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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A VISIT TO NEWFOUNDLAND ***

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*A Visit to
Newfoundland.*

By Mary L. B. Branch.

*Printed for the
Lucretia Shaw Chapter, D. A. R.*

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A VISIT TO NEWFOUNDLAND.

I know where there is a poppy-bed by a broken fence, and a house belonging to the poppy-bed, where old Mrs. Pike lives. Mrs. Pike can neither read nor write, but she commands respect, and her face is eloquent with the wisdom of many years. I know a little one-roomed cottage where Jim Savery's wife rears her children. The chairs are rough-hewn by hand and the legs are unequal. Jim is a fisherman, like all his neighbors, and his cod lie drying on the frames outside.

I know a tumble-down gray house, sixty years old, whose owner will never again repair it, but will live in it until it falls. He has a boy of twelve who gets up before light to study his lessons, when he hears his father going out to his nets. Once his father drifted in a small boat three days and nights, among the ice floes, in a dense fog, without food or water. The man with him died of the cold and lay frozen stiff in the bottom of the boat. All night long, before that man died, he lay beside him in the boat, clasping him in his arms, trying to keep the vital spark.

I know where a wooden cross stands in memory of a clergyman who went in a storm to visit a sick man on an island near the coast. He promised his wife he would return that night, and he started home, but perished in the sea.

I know the way over the sharp rocks two miles to "Mother Legg's Brook," where are, perhaps, four little dwellings. Why any one should choose to build there is inexplicable. Why they remain is not so puzzling; they are too poor to move.

These things come before me in pictures as I recall Newfoundland. Again I breathe the clear, cold, exhilarating air and tread the flinty roads.

We had come up through beautiful Cape Breton Island, with its rich meadows, orchards and forests of pine, and its far-reaching, wonderful Bras D'Or Lakes. It was a dark night and raining hard when we reached North Sydney and stepped on board the steamer "Bruce", which seemed to fold strong arms around us as she carried us through the great rolling billows, over a hundred miles of ocean.

But the morning was clear, and a rocky shore loomed up before us--the Newfoundland of our dreams!

The white rocks were almost dazzling in the sunshine, with scant herbage in the crevices, and here and there where foothold could be found a fisherman's cottage perched like a bird resting in its flight. The air was crystal clear, and the sky the bluest ever seen. We glided into a harbor which wound like a river between jagged precipices, and then the "Bruce" reached her wharf, and all the passengers but three hastened to board the train for St. John's.

A twenty minutes' walk along a rugged path, much of it the exposed surface of solid rock, brought us to Channel, a typical fishing village, like which there are scores along the deeply indented coast of Newfoundland.

It is said that Newfoundland resembles Norway. Its deep bays, guarded by lofty cliffs, are like the Norwegian fiords. Some of these bays run inland eighty or ninety miles, with the wildest and grandest of scenery. In the interior of the island are boundless forests of pine, fir, spruce and birch. They are almost entirely untraversed, though the railroad passes through them, and hunters camp by the lakes. Many of the interior stations set down on the railroad map consist, we were told, only of a platform and a pine tree or a telegraph pole.

On the western side are mountain ranges clothed with evergreens and maples, and between those and the Gulf are fertile farm lands.

There are copper and iron mines on the island, which are being developed, so that fishing is not now the only industry, though it is the most absorbing and the most prominent. It holds the attention at every point of the coast. Often there are hamlets only a mile apart, yet it may be impossible to go from one to the other except by a boat. When we found that Rose Blanche, a very picturesque village, was only four miles "as the crow flies" from Channel, where we were staying, we proposed to walk there, but were met by looks and exclamations of utter amazement from the fishermen, and we were soon convinced that we could never cross the precipices and ravines that lay between.

Channel has but a few hundred inhabitants, its roads are hard and narrow, untraveled by so much as an ox-cart, and horses and carriages are unknown. Sheep meet the wanderer on these paths and turn aside for him with a gentle start of surprise. The roads are laid out something like a bow-knot with several ends, and on one of the loops looking down sheer upon wave-beaten boulders, we found a house where we could stay, kept by a widow who had not much more than a measure of meal and a cuse of oil among her supplies, but who did her best. She sent her son to the "Bruce" with a wheelbarrow, to get our extension bag, but there was absolutely no way of transporting our trunk, so that as long as we remained in Channel, if we wanted anything from the trunk, we had to walk two miles to get it.

Dropping our wraps in our landlady's neat spare room, we started gaily out, enjoying the sound of our own steps on the hard road bed, and bracing ourselves against the strong clean wind. Everything was strange to us, and we found our first common interest in a bed of red poppies by a slanting fence. There we stopped, and were glad when we saw a woman stepping out from her door to see who we were. It was Mrs. Pike, and on her invitation we entered her tidy kitchen and rested by the fire while she related to us the story of her son's voyages.

Next we made the acquaintance of the postmaster, who invited us to call on his wife at "Willow House," so named from the row of light green willows planted along his fence.

On leaving him and returning along the ledge-like path we met the stipendiary magistrate, who greeted us because we were strangers, and introduced us to a great telegraph magnate, Mr. A. M. Mackay, who was stopping over a few hours to catch a coast steamer. He told us he had three times, before the completion of the railroad, crossed the island from Port-au-Basques to St. John's on foot (which was really the only way he *could* go), a distance of 548 miles, living upon what game he could secure as he went along. His object in this arduous trip was to locate the Anglo-American Telegraph Company's line.

In conversation with Mr. Mackay and the stipendiary magistrate, we gained some knowledge of the politics and government of Newfoundland.

Newfoundland is a country by itself, owning allegiance to King Edward VII., it is true, but having its own government and making its own laws. It is so distinct from Canada that it is regarded as a foreign country, and goods passing between the two are as strictly examined as if between England and France. Government has not been indulgent to the fishermen, who form so large a part of the population. They have not been allowed to take up or occupy the more fertile and productive parts of the country, but have been compelled to seek their shelter among the rocks, like the conies, and no way is open to them to gain a living except by the catching and salting of codfish, herring and salmon nine months in the year, and by perilous sealing trips in the winter among the ice floes.

Formerly they took their own fish to other places to sell, making trips to Halifax, Boston or New York, and some adventurous sailors even carried ship loads annually to Italy, just before Lent, bringing back good pay and cargoes of oil and salt. In those days they could bring their own supplies from the ports they visited, and a very simple shop or two in each village was enough. But the keen eye of the speculator was upon them. The merchant, a new factor, made his appearance. The merchant came into the village, with means at command, and built warehouses and a wharf, and had his own vessels. He brought in staple articles of all kinds, groceries, cloth, shoes, coal--and then he took pay for these in codfish. This saved the fishermen all trouble in marketing their

catches; they had only to fish and take what they caught and cured to the convenient merchant, instead of across the seas to Italy or down to the States. If they had a bad season, the merchant trusted them, and they could pay when they had better luck. Of course he paid something less than they could get by going farther, but they saved time and stayed nearer home. So they fell easily into the new way, and dropped the habit of going abroad, having this ready purchaser at their door.

Bye and bye prices were not so good for fish, and now and then groceries went up a little. The people awoke too late to the situation. They had lost their markets. Simple as their wants had always been, they were now more pinched than ever before, and there was nothing to do but to go on fishing, always fishing, that they might get flour, molasses, clothing, coal, from the ever accommodating merchant.

Channel is a fair sample of the larger coast villages. Its merchant has a comfortable house and a well-filled store. His yard is well fenced, and there his only child, a little daughter, plays alone. She is not allowed the companionship of the fishermen's children, and when she is older she will have a governess. Other children attend the Church of England school or the Methodist school, the Roman Catholic children remaining outside until after prayers.

The fishermen live in small, poor cottages, with the barest necessities of life. As you meet them on the road or shore and look at their weather-beaten, serious faces and their friendly, inquiring eyes, you are touched with the pathos of their condition.

The merchant is not the only well-to-do man in Channel. The government has its salaried officials there also, the stipendiary magistrate, who can offer his guests cake and wine, the constable, who has charge of the empty prison, patrols the paths, and takes command in cases of shipwreck, and the postmaster, who for thirty years has lived there comfortably and raised a large family of sons and daughters. He told us that it had been his custom at the beginning of each winter to lay in ten barrels of flour and a whole frozen ox. These men support the government policy and seek no changes. They are good in their place and earn their salaries, but their lot is immeasurably easier than that of the fishermen.

The school teacher gets a little pay from the government and a little from each family, probably not more than three hundred dollars in all. The doctor receives five dollars annually from each family, except the very poorest, and for this sum he treats them in all their illnesses. He is also the doctor for Codroy, Little River, and one or two other places, on the same terms.

There is no dentist or barber in Channel, and not one saloon. It is a strict temperance place from force of circumstances, and the roads are as safe at midnight as at midday.

There are no lawyers there, but for the purposes of justice the circuit court visits the place at intervals, coming by boat. A curious case was being tried the day of our arrival, and a crowd of boys were in attendance. A certain boy had been made the subject of ridicule by the others, who jeered at him and nicknamed him the "Sheep." The more he showed his resentment the more they tormented him, and one boy went so far as to call out "Ba-a-a! Ba-a-a!" when he met him on the road.

The boy who said "Ba-a-a!" was now on trial, his offense was proved, and he was sentenced to jail for thirty days.

The jail is in the constable's house, and when I was calling there a few days later I was shown the cells, which are simply three neat little bedrooms, and I saw the jail yard, where the culprit was digging his bare toes in the ground, with an embarrassed air.

Public opinion was with him, because he was a poor and honest boy who had just got a place to work, while the "Sheep" was an arrogant boy home on a vacation from a St. John's school.

The air at Channel is so crystal pure and bracing, that it seems as if one living there need never be ill or tired, but the water supply is poor and the wells are few and shallow. That is a drawback. The merchant has secured a good well, and another man has a cistern full of rain water which he filters, but most of the people depend on shallow wells. There is no depth of soil, and where there is soil without drainage it is boggy. There was a pretty house next the one where we stayed, with a broad, green yard, but the owner told me that all the earth had been brought in boat-loads from a river bank some miles away. Although there are such limitless forests in the interior, at Channel there are no trees except the postmaster's willows, and that is why the people have to buy coal for fuel.

But the rocks, the air, the harbor, the sea, and the waves dashing in foam over the bar, yield a fine exhilaration and make one unwilling to leave Channel. The people are so friendly that it is easy to become personally acquainted with them. We were called "the Americans," and everyone was ready to stop and talk with us and to invite us into their homes. My heart warms when I think of them. There was the day when we visited the Methodist school and saw a chalk line drawn on the floor before the toes of the class which came up to recite. After the recitation, the earnest young teacher asked us for speeches, so we paid for our pleasure. At the Church of England school we were much interested in the games which the children played on the rocks in recess.

I am convinced that we burden ourselves with too many luxuries. When we were calling on Jim Savery's wife, whose house has only one room, with a loft above, where the family sleep, I glanced around and could not see that any actual necessity of life was lacking. There was a table and four home-made chairs, so that I could imagine the family at meals, or the mother sewing and the children studying their lessons. There was a good stove, with kettle and tins, a chest to keep clothes in, a few shelves in a corner, with notched paper and the best dishes on them, and in another corner a closet, which presumably held provisions. There was one lamp and a spinning wheel. A bright little girl of four swung on a chair-back watching us, and a tall boy stood in the doorway.

I wish that you could see Jim Savery's wife! She might have stepped out from one of Millet's best pictures. She is a tall, strong woman, with noble features, well browned, and carries herself grandly. She was carding soft, white masses of wool, and after that she began to spin, walking back and forth beside the wheel. She was not born in Channel. She told us she came from Codroy. She said Codroy was beautiful, with trees and gardens--different from Channel. She had been back once

or twice to visit her folks there. In her calm, benevolent countenance there was not a trace of discontent, but I found myself wishing that she could go to Codroy once every year when gardens were in bloom.

When a little girl in Codroy, going to school, she used to like the poems in the Reader. I asked her if she could remember any of them, and stopping her wheel she stood by it there in that little room and repeated Wordsworth's "We Are Seven." Once or twice she faltered, and the boy in the doorway prompted her with the missing words.

If I go to Channel again I shall take as pretty a plate as I can find with me, to exchange with Mrs. Savery for one of hers. She has several white ones, each with a highly colored picture in the centre, and the one I desire is adorned with a figure dressed in bright red and blue, with these words printed below: "A Lady."

Our gentle, care-worn landlady, Mrs. Arnold, won our respect and affection. Her pretty and ambitious daughter, Bessie, was assistant teacher in the Church of England school and the organist of the church on Sunday. Every Sunday the first officer of the "Bruce" came to spend the evening, part of the time singing hymns while Bessie played, and part of the time telling us tales of adventure such as we had never heard before.

One afternoon, when we came in from a long walk, expecting the usual supper of bread, tea and tart, we were greeted by the appetizing smell of fresh cod fried with onions. Two men had arrived to stay over night, waiting for the coast steamer, and we all had supper together. Those men told us the most interesting things. Mr. McDougal said when he began sealing he could not kill the first baby seal, because it cried so pitifully. He picked it up and carried it to the boat, where another man killed it. Sometimes, out in the ice, their hands would get so cold that they had to thrust them inside a freshly killed seal to warm them in its blood.

The other man, Captain Smith, had been to the same points on sea and shore where Captain Parry went so many years ago. Once he steered his ship through a narrow passage between two icebergs, and just as he got through the whole mass lifted and proved to be all one iceberg with two pinnacles.

He was present when Captain Buddington, of Groton, took possession of the "Resolute," and felt chagrined because the American reached that vessel first. He knew the Esquimaux that Captain Buddington brought home, and himself once bought an Esquimau boy for a penknife, intending to bring him away, but repented at the last moment, thinking that the boy's life would be shortened in our climate, and so set him ashore just before the ship started. The little Esquimau was sadly disappointed, and looked after them with longing eyes as they sailed away.

This is only a tithe of the stories those men told us of their adventures on sea and land. Every fisherman in Newfoundland has thrilling tales to tell, and every number of the St. John's newspaper has some account of shipwreck or other tragedy, or some perilous deed of daring and narrow escape to relate.

At last the equinoctial caught us there at Channel, and the wind blew so heavy a gale that we had to hold to the fences if we ventured out of doors. The sea dashed over the bar in mountains of white spray, and the weather grew cold. Then we began to think of home, and the homing instinct drew us to the "Bruce" again. Again we trod the rocky road to Port-au-Basques, while Clem, our landlady's son, laboriously pushed the wheelbarrow that held our baggage. Many of our new friends accompanied us to the wharf for a last goodbye, and then we were off, and next morning found us at Cape Breton Island once more, taking another boat to sail down the beautiful Bras D'Or lakes to Baddeck.

All this was a year and more ago. My heart turns to Newfoundland, and I wish that I were there again. The equinoctial should not frighten me away *this* time. I would step ashore from the "Bruce" and speed over the stony hills to our landlady's home. I would go in and say: "Do you remember me?" and we would breakfast together on tea and porridge and brewis. Then I would go out and make a round of calls, and hear the news, and live the happy days over again.

But it takes three days and three nights to reach Newfoundland. Fine, invisible barriers, woven by circumstances and habit, by thrift and convenience, restrain me. Telepathy is my resource. There is not a day that I do not send kindly thoughts to Channel, and sometimes it seems to me that a little kindly thought from there comes fluttering back, and that I am not forgotten.

Transcriber's Note:

Spelling and hyphenation have been left as in the original publication.

Punctuation errors have been corrected without note.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A VISIT TO NEWFOUNDLAND ***

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