

October 2013: "Blow the Man Down!"

From author C. (Cicely) Fox Smith's book *Sailor Town Days*, published in 1923, quoted in *Roll and Go*, *Songs of American Sailors* by Joanna C. Colcord, published in 1924, comes this vivid perception of the sailor's life from the vantage point of the Liverpool waterfront during the days of sail:

"Out on the river a big four-master, 'Frisco-bound, is just getting underway. The wind is fair, and already she is hoisting her topsails ready to drop the tug's hawser as soon as she is clear of the anchorage. The mate, a big raw-boned 'blue-nose', with hands like hammers, and a mouth like a slit across his lean face, is storming about the deck trying to rouse the half-drunk, half-dead crew to some semblance of willing liveliness.

'Na-ow then – are ye sailors, or ca-arpses, or what are ye? Ain't there a shantyman among the whole blamed crowd o' ye?'

And, the crew remaining unresponsive, he bursts forth himself in a voice which is strong rather than melodious – accompanying the strains with a sort of obligato of comments and exhortations, more pointed than polite.

'As I was a-walking down Paradise Street –

(Give it lip, ye Mahoud sojers!); And in a wavering, half-hearted fashion two or three of the crowd take up the chorus –

'Aye-aye, blow the man down.
A big fat policeman I chanced for to meet –'

('Sing up, there, damn ye!...you, ugly, sing up – air ye deaf or dumb or what are ye?')...Great is the power of the shanty over the sailor! At last the chorus comes roaring out with a will, ringing out across the river, a full-throated volume of sound...":

December 2013: Sailor Town

Sailor Town is a term used to describe those distinctive places that occupy the margin-realm between land and ocean worlds, most notable during the heyday of sailing merchantmen of the nineteenth century.

The distinct character of the nineteenth century Sailor Town is described beautifully in the book **Sailor Town Days** by prolific author C. Fox Smith, first published in 1923, excerpted below and recommended:

"It has the fascination and the romance which belong to hard, perilous, wandering lives."

"There is no land quite like it. It is not always beautiful on the surface. More often than not its beauty must be sought out through vistas of mean streets..."

"It is, strictly speaking, of no country – or rather it is of all countries."

Always there is that same fringe of shops which in one way or another make their livelihood out of the seafaring community, the same saloons and bars and restaurants and cocoa-rooms, the same ship chandlers with their pleasant smells of ropes and canvas,

their stocks of shining brasses and bright bunting, the places where they sell sea-boots and oilskins and sailors' beds, or exchange them for the gaudy parrots and ship models and lumps of coral that seamen bring in from other voyages..."

"Sailor town the world over is a realm apart. Under whatever flag it may happen to be – to whatever temporal sovereign it may owe its external allegiance – in spirit is of the Kingdom of Neptune: a shore-going Neptune, it is true, stretching his legs in a pub and having a gay time among the girls – but Neptune just the same."

Sailor Town is a curious reflection of the sailor himself:

"As a general thing, the sailor is intensely national – the genuine shellback, that is, the sail-trained seaman, now fast passing away with the ships and the life he knew. He seeks out in foreign ports the resorts of his fellow-countrymen, and scorns any nearer approach to a foreign language than a sort of Chinook jargon, which he uses impartially wherever he goes. He regards the customs and languages of foreign countries with a fine scorn, not unmixed with suspicion. He does not understand them; he refuses to learn their speech, just as he refuses to provide against contingencies by learning to swim."

"His knowledge of the countries he visits is bounded, but for occasional excursions, by the confines of Sailor Town. However many new lands he discovered and named in the centuries gone by, he never explored them, leaving that, as a rule, to others."

"Yet perhaps one need not go very far back to find a reason for his distrust of the land and its ways. How it has fleeced him, robbed him, duped him, stripped him, taken his hard-earned pay and shanghaied him into the foc's'les of hell-ships; taken his trust in womankind, his very soul itself. What a display is has offered him of all that is worst in humanity!"

There remain today, ports where the distinctive margin-realm between sea and land still lives and breathes; maybe harder to find, to recognize and appreciate than they once were, but Sailor Towns always.

PRIMARY SOURCE: Sailor Town Days, by Cicely Fox Smith, first published in 1923.

December 2013: Sailor Town

Sometimes you run across words that express the thought so precisely. Found among the writings of author Cicely Fox Smith, we have this:

"It is strange to think that, of all that strength, beauty, and swiftness; all that wealth of patient labour and craftsman's skill; that solid oak and teak and elm that had been growing through the slow generations; that copper, and iron, and flashing brass; that stout canvas and honest rope – there should after a few years no more remain than of a child's paper boat launched on a gutter stream; no more, but for a memory in some old man's mind, a model or two in a few seafaring families, a name in an old seaman's song."

From her book Sailor Town Days, first published in 1923 by Methuen and Co., London;