

THE OLD CHAIRMAKER

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"THIS," said Uncle Gilbert, his strong hand caressing part of the straight-slatted chair beside him, "is a piece of wood from Nelson's flag-ship at the battle of Copenhagen."

"Now, Uncle Gilbert," I remonstrated, wondering a little how this could be but pretending a deep incredulity, for I knew how the old gentleman would love to be accused of "coddin' " me. "How in the world could a piece of wood from Nelson's flag-ship get to *you* here in Shag Harbour?"

"Wal now, that's just what a lady from New York asked me the other day when she was looking at my chair." The slow drawl was gleeful, for the joke was on me and on the lady from New York. "'Twas this way. After the battle of Copenhagen the ship was part of a squadron based on Bermuda. Then, years later, she was sent up to Halifax to be overhauled. One of the workmen saved a bit of the discarded wood, and it was kept in his family until they heard how my hobby was building things from such wood, and they sent it to me. So here 'tis, part of my chair."

My two small children and I were making our first visit to Mr. Gilbert Nickerson of Shag Harbour in his cosy home overlooking the bays and islands of Nova Scotia's curving western shore. Naturally we'd been taken into the "front room" to see the pride of his heart, the well-known chair made of wood from wrecks and old buildings with a history.

At the time of my visit Uncle Gilbert was over seventy, but his breadth of shoulder and erect height gave him a much younger appearance. His white hair was thinning out, his blue eyes twinkled boyishly behind his glasses and, with his open countenance, told the world that here was a good and kindly man. His remarkable memory, which surprised me that day, served him to the end, more than a decade later.

I called him "Uncle Gilbert," but he approximated our relationship more closely when in his delightful letters he addressed me as "My dear little cousin, Mrs. Evelyn." My grandmother and he had been cousins, but if we'd been no "blood-relations" (as he would say) he'd still have been "Uncle Gilbert". He was that kind of man.

He invited my little sons, then only three and four years old, to sit in his chair, and he told them with his blue twinkle, "Now,

this chair is like the throne of England; there's no other like it in the world. If it should come to harm, it could never be replaced."

So the children in turn backed up to the big wooden chair and were helped into it by the tall, white-haired man with the gentle hands and kind smile. No child needed to be shy with Uncle Gilbert, so they sat beaming in state for a few moments while he beamed down on them. Then they wriggled out of the chair and went to the opposite side of the room to inspect a cannon-ball, fired at the siege of Louisburg. I looked about to make sure that the little parlour's antiques and mementoes were not the sort to go crashing to destruction before the awkwardness of little children, and then turned to enjoy the chair and its maker.

I suppose one would need to be "born and bred" along this coast and have the stories of old wrecks in one's ears from childhood for the very names to bring back the half-memories that they bring to me. But anyone with an ounce of imagination or a drop of salt water in his veins must find interest in an accumulation of relics such as those that make up Uncle Gilbert's chair. Every piece tells of the past, of brave ships and their crews, most of them smashed to eternity in a smother of sand and foam, or battered to their deaths on the outlying ledges and swept away in the swift tides. From a list of the wrecks and their last resting-places a mariner could mark on his chart the danger spots of the coast, from the Half-Moons to Gannet Rock, for a victim of nearly every reef and headland is represented in the chair.

The pieces of wood are beautiful in themselves—the white oak and the pine from our Canadian forests, the darker teak and rosewood from tropical shores, golden gumwood from the southern States, with here and there the black of ebony for contrast. They vary in size from those large enough to make the broad flat arms of the chair to some so small as to yield to the carver's knife only a leaf to adorn the front legs. Some are plain, from the strong timbers of ships, with flaws showing where the sea had eaten into their grain; some are elaborately scrolled, part of the rich hand-carving that decorated the cabins and salons of the sailing ships and early steamers. Each piece was known and loved by the hands that had shaped them after long years of sorting and caring for them. How far they have travelled, some of them, to make a part of this chair in a trim little Shag Harbour home!

Gilbert Nickerson started collecting pieces of wreck-wood when he was but a lad. There were many wrecks in those days, and many "wrackers", as they are still called, men who the instant a ship was known to be ashore sprang at once to their small boats. They were eager to save lives, yes; but more eager to be first on the scene and have the pick of the rich ship furnishings and its cargo. Filled with a frenzy to cheat the sea (and truth to tell, the legitimate owners) of everything possible to be boated away, and to demolish what they could not carry off, they hacked and cut at the beautiful woodwork and furnishings and perhaps threw a likely-looking stick or two into their boats. Others garnered choice bits from the driftwood that lined the shores when a ship had completely broken up.

Then, long after, when the greed and excitement had died away, they might see a piece of wood about their barns or fishshed and say to themselves, "There's that stick I got from last winter's wrack, no earthly use to me. Cal'ate I'll send to Gilbert Nickerson in Shag Harbour. He sets great store by such trash, they say."

As Gilbert's name became known all along the coast, others, who had treasured bits of wreck-wood for the stories they told, felt that such pieces should become part of a permanent collection rather than be lost or thrown out when those who knew their histories should be gone. So the collection grew, and Gilbert began to fashion little tables and sewing stands from wreck-wood and finally made his chair—to be followed later by a second one. From the smaller pieces he carved picture frames and maple leaves, which he sold to folks who came to see his chairs and wished souvenirs of their visits—for while Gilbert had riches, money was not amongst them.

Probably the oldest piece of wood in the chair is from the English ship *Lass*, wrecked on Cape Sable in 1817. She lay buried in the sand for a century and then a heavy storm bared her still strong timbers, and from them was fashioned a small boat to ride the water yet again. The newest piece is from the *Linton*, lost in 1930 with all hands. The most recently acquired bit, a leaf carved from a relic of the *Titanic*, was sent the chair-maker by a Halifax clergyman, the late Canon Cunningham.

Here's wood from the *Anglo-Saxon*, a clipper of that master-builder, Shelburne's Donald Mackay. She was built in Boston and was one of the finest packets ever launched in that port. Bound for Ireland with grain in 1847 and only eight months

old, she left her elaborate fittings and her fine new timbers on Duck Island near Shag Harbour.

On the back of the chair I noticed a faded pink bow from the wreck of the *Hungarian*. Ah yes, the *Hungarian*. The very name was a lament in Uncle Gilbert's ears and in mine. I touched the faded bow lightly and spoke of a doll's petticoat I treasured. It was made for my grandmother when she was a little girl playing with her dolls, but the silk, a brown and black plaid from the cargo of the *Hungarian*, is still strong. Uncle Gilbert knew of many other mementoes from that wreck.

Unconsciously we spoke of the *Hungarian* in hushed voices. People along this shore still do, after over eighty years. That was a wreck to daunt the greediest and most hard-hearted wracker.

The *Hungarian* was lost in 1860 on the Horse Race off Cape Sable. The Horse Race is one of the cruel-toothed traps that run seaward from the Cape and the wild white horses that seldom cease to toss their ragged manes and thunder shoreward are the huge Atlantic breakers that swing in around the sandy cape. There was no lighthouse on Cape Sable then, though one was erected shortly after the terrible disaster.

The new Canadian Mail steamer *Hungarian* of about 1500 tons was bound to America from Liverpool, England. She carried a total of 205 persons, not one of whom lived to reach the shore. She struck in the early hours of a wild February morning, and in the bleak dawn the helpless men on shore could discern the trapped steamship some distance from the beach. Her foremast had apparently gone by the board when she struck, but the main and the mizzen were still standing. Yards and rigging were black with people. No small boat could live in the seething water between the shore and where the doomed ship lay. She gave to the seas with a sickening roll as they smashed against her broadside and then receded to gather renewed force. As a final misfortune the tide was on the flood. By ten o'clock in the morning the tragedy was completed. Masts and rigging were gone with their human burdens and the hull was covered by foaming seas.

The storm blew itself out during the night. The following day was exceedingly mild, and many boats hurried to the wreck. The water was calm and clear, and the men could see beneath them a jumble of broken machinery, smashed timbers and twisted plates, where loosened bolts of cloth waved like kelp-blades among the ruins, bending aside now and then with the

tide's uneven pull to disclose a pale drowned face or an arm upthrust from beneath a jagged plank.

Few bodies were recovered for burial apart from those which could be extricated from the wreckage, for the tide carried its victims out and beyond the curve of the coast. The only living thing to reach shore was a small dog that crawled out of the sea to die on a beach some miles from the wreck.

Much of the cargo was salvaged later, and many young ladies of the district had their first silk dresses fashioned from the rich materials of the *Hungarian's* lading. Every woman on Cape Sable Island, they say, sported a beautiful silk parasol. I wonder if sometimes they did not feel through their finery a chill as from a dank, sea-filled hold where drowned bodies rubbed against the bales and boxes, and if they never heard the still spiteful hiss of a glutted sea in the swish of their silken skirts.

We turned from the saddening memories of the *Hungarian*.

"Now here," said Uncle Gilbert, "is a piece of the old Kaiser's yacht." This did not surprise me after Nelson's flagship. During the first Great War the yacht had been brought into Halifax to be made into a naval craft, and someone saw to it that a piece of her wood reached Uncle Gilbert.

This bit came from the *Moravian*. There was no loss of life when she went ashore on Mud Island in 1881. She was loaded with foodstuffs, tons upon tons of cheeses, butter, bacon, lard, beef, pork, flour, apples and other foods. It is almost impossible for the uninitiated to realize the tremendous quantities that are stowed away in the bowels of a large steamer. The wrackers were in their glory—for once there were no thoughts of drowned crew and passengers to dampen their zeal, and they reaped a rich harvest from the helpless ship and the laden waters about her.

Uncle Gilbert and I laughed as we recalled the story told of one insatiable wracker. Joe took his boat more than once to the stranded *Moravian* and returned with her loaded to the gunwales with quarters of prime beef. A day or so later, a neighbour, driving by, noticed pieces of beef hanging against the outer walls of Joe's house and along his barn as well. "Enough beef," the neighbour thought, "to feed a small army." Joe sat on his doorstep, for once in his life of scant rations surrounded by plenty.

The neighbour called, "I see ye got some meat from the wrack, Joe. Be it good?"

Joe spat, raised his head and cast a calculating eye over

the hanging quarters, then replied dubiously, "Good? Ay-ah, I guess it'd be good all right. If ye could get *enough* of it."

The *Bamboro*, fruit-laden from Sicily to Boston in 1894, left the waters near her last berth on the Half-Moons strewn with luscious oranges and lemons, and again the wrackers feasted. A year before her loss the *Bamboro* had saved the crew of a Yarmouth ship in the South Atlantic; now a Yarmouth boat came to the rescue of the *Bamboro's* crew.

The new Furness liner *Ottawa*, from which the next bit came, was lost on Seal Island in 1891. The crew had a terrible struggle and almost unbelievable escape. The stewardess was drowned when the port-boat capsized, and the others owed their lives to the bravery and unrelenting efforts of the fishermen of Seal Island, who risked their lives over and over in the breaking seas, to aid the ship's boats as they landed.

When the *Castilian* struck on Gannet Rock Ledges in 1899, she was the largest steamer to be wrecked on shore "in the history of the world", as an old account puts it. She was 8200 tons and 470 feet long, a new Allen Line steamer from Portland, Maine, to Liverpool, England. There was no loss of life, and much of her cargo was salvaged. Rightly or wrongly, local opinion hinted that human frailty and the previous night's celebration in Portland should bear their share of blame with the fog and rocky shore for the loss of the *Castilian*.

Every piece of wood in the unusual chair could tell tales of pleasant voyages on perfect seas, of battles with the elements, or with other ships; of crews and passengers filled with high hopes for new life in a new world, of despair and often death as these wooden pieces were wrenched from the ships of which they had formed a part. The history of the long dangerous coastline is here, written not with pen and ink but with saw and hammer and a love of the past.

There is another story, too, in the chair. It is a quiet story of a kind husband and father, a friendly neighbour, a worker in the little church of his faith, a good citizen, the *Old Chairmaker of Shag Harbour*, as he liked to call himself.

Gilbert Nickerson was born in the quiet fishing village and never left its boundaries save for a few coastal and fishing trips as a boy and young man. His formal education was limited to what he could gather from the village school before he was big enough to go fishing, and boys went fishing at the ripe old age of ten and twelve in those days. He might well have led a narrow life with little interest beyond a boat and a potato-

patch and nightly arguments around the stove of the general store.

He did not long follow the sea, or sail to far shores as so many of his boyhood companions did. Although his feet stayed planted ashore, his mind went voyaging: into the past, as he tried to decipher the Indian relics found in the district and to put together the scraps of local history heard from father and grandfather; over strange seas and into foreign ports, when his thoughts went with his friends on out-bound vessels; to many lands, with the letters he sent faithfully to his many correspondents; and on marvellous cruises, through books with the good and the great minds of the world for companions.

Contented in his own little village, Uncle Gilbert felt himself, nevertheless, a citizen of the world. In a small way, the world came to him. Many people grew interested in his wooden treasures and came to see them, to hear their stories, to buy the maple leaves carved by his sure knife through the long winters and to write their names in his Visitors' Book.

Woodworking was not Uncle Gilbert's only hobby. On a wall near his precious chairs is a large painting of a three-masted top-sail schooner. Every sail is drawing tautly, and the short chop hisses past. The picture may not be art, but I can feel the taut sails pulling and hear the slap of the chop, and that is what Uncle Gilbert meant to show. However, he had no delusions about his picture and art.

He told me of an artist who, on seeing Uncle Gilbert's picture, regretted his own failure to catch a similar play of light and shadow on sails, and who asked Uncle Gilbert what paints he had used to get his effect. As he told me this, Uncle Gilbert laughed his huge "Ho-Ho". I had never before heard anyone who actually laughed "Ho-Ho", but he brought it up from deep in his big chest and savoured it all the way.

"Ho-Ho. That was a grand joke on the artist. Your old uncle had painted the picture with some house paint he had left over and one of his small brushes. That artist couldn't get over it! A fine joke on *him*," said Uncle Gilbert, and surely no less harmful joke was ever perpetrated, or one that gave more innocent joy to the perpetrator.

The Nickersons of Shag Harbour trace their ancestry back to Joshua, one of the first settlers of Barrington in 1761. He framed the Meeting-house, built the first decked vessel and the first grist mill. That he built well is attested by the fact that the Meeting-house, erected in 1765, still stands, one of the

oldest Protestant places of worship in the Dominion. His son, who settled in Shag Harbour, was a ship-builder, one of the first along the coast; so Uncle Gilbert came naturally by his love of ships and woodworking. Joshua Nickerson and his wife sleep in the family burying-ground on Uncle Gilbert's property, with members of succeeding generations about them.

Uncle Gilbert was proud of his descent from the God-fearing upright New Englanders, fishermen and boat-builders, who settled this coast and with little more than their two hands and a "digging-up hoe" made homes along the rocky shore and wrested a living from the treacherous sea and a reluctant soil. Some might smile at this pride in an humble ancestry, but these men and women, obstinate and strait-laced though many of them were, would be grand fighters to feel at your back as you faced life's struggles.

Because of his pride and interest in "the olden days" Uncle Gilbert sorted out the local traditions and wrote down many of them. It gave him great pleasure to see his work printed in newspapers of the province, and it is due to his efforts that much of the neighbourhood's past, which otherwise would already be forgotten, is kept alive.

It seems fitting somehow that Uncle Gilbert's home should top the height that local tradition says the first French traders used as a signal hill. It is of all the surrounding countryside the most easily distinguished from a ship rounding Cape Sable, and the water at its foot is sheltered. Fitting, too, that the eastern boundary of his property begins at the site of the "Vieux Logis" (which the English settlers called The Old Gunning House) where Biencourt took refuge when Argall sacked Port Royal. Who could have taken greater pleasure than Uncle Gilbert in those fading links with the past?

Uncle Gilbert is gone now, and I miss him as the whole village misses him. He is busy and happy, I know, wherever he is and whatever he's doing. But I hope he finds a little spare time for collecting celestial wreckage from lovely lost ships, and leisure to fashion heavenly chairs "like the throne of England" for strangers to admire and ask their story, and for the little angels to wriggle up into, while he helps them with that strong and gentle hand and that encouraging smile.