

Rise & Fall of the Star of Bengal, V: The Captain's Daughter

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Introduction

It was March 1929. Joan Lowell, the fresh, new best-selling author, stood aboard the ocean-liner, *Ilé de France*, in a party thrown in her honor.

The Daily Illinois State Journal:

A full-rigged ship was her nursery, a flour bag her first nightgown, a canvas hammock her cradle and the ship's sailmaker her nurse. She was raised large on milk from Norfolk Island goats... And now, at 26, Skipper Joan has licked the world! ..Skipper Joan has set down her life in a book. It is "The Cradle of the Deep," to be published by Simon & Schuster early in March, and it promises to be one of the literary sensations of the year. Theatrical and movie rights already have been sold. Within two years, it is estimated, Skipper Joan will have a bank account of more than \$200,000.¹

For one brilliant moment, as flashbulbs snapped, Joan Lowell was the American dream. But in a flash, it would all be gone.

This is the story of a true legend of Hollywood, hoaxes, and an unsinkable star.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. You're listening to the fifth and final part of Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal, presented by Wrangell History Unlocked. Today's episode, The Captain's Daughter.

¹ 1929.03.10 Daily_Illinois_State_Journal_1929-03-10_3.pdf

Early Life

Family Tragedies

She was born Helen Joan Wagner November 23, 1902, in the city of Berkeley, California. She was the seventh child of Nicholas and Emma Wagner.

Her family life was marked by a series of tragedies that she never discussed.

Years before Helen was born, her parents' first three children, Philip, Albert, and Annette (ages 7, 3, and 1) died within days of each other from diphtheria.

Nicholas and Emma Wagner went on to have more children: Harold, Lowell, Phyllis, Helen, and Francis.

When little Joan was five years old, her brother Harold was struck by a train, just days before Christmas. Doctors operated on Harold's fractured skull, and he seemed to be making a miraculous recovery. Harold Wagner passed way on New Years Eve 1907 at the age of 12. He is buried with Philip, Albert, and Annette.²

Star of Bengal

Nine months after Harold's death, Nicholas Wagner was nearly killed in Alaska when his ship, the Star of Bengal, wrecked on the rocks of Coronation Island. 111 men died, and Nicholas Wagner was dragged from the water, unconscious. He came back to San Francisco bruised, beaten, broken, and bitter about being let go from his job with the Alaska Packer's Association.

The Wagners moved where Nicholas found work. When Helen was 12, Nicholas Wagner once again narrowly survived a shipwreck in Alaska, this time the Paramita, which dragged anchors and hit a reef along the Aleutian Islands.³

Australia

In 1917, at the age of 14, Helen Wagner went on the trip that changed her life forever. Nicholas Wagner was captain of the Minnie A. Caine, a cargo schooner bound for Australia. He brought his wife and children along.

² <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/137789466/harold-t-wagner>

³ 1914.06.24 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_THE_POST-INTELLIGENCER__June_24_1914__p14.pdf

This was Helen's first taste of life at sea. The 80 day trip to Australia was memorable for many reasons. The Tacoma Daily Ledger:

Henry Meyers, better known locally as "Suicide" Meyers, a character well known to the police, [who] was one of the crew of the vessel on the outward voyage, succeeded in hanging himself.⁴

In Australia, things got worse. While the Minnie A. Caine sat at harbor, the ship burst into flames. Firemen doused the Minnie A. Caine, causing the ship to list to the side⁵ and burn to the edge of the water.⁶ Repairs would take months. The fire raised suspicions. Nicholas Wagner offered 100 pounds to anyone with information.

The Wagners enrolled their children in Australian schools for their temporary stay. One of Helen's classmates recalled:

Both girls were clever and intelligent, but Helen was the more brilliant and interesting. Helen had strong and original artistic ability which won the admiration of the other pupils. It was an inspiration to hear Helen sing "My Country 'Tis of Tee" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." She felt every word she uttered, and her whole being was suffused with a patriotic love and pride that lit up her shining eyes.⁷

When workers billed him for the repairs to the Minnie A. Caine, he accused them of extortion and refused to pay. Australian authorities seized the ship. Captain Wagner said:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: So you arrested my ship, have you? You disgraced my ship and myself.⁸

Nicholas Wagner won the case in court, on a technicality, and the repairmen paid his fees.⁹ The Minnie A. Caine soon left for America, but not before learning the cause of the fire. It was an act of terrorism by their own cabin boy: Harry Shebeck. Authorities accused him of being with the International Workers of World, and bombing the ship on Labor Day because it carried food for European Allies in the midst of World War I.¹⁰

⁴ 1918.08.04 Tacoma Daily Ledger

⁵ 1918.03.18 Express and Telegraph.pdf

⁶ 1918.05.09 Oregon Daily Journal.pdf

⁷ 1930.03.08 Australasian.pdf

⁸ 1918.03.18 Express and Telegraph.pdf

⁹ 1918.03.26 Daily Commercial News and Shipping List.pdf

¹⁰ 1918.11.26 San Francisco Examiner.pdf

Evolution

Helen Joan Wagner never talked about Harry Shebeck or the fire bombing. She never talked about her brother who died when she was young, or the siblings she lost before she was born. Instead, Helen Joan Wagner would create a world of her own, one far more exotic than her own life.

And to live this life, she need only look down the California coast, to the place where people make stories, and stories make people: Hollywood.

Actress

Up and Comer

In 1920, World War I was over, and the Roaring 20s were just beginning. At the age of 18, Helen Wagner stepped into the busy streets of Hollywood, a place where beautiful, young women just like her came every day, hoping to strike fame and riches.

One newspaper described Helen:

...a beauty of an extraordinary type, her complexion being of a coppery bronze while her eyes are dark brown and her hair is chestnut.¹¹

She signed on as an extra in a movie, "Souls for Sale." But she told the Oakland Tribune she was the second lead actress. It wrote:

Berkeley Girl Chosen for Big Role In Rupert Hughes Film. She is an adept swimmer and it was her prowess in the water which first attracted the attention of Hughes to her at Santa Monica three years ago while she was contesting for honors in a swim meet.¹²

In reality, Helen Wagner was one of six hundred extras, huddled inside a circus tent out in the desert. But she still managed to make the papers, if for all the wrong reasons. The Oakland Tribune:

The tent had been saturated with gasoline, set afire and blown down with wind machines, while 500 or 600 extras rushed for the exits. A six horse team, pulling a circus wagon in flames, ran away and into the crowd of actors. The most seriously injured was Joan Lowell, young actress, who was given emergency treatment at the studio and then hurried to a hospital in Culver City.¹³

Helen Wagner was trampled inside the flaming tent. But Joan Lowell emerged, like a phoenix from the ashes. She would use this name for the rest of her life.

Her big break left her broken. She worked as a waitress, eating the leftover scraps her customers left behind.¹⁴ To become a stenographer, she learned how to type — a skill she would put to good use later. She worked in a Hollywood wardrobe department.

¹¹ 1924.01.06 News-Journal.pdf

¹² 1922.12.30 Oakland_Tribune_Joan_Lowell.pdf

¹³ 1923.02.24 Oakland_Tribune_Joan_in_fire.pdf

¹⁴ 1929.02.24 New_Orleans_States_1929-02-24_p2.pdf

The Lie Begins

But by the age of 20, she had little to show for her two years in Hollywood.

She set about giving Joan Lowell a backstory, one that would turn heads. In 1922, the Alexandria Gazette published a full feature on the up and coming talent, Joan Lowell, and her amazing life story:

The old schooner Minnie A. Cain, which pokes all round the Pacific Ocean, is more of a home to Joan Lowell than any place else. She has spent 16 of her 19 years traveling on the vessel, of which her father is skipper. She was taken aboard when three months old, and learned to swim as soon as to walk. Tutored by her father, and oft to her own devices for amusement, Helen has developed an imagination that is helping her win success now as a scenario writer.¹⁵

Joan's imagination really was incredible. Her story turned heads, defied belief, and tantalized readers' imagination. It was perfect publicity fodder. Joan kept elaborating. The Los Angeles Times:

Joan never saw another girl until she was 16! Reared on the bounding main by her father, captain of a trade schooner, she was proficient in the arts of seamanship and once harpooned a whale single-handed. Spending her childhood in tropic waters, Joan grew up with a burning desire for companionship with other girls, of whom she had heard seamen talk; and when her blossoming womanhood brought complications to the placid hearts of the old salts on his schooner, her father decided to ship her back to civilization.¹⁶

For a glowing publicity photo, Joan posed topless, her arms and sea kelp wrapped around her. She provided the caption:

While cruising on her father's trading schooner, Joan Lowell... was offered the lotus flower coronet that marks the queen of the Atafu Islands. But she turned it down, together with the courtship of King Omaiku, the seven foot ruler of the tropical kingdom, to follow a career in pictures.

In 2017, Kevin Young, published "Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News." It contains a detailed, thoughtful analysis of Joan's use of stereotypes. Quoting from the book:

¹⁵ 1922.10.14 Alexandria Gazette

¹⁶ 1923.02.18 The_Los_Angeles_Times_Sun__Feb_18__1923_.pdf

Her improbably yet predictable, unlikely yet unavoidable natives are all part of the typical hoax package, yet too often part of the actual travelogue too.... to have left out such cliched elements would have aroused suspicion much earlier...¹⁷

Lead Actress

However improbable, Joan's lies worked. In 1923, she landed her first leading actress role in *Loving Lies*, a movie set at sea aboard a sailing ship, written by a man named Thompson Buchanan, with whom she would cross paths later.

Joan¹⁸ and the movie¹⁹ won rave reviews. One paper said,

“Joan Lowell... brings to the screen in reality a girl of the sea, free from the artificialities of life, having been reared from a babe to the age of 17 aboard her father's four-masted sea-going sloop.”²⁰

She followed up by filming in several Westerns in Mexico, where she was made Queen of Tijuana's 4th of July festivities and paraded through town.²¹

By the age of 21, she told the Los Angeles Evening Post:

JOAN LOWELL: Circumstances compelled daddy to take me to sea with him when I was a 3-months babe. Everyone said I'd die. He fed me on dried milk, kept me clean and trusted to God! Look at me now!

In its profile of Joan Lowell, the Post reported:

Shipwreck, tempest and scurvy, the shadowy perils and romance of the South Seas have beaten against this slim young nymph in a succession of adventures which single her out even among remarkable folk.

Detailed embellishments of all this and much more, the astonishing Miss Lowell, now 19, tells with the naive directness that shames conventions. A girl strangely cultured for all her unrestraint, steeped in Biblical and classical lore imbibed in ships' cabins, strong, fearless, clear-eyed...²²

¹⁷ Bunk, Kevin Young, p. 90.

¹⁸ 1923.12.09 SF_Chronicle_Lowell_was_sickly_infant.pdf

¹⁹ 1924.02.19 Stockton_Daily_Evening_Record_Joan_in_play.pdf

²⁰ 1926.10.17 clipping_90091707.pdf

²¹ 1924.07.04 LA Times Branded a Thief

²² 1923.04.06 LA_Evening_Post_Record_Joan_Lowell.pdf

JOAN LOWELL: I cussed with the best of 'em. I could steer ships with my toes. Shirt and overalls were my only clothes. I understand rough men; they treat me with utter respect. I practiced with prune juice so that I could spit tobacco as far and straight as they. I have knocked men down with my fists. They regard me as their equal. When scurvy struck us, I drank the blood of a porpoise with the others.²³

A few months later, Joan told her hometown newspaper, the San Francisco Chronicle:

JOAN LOWELL: Besides my father, the only men I knew were Poles and Swedes and other members of the crew. They were a primitive lot, hairy and tattooed. My father himself was a hard man—hard as nails. He was the despot of our little vessel—a tyrant kinging it over his own small monarchy.²⁴

If Joan portrayed herself as anything but ordinary, she portrayed her father, Nicholas Wagner, as extraordinary.

Joan's mother did not receive the same treatment. The October 1923 San Francisco Chronicle:

Joan's mother had died soon after the baby's birth and, as [her father] looked down at the atom in the cradle, he swore that the child should live... Her cradle was the tarpaulin and an old sou'wester, her nurse was a pig-tailed sailor with a tattooed arm, and her only food at first was goat's milk.

In early 1924, she was given a screen test, then a second, then a third, and a fourth, before being signed to a three year film contract by Associated Authors.²⁵

The backstories paid off. Joan Lowell was officially a working Hollywood actress.

Gold Rush

The same year, Joan was cast by the biggest movie star in the world, Charlie Chaplin, to appear in his biggest movie yet: Gold Rush. It told the story of a tramp in Klondike Gold Rush, who falls in love with a dancehall girl.

While this was a huge opportunity for Joan, she learned that all that glitters, is not gold.

²³ 1923.04.06 LA_Evening_Post_Record_Joan_Lowell.pdf

²⁴ 1923.10.21 San_Francisco_Chronicle_Sun__Oct_21__1923_.pdf

²⁵ 1924.03.29 News_Pilot_Joan_in_movies.pdf

When 15 year-old actress Lita Grey heard Charlie Chaplin was casting brunettes for the film, Lita Grey appealed to Chaplin directly, and landed the lead part as lead actress.²⁶

Chaplin cast Joan Lowell as the second lead actress. Both women were young, of a similar height, build, hair, and complexion. Chaplin cast the two women as best friends.

Chaplin filmed Gold Rush in remote, snowy, mountainous California. This was Chaplin's biggest, most expensive production yet. Midway through filming, Chaplin isolated, groomed, and impregnated 15 year old Lita Gray. Lita Grey wrote in her memoir:

It's hardly a secret that Charlie had a penchant for young girls. He approached them as projects, and indeed, cared for some of them. He liked to cultivate them, to gain their trust, to be their first—never their second or third lover, and to create them as scrupulously as he created a motion picture.²⁷

Charlie Chaplin fired Lita Grey from the film, and married her. He cast Georgia Hale as the new lead, and began a relationship with her shortly thereafter. Joan and the cast of Gold Rush returned to the mountains to reshoot the movie all over again, with their new leading actress.

And Joan Lowell never worked in Hollywood again. It's never been clear why. She was only one year into a three year contract.

Years later, Joan remarked:

JOAN LOWELL: I wish I had a dollar for every one of those Hollywood lice in pants who sided up to me and offered me a cozy little apartment without a wedding ring... There was something slimy and smutty and pallid about the lusts of Hollywood.²⁸

JOAN LOWELL: The movies were pretty mean to me and now I'm glad to have a chance to thumb my nose to them.²⁹

The Stage

Putting Hollywood behind her, Joan announced her next move. The Los Angeles Evening Express:

²⁶ Wife of the Life of the Party.

²⁷ Lita Gray Chaplin. "My Life with Chaplin." p. 96. <https://archive.org/details/mylifewithchapli00chap/page/96/mode/2up?q=%22young+girls%22&view=theater>

²⁸ 1929.02.24 New_Orleans_States_1929-02-24_p2.pdf

²⁹ 1929.04.07 San_Antonio_Light_1929-04-07_28.pdf

There are very few girls who would sacrifice the opportunity of playing lead roles opposite movieland's best known leading man and a salary of \$750 a week to become an extra in a stage presentation. This may sound strange but it is just what Joan Lowell has done. Miss Lowell did this just for the chance of getting on the stage—starting from the bottom.³⁰

Joan played a sea captain's daughter in the New York City Production of Port O' London. A Brooklyn newspaper raved,

We nearly forgot to mention the sudden, thrilling shrieks which Miss Lowell emitted from time to time, and also the graceful way in which she fell across the floor each time she was knocked down.³¹

She sang sea ditties on the radio.³² She continued to embellish her back story:

JOAN LOWELL: I'd like to tell the world just what a girl's life really is... I could swear four straight minutes and never repeat... I was strong as an ox, and used to help all the time. But the thing I was rated highest for was because I could spit four feet! I used prune juice instead of tobacco... Spitting well, as I did, put me on a regular footing with the sailors... My own father never kissed me. Afterward he said he wanted me to be boyish...³³

One reporter noted:

Her speech is excellent... except for the ease with which she handles maritime terms, you might easily believe she had just come from a convent.³⁴

She joined the cast of Detroit's Bonstelle Playhouse, playing the role of the young, beautiful ingenue. She reconnected with Thompson Buchanan, the man she met three years before, who wrote her first big role in Loving Lies.

At 49 years old, Thompson Buchanan was twice her age. He was a veteran stage and screen writer. He was a dapper, well-dressed man of the city, but he could write like a sailor, and throw around nautical terms. The potential was clear: He could write, and she could act.

On October 10, 1927, the couple married in secret at the Bonstelle Playhouse.

³⁰ 1924.12.05 LA_Evening_Express_Joan_Lowell_stage_play.pdf

³¹ 1926.02.20 clipping_90091514.pdf

³² 1926.07.26 clipping_90091986.pdf

³³ 1925.02.01 LA_Times_Joan_Lowell_pt2.pdf

³⁴ 1925.02.01 LA_Times_Joan_Lowell_pt2.pdf

Whether he knew her stories were bunk, or not, may always be a mystery. But he used them.

Thompson Buchanan began work on a stage play, set at sea, aboard a great sailing ship, about a young woman named Joan, who grows up aboard her father's ship, and falls in love with a member of the crew, a man who is secretly a writer.

Joan became his muse. He brought out the qualities he loved about her, her beauty, spirit, and toughness. From the start, he intended Joan to play the lead.

Thompson Buchanan gave the play a grand name. One that would look good on a Broadway marquee: Star of Bengal.

New York City

At the beginning of 1928, Joan left Detroit to join Thompson in New York City to assume the lead in Star of Bengal. But when she got there, the play still had no theater. Joan took acting jobs in New York City and New Orleans.

She told a New Orleans paper she'd caught scurvy at 14, and lost every tooth in her mouth. She claimed to have fought hurricanes and man-eating sharks, and to have been deaf for 2 years after jumping in the water and rupturing her eardrums. And she was no longer raised aboard the Minnie A. Caine:

JOAN LOWELL: There wasn't any coddling the baby-girl on the Star of Bengal... But any sailor respected me when I could climb the rigging faster than he could, when I could haul on a rope as hard as he could when I could steer a trick at the wheel the way he could, and when I could spit a curve to windward and swear as well as he could, I earned their respect. I was chewing plug tobacco when I was twelve.³⁵

The Charleston Evening Post tells what happened next:

Mr. Schuster, of the publishing firm of Simon & Schuster, got immediately interested in what Joan went on to tell her audience. He wanted her to write about her life in just the way she told about it. She wrote exactly 5,000 words of what was to be Chapter 11 in the book, and demanded \$25 in payment.³⁶

³⁵ 1929.02.24 New_Orleans_States_1929-02-24_p1.pdf

³⁶ 1933.04.25 Evening_Post_1933-04-25_3.pdf

Simon and Schuster loved it. For the sample, Joan pulled out an old family story from her father: the wreck of the Star of Bengal. Simon and Schuster were sold. They offered an advance, and agreed to publish her book. Joan had only to thank the Star of Bengal for opening the door.

Now there were two typewriters clicking away in the Buchanan Lowell household.

Author

Writing the Book

JOAN LOWELL: Chapter 1. I spit a curve in the wind. “She ain't any water rat, ma'am! She's a girl flower, she is, with the tropic heavens fer a hothouse, and the scoldin' of the storm fer her when she's bad.”

Near the end of 1928 Joan poured herself, and years of well-crafted lies, into her book. She gave the book a name from a familiar hymn: Cradle of the Deep.

Joan wrote she was nursed by a goat until 2, and raced her pet seagull named Salt Pork down the deck of the ship. When scurvy struck, Joan said:

JOAN LOWELL: I felt I was dying from the outside in. I would sit for hours and peel dead skin off my body.

Bengal Wreck

And she wrote her father, Captain Nicholas Wagner, as godlike and fearless. A brutal, but fair dictator. She described him striking crew members, kidnapping men at ports and pressing them into service, and shooting a giant waterspout with a rifle, destroying it and saving the ship.³⁷

Nestled in the middle of Cradle of the Deep is a dark story from her father's life:

JOAN LOWELL: Chapter 11. The sea gives up its dead. San Francisco in April. High out of the network of masts and rigging of ships that made the waterfront look like a black spider web across the skyline, jerked the blue house flag, with its flying fish tails, of the famous Star, queen of the fleet of sailing ships in the Alaska salmon trade.

Of the steamships that towed the Star out to sea:

JOAN LOWELL: The tugs Hattie H. and Kayak were to tow the Star out. Nearly all the crew of these two tugs were drunk before they left the dock.

Joan wrote the steamships towing the Star panicked:

JOAN LOWELL: No sooner had he dropped the anchors than the tugboats, instead of fighting for the ship and the lives of the men on board, cut their towing hawsers and ran for it—deliberately steaming away at full speed.

³⁷ Cradle of the Deep, p. 185.

Joan described scenes never before shared in the newspapers or investigation. She described the last meeting of the ship's officers.

JOAN LOWELL: Down in the stuffy red plush cabin the men sat around the chart table. The clerk of the cannery, pale and husky voiced, asked my father to take the money he had, nine hundred dollars, and give it to his family, when my father reached San Francisco. Another man asked Father to take a message to his wife, and still another broke out into vile profanity. A huge man, one of the wealthy owners of the cannery, forgot his pose of dignity and knelt down on the cabin floor and prayed like a frightened child.

Joan shared a heartbreaking, never before published detail about the brothers Hansen, who argued over who would risk their life:

JOAN LOWELL: Four young men responded to his call for volunteers. One of them, the younger, couldn't swim. His older brother urged him not to go. He, the older one would go, for he was a strong swimmer. The younger boy would not hear his pleading and went first. The good swimmer was drowned just out of reach a few moments later.

Joan offered her explanation why the Alaska Packer's Association rallied behind the steamship captains, and against her father:

JOAN LOWELL: If the responsibility of the wreck was fastened on the two captains of the tugboats, the corporation faced enormous damage suits from the families and dependents of the hundred and eleven dead men. So the owners used every bit of their influence and resources to protect the guilty tugboat captains.

She ended the chapter with this:

JOAN LOWELL: He still carries the bitterness and hate in his heart.

This was an exceptional chapter, the only story not told from Joan's own supposed first-hand experience. It paints her stoic, stern father in a sympathetic light.

To give the book a dramatic ending, Joan described the Minnie A. Caine bursting into flames at sea, and swimming three miles to shore with a family of kittens on her back:

JOAN LOWELL: If I had to swim no nightgown was going to get in my way to drag me down. I tore it from me, but the drenched kittens still clung to my flesh. I filled my lungs with a deep breath and jumped out of the lifeboat. When I came up in the choppy sea I was conscious of only the pain caused by the salt water on my bleeding cuts and scratches. Each stroke I took was

like a knife cut, and I couldn't shake the drowning kittens off. Perhaps to those cats I owe my life, for the pain made me so mad I fought on and on...³⁸

After six weeks of typing away, Joan had her manuscript complete.³⁹

Published

Near the end of 1928, she approached the new publishing company, Simon & Schuster, who leapt at the extraordinary, allegedly true story of a beautiful, young woman growing up at sea.

When the Book of the Month Club reached out, everything changed. The club selected *Cradle of the Deep* as its official book for March 1929, an ordered 75,000 copies. *Cradle of the Deep* became an instant best-seller.

Through gasps and guffaws, shock and disbelief, the American public fell in love with Joan Lowell.

And Hollywood took notice. Hollywood director D.W. Griffith paid \$75,000 to make Joan's upcoming play, *Star of Bengal*, into a movie — nevermind that the play still had never seen an audience. Joan and D.W. Griffith were photographed together aboard the luxury ocean liner, *Ilé de France*, reserved for a party hosted by Simon & Schuster.

It was the fever pitch of the Roaring 20s, and Joan's career was hot. But the fever would break.

Exposed

Tucked away in a corner of Maine, Lincoln Colcord read *Cradle of the Deep* and thought:

LINCOLN COLCORD: An imaginative moron who tells absurd tales and actually believes them to be true.⁴⁰

Unlike Joan, Lincoln Colcord actually had been raised at sea aboard his father's sailing ship, and he immediately recognized Joan's work as a piece of nautical nonsense.

Lincoln Colcord had been asked to write an endorsement of the book. Instead, he wrote a blistering review of the book for *Time* magazine, laying out fifty-one problems with *Cradle of the Deep*.

³⁸ *Cradle of the Deep*, p. 260.

³⁹ 1931.01.14 Indianapolis Star.pdf

⁴⁰ 1929.08.02 Evening_Gazette_1929-08-02_6.pdf

Before publishing his list, Simon & Schuster called him to meet with Joan, in their offices. Lincoln Colcord remembered:

Joan had been sitting on the desk in the middle of the room swinging her legs... Suddenly she sprang to the floor and came at me... When she advanced to within a few feet of me, she drew herself up—I mean drew herself up—and looked me over scornfully from head to foot. In a voice of withering contempt:

JOAN LOWELL: Oh, if you weren't so old!

JOAN LOWELL: God damn it! No one has ever called me a liar before!⁴¹

It was as if Lincoln Colcord had broken a spell. Now, reporters from across the country dug up Joan's past, and came up with a name: Helen Wagner.

They even found the Minnie A. Caine. It hadn't sunk, as Joan wrote. It was sitting at a dock in California.

One newspaper dubbed the whole scandal "Cradle of the Dope." Simon & Shuster offered refunds. The scandal only drew more readers.

One critic, Arnold Mulder, initially suspected someone else wrote Joan's book. When the scandal came out, he took this as confirmation:

I suspected from the first that while she had some experience on the sea, she had told her yarn to a trained writer and that the latter... had built up a corking sea yarn.⁴²

Joan Lowell was lying in Cradle of the Deep, but these were her lies — nobody else's. She would spend the rest of her life proving herself as a writer.

Joan's fiercest defender was her 71 year-old father, Nicholas Wagner:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: One of them said my daughter never was on the sea, did he? Well, tell him to come around here and I'll change his mind. Oh, and he said he didn't think I was a sailor, either, did he? Well, tell him he'll get a good punch in the nose.⁴³

⁴¹ New Yorker Magazine, Nov 11, 1939, p. 79-80.

⁴² 1929.04.22 Grand Rapids Press.pdf

⁴³ 1929.10.12 Knoxville_News-Sentinel_1929-04-10_12.pdf

Star of Bengal Play

Riding Joan's wave of infamy, Thompson Buchanan found a theater for his play, Star of Bengal. It wasn't quite Broadway. It was Hoboken, New Jersey, across the river from Broadway. The owner, Mr. Morley, was also on the committee of the Book of the Month Club.

Star of Bengal was a large production, with 22 actors, a ship setting, and Joan playing the lead.⁴⁴ A large oil painting of Joan hung in the lobby, beneath the "Star of Bengal" marquee.⁴⁵

Moments before the curtains went up on opening night, Mr. Morley announced to the audience that Joan had applied for jobs at the theater in the past, but been turned down, but here she was, performing in a play, written by none other than her husband.⁴⁶

And then the curtains went up.

JOAN LOWELL: Landlubber ahoy!

For three weeks...

JOAN LOWELL: I'm not going to live always on ships... I gotta steer my own course or I'll never make port the port of my dreams.

She played the person she pretended to be in Cradle of the Deep...

JOAN LOWELL: Have you faced scurvy in a doldrum? Have you heard the squeal of a stuck porpoise and drunk its blood when there wasn't any water? Have you seen an octopus caught by a rock mussel fighting for its life?

In a passionate, tropical romance...

JOAN LOWELL: Only I thought some day I was going to dance the dance of the Virgins for you...

Every night, she shook her hips, and waved her arms...

JOAN: Star of Bengal, ahoy!

And played out the story of forbidden love aboard her father's ship.

⁴⁴ 1929.08.12 Jersey_Journal_1929-08-12_16.pdf

⁴⁵ 1929.09.07 Trenton_Evening_Times_1929-09-07_4.pdf

⁴⁶ The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Brooklyn, New York) · 3 Oct 1929, Thu · Page 25

JOAN LOWELL: You can't do nothing to him father 'cause of what it would do to me. I'm goin' to have a baby — his baby.

That all falls apart at the end:

JOAN LOWELL: No Dan. I can't go on living with you — not until you learn what makes that life worth living. This is good-bye.

Reviews

Some reviews were okay:

...She WAS a sailor and the captain's daughter, just as the book said, and now nobody can deny it... Your reviewer, a good deal of a landlubber himself, had no way of telling whether Miss Lowell's seamanship was that of a sailoress born to the purple or whether it was just good acting.⁴⁷

Some were harsh:

...The fact the play is terrible and the star just as bad would be passed off without much comment had not Mr. Morley appeared serious when he promised... that something unusual in an artistic way, was to be revealed.⁴⁸

"Ship-A-Hooey" which may give you some idea how the "Star of Bengal" was received... The constant reminder of that ole devil sea produced an effect... closely resembling sea sickness.⁴⁹

The play lacks the lusty quality which the Hoboken thrillers have supplied to date and is not likely to please the peanut-tossing slummers.⁵⁰

Cancelled

The plan had been for Star of Bengal to run three weeks, then make a triumphant leap across the river onto Broadway. It never made it. After three weeks, Star of Bengal came to an end. It was over. Rumors speculated the failure would bring down the Lyric Theater, too.⁵¹ But things were about to get much worse.

⁴⁷ The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Brooklyn, New York) · 3 Oct 1929, Thu · Page 25

⁴⁸ 1929.09.28 Charleston_News_and_Courier_1929-09-28_11.pdf

⁴⁹ 1929.10.08 Boston_Herald_1929-10-08_17.pdf

⁵⁰ 1929.10.13 Huntsville_Times_1929-10-13_15.pdf

⁵¹ 1929.12.07 Jersey_Journal_1929-12-07_7.pdf

Two weeks after Star of Bengal came crashing down, so did the stock market, on what may be the worst day in American history: Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929. Joan was in New York City to watch it happen, as a single crash wiped out the fortunes of Americans, leading some to leap to their death from New York City's high rises. The Roaring 20s were dead. The Great Depression had begun.

Joan fled to Pennsylvania and announced she was getting divorced.

JOAN LOWELL: I have nothing but admiration for Mr. Buchanan, but I like to live life quietly here in the country with my horses and my books and my dreams, while Mr. Buchanan likes city life—Broadway.⁵²

The couple reconciled for Christmas, and sat for an uncomfortable, staged publicity photo, surrounded by unwrapped baby toys. Joan's eyes looked heavy, and her smile forced. Thompson gazes awkwardly at the floor.

It didn't last. Joan used an old Hollywood trick, and got a no-questions divorce in Mexico.

Joan Lowell and Thompson Buchanan had no children together — only Star of Bengal, a failed play from a failed marriage.

The Comeback

Joan never stopped defending her story.

JOAN LOWELL: Believe it or not, I was on the sea.⁵³

Joan said something, which historian Garson O'Toole believes may be the very first time this exact phrase appeared in print. It goes:⁵⁴

JOAN LOWELL: You've got to be twice as good as a man to get half as far.⁵⁵

Joan Lowell plotted an epic comeback, to prove herself to the world.

She landed a job writing for a Boston newspaper, doing gritty undercover work. She wore wigs and used fake names. While pretending to be an out of work actress, which was not far from the truth, she was assaulted by theater booking agent Morris Levine. The Oakland Tribune:

Miss Lowell declared she escaped from his office by a ruse, promising to receive Levine later in her room... When Levine arrived at her lodgings to keep the appointment, burly policemen stepped out of hiding and arrested him.⁵⁶

Morris Levine was sentenced to 14 months in jail. Joan published this and other stories in her second book, *Gal Reporter*.⁵⁷

In 1934, Joan Lowell shocked everyone when she announced a five year sailing voyage around the world, aboard the schooner *Black Hawk*. She brought along her aging, 76 year old father, Nicholas Wagner, to serve as captain, along with two deckhands and a German shepherd.⁵⁸ The voyage lasted six months, before the *Black Hawk* wrecked.

Incredibly, when Joan and the group returned to the United States, they had reels and reels of film footage:

⁵³ 1931.01.14 Indianapolis Star.pdf

⁵⁴ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/01/07/twice-good/>

⁵⁵ 1930.03.12 clipping_89495018 p2.pdf

⁵⁶ 1932.01.27 clipping_89490389.pdf

⁵⁷ 1932.01.27 clipping_89490389.pdf

⁵⁸ 1933.04.12 Advocate_1933-04-12_6.pdf

JOAN LOWELL: And every foot is authentic... The storms, the battle between my dog and the octopus, the turtle hatching, the Mayan ruins and all. No faking, no dummies, no studio shots.”⁵⁹

The 5 year voyage was a ruse, just to film Joan’s next movie: Adventure Girl. Joan and her father, Nicholas Wagner dramatized disasters at sea, life and death peril, and scenes familiar to readers of Cradle of the Deep. Here’s a clip of Joan talking in the movie:

JOAN LOWELL: <quote>

Some film historians consider Adventure Girl the first fake documentary, a style of film-making that would grow in popularity. Audiences panned Adventure Girl. But even Joan’s failures made her more famous.

Omaha

In May 1935, a torrential downpour flooded the Republican River in southern Nebraska, turning a Dust Bowl into waves of surging mud, demolishing homes and farms, leaving a wake trail of death.

Desperate Nebraskans scrambled to organize relief. Into the breach entered Joan Lowell, a bona fide celebrity, who agreed to appear at a benefit. In less than two hours, the organizers sold 150 tickets at a dollar a piece. She was greeted and photographed at the airport and visited the devastation, writing for the newspaper:

JOAN LOWELL: Over to the west, I saw grim tombstones of a whole community’s life and splintered windmills standing as sentinels where once lush valleys bore produce, and stalwart toilers of the soil formed the backbone of homesteads that make a state a nation.⁶⁰

Joan wowed Omaha. She dazzled locals with her characteristic bravado and unbelievable stories. Newspapers reported:

She is now a pilot, but abandoned flying when Amelia Earhart flew the Atlantic and her goal vanished.⁶¹

In Gautemala, Miss Lowell was asked to take the lead in a movie, “Adventure Girl.” During the production she visited an orphanage, saw a

⁵⁹ 1934.08.05 Charleston_News_and_Courier_1934-08-05_11.pdf

⁶⁰ 1935.06.10 Omaha_World-Herald_1935-06-10_1.pdf

⁶¹ 1935.06.09 Omaha_World-Herald_1935-06-09_10-2.pdf

small boy who had lost an arm, adopted him, and took him back to New York. Now he is in school there.⁶²

Miss Lowell is the only woman who has ever made a trip on a United States coast guard cutter in pursuit of rum runners off the Atlantic coast.⁶³

During an impromptu address to a women's luncheon, Joan announced Rolling Down to Rio, a 41-day South American cruise helmed by none other than herself. One woman signed up.⁶⁴

In the pit of despair, Joan Lowell brought some Hollywood glamor, and celebrity glitz, to the downtrodden masses. Despite her scandals, Joan Lowell was the hero of Omaha.

Nicholas Wagner Dies

Shortly after starring in Adventure Girl, Nicholas Wagner moved into the Sailor's Snug Harbor, a retirement home for old mariners in Staten Island, New York. Though his appetite waned, his mind remained sharp until the end. On August 3, 1943, Nicholas Wagner passed away. He was 81 years old.

Brazil

It was July 1957. Joan Lowell, 55, sat in a Brazilian jail cell, accusing of passing \$15,000 in bad checks.

JOAN LOWELL: I am a victim of persecution.⁶⁵

She had a rational explanation:

JOAN LOWELL: I put out the checks under threats from an organized gang. They demanded checks and loans with interest of 50 and up 80 per cent. For a long time now I have been suffering an underground campaign.⁶⁶

The judge believed Joan's story, and let her go. This was one of the many adventures of the woman who moved to Brazil in the late 1930s, and began turning undeveloped jungle into coffee plantations. She sold plots of land to Hollywood movie stars, who sometimes arrived to find the land in dispute.

⁶² 1935.06.09 Omaha_World-Herald_1935-06-09_10-2.pdf

⁶³ 1935.06.10 Omaha_World-Herald_1935-06-10_2.pdf

⁶⁴ 1935.06.25 Omaha Evening Bee News.pdf

⁶⁵ 1957.07.10 NY_Daily_News_Joan_Lowell_checks.pdf

⁶⁶ 1957.07.11 Springfield_News_Leader_Joan_Lowell.pdf

She married again, this time to a man who didn't just talk like a sea captain, he truly was a sea captain: Leek Bowen. She wrote about their lives together in her third and final book, *Promise Land*. In 1961, Leek Bowen was struck by a bus, and passed away.⁶⁷

Six years later, on November 7, 1967, Joan Lowell-Bowen passed away. She was 64. She is buried in Anapolis, Brazil.

<music>

⁶⁷ <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/goyaz-conquers-hollywood-records-of-an-adventure-in-central-brazil>

Epilogue

In the center of all her lies, he was the one true thing. Joan Lowell adored her father.

She built him up, in legend and stature. She made him the hero of Cradle of the Deep. She put him in her movie. She patterned herself after him.

She wanted to be so much like him, that she lied about who she was. In her fantasy, it was just her and her dad, against the world.

The Star of Bengal was a tragedy for the Wagner family. Nicholas Wagner nearly died, lost it job, and had to move to find work. Joan never forgot the humiliation.

When she was 26, Joan struck back at everyone who doubted her father. She wrote Cradle of the Deep to paint her father as a hero. When it became a best-seller overnight, suddenly Americans were talking about the Star of Bengal all over again.

The most well-known version of the Star of Bengal story ever told was written by a 26 year old woman, who wasn't even there.

Everyone who studies the Star of Bengal must confront Joan Lowell, and all the stories that survive. We must ask: Where does the fiction end? And the truth begin?

Credits

Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal is a Wrangell History Unlocked production.

Music from today's episode:

- Rhapsody in Blue and Mars from The Planets performed by "The Presidents Own" United States Marine Band.
- Greensleeves and O Christmas Tree performed by Mary Rooney.
- Stompin' Jazz Night from Epidemic Sounds.
- Gonzaga Gaucho performed by Markus Staab from Museopen.org.
- Music from Archive.org:
 - Tiger Rag performed by Original Dixieland Band.
 - At the Moving Picture Ball performed by Maurice Burkhart
 - Sea Songs performed by the Victor Mixed Chorus
 - Wedding March performed by the American Symphony Orchestra.
 - Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep performed by Wilfred Glenn and J.P. Knight.
 - Brother Can You Spare a Dime performed by Bing Crosby.
 - Auld Lang Syne performed by the Westminster Chimes.
- Remaining music from the Wikipedia Commons:
 - Lullaby Wound Up Clock by Stephan
 - The Entertainer performed by Adam Cuerden
 - Also Sprach Zarathustra by Kevin MacLeod.
 - Funeral of a Marionette performed by the San Francisco Symphony.

Sound effects from epidemicsound.com.

Thanks to our voice talent, Mary Rooney, for being our Joan Lowell, and Lexi Prunella for being Lita Grey.

Thank you to the Billy Rose Theater Division of the New York Public Library for providing the script for Thompson Buchanan's play, Star of Bengal.

Thanks to Bonnie Demerjian, Alice Rooney, and Steve Lloyd for offering feedback on early drafts of this episode. Bonnie Demerjian is the author of several wonderful books on Wrangell history, and Steve Lloyd is the author of two gripping articles about the Star of Bengal published in 2001 in the Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society's journal, the Sea Chest.

You can learn more about the Star of Bengal at wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star. Read a transcript of this episode, see photos, maps, a timeline, and more. Browse around and check out some of our other features from Wrangell's rich past.

Thanks to my wife and kids, for being patient with me while I've been working on this project.

Thanks to everyone in Wrangell and around the world who've been listening. If you've never been to Wrangell, visit sometime!

That's all for Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. Thanks for listening.