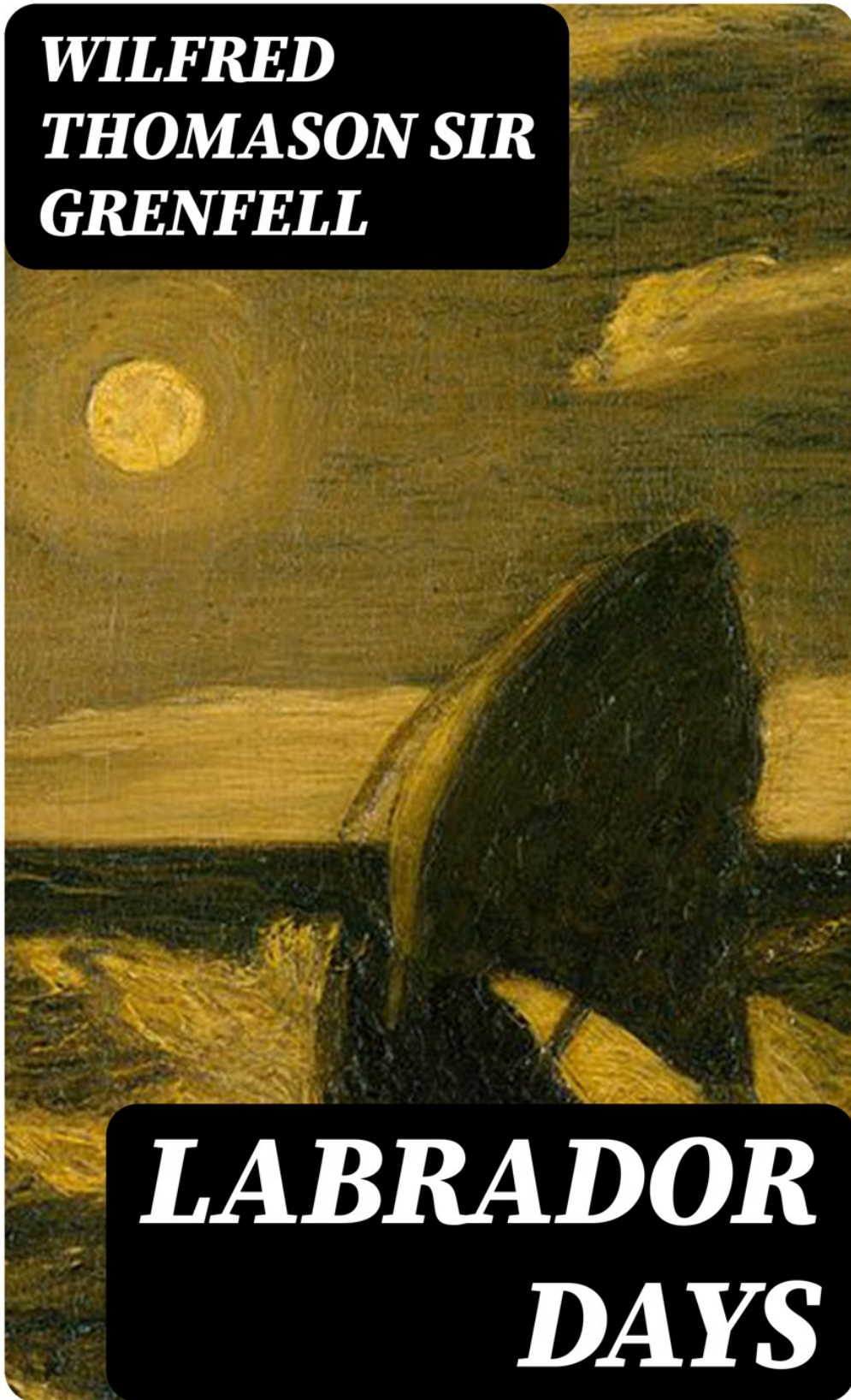




***WILFRED  
THOMASON SIR  
GRENFELL***

***LABRADOR  
DAYS***

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***LABRADOR  
DAYS***

**Wilfred Thomason Sir Grenfell**

# **Labrador Days**

**Tales of the Sea Toilers**

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# LABRADOR DAYS

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## THERE'S TROUBLE ON THE SEATOC

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The ice in the big bay had broken up suddenly that year in the latter part of March before a tremendous ocean swell heaving in beneath it. The piles of firewood and the loads of timber for the summer fishing-rooms on all the outer islands were left standing on the landwash. The dog-teams usually haul all this out at a stretch gallop over the glare ice which overlies in April the snow-covered surface of winter. For weeks, heavy pack ice, driven to and fro with the tides, but ever held in the bay with the onshore winds, had prevented the small boats' freighting more than their families and the merest necessities to the summer stations.

So it came to pass that long after the usual time, indeed after the incoming shoals of fish were surely expected, John Mitchell's firewood still lay on the bank, some twenty miles up the bay. When at last a spell of warm and offshore winds had driven the ice mostly clear, John announced to his eager lads that "come Monday, if the wind held westerly," he would go up the bay for a load. What a clamour ensued, for every one wanted to be one of the crew to go to the winter home. The lads, like ducklings, "fair loved the water"; and though John needed Jim, and was quite glad to have Tom, now of the important age of fourteen years, he did his best,

well seconded by the wise old grandmother, to persuade Neddie, aged twelve, and Willie, aged ten, to stay behind.

"You be too small, Ned, yet awhile. Next year perhaps father will take you," was the old lady's first argument. "'Twill be cold in t' boat, boy, and you'll perish altogether."

"Father'll look after me, Grannie, and I'll wrap up ever so warm. Do let me go. There's a dear grannie."

The curly-haired, rosy-cheeked lads were so insistent and so winsome that the old lady confessed to me afterwards, "They somehow got round my heart as they mostly does, and I let 'em go, though sore against my mind, Doctor."

Of course, Willie had to go if Neddie went, for "they'd be company while t' men worked, and he could carry small things as well as t' rest. He did so want to go."

When at length Monday came, and a bright sun shone over a placid sea, the grandmother's last excuse to keep them at home was lost. Her consent was finally secured, and, before a light, fair wind the women watched, not without anxiety, so many of those whom they held dearer than life itself sail "out into the deep."

Progress was slow, for the wind fell away almost altogether as the morning passed, but the glorious warmth and exuberance of life made the time seem as nothing. The picnic in the big trap boat was as good as a prince's banquet. For the fun of "boiling t' kettle yourself," and an appetite bred of a day on the water, made the art of French cooks and the stimulus of patent relishes pale into insignificance. During the afternoon they "had a spurt singing," and as the words of hymns were the only ones they knew, the old favourites were sung and resung. The

little lads especially led the programme; and the others remembered Willie singing for them, as a solo, a childish favourite called "Bring Them In."

It was just about seven o'clock in the evening. The boat was well out in the bay, between three and four miles from land, when John noticed a fresh "cat's-paw" of wind, just touching the water here and there. There was scarcely a cloud in the sky, and nothing whatever to suggest a squall. But as he looked again, a suspicious wisp of white water lifted suddenly from the surface a few yards to windward. Like a flash he remembered that the boat had no ballast in her, and was running with her sheets made fast. Instinctively he leaned forward to let go the foresail, but at the same moment the squall struck the boat like the hammer of Thor. Relieved of the fore canvas, the trap should have come to the wind in an instant. Instead, leaning over heavily with the immense pressure, she staggered and reeled as if some unseen enemy had gripped her. Scarcely perceptibly she gave ground, and a lifetime seemed to elapse to John's horror-stricken mind as she fell slowly over, as if fighting for every inch, and conscious of her terrible responsibilities for the issues at stake.

At last, in spite of her stout resistance, and before John could climb aft and get at the main sheet, or do anything to relieve the boat, her stern was driven right under water by the sheer pressure of the storm. Slowly she turned over, leaving all of her occupants struggling in the icy water, for there were many pieces of ice still "knocking around."

The slow rate at which the boat had gone over was one point in their favour, however, for it enabled even the little

lads to get clear of the gunwale; and by the help of John and Jim all five were soon huddled on the upturned keel of the boat. The boys being all safe for the moment, John rubbed his eyes, and, raising himself as high as he could, viewed the situation. Alas! the squall had come to stay. Everywhere now the placid surface of the sea was ruffled and angry. The rising, flaky clouds convinced him even in that instantaneous glance that the brewing storm offered them little chance for their lives.

Far away to leeward, not less than four miles distant, the loom of the land was only just visible. Well he realized that it would be many long hours before the boat, with her masts and sails still fast in, could drive near enough to enable them to make a landing. For, like most fishermen in these icy waters, none of them knew how to swim. Moreover, he soon found that the anchor, fast to the warp, had fallen out, and would certainly sooner or later touch bottom—thus robbing them of their one and only chance of escape by preventing the boat from drifting into shallow water.

So cold was it already that it appeared as if a few moments at most must chill the life out of at least the younger children.

"Hold Willie on, Ned, and ask God to bring us all safe home," said John. He told me that he felt somehow as if their prayers were more likely to be heard than his own. He then crawled forward, having made up his mind to try and cut the anchor free, and to get the rope to tie round the boat and hold on the children. His determination was fortified by his anxiety; but it was a forlorn hope, for it meant lowering himself right into the water, and he knew



well enough that he could not swim a yard. Then it was done, and he was once more clinging to the keel with the rope in his hand. It was not difficult to get a bight round the boat, and soon he had the children firmly lashed on and the boat was again making fair progress before the wind to the opposite shore.

Hours seemed to go by. The children were sleepy. Apparently they no longer felt the cold, and the average man might have thought that it was a miracle on their behalf, for God knows they had prayed hard enough for one. But John recognized only too well that it was that merciful harbinger of the last long sleep, which had overtaken more than one of his best friends, when adrift in the storms of winter. And still the age-long journey dragged hopelessly on.

At last the awful suspense, a thousand times more cruel for their being unable to do anything, was broken by even the welcome incident of a new danger. Breakers were visible in the direct course of their drift. "Maybe she'll turn over, Jim," whispered the skipper. "I reckon we must loose t' children for fear she does." This being effected as promptly as their condition allowed, Tom was told off to do nothing but watch them and keep them safe. For already the men had planned, if the slightest chance offered, to try and get the masts out while she lay on her beam-ends.

The breakers? Well, they knew they were only of small extent. There was a pinnacle of rock and a single sea might possibly carry them over it; but the peril of being washed off was none the less. Now they could see the huge rise of the combing sea with its frowning black top rushing at the shoal, and smashing into an avalanche of snowy foam. They

could hear the dull roar of the sea, and its mighty thunder, as it curled over and fell furiously upon itself, for want of other prey.

"Good-bye, Jim," whispered the skipper. "The children is all right either way, but one of us may come through. Tell 'em home it was all right if I goes."

Almost as he stopped speaking, the rising swell caught the craft, and threw her once more on her beam-ends. As for a moment she lay on her side, the men attempted to free the masts, but could do nothing, for the boat almost immediately again fell over, bottom up. But a second comber, lifting her with redoubled violence, threw them all clear of the boat, turned her momentarily right way up, and then breaking into the masts and sails, tipped her for the third time upside down, flinging her at the same instant in mad fury clear of the angry water. So violent had been the blow which had thrown them clear, that they must inevitably all have perished, had not the last effort of the breakers actually hurled the boat again almost on the top of them. Clutching as at a straw, the two men caught the loops of the rope which they had wound round their craft, but they could see nothing of the other three. Suddenly, from almost directly under the boat, Tom's head appeared within reach. Grabbing him, they tried to drag him up on to the keel. Rolling in the wake of the breakers which still followed them with vicious pertinacity, they twice lost their hold of the boy, their now numbed limbs scarcely giving them strength to grasp anything. It seemed of little account at the time either way. But their third attempt was successful, and they got the lad once more on to the bottom of the boat.

Of the children they saw no more. Only when Tom had revived somewhat could he explain that the capsizing boat had caught them all three under it as in a trap, that he had succeeded, still clinging to Willie, to get him from under it, and that he was still holding his brother when he first came to the surface. After that he did not remember anything till they were calling to him on the boat's bottom. The men were sure that it was so—that because he had been true to the last to his trust, he had been such a deadweight the first two times he came to the surface.

And now began again the cruel, wearisome, endless drift of the water-logged boat toward the still distant shore, lightened but little by the loss of the loved children. There was no longer any doubt left in their minds; unless something could be done, none of them would possibly live to tell the tale. It was the still active mind and indomitable courage of the skipper which found the solution. Crawling close to Jim, he said: "There's only one chance. We must turn her over, and get in her, or perish. I'm going to try and loose t' masts."

Swinging himself once more into the bitter-cold water, he succeeded in finding the slight ropes which formed the stays, and though it is almost incredible, he actually managed to cut and free them all, before Jim hauled him back, more dead than alive, on to the boat's bottom. At all hazards they must right the boat and climb into her. Their plans were soon made. Tom, placed between the two men, was to do exactly as they did. Stretching themselves out, and holding the keel rope in their hands, they all threw themselves over on one side, lying as nearly as possible at

full length. The boat responded instantly, and their only fear was that, as she had done before, she might again go right over on them. But there were no masts now to hold the wind, so she stood up on her beam-ends. As the water took the weights of the men, it was all they could do to get her over. Moreover, the task was rendered doubly difficult and perilous by their exhaustion and inability to swim when the keel to which they were holding went under water. But their agility and self-reliance, evolved from a life next to Nature, stood them in good stead, and soon all three were actually standing inside the water-logged boat. The oars, lashed under the seats, were still in her, and, though almost up to their waists in water, they began sculling and rowing as hard as their strength and the dangerous roll of the sunken boat would permit.

Slowly the surf on the sandy beach drew near, and now, keeping her head before the breeze, they rolled along shorewards. Again, however, it became apparent that a new departure must be made. For a heavy surf was breaking on the shore which they were approaching, that ran off shallow for half a mile. There was not water enough to let the boat approach the land, and they realized that they had not sufficient strength left to walk through the breakers. Yet struggle as they would, the best they could do was to keep the boat very slightly across the wind.

John maintains now that it was the direct intervention of Providence which spared them just when once more all hope seemed over. They suddenly noticed that while still forging shorewards they were also drifting rapidly into the bay. It was the first uprush of the strong rising tide, and they might

yet be carried to a deep-water landing. The play of hope and fear made the remaining hours an agony of suspense. What would be the end of it all seemed a mere gamble. Every mark on the approaching shore was now familiar to them. It had become, they knew well enough, a question of life or death where the drifting boat would touch the strand. Now it seemed impossible that she should clear the shallow surf, whose hungry roar sounded a death-knell to any one handed to its tender mercies. Now it seemed certain that she would be carried up the bay without touching land at all. Hope rose as a little later it became obvious that she would clear the sands.

Now the rocky headland, round which their winter house stood, was coming rapidly into view. As the mouth of the bay narrowed, the pace of the current increased, and for a time they seemed to be hopelessly rushing past their one hope of landing. The excitement and the exertion of putting might and main into the oars had made them almost forget the wet and cold and darkness, now only relieved by the last afterglow of the setting sun. But it all appeared of no avail; they were still some hundred yards off as they passed the point. It might as well have been some hundred miles, for they drifted helplessly into the bay, which was widening out again.

Despair, however, still failed to grip them, and apparently hopelessly they kept toiling on at the sweeps. Once more a miracle happened, and they were really apparently approaching the point a second time. The very violence of the tide had actually saved them, creating as it did a strong eddy, which with the little aid from the oars, bore them now

steadily toward the land. Nearer and nearer they came. They were half a mile inside the head. Only a few boat-lengths now separated them from the beach. Would they be able to get ashore!

Strange as it sounds, any and all speculations they might have with regard to where the boat would strike bottom were to be disappointed. Her keel never touched bottom at all. It was her gunwale which first bumped into the steep rocks—and that at a point only a few yards from their winter house.

Even now their troubles were not over. Only the skipper could stand erect. Tom, dragged out by the others, lay an inert mass on the soft bed of crisp creeping plants which cover the bank. Jim was able to totter a few yards, fell, and finally crawled part of the way to the house door. But the skipper, in spite of swollen and blackened legs, held out not only to get a fire lit, but to bring in the other two, and finally wean back their frozen limbs to life.

It took two days to regain strength enough to haul up the boat and refit her; and then the sorrowful little company proceeded on their homeward journey. It was a sad homecoming after the brave start they had made. It was a terrible message which they had to carry to the anxious hearts awaiting them. For nothing in heaven or earth can replace the loss of loved ones suddenly taken from us.

"I've been cruising in boats five and forty years," said John. "I were out two days and a night with t' Bonnie Lass when she were lost on t' Bristle Rocks, and us brought in only two of her crew alive. And I was out on t' ice in t' blizzard when Jim Warren drove off, and us brought he back

dead to his wife next day. But this was the worst of all. As us passed t' rocky shoal, it seemed only a few minutes since us capsized on it; and I knowed Ned and Willie must be right alongside. As us passed Snarly Bight, out of which t' puff came, us thought of t' boys singing their little songs, and know'd that they should be with us now; and when t' Lone Point loomed up, round which youse turn to make our harbour, us all sort of wished one more puff would come along and finish t' job properly. For it wouldn't have been hard to join t' children again, but to face t' women without 'em seemed more'n us could do.

"How to break the news us had talked a dozen times, but never got no nearer what to say. As us ran in at last for t' stage, us could see that Mother had hoisted t' flag t' Company gived we t' year us bought furs for they, and that Grannie was out waiting for us on t' landwash.

"All I remembers was that scarce a word was spoke. They know'd it. I believe they know'd it before they seed t' boat. If only them had cried I'd have been able to say something. But ne'er a word was spoke. So I says, 'Jim, go up and pull t' flag down quick. Us has no right to having t' flags flying for we.'

"Then Grannie, she gets her voice, and she says, 'No, Jimmie, don't you do it. It be just right as it is. For 't is for Neddie's and Willie's home-coming it be flying.'"

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