

Suzanne

A Story of the Labrador Coast

By WILFRED T. GRENFELL
The Famous Labrador Missionary

Uncle Jonas had missed the fish. For the first time within the memory of many neighbors in Deep Water Creek, Uncle Jonas's schooner had "come back from t' Labrador, clean."

Under ordinary circumstances even the catastrophe of one's family being unable to purchase supplies for the winter would not have been a matter of deep concern to the inhabitants of the Creek. For they were accustomed to having "to make things do," and no one ever heard a real Livyere from the Atlantic seaboard "squealing" because it had "pleased t' Lord they shouldn't be able to reach t' fats after Easter."

But this case was somewhat different: Uncle Jonas's hospitality was an institution. It was as much a matter of course as the ice in the harbor. Every benighted traveller; every desolate family following the komatik track, because they had no longer any food in the larder at home; even every starving dog-team whose lord and master could no longer find them a morsel to put in their stomachs, knew which way to turn when they caught sight of the blue smoke of the cottages above the cliffs that made the harbor of Deep Water Creek. Uncle Jonas's had ever been a veritable city of refuge for many miles of coast, both north and south. No one, good, bad or indifferent, had ever been known to knock at Uncle Jonas's door without getting, whatever the time of day, a cheery invitation to "sit right in and have a cup o' hot tea."

But though this unaffected love of a pure heart had ever proved to the man's own soul the truest of God's blessings, it had not been purchased without cost. For Uncle Jonas enjoyed yet another blessing straight from God's hands, and that was a quiverful of children—possession of which a millionaire might have well been proud. His four stalwart boys were already able to help with the trap-net, and though the youngest could scarcely yet row "cross-handed," that is, handle two oars at once, all four were rated in the crew of the Saucy Lass when Uncle Jonas cleared in the spring of the year for the annual voyage "Northward Ho." His five lasses, also, having come early in the sequence, had been invaluable, first in helping in the home and in the garden and with the rapidly following babies—while the eldest had twice sailed as cook in the schooner before the boys had been of an age to leave home. She was eighteen now, and although as bonnie a lass as the country-side could produce, with her clear rosy cheeks and the curly shock of black hair she had inherited from her mother, she was still living at home. There are no industries in the Creek at which young women can earn money to help out on expenses. When the men bring home a "full fare," however, they are able to earn quite a bit at washing, cleaning and spreading the fish and so helping to get it earlier to the market and secure a better price. This year even that occupation was denied them.

It is not unnatural that the families in these out-of-the-world places should cling together with even more than the tenacity we are accustomed to in the more crowded centres. For everything outside is like one vast unknown land, and ghosts of the dangers that lurk there unseen haunt the fancies of our home-loving fisher-folk. Indeed, who shall blame them for the sensitiveness of their imagination, seeing that the contempt of familiarity has so often proved the path to ruin among our own?

However, with Uncle Jonas's failure to secure a "fare-of fish," a crisis of unusual portent faced the Creek. If he had no fish under salt, there were certainly others in the same situation, and there could be little doubt that there would be more mouths than the supplies attainable before navigation closed could be expected to fill. No wonder that a certain amount of gloom lurked in this usually happy little cove.

Reluctantly, as Virginius of old, Uncle Jonas realized that only one course was open to him. His eldest girl, Suzanne, would have to go out to service. It was neither a pleasant nor an easy task finally to bring the matter to an issue, and it was only after many tearful farewells that at last, with her home-made seaman's chest filled with all the little tokens of love her family and friends could "reach to," Suzanne finally embarked on the last schooner from the harbor that was going south. Thus she fared forth into the wide and unknown world beyond the dearly loved though rugged cluster of rocks that closes the

northern fleet of vessels. We had been threading our way through a veritable archipelago of uncharted islands, seeking a place to bring up for the night where we might be in the neighborhood of other vessels and so get the chance to do some medical or surgical work for the fishermen. Suddenly the watch reported a small schooner with flag at half-mast, and a six-oared seine skiff, with a spudger (or sign) up, crossing the ship's run to intercept us.

It was only necessary to slow down and throw their bowman a line soon to have the seine master on board. "Skipper's compliments, Doctor," he said as he gripped my hand. "We've a girl very bad on board. We wants you to come alongside if so be you can manage it."

We needed no second invitation. The opportunity to serve is the daily quest of our vessel. So while our new friends returned to relieve their skipper's mind and prepare for our arrival, we moored for the night and got ready such accessories as we deemed, from the informa-

tion might spare her seeing the grief of those who loved her. For well she knew the inevitable consequences when the sorrowful tale should reach the peaceful hamlet by the sea, from which she had but so recently set out.

This was no time for philosophy, however. Every minute was precious. For it was a case in which one had to work single-handed.

The baby had been born four days and was dead. Every member of the crew was a stranger to the girl, and anyhow, even with all the sympathy and kindness so universal in our men of the sea, they had been far too fearful that they might do injury, to touch even a rag of the poor coverings that fairly littered the bed. For they had contributed generously of whatever they had that might possibly be useful.

An hour later my patient, wrapped up like a mummy in clean linen and blankets, was tenderly carried on deck and ferried over in the ship's jolly boat to the mission steamer. The boat that served us at that time was, indeed, so

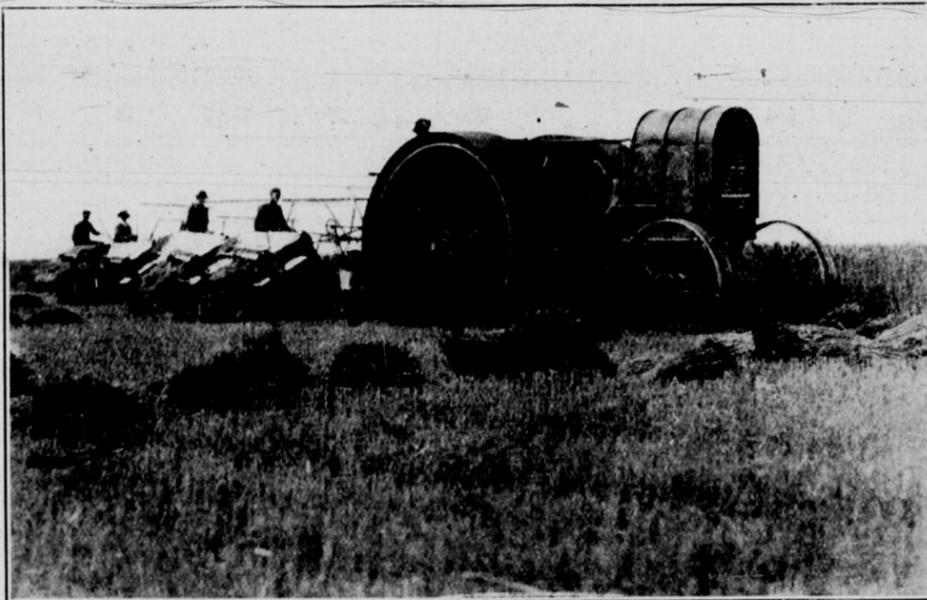
small that she allowed no special provision for patients. Aside from my own cabin and the saloon, there were no spare accommodations below decks. On the settle of the saloon, which was the more airy and convenient for moving about in, we built up a bunk which should prevent, at least, the risk of a serious fall in a sea-way. As soon as the first rays of dawn permitted, we weighed anchor and ran for a Moravian mission station, where we hoped we could induce a married woman with some knowledge that might be useful to us in our dilemma, to come south as far as our most northern little hospital.

It was not until next day, however, that we anchored once more in the quiet waters of Okkak Bay under the great cliffs that flank the harbor. At this little station, for over one hundred years, the self-sacrificing missionaries of the Moravian church have been doing their best to uplift the Eskimos, of the bleak north coast. One might have supposed that a mother with children

of her own would hesitate even in such a dilemma to venture forth in so small a vessel as ours. For the troubles of the sea are by no means confined to the sensitive organizations of those who live in civilization. But this mother looked upon the opportunity as only one more gift of Him whose services had called her from the homeland nearly twenty years before. So without hesitation, as if it were an ordinary daily duty, she set about preparing for the trip. Her husband agreed to accompany us that he might see her home when her services should be no more needed.

The evening was by no means idle. To afford even a chance of saving my patient an operation became necessary, and the help from the station and the quiet of the harbor made it possible and wisest not to risk the delay that would be inevitable before we could reach hospital if the weather should be boisterous.

Things went well. Before night the patient's pulse had fallen, and the watchers in turn reported a much better rest. When morning came the girl herself felt that she could face another stage of the journey. To run out to sea and make the necessary crossing and run in on a parallel of latitude to the hospital would be our quickest way. But such a course with the wind on the land made the heaving and rolling dangerous. By keeping the inside runs we got smooth water, but could not move



In the Bread Basket

Courtesy C. N. Rly.

harbor in, and that is not inappropriately known as Break-Heart Point.

The letters that reach Deep Water Creek in winter are few and far between. True, twice during the long months of frozen water, toiling dog-teams bring what we please to call the winter mails. But they are unsafe and uncertain at best. Many prefer to consider no news good news rather than risk anxious weeks because they have trusted to what has so often caused entirely unnecessary worry.

One letter, however, did come through. It brought the joyful news that Suzanne had found a home with a fine Christian planter, whose wife promised well to be a second mother to her, the maid that helps being as much one of the family as those she ministers to, in our unsophisticated country.

No letter was ever received from Suzanne again—only a brief line from the planter to tell Uncle Jonas the sad news that his own young wife had died during her first confinement just before Christmas—consequently Suzanne had been thus out and about a good deal during the spring. Eventually she had sailed north for the summer, having shipped as cook on a Labrador schooner entirely against his will. She insisted that she had filled a similar position twice before.

I was cruising late that year in our mission hospital-boat with the most

tion derived from our visitors, that the case called for.

The circumstances and details that among so many others impressed this case vividly on my memory do not bear retelling here. Ushered into the schooner's small and dark after-cabin, which had been abandoned by the kindly men for her entire use, by the light of a tiny kerosene lamp, I found a young girl lying in the dark bunk built into the side of the ship. Her bloodless face, hollow eyes, parched lips and fevered cheeks surrounded by a tangled mass of endless jet-black wavy hair, loomed up as soon as my eyes got accustomed to the semi-darkness. She was peering directly into my face with the hungry look of a wild animal at bay.

Her only companion, a child of fifteen, was crouching at the foot of the bunk, and adding to the pathos of the moment by her pitiful wailing, that seemed to beat time to the sounds of the lapping waves against the planking of the vessel's quarter.

It was the old story—a trusting girl, a false lover, a betrayal and a wild unreasoning flight to anywhere, anywhere that seemed to offer, however vaguely, still a temporary postponement of the inevitable harvest of shame and sorrow and suffering. Hither, hundreds of miles from home, this mere child had fled, hoping that possibly death, with its false offer of mercy through oblivion,