Wilfred T. Grenfell

Northern Neighbours: Stories of the Labrador People

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PREFACE

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"Where can I find that story of the 'Copper Store'?" was asked me one day.

"You can't get it; it's out of print."

"Well, why not reprint it?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

Conference with the publishers revealed that they did not know either.

The latest science teaches us that Nature conserves everything; not only matter, but energy. A number of new stories which had been graded as worth telling needed a medium for materialization. Man is nothing if not imitative. There seemed no valid reason why we should not copy man's great teacher in conservation and, like history, repeat anything that might be of interest or value. Hence, this book, *Northern Neighbors*, has become the required vehicle to meet the wishes of many friends of Labrador and its fisherfolk.

Not only "The Copper Store," but "Off the Rocks," "That Bit o' Line," "Little Prince Pomiuk," "Reported Lost," "Johnny," "Peter Wright, Mail-Carrier," and "Green Pastures" are reprinted from the volume entitled *Off the Rocks*, first published in 1906.

W. T. G.

July, 1923.

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Northern Neighbors

OFF THE ROCKS

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It was Saturday night in the early fall when in our hospital schooner we anchored among Adlavik Islands. A number of vessels were there "making" the fish, which they had caught farther north. Many of them had called to pick up their freighters, or poorer folk, who had to come down to the Labrador fishery for a living, and yet had been too poor to get credit to purchase a schooner of their own. They had therefore taken passage on some already crowded craft, in return paying twenty-five cents to the master for every quintal or hundredweight of fish they should catch during the summer.

Among these, lying close beside us at anchor, was a small vessel, labeled on the bow the Firefly, though if ever in her early days she had possessed any claim to display the fascination of her namesake, there was nothing about her to betray it now. As I walked on the deck of our well-appointed little ship, I could not help feeling a real sorrow for any man who had to wrest a living from the North Atlantic in a craft so terribly ill-fitted for the purpose.

Her hull was obviously the rude design of some unskilled fisherman, and was innocent of any pretension to paint. It was probably the devoted work of the skipper, the father of a family of boys, who no doubt had helped him in that one great step towards an independent living—the ownership of a schooner. Curves and fine lines are difficult to obtain, and, compared with our graceful hull, this poor little craft looked merely a bunch of boards. Our planks and timbers were of stout oak and were all copper-fastened. Our humble

neighbor’s were of the local soft wood, no doubt from the Bay in which he lived, and were held together with galvanized iron nails, at the very best. Her masts and spars of local spruce compared poorly indeed with ours of staunch Norwegian pitch pine. Her running gear was obviously old, and even her halyards were spliced in many places. Our stout canvas sails made the Firefly’s old patched rags of canvas look insufficient indeed to face the October gales she was sure to encounter before she once more reached her harbor far away to the southward. Her small deck space, crowded as usual with barrels and casks and fishing boats, suggested that if by any chance a sea came over it, it would go hard with the ship and all aboard her. But there was something even more distressing about her; she was evidently “clean” betwixt decks—that is, she had “missed the fish,” and the poor skipper was going home to face a winter in which little or nothing could be earned, yet without money to purchase a winter’s food, and still less to devote to the many needs of his plucky little craft. If she was ill-fitted this year, what would she be next?

Churches as we conceive them are “beyond the reach” of the summer fleets “down north,” but perched in many a barren island harbor on the Labrador is some substitute that serves—some fish store regularly prepared each week-end for its Sunday, or even some special house solely devoted to “any kind of religious service.” Ashore was a little building devoted to “meetin’s,” which had been the labor of love of one or two poor fishermen “who loved the Lord.” It was built of chopped upright sticks, the chinks between had once been stogged with moss, and the rough hand-sawn boards

that formed the roof had once been made water-tight with rinds of birch-bark. The floor had always been the native heath—that is, pebbles—and the seats were narrow, unedged, chopped boards, seriously rickety for want of good nails. Death had claimed one of the builders; the other had gone to the "States."

That Sunday was a really raw Labrador fall morning, cold, sunless, and dispiriting. None of the craft sailed, and no work was done, as is our wont in Labrador, yet it did not look as if we could expect much of a gathering to "heartily rejoice in our salvation," for nearly every craft was "light-fished," the season was almost gone, and "t' merchants" had fixed a low price for fish. But the skipper of the Firefly upset all our calculations. For not only was he up betimes "getting a crowd," but his own exuberant joy showing out through his face—yes, and his very clothing—was so contagious that the service went with a will. Indeed, this mere fisherman, ignorant and unlearned like his Galilean forebears, radiated that ultra material thing, "the Spirit which quickens," bringing into our midst that asset without which orthodoxies, ornate rituals, and ceremonies are not only dead, but destructive.

This man made the best of everything. He moved the topply seats so that they were steadied by the outside walls, and arranged the congregation on the weather side of the building, so that their broad backs might serve to block the drafts out from the chinks. He apologized for remaining defects by saying that the holes above "will do to let 'em hear the singing in the harbor." Afterwards, as we walked

down to our boats, I spoke to him of his poor luck with the fish.

“I shall have enough for the winter, thank God,” he told me. He meant dry flour enough not to starve.

The whole fleet got under way at daylight, for all were anxious to get south. Soon after midday, we reached a harbor where we wished to see the settlers. The barometer had fallen a good deal during the day, and there was a lowering look about the sky and an ominous feeling in the air. So we put out two large anchors with a good wide spread, and buoyed them as well. The harbor was none too good if the sea came in from the eastward, and a sullen ground swell hinted of something behind the present light air. By sundown the little air had fallen to a flat calm, but the swell had increased, and the barometer was still lower. We knew we were in for a storm, so we gave sixty fathoms on each chain, and got out our big kedge on the rocks with a hundred fathoms of good stout hawser to it. It was almost dark, when we saw in the offing a small schooner being painfully towed into the harbor by some men in a rowboat. The calm outside had left her helpless. Inky blackness shut everything out long before she rounded the heads, but to our great relief we at last heard her a little way ahead let go first her port and then her starboard anchor. Evidently her skipper, whoever he might be, was aware of what was threatening; we were glad to have a companion, anyhow.

Soon after midnight it began to rain, and then, with scarcely any warning, the wind struck us. Everything loose was instantly blown away, but as there was yet little sea and we always kept an anchor watch so late in the year, we

did not stir from our bunks and soon, as far as I was concerned, I was fast asleep again. It was hardly daylight when I was awakened by men talking eagerly in the cabin. The motion of our ship told me at once that the sea had risen considerably, though we rode easily to our anchors. The rain was pelting in torrents, or the flying spray falling on deck, one could not tell which.

“What’s the matter, Joe?” I shouted to our mate, whose voice I could distinguish. “Anything gone wrong?”

At the sound he put his head in at my cabin door. His oilskins were shining with water, and his hair was dripping also.

“The schooner ahead of us is drifting, Doctor. It’s the one came in after us last night.”

“Drifting! How’s the wind?”

“Right into the harbor, sir. There is nothing but a watery grave for their crowd if she goes ashore. The breakers are halfway up the cliffs.”

It didn’t take long to get into sea-boots and oilskins, and join the rest of the crew, who were on deck before me, watching the schooner.

“She’s only riding to one anchor, Joe, isn’t she?” I knew he could see in the dark like a cat.

“Sure enough, sir. She must have parted her other cable in the night. She looks a poor little craft. I expect her holding gear is none too good.”

We were sheltering under the weather cloth in the after-rigging. It was still scarcely dawn, and the murky sky, over which endless clouds were scudding, looked cold and disheartening. The roar of the breakers against the cliffs

behind us seemed to have a hungry sound, as if they were greedily anticipating the death knell of the poor souls on the slowly drifting schooner.

"There are women aboard, aren't there, Joe?"

"Yes, sure," he said, "and children, too. 'Tis a small freighter, bound home."

As we spoke we could see the deck getting more crowded, evidently with people coming up from the cabin.

"There's thirty or forty of them if there's a man, Doctor!" the mate shouted above the storm. "I guess they're going to try the boats if it comes to the worst. They might as well go down in the vessel. They'd never put to windward in this wind."

Meanwhile the schooner was getting nearer to us, though as the wind was blowing then she would pass at least fifty yards to the south'ard of us. It grew a little lighter as we watched. The schooner was riding to the full scope of her chain, and seemed, like some live thing, to be making a desperate effort to save herself and the human souls she was responsible for. As the larger swells came along she would plunge almost bow under, and then rise and shake herself of her enemy before he struck her again. Casks and barrels and heterogeneous lumber of every sort had all been thrown overboard to free the decks, and were even now being pounded to atoms on the rocks astern. It seemed only a matter of time before all on the devoted little schooner would share the same fate.

"Joe, that's the little schooner that lay near us last night?" I asked at last. "I'm sure that's her stern."

“It’s the Firefly, as I live, Doctor. If the wind canted ever so little, we might pass them a line,” he said, hoarsely. “We can only fail, at worst. I’ll be glad to make one in the boat to try.”

“You’ll do nothing with the lifeboat, Joe. She’s much too heavy. It must be the jolly-boat, and she’s poor for a night like this.”

There was no time to be lost. Volunteers were plentiful for the four places in the boat. Who ever knew a deep-sea fisherman to hang back when life was to be saved?

The boat was manned as much as possible under the shelter of our own hull and a long fine line coiled in the stern, to which we attached the end of our stout double-twisted wire hawser. A second line attached to the boat was to act as a life-line in case anything went wrong.

“God give you strength, boys,” was all we could say as they stood to their oars, ready to make a dash to windward.

The crazy wind seemed to howl down with extra violence as the men bent to the oars, and a fierce sea, rising up, hurled the bow oars out of the rowlocks, and drove the boat some precious yards astern. The tail of it, topping over the boat’s rail, set the cox to bailing for all he was worth. Again the bow oars were shipped, and those herculean backs, toughened by years of contest with nature in her angry moods, were straining every sinew to hold their own. Now they would gain a little, now lose it again. Again an oar would be unshipped, and again the boat half filled with water. They were edging away to the south’ard, but making no headway. It soon became obvious that they couldn’t get to windward. At best they could only hold their own, and if

their strength failed, or an oar broke, it became a question if we should be able to get them back. If only the wind would cant a little, there was still a chance, but to expect that seemed absurd.

We soon perceived that the men on the Firefly had seen the boat, and had at once taken in the situation. A small waterbreaker was immediately emptied, lashed to the end of their log line, and flung over the side. The schooner was now nearly abeam of us, and riding not more than four hundred yards from the rocks under her stern that spelled death to every soul aboard her if she touched. Everything would be decided in a few seconds now. Even our lads couldn’t stand the strain much longer. I think that, could we have read them, some of their thoughts were in little homes ashore just then. I know that I was thinking of wives and children—

But just then a wonderful thing happened. The empty cask was coming appreciably nearer to the boat. Were they making way? No, not an inch. They were still astern of our counter, which they had left, it seemed, ages ago. Surely it isn’t a change of wind! Our wind-vane on the masthead hadn’t budged an inch. No, it was just a flaw of wind on the water—a flaw, but oddly enough just in the nick of time! Almost unable to speak for excitement, we saw that our boys in the boat had noticed it. What would we have given at that moment to have been able to lend a hand in the boat! It must be now or never. They saw this also, and with one supreme effort our noble lads had seized the moment, and bent every ounce of strength to the oars.

If cheering could have been heard in the howling wind, we could have cheered ourselves speechless as we saw the bow man drop his oar, lean over, and heave the cask into the boat. In less than half a minute the line was detached, fastened to the line coiled in the stern, and the Firefly's men were hauling it in, while our boat still had her work cut out to make the ship once more. The wire hawser, carefully paid out, was soon through the Firefly's hawsepipe and fast around the mainmast itself. In less than a quarter of an hour she was riding behind our ship. True, her keel was only a few feet from the rocks as she rose and fell on the mountainous swell, but the line was trustworthy, and we ourselves were anchored "sure and deep."

And so, when the storm was over, and our friends of the Firefly came on board, I don't know which of us was the most grateful, the saved or the saviours. It was only a pot of tea, without sugar, and salt tub butter which graced our humble table! It was only a crowd of men in coarse clothing, with sea-boots and blue guernseys in place of broadcloth and patent leathers, but I know that all our hearts, as we gathered around to thank the Giver of all good gifts, were full of a joy not to be purchased with dollars.

“THAT BIT O’ LINE”

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“Heave her to, skipper, and tell Jim to throw the boat out. I’m going to board that steam trawler; I see she has her gear down.”

This was to the skipper of the North Sea Mission vessel in which I was at the time working among the deep-sea fishermen of the Dogger Bank.

“She’s going fast, Doctor; do you think we shall catch her?”

“Run out a Spudger on the mizzen gaff; she’ll come around then. She’s a stranger to our fleet, I see.”

“I think she joined us in the night; must have mistaken the lights, I suppose. The Short Blue Fleet passed through our weather-most vessels last night, and she’s a Short Blue vessel.” While he was speaking he had been hauling out our broad tri-color “Bethel” flag to the gaff end. It usually signals to the fleet for service, but hung on the gaff end it means “want to speak to you.” The strange trawler blew her whistle in answer and evidently put her helm over, for she commenced to make a circle round us as nearly as her great net, sweeping over the bottom, permitted her.

“Who’s the skipper of her, do you know?” I asked, handing the glasses to our captain.

“Can’t say I do, Doctor; but him they call Fenian Jack had her once. It’s the old Albatross—you know her, I’m sure.”

“Well, let’s have two good hands in the boat; we shall need them in this lop.”

The trouble in boarding a trawler at sea is that she cannot stop to allow you to come alongside, and it is always hard to go alongside a vessel that is under way, even in smooth water. However, it is a faint heart that never won, and no man can accuse a deep-sea fisherman of that. We were soon aboard and the big-bodied and big-hearted fisherman on the bridge was shouting out:

"What cheer-oh! Come up on the bridge. Mind the warp there. Go down below, you lads, and get a mug o' tea. You'll find the cook in the galley."

The grip the skipper gave me as I mounted the bridge left no doubt that there was a man behind the hand that gave it. Strangers though we were, we were soon good friends, for the skipper was a typical deep-sea man, with the absence of self-consciousness so delightful in men of the sea. Generosity, indeed, becomes almost a fault with them, and is often the cause of their being absolutely unable to say "no," just because "no" means hurting the feelings of some comrade who perhaps is asking them to enter, say, a saloon that they have promised the wife to keep out of.

Chancing to look up, I saw a man sitting in a sling about halfway up the funnel, which he was leisurely chipping preparatory to repainting it. On looking more closely at the man on the funnel I thought I noticed something familiar about him, more especially the head of red hair.

"That's never you, Dick, is it?" The red head turned around, and now I saw there could be no doubt about it, for the laughing countenance was ablaze with freckles. "Why, man alive, I thought you were drowned last New Year's!"

“So did I, Doctor. And ’deed so I was, till the crew of the old Europa pumped the water out of me.”

“Come and tell us a yarn as soon as you are through with the funnel. I’m mighty glad to see you in the fleet again.”

The watch was roused at eight bells, and after Dick had enjoyed a scrub in a bucket on deck I followed him below. The steward had spread out for all of us some steaming bowls of tea, which seemed to have driven the thoughts of the promised yarn out of my friend’s red head, till I broke in: “Come along, Dick, let’s hear how it is you’re still above water.” At last, as if he had already forgotten all about it, and when he had lighted his pipe to assist his memory, he began:

“It was last New Year’s Day, Doctor. We was in the old Sunbeam on the tail end o’ the Dogger. The wind was in the nor’northeast, and there were a nasty lop heaving along from overnight. ’Deed it was so bad the admiral didn’t show his flags for boarding fish on the cutter.”

Under our regulations if any loss of life occurred from throwing out a boat to try to transfer fish to the carrier, it meant a charge of manslaughter against the skipper of the vessel who sent his men. But the temptation to a skipper to do so is great, because the worse the weather and the fewer boats that send their fish to the market, the higher will be the returns for those that do send. Moreover, the young fellows are recklessly courageous and don’t care to show the white feather when ordered to go in the little boat to ferry fish.

“Our skipper ordered the boat out, as we had a big haul, and me and Sam and Arch took her. It was pretty bad

alongside the steamer among the other boats. She were shipping the lop over both rails as she rolled in the trough o' the sea. I never saw such a crowd knocked off their pins by loose boxes, and rolled into the water in the scuppers in my life. Almost every one got a cold bath on deck before they were through with it. However, our boat got clear all right at last. It was snowing at the time and looked dirty to wind'ard, so we were for getting aboard again as soon as we could. I suppose we must have been a bit careless, now we were clear of that heavy lot o' fish. For I was just standing up shouting 'A happy New Year and many of 'em' to the Sunbeam's boat, when a curly sea caught us right under the quarter and turned us clean upside down. I grabbed hold of something hard, and found myself holding on to the thwart. Only it was pitch-dark, for I was clean under the boat. There was air enough, as we had tipped over like a trap, but it were awful cold hanging in the water. I knew it weren't much good holding on there, so I just grabbed the gunwale, and hauled myself outside. I had to go right under water for it, and I can't swim a stroke. But somehow I came up all right and caught the life-line which is rove through the keel, and out I climbed on the bottom.

"Archie was there already, but Sam had gone, and I guess he was dead by then. The driving spray kept us from seeing to windward, and we knew that was the only way help could come. We were half dead with cold, for the old boat was level with the water and pretty nigh every sea went over us. Arch soon gave up and his head went down on the boat's bottom. I kept shouting to him, 'For God's sake keep up a little longer,' for I could see a smack shaking up

into the wind ahead of us, and I guessed they had seen us and were getting out their boat.

“Just then an extra big sea came along and washed us both off, me still holding on to Arch’s oil frock. All I remember was striking out and finding something was holding me up. I had come up right through the life-buoy ring. I’d hardly had time, however, to cough up some of the water I’d swallowed when I felt something tugging at me, and then it pulled me right under water again. The life-buoy was fastened to the stern of the boat by a half-inch hemp line, and every time a sea came along the old boat sogged down under water and dragged me with it.

“Then it flashed across my mind what would happen. If I didn’t cut that line and get loose, the same sea that would bring the boat for me would find me under water, even if I wasn’t drowned before that. I felt in my pocket for my fish knife—I couldn’t have opened it if I had it. I knew it wasn’t there, for I could remember leaving it on the capstan after cleaning the fish. ’Deed, it seemed I could remember everything I ever did. Then I felt the tugging again, and down I went. It weren’t the fault o’ the life belt. It was just that bit o’ line. All I could do was to get it in my teeth when I could and chew at it. But it was no good; I couldn’t cut adrift, try as I would.

“Then suddenly I saw the boat coming. It got nearer and nearer. I could see some one leaning over the bow to grab me, and then I felt the old tugging again, and down I went under water. It was just as I had thought it would be. As I looked up through the water I saw the boat rush past over my head, and I knew, once it was to leeward, it could never

get back to me. Then I lost consciousness. Of course, they went on and told every one I was lost. But I suppose the Lord hadn't done with me yet. For soon after, the steam carrier came along, and saw the boat, and then saw me still fast in the life buoy. They picked me up, and after a couple of hours rubbed life into me again. So here I am, you see." He stopped and sucked strenuously at his short clay pipe as if the telling had been an effort.

Surely God's ways are not ours. Here in this unexpected way he had put into my mouth a subject that would be sure to interest the little company that gathered in the strange trawler's after-cabin. When the meal was over and the pipes alight again, while the cook-boy washed up the last remains of the meal, I produced my pocketful of hymn-books and proposed to sing. With a ready response, such as sailors generally make to such a proposal, we launched out into "one with a chorus." The various members of the crew chimed in with the nearest tunes they knew, so that it was a cheerful noise together that ascended the hatchway. Owing to the vigor displayed it reached the man at the wheel, and even he couldn't resist joining in as he steered the ship. The life buoy and its lessons served as a subject all could understand.

LITTLE PRINCE POMIUK

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"Whatever is that schooner bound south for at this time of year, skipper?" I asked a fisherman who had just come aboard the mission ship with a "kink" (a sprain) in his back, as I looked up and saw a large, white-winged vessel bowling along to the south'ard with every inch of canvas spread to the spanking breeze. "Her decks seem as crowded as if they were Noah's Ark."

He looked at her for a long time, and then replied in his deliberate way: "I guess, Doctor, that that's the Yankee what's been down north after some Huskies. What does they do with 'em, Doctor, when they get 'em?" he asked in a tone of voice that implied that they might be going to make them into sausages.

"Why, put them in a cage, like a lot of monkeys, and get people to pay ten cents a head to look at them," I replied. "They are going to the World's Fair, and it's very little good the poor souls will get there. The Moravian Brethren at the Mission station have tried all they can to prevent their going, but they make such big promises that the poor creatures think they will never have to work again—and that's true, unless they work in heaven, for most of them will never come back to the Labrador."

"Well! May God keep 'em," he replied reverently.

The schooner soon disappeared over the horizon, and with her vanished from our minds all thoughts of her unfortunate occupants.