reduced to a mere plaything compared with what it had been, and yet I was not allowed to put the finishing hand to it. Notwithstanding this, the deep interest that I had felt in the undertaking remained unabated, and I was determined that nothing should be wanting on my part to ensure a successful termination to it. On the 7th I ordered the necessary survey

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on the stores previous to their being turned over to the charge of other~~x~~ hands; and while the proper officers were performing this duty, I took Commander de Roos to examine the air pumps and hoses, ^{store}~~set~~rehouses and stores, and on the cliffs to inspect the various fastenings and machinery, and afford him every minute verbal explanation and information respecting the operations that he should consider would be advantageous to him, and offered him the perusal of my logbook, that he might abstract anything from it that he might think useful, in fact to make ^a him thoroughly acquainted with the whole establishment." (7)

^f
Just before Captain Dickinson departed for Rio de Janeiro he received a communication from Commander de Roos asking for more details in connection with plans of the cove and especially in regard to the probable location of the remaining bits of wreckage as well as abstracts of Dickinson's log. The now crusty captain answered testily that he was amazed at this recent request inasmuch as he had previously offered de Roos free access to the log and had ^d personally conducted him over the cove showing him the locations where they were actually retrieving treasure and where he thought there might be additional treasure.

f De Roos ultimately recovered 165,000 dollars worth of treasure. Dickinson had recovered and sent home over 585,000 dollars worth.

Dickinson sailed for Rio on the 13th of March 1832 and eventually arrived in England where he learned of startling

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events in connection with his long, hazardous and trying salvage operations. Agents of the underwriters and of Rear Admiral Baker had placed claims with the Admiralty Court for possession of the salvaged treasure, with the Admiral described as the 'principal salvor'. Lloyds, the underwriters, had presented a very strong claim in which their council stated, "All of the several persons therein and now claiming to be salvors, as well officers as men, were during the period referred to, as they now are, in his Majesty's service and receiving pay as such, that it was the unquestionable duty of the said alleged salvors to proceed in their public capacity upon any service which might call for the exercise of their skill and labor, without any reference to private emolument to be derived therefrom." (8) Lloyds therefore **1** "denied any right to salvage".

Both Rear Admiral Baker and Captain Dickinson appealed the court's decision which was in favor of Lloyds and eventually a higher court awarded 17,000 pounds to the salvors who included, Baker, Dickinson, *Lightening crew,* de Roos and the crew of the ALGERINE, a total of more than 400 persons. **A** De Roos, as well he should, appeared to be satisfied with this decision, for he did not appeal. Baker and Dickinson however appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council who, "confirmed the decision of the Admiralty Court in all respects except as to the amount

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of award to the appellants, decreeing the sum of 12,000 pounds in addition to the 17,000 pounds already awarded." (9) As the recently promoted Captain de Roos and his crew were not appellants, they did not benefit by that augmentation of the award. However in January 1835, a Lloyds committee unanimously passed the following resolution:

- " 1st. A vote of thanks to Admiral Sir Thomas Baker for his zeal and exertions.
- 2nd. The same to Captain de Roos, of the ALGERINE, and a grant of 2000 pounds to himself, his officers, and crew, being the amount they would have received had they been parties to the appeal.
- 3rd. To mark the sense of the Meeting of Captain de Roos' conduct, it is further voted to this officer a piece of plate, of the value of 100 guineas." (10)

There was no mention of Captain Dickinson's efforts as salvor in this resolution, which was in line with the underwriter's counsel's efforts during the hearings to avoid naming him principal salvor. By influencing the court to name Rear Admiral Baker, who did no actual salvage work, as principal salvor they were successful in keeping the award down to a comparatively small amount. Otherwise the award might have reached a much higher figure.

Captain Dickinson was not so much disappointed in the amount of the award as he was in the Admiralty Court's decision that he was not the principal salvor. He asserted, "Salvage is a reward for personal services exerted in the rescue or recovery of property, and that salvage service differs from the ordinary service of naval cooperation, such for instance as joint capture, where the

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mere being in sight entitles a vessel so situated to share with the actual captor; for, in respect of salvage services, there is not known in law any such principle as constructive assistance, but the principles adopted by the Admiralty Courts in awarding salvage has heretofore been uniformly in proportion to the fatigue, anxiety, determination to encounter danger, spirit of adventure, skill and dexterity, and especially danger and hazard of life exercised and incurred by actual salvors and no others. Now, this being the nature of salvage, could I, without depreciating the services of my officers and crew, no less than my own, consider myself in any other light than as the principal ^{sal} salv or ?" (11)

The circumstances of that determined, skillful salvage operation for the THETIS treasure and the long interesting litigation that followed must have been the topic of wardroom and coffeehouse discussions for many years. Actually, Captain Dickinson's friends prevailed upon him to set the circumstances down in writing, which he did in 1836 in the form of a private printing published for his friends and acquaintances, most of whom were evidently not seafaring persons for his narrative contains copious footnotes describing the nautical terms used.

One copy of this publication eventually reached the hands of a famous American naval officer and it is duly inscribed ^o on the preface page in bold ink signature:

New York

May 1st 1867

D. G. Farragut

Admiral

U S NAVY

(Use photo of signature here)

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Footnote #1. All numbered quotations are direct from the narrative,
the title of which is reproduced in print No.1.

Footnote #2. All photographic prints are from Dickinson's narrative.