

# CHARLIE MAGUIRE

MUSICIAN SONGWRITER



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## The Ballad of Tommy Woodgate

(As told by Charles Bryne, Fireman)

Words & Music by Charlie Maguire

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The storm of November 28, 1905 is known in some circles as “The Mataffa Storm,” when some 30 vessels were embroiled in the fury of the “inland sea” known as Lake Superior. Two boats were lost outright; the LAFAYETTE, and the MADERIA, which led to the construction of the Split Rock Light Station just above Two Harbors, on Minnesota’s north shore. (Hear the new song about the Split Rock Light on WILDERNESS ROAD)

There were many heroes, and many stories of a day, that started so serenely warm and heavenly for that time of year, and quickly descended into an icy hell by late afternoon. The story that grabbed my attention early on in my writing of Great Lakes songs, was the heroics and courage of Tommy Woodgate, a young man from the Lake Erie region of the Great Lakes.

Tommy worked in the engine room of the MATAFFA alongside Charles Bryne, the narrator of the song. Trying to make safe harbor in the pounding late afternoon waves of the 28th, the MATAFFA’S rudder was too small, and her engine underpowered for her size, and she hit the pier at the entrance to Duluth harbor in what is now known as Canal Park. There she sat, her back broken, in full view of the city, the waves and wind crashing over her.

Woodgate, Bryne, and others came topside when the engine room flooded, and looked longingly at the wheel house in the bow of the ship where the rest of the crew huddled, cold, but dry, to wait for rescue. But for Woodgate and his mates, there was no choice, they had to make to the wheelhouse too, or freeze to death, for there was no shelter for them where they were. Soaked and frozen to the bone, they were about to give it up, when Tommy Woodgate tied a line around his waist and prepared to do battle with the storm.

# # #

“The Captain was a proud man, but Humble was his name  
Aboard the ship MATAFFA, with her silver stack so plain  
We broke in two upon the pier, in the worst I can recall  
With stricken crewmen on both ends  
It looked badly for us all”

(CONTINUED NEXT PAGE)

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### REFRAIN:

And the wind was saying, "Boys you're doomed to die"  
And the waves were saying, "Boys, don't hang on so tight"  
But Tommy he was saying, "We'll get out of this alright  
If we don't listen to that cold stormy night  
If we don't listen to that cold stormy night".

### ADDITIONAL VERSES:

"Our bunch was stranded in the stern, no shelter could we find  
Trapped out in the weather, death would take us all in time  
In the harbor of Duluth, we were so close to the land  
But no rescue could be coming, from anybody's hand"

"Then Tommy grabbed a railing, he said would get us to the rest  
Of the men who huddled forward, in the wheelhouse on the wreck  
Fires were burning on the beach, the helpless cheered him on  
But they could not warm him or the cheering make him strong"

"He tried so hard to save himself, he tried so hard alone  
But the lake it showed no mercy as she crushed and broke his bones  
The spray was higher than the mast, and senseless with the cold  
His steps I followed through a night that screamed, and rocked, and moaned"

"Next day we were taken off, fifteen of us were left  
Poor Tom was chopped free of the ice that bound him to the deck  
With his arms stretched out before him, and his glazed eyes open wide  
He held that Nor'easter up close, then held it until he died" (Refrain)