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Cod Fishing from a Dory Ten Miles from Shore.

THE STORY OF THE COD AND HIS FOES

By Broughton Brandenburg

From Labrador to Montauk in the waters of the western ocean and the myriad bays, straits, and estuaries teems the great American cod, and wherever his shining hosts pursue the caplin, squid and herring, whose enemy he is and on whom he subsists, there follows him a vast fleet hailing from both sides of the Atlantic, and they in turn are his implacable foes. They drag more than one hundred millions of him from the shadowy depths each year, and the proceeds of the North Atlantic fisherman's catch are the main sustenance of whole provinces.

It was nearly four hundred years ago that the first small fleets began cod-fishing; but they have grown steadily till now the number of sail is incalculable. The business having been handed down from generation unto generation, it has come to pass that thousands of communities in France, England, Ireland, Newfoundland, the Maritime Provinces of Canada and the United States are by fixed custom fishing centers large or small. Among them is found a most interesting quaintness and oddity of localisms bred of the fact that fishery brings them in contact with the unchanging sea instead of the world of shore-life that is ever changing it-
self and transforming everything that touches it.

The names of some of the men who are leaders in these communities are known internationally, for to be a leader among the hardy fishermen is to have been a hero in facing the dangers on the Grand Banks or the Labrador, and these deeds of heroism have been retold far and wide. Capt. Howard Blackburn, of Gloucester, Capt. Sol Jacobs, formerly of Placentia, Capt. Jackman, of St. Johns, Newfoundland; these are men famous wherever English is read. There are a host of minor instances of bravery and fortitude, and one of the most interesting of these is of an old woman of Conception Bay, who takes a schooner to the Labrador every year, and is owner, navigator and boss of the fish-work as well. She had a husband and three sons eight years ago, and for many years they had been going to the fisheries off the Labrador in their own schooner. One son went into the navy and died of yellow fever at St. Lucia, West Indies, and the very next season her husband and the two remaining sons were lost in a fog in a small boat and were killed by a sleet storm, the boat with the dead men in it being picked up five hundred miles due east of Sable Island by a Belgian tramp steamer, after they had been adrift three weeks. Nothing daunted by the terrible misfortune which had come to her, the brave old woman had the schooner brought back to Conception Bay, remanned and fitted it, turned over the ‘making’ of the fish, the woman’s share, to her daughters, and sailed away to the Labrador. On her first trip she brought back nearly a thousand quintals of fish, and ever since she has gone regularly, and none make better catches than she and her crew.

The fog is the fisherman’s greatest danger. Off the hard, forbidding coast of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland the little boats that run out from the villages in the numberless coves and bays keep a sharp lookout that they are not caught in the fog, for there are strange and varying currents, sudden squalls, high tides and sharp, jagged rocks to make an immediate danger, and the ever-present greater one of being swept out to sea without food or water.

On the Grand Banks the men take
their lives in their hands, and how dangerous is the work can be gathered when it is said that in Gloucester alone last year there were seventy-one funerals at which the remains were not present. That way lies the track of the great Trans-Atlantic liners, and almost yearly some fishing schooner is run down by one of the greyhounds in a fog. The men putting out in the dories to attend the trawls are often caught by the fog before they can get back, and unless they are picked up by some other vessel or they succeed in rowing to land, death is almost certain, a horrible death of starving, famishing, and oftentimes slowly freezing.

There is a famous story on the banks of two fishermen named Belding and Sullivan, the first an old Yankee "cod-choker" out of Gloucester, and the other a huge Nova Scotian boy, a "blue-nose" out of Lunenburg, who, as part of the crew of the schooner Martha A. Janvier, baited the hooks on their trawl lines one morning, piled them up in the bow of their dory and set off to lay the trawls by anchoring them. In some way they got separated from the other dories, the fog came rolling along in a twinkling, and though they rowed back to where the schooner should have been they found they were lost. They set out rowing while they were fresh, trying to reach the southern shores of Newfoundland, over two hundred miles away. They came alongside an old derelict late that day and daringly went aboard her, finding in the steward's stores abundant food in the shape of cookies, canned pineapples and orange marmalade, all in tins that the water had not penetrated. Everything else was unfit to eat, for the old bark was awash to the deck beams, fore and aft, and had been for a year. Sullivan's curiosity led to his making the dangerous exploration that developed the food, and on a second adventure he found some specie that had been left behind in the form of $900 in French gold. They rigged their sail to the stump mizzenmast of the old hulk hoping to attract attention there-to, but after a couple of days of their sweet diet, grew weary of inaction and

HUNDREDS OF TONS OF COD FISH, WORTH FIVE DOLLARS PER HUNDRED-WEIGHT, LOADING DOWN THE DOCKS.
put off toward what looked like land to the northward. They had not got ten boat lengths away from the derelict before she dipped below forever. That night they found they were nearing a schooner. She proved to be the trader Daphne, with ice and stores aboard such as fishermen delight in, and was cruising about the banks supplying schooners too busy catching fish to run in for provisions. The two castaways were taken in; but in three days the craft sprung a leak, a dead calm fell so that they could not put into any port, and in a little while the crew, too exhausted to longer man the pumps, took to the boats, and the two fishermen to their dory once more. The second night they heard the sound of breakers, and in ten minutes the unmistakable "plump-plump" of a man-o'-war's boat crew at the oars. Before they could realize what had happened they were challenged in a foreign tongue, were overhauled, arrested and taken ashore to prison. Sullivan concealed the money, and the tin goods were left in the dory. In the morning they found they were on St. Pierre, the island reserved by the French in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1813 for a base for their fishing operations on the banks, and that they were charged with violation of the laws in coming into forbidden waters. The next night they escaped, stole their own dory which still had the provisions in it and were getting away when a sentry spied them and fired. Belding was shot through the arm, but Sullivan drove the boat on into the darkness and safety. Belding's wound was slight. After five days of drifting they awoke one morning in the midst of a whole fleet of fishing schooners, and as the light grew brighter saw they were lying close under the stern of the Martha A. Janvier. They hailed the deck watch and were taken aboard, having been absent three weeks, having traversed at least one thousand miles of open sea and returned richer by $450 each—nearly three times what they could make on the banks in a whole year.

The low wages which fishermen are paid has been the cause of much comment, investigation and bitterness; but the men seem willing to go for one-third of their "hand," that is, what they catch, or from wages of from $120 to $150 per season. In the great fishing centers like St. Johns, Harbor Grace, Lunenburg, La Have, St. Pierre, and Gloucester, the dominance of the power of capital is plainly visible. Newfoundland shipped nearly $5,000,000 worth of codfish last year, and yet about twenty merchants handled it all and pocketed the profits. These merchants keep large docks adjoining which are general stores, and to them the owners of schooners come in the spring to get provisions and fittings for the season's work. As security for the goods the owner of the schooner agrees to bring his fish to their wharf. In this wise the merchants are enabled
to control the product, for it is practically sold in advance, and so they pool interests and fix the price to pay the catchers of the fish. This often has little relation to the real market price. If the owner of the schooner has made a good catch all is well; he pays his men and goes home for the winter to the fishing village from which he hails. If he has had bad luck he is compelled to mortgage his schooner to the merchants in order to pay his men and to get provisions to take home to his family, and so it is coming to pass that the real ownership of the great fleets of fishing vessels is passing into the hands of a few men.

Early in the spring the cod coming in enormous shoals from the south feed on the tiny squid; later they devour the small, oily caplin which sometimes crowd into streams till they make a solid mass of fish; later they feed on the herring, and the wily fishermen bait accordingly in season. A part of the business is catching bait and selling it to the schooners. "Raw jigger" is fishing with a hook and line over the side of a boat, a bright piece of lead above the hook attracting the simple-minded cod. The fisherman jerks this up and down in the water all day; a very fatiguing process is this "jigging." The fish once caught on the banks are packed in ice till a load is got; then the schooner puts in to shore and lands the cargo for "making." This consists of splitting, washing, salting and spreading in the sun to dry on a very broad platform called a "flake." In Newfoundland and Nova Scotia these platforms are of tree boughs and small poles made into a sort of wicker or wattle work. Great banks of them fringe St. John's harbor for miles, while nearby are the tiny houses of the fishermen. In Gloucester the processes are thoroughly American. The flakes are portable tables, well made of boards; the "screw" rooms where fish are pressed into casks and drums are equipped with good machinery and power. In
Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, St. Pierre, and Miquelon, and on the Labrador the process is the old one—nearly all by hand.

From all the little coast havens the men from the fishing villages who do not go to the Grand Banks or the Labrador run out to the fishing grounds and bring in the fish by small boat loads. These the women “make” and in the fall schooners are loaded up to take them into St. Johns or Lunenburg, or they are piled in “domes” on the beach and steamers come by to collect them.

Cod trap fishing is the sort largely done on the Labrador where the fish are scarce till after July, not having reached the northern waters till that time. The traps are great nets with entrances that close. They are set just off a little point where the fish striking the shore are deflected into the net. This trap is drawn (a very tedious and painful process in cold weather) whenever the wise old fisherman in charge of the youths and boys thinks he has got a catch.

On the Grand Banks the principal method is trawling, though a very considerable amount of hand-fishing and “jigging” is done by the Gloucester men who have been for years making a study of the sort of bottoms over which the fish like to run. This is a bit of American shrewdness which the Newfoundlanders have not been able to imitate.

Some years ago an English war vessel was anchored on the banks when a great run of fish was on, and one of the officers thought to do the fishermen a favor by killing a lot of the cod by electricity. A wire was carried by the steamer’s cutter from the ship to some distance so as not to do harm by any chance to the vessel itself, and several heavy shocks were sent through the wire, the end of which had been lowered among the fish. It was a calm day, and in a few seconds the water all about for fifty yards was covered with fish. The fishermen were so appalled by the miracle, as they thought it, that they refused to take a single fish, despite all the explanations the officers could shout through the megaphone.

In the fall there is the danger of the fog and the cold. If the weather
should suddenly change and the men out in the dories get lost in a fog or snow squall, death is nearly a certainty, for in their wet clothes in an open boat, they freeze in a short time. Capt. Howard Blackburn is an example of that. He did what many another man has done. When he found he was freezing and that his only hope of prolonging life was to keep on pulling with might and main at the oars he placed his numbed hands on the oar-grips and allowed them to freeze in position, for he knew his hands would freeze in any case, and it was best that they freeze on the oars. Now he has mere stumps.

It is a terrible price that is often paid for a few hundred weight of fish: they are literally bought with human life, and yet there is never any lack of men to make the venture.

This last spring there was an instance of what fine clay some of the men are made. Two young Frenchmen from the schooner Belle de Granville, twenty days out of St. Pierre were lost in the fog one warm day. The one had on heavy leather deck boots and a heavy coat, and the other only trousers, jacket and sabots. It turned suddenly cold and the poorly-clad one was rapidly freezing to death. It chanced that the two men loved the same girl, and the man with the deck boots had been ousted from her affections by his handsomer rival. Realizing that the death of her lover who expected to go home to wed her in the fall would break the poor girl’s heart, the discarded lover, instead of allowing his rival to die and then re-winning the girl—stripped off his own clothes, forced his dory-mate to take them at the point of a knife, and then rolling himself up in a piece of canvas lay down in the stern of the boat to die. Four days later the dory was taken into Placentia by some coast fishermen, and one sad man was alive, and another—he who had made the sacrifice—had long been dead.