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WILLIAM GREENWOOD

BY

ARCHIBALD MacMECHAN



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To

S. M. Strong

with the writer's kind regards

A. D. W.

WILLIAM GREENWOOD

HALIFAX, the ancient and picturesque capital of Nova Scotia, is visited every summer by hundreds of American tourists. They enjoy their escape from the torrid heats of August to the cool sea air, the clear blue days and the peaceful, sleep-filled nights, and they find no little interest in the bowery public gardens, the mazes of the sea-girt park, the royal prospects from the star-shaped citadel, and the many monuments that record the history of this old garrison town. As long ago as the eighteenth century, hundreds of American citizens used to visit the place, but they did not come willingly; they were singularly blind to its scenic charm and they took the earliest possible opportunity of returning to their native land. They were, in fact, prisoners of war gathered up by His Britannic Majesty's cruisers and land forces. They were confined in jails and prison-ships and barracks, and they lived on prisoner's fare. Their lot was hard and they gave the city of their captivity a bad name which it was slow to shake off. Sooner or later, they were sent home by cartel in exchange for British prisoners gathered up by the Continentals; but the more impatient broke out by force or stratagem, and the sympathizing Nova Scotians helped them "up along to the westward" on their way to freedom.

The rape of the *Flying Fish* is a case in point; and it also shows how peaceful men suffer in time of war.

On the evening of April 7th, 1780, a little ten-ton schooner with this poetic name lay at a wharf in Halifax, probably Fairbank's, near the foot of Blowers street. With the help of a single other hand, William Greenwood had brought her up from Barrington, a small fishing village at the butt-end of the province, to the capital, with a load of potatoes. He had sold his cargo, possibly to the commissariat department, for Halifax had a huge garrison to feed at the time; and he had

received his money. He had also his clearance from the Customs and he was ready to sail. Between eight and nine o'clock he was in the tiny cabin with the other man who formed the entire crew; he may have been getting ready to turn in for the night, or he may have been reckoning up the profits of the trip, or considering how soon he could get back to Barrington and begin the spring fishing. He had nets and other gear on board, and he knew where he could procure a sufficiency of salt; he may have been thinking of the Banks. Or he may have been meditating on the varied experiences of the past five years, since the Thirteen Colonies declared their independence of the mother country.

The war had been a hard trial for poor men like William Greenwood. Only ten years before it broke out, he left his native state of Massachusetts for Nova Scotia and had settled at Barrington for greater convenience to the rich fisheries of the North Atlantic. He was a British subject. He had simply transferred himself and his belongings from one British colony to another, and now, for no fault of his, by the ironic accident of mere residence, he found himself an enemy to his old friends and the kindred he had left behind. How could he be expected to bear arms against them? How could he help sympathizing with the "rebels," against whom the Governor and Assembly fulminated in menacing acts and proclamations? It was a cruel situation for a poor man, especially after Congress declared that the Thirteen Colonies would have no trade or commerce with the two erring sisters to the north, which had refused to join the union. The fishermen of Barrington and Yarmouth soon felt the pinch of want. Fishing was their sole means of livelihood; to move back to Massachusetts meant ruin; to remain in Nova Scotia exposed them to the American privateers and shut them out from their natural market.

Still, men are not as harsh as their laws; commerce between Nova Scotia and Massachusetts did not wholly cease even in the worst year of the war. In October, 1776, the Barrington men loaded the schooner *Hope* with fish and liver oil and

sent her to Salem with a piteous request that they might be allowed to barter the cargo for provisions, to keep them through the long winter approaching. It is impossible to get provisions elsewhere. The homely petition breaks into an irrepressible cry of distress—"God only knows what will become of us." To resist such an appeal was impossible. The House of Representatives allowed the agent of the *Hope*, Heman Kenney, to dispose of his cargo, and to purchase 250 bushels of corn, thirty barrels of pork, two hogsheads of molasses, two hogsheads of rum (a necessity of life) and 200 pounds of coffee. With these rations, rather plentiful and luxurious compared with what they purchased in later years, the community at Barrington managed somehow or other to get through the long winter.

Exactly a year later, Greenwood was able to render an important service to the new republic by restoring to it no fewer than twenty-five of its fighting men. Captain Littlefield Libby had the misfortune to lose his privateer. She was driven on shore by one of H. B. M.'s cutters. Her crew set her on fire and took to the woods. After a toilsome journey of seventeen leagues through the primeval forest, they reached Barrington and bought a boat with what money they had, eked out with their shoe-buckles and thirty small arms. But ill-luck still followed them. They were wrecked and lost their dear-bought boat. Once more they were forced back on the limited hospitality of the fishing hamlet at the east passage of Cape Sable Island. In this crisis, Greenwood undertook to ferry them over in his forty-five ton schooner, the *Sally*, which may have been named from his wife. In addition to Libby's crew, he brought one of Captain Fullerby's men and three others who had escaped from Halifax and made their way to the end of the province nearest their own home. The plan of the previous year was repeated. On Captain Libby's advice, the *Sally* was loaded with a few quintals of fish, the result of many families' labour, some bushels of salt, and some fish oil to be exchanged for corn, or wheaten flour for the indispensable daily bread. By

October 27th, 1777, the *Sally* with her cargo and her returning privateersmen was safe at Salem, and, four days later, Greenwood's petition for leave to buy food was granted.

For the return trip, Greenwood shipped a new hand, one John Caldwell, a young fisherman, whose artless tale illustrates the sufferings of the innocent non-combatants in time of war. He lived in Nova Scotia not far from Barrington, where the visionary Colonel Alexander McNutt projected his marvellous city of New Jerusalem. Caldwell was the only support of his widowed mother and his sisters. The fishery had been ruined by the depredations of the merciless small privateers, so he made a voyage in a merchantman from Nova Scotia to the West Indies. On his return, he avers that he was "strongly importun'd" to go on another voyage to Quebec; so he must have been a likely lad. On his way thither, his vessel was snapped up by the privateer *Dolphin* out of Salem, and he himself made prisoner of war. Now he petitioned for release, and the council of Massachusetts were not without bowels. They considered his motives, his youth, and his peculiar circumstances, as he requested, and they gave him leave to return in the *Sally* to his own place.

The next October saw Greenwood again in Boston with his annual cargo of escaping prisoners on board the *Sally*, and his annual petition for leave to buy food. His passenger list included Amos Green of Salem, Ichabod Mattocks of Mount Desert, and Mr. John Long, late quarter-master of the Continental ship *Hancock*. She had been captured by that very active officer, Sir George Collier of the *Rainbow* in a sea duel, like that between the *Chesapeake* and the *Shannon*, and taken to Halifax. The local jail must have been a curious place. The jailer was infirm and delegated his duties to his wife. The shackles were insufficient and the regulations for visiting the prisoners at night were not enforced. Apparently nobody with any contrivance remained long in durance. Americans were always escaping and always being helped "up along" by the people of Nova Scotia.

So far Greenwood, the "hearty friend of America," as Captain Libby calls him, had managed to escape being ground between the upper and nether mill-stones of the hostile forces, but soon he was to suffer not from "the enemy," but from the Americans whom he had consistently befriended.

Early on the morning of the twentieth of August, 1779, the fishing hamlet at Ragged Islands was surprised by American privateersmen from Coaxset. They had made the journey of four hundred miles in three open whale-boats. After setting a guard on the houses, "they went a-robbing," as the injured ones testified. Nineteen quintals of codfish, four barrels of salt, three salmon nets, sixty pounds of butter, one green hide, six dressed skins, and some cheese were part of the loot. The people of Ragged Islands felt aggrieved. They had helped three or four hundred prisoners "up' along to America," and concealed privateers and even prizes from the British cruisers. After sacking Ragged Islands, the whalers went to Barrington and despoiled Greenwood of the faithful *Sally*. He followed up the robbers, but apparently never got redress.

In September of the same year, this humble patriot was loading a vessel at Barrington with the property of Mr. John Pitts of Boston, when an armed boat from Rhode Island entered the harbour, cut the vessels adrift and proceeded to rifle the store-house of Mr. John Pitts's valuable goods. Apparently, in consequence of this outrage, Greenwood did not get to Boston until December. In that month, thanks to the protection of the great Mr. Pitts, he obtained permission to purchase twenty-five bushels of rye and twenty-five bushels of Indian corn for the support of his family (he was a married man with young children) and other distressed persons at Barrington. He also obtained a "protection" against American armed vessels, and he seems to have intended returning, bag and baggage, to his native state of Massachusetts in the following spring. He had brought his vessel across single-handed, but now he asked for the loan of a boy out of the prison-ship at Boston to help him work her back to Barrington-

ton. He promised to return a person, that is, an escaping American, in exchange for the borrowed hand.

In the spring he was at Halifax instead of home in Massachusetts, a fact that was afterwards used against him. The potatoes, which he and, no doubt, other thrifty fishermen had raised and kept through the winter, were surplus stock and specially valuable as being out of season. His reasons for trading with "the enemy" were obvious. Oppressive Britain paid not in depreciated paper, but in good solid gold and silver. Besides, those "moving things called wife and weans" would lead him to bring his goods to the best, nearest, and safest market. Now history finds William Greenwood at a definite place and date with all this experience behind him.

Whatever may have been passing through his mind, as he sat with his mate in the cramped cabin of the *Flying Fish* that April night, he could hardly have had any inkling that he was on the eve of his greatest and most unpleasant adventure. He could not know that on the wharf outside in the darkness, six grimy, desperate American soldiers were scrutinizing the little schooner with anxious eyes, and, in stealthy whispers, were planning her capture. They were Thomas Hooper of Beverley, William Forbes (or Forbush) of Salem, one Jarvis, one Jenks, and a Scot whose name does not transpire. The sixth man, their leader, called himself at one time James Reed, but the name he gave in his affidavit was William Stanton. He had been swept up by "the enemy" at Stoney Point on the Hudson, and as that post was carried by the Americans under Wayne on July 15th, 1779, he must have been captured prior to that date. They had all been confined for "some months" in Halifax and that very hour, between eight and nine, they had succeeded in digging a tunnel out under the jail, and now they were looking for a vessel to escape in. They were still in the greatest danger. The place swarmed with red-coats. The main guard was next the jail. Patrols, sentries, batteries were everywhere. If they did not escape by water, they were sure to be discovered and haled back to prison. Now, by the greatest good luck,

they stumbled on the man and the vessel most likely in Halifax that night to complete their rescue.

But they knew nothing of Greenwood, his disposition, or his sympathies. Their first step was to discover, if possible, how many hands were on board. Stanton undertook to find out. Stripping off his own shirt, or procuring one of his comrades, he went on board boldly, entered the cabin and offered it for sale. His action was not surprising. In those days when factories were unknown, and sewing-machines not invented, a linen shirt was a rare piece of needle-work with a distinct market value. Soldiers and sailors were continually selling their "slops" for the price of a few drinks. The practice was forbidden by Nova Scotia law. While Stanton was engaging Greenwood's attention, Hooper followed him down the companion-way, also with an article to sell,—this time, a razor. As the two conspirators were chaffering below, the other four silently cast off, and took possession of the deck. The *Flying Fish* began to drift out into the harbour and soon the sound of water lapping overside apprised Stanton and Hooper of their comrades' success. At once they drew their bayonets (why or how prisoners of war should have been allowed to retain their side-arms is not explained) and told Greenwood and his mate that if they dared to resist, they were dead men.

Taken completely by surprise, the lawful owners made no fight, and a parley ensued. The violent strangers soon made it clear that they were American soldiers trying to escape. Indeed, though ragged and dirty, they were still in the buff and blue uniform of the Continental army. Greenwood, hearty friend of America as he was, knew that in helping them, he was risking his neck. He represented how dangerous it was "for him to carry away Soldiers [they being all dressed in Regimentals] as he must expect to suffer for it if he was Caught." "Suffer" meant, of course, "stretching hemp." One of them replied he would kill or be killed, and Greenwood had no choice but submission. About nine o'clock the sails were hoisted, and Greenwood took the helm. Stanton and

Hooper stood guard on each side with their bayonets threatening instant death, if he tried to run the schooner aground in the darkness, or speak so loud as to be heard on shore. In such guise, the lightless *Flying Fish* slipped down the harbour before the north wind between McLean's battery on the starboard hand and George's to port, past all the works on Point Pleasant, past Sandwich Point and Thrum Cap unchallenged, to the open sea and safety. Seldom, indeed, has fickle Fortune so signally favoured daring and desperate men. Within an hour of digging themselves out of prison, they had captured a vessel and were bowling along straight for home and freedom.

Squint suspicion always clings to an *alias*. That the same man should call himself at one time James Reed and at another William Stanton clouds all his narrative with a doubt, but this is the tale he told "repeatedly" in the presence of Rachel Chandler and Mary Hambleton of North Yarmouth, on Great Chebeag Island. His five comrades heard his repeated story and agreed in the details. The sworn testimony of the two ladies is confirmed by the affidavit of Jacob Curtis of Great Chebeag and by Greenwood's petition. Stanton seems to have been a talkative person, and, therefore, apt to say more than he knew. In his affidavit, he poses as Greenwood's friend by minimizing the violence used in seizing his schooner and tells chiefly what took place after they got clear of Halifax.

According to his account, nothing of importance occurred until the *Flying Fish* had flown some thirty marine leagues "up along to the westward." She would do at least her five or six knots an hour; therefore, it was probably the next afternoon that Greenwood steered her into an unnamed harbour, which must have been at Ragged Islands, that nest of American sympathizers. Still he ran no risks. Stanton swears that he "took every prudent measure to prevent our being discovered. . . . He went on shore while our vessel lay aground and never discovered us to the inhabitants." Stanton believed that "the said Greenwood might have taken said

schooner from us if he had been so minded." It seems plain that if Greenwood was at first intimidated into carrying these prisoners away, he was now willing to help them to the utmost of his power, which is thoroughly consistent with his conduct all through the war.

What happened next day was sheer outrage. Early on the morning of April 9th, the *Flying Fish* was once more under way, still heading westward. When she had run some five leagues, a shallop came within hail. It belonged to Greenwood's brother, who was on board with three other men. Greenwood sent his passengers below on the ballast that they might not be recognized. He sailed about two leagues farther. Then that voyage ended abruptly for him and the single "hand."

Apparently the chance meeting of the two Greenwoods aroused the soldiers' suspicions. Stanton tells that he was summoned on deck by "four of our company. . . . They told me they had agreed to set Greenwood ashore on a desolate island." Stanton would not consent, but the four insisted on marooning, or killing Greenwood. Their luckless rescuer, who was apparently a quasi-prisoner in his own cabin, offered to take them to Salem, if they would allow him to land his chest and the one man who composed his crew. At first they agreed to this proposal, but soon they changed their minds. Stanton acted as go-between and peace-maker, and showed his friends the "protection" obtained from the Massachusetts Council the year before. From this document they gathered that they could not make the *Flying Fish* lawful prize, and, once more, were all for killing Greenwood and his man. According to Stanton, he begged their lives, and the others agreed to spare them, if they would go ashore peaceably. "On which I went into the cabin and gave him to understand there was a plot and made signs for him to go on shore." Greenwood's next and natural request was to be set ashore with his sea-chest, containing, no doubt, all his property. He would make shift to get it home. But they would not listen to him. They

demanded his money "with a cocked pistol at his breast," stripped him "of all his clothes" and put him and his man ashore on the nearest "desolate island," which must have been Negro Island, and made off with the schooner. Greenwood's sole epithet for their conduct is "ungrateful."

Probably he did not remain long marooned on Negro Island. He was only some seven miles from his home, and, if his brother was cruising in the neighbourhood, he may have been taken off the same day. How the six soldiers managed to navigate the stolen *Flying Fish* is not recorded, but Yankee ingenuity would be equal to the task. Forbush as a Salem man must have been half a sailor. At any rate, their wonderful luck still held, for they brought their prize safely into Casco Bay. There they sold her to Daniel Wyer, mariner, Nathan Bucknam, yeoman, David Chandler and Reuben Noble for five thousand (depreciated) dollars. The adventurers lived in different parts of the continent, they were eager to reach their homes and they needed the money for travelling expenses. Evidently they shared the proceeds of the sale and separated, each to his own place.

On their way to Casco, Stanton told his friends that Greenwood would recover his vessel. The idea was not well received. Thomas Hooper of Beverley and William Forbush of Salem were particularly truculent. If Greenwood came to Salem, or Boston, or Marblehead on any such errand, they would "knock him on the head and throw him over the wharf," phrases that bear the impress of reality. None the less Stanton was a true prophet. By the end of April, Greenwood was in Boston petitioning the Council for the recovery of his schooner. He had powerful friends and he had deserved well of the republic.

On the second of May, the House of Representatives appointed a committee of two, General Warren and Major Cross, to look into the matter. To their number was added the powerful Mr. John Pitts who knew all about the petitioner and had himself suffered in pocket from his own side in the war. This committee acted with great promptitude, for the

very next day the prayer of the petition was granted as far as possible. The local Committee of Correspondence was empowered to take possession of the *Flying Fish* pending the action of the General Court, and to serve the present owners with copies of Greenwood's petition, and the order of the court "to show cause if any they have" why they should keep what did not belong to them.

Naturally "the present owners," Nathan Bucknam, mariner, and his friends, who had bought and paid for Greenwood's schooner, objected vigorously to surrendering her. They filed a counter-petition, emphasizing the fact that the schooner was taken by force and therefore lawful prize. They tried to make it appear that Greenwood was a dubious character who wanted to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. That in his clearance the shallop was called the *Peggy*, that he had gone to Halifax instead of Massachusetts in the spring, that "the enemy was probably supplied" with his cargo of potatoes, were all twisted into suspicious circumstances. But they had no case. Justice prevailed, and by the middle of June, Greenwood had his property restored and was on his way back to Barrington.

History vouchsafes one more glimpse of him. On August 2nd, 1782, he sailed from Barrington in a small schooner with a hundred quintals of fish, the property of some thirty poor families of that place. He had on board six escaped prisoners. Five were privateersmen of the schooner *Fox* out of Newburyport. One of these, Zebulon Rowe, was "of lawful age," and his testimony has been preserved. He had started on a short-lived cruise against "the enemies of the United States of America. . . . On the second day after we sailed from Georges River we were captured by the British frigate *Ceres*, carried into Halifax and there confined on board the prison-ship." About the 20th of July, Zebulon and his four ship-mates made their escape, and "with much difficulty arrived at Barrington in Nova Scotia without money or provisions." Here they found Greenwood, the leading man of the village, "who kindly supplied us with whatever we needed, gratis. . . .

We applied to the said Greenwood to bring us to Newburyport, but it was with the greatest difficulty that we prevailed with him to consent to bring us, as he had lately lost his wife and had nobody but a girl to leave a family of small children with, and was just engaged in his mowing." So Mrs. Greenwood, poor soul, had her own troubles, the woman's part, in these calamitous years. Greenwood had his private grief, his motherless children, and the inexorable labour of the earth to tie him to his home, but he listened to the call of humanity. He loaded his schooner with all the fish the hamlet had ready and carried it, with Zebulon Rowe, and the other *Foxes* safe to Newburyport. "He never charged us a farthing for his trouble or our provisions," says the grateful privateersman. And then,—the naval officer of the port obeyed the letter of the law forbidding all intercourse with Nova Scotia, and seized both vessel and cargo.

Finally he got his schooner back and obtained permission to exchange the hundred quintals of fish for such necessaries and articles as the naval officer, Mr. Michael Hodge, might think proper. He was further ordered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to pay any expenses zealous Mr. Hodge might have incurred in the discharge of his duty. So he is out of the saga and returns to his darkened home, his mowing, and his fishing. A hamlet in Nova Scotia bears the name of this humble patriot, and his descendants are found where he lived and suffered more than a century ago.

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