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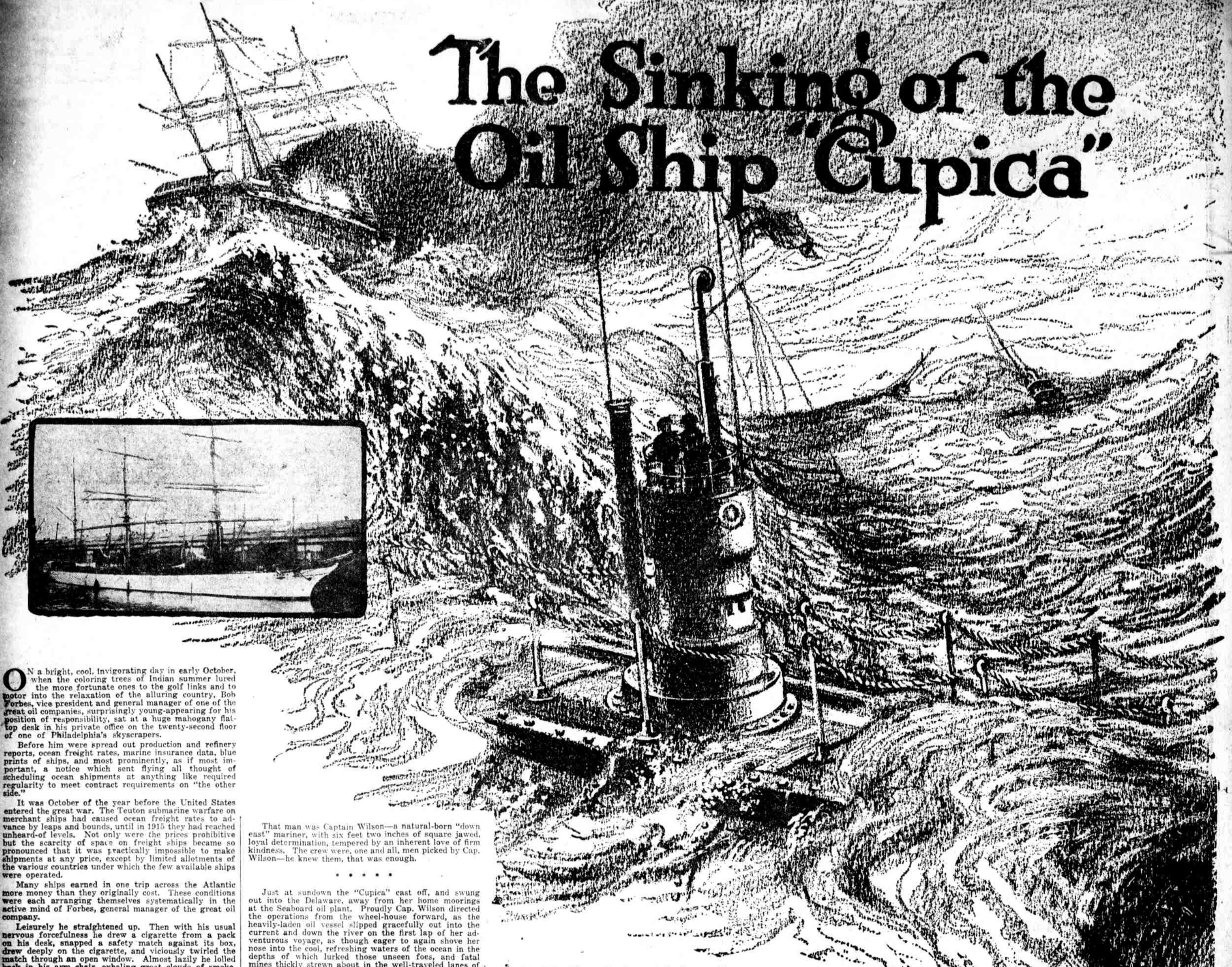
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# The Sinking of the Oil Ship "Cupica"



**O**N a bright, cool, invigorating day in early October, when the coloring trees of Indian summer lured the more fortunate ones to the golf links and to motor into the relaxation of the alluring country, Bob Forbes, vice president and general manager of one of the great oil companies, surprisingly young-appearing for his position of responsibility, sat at a huge mahogany flat-top desk in his private office on the twenty-second floor of one of Philadelphia's skyscrapers.

Before him were spread out production and refinery reports, ocean freight rates, marine insurance data, blue prints of ships, and most prominently, as if most important, a notice which sent flying all thought of scheduling ocean shipments at anything like required regularity to meet contract requirements on "the other side."

It was October of the year before the United States entered the great war. The Teuton submarine warfare on merchant ships had caused ocean freight rates to advance by leaps and bounds, until in 1915 they had reached unheard-of levels. Not only were the prices prohibitive but the scarcity of space on freight ships became so pronounced that it was practically impossible to make shipments at any price, except by limited allotments of the various countries under which the few available ships were operated.

Many ships earned in one trip across the Atlantic more money than they originally cost. These conditions were each arranging themselves systematically in the active mind of Forbes, general manager of the great oil company.

Leisurely he straightened up. Then with his usual nervous forcefulness he drew a cigarette from a pack on his desk, snapped a safety match against its box, drew deeply on the cigarette, and viciously twirled the match through an open window. Almost lazily he lolled back in his arm chair, exhaling great clouds of smoke. Then, as unexpectedly, he pitched forward to grasp his telephone, and in low-spoken, staccato words called a man whose evident conversation indicated him to be a ship broker.

Barely more than a minute later, Forbes clicked the telephone receiver onto its inoffensive hook, and pushed a button as though the very pressure on it could send his forcefulness and virility over the wires to the buzzer. Instantly a still younger man, whose whole atmosphere radiated self-assurance and a pronounced ability to receive and execute orders, stepped hastily into the private office.

"Mac, how much Perfection oil have we at the Seaboard plant ready to ship?" "There are 6500 barrels there now, and 500 in transit from Titusville, which should be here by the end of the week. That will give us 7000 barrels to apply on our contract lot for France."

"That's good work, Mac, I've just bought the 'Cupica.' She's that tub that has been doing service between Africa and the West Indies, a veritable tramp barque. She's 226 feet long, 36 feet beam, 23 feet 6 inches deep—1600 dead weight tons, so your 7000 barrels will just make up a cargo. They tell me she has just been fitted out as an oil burner, twin-screw, and that she'll amble across the pond in 28 days. Get a hold of the best inspector you can find, and go over her. But, we'll use her anyway. We've got to get that oil across in spite of H—"

Mac was the "doer" of the office, and the envy of the other young men who were jealous of his so-called "pull" with the "chief."

One morning, (just ten days later), he stepped into the "chief's" office as his superior was hanging up his hat.

"Well, chief, the 'Cupica' is loaded, manned, and clears today for London, chuck full of Perfection lubricating oil. By George, I'll bet those boys will be glad to see her over there. They tell me at the river that the reports are garbled over what they have to use in their trucks and ambulances because there isn't enough real oil to more than keep the airplanes up. Good God! chief, you've got to put Murray on the job so I can go over and get into that fight." Mac's face was crimson with youth's dash of angered excitement as he thought of the brave men who took the necessities of war "over there," and of the just as brave men, boys and women who bared their hearts to the death-dealing bullets and shells of the Huns.

The chief's answer was typical. "Hold on, boy, wait until it gets to be your fight. No doubt they need you, but so do I, and your wife—now." Silently Forbes was pleased. In fact, he still had to encounter his first time to be displeased with the way Mac worked. He had started several times to ask him about the "Cupica," but hesitated because he knew Mac would be "there" in reasonable time. He had not been disappointed.

Bob Forbes had always loved ships and ship men. He knew lots of both—he associated with both when his big business permitted. So now, he knew the man he wanted to take the "Cupica" across—the man he knew could take her across in spite of Hell and its arch-enemy, the German submarine officers.

That man was Captain Wilson—a natural-born "down east" mariner, with six feet two inches of square jawed, loyal determination, tempered by an inherent love of firm kindness. The crew were, one and all, men picked by Cap. Wilson—he knew them, that was enough.

Just at sundown the "Cupica" cast off, and swung out into the Delaware, away from her home moorings at the Seaboard oil plant. Proudly Cap. Wilson directed the operations from the wheel-house forward, as the heavily-laden oil vessel slipped gracefully out into the current and down the river on the first lap of her adventurous voyage, as though eager to again shove her nose into the cool, refreshing waters of the ocean in the depths of which lurked those unseen foes, and fatal mines thickly strewn about in the well-traveled lanes of the sea.

On, on she went, knowing no fear, with the staunch support of her stalwart crew, whose faith in their officer was implicit.

Through the days of the first weeks all was serene. The job of the look-out in the crow's-nest became monotonous. He almost wished something exciting would happen.

As the "Cupica" neared the Irish coast, at breakfast one morning the colored cook surprised every one by wagging his square, kinky head, as with rolling eyes, he said in deep, shaky basso, "Oh, lawdy, captain, today we're sh' gwine to be sank. Las' night ah dream ma mammy kiss me and say, 'Lor' bless you ma chile, pin on yore life deserver, for ah done had a vision what say to morrow you'se gwine to a watery grave."

Loud laughter at this ominous prognostication followed the cook back to his galley, and from then on the story of the negro's dream was mouthed to every one aboard. Some of the more superstitious men were noticed scanning the sea during spare moments that day, yet making certain that they loafed near the great bins of life preservers.

However, in spite of the cook's warning, not a submarine was sighted, and the "Cupica" steamed up the Thames to London. Here, in maneuvering in the harbor, amid a bedlam of whistled signals, a confusion and misunderstanding of intentions resulted in a collision with the S. S. "Angelica Maersk." The minor injuries received by the "Cupica" did not interfere with the unloading of her valuable cargo of Perfection lubricating oil. Captain Wilson then secured drydock facilities; but labor conditions were such that the "Cupica" lay there for five months before her necessary repairs were completed and she could again take to the water.

In June, 1917, two months after the United States declared war, the "Cupica" arrived in Philadelphia with a cargo of chalk.

She was immediately reloaded and in July sailed for London with another complete cargo of Perfection oil. By this time, Uncle Sam and John Bull were protecting the Merchantmen with convoys, and the uneventful journey was made with dispatch and safety.

Throughout the history of the world, men have been made careless by the absence of conditions to excite caution. They become rashly brave through over-confidence or forgetfulness of danger. Such men are not fit to be trusted with the direction of others or to be shouldered with responsibility for the protection of lives and property.

Such a man Captain Wilson was not. His many hard voyages before the mast which had won his gold braid, and his worthy years upon the bridge had taught him the treachery of the sea. And the voyages of the first three years of the awful war had taught him the treachery of the stealthy foe.

Captain Wilson knew his danger. He knew and realized his duty to his owners and his crew.

It was in August of 1917 that our heroic Captain piloted his ship out of England. Hardly had she left the English Channel when the lookout and deck officers sighted three super submarines as they rose from the depths, scarcely two cable lengths away with the glistening water rushing down their sides, as over the sleek bodies of terrible sea serpents of fiction.

Although surrounded by the vipers of the sea, Captain Wilson maintained his proverbial stolidity and coolness. Without notice, even though the subs were within shouting distance, a gun boomed and a shell hurtled and howled over the bow of the "Cupica."

Fearful were the odds against the ill-fated "Cupica." Even had she been armed, her gun could have been but futile against the clever service-trained gunners of the subs.

Yet, with typical Yankee presence of mind, Captain Wilson engaged the nearest submarine commander in conversation, while the men on the lee side hastened to get the boats and rafts ready.

In perfect English, the German megaphoned "what ship is that?" And while Captain Wilson shouted "Can't hear you!" several times, he put the "Cupica" under slow speed ahead, and gradually swung around; as though drifting, until his bow was at the stern of the nearest sub and in a direct line between two of the enemy. This left him at the mercy of only the more distant sub, and that one dared not discharge a gun or torpedo for fear of spreading death among its co-death dealers.

Now near enough to cause fear of being rammed, the German, who had first asked the name of the barque, continued his megaphone questioning.

"Who are you, and what is your cargo?"

To which Captain Wilson bellowed his response—"We're the Skip-and-Get-There from Hell-Roaring Swamp. And if we could get more than six measly knots out of this mongrel we'd show you navigating that would make your wheel hand think he'd joined a circus."

This exhibition of Yankee nerve piqued the Teuton severely. He had not encountered anything like it on his voyage of depression.

Importunately, he repeated his question—"What is your cargo?"

Passively, Captain Wilson replied with a voice that needed no megaphone, "Why, we have a hold full of limburger cheese today, just fresh from the cheese-foundry! But when we came over we brought a load of shells for the Germans!"

"Shells for the Germans?" repeated the enemy, "Why, how could you get them over?"

"Shot them over!" answered the stalwart Yankee.

With that, another German appeared at the top of the conning tower and handed the officer a piece of paper.

His eyes brightened, and he shook his fist at Captain Wilson, as he checked in anger at the jest, and in his anger reverted to broken English, "Ach! nun I know you. Et was die Cupica von Philadelphia—which brings to der Allies das fine oil. Ve'll show you." And he turned

to the gunners. Realizing his great danger, Captain Wilson's face blanched, as he firmly stood his ground at the forward rail.

A gun boomed, there was a terrific crunch and the poor "Cupica" trembled and lurched forward mortally wounded at her water line.

At this, the men who had leisurely released the boats from the davits, now floundered over each other for seats and oars when the blood-thirsty fiends opened fire from all three submarines simultaneously, plugging the hull of the ill-fated "Cupica."

After eighteen shots had been fired into her, near the water line, she slowly began to fill, and in less than an hour, the vessel with her cargo disappeared beneath the waves, leaving but a boiling, surging surface to momentarily mark her departure to the port of missing ships.

Their hellish deed completed, the three marauders as silently disappeared, leaving the "Cupica's" officer and crew to their fate in the open boats.

The storm-swept waves gave desolate promise of death. Yet, under the most hazardous conditions, the law of self-preservation is such that strong men set about doing their fullest what is to be done to get them to safety.

Hours piled into what seemed days. Tongues were swollen and throats burned with thirst. Some of the weaker men became exhausted from the nerve-racking battle against the waves that almost swamped the tiny boats. They cried to be shot and thrown overboard.

Yet, the up-bearing, hope-inspiring presence of Captain Wilson was felt as he took an oar to relieve one of the crew who became nauseated with fatigue. Perhaps through divine guidance and sympathy, the boats were able to keep close together.

Night came on. Tallow-burning, water-proof lanterns were clamped to the bow of each boat to prevent their being separated in the darkness and lost; the Captain only being able to guide them toward shore by means of a tiny watch-charm compass he wore. In this respect

fate had been good, else they all surely would have been lost.

Long hours after the inky blackness of a moonless night had settled, like an opaque blanket over all, the dulled ears and senses of the men were quickened by the well-known boom and swish of waves breaking over rocks. Could they be near land? God grant that hope be realized!

A few minutes later, a great wave carried the first boat well up onto a rocky shore, the flow leaving it there side-tilted, spilling the stiff, aching men over each other, too lame and dazed to move, until revived by the second wave, a little less vicious, spraying their faces and bodies with its cold. Shortly the others safely followed, making insecure landings.

After resting on the wet rocks to regain their strength, the men under the leadership of Captain Wilson made their way to the nearby fishing hamlet. Food and warmth soon revived the spirits and vitality of these hardy men of the sea, and before another sun they were on their way to London and another berth to defy the submarine peril in taking supplies to the valiant armies of the Allies.

Captain Wilson was later lost while in command of a ship owned by a Canadian shipping company, which foundered and went down in a heavy sea.

Thus ends the story of one of the best and bravest of our war heroes, the Captain of a merchant ship which did its full bit to aid the Crew Levick Company to deliver supplies of "Perfection" Motor Oils and Greases to our Allies in the great war.

It is generally understood that the Crew Levick Company is the oldest and one of the largest producers of petroleum products. Their superior quality "Perfection" motor oils and greases are refined exclusively from the famous Pennsylvania paraffin base crude.

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