

The Last Cruise of the *Judas Iscariot*

By Edward Page Mitchell

“She formerly showed the name *Flying Sprite* on her stern moldin’,” said Captain Trumbull Cram. “but I had that gouged out and planed off, and *Judas Iscariot* in gilt set that instid.”

“That was an extraordinary name,” said I.

“‘Stromary craft,” replied the captain, as he absorbed another inch and a half of niggerhead. “I’m neither a profane man or an irreverend; but sink my jig if I don’t believe the sperrit of Judas possessed that schooner. Hey, Ammi?”

The young man addressed as Ammi was seated upon a mackerel barrel. He deliberately removed from his lips a black brierwood and shook his head with great gravity.

“The cap’n,” said Ammi, “is neither a profane or an irreverend. What he says he mostly knows; but when he sinks his jig he’s allers to be depended on.”

Fortified with this neighborly estimate of character, Captain Cram proceeded. “You larf at the idea of a schooner’s soul? Perhaps you hev sailed ’em forty-odd year up and down this here coast, an’ ’quainted yourself with their dispositions an’ habits of mind. Hey, Ammi?”

“The cap’n,” explained the gentleman on the mackerel keg, “hez coasted an’ hez fished for forty-six year. He’s lumbered and he’s iced. When the cap’n sees fit for to talk about schooners he understands the subjeck.”

“My friend,” said the captain, “a schooner has a soul like a human being, but considerably broader of beam, whether for good or for evil. I ain’t a goin’ to deny that I prayed for the *Judas* in Tuesday ’n’ Thursday evenin’ meetin’, week arter week an’ month arter month. I ain’t a goin’ to deny that I interested Deacon Plympton in the ’rastle for her redemption. It was no use, my friend; even the deacon’s powerful p’titions were clear waste.”

I ventured to inquire in what manner this vessel had manifested its depravity. The narrative which I heard was the story of a demon of treachery with three masts and a jib boom.

The *Flying Sprite* was the first three-master ever built at Newaggen, and the last. People shook their heads over the experiment. “No good can come of sech a critter,” they said. “It’s contrary to natur. Two masts is masts enough.” The *Flying Sprite* began its career of base improbity at the very moment of its birth. Instead of launching decently into the element for which it was designed, the three-masted schooner slumped through the ways into the mud and stuck there for three weeks, causing great expense to the owners, of whom Captain Trumbull Cram was one to the extent of an undivided third. The oracles of Newaggen were confirmed in their forebodings. “Two masts is masts enough to sail the sea,” they said; “the third is the Devil’s hitchin’ post.”

On the first voyage of the *Flying Sprite*, Captain Cram started her for Philadelphia, loaded with ice belonging to himself and Lawyer Swanton; cargo uninsured. Ice was worth six dollars a ton in Philadelphia; this particular ice had cost Captain Cram and Lawyer Swanton eighty-five cents a ton shipped, including sawdust. They were happy over the prospect. The *Flying Sprite* cleared the port in beautiful shape, and then suddenly and silently went to the bottom in Fiddler’s Reach, in eleven feet of salt water. It required only six days to float her and pump her out, but owing to a certain incompatibility between ice and salt water, the salvage consisted exclusively of sawdust.

On her next trip the schooner carried a deckload of lumber from the St. Croix River. It was in some sense a consecrated cargo, for the lumber was intended for a new Baptist meeting-house in southern New Jersey. If the prayerful hopes of the navigators, combined with the prayerful

expectations of the consignees had availed, this voyage, at least, would have been successfully made. But about sixty miles southeast of Nantucket the *Flying Sprite* encountered a mild September gale. She ought to have weathered it with perfect ease, but she behaved so abominably that the church timber was scattered over the surface of the Atlantic Ocean from about latitude 40° 15' to about latitude 43° 50'. A month or two later she contrived to go on her beam ends under a gentle land breeze, dumping a lot of expensively carved granite from the Fox Island quarries into a deep hole in Long Island Sound. On the very next trip she turned deliberately out of her course in order to smash into the starboard bow of a Norwegian brig, and was consequently libeled for heavy damages.

It was after a few experiences of this sort that Captain Cram erased the old name from the schooner's stern and from her quarter, and substituted that of *Judas Iscariot*. He could discover no designation that expressed so well his contemptuous opinion of her moral qualities. She seemed animate with the spirit of purposeless malice, of malignant perfidy. She was a floating tub of cussedness.

A board of nautical experts sat upon the *Judas Iscariot*, but could find nothing the matter with her, physically. The lines of her hull were all right, she was properly planked and ceiled and calked, her spars were of good Oregon pine, she was rigged taut and trustworthy, and her canvas had been cut and stitched by a God-fearing sailmaker. According to all theory, she ought to have been perfectly responsible as to her keel. In practice, she was frightfully cranky. Sailing the *Judas Iscariot* was like driving a horse with more vices than hairs in his tail. She always did the unexpected thing, except when bad behavior was expected of her on general principles. If the idea was to luff, she would invariably fall off; if to jibe, she would come round dead in the wind and hang there like Mohammed's coffin. Sending a man to haul the jib sheet to windward was sending a man on a forlorn hope: the jib habitually picked up the venturesome navigator, and, after shaking him viciously in the air for a second or two, tossed him overboard. A boom never crossed the deck without breaking somebody's head. Start on whatever course she might, the schooner was certain to run before long into one of three things, namely, some other vessel, a fog bank, or the bottom. From the day on which she was launched her scent for a good, sticky mud bottom was unerring. In the clearest weather fog followed and enveloped her as misfortune follows wickedness. Her presence on the Banks was enough to drive every codfish to the coast of Ireland. The mackerel and porgies were always where the *Judas Iscariot* was not. It was impossible to circumvent the schooner's fixed purposes to ruin everybody who chartered her. If chartered to carry a deckload, she spilled it; if loaded between decks, she dived and spoiled the cargo. She was like one of the trick mules which, if they cannot otherwise dislodge the rider, get down and roll over and over. In short, the *Judas Iscariot* was known from Marblehead to the Bay of Chaleur as the consummate schooneration of malevolence, turpitude, and treachery.

After commanding the *Judas Iscariot* for five or six years, Captain Cram looked fully twenty years older. It was in vain that he had attempted to sell her at a sacrifice. No man on the coast of Maine, Massachusetts, or the British provinces would have taken the schooner as a gift. The belief in her demoniac obsession was as firm as it was universal.

Nearly at the end of a season, when the wretched craft had been even more unprofitable than usual a conference of the owners was held in the Congregational vestry one evening after the monthly missionary meeting. No outsider knows exactly what happened, but it is rumored that in the two hours during which these capitalists were closeted certain arithmetical computations were effected which led to significant results and to a singular decision.

On the forenoon of the next Friday there was a general suspension of business at Newaggen. The *Judas Iscariot*, with her deck scoured and her spars scraped till they shone in the sun like yellow amber, lay at the wharf by Captain Cram's fish house. Since Monday the captain and his three boys and Andrew Jackson's son Tobias from Mackerel Cove had been busy loading the schooner deep. This time her cargo was an extraordinary one. It consisted of nearly a quarter of a mile of stone wall from the boundaries of the captain's shore pasture. "I calklet," remarked the commander of the *Judas Iscariot*, as he saw the last boulder disappearing down the main hatch, "thar's nigh two hundud'n fifty ton of stone fence aboard thet schoon'r."

Conjecture was wasted over this unnecessary amount of ballast. The owners of the *Judas Iscariot* stood up well under the consolidated wit of the village; they returned witticism for witticism, and kept their secret. "Ef you must know, I'll tell ye," said the captain. "I hear thar's a stone-wall famine over Machias way. I'm goin' to take mine over'n peddle it out by the yard." On this fine sunshiny Friday morning, while the luckless schooner lay on one side of the wharf, looking as bright and trim and prosperous as if she were the best-paying maritime investment in the world, the tug *Pug* of Portland lay under the other side, with steam up. She had come down the night before in response to a telegram from the owners of the *Judas Iscariot*. A good land breeze was blowing, with the promise of freshening as the day grew older.

At half past seven o'clock the schooner put off from the landing, carrying not only the captain's pasture wall, but also a large number of his neighbors and friends, including some of the solidest citizens of Newaggen. Curiosity was stronger than fear. "You know what the critter," the captain had said, in reply to numerous applications for passage. "Ef you're a mind to resk her antics, come along, an' welcome." Captain Cram put on a white shirt and a holiday suit for the occasion. As he stood at the wheel shouting directions to his boys and Andrew Jackson's son Tobias at the halyards, his guests gathered around him—a fair representation of the respectability, the business enterprise, and the piety of Newaggen Harbor. Never had the *Judas Iscariot* carried such a load. She seemed suddenly struck with a sense of decency and responsibility, for she came around into the wind without balking, dived her nose playfully into the brine, and skipped off on the short hitch to clear Tumbler Island, all in the properest fashion. The *Pug* steamed after her.

The crowd on the wharf and the boys in the small boats cheered this unexpectedly orthodox behavior, and they now saw for the first time that Captain Cram had painted on the side of the vessel in conspicuous white letters, each three or four feet long, the following legend:

THIS IS THE SCHOONER *JUDAS ISCARIOT*
N.B.—GIVE HER A WIDE BERTH!!

Hour after hour the schooner bounded along before the northwest wind, holding to her course as straight as an arrow. The weather continued fine. Every time the captain threw the log he looked more perplexed. Eight, nine, nine and a half knots! He shook his head as he whispered to Deacon Plympton: "She's mediatin' mischief o' some natur or other." But the *Judas* led the *Pug* a wonderful chase, and by half past two in the afternoon, before the demijohn which Andrew Jackson's son Tobias had smuggled on board was three quarters empty, and before Lawyer Swanton had more than three quarters finished his celebrated story about Governor Purington's cork leg, the schooner and the tug were between fifty and sixty miles from land.

Suddenly Captain Cram gave a grunt of intelligence. He pointed ahead, where a blue line just above the horizon marked a distant fog bank. "She smelt it an' she run for it," he remarked, sententiously. "Time for business."

Then ensued a singular ceremony. First Captain Cram brought the schooner to, and transferred all his passengers to the tug. The wind had shifted to the southeast, and the fog was rapidly approaching. The sails of the *Judas Iscariot* flapped as she lay head to the wind; her bows rose and fell gently under the influence of the long swell. The *Pug* bobbed up and down half a hawser's length away.

Having put his guests and crew aboard the tug, Captain Cram proceeded to make everything shipshape on the decks of the schooner. He neatly coiled a loose end of rope that had been left in a snarl. He even picked up and threw overboard the stopper of Andrew Jackson's son Tobias' demijohn. His face wore an expression of unusual solemnity. The people on the tug watched his movements eagerly, but silently. Next he tied one end of a short rope to the wheel and attached the other end loosely by means of a running bowline to a cleat upon the rail. Then he was seen to take up an ax, and to disappear down the companionway. Those on the tug distinctly heard several crashing blows. In a moment the captain reappeared on deck, walked deliberately to the wheel, brought the schooner around so that her sails filled, pulled the running bowline taut, and fastened the rope with several half hitches around the cleat, thus lashing the helm, jumped into a dory, and sculled over to the tug.

Left entirely to herself, the schooner rolled once or twice, tossed a few bucketfuls of water over her dancing bows, and started off toward the South Atlantic. But Captain Trumbull Cram, standing in the bow of the tugboat, raised his hand to command silence and pronounced the following farewell speech, being sentence, death warrant, and funeral oration, all in one:

"I ain't advancin' no theory to 'count for her cussedness. You all know the *Judas*. Mebbe thar was too much fore an' aff to her. Mebbe the inickerty of a vessel's in the fore an' aff, and the vartue in the squar' rigin'. Mebbe two masts *was* masts enough. Let that go; bygones is bygones. Yonder she goes, carryin' all sail on top, two hundred'n-odd ton o' stone fence in her bolt, an' a hole good two foot acrost stove in her belly. The way of the transgressor is hard. Don't you see her settlin'? It should be a lesson, my friends, for us to profit by; there's an end to the long-sufferin'est mercy, and unless—Oh, yer makin' straight for the fog, are ye? Well, it's your last fog bank. The bottom of the sea's the fust port you'll fetch, you critter, you! Git, and be d—d to ye!"

This, the only occasion on which Captain Cram was ever known to say such a word, was afterward considered by a committee of discipline of the Congregational Church at Newaggen; and the committee, after pondering all the circumstances under which the word was uttered, voted unanimously to take no action.

Meanwhile, the fog had shut in around the tug, and the *Judas Iscariot* was lost to view. The tug was put about and headed for home. The damp wind chilled everybody through and through. Little was said. The contents of the demijohn had long been exhausted. From a distance to the south was heard at intervals the hoarse whistling of an ocean steamer.

"I hope that feller's well underwrit," said the captain grimly, "for the *Judas'll* never go down afore she's sarched him out'n sunk him."

"And was the abandoned schooner ever heard of?" I asked, when my informant had reached this point in the narrative.

The captain took me by the arm and led me out of the grocery store down to the rocks. Across the mouth of the small cove back of his house, blocking the entrance to his wharf and fishhouse, was stretched a skeleton wreck.

“Thar she lays,” he said, pointing to the blackened ribs. “That’s the *Judas*. Did yer suppose she’d sink in deep water, where she could do no more damage? No, sir, not if all the rocks on the coast of Maine was piled onto her, and her hull bottom knocked clean out. She come home to roost. She come sixty mile in the teeth of the wind. When the tug got back next mornin’ thar lay the *Judas Iscariot* acrost my cove, with her jib boom stuck though my kitchen winder. I say schooners has souls.”