

John Masefield (1878-1967)

7 *One of the Bo'sun's Yarns*

Loafin' around in Sailor Town, a-bluin' o' my advance,
I met a derelict donkeyman who led me a merry dance,
Till he landed me 'n' bleached me fair in the bar of a rum-saloon,
'N' there he spun me a juice of a yarn to this-yer brand of tune.

"It 's a solemn gospel, mate," he says, "but a man as ships aboard 5
A steamer-tramp, he gets his whack of the wonders of the Lord —
Such as roaches crawlin' over his bunk, 'n' snakes inside his bread,
And work by night and work by day enough to strike him dead.

"But that there 's by the way," says he; "the yarn I'm goin' to spin 10
Is about myself 'n' the life I led in the last ship I was in,
The *Esmeralda*, casual tramp, from Hull towards the Hook,
Wi' one o' the brand o' Cain for mate 'n' a human mistake for cook.

"We'd a week or so of dippin' around in a wind from outer hell,
With a fathom or more of broken sea at large in the forrard well,
Till our boats were bashed and bust and broke and gone to
Davy Jones, 15
'N' then come white Atlantic fog as chilled us to the bones.

"We slowed her down and started the horn and watch and watch about,
We froze the marrow in all our bones a-keepin' a good look-out,
'N' the ninth night out, in the middle watch, I woke from a pleasant dream,
With the smash of a steamer ramming our plates a point abaft
the beam. 20

"Twas cold and dark when I fetched the deck, dirty 'n' cold 'n' thick,
'N' there was a feel in the way she rode as fairly turned me sick; —
She was settlin', listin' quickly down, 'n' I heard the mates a-cursin',
'N' I heard the wash 'n' the grumble-grunt of a steamer's screws reversin'.

“She was leavin’ us, mate, to sink or swim, ’n’ the words we took
’n’ said 25

They turned the port-light grassy-green ’n’ the starboard rosy-red.
We give her a hot perpetual taste of the singeing curse of Cain,
As we heard her back ’n’ clear the wreck ’n’ off to her course again.

“Then the mate came dancin’ on to the scene, ’n’ he says, ‘Now quit yer chin,
Or I’ll smash yer skulls, so help me James, ’n’ let some wisdom in. 30
Ye dodderin’ scum o’ the slums,’ he says, ‘are ye drunk or blazin’ daft?
If ye wish to save yer sickly hides, ye’d best contrive a raft.’

“So he spoke us fair and turned us to, ’n’ we wrought wi’ tooth and nail
Wi’ scantling, casks, ’n’ coops ’n’ ropes, ’n’ boiler-plates ’n’ sail,
’N’ all the while it were dark ’n’ cold ’n’ dirty as it could be, 35
’N’ she was soggy ’n’ settlin’ down to a berth beneath the sea.

“Soggy she grew, ’n’ she didn’t lift, ’n’ she listed more ’n’ more,
Till her bell struck ’n’ her boiler-pipes began to wheeze ’n’ snore;
She settled, settled, listed, heeled, ’n’ then may I be cust,
If her sneezin’, wheezin’ boiler-pipes did not begin to bust! 40

“’N’ then the stars began to shine, ’n’ the birds began to sing,
’N’ the next I knowed I was bandaged up ’n’ my arm were in a sling,
’N’ a swab in uniform were there, ’n’ ‘Well,’ says he, ‘’n’ how
Are yer arms, ’n’ legs, ’n’ liver, ’n’ lungs, ’n’ bones a-feelin’ now?’

“‘Where am I?’ says I, ’n’ he says, says he, a-cantin’ to the roll, 45
‘You’re aboard the R. M. S. *Marie* in the after Glory-Hole,
’N’ you’ve had a shave, if you wish to know, from the port o’ Kingdom Come.
Drink this,’ he says, ’n’ I takes ’n’ drinks, ’n’ s’elp me, it was rum!

“Seven survivors seen ’n’ saved of the *Esmeralda’s* crowd,
Taken aboard the sweet *Marie* ’n’ bunked ’n’ treated proud, 50
’N’ D. B. S. ’d to Mersey Docks (’n’ a joyful trip we made),
’N’ there the skipper were given a purse by a grateful Board of Trade.

“That ’s the end o’ the yarn,” he says, ’n’ he takes ’n’ wipes his lips,

“Them ’s the works o’ the Lord you sees in steam ’n’ sailin’ ships, —
Rocks ’n’ fogs ’n’ shatterin’ seas ’n’ breakers right ahead, 55
’N’ work o’ nights ’n’ work o’ days enough to strike you dead.”

1902

(From *The Collected Poems of John Masefield*. 1923; London: William
Heinemann, 1925)