

Just A Coincidence ?

John A. MacDonald, '38

"Mama, mama, daddy is saved !" Again the child of four repeated her mysterious message to her mother and aunt. Then, as if satisfied that she had performed her task, climbed back into bed to spend in peaceful slumber the few remaining hours before dawn.

From its source it *was* fantastic; yet it *did* bring a spark of hope. Stranger things have happened ! Perhaps the new ship could weather even this storm, the most violent experienced on the Atlantic in many years. Perhaps they had been forced to put in at some isolated port where communication was impossible. The worries of an anxious wife, of her small children, and of solicitous friends were lessened somewhat by the little girl's strange message of assurance.

It was the ship's maiden voyage. Still vivid is the picture of the small white motorboat tugging at the heavily-laden, white three-master as she towed her down the Cardigan River to where she could get a breath from the sea. The snowy white coverlet of early December gave a new beauty to the surrounding countryside; but it extended only to the edge of the river whose waters were dark and foreboding. A voyage to Newfoundland at the beginning of the twenties was not considered an extraordinary run even for a schooner. Consequently, on this particular day, farewells had been brief. Furthermore, the ship's owner, now relieved of the many burdensome tasks that had been his as Fuel Administrator for one province and part of another during the War, had decided to combine business and pleasure in making the trip: he hoped to enjoy a sea voyage and to discharge the cargo himself.

The new ship gave evidence from the beginning of seaworthiness and was manned by a capable crew. Nothing extraordinary occurred during the first few days. Then the barometer began to drop lower, and still lower. All realized that a big storm was brewing and that their only alternative, so far out to sea, was to prepare to weather it. The wind became still more violent and the waves mountainous. At length, the mighty Atlantic gales tore the sails from their masts making control of the ship

impossible. Scarcely had the cook and other members of the crew reached the after cabin when the forecastle was swept away. "How long can she stand it?" was the question uppermost in the mind of all during the three or four days that they were tossed about on the cabin's floor. Though the faithful captain had been washed overboard when he had ventured on deck his tragic end scarcely could be realized in such utter helplessness and general confusion.

After three days—they seemed like an eternity to those men—the storm abated. As soon as weather conditions permitted, the crew, exhausted from the joltings of the angry sea and nearly famished from their forced fast, made their way to the ship's provisions. Strengthened by this first meal in three days they proceeded at once to spread new canvas in order to continue their voyage. Automatically the first mate took command. Later his appointment was to prove an unfortunate one.

No one was sure of the ship's present location. The mate maintained that they had drifted miles out to sea and, despite the practical suggestion of the ship's owner that they were somewhere near the coast, scoffed at his recommendation that soundings be taken. By nightfall they were sailing directly for the coast of Newfoundland. Hopes ran high as the schooner ploughed her way through uncertain waters.

Just before midnight the lookout peering into the dark night saw something suddenly loom up immediately in front. Before his cry of warning could be acted on by the helmsman the ship was piling upon the rocks. Side-ways she swerved and keeled over as mountainous seas hurled her violently on the treacherous rocks below. Instinctively, the men on board quickly tied themselves at intervals to a rope and lined up along the highest rail of the ship. A channel of furious water still cut them off from the base of the cliff. Resigned to their fate, they determined to hang on as long as the ship held together.

While clinging desperately to the side they were startled by a violent crash. This, they thought, spelled their doom. But suddenly, the incredible happened! A large part of the stern broke away, swung shorewards and made a rough kind of bridgeway to the foot of the cliff. With feverish haste they succeeded in making the treacherous crossing before their miraculous bridge had been swept away.

But still another formidable barrier lay between them and safety. Towering above them was a cliff as rugged as any that can be found in the vicinity of Cape Pine on Newfoundland's southeastern shore. The precipitous side of this mighty rock formed their only avenue to safety. Could this band of exhausted men scale its rugged height? In the darkness, fortunately, they did not realize its loftiness nor the dangers with which it was beset. Having begun the ascent, they were also unable to see the fate which would befall them if any of them should slip. The difficulty which these men encountered as they dragged their battered and now scantily clad bodies from one little ledge to another, and to which they clung with numb fingers, can only be imagined. Especially great were these for the cook who had a wooden-leg and for the ship's owner who was not accustomed to such exhausting hardships. Several times they wavered, barely able to keep on, but, driven on by desperation they finally reached the top.

The account of how these men tramped for fifteen miles through slush and snow along the coast till they came to a lighthouse, their subsequent recovery in a hospital, and their uneventful journey to their Island homes is the less interesting part of this true tale of the sea. On the day following the wreck men from the lighthouse went to the cliff where they found nothing but the anchors and a few pieces of wreckage. Among the latter was a broken plank (probably from the bow) on which was written the ship's name, "Barbara MacDonald."

The wreckage has long since disappeared; only the anchors with their chains still mark the spot for passing mariners. The incident is remembered by few apart from those who were on board. Even the little girl's *mysterious* message is almost forgotten. What indeed could have been the *source* of her knowledge? Doesn't it seem strange that she should have assured her mother of her father's safety at the very moment that he gained the top of that dangerous cliff?



Violent fires soon burn out themselves,
Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short.
He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes.

— Norfolk—King Henry VIII.