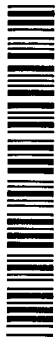


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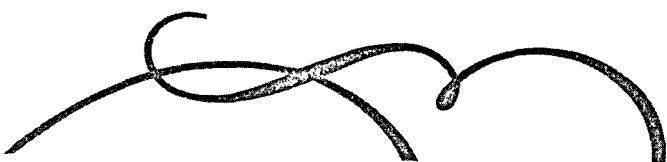
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T A L E S O F  
G O O D A N D E V I L,  
H E L P A N D H A R M



**PHILIP HALLIE**



with a Foreword by JOHN J. COMPTON  
and an Afterword by DORIS A. HALLIE



HarperCollins*Publishers*

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# THE HANDS OF JOSHUA JAMES

## I

On Sunday, November 25, 1888, a reporter for the *Boston Globe* was walking across Boston Common at about two o'clock in the morning, when he looked southward and saw a big cloud of dust whirling over Tremont Street. The dust sped toward him, getting thicker and thicker as it moved, until it hit the Public Gardens to the west of the Common. When it was at the center of the gardens it was as thick as a dense fog. Then he heard a roar "like the distant sounds of the sea," and a full gale struck. In what seemed like an instant it covered everything he could see with a crust of ice and snow. In a few minutes the blizzard was so thick that he could barely make out the storm-signal light high over Boston. The light had come on too late: One of the most ferocious storms to strike the New England coast in a hundred years had suddenly begun.

On Saturday the United States Weather Service in Washington, D.C., had announced the existence of two storm centers that might affect New England. One was over the Midwest, and the other was off the coast of Florida. The latter was the more active, but Gen. Adolphus Washington Greeley of the Weather Service chose to ignore it. He predicted either fair weather or light showers on the coast. But the Florida low-pressure area swept north along the Gulf Stream up the Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina coasts, gathering strength as it went. Hot air rises, and so the freshly heated air near the

Gulf Stream leaped up and left a hollow low-pressure area beneath it; into that low-pressure area the winds poured more and more violently, like water into an empty jar, while the whole jar raced up the Atlantic coast, struck Cape Hatteras, bounced east out to sea, swept north over hundreds of miles of unobstructed water, and hit the coast of New England, leaving behind it a thousand miles of disaster.

In the age of sail, when Boston wharves were forests of masts, a storm was the devil's brew. Whatever else the devil is, he is vast and murderous. And whatever else he is, the Prince of Air is a tempter. If you are in the middle of a storm at sea the pandemonium can tempt you into confusion and despair; and if you are safe on shore the pandemonium can tempt you to enjoy the comfortable thrill of witnessing the immense spectacle of overwhelming power destroying other human beings.

But the Boston Harbor wharfmen were not easily tempted into enjoying the "aesthetic sublime." They were running along the wharves and yelling wildly in order to wake up the crews aboard the ships moored near the wharves. Officers who had been biding their time until the tide was high enough to get under way reacted to the sudden storm by "swearing oaths enough to sink a Cunarder" (as the *Globe* reporter put it) at sleepy sailors under their command. The winds onshore were already strong enough to smash the ships against the wharves and bridges of Boston. In a little while boat crews were hauling all sorts of ropes, and channel pilots were moving their vessels out into the open water in order to avoid the anvil-shore.

But people like the reporter stood appalled and exalted by the tempest. The ancient interest of limited creatures in the mobilization of vast power caught him up as if his fascination itself was part of the storm. All he could do was feel—and express in words—a delightful horror at watching a vast force descending on little beings like himself. The reporter knew that his readers would be fascinated too. The storm was news.

## 2

Later that Sunday morning less than a dozen sea miles\* south and east of Boston, a fourteen-year-old boy was standing beside his

\* One nautical mile equals 1.5 statute miles.

father watching the same storm strike. They were on the beach at Point Allerton, the back of the head of the pelican called Hull. The boy's mother had a "delicate throat" and had not been able to leave the house that morning for fear of the cold wind. But his father was a sailor, and cold winds were his element. And so the boy and his father had gone alone to church, and then they had taken the train to the point in order to get a good view of the storm.

When the two of them had gotten off the little train the wind almost blew them off their feet, and they had to turn their backs to it in order to breathe. Behind the pelican's head there were thousands of miles of open ocean, a vast "fetch," on which the winds could pick up speed—and gather immense power—like a sled going downhill. The boy's father told him that he thought the winds were blowing about sixty miles an hour.

Through the snow and the spray and the fog the two of them could still make out more than a dozen ranks of breakers churning toward them from the east. The boy did not know it, but the waves around Harding Ledge, due east of Point Allerton, must have been about thirty feet high—mountains in motion. But he did see the spindrifts, the spray that great winds rip off the tops of waves. "Like a horrid nightmare," he said, they whirled toward them out of the snow and fog and fell with a crash at the high-water mark in front of them, or lashed their faces. The storm sent rolling and bouncing chunks of yellowish foam far up on the beach. The wind and waves had compacted the tiny bubbles into solid masses of dead foam, so that you could pick up the chunks without breaking them.

The boy and his father watched the water undermine the sand cliffs of Hull and tear gullies through the beaches. In the boy's mind the sounds of water striking the land were like the roar of battle between two armies of madmen, smashing up against each other again and again and again. He begged his father not to go closer to the water. It did not occur to him that any human beings would dare to go out on that sea in an open boat.

The two of them were crouching on a moor with some other people, and they heard someone say that Capt. Joshua James had just rescued nine people from a coastal schooner not far from where they now stood. Suddenly the people on the moor were in almost total darkness, and they could barely make out a three-masted schooner that had just struck the rocks about an eighth of a mile to their left.

An old sailor was standing with them on the moor, and he said, pointing up to Telegraph Hill toward the beak of the pelican, "Captain James is over on those cliffs. Who'll run and tell him about that wreck?" After a nod from his father, the boy ran up the cliffs, with the winds knocking him about. On the top of the hill, James and his lifesaving crew were huddled together; they had seen the wreck. The boy stared at the massive men gathered close around James in their glistening yellow sou'wester raingear with the white straps under their weatherbeaten faces. The men looked gigantic.

Years later, when he had become a Boston lawyer, he remembered James as a thick-bodied man standing in the middle of his crew, but detached, thoughtful, quiet, like a general before a battle. It was dark, but they could all see that the tide was up, and a great sea was running with the onshore winds. Great seas usually run with the wind, and wind and water could smash an immense vessel in minutes. They could barely see the orange-red flare that was burning on the wrecked schooner, which was too far out for the little cannon that lifesavers used to shoot the lines of the breeches buoy out to a wrecked ship. The only way to rescue the crew was by lifeboat through the wilderness of wind and rain and hail and moving mountains of water.

The boy heard the captain say, "It's only fair to tell you fellows now that we're not likely to come out of this. I don't want any man to come out this time, who—" Those were the last words he heard. After a little while all the quiet men walked down the hill toward their Humane Society boathouse. Not one held back.

The boy's father ran up Souther's Hill overlooking the schooner, and he and many of the other people of Hull tore up some picket fences near the crest of the hill and built a big fire that lit up the wreck and helped the lifesavers to avoid the flopping, slashing debris around the boat. The loose and broken spars of a ruined ship were one of the main dangers lifesavers had to face. But the sailors on the wrecked ship needed the firelight too. It showed them what the lifesavers were doing, and what they could do to help them. And it gave them hope: It showed them that they were not alone.

The boy saw the lifeboat moving toward the schooner with Captain James standing erect in the stern handling the long, thick steering oar. More than once the boat seemed to be standing on end in the troughs of the vast waves. Again and again it was on the

verge of being pitchpoled.\* The boy was sure that he would soon be seeing the bodies of the surfmen floating ashore at the foot of Souther's Hill. His father had told him that the surfboat was not a self-bailer,<sup>†</sup> and he could see two members of the crew frantically scooping water out of the boat with buckets. In the firelight he could barely make out Captain James, with his men crouched and rowing before him, moving into an immense darkness only dimly lit by the fire on Souther's Hill.

Then he heard the voice of a stranger, who was standing near him by the fire. A well-dressed man, he was shivering with the cold despite his nearness to the blaze. He said, "They'll never come back." And then he added, "I'll lay you two to one they don't make land, even if they reach the schooner."

Then he heard another voice, a familiar one; it belonged to a Hull farmer. "If they don't get back, we've lost the best man since Abraham Lincoln. James is a God-almighty man."

But about an hour later—at about nine-thirty—the boat reappeared a few hundred feet from shore, heading for the beach below Souther's Hill. It was overloaded with human beings, so that the crew was hard put to work the oars. The big sea running kept the tide from falling. The winds out of the east were driving the surfboat toward black rocks that jutted up between the boat and the shore.

Suddenly the boat struck a rock and rolled over with one side deep in the water. The boy heard Captain James call out: "Hang on to the boat! All at once the men in the boat climbed up the raised side of the boat and righted it. But it kept striking rock after rock, until only a few oars were left. Now it was hard to keep the boat headed toward shore, which was vital, because if it broached to<sup>‡</sup> again it would turn over completely and spill all of them into the salt sea. In that tumultuous, cold water they could not live more than a few minutes.

And then the worst happened. Because of a strong "set," or current running along the shore, the bow of the boat swerved, and a great wave turned the boat upside down. All sixteen men were struggling in the sea. The boy buried his face in his father's coat.

\* Being capsized end over end.

<sup>†</sup> A boat equipped with a device that allows water to run out through the sides.

<sup>‡</sup> Yawing so severely as to lie parallel to the waves.

His father pushed him away and ran with all the other people down to the beach to make a human lifeline to pull the survivors to the shore. The people of Hull, who were now crowded along the shore, knew what they had to do to help: They had been doing it for years, for centuries. The boy lay in the dark by some bayberry bushes, listening to the shouting on the beach and trying not to think of all those people drowning in the wilderness of darkness, wind, and water, drowning so close to land, so close to help.

After a little while he learned that no one had drowned, and that only one crewman had been injured, with a broken arm. He felt that he had witnessed a miracle. But he had not witnessed the whole of the miracle. The storm of '88 had only begun, and so had the work of the lifesavers.

### 3

There was someone who saw it all from beginning to end, and from up close. That person was Joshua James, the captain of the volunteer crew of the Massachusetts Humane Society. A little more than a month after the storm that was to make him one of the most famous Americans of his time, he wrote out a summary of what he described as "work done by myself and others who joined me." Lt. O. C. Hamlet of the U.S. Life-Saving Service had requested him to do so. It is one of the very few available documents written and signed by Joshua James, and if we know enough about Hull and his life in that village, it gives us a picture of a man whose caring lay not on his tongue but in his nerves.

The document tells how in the first morning of the gale of November 25, 1888, James climbed Telegraph Hill in the wide beak of the pelican, looked down on the Lighthouse Channel, which ran between Hull and the Boston Light, and saw five schooners and a coal barge anchored there. While James stood on the hill he felt the gale rising out of the east, and since Hull was on the lee side of the anchored vessels, they were slowly moving toward Stoney Beach, on the top edge of the pelican's beak. They were dragging their anchors behind them. Once again, for the more-than-thousandth time in the long history of Hull, the top of the beak of the pelican was a lee, or protected, shore in a storm, the deadliest enemy of coastal sailors.



When I first read this report, I thought that I was in on the beginning of a suspenseful story, in which one dramatic action would follow close on the heels of another with not a moment of respite. But Joshua James, after he had studied those six endangered ships, walked down the hill to Spring Street and took his dinner.

He was not a man who acted impulsively. Persistence was his way, dogged attention to the facts at hand. But though he was as persistent as the tides, unlike the tides he knew how to rest. He knew enough to loaf with an absolutely clear conscience. When the facts required it he could go on the stretch and stay on the stretch. And he would show this constancy during the whole storm of '88, as he had been showing it for almost sixty years as a volunteer lifesaver with the Massachusetts Humane Society. But now the facts did not oblige him to exert himself and his crew. The anchored vessels were moving very slowly toward the beach. He calculated that by the time he and his crew were through eating, they could reach them. Moreover, he knew that in this immense gale, and with the heavy sea traffic into Boston Harbor, he and all the other lifesavers on the peninsula of Hull would soon be very busy, and for a long time.

He and his crew were hungry, and hungry men, weakened men, can lose their presence of mind as well as their physical vigor. And so they ate their main meal of the day in peace. I am not sure what it was they ate; James's report to Hamlet does not say; but one of the favorite dishes for the lifesavers of Hull, and a dish that could be kept hot for the lifesavers for hours without losing its savor, was fish chowder. It was a dish that the people of Hull loved. They made it in layers, usually in a big pot: the bottom layer was pork fat drippings mixed with water; the next layer was freshly caught cod spread over the bottom of the pot; the next was a layer of small potatoes; then they spread salt, pepper, and some more pork drippings over the potatoes; finally there was another layer of cod and potatoes. And all of it was set to boil for about a half hour, with a lid on the pot. While the chowder was still hot, they poured in a quart of sweet milk and boiled it all for five minutes more. This—with much bread—was the classic meal for hard winter work in nineteenth-century Hull.

James had already shown the people of Hull how he could loaf. One of his descendants, Gladys Means, has told me about the hours

he would spend with friends by the flagpole on Spring Street. Around the flagstaff there was a crudely constructed wooden platform, and around the platform were spars and figureheads from vessels that had been wrecked on the beach a few hundred yards away. On that platform Joshua and some of his Humane Society crew would stand for hours in the summertime, laughing and talking, while other young men of Hull were off fishing or farming.

One day, Gladys Means said, the word got around Hull that there were lots of mackerel running offshore, so that you could practically scoop them up with a net and make good money selling them to the Boston dealers at Pemberton Wharf at the tip of the pelican's beak. And so men, young and old, took whatever boats they could muster and went out. But not Joshua. For some reason, or for no reason at all, he decided to sail a little boat out to Bumkin Island in Hingham Bay. He had his dog with him, and a gun. Almost all the little islands near Hull had birds on them, and Joshua was apparently going to shoot some birds. While his friends were busy making money he spent the day wandering around the island.

He shot one bird, but apparently he did not bother to search for it with any zeal. At the end of the day he came back to 104 Spring Street with nothing to show for his day of hunting. The next day a friend hunting on the island found the bird Joshua had shot and brought it to him.

When I asked Gladys Means why a poor man didn't go fishing that day, and instead just loafed, she told me, "Joshua was so wrapped up in saving lives he wasn't much concerned about whether his family had enough to eat or had enough money. It was summertime, and there weren't any wrecks. There was no other work that he was interested in but lifesaving." He was a man whose life was immovably centered, and when he was away from that center, even for a few hours at dinnertime, he could take it easy. It has been said that you can tell the strength of a horse not only by how fast it can run but also by how suddenly and how firmly it can stop.

At about two o'clock on that afternoon in November, after a meal that took at least two hours to finish, he and his crew took a surfboat out of the Stoney Beach Humane Society station and placed it on the beach at a spot where they expected one of the

vessels to strike. The three-masted schooner *Cox and Green* struck nearby, just to the west, toward Windmill Point. But according to James the sea was much too rough to use the surfboat, with Toddy Rocks close by. And since the schooner was not too far offshore, James decided to use the ship-to-shore "bridge" called the breeches buoy to carry the shipwrecked sailors to safety. His report reads: "Many of the people in Hull assisted in placing and working the beach apparatus."

According to a letter written in the middle of the nineteenth century and published at about the time that Thoreau was taking his walks through Hull and on Cape Cod: "Almost every one laughs when the name of the town is mentioned. . . ." The writer surmises that the reason for this is that Hull was the tiniest village in Massachusetts. But he goes on: "Its bold and enterprising inhabitants have saved the lives of hundreds of shipwrecked sailors, and that of itself is enough to immortalize the place, and give its people a fame that will endure forever."

Again and again, through all the recorded storms that struck Hull, the people of that village were almost as important to the work of lifesaving as the famous heroes like Joshua James and his crews. They came to the shore not merely to look but to help. On the first day of the storm of '88 they helped push up and anchor the great wooden X that carried the heavy hemp hawser, the trolley line along which the breeches buoy ran from the vessel to the shore; they ran out into the surf and waves to pull the buoy along the line out to the ship and then to draw it back close enough to the shore to lift the exhausted, frozen shipwreck victims out of the canvas breeches of the breeches buoy; they carried them to their houses and gave them food and warmth out of their own meager supplies; and those who could not help with their hands stood on the beach and shouted encouragement to the shipwrecked victims freezing and screaming for help on the decks and in the rigging of their boats.

There is no understanding Joshua James, the patron saint, to this day, of the Search and Rescue Service of the U.S. Coast Guard, without understanding that he was a mere extension, a conspicuous part—but only a part—of the people of Hull. Especially in the nineteenth century, at the height of the age of sail in America, almost every able-bodied man and woman in the village was a saver

of lives. As the record of the protest meeting of 1848 shows in its half-humorous, half-desperate way, Hull was perhaps the most hospitable village on the eastern seaboard of the United States, and Joshua James was one of them. He was not alone. Helpers often need help.

While the people of Hull were pulling the last crew member of the *Cox and Green* out of the stiff canvas trousers of the breeches buoy, Joshua James heard that another three-masted schooner was in trouble. About an eighth of a mile east of the wrecked *Cox and Green* the *Gertrude Abbott* was flying its flag upside down. It had struck the eastern edge of the Toddy Rocks.

It was getting very dark, the sleet was getting heavier, the wind and the tide were up, and the heaviest sea of the day was running. The water was too wild and the waves and breakers too high for the surfboat. James decided to pull the surfboat opposite the wrecked *Gertrude Abbott* and wait for low tide before launching it. Between eight and nine in the evening, they launched the surfboat with only the light of the great bonfire on Souther's Hill to guide them. Aside from the fire that the people of Hull had built out of their picket fences, there was the utter blackness of a moonless, starless night. The onshore wind and the waves and breakers were so violent that there was no low tide, only high seas.

Joshua James's version of the rest of the story of the *Gertrude Abbott* rescue is much the same as the boy's account: The great sea running, the eight crew members taken down from the big schooner into the small surfboat, the difficulty of keeping the boat head-in when it was so crowded that the oars were almost impossible to work, the capsized boat, the boat righted, the boat finally smashed, but everybody in it saved, all by about ten o'clock at night.

One of the things the boy did not know was how important to the rescue operation the hands and the eyes of Joshua James were. Only James could see where they were going, because he alone was facing the bow. His crew was crouched deep in the boat, facing the stern and looking up at their captain. He alone handled the big steering oar, and though the other oars propelled the boat, the main task of keeping the boat from broaching to was in his hands. It was he who had to keep the bow facing each oncoming wave

head-on, so that it could cut through the crest of the wave as soon as possible without wavering on the crest. A moment too long on the crest of an oncoming wave, when the bow and the steering oar were in midair and the boat was out of control, could produce the worst disaster of all, broaching to.

The boy did not know that James was a man of awesome physical power. His hands were four times the size of normal ones. It seemed as if nature had made those hands to control the great sweep oar in stormy seas. His shoulders were not wide, and at five feet six and a half, he was not a tall man—slightly under the normal height of Hull sailors in the nineteenth century. But his arms were almost preternaturally long, and at their ends were those enormous hands, powerful even compared to the hands of other sailors who had spent their lives—and whose ancestors had spent their lives—pulling thick oars. Lifesavers needed somewhat different physical powers from those of sailors on coastal or deep-sea boats. Most sailors did not spend much time rowing. Usually they did not have to wrap their hands around broad oar handles and pull heavy oars through turbulent waters. Mainly they handled flexible materials like ropes and canvas. The long, heavily muscled arms and the vast hands of Joshua James helped make him the perfect handler of a sweep oar.

All of this the boy did not know, and he also did not know about a certain point brought out by Lieutenant Hamlet's questioning of James a few weeks later. Hamlet asked the captain if during November 25 and 26 he ever felt that his life and the lives of his crew were in great danger. James answered, "Yes, I did." And he described the rescue of the crew of the schooner *Gertrude Abbott* on the night of the twenty-fifth. He said, "The danger was in going out and coming in through the breakers among the sunken rocks." He said that the rescues after the *Abbott* rescue involved breakers and sunken rocks too, but the other rescues were in daylight, and the rescue of the crew of the *Abbott* took place in the dead of night with only the distant light of the fire that the people of Hull had built on Souther's Hill.

Seeing—*light*—was a matter of life or death in lifesaving. The captain, the only one who could see ahead, and therefore the only one in the boat who could decide what to do with split-second speed, had to be able to see not only waves, and breakers and rocks,

but also the heavy debris that surrounded a wrecked ship. If he could not see an oncoming "slatch" (the smooth patch of water that often comes after the master wave, the third wave), or if he could not see the seventh wave (which is sometimes far larger than the preceding six), the surfboat could be broached to or pitchpoled in a moment. And if the captain could not see the heavy wooden spars of the wrecked ship leaping and falling all around it, his lifesaving efforts would be nothing but strenuous suicide.

On the night of November 25, the Humane Society surfboat *R. B. Forbes*, in sleet and rain and in mast-high seas that capsized the surfboat more than two hundred yards from shore, finally carried the whole crew of the *Gertrude Abbott* to safety under the light of the bonfire on Souther's Hill. If ever there was an instance of the "ethical sublime"—of unappeasable, limited human beings struggling to live and to help others live against overwhelming power—the rescue of the crew of the *Gertrude Abbott* was that instance.

#### 4

But an event like this is not enough to make the doers of those deeds "good" people. In the first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes, when he is discussing the good life: "One swallow or one fine day does not make a spring." A good deed must happen in "a complete life," as he put it. A good life takes time, more time than one fine action. Because this is so, there is more to tell about Joshua James and the people of Hull, Massachusetts, than what happened at the protest meeting in 1848 and what happened during the rescue of the crew of the *Gertrude Abbott*.

After ten o'clock on the night of the twenty-fifth, when the sailors from the *Gertrude Abbott* were all being warmed and fed and comforted in the homes of the people of Hull, James and his crew took turns keeping a lookout along the beach that forms the top of the pelican's beak. It was still very dark. The sleet had turned to rain, and the onshore winds were more ferocious than ever. A lookout close enough to the sea to be of any use was in great danger of being drowned in gullies that had been cut in the sand by the storm, or of being struck by wreckage that suddenly swept ashore.

At three o'clock in the morning of November 26 James learned

that there was another vessel wrecked near the *Cox and Green*. In the black night James and his crew moved the surfboat *Robert G. Shaw* more than a mile to a good launching place opposite the wrecked schooner. This time there was no bonfire to help the life-savers, and so they had to wait until daybreak before launching. When morning came they saw sailors in the rigging of another three-masted schooner, the *Bertha Walker*, screaming for help. In all the noise of wind and water the winds carried their voices to the people on the shore as if they were shouting in a big room.

The winds were hurricane force, and the thickening rain was like a solid wet wall in the faces of James's crew. The sea was breaking over the *Bertha Walker* fore and aft—it was deeply embedded in a shoal, being loaded with coal—and the heavy spars of the wrecked vessel were all around. And so it took a long time to get close enough to get the sailors to bend (fasten) ropes around themselves, jump into the sea near the lifeboat, and have themselves pulled up. The captain and the first mate had been swept overboard and drowned in the night. When the lifesavers pulled the seventh and last living sailor into the boat and set off for shore, the people on the beach gave a great yell of triumph.

By nine o'clock in the morning, the crew of the coastal schooner was on its way to various homes on the north side of the thick beak of the pelican that is Hull.

The lifesaving crew had had no breakfast, but before they could leave the boat, James requested that a tugboat pull the *R. B. Forbes* out to another schooner anchored not far from the *Bertha Walker*. It was the *Puritan*, and though an upside-down flag was flying in her rigging, it turned out that the ship was in no danger; the captain wanted only to be towed in. James arranged with the tugboat captain that this be done and headed for the shore near Toddy Rocks.

But the storm of '88 was far from over. Shortly after ten o'clock—that is, immediately after James and his crew had come back from the *Puritan*—they learned of another wrecked vessel in a dangerous situation off Nantasket Beach. This was the great white-sand barrier beach that constitutes the almost perfectly straight back of the pelican. It has the fetch of the whole Atlantic Ocean behind it to the northeast, and so it receives the most immense winds and waves of any place in the outer Boston Harbor. For this reason Captain James decided to use the large lifeboat *Nantasket*.

And so, a little more than an hour after they had saved the crew of the *Bertha Walker* on a sea more ferocious than any they had ever encountered, and after having spent much of the previous night on the lookout, James and his crew took the heaviest and biggest lifeboat in the United States down from the tip of the beak, south across Hingham Bay, down the Weir River under the feet of the pelican to the narrow strip of beach inland from the Hotel Nantasket. In order to cross the strip of beach to get to the sea, they had to make a landing from the inland side. In the process of making that landing, the big boat slammed against the rocks, and James and his crew had to put lead patches on the holes before hauling the boat across the strip of sand.

All this was happening while the storm was growing more and more powerful, and immediately after a morning of intense and dangerous boat handling. Ever since three in the morning of November 26, crises had arisen so swiftly, one after another, that the crew had not had a bite of food or sip of water. Now they were about to take the *Nantasket* out on the high seas to rescue the crew of a wrecked vessel at the height of the greatest storm of the century.

The boat they were using had never been used before in a rescue. An unfamiliar boat was an object of great suspicion for even the most fearless lifesavers. Experience had taught them that it is far more dangerous to go out in an untried boat—no matter how excellent it might be—than in a familiar, tested one that has its known faults. Especially in a storm like this, their lives depended on their knowledge of their boat. Nevertheless the whole crew of ten immediately agreed to take the boat out.

The *Nantasket* had been designed by Samuel James, Joshua's older brother, who had been helping for four decades to save lives off the coast of Hull. The James brothers had had great difficulty persuading the Massachusetts Humane Society that this twenty-nine-foot immensely heavy boat would be manageable in the breakers, shoals, and rocks off Hull. Edward Burgess, the designer of some of the most successful America's Cup defenders in the history of the race and the experienced boatbuilders who worked for him, believed that the boat could not succeed. But the two Hull lifesavers somehow prevailed, and the boat was built and put in the Stoney Beach Humane Society boathouse in April 1888, a half dozen months before the storm.



The *Nantasket's* bow and stern were of the same profile; they were designed to keep the sea out of the boat during the launch and the landing. The wood on the bottom of the boat was fitted piece to piece so that the boat could turn in the water swiftly and with a minimum of effort. Most important, it was very light in the water, easily rowed toward the wind on a heavy sea, and easily maneuvered.

The ancient Syracusan Archimedes had shown that an object in water loses exactly the amount of weight of the water that the object displaces. The greater the volume of the object, the more water it displaces, and the lighter it becomes, the higher it floats. This is why a big raft, even when it is heavily loaded, floats high on the water with very little space below the waterline. The *Nantasket* was long and wide at the waterline, and so it floated like a gull's feather, able to respond to the will and the skill of the Hull life-savers better than any other lifeboat ever built.

The fact that it rode high in the water and was responsive to pressures also meant that it could capsize quite easily, so the crew had to be immensely skillful and strong to keep it from broaching to or pitchpoling in the teeth of a storm. But the lifesavers of Hull had the skill and power to work the boat, and in their hands the *Nantasket* embodied the sea-wisdom of the two James brothers and the people of the village. It was to become the most successful lifeboat in American history.

It took four horses and fifty men to haul the big boat across the sands opposite the wreck, but at daybreak the brand-new dark green *Nantasket* stood opposite the wrecked ship, ready to launch.

Even with a boat as responsive as the *Nantasket*, it took a long time to get past the breakers and waves to the wreck, because of the heavy sea running, and because the most furious gale Captain James had seen in decades was running with it. I have mentioned that the heaviest seas almost always run with the wind. This means that rowing out to sea in a heavy surf demands speed, or all is lost, especially when a great onshore gale is blowing. There is no room for error in the steering of such a sea-responsive open boat as the *Nantasket*. The boat has to cut through the crests of the waves not only swiftly but head-on. The smallest swing from the perpendicular, the tiniest relaxation or overcompensation on the part of the captain or crew, can destroy them all.

But Joshua's "boys" (as he called them) kept the new lifeboat moving with enough speed to get over the crests of the waves handily, and the captain worked the immense new sweep oar truly, so that the surfboat reached the schooner without incident. Because he and his crew were what they were, the most dangerous part of the rescue operation came after the trip to the schooner. James's report to Lieutenant Hamlet is a masterpiece of understatement, describing most of the rescues in the storm of '88 as "work done by myself and others." But in describing the sea around the *H. C. Higginson*, Joshua James became a different man: "The sea alongside of the vessel was terrible," he wrote. When I first read that sentence I rubbed my eyes and shook my head in unbelief: The seas must have been awesome to have made him say that.

In that sea, and having had no food or rest for almost twenty hours, James and his crew had to keep the surfboat clear of the wreckage around the schooner while staying close enough to it to pull the sailors out of the sea after they had jumped from the rigging. This they had to do speedily, even though the sailors had stout lines bent around their bodies. The waves towering over the masts, the bitter-cold water, and the whipping debris of the ship would have killed them in minutes. In his report to Hamlet, James wrote: "It is my opinion that no other boat, except the one we had, could have gotten up alongside of the vessel as far as the main rigging where the men were; no boat that I know of."

As in the case of the *Bertha Walker*, the Hull Humane Society crew saved everybody aboard—everybody, that is, who was alive when they launched their lifeboat. The master of the *Higginson* and his first mate had been swept off the boat and drowned during the night, and the steward had frozen to death that night hanging in the rigging. His ice-covered body had to be left hanging and swaying in the rigging offshore of the Nantasket Hotel for much of Sunday, November 26, while the storm continued.

A few hours later, at 5:00 P.M., Captain James's crew had to transport the *Nantasket*, with the help of four horses and fifty men, three miles across icy roads and shifting, crusty sands to Long Beach near Strawberry Hill on the back of the pelican. They launched their boat into a full gale of wind and monstrous seas, and they saved the men from the British brig *Alice*.

In about twenty-four hours they had saved the lives of twenty-

nine people from five ships. Twenty men had done the "work," as James put it, but only four had been on all five missions. One was James, who at sixty-two was twice as old as the oldest man in his command, and another was his dark, handsome son, Osceola, who had been named after the dauntless, betrayed Seminole chief who had died earlier in the century. They were unpaid volunteers who received occasional medals or rewards for exceptional bravery and success. Saving lives was their avocation. They usually listed their vocations as "Fisherman."

## 5

In an interview with James after the captain had submitted his written report, Lt. O. C. Hamlet asked him if there was anybody in his command who during the storm of '88 conducted himself more bravely than the others did. James answered, "No. All of the men exhibited the same courage and determination, and no one did anything more than any other in the effort of rescuing the shipwrecked."

James was not being modest; he was—in a way—being factual. From the first trip out to the *Cox and Green* at two o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, November 25, to the last trip out to the *Alice*, all the men were "in the same boat," as the phrase goes. From those who bailed water in buckets out of the surfboats to Joshua James himself at the great steering oar, these people of Hull worked together. There was not a "tub of butter," as James once described a new, incompetent crewman, among them. They worked for others together. And in this they were as much an extension of the tiny population of Hull as the captain was.

Still, the decisions to go out time after time, to haul the lifeboats for mile after mile, and to drive the boats forward so that they were close enough to the ships to receive the survivors—these and many lesser decisions were Joshua's only to make. No one could make them for him, though he always gave crewmen the opportunity to step aside and let somebody else take their place. He could not command them to risk their lives. And so the decisions to save those twenty-nine people were first made by him alone.

And not only the decisions: The actual conduct of the surfboats and the lifeboat *Nantasket* through those wild winds and waters

and rocks and debris was dominated by his powers of body and mind. With those long arms and gigantic hands, that immense strength, and that inflexible will, he alone controlled the boat amid the shifting forces of wind and water. He alone decided and guided every move in each of the rescues, and almost every move was a major one. Almost every move could have destroyed them all.

## 6

There are those who think that citizenship is simply a possession, a legitimate right symbolized and legalized by a duly attested document that one puts in a strongbox, or something one receives as a birthright. For them being a citizen is primarily a public, legal matter, with no special obligations, except perhaps *not* to do certain things—not to kill, not to rob, not to cheat. Hull village had such persons in it, as, perhaps, do most political units. But this tiny community of two to three hundred families saw membership in the community of Hull as a life in common, a life in which people felt silently but firmly obliged to help strangers and one another.

One reason for this was that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century Hull was made up mostly of relatives. Almost everybody was related by marriage or by blood to almost everybody else. Once in a while a sailor or a soldier from the outer world, or an employee of one of the grand summer hotels on the pelican, would marry into the village. But others were in no rush to spend their lives in this poor, isolated, culturally barren village that the Industrial Revolution had bypassed without a glance. Hull remained a community of close relatives. A visitor to Hull would soon learn that he or she had better not speak ill to one Hullonian about another: The two were usually related, and they were as passionately defensive of each other before strangers as they were critical of each other among themselves.

Another reason for their intimacy was the size and location of the village. Since its founding in the seventeenth century it had stayed small. It had fewer than three hundred families in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact it was the tiniest village in the state of Massachusetts. On the northernmost part of the peninsula called Hull, the village of Hull—the head and the beak of the pelican—lies between two long hills that run up from the south to

the west. The hills protect the village from the terrible northeasterly winds of winter, but they also help cut the village off from the rest of the town. The only close neighbors of the villagers are one another, and the salt sea.

Gladys Means, who has lived all of her long life in Hull and whose parents and grandparents lived out their lives there, told me that one of the reasons that the village was called "Moon village at the ends of the earth" was that on clear nights when the moon was full, and the weather was good, they would close a gate on what is now Nantasket Avenue and shut out the rest of the world. Exactly what they did behind that gate Gladys Means has chosen not to tell. She did tell me once that what they did was "fun and games." And once she said, "The reason you're upset about not knowing is that you're jealous."

But fun and games aside, before World War I, before power boats and navigational instruments made the seas off Hull comparatively safe in winter, and before land transportation took the place of coastal navigation, every able-bodied man in Hull went down to the sea to save lives as they had been for centuries. When I thought about Hull in the winter, I found myself thinking of the famous funeral oration of Pericles, in which he praises ancient Athens as "the school of Greece," after having said, "It is only the Athenians who, fearless of consequences, confer their benefits not from calculations of expediency, but in the confidence of liberality."

I sometimes smiled to myself when I found myself comparing ancient Athens in all its glory to tiny, isolated, poor Hull village. But I still find myself thinking about the two of them. One of the reasons Pericles called his great city the school of Greece was that he found its people equal to emergencies. He saw them facing danger squarely in the service of mankind, acting boldly, and trusting in themselves. Of course, the Athenians got some of their glory by conquest and threats, and the people of Hull did nothing noteworthy except save a few hundred lives. The Athenians gave the world artistic, political, and philosophical gifts of such persuasive power that—perhaps—no era in history did more than theirs to create civilization as we know it. All Hull village did was save human lives and alleviate the terrible distress of shipwreck for centuries.

They resembled the village of Le Chambon, these few people who saved a few strangers. They did nothing to stop or to alter the

course of the hurricanes they faced. But they meant much to those few, just as that French mountain village saved the lives and hopes of some children.

## 7

The last trip of the *Nantasket* during the storm of 1888 started from the long barrier beach by the Nantasket Hotel. Along much of the Atlantic seaboard the eighties and nineties were the decades of the great summer hotels, and the town of Hull was perhaps the most opulent resort of them all. The Nantasket Hotel was only one, and by no means the biggest, of many hotels that lay scattered along the top of the head of the pelican and clustered down its three miles of gently curving back. Other big hotels, like Atlantic House, Rockland House, Villa Napoli, and Hotel Pemberton, helped make Nantasket (as the town of Hull was usually called then) the queen of the Atlantic seaboard. Presidents of the United States, financial magnates, and internationally famous opera and theater stars spent summers in those immense wooden structures with their great ballrooms, their curving staircases, their foreign chefs (French, Italian, German, and Chinese, sometimes all in the same vast kitchen), and their roulette, poker, and blackjack tables.

The Nantasket Hotel, like the others, had a benign relationship with the sea off Hull. Like the others it was open only in the summer, when there were no storms and no dangers, when the living was easy. It was a place where nature seemed benevolent, peaceful, a pretty background, but only a background, for really important matters like human comfort, human display, and profit making. A veranda wrapped itself around the great wooden building, and the rich sat on that veranda and looked occasionally at the bland and harmless spectacle of a three-mile sweep of white sand and blue water. It was part of what Thoreau, after one of his walks there, called "the most perfect seashore" he had seen.

The hotel and the seashore that surrounded it allowed people to turn to one another for challenges. The hotel made it look as if humankind had total sovereignty over a harmless nature sprinkled with ribboned hats and peach-colored suits. For them Nantasket Beach posed no life-or-death problems. For them there was no need to band together against a wintry world that knew no pity.

But for the villagers of Hull that need was great, not only because the powers of a great sea threatened them but also because they felt an obligation to help shipwrecked strangers. They needed to band together in order to help them. All the rich and powerful needed to do was to impress and command others—during beautiful summer days—while they tasted the fruits of their ascendancy over everyone else. Social or economic ascendancy was of no avail on the cold salt sea during the winter. In the great summer hotels a person had the wherewithal to enjoy solitary splendor. In the village of Hull people could not survive narcissistic and alone, being where they were—and who they were.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, electric trolley cars, steam trains, and large, luxurious steam packets carried crowds of people into Hull from the Boston area and elsewhere in the United States. Occasionally Hull villagers would work at the hotels (Joshua James's five daughters sometimes played dance music there), and occasionally they sold lobsters to the hotelkeepers or to individual visitors from Boston. But somehow the village remained a poor, drab backwater that showed its powers to the world in the wintertime only, long after hotels were boarded up against winds and weather. At a time when not only great summer resorts were thriving in Hull, but great cities, high structural-iron-ribbed skyscrapers, immense corporations and corporation mergers, and vast "bonanza" farms were forming across the country, Hull remained a little place at the ends of the earth, where competition and self-aggrandizement were not as important as living out one's days in intimacy with one another and with the sea.

For years I have been asking my friends in Hull to help me to grasp in an image the differences between the wintry village and the great summer resort of Hull. And for years we failed to find that image. But one day I found it in a book written by a man born and raised in a little house in Hull, a wooden house his family banked around with seaweed to keep out the winds.

Dr. William Bergan lived from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth, and in his book *Old Nantasket* he described in detail the great resorts of the gilded age in Hull. But he described even more forcefully the dark underside of that age.

There was once, he wrote, a forty-foot cabin boat lying ruined and high and dry on the beach near Pemberton Wharf, where the steamboats from Boston docked. Its large cabin had a padlock on it, and it had a broken glass porthole. When the town authorities decided, after four years, to break up this eyesore and take it away, they had to break down the door of the main cabin. When they entered they saw before them an immense pile of empty wallets and pocketbooks that reached to the roof of the cabin and filled the room.

It was one of the places in Hull the police had told pickpockets to use as dumping grounds for stolen items. Since the boat was close to busy Pemberton Wharf, at the tip of the pelican's beak, it was convenient for thieves; it allowed them to get rid of useless burdens and hide them from any passersby, so that new "suckers" would not be alerted. Were a tourist to see a pile of stripped purses and wallets when he or she stepped off the boat, he or she might well become careful. This would mean less money for the thieves and less money for the police, who were working with them. And so for years thieves dropped the purses and wallets of thousands of people through the open porthole.

The people of all ages and conditions who came to Hull to revivify the pleasure of being alive were forced to enjoy the hospitality of pickpockets—and of their accomplices, the corrupt police. For me the image of that wrecked boat loaded with the detritus of many small and great losses shows what summertime was—for many people—during the gilded age in Hull.

In the wintertime, the time of hurricanes, the village did its best to alleviate human suffering and save human lives. In the summertime the town of Hull created that twisted pile. Like people, some places are better than others, and if you think "better" is an empty word, imagine asking the sailors who were rescued from the *Gertrude Abbott* how they felt about Hull; then imagine asking a victim of the pickpockets the same question.

## 8

Thoreau was no friend of do-gooders. Usually when he wrote about human decency he despised doers of good deeds. His life task was to "set about doing good." When he helped people it was "aside



from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended." Being good for him mainly meant being independent and self-reliant, not society-reliant. He was one of a long history of people who believed that goodness was mainly a matter of inward mental or spiritual power, not outward deeds.

Thoreau had tried to be philanthropic, but he gave it up because it distracted him from living and loafing by his own lights. He felt that a person should be like the sun, which does not exist only in order to give warmth and life, and does not exist in order to wake us up in the morning through our bedroom window. It exists in itself. He believed that people do not exist in order mainly to do good or bad deeds. They exist mainly to burn brightly in inward power—so brightly that you cannot look upon them.

But the life of Joshua James was a concentrated, unswerving life committed to helping others. Somehow he managed to help others, to devote himself to lifesaving, and at the same time to achieve an integrity: a powerful, immovable centeredness that Thoreau might have admired, had he gotten to know James in those walks on the Massachusetts shore.

## 9

Joshua James was tough and short-legged, with those great hands of his that hung below his knees. Under his yellow sou'wester hat, and behind his full, gray beard, you could barely make out his gray-hazel eyes. He looked like a machine made to do what he was going to do. And in a way he *was* a machine, made for doing the job he did.

He was sixty-two years old, almost to the day, when he stood atop Telegraph Hill that November morning in 1888 and watched the vessels around the village being driven toward a lee shore. For almost fifty years—ever since he was fifteen—he had been an unpaid, unpensioned volunteer lifesaver using the equipment of the Massachusetts Humane Society. Because of the fire that destroyed the archives of the Massachusetts Humane Society in 1872, we shall never know how many people he saved in the first decades of his service, but a Humane Society award he received in 1886 praised him for saving lives from the age of fifteen onward.

On a clear day in early April 1837, the schooner *Hepzibah*,

which was owned by Joshua James's older brother Reinier, was crossing Hull Gut from Peddock's Island to Windmill Point at the tip of the pelican's beak. The two-masted fore-and-aft-rigged boat made a living for Reinier by carrying paving stones to Boston. But that shining spring day it had no steady ballast in its hold. All it had were passengers, and very few of them: Joshua's mother and baby sister.

Hull Gut was a dangerous place, even for Hull sailors like the Jameses. Strong currents from three directions flow through it as if through a funnel, and a fourth current, or set, flows fast along the Hull shore at the top of the tip of the pelican's beak. Joshua, who was then eleven years old, was standing near the Tudor saltworks on the rise near the windmill that gives Windmill Point its name, when it happened. Out of the blue a great gust of wind suddenly burst out of Hingham Bay to the south, stirred up the conflicting currents in the gut, and in a split second turned the schooner on its beam ends. The boat was shipping water through every hatchway. Joshua's mother, Esther Dill James, was above decks when it happened, but instead of moving to the lifeboat, she rushed below through the forward hatchway. Her baby daughter was sleeping down there. While she was below the boat sank, under Joshua's eyes.

Joshua's older sister, Catherine, was fifteen when their mother and sister died. For the rest of Joshua's young manhood she mothered him in Esther's stead. Long after the wreck of the *Hepzibah*, she said that Joshua never wept for his mother and his baby sister. She said: "Ever after that he seemed to be scanning the sea in quest of imperiled lives." His only visible reaction was to devote his life to saving lives off the coast of Hull.

There was one thing besides lifesaving to which he was committed, body and soul. It was Louisa Lucihe, his fourth cousin. He first encountered "Little Louisa" when she was an infant and he was sixteen. In 1858, when she was sixteen and he was thirty-two, they married. When Sumner Kimball, then the superintendent of the federal Life Saving Service and the only biographer of Joshua James, asked Louisa in her old age why she married Joshua when he was twice her own age, she smiled and said that he had had his eye on her since the moment he first saw her. She told Kimball that his strength of will explained it all.

But she was oversimplifying. She had a will of her own. When she was very young she put her life in danger off Nantasket Beach in order to save a visitor from drowning. She was educated and beautiful enough to pick and choose, and she chose Joshua as stubbornly as he chose her. She had a small straight Roman nose that came down from between her eyes in a short diagonal line. It was not tipped up sweetly; it had three lines: a diagonal, a short vertical that was its tip, and a horizontal. She was as sturdy as Joshua, and an excellent boat handler.

The year after they were married they moved into the house at 104 Spring Street where they spent the rest of their lives together. Their house was full of music in the evenings, and Louisa and Joshua spent much of the little money they had teaching all five of their daughters how to play musical instruments. The girls formed a small band, and sometimes—very seldom, because they were not very accomplished musicians—they played at the big hotels. In the evenings in that otherwise quiet village you could hear the music coming out of 104 Spring Street, and anybody who wanted to come in without knocking.

There are not many stories that show much about James's home life or his personality. The stories are mainly about his work as a lifesaver for the Humane Society and later for the U.S. Life Saving Service. But there is one story about him that is personally telling.

He was a silent man. Even when he was young and used to stand on the platform around the flag at the corner of Nantasket Avenue and Spring Street, he seldom talked unless he was addressed. After the storm of '88, when he had been to Boston a few times to get awards and praise (and had managed to give the shortest speeches on record), a young woman reporter from the *Boston Globe* appeared at the front door of the house on Spring Street. She was a little timid, and she was not sure how she would interview him, famous and quiet as he was. James opened the door to her, and before she could utter a word, he took both of her hands into his vast ones, his dark eyes shining with the pleasure of seeing her, and said: "You are welcome here!" She never forgot that short, loving greeting for a stranger, and it was more important to her understanding of the man than any of the stories he told her.

Lifesaving was the only work of Joshua James. Others in the village were fishermen, wreckers, skippers of commercial vessels of

various sorts, but for Joshua alone saving the lives of strangers was his only occupation. He loved family, music, and loafing as much as anyone in Hull, but for the last three decades of the nineteenth century nobody in Hull went in harm's way as persistently as he did; nobody in Hull saved the lives of as many human beings as he did. He was a being immovably centered, and the storm that struck Hull on the days and nights of late November 1888 showed how immovably, how stubbornly centered he was. It was his will, and his will alone, that drove his crew into the terrible sea again and again and again, and by the time he died he had spent fifty-seven winters of his life working only at this.

One morning I was talking about him with Joe Ottino, a burly old man, tall and weathered. Ottino was one of the last surviving lifesavers of Hull who could remember the days when lifeboats were rowed, not powered. He had a deep, ragged voice, and he was a little disdainful of my somewhat adoring attitude toward Joshua. And so in the middle of our conversation he reached his heavy hand out and put it on my knee. Then he said, "You know, Hallie, I've heard rumors about how Joshua's crew reacted to his death. One of 'em said, 'Good for the old bastard. It's about time.'" And then with a wry smile Ottino added, "But it's only a rumor. Anyway, I can tell you for sure that Joshua made his boys practice and practice and practice in between storms."

## 10

Often Thoreau leads us to think that we must choose between allegiance to nature and allegiance to human society. He wants a freedom that is not just civic, but that is absolute. As he put it at the beginning of his essay *Walking*, he wanted "to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society."

For Joshua James that choice, that "rather than," was nonsense. He lived and moved and had his being in both nature and human society. During the long summer days and nights in the lifesaving stations, he read for hours and hours on end (an old drawing of him has him surrounded by books). The books were mainly about nature—astronomy, weather, and physics. As children he and his brothers and sisters had been forbidden by their intense, dutiful

mother to read novels or fiction of any kind. Once she destroyed a beautiful, expensive copy of a novel she found in the hands of one of her daughters.

She helped turn him to studying nature, not human imagination. But of course books were not his main links with nature. Experience was, experience and his own powers of observation. One night when he was in his teens he was sleeping belowdecks on a voyage into waters far from Hull, and the captain of the boat, a fellow Hullonian, suddenly realized that he was lost. Someone suggested that he wake Joshua and ask him to help. When they did, Joshua looked up at the sky through sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes, recommended a new bearing, and casually said that in about two hours they would make a certain lighthouse. About an hour and fifty-five minutes later they made the light. James's father used to tell this story, but had no idea how his son had been able to examine the stars and draw such accurate conclusions in unfamiliar waters.

Once when he was sailing a boat into the Inner Harbor of Boston, he lost his bearings for a little while in an opaque fog. After a few moments somebody asked him where they were. Without hesitating he answered, "Off Long Island Head," and when he was asked how he knew it, he answered, "I can hear the land talk." A few minutes later when the fog lifted they were exactly where Joshua had said they were. He was a man in touch with nature—his eyes, his ears, his cast of mind, and the experiences of a lifetime at the ends of the earth had made him, to use Thoreau's words, "part and parcel of Nature."

From the age of fifteen until he was seventy-two years old he laid his big hands on nature, and he never lost his grip. He did not live with nature as a solitary being like Thoreau, but as part and parcel of Hull Village, and as part and parcel of the lives of the people he did so much to save from terror and death. His fifty-seven years of service as a lifesaver are unique in the history of the Massachusetts Humane Society, the U.S. Life Saving Service, and the Search and Rescue arm of the U.S. Coast Guard. He was both a dogooder and a man of unshakable self-will. Thoreau could have been describing him when he wrote, "Let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores."

## II

On March 17, 1902, one of the worst disasters in the history of lifesaving occurred off the southern end of Monomoy Island, a strip of land hanging down from the elbow of Cape Cod. During a great storm, the Monomoy Point lifesaving station sent out a boat to pick up some men stranded on a wrecked barge. The seas and the winds were very high, but the five crewmen dropped into the lifeboat, and the Monomoy crew started rowing them back to shore. Then a great wave struck them, and the boat was suddenly full of water. The rescued men jumped up from their seats in a panic, even though Captain Eldredge of the Monomoy station had ordered them to stay low. They threw their arms around the necks and shoulders of the surfmen and kept them from heading the boat to the shore. The boat broached to, turned bottom up, and everybody on the boat, except a surfman named Seth Ellis, drowned.

All along the coast of Massachusetts the story of the Monomoy disaster was in the air. Within hours of the drownings, every surfman and most of the inhabitants knew the details. Capt. Joshua James was now head of the U.S. Life Saving Service around Hull. The Monomoy disaster reminded him of the immense dangers in his profession, and he needed that reminder, because for almost sixty years he had been saving lives without losing a crewman and without failing to rescue a single shipwrecked person who had been alive at the moment when Joshua and his crew set out to pick him up.

There is no record of his having said anything to express his feelings about the Monomoy disaster, but there is a very clear record of what he did. On March 19, two days after the disaster, a great northeast gale struck the shores of the pelican. There were no wrecked ships and no ships in danger. Captain James did an almost unprecedented thing: He called his crew to a boat drill at seven o'clock in the morning at the height of the storm. He wanted to reinforce the discipline of his men, and he wanted to reassure them and himself that they could handle the lifeboat safely in very heavy weather.

And so they launched the dark green *Nantasket*, with James, as usual, at the great steering oar. He was seventy-six years old, three decades older than the regulations permitted for a captain. He was

the only lifesaver who was ever allowed by the U.S. Life Saving Service to keep his post so long after the legal age limit. A few months before the drill he had passed a physical examination with grades higher than any of his "boys." His eyes and lungs were normal; his pulse rate 84; he had no rheumatic symptoms and no varicose veins. And he was stronger than any of the men in his command.

For one hour he had his "boys" maneuver the lifeboat in the immense sea off Stoney Beach. These were steering maneuvers, and he alone was at the big sweep oar. At the end of the hour he was satisfied with the behavior of his crew and delighted that the lifeboat freed itself so swiftly of the water it had shipped.

He gave the command to head for shore. At the moment when the bow of the boat touched the sand of Stoney Beach, he leaped from the boat, took a few steps, turned, looked at the sea, and said to his men, "The tide is ebbing." And he fell on the sand, dead.

There is a legend in coastal communities: People here do not die when the tide is at the flood; they die only when the tide is going out. The legend goes on: If a person lives until the flood starts, that person will live at least until the tide starts ebbing. If this legend does not describe a fact, at least it expresses a spiritual truth. People along the coast are intimately acquainted with a superhuman force, the sea, which—like every cell in our bodies—is awash with water. They are in communion with something vastly larger and vastly more powerful than themselves. They are creatures of human society *and* creatures of superhuman nature. Such a one was Joshua James.

## 12

After I had been studying the life of Joshua James for a few years, I found myself asking whether I had managed to answer the invitation he had seemed to give me in the Coast Guard Museum the first night I heard about him: "See if you can understand me, Mister."

My first answer was that I had not done so. I had so few words from his hand and mouth, so few firsthand accounts of his feelings and ideas. Sometimes his actions had seemed to me to be opaque, as far as letting me see what was in his mind and heart. He was almost like an inscrutable though magnificent athlete who could do

wondrous things with that powerful body of his. I could admire his actions, I felt, but I did not know his mind.

Then I realized that I was interested in him not because I was trying to guess or infer what was happening deep inside of him, but because of what he was *in the world*. I was interested in him because he had relationships with other human beings that I felt were beautiful and good. I was fascinated by him from the beginning because of the story he lived.

How much can we know for sure of the innermost mind of even a person much given to words, like Henry David Thoreau? Thoreau's hundreds of thousands of words were a little like Joshua James's many actions—they showed you Thoreau, but only up to a point. They brought you just so far into his mind, and then suddenly a line was drawn, a limit touched. What, for instance, did Thoreau mean when he wrote toward the end of the chapter "Economy" in *Walden*: "I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself"?

No, what interested me in Joshua James was his story, as far as I, a curious outsider, could hope to discover it. And after I had spent a few years seeking out that story, I knew all that I needed to know. I knew that the story of his life was the story of a helpful, lifesaving human being committed to helping other human beings, and strangers at that. Benevolence, hospitality, helpfulness were embodied in the plot of his story, and I had done my best to get the story straight. His goodness was not some secret, hidden feeling or thought inside his head or heart. It was not something you have to guess about or draw elaborate psychological inferences about. It was the visible, the very *form* of his life, and anybody who looked long and hard at his life could discover that form.

His power to spread life did not lie in one of his deeds, like what he did in the storm of '88. It was his whole persistent, centered, life-giving life that was the very form and essence of the decency I was after. There it was in the story of that life, like the light of the sun that Thoreau wanted to emulate. It was visible; it was there; it was luminous.

And it had beauty in it. Whatever else beauty is, it is a confluence of joys, a unity of different jubilations. Beauty is happening when one entity makes you feel yourself coming alive in a wide joy,



the way the contrasts and harmonies between sounds and silences in any Haydn trio make me feel myself coming alive. It is a diversity of joys unified into a single joy, almost overwhelming.

And moral beauty happens when someone carves out a place for compassion in a largely ruthless universe. It happened in the French village of Le Chambon during the war, and it happened in and near the American village of Hull during the long lifetime of Joshua James.

It happens, and it fails to happen, in almost every event of people's lives together—in streets, in kitchens, in bedrooms, in workplaces, in wars. But sometimes it happens in a way that engrosses the mind and captivates memory. Sometimes it happens in such a way that the people who make it happen seem to unify the universe around themselves like powerful magnets. Somehow they seem to redeem us all from deathlike indifference. They carve a place for caring in the very middle of the quiet and loud storms of uncaring that surround—and eventually kill—us all.