

# The Fighting Boys of Confusion Bay

By THEODORE ROBERTS, Author of "Hemming, The Adventurer of Peril."

THE settlement of Confusion Bay is more than a hundred and fifty years old. It consists of five families of Irish extraction, eleven cabins, and a half-dozen stages for the drying of fish. It lies hundreds of miles from any town, and its business with the world is carried on through the medium of occasional trading schooners. These craft—dirty of canvas, battered of hull and rank of bilge—come from Harbour Grace and St. John's, well-stored with tea, tobacco, molasses, ready-made boots, and divers others of the luxuries of life. The tea, in its bright packages, and the tobacco and other delights, are always eagerly taken by the poor fishermen and lavishly paid for in the coin of that region—cured codfish. A dollar's worth of fish (calculated by the state of the market of which the livyers entertain but the foggiest notions) usually goes for forty cents' worth of luxury. So you see, it is not a bad business for the trader, and is likely to repay him for wear-and-tear on rigging and damage from drifting ice. At his port of departure he cheats the merchant and at his port of call he squeezes the simple fisher; but sometimes, between the two, fog and ice snatch him to the final reckoning.

Though in their business transactions and ignorance of the world the inhabitants of Confusion Bay are indistinguishable from the other livyers of that grim coast, they possess one characteristic that has won them an unenviable notoriety. They are the most ill-natured people—English, Irish or French—of that rough country. They are quarrelsome to such a degree that, from Rotten Harbour to Red Man Tickle, they are known as the "fightin' b'ys o' Confusion." Their deeds of violence are discussed in many lingoos, in a dozen outposts. They fight for the excitement of it. They scorn the cause—which, for that matter, is usually absent—and smite for the effect only. When men from other harbours are not to be found, they punch, club and kick among themselves. But their inter-family ructions are not so sanguine as their battles with outsiders. Every gathering, from a wake to a wedding, is to them nothing but an opportunity of combat; and sometimes the good priest himself has trouble enough in keeping clear of the mix-up. Their fathers and grandfathers diverted themselves in the same manner. They have two ideas, two purposes in life—fishing and fighting. They fish because the impulse to do so is in their blood, and because the alternative is starvation. They fight because the impulse for that is in their blood also, and because the alternative is to sit down and contemplate the barrenness of life. But, drunk or sober, by no chance do they fight fair. Lumps of rock, clubs, knives, and articles of furniture are all parts of the game. But they do not fight to kill. They are satisfied with stunning their antagonists, and with breaking a few bones. The victims frequently recover.

Like the other dwellers on that coast, the fighting boys of Confusion are splendid seamen, though in the cores of their hearts they fear the sea. Few of them can swim, or care to learn the accomplishment. They say that, when once the cold, gray monster chooses one he is a fool to prolong the agony by his pigmy resistance. So, by the continual risk of life, and toil that would break the spirit of less courageous people, they wrest a pitiful livelihood from the shore fisheries. They believe in all manner of evil spirits, which they call fairies, without regard for their different natures, shapes, or capabilities of evil. They see forms of menace in the swirling snow, and hear voices of warning in the shrouding fog. They love their women, their children, and their homes with a jealous, animal affection. They see the awfulness of God's hand in the tumult and peace of the wilderness. Their idea of Him is altogether of

something to fear, and when they pray it is to the saints for intercession with that stern Being whom they dare not address themselves. Father Quinn can bring them to no other way of thinking. So we find them religious, in a manner of speaking, hard-working, and faithful to those dependent upon them. But for their vile tempers they would be as worthy a people as the fishers of other harbours.

There is a legend that the propensity for bodily assault in the blood of the men of Confusion Bay, is an inherited curse. The story is that shortly after the bay was settled by the McGraws, the Macnamaras, the Sullivans, the Todds, and the Walshes, all of St. John's, two of the young men fell to dispute concerning the ownership of a three-shilling knife. They had both been drinking. Soon their high words blew away, leaving a sinister silence, and, with a deadly understanding, they grappled on the bleak land-wash. With shrill cries of distress the mothers begged the other men to drag them apart. For their trouble the distracted women were pushed aside, and the rough fellows gathered round to watch the fight. Macnamara had the disputed knife. Walsh was armed with a ship's hatchet from the general stores of the settlement. When it was over Walsh lay unconscious with his feet in the tide. Macnamara crawled away to his cabin, marking a red trail. Both died within the week. The frenzied mothers cried for a fearful judgment upon the men of the little community—that so long as the ice comes out of the North and the harvest of the sea is gathered by men, so long will the men of their blood be mad with the madness of beasts that fight without cause.

One December night Gabe Perley, the half-breed Micmac, told John Archer something of the unpleasant reputation of Confusion Bay. They sat before Archer's rusty stove, in his winter camp on Ripping Brook.

"The devils!" exclaimed Archer. He had been in this northern wilderness a matter of two years, and had never suspected it of harbouring such brutality as this of which the 'breed had just told him. What he knew of the fishermen, and of the trappers and guides of the interior, was very much to their credit. By their primitive kindness he had regained a good deal of his old trust in the decency of human nature—a trust that had been desperately wounded some years before: the telling of that is another story. He had learned to love these scattered people and their strange country above all other peoples and parts of the earth.

"How is it that these beasts are not all locked up in jail?" he asked.

An enigmatic smile flitted over the half-breed's lean features.

"Irish," he replied. "An' one hunder, two hunder, mile from jail," he added.

"What has that to do with it?" asked the Englishman.

"Suppose Police Inspector sen' ten men, twenty men, 'roun' from St. John's," said Gabe, slowly. "They come to Confusion, to catch all them Macnamaras an' Sullivans. Them Irish kick up hell-a-hoopin' by Sin Patrick an' Sin Peter. Then come Lobster Harbour boys an' Little Bay Islan' boys, an' Rotten Harbour boys an' they all rip an' tear onto them police. So? Because they's all Irish and maybe all the police ain't."

"But those are the very fellows who have been kicked and beaten about by the Confusion Bay men," replied Archer.

Gabe nodded.

"That is so," he said. "I tell you what I know. Maybe the devil know more about 'em."

Archer thrust wood into the hot stove, for the walls