

ROMANCE OF THE SEA

By EVELYN M. RICHARDSON

WE of the Maritimes are often accused of stumbling over our feet because we persist in looking back across our shoulders. But where, may I ask, would we find more fascinating views? Particularly if we glance seaward, where the white-winged ships of the nineteenth century drift and swing in memory's haze.

It may well strike you as strange that a woman should be speaking on the "Romance of the Sea and the Golden Age of Sail." I admit my actual acquaintance with deep water and sailing-ships is limited; but my childhood was spent with the sound of the sea in my ears, while tales of fair ships and far voyages, pirates and buried treasure, shipwrecks and mutinies at sea formed a large part of family reminiscences. Later, when I returned after an absence from their background, the stories struck me with fresh impact while, by then, I could grasp the sea's larger aspects, missed by the child playing about the shore or rowing across the harbour. I could understand Filson Young, when he wrote:

"The sea is the great disturber. Nothing human can endure long unchanged in its presence; no work of man's hands, or of his thoughts. . . but must ultimately go down before its eternal force. . . Its vastness is confounding. . . and dwindles us to pinpoints of unimportance; beside its movements. . . laid out in cycles of the everlasting, the most majestic of our actions seem as the fretting . . . of an insect's wing. . . and within its age the twinkling moments of our life pass and disappear unheeded into the murk of eternity."

Accepting this concept of the sea itself, I understood that the family stories of ocean tragedies and triumphs, were of mere incidents in the unceasing and universal struggle which man wages against his environment. The struggle continues, on the sea as elsewhere, but in today's motored ships, with their radar, loran and sonic equipment, the odds are not so heavily loaded against man as they were when he must depend upon his own muscles and manual skill and that not-quite-instinct seamen developed for weather and direction.

The age of sail is conceded to have been one of the most picturesque and progressive in the history of the western world; the heyday of sailing-ships gave the Maritimes our most romantic age. A fine ship under blossoming sails was one of man's most beautiful and ingenious creations; it was part of wind and sea

in a poetry of motion impossible to an internally-powered ship. But that was true only in a fair wind and fine weather. They had to fight their way *against* the wind with grinding labour and, once caught on a lee shore, were almost helpless. Up until a few years ago our coasts were strewn with wrecks, those of our own ships and those of strangers overcome by storm and tide, or betrayed by fog.

Yet while the sea's cruelty repelled men, its beauty drew them. Its follower and lover, Joseph Conrad, might deary, "the sea that plays with men till their hearts are broken, and wears stout ships to death. Nothing can touch the brooding bitterness of its heart. To love it is not well." And many a seaman has tried to impress this truth upon his sons. They might as effectually warn the young man of sea-going blood not to look at the pretty girls, lest they prove heavy on the pocketbook and on the heart. To such, the sea's voice has always been irresistible and, like love's, has nothing to do with logic.

While the settlers in Upper Canada were overcoming vast distances and pioneer difficulties of travel, along our coasts the wide sea-tracks lay open and enticing, leading to the world's bustling cities and to the far, fair isles. With virgin forests behind them and the sea before, builders developed great skill in fashioning the one for the other until, as we may say, "Bluenose ships and Bluenose men were found on every sea and in every port." Look for example at a Cape Sable boy, born a century ago, who rose to command blue-water ships. His logs show the sea-lanes he traversed. Picture to yourself a globe of the world and trace with him the wide areas of empty oceans, mark the dangerous capes he must have rounded to enter and leave these ports: Leith, Le Havre, Dover, Singapore, Batavia, Cebu, Samarang, Manila, Monte Video, Iqueque, Cardiff, Rosario, Shediak, Liverpool (England), Buenos Aires, Rotterdam, St. Helena, Seattle, London, Port Townshend, Colombo, Bombay, Amsterdam, Antwerp and San Francisco. His routes present a geographical picture that was typical of the far and varied sailings of Nova Scotian mariners. Not even with today's air travel are any class of men so truly world citizens — for these sailors lived in a world open to trade, and felt themselves at home in any roadstead. Men made fortunes and came home to spend them; men died and were buried at sea or in foreign ground. And still across the years and the seas come back whispers from their sails and the sound of bow water.

Not long ago a Canadian, working in Colombo, found a narrow strip of land crowded between large buildings in the heart

of the city, all that was left of an old Dutch church burying-ground. In it a tombstone read, "In memory of John Ells, Of Barrington, N.S., who died 19th October, 1863, aged 16 years." The intrigued finder wrote to ask our county paper how that boy came to be buried half-way around the world from his home. In my files I found the story of the barque *Jessie Coffin* which, on her maiden voyage, sailed to the Far East, carrying many of Barrington's finest young men. John Ells was not the only one who did not return. As I reread the old account I was struck by how much adventure and courageous seamanship, how many bereavements, were recalled by that single stone in an alien land.

And every ship that left the ways knew high adventure and the tragedy which is its price. The bare outlines of their voyages overwhelms me with the wealth of stories and character-sketches suggested.

Last October, Edward Weeks, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, speaking in Toronto, expressed his belief that Canada's present growth and prosperity would stimulate her writers, and he regretted that the Maritimes had as yet produced no great sea novels. I hope that before this he has read some of Dr. Raddall's excellent books. Perhaps none of them is a sea-novel in the sense that *Moby Dick* or *The Caine Mutiny* is one, but most of them have considerable salt water "sloshing around" in them. Being laid in Nova Scotia, how could they help it? For the romance of the sea lies upon our little province, almost as thick and prevalent as our fog.

Yet the few stories which have been written diminish the waiting store no more than a tossed stone diminishes a beach, and rousing tales lie thick as beach-rocks in every harbour. Who is to write them? Not a woman, I think, though I shall continue to put down outlines whenever possible, just to save them. To do them justice a man need not be a literary artist, nor polish faceted words, for the sea's voice is direct and primitive. It is not altogether true of the sea that "only those who brave her dangers comprehend her mysteries." Men like Melville, Conrad and Montserrat certainly wrote out of the full knowledge which experience imparts; on the other hand, neither Stevenson nor Kipling ever spent a long night watch in the grip of a gale, nor felt the scorch of salt water in split hands and feet. And while we are waiting for a Maritimer to come up with another *Cruel Sea* or *Captains Courageous*, why doesn't someone give adequate expression to a few of the true adventures lying to hand?

"Stories of the sea," we'd call them, but primarily they must deal with some man, good or evil, who dominated his crew and his

ship and — almost — the sea. The sea might destroy him, yet it could not be said to have defeated him. The age of sail was actually the age of a certain breed of men and their adaption to a hostile element — men with great strength of will and body, of tremendous ambition.

There are many counterparts to the stories I shall mention because of a personal or family connection.

A typical success story is that of Captain Arthur McGray, who was born on the southwestern shore of Nova Scotia and who, during his last years, became my esteemed correspondent. In 1865, when he was two and a half years old, he and his mother and younger brother sailed on his father's barque, which was carrying horse-cars from New York to Cape Town. His earliest recollections are of Table Bay and Mountain, and of watching 3000 English convicts (each held to his work by a solid 30-lb shot shackled to his ankle) as they laboured at digging out the great space for today's fine man-made harbour. During his early years, young Arthur visited most of the principal ports of the world while, for formal schooling, his parents taught him aboard ship, or occasionally left him home with his grandparents for a winter, that he might attend the village school. When he was thirteen he signed on as ordinary seaman and began his hard climb to the bridge of his own ship, through fishing and coastal craft to passenger steamers.

He wrote me that he had been presented to four of Britain's sovereigns and, counting the time he was received by Czar Nicholas II on the royal yacht in Cronstadt, believed he held something of a record for a Nova Scotian seaman. He came to be entrusted not only with the command of big passenger steamers, but with the overseeing of their construction and outfitting. After retirement he sat on several boards which shaped American naval policy during World War I. Honors came to him, but what he wrote me of, what held his heart and his memories, were the hard days of sail and wooden ships.

Not all shipmasters were polished gentlemen like Captain McGray. You may *prefer* a roaring, two-fisted skipper. Judging from an outline of his life, Captain Beveridge of Yarmouth would be your man. He was fearless, fond of a brawl and able to handle refractory crews by sheer strength and courage. When he was first mate, one of the crew stabbed the second officer and the stabber's companions refused to give him up. Beveridge says, "I had to go into the forecastle and bring him out. The captain covered me with two guns. But," he admits, "I was glad when that was over." He was wrecked in a pampero off

Monte Video and, when the lifeboat capsized, he and his companions were saved by gauchos who rode into the surf, using their lariats to pull the seamen ashore.

I enjoy his ability to laugh at himself. On his first voyage he went ashore in Londonderry, "a city where," he tells us with a straight face, "religious feeling seems to run high. I was set upon and beaten up because I had picked a common yellow flower and was wearing it in my hat. It happened to be a Catholic holiday." I can't believe he was that naïf; he means us to see the cocky young Bluenose swaggering through a Catholic section of the city — orange flower and all — and getting just what he was asking for!

While mate in a Yarmouth ship he was caught in a feud between the captain and the cook — a negro ex-slave who had belonged to the owner's wife and hence enjoyed many privileges. The captain was a staunch Free Will Baptist; the cook was an equally staunch Methodist. Each night the after-cabin was filled by their vociferous efforts to "pray each other down," while the mate, if he prayed at all, asked only for a chance to sleep. "This went on every night until we reached Barbadoes," he remembers ruefully. Some Maritime Joseph C Lincoln should find material in that cabin contest!

Do you like to open a story with a set scene and placed characters while, with crisis as a catalyst, personalities react upon one another, revealing the fundamental structures of each? Consider the Yarmouth brig *Mary Jane*, becalmed in the Gulf of Tehuantepec, in the year 1850. Becalmed in a tropical sea and out of fresh water. Officers and men are alike owners and workers of the ship, for these are a company of Yarmouth adventurers, who were seeking the California goldfields and had bought ship and cargo as a speculation and means of passage. The scene opens at night, with a group of malcontents who formerly have been selling much of their water ration for liquor and tobacco and who have now called a meeting to force the more saving to share their precious supplies of water. The discussion around the windlass, according to the account kept by one of the company, revealed greeds and envies, smallnesses and weaknesses completely unsuspected in the home town. It must also have revealed a healthy sense of reason and fair play in the majority, for no mutinous plans matured. The emergency was relieved by the ingenuity of crew members who fashioned a distillery out of the cook's largest kettle, a cement of ashes and dough, and a gun-barrel running through a keg of salt-water and dripping drops of fresh water into a demijohn. After a time the ship got a

fair wind and reached San Francisco to join the thousand sailing craft anchored there. But the night scene about the windlass is the focal point.

This brig *Mary Jane* was the first Yarmouth vessel to round the Horn. Yarmouth, as you probably know, was famous for its shipping; and a list of its ships is bound to include the *Essence of Peppermint* because the name seems a puzzling one. Not long ago, among old family papers I found a possible explanation for the name. Unfortunately the explanation kills any belief that in those "good old days" men acted with greater rectitude than they do today. At any rate, in 1862 a Yarmouth merchant, who signs himself simply "D." instructed his young Boston agent to send him, among other things:

- 1 doz. wine (must be good)
- 2 doz. port or maderia
- 2 doz. Holland gin (good or don't send)
- 1 doz. good old whiskey.

"Now if you can get them low," he wrote, "do so. But if known these are liquors, the Customs House will seize them. So send an invoice at \$2.00 the dozen and be very particular to mark the boxes 'Essence of Peppermint'."

Probably "D." was not the only Yarmouth merchant making a good profit on *Essence of Peppermint*. I think when that craft was christened someone had his tongue in his cheek!

To get back to our stories. There are pirate yarns of captains horribly slain and crews forced to join the pirates or their dead skippers. There are happier stories of escapes like that of the Barrington *John Ryder*, whose crew decided they would rather go to bottom than have their throats cut and who eluded their pursuers by cracking on all sail in a squall. Later they safely delivered the 30,000 Spanish silver dollars that had been consigned to their care.

Do you like a touch of the Arabian Nights? Perhaps of Boccaccio? Take the life of Ransford Bucknam, born around 1860 in Hall's Harbour on the Fundy shore. He spent his boyhood in Nova Scotia, went west and then to the States, and later became Admiral of the Turkish navy. My friend, Captain McGray, read a reference to him in Dorothy Duncan's *Bluenose* and sent me his version of the story, for he and Bucknam were cronies and in 1902, when Bucknam became Admiral, he offered his friend McGray the position of Vice-Admiral and was deeply disappointed when it was refused. I wish there were time to tell this story in full — of Bucknam's adventures at sea and his rise to command and his commission to deliver four armed revenue

cutters to the Turkish government, and how he made a favorable impression upon Sultan Abdul Hamid — but it would truly need a book! However, once in Constantinople Admiral Bucknam Pasha was given a salary of \$15,000 and all expenses of a large establishment ashore. In today's parlance, he never had it so good! Until his wife, whom he had left back in Maine, learned that a harem was part of the establishment. She wasn't lacking in "Down East starch" and set out at once to bring her husband home. Like many wives she blamed others for her husband's failings, and Captain McGray thought that if the Sultan could have heard her plans, the Imperial throne would have been vacant on her arrival. But I don't know. After all those years with a harem. . . He had probably developed a short memory and a tough hide, like our uncle's old horse.

Transatlantic travel then was not what it is today, but Mrs. Bucknam finally reached Constantinople; stormed the Royal Palace and then the Admiralty. Finally she persuaded the guards to let her into a waiting-room. Admiral Bucknam Pasha afterwards confessed to his friend that he had never met such a hurricane in all his sea-going career! Perhaps after such a meeting harem beauties seemed tame; Bucknam resigned and followed his wife home.

In Boston, at the old Parker House, he arranged a meeting with McGray, who all this time had been captain of the Yarmouth to Boston steamer and "eating Fundy fog," as the saying goes. "But", he wrote me, "we ate something else that night, and drank something else, as we roared with laughter at all he had experienced and I — fortunately or unfortunately — had missed."

Mrs. Bucknam vs. the harem has hilarious possibilities, but the story ends sadly. In 1916, Captain Bucknam was living in Philadelphia when the Turkish government sent for him. He and his wife went to Constantinople but he refused his old post as Admiral, in view of Turkey's alliance with Germany. Ransford Bucknam, Hall's Harbour boy and one-time Admiral of the Turkish navy, died in Constantinople under what his Nova Scotia relatives regarded as "suspicious circumstances."

His story is not the only one with a feminine interest. As you know, many wives went to sea with their captain-husbands and after cabins became real homes on the long voyages. My great-aunt Mary was a sea-going wife. Somewhere in the Indian Ocean she and her husband once spent two weeks barricaded behind furniture and mattresses in their cabin, while the crew controlled the ship. When Uncle Henry snatched sleep,

she kept watch, a revolver in each hand. An approaching typhoon and the fact that the mutineers had killed the mates, leaving the captain the only navigator aboard, forced the crew to seek terms and ended that episode. It wasn't, you understand, a particularly unusual episode, and I never got around to finding out details.

Children were born at sea. Captain James Fernandez Coffin of Barrington got his middle name from entering this world while his father's whaling-ship was off Juan Fernandez. Immediately after the captain had announced the birth of his son, a school of small whales was sighted. A journal kept by a crew member tells of the men singing on the forecastle that night and comments, "A baby boy and seven blackfish don't come to a whaler's captain every day."

Children died at sea. In her journal, Captain McGray's mother wrote a heartbreaking account of the burial of her two-year-old son, off the coast of South America.

But only captains' wives could sail with their husbands, and not all of them did so. Most women watched and waited ashore. Like wives and mothers of seamen today, they would have said that they hated and feared the sea, because of what it did to their men. Yet most of them felt its fascination and would have grieved if away from its sound, its tang, its changing face.