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The Sealing Fleet At Its Zenith

When the Ships sailed March 1st

(H. F. SHORTIS).

In the fifties and sixties of the past century the sealing fleet was at the zenith of its glory, both with regard to the quality of the vessels employed and the reputation of the masters. What a sight has been lost to the present generation to witness the great display of those hundred sail of vessels, all with sails set, flags flying in all parts of the harbor, waiting the time when the channel would be opened up to permit them to proceed on their voyage. It was customary during those hard springs, when the harbor was full of ice, to select one of the number of vessels, and all the crews united, numbering about four thousand men, provided with great hawsers, and headed by bands of music, haul the vessel through the channel, which had been cut with great saws, making an opening through which all the others connected, and thus get out in clear water. I remember one year particularly in my old home (about 1866), when the British Band was employed, and on going out on the ice, Mr. William Ford fell in and would have been drowned only the big drum (he was drummer in the band) floated him up. He was hauled out by two men from the shore, who witnessed his plight and went to his assistance. The majority of those vessels were built in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, and it is a matter of history that more Newfoundland Bank Notes were in circulation in Prince Edward Island in the fifties and sixties than there were in Newfoundland itself. This is not to be wondered at, because every vessel purchased by our commercial men cost from six to twelve thousand dollars. These vessels were given to the skippers to clear, which they sometimes did in one spring, as was the case with Capt. John Pumphrey and Capt. James L. Keefe, and many others.

The most of us remember the days when one of our skippers required a

during a period of at least half a century, and never was it known that a five cent piece went astray. The same may be said of his son, John Coughlan, to-day, who for years carried hundreds of thousands of dollars round Conception Bay by horse and carriage, sleigh or catamaran, often over the ice in the bay, and John to-day, after his half a century with his tremendous responsibility of former years, has proved himself a worthy son of a worthy sire.

THREE TRIPS IN ONE YEAR.
I know of only four men who made three trips in the one year in sailing vessels, viz: Capt. Dick Britt in the Julia, in the forties. He was an Irishman; Capt. John Murphy in the William about the same date. He was also an Irishman; Capt. Wm. Whelan of Brigus, one of the greatest seal-killers in our history, and Capt. Billy Roberts (surnamed the "Dandy"), also of Brigus. Capt. Roberts was called the "Dandy," because that was the name of his vessel. "Her name is Dandy, and she is a dandy," was a favorite expression of his.

There is one individual whose history goes back until it is lost in antiquity. No one can tell for certain how he originated, or whence he came. Nevertheless he has always existed, and is as strong and vigorous as the present day, as he was in the days of our forefathers. I refer to that ubiquitous individual—the Jinker. No Newfoundland sealer is without a thorough, and often a melancholy knowledge of the jinker. For to him is often attributed the misfortune of losing a trip of fat, when the seals seemed within easy reach of the crew, of whom he was, unfortunately, a component part. From my childhood I have been familiar with stories of the ill-omened individual. This much must be borne in mind in connection with the jinker, and it gave strength to the unshaken conviction of our sealers with regard to this unwelcome customer on board ship, that, wherever he went, no matter what prospect of a voyage was in sight, the fact of the presence of the jinker entirely disheartened them, and they were never disappointed when luck forsook them. In fact it would be a matter of the greatest notoriety if a vessel having him on board had been successful. I have never heard an instance cited when a jinker's "luck" had left him.

AT ITS ZENITH FROM THE FIFTIES TO SEVENTIES.
From the fifties to the seventies, as I have stated, the seal-fishery, as a commercial industry, was at its zenith, and it was a matter of controversy, as to whether, during that period, the seal-fishery as a labor-giving and productive enterprise, was equal, if not superior to the cod-fishery. When we take into account the mode of conducting the seal-fishery of those days, and the vast number of appliances which were then necessary for the carrying out of the voyage, it will be seen that, as a labor-giving business, it was broader and more expansive than it is to-day. The blacksmith, tinsmith, shoemaker, sailmaker, and the ordinary laborer were all kept busy during the winter months from December to March in preparing for this important enterprise.

The farmer utilized his spare time in procuring and supplying the numerous vessels, which were, during the year, employed in foreign trade, had to undergo considerable alterations before going to the ice. Yards had to be struck and altered on square-riggers, and in the case of fore-and-aft rigged schooners they were supplied with square-sails on the foremast, and these were styled in local parlance "beaver-hat men"; and all this gave a vast deal of employment. From this it will be seen that it was not alone in the actual prosecution of the voyage, but in the preparation thereof; a source of income was provided for the people.

I have often written about the darling of our people in pursuit of their calling; but it must not be forgotten in this connection that their power of endurance was in keeping with their courage. It is a well-known fact that the winters and springs of sixty years ago were far more severe than those of the present time. Everything goes to prove that the men of those days were possessed of iron constitutions. There was no such a thing at that time as the comfortable skin boot of later years.

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BLUCHEE AND BUSKIN DAYS.

The blucher and the buskin were the only protection against intense frost and the frequent immersions they were subject to in working before their vessels on the ice in order to open out a passage to the "pockets." In those days all the sealers carried an ample supply of pokers, from 15 to 18 feet long, with an iron start in the end of it and when jammed every man was supplied with one of these, and they worked before their ships night and day, no matter how the weather was, and in this manner by the force of absolute determination, and continual battle with the forces of Nature, they managed to bring the vessel in the neighbourhood of the coveted whitecoats. No man, who has made a study of the history of the seal-fishery in the early forties and the two succeeding decades, can deny the fact that the men who prosecuted that industry were men of invincible pluck, energy and endurance. The conditions of the times demanded such men, and they, in all cases, proved themselves equal to the occasion. The fishermen of the present day must feel justly proud of such an ancestry. Owing to the entire change in the mode of prosecuting the seal-fishery, the men of the present day have not such demands made up on their courage and endurance, but I have no doubt that if the conditions I speak of were prevailing to-day, most of our hardy fishermen would be equal to the occasion as has been amply proved by most of our people who have accompanied the various expeditions in search of the North Pole. That the spirit of old and dare was conspicuously developed in the Vikings who captained our sealing crews of old cannot be denied, but great as their fortitude and courage were, all would have been of no avail were they not backed up by the determined men who served under them. In these days, a schooner having secured 3,000 seals would net a very comfortable bill for the crew, but it must be remembered that this

money was earned in the hardest possible way. To accomplish this end, risks had to be run, hardships encountered, and even life itself placed in danger, and this not alone once, but over and over again. It may be said of the sealers of those days that in going out to the ice they took their lives in their own hands. The spirit of adventure and daring is by no means confined to any one section of our countrymen. All over the island instances could be multiplied of courage and self-sacrifice on the part of Newfoundlanders when in pursuit of their dangerous and hazardous vocation, which circumstances and environment compelled them to follow. That they were a countless and fearless race of men numerous instances may be cited to prove. The perils and dangers to less experienced navigators were often utilized by our sealers as means of safety and protection. Take for instance that terror to "those that so down to the sea in ships"—the iceberg. Nothing—not even fog or a lee shore is possessed of so much terror to the foreign-going mariner as these floating menaces to navigation. Yet, our hardy sealers are so familiar with these traveling mountains of the deep, that it is a common occurrence to moor their ships to them, and safely ride out a terrific gale under the lee of their protection.

101 SAILING VESSELS IN 1848.
In the year 1848, there were 101 sailing vessels, with a total of 9,378 tons and 4,000 men, sailed from St. John's, and as masters of these are the names of the heroes who will live forever in our history. Purcell, Graham, Freeham, Halloran, Mallowney, Pike, Waite, Jackman, Mealy, Duff, Barron, Ryan, Silver, and scores of others, whose descendants are amongst us to-day. They were English, Irish and Scotch of their off-spring. They were possessed of the same pluck and daring, and they were, above all things, eminently successful in their undertakings. History has been very careful to hand down to posterity the exploits of Richard the Lion-hearted, or Brian Boru when wielding his ponderous battle-axe, and of Wallace's exploits of valor with his wonderful sword, which is exhibited to this day; but no one has placed on record the feat of the Newfoundland fisherman-sealer, holding a seven-foot flint-lock gun to his shoulder and firing a charge of ten inches of powder and shot from its muzzle after carrying it for 10 or 15 miles over the ice-floe. Few men of the present generation would hold the implement in a horizontal position from the shoulder, not to speak of firing a charge therefrom. I feel strongly of opinion that if there was an analytical contract drawn between the feats of the broad-sword and axe, and that of the old flint-lock of former years, the palm would be awarded to the hardy sealer of Newfoundland.

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If you can see in the bloom of tree A hint of boyhood's happier days. Or in the gleam of silver stream Discover long forgotten ways; If in a boy you glimpse the joy You owned before you'd earned a cent. And claim from him some memory dim. You've still the touch of sentiment.

If you are stirred by call of bird To search him out on bush or tree, And make the nest to find his nest, You're still the boy you used to be. If in your throat a lump you note When others face a grief you've known.

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But earlier days and happier when I can know many a feverish name; If church or school or dimpled smile Or long deserted barn or mill still takes you back over memory track. You've something critics cannot kill.

If you will make for friendship's sake A journey, be it far or near. A care to shift, by word or gift; If only leave or twice a year. Unselfishly you rise to be A friend, not counting time or cost. Sit down content—that's sentiment. The joy which cynics say is lost.

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