Mary Patten was a nineteen year old and four months pregnant when her husband collapsed in a storm as they approached Cape Horn.

Since no other member of the crew could navigate, she took command of the vessel, a clipper ship the size of the Cutty Sark, and sailed her around the Horn to San Francisco.

Women Sailors and Sailor's Women
David Cordingly

New-York Tribune.

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A HEROINE OF THE SEA.

Among the noble band of women who, by their heroic bearing, under great trial and suffering, have won for themselves imperishable fame, Mary A. Patten may claim a prominent position. Mrs. Patten is a native of Boston, and but 21 years of age. Her husband, Capt. Joshua A. Patten, sailed from this port in July last, for San Francisco, as commander of the clipper-ship Neptune's Car, of Foster & Nickerson's line, and it was during this voyage that his wife rendered herself so distinguished. Capt. Patten is well known in this port, and at the outward, as a young and rising seaman; and the vessels under his command have made some of the swiftest passages on record. He took command of the Neptune's Car about two years ago, and made his first voyage in her to San Francisco in 90 days. On that occasion Mrs. Patten accompanied him to San Francisco, China, London, and back to New York. His next voyage was that last year to San Francisco, in which his wife again accompanied him. The Neptune's Car left port at the same time with the clippers Romance of the Seas, Intrepid, and two others, the names of which we do not remember. As usual with commanders in the Pacific trade, Capt. Patten wished to get his ship into port ahead of his rivals. He soon found, however, that his first mate slept during half his watch on the quarter deck, while he kept the ship under reefed courses, and after repeated remonstrances had proved unavailing he found it necessary to remove him. After that he undertook to discharge the mate's duties as well as his own, and in consequence of fatigue was taken sick, while passing through the Straits of Lemaire, around the Horn, and in a short time brain fever developed itself.

From that time, up to the period of her arrival at San Francisco, Mrs. Patten was both nurse and navigator. When her husband was taken sick the ship was given in charge of the second mate. He, however, was but an indifferent navigator, and although he knew how to take an observation, he could not work up the reckoning. Mrs. Patten, who, on her previous voyage, had studied navigation as a pastime, now took observations, worked up the reckoning by chronometer time, laid the ship's courses, and performed most of the other duties of the captain of the ship. During this time her husband was delirious with the fever, and she shaved his head, and devised every means in her power to soothe and restore him. To this end, she studied medicine to know how to treat his case intelligently, and in course of time succeeded in carrying him alive through the crisis of his complaint.

About one week after the Captain fell sick the mate wrote a letter to Mrs. Patten, reminding her of the dangers of the coast and the great responsibility she had assumed, and offering to take charge of the ship. She replied that, in the judgment of her husband, he was unfit to be mate, and therefore she could not consider him qualified to fill the post of commander. Strong by this rebuff, the fellow tried to stir up the crew to mutiny against her; but she called the other mates and sailors aft, and appealed to them to support her in her hour of trial. To a man they resolved to stand by her and the ship, come what might. It was pleasant to witness their cheerful obedience to her orders, as each man vied with his fellows in the performance of his duty.

By the time the ship came nearly up to the latitude of Valparaiso, Capt. Patten had somewhat recovered from the fever, although far too weak for any mental or physical exertion, and the mate, under promise of doing better in future, had partially resumed duty. But Mrs. Patten discovering that he was steering the ship out of her course, and making for Valparaiso, apprised her husband of the fact. The mate was summoned below and asked to explain his conduct, which he did by saying that he could not keep the ship nearer her course. Capt. Patten then had his cot moved to a part of the cabin from which he could view the "bobtail" of the compass, and soon found that the mate was still steering for Valparaiso. He then sent for the four mates and the sailors, and formally deposed the first mate, promoting the second officer to his place. Then he gave orders that under no circumstances was his ship to be taken into any other port than San Francisco. Soon after he had a relapse, and for 15 days before the vessel reached port he was totally blind. At length San Francisco was reached in safety, after a short voyage of 120 days, the vessel beating three out of four of her competitors.

The safety of the ship and the preservation of her husband's life were wholly due to the constant care and watchfulness of Mrs. Patten. On her arrival she informed the consignee of the vessel that for fifty nights previous she had not undressed herself.

Some time in December last we published the only account of this remarkable instance of female fortitude which had been given, in an extract from a commercial letter to the owners in this city. Yesterday we received a note from our ship-news collector, stating that Mrs. Patten and her husband were in this city, having arrived in the steamer George Law. We found them at the Battery Hotel, and obtained an interview with Mrs. Patten. She was assiduously attending her husband as heretofore; but his situation is such as to preclude all hope of recovery. Before leaving San Francisco, deafness was added to his other afflictions, and he now lies upon his couch insensible to everything but the kind offices of his beloved companion, and so weak that he may expire at any moment. Occasionally he speaks to his wife, sometimes hastily, but oftener in a wild and incoherent manner. Mrs. Patten's brother, Mr. Brown, we believe, who is foreman of a ship-yard in Boston, is in attendance upon his sister and brother-in-law. From him we learned that Capt. Patten had been taken care of by his brother Masons in San Francisco, and Dr. Harris, one of the fraternity, had watched over him on his way home. On leaving San Francisco, he seemed to rally considerably, but on reaching a warm latitude he relapsed, and has sunk to the hopeless state in which we found him. The Masons of this city, having been advised from San Francisco of his intended departure for home, were waiting for the George Law on her arrival, and brought him on a litter to the Battery Hotel, where they have since watched over him.

With the modesty which generally distinguishes true merit, Mrs. Patten begged to be excused from

"A Heroine of the Sea"

New York Daily Tribune February 18, 1857

Among the noble band of women who, by their heroic bearing, under great trial and suffering, have won for themselves imperishable fame, Mary A. Patten may claim a prominent position. Mrs. Patten is a native of Boston, and but 20 years of age. Her husband, Capt. Joshua A. Patten, sailed from this port in July last, for San Francisco, as commander of the clipper ship Neptune's Car, of Foster and Nickerson's line, and it was during this voyage that his wife rendered herself so distinguished. Capt. Patten is well known in this port, and at the eastward, as a young and rising seaman; and the vessels under his command have made some of the swiftest passages on record. He took command of the Neptune's Car about two years ago, and made his first voyage in her to San Francisco in 90 days. On that occasion Mrs. Patten accompanied him to San Francisco, China, London, and back to New York. His next voyage was that last year to San Francisco, in which his wife again accompanied him. The Neptune's Car left port at the same time with the clippers Romance of the Seas, Intrepid, and two others, the names of which we do not remember. As usual with commanders in the Pacific trade, Capt. Patten wished to get his ship into port ahead of his rivals. He soon found, however, that his first mate slept during half his watch on the quarter deck, while he kept the ship under reefed courses, and after repeated remonstrance had proved unavailing he found it necessary to remove him. After that he undertook to discharge the mate's duties as well as his own, and in consequence of fatigue was taken sick, while passing through the Straits of Lemaire, around the Horn, and in a short time brain fever developed itself.

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