

A Happy New Year

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Ingenuity of the Newfoundland Fisherman

NOVEL IDEA OF STOPPING A LEAK

(H. F. SHORTIS)

There is one remarkable characteristic of the Newfoundland fisherman which is often overlooked. I refer to their natural ingenuity. This is a trait which is developed more fully in the people of our country than in any other race. Many causes have been assigned for that remarkable gift of planning, designing and completing with which almost every Newfoundland fisherman is endowed. Some attribute it to their environment, others to their isolation, and still others to their necessities. It may not be far from the mark to say that all these causes together contribute their share in making him what he undoubtedly is—a natural architect. He has no knowledge of technique. His ideas of geometry are, up to now, very hazy. The science of angles and their degrees were mysteries to him, and the difference between an acute and an obtuse one gave him very little concern.

I speak now of the generation that passed away—the old pioneers—the men who designed and built the staunchest and most graceful vessels that ever floated on the waters of our noble bays. Those were men, who, without training, and not possessing a knowledge of the first elements of architecture, went into the forest, hewed down the trees, brought them to the sea-shore, and fashioned them into ships capable to withstand the fiercest storms of the Atlantic, as well as to battle with the ice-floes. Any vessel of the principal, or even the ordinary outport, must be struck with the many fine buildings to be met with. Many of these buildings would do credit to the most skilled and trained workman. In external they present a beauty of design and symmetry of finish which one would never expect from men who had no opportunity of training the mind or the eye in architectural science. The whole thing comes quite natural to them, and they cannot explain how or why they have attained such perfection.

One great mystery in connection with this natural constructive power of our people is the amount of work they accomplish with the minimum of tools. Their stock in trade is usually a hatchet and saw, and a plane or two. These with a rule and square can constitute a fisherman-carpenter's outfit. What a Newfoundland fisherman can accomplish with an ordinary pocket-knife is simply astounding. He has an inherent natural taste for carving. With

his knife he can model a ship in miniature—draw the lines of the hull with perfect accuracy, shape and fashion all the numerous stationary and movable requisites which go to furnish the deck of a well-equipped vessel, not omitting a solitary detail. He will put the spars, yards and rigging in perfect shape, and it is no difference as to whether his model is a ship, barque, brigantine, brig or brigantine, he will put the work of any particular class out of his hands as perfectly, in miniature, as can be done at any of the shipyards in the Mersey or Clyde. It is nothing short of astounding the perfection they have attained in this art. So greatly is this trait developed in the people of the outports, that in numerous instances it amounts to a passion.

As a people Newfoundlanders have no superiors in coping with sudden and unforeseen emergencies. They rise to an occasion of this sort with splendid promptness. A sudden catastrophe at sea, which would throw other people into a state of utter confusion, has the effect on the Newfoundland mariner of calling forth all his resourcefulness and coolness. Numerous instances are related of this trait in our people. Scarcely a year passes by in which some serious mishap has occurred to our fishermen or sailors either along the coast or on the high seas, and in all cases they have met the experience with a courage and coolness characteristic of their race. People of other countries have paid high tribute to this natural resourcefulness of our countrymen. In days gone by stories could be multiplied of how our people have met dangers and difficulties and storms and tempest, and of how they, by fortitude and courage, have beaten down what at first appeared to be insurmountable difficulties by their indomitable pluck and dogged perseverance; and this not only in the days gone by, but in recent times, as reference to contemporary journalism can amply prove.

The deeds and daring of Newfoundlanders have from time immemorial been allowed to go unrecovered. They were only treasured by the people themselves and related at their own firesides, while the exploits of other people of far less importance and magnitude have been flashed from one end of the globe to the other. It is not egotism on our part then to relate what we know of the heroism of our

people. I take it to be true patriotism to call those deeds up from oblivion and give to this hardy race of men that praise and acknowledgment of their bravery which is justly their due.

In the late seventies of the past century our once great fleet of sailing vessels prosecuting the sealfishery has dwindled down to comparatively few in number. Many of them were lost at the icefields. Others which were employed during the codfishery in bringing down supplies, freighters, etc., to Labrador, were lost during the many gales of wind that visited that coast. Others again having become worn out through age and buffeting against the icefloes and the storms of the Atlantic were stripped of their rigging, spars, etc., and the hulls utilized in making breakwaters, sinking wharves, etc., whilst again others were lost in conveying cargoes of products to and from the various ports in Europe and America. Many of those vessels after their arrival from the sealfishery were employed in the foreign trade, and it is a matter of record that some of the quickest passages made across the Atlantic were made by this particular class. However, as they disappeared, through one cause or other, they were never replaced.

It was about the year 1879 that the splendid brigantine, "Creole," Captain Robert Gosse, familiarly known as "Anti-Bob," owing to his determined and patriotic attitude against Confederation, in the year 1869, father of our genial friend, Capt. George Gosse, the enterprising and successful planter on Labrador, now residing on Victoria Street, and a "chip of the old block," sailed for the sealfishery on the 1st March, Capt. Gosse was a resident of Spaniard's Bay. The "Creole" had a crew of 60 men, all sturdy, robust, daring fellows from various parts of Conception Bay. Bart Gosse and John Hutchings were the masters-of-the-watch. She was accompanied by the few remaining of the "old guard" of our once famous fleet notably the William Ravenwood, Islay, William, Isabella Ridley, Four Brothers, Anastasia, Brighton, sisters and a few others. As they sailed away with every stitch of canvas set, flags flying, crews cheering, they were answered from the wharves by the hundreds of people on shore, who wished them a good time and a lucky Spring.

Many on the other hand shook their heads in sorrow and exclaimed, "It was an unlucky day for us that those steamers were ever employed in prosecuting the sealfishery. It will soon be overdone, and then good-bye to our second great industry." The "Creole" and her companions had a fine run down to the Punks, and there they all separated. One night early in March, during a strong gale from the North East, with blinding snowdrift, heavy

sea, and heavy scattered ice, Capt. Gosse endeavored to hold on to the Punks, if possible, as the great field of ice was rapidly coming up from the Northward, and he put the ship under double-reefed mainsail, close reefed fore-topmast, main stay-sail, middle staysail and inner jib. The wind increased in violence and the ice becoming very heavy, and the "Creole" coming in contact with one of the greatest dangers of the icefloes—a growler, the stern became damaged, and the ship immediately began to leak badly. It was a very blue look-out for all on board—a leaking vessel under them, and not another vessel in sight. It was then the inborn ingenuity of the Newfoundland fisherman shone forth with all its splendour, and by their pluck and perseverance they became masters of the situation.

When the captain found that his vessel was leaking and filling rapidly, he sent for his master-watch, Bart Gosse, and after consultation they gave orders to the crew to take up several bags of hard bread, also to get some plank, etc., and bring them forward in the ship. They laid down the plank across the bows in the inside from port to starboard, and filled up with several bags of hard bread. They then planked the biscuit over on top, "shored" up the "pound" on the aft side, and made everything secure. In a few minutes the hard bread, owing to the entrance of the water, swelled, and being securely confined in the "cree" of the vessel, became as hard as cement, and not a drop of water entered the ship from that day until she arrived back to port over a month afterwards.

The novel idea was planned and carried out when the vessel was jammed in the ice near the Funk Island, and as she was continually and swiftly drifting south, she did not get clear until Easter Saturday, when she was found to be about 60 miles South of Cape Race. With that dogged perseverance of the Newfoundlanders, Capt. Gosse gave it to her for all she was worth back to the Funk Island and locality again, and managed to pick up a saving trip of seals for the owners, crew and himself, which amply repaid them for all the dangers they had experienced and overcome by putting into operation the novel idea of successfully stopping a leak in the bows of the vessel by utilizing a few bags of hard bread. Nowadays if we hear of a leak being stopped in the bows of a large steamer whilst securely resting in our Dock, by the application of some hundreds of barrels of cement, etc., to the injured part, our newspapers make a wonder of it, as witness the account of the steamer which was hurriedly repaired in that manner, but in the story I have related the heroic Capt. Bob Gosse had no dock, no appliances, no cement, in fact, nothing but hard bread to fall back upon, and this he utilized with such effect that he not only made his ship as tight as a bottle, but kept her so, and enabled her to prosecute the voyage with comfort to the crew, and success to all concerned. Such is a sample of the ingenuity of the Newfoundland fisherman in great emergencies. As far as I know there are only four of the crew of the "Creole" on that eventful voyage alive to-day, viz., District Chief Benson of the East End Fire Station, Sergeant Sandy Dwyer of the Constabulary, a man named Adams, surnamed the Colner, for years in the United States, and Stephen Williams of Leslie Street, St. John's.

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