

A FOOTNOTE TO TALES OF THE SEA

By V. L. O. CHITTICK

IN the closing months of the centennial year of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* I became the discoverer--so I like to think--of an obvious parallel between a passage in the "Song of Myself" and the story of a dramatic rescue-at-sea effected by a Nova Scotian ship's captain and his crew as told long afterward by a well beloved Maritime Province author and scholar. It is of sufficient literary interest, I feel, to warrant my sharing it with others who take note of such things, especially with those of them who happen to be Haligonians.

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Tales of the Sea, by Archibald MacMechan, a reprinting of Nova Scotian sea-stories (all true) from three of its author's out-of-print volumes, appeared in 1947. One of the most memorable of its many memorable tales of deep-sea heroism is "The *Sarah* Stands By," the story of the saving (late in 1849) of all but 100 of some 460 persons on board an American packet-ship, the *Caleb Grimshaw*, burning in mid-Atlantic. The *Grimshaw*, out of Liverpool, England, with a cargo of coal in her hold, and over 400 emigrants between decks, was discovered to be on fire when not more than halfway across the ocean to her home port, New York. After five days of horrible suffering and panic-stricken disorder, the ill-fated freight-and-passenger ship, the fire partially contained under sealed hatches, was sighted by another west-bound sailing vessel. The stranger, a barque, bore down close enough to identify herself: "*Sarah* — of Yarmouth — Nova Scotia — Cook, master—timber ship — in ballast — from London—homeward bound — *will stand by.*" The two ships were then put about and headed eastward for the Azores. On the evening of the fifth day following, the wind, which had luckily been calm, freshened to near gale strength. The night was one of abject terror on board the *Grimshaw*. Weighted down with water pumped into her hold in a vain attempt to staunch the flames raging there, she made scarcely enough headway to keep her on course. "The terror of the three hundred poor creatures (the greater part of the steerage complement), men, women, and children, half-naked, drenched, famished, parched, exhausted, unsheltered on the main deck, can be imagined." The lights of the *Sarah* faded out of sight of the *Grimshaw's* lookout. "There was not an aid to navigation left, no chart, compass, sexton,

chronometer." Early next afternoon the *Sarah* hove to, and the *Grimshaw* came up with her. Under the direction of the *Sarah's* first officer the task of taking off the *Grimshaw's* passengers began. "Women and children first . . . With the male emigrants there was no special problem; they could let themselves down (to the *Sarah's* boats) by means of ropes. This women could not do, lacking the strength and the nerve; they had to be lowered in slings. Rescuing the children was harder still . . . But trust sailors for ingenuity. The sixty-one children and the six small babies were done in bags and so passed down the side of the *Grimshaw* and up the side of the *Sarah* . . . Between three o'clock and dark, the *Sarah's* two boats transhipped one hundred and thirty-three persons . . . without a single mishap." For two days more the two ships, in one another's company, continued slowly on their way. There was no slackening-off of the storm. "Sleep, food, drink, rest were strangers to the *Grimshaw*; exhaustion, hunger, thirst, fear possessed her." Finally, at the climax of the two days' horror, the Azores were sighted, and under the lee of their coastline the rest of the *Grimshaw's* passengers were transferred to the *Sarah*. "To and fro between the stationary ships, the *Sarah's* boats plied, for nine hours. . . . Between eight o'clock one night and five o'clock next morning, the work was done." Not a life was lost.

There is more, of both courage and horror, to the story; but here it will suffice to tell only that the *Grimshaw's* survivors eventually reached New York, most of them on the *Sarah*. As was sure to be the case, Captain Cook was given a hero's welcome, and was presented with what nowadays would be a chamber of commerce resolution of thanks for his "humane and intrepid conduct," and a purse (shared by his crew) of \$8000. Captain Cook's remarks in reply to the resolution were reported in full in the New York daily press. From the mayor he received an illuminated address, a gold snuff box, and the freedom of the city. At the city hall there was a veritable riot of people eager to shake his hand. Detailed accounts of these events were likewise reported in the metropolitan newspapers.

In 1848 Walt Whitman returned from an unexpectedly shortened sojourn in New Orleans to New York, and for a time (until 1851) resumed his work as a journalist there, accepting for his new post, the editorship of the *Brooklyn Freeman*. That, in that position, he could have been unaware of what was going on, and being told, about Captain Cook's valiant rescue feat is unthinkable. Almost certainly he would have assigned someone on his staff to cover the story, unless, as is not unlikely, he covered

it himself. But it was in the "Song of Myself," probably completed after he had left the *Freeman*, that Whitman, if I am not very greatly in error, recorded his personal reaction to, and his own version of, the recently current "talk of the town" concerning Captain Cook and the *Sarah*. In the thirty-third section of that poem, he reiterates what he has said over and over earlier in it, that he possesses the gift of entering into the inmost life and feelings, the joys and sorrows, of all classes and conditions of his fellow-men. This is no mere assertion of a special power of empathy. Rather it is a declaration of his sense of being able, through some process of mystic identification, to become one with all humanity, individually and *en masse*. Nor is it any part of the "pose" so often charged against him. (He convinces me, at least, of the genuineness of his avowed experiences). Between his version and the sea-story I have summarized there are inconsistencies, of course. His is a poet's rendering, compressed with the skill of an artist to fit neatly into the scheme of the poem of which it forms a unit. But if the parallel is not exact, the differences can be explained away fairly enough as discrepancies permitted under "poetic license," or more fairly still as changes in detail dictated by the rigorous impositions of verse. (There are such even in verse as "free" as Whitman's). Here, with whatever validity it may lend to all I have claimed for it, is what Whitman wrote:

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
 The courage of present times and all times;
 How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck
 of the steamship, and Death chasing it up and down
 the storm;
 How he knuckled tight, and gave not back one inch, and
 was faithful of days and faithful of nights,
 And chalk'd in large letters, on a board, *Be of good cheer,*
 we will not desert you:
 How he follow'd with them, and tack'd with them — and
 would not give it up;
 How he saved the drifting company at last:
 How the lank loose-gown'd women look'd when boated
 from the side of their prepared graves;
 How the silent old-faced infants, and the lifted sick, and
 the sharp-lipp'd unshaved men:
 All this I swallow — it tastes good — I like it well — it be-
 comes mine;
 I am the man — I suffer'd — I was there.

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Many years later, with the help of newspaper files, ships' registries, Admiralty Court findings, *The Congressional Record*, and Cook family memories, Archibald MacMechan — so I like to think — was there too.

RIVER WILLOW SONG

By WILLIS EBERMAN

For you is the song spent, and the dream awakened.
O love, I am not alone in your heart.
Beautiful are the willows. I will send my song
 into them;
I will float my poems upon the river wind:
Away, away, pale wings.

Like burnished copper glows the shining sand.
I will lie and watch the river willows blowing,
And think of my beloved.