

The late spring sun dazzled bits of light on the bay's water. The creaking of old and new-built schooners and dories, aided by seagulls cries and hardy men shouting at the docks filled the air of the early evening. In Indian Arm, the new fishing season had begun, and the eager skippers and their crews were preparing their ships for the voyage to the place that contained the sea's treasure: cod.

With this one gift of Newfoundland, fisherman could help pay off their debts to merchants and get more supplies for the next winter. Fishing meant a chance for life, and that message was universal amongst Newfoundland families. For hundreds of years, Newfoundland men went out every summer to fish for food and money, or "credits" with a merchant in their town. This was the way it was in 1943.

For Captain Henry James Humby, or Skipper Jim as he was known, this year was special on its own: he would sail his new schooner, the *J & A. Humby*, named for himself and his wife, Anne, to "the Labrador." There was one small problem, however, his beautiful new vessel, painstakingly built over the past year, was missing the anchor chain.

When Newfoundland entered the Second World War in 1939, as in the Great War of 1914, Newfoundland had to ration out its supplies, especially metal. This meant that it was exceptionally hard to obtain the right size anchor chain for the schooner. This was unbelievably frustrating for Skipper Jim, for he wanted to set out as soon as possible.

Sitting on the beach, he watched the men on the boats put to anchor in the bay and pondered what to do. As the gentle lull of the sea in the bay rolled towards him, he finally decided what must be done. With the sun setting and the wind picking up, he headed inside his home. It was 10:21 on the clock, and the house was quiet but for the crackle that pierced the silence from the dying fire in the wood stove. With the children in bed, he

moved to go to bed himself. He found his wife, Anne, who had fallen asleep while knitting new wool socks for their son, Lloyd. He gently rubbed her awake and with the tired but strong eyes of a Newfoundland woman, the wife of a fisherman, she looked at him.

“Where were you?” she asked, while getting out of the chair.

“I was down on the beach, watching the b’ys on the water,” he replied. “I was thinking about what I have to do, Anne. I’ve got to make a trip to St. John’s in a few days to pick up an anchor chain for the *J. & A.* ”

Getting into bed, Anne half smiled and sighed, “Well, tomorrow I’ll bake you some bread for the trip I think, and get your clothes ready...what is it?”

Jim, getting into bed as well, had a look of worry upon his face as he answered, “Well, with the war on how can I expect to find good quality chain? All of them warships will have bought most! And this extra trip to St. John’s is goin’ to put me behind getting to the Labrador.”

Anne, placing her hand on his chest and putting her head on the pillow, said tiredly, “Don’t worry about that tonight, you’ll have all day tomorrow to think about it.”

The next day was drizzly, but not all that cold. Waking up, Jim found that Anne had already awakened and was preparing breakfast for the kids: toutons! After breakfast, Jim walked down to Mick Abbot’s home, which was a small trot up the road at just 10 minutes away. He saw him sitting down having a puff of smoke with his pipe on the porch.

“How’s she comin’?” a smiling Mick asked, each word expelling out more smoke.

“Jus’ fine, me son,” Jim replied, taking a seat next to Mick.

Mick looked at Jim and enquired, “Well, b’y, am I right in t’inking that the schooner is finished?”

“No, me son, she needs an anchor chain, and no one ‘round here has any, so we got to get up ta’ St. John’s before we ‘ead out.”

Mick grunted in agreement and the two sat in silence for a minute watching the bay and the gulls.

Suddenly, Mick’s salty face split into a grin and he slapped his hand on his knee saying, “Well, why don’t we simply get the b’ys ready for the trip, ‘ead to St. John’s in the *J. & A.*, pick up the chain, and go to the Labrador straight from there?”

Thinking for a moment, Jim’s eyes suddenly brightened as he smiled. “Mick, we might just do that yet! We might just do that!”

Getting out of the chair, Mick said to Jim, “I’ll get the b’ys ready for the trip, and tonight we’ll meet again for us to lay out the supplies and what we need.”

Jim, standing as well now, put his arm on Mick’s shoulder and told him, “That’ll be perfect me son. Tell em’ we’ll be gone in a week!”

A week later, the *J & A Humby* was well on her way to St. John’s. The crew on board felt at ease with the day’s weather as the night sky the day before was a bold red. The sun splashed down onto the white sails as the beautifully built ship cut through the water. The sails were fully pregnant with the wind as the ship pushed along the coast on her way to St. John’s.

It was night by the time they were approaching St. John’s. Jim was up on deck, peering through the velvety darkness, navigating their way towards the Narrows, the

entryway into St. John's harbour. Jim was worried about the time. Fear of attack by German submarines made the Canadian Navy put a submarine net across the Narrows, to avoid another attack like the one that occurred off Bell Island the previous year. At night, there was also a cable, which was stretched across the harbour to keep unfriendly ships out. But this cable also stopped any friendly ships wishing to gain entry into the port of St. John's. This is what Jim feared, being stuck outside the whole night with no anchor, with enemy submarines and patrolling warships to keep company with. The silence was like a heavy blanket draped over the ship, only broken by the ocean and the occasional voice drifting above deck from below.

Jim heard heavy thumps of somebody on the wooden deck behind him, and turned to see who it was. Mick was puffing on his pipe and had his hand in his jacket. He eyed the night ahead.

"T'ink we'll make it in time?" Mick inquired, talking of the net.

Jim sighed heavily and checked his watch. It was 11:36 PM. Shaking his head, Jim replied, "I don't know, b'y, I don't know."

Finally, the opening of the harbour came into sight. Straining to see, Jim spotted the outline he feared: they were too late, and the cable had been stretched across the harbour. Mick, seeing the problem as well, spat out some choice words of his disgust. Turning to Mick, Jim said, "Go tell the crew that we're gonna 'ave ta' take a long night out."

"What about them U-boats?" Mick said, some fear clouding his eyes.

Jim thought of his options. "Well, I guess that if there's no light on 'da ship, they can't see us, can they?"

Mick nodded, and turned to go to the galley. Jim heard the crew set off to their duties of dimming the oil lamps. He shook his head and tried to rub the tiredness out of his eyes. Then he steadied himself for the night ahead.

By 4:00 AM, they had sailed to Cape Spear and were on their way again past the Narrows. It was then they heard it: through the sounds of the ship crashing through the ocean floated a low, repeated wump-wump-wump of an engine. Jim heard it and scanned through the black veil, trying to see a discernable outline. The crew were silent, all thinking the same thing: What if it's a U-boat? Or if it's a patrolling ship that thinks we're a U-boat? It was a problem either way. If they try to signal the ship, it could be a U-boat and they just doomed themselves! Or, if they try to stay silent, the patrolling ship may attack them! Skipper Jim and the crew, without need of a vote, unanimously chose to stay hidden. No one dared to speak. No one dared to breath. It was like time had stopped on the ship. The low growl of the engine grew. Seconds took years. Then, like a beast that loses interest in a hunt, the engine began to withdraw back into the night. Jim and his crew all breathed a sigh of relief and carried on. By 8:00 AM, they had sailed to Bell Island and back to the Narrows again. Jim whispered a silent prayer to God for their luck and then set to work sailing the schooner into St. John's Harbour.

Skipper Jim, roaring over the wind, yelled to the crew to put the sails down and use the engine on the ship to move slowly into harbour. Easing through the Narrows the schooner passed Signal Hill and Jim and his crew caught their first sight of the bustling and alive city of St. John's. A very colourful city with the row houses lining the streets, it was an ant's nest of people moving about. With fishing ships coming and going, and even warships leaving port for Britain, the docks were very full and busy. The same menacing

noise of engines the night before that had haunted them were now everywhere, mixed with the yells of sailors, and calls of seagulls. Merchants, soldiers, fisherman, and shoppers - everyone had somewhere to be, to go. The pace of the city was a thousand times more than the peaceful tone of Indian Arm.

Easing gracefully into dock, Jim and Mick hopped off, ordering the rest of the crew to stay put for now. The smell of salt cod being sold by merchants, as well as stored seal oil and furs from the recent hunt, floated in the air and mixed with the smell of the harbour at low tide. Walking up Water Street, they passed a gaggle of American sailors who came bursting out of a pub, their laughter filling the air. As a constant reminder of the war effort, paperboys stood on every corner selling the morning news and calling out the latest victories and losses on the front. The never-ending queue at the recruiting station was full of young Newfoundland boys eager to fight and explore new lands. Propaganda posters filled the windows around the city, along with war bonds posters. The cobblestone street was filled with people in streetcars and chaos.

“Every time I comes ‘ere, I’m in awe of the foolishness of these townies!” Mick said with a look of disbelief on his face.

“Luh,” Jim pointed, “the blacksmith is only up the street a little ways. I can see ‘im from ‘ere.”

The old shop had a worn sign out front that swung playfully in the slightest breeze as it hung from a pole over the door, with a hammer and anvil etched into the side.

Opening the heavy oak door, Jim and Mick made their way into the shop. The heady smell of fire hung in air and their ears were treated to the pop and sizzle of hot metal in water and the heavy and rhythmic clang of a hammer that rang through the shop.

Walking over creaky floorboards, Jim and Mick stepped to the desk and rang a bell. The hammer stopped and a heavysset man with a beard and wearing a burnt leather apron stepped from a door from the back of the shop.

“How can I help yeh?” the man said with a rumbling deep voice.

“I’m lookin’ to see if you got any anchor chain in stock, ”Jim replied, leaning on the desk. “One fit for a schooner.”

The man burrowed his eyebrows in thought and scratched his chin with heavily calloused hands. “Let me check out back,” he said, turning and walking through the door to the backroom.

After several minutes of waiting, he returned empty handed. “Sorry b’ys, but I’ve got no chain that’s the right size for yeh’. I’ve been workin’ non-stop to fill contracts to help make chains for the war!”

Jim, after thinking heavily for a moment, enquired, “Well, do you ‘ave any chain a’ tall?”

“Well, yes,” the man replied, “but it’s for a steamer see, and its much more heavy and longer than the chain you need. The chain is also different from the normal chains, ‘cause the loops have a metal bar ‘cross the middle ta’ reinforce em’. It’s much more stronger, see. ”

Talking for a moment with Mick, Jim made his decision. “I’ll take that chain, sir,” he said, “for any chain is better than losing a season of fishin’!”

And so Jim bought the chain and hooked it to the *J. & A.*’s anchor and anchor housing inside the schooner. Then, finally ready, they set sail for the Labrador.

It took about a week to sail up north to Labrador, but they made good time. The recent weather had been very good: sunny with a good wind, but with the sea not being too choppy.

Reaching Labrador, they started to fish. Casting nets and hauling in the sea's gold is what they did from dawn to dusk. Jim was in his element, as was his entire crew. For weeks, they fished off the coast of Labrador, close to an island just north of Nain.

One evening, after another hardy day of fishing, Jim felt uneasy. The wind was picking up for the past few hours, and the sky was filling with a thick layer of grey clouds. The ocean itself seemed to be rebelling against the weather and the grey water was churning like a witches brew against the ship.

Mick stepped into the Captain's cabin, where Jim was planning the next route. Anything not nailed down rolled across the deck in the dimly lit cabin as the ship rolled side to side on the swells of the sea. "Jim, b'y, I think we ought to 'ead to a bay for the night ... the weather doesn't seem to be gettin' any better, and is actually gettin' worse by the day!"

Jim, leaning over a map, looked up, scratched the scruff of beard on his face and replied, "I couldn't agree more, me son. I planned a route to the sou'west of where we are now, where we can get close to this small island in this bay. There we should be protected from the weather 'til it clears up. It's close to an Eskimo village I've 'ad dealings with before. Nice people there."

Jim, straightening up and grabbing his sou'wester, winked at Mick and headed to the wheelhouse on deck. As he stepped on deck, the wind whipped over the ship. The crew on deck were struggling to keep their hats and the sails down. Jim bawled over the



roaring wind for the engine to be turned on, so the schooner could start to head for the cover of the island.

Three hours into the journey, the outline of the island could be seen through a vale of heavy rain, sleet and icy winds. The storm had worsened and was a full force gale; the crew could barely stand on deck any more and had to be tied on, for waves would crash over deck and threatened to carry a man towards the ocean, where the swells were so sporadic, it seemed like boiling water.

Finally, giving into fate, Jim ordered the crew into the cabin below deck and the anchor to be dropped. The anchor plopped into the grey ocean that then greedily consumed the heavy chain as the anchor sunk. However, when the anchor hit bottom, the chain kept sinking!

“She’s too long, Skipper!” a crewman called out.

Jim noticed that the chain would become slack, and slowly tighten as the ship rolled with the angry sea, but there was nothing he could do.

Being able to see the safety of the island but unable to reach it was maddening to the crew, for below deck, the ship was rolling so much, lanterns had to be relit constantly because the fire would choke on the oil and die.

Waves crashed over the deck, and seawater seeped insidiously under the hatches to the hold and cabin. Below deck, the crew sat together at a table. They talked of anything and everything to get their minds off the storm, to keep their hope up. But the ship rolled dangerously side-to-side, almost as if the sea was teasing them of capsizing.

Watches were set up to stay awake through the night, while others struggled to sleep.

In the morning the storm continued as if determined to destroy the ship that dared cross the seas and harvest its treasures.

Jim, sitting in bed, was smoking his pipe when the crack of wood splintering off deck ripped through the air. A heavy thud smacked the deck overhead and the sound of timber rolling over the wooden deck thundered for a minute and suddenly ended in a splash over the portside.

One of the crew ran into his cabin, slipping on the water, and yelled over the waves hitting the ship, “Skipper, I t’ink that was the main boom broke clear!”

Jim started to stand when another massive wave hit the ship. The two men fell, and multiple cracks could be heard overhead.

“Me son, more than the boom is lost!” Jim said, with an angry and worried look on his face.

Jim walked with the other man out of his cabin, and into the hold, on his way to the galley. The hatches to the hold would bend in slightly with each crashing wave, and Jim had to steady himself on the deckhead from the bucking ship. Stumbling into the galley, Jim found the crew, who were playing cards at the table, looking up at the deckhead, which had buckled slightly from the crash of the falling boom. Jim noticed the eyes of his crewmen were glassy with fear and awe at the power the sea and wind had over the ship.

He sat down with them and poked at the potbelly stove. The burning wood in the stove sent a comforting wave of warmth over his cold, wet body, like having a blanket draped over him. Every member of the crew was miserable. The constant water had

soaked them to the skin, allowing only the fire in the stove to thaw them. The wood of the ship groaned against the strain of the ocean, complaining of the constant stress.

Jim looked around. The crew were trying to carry on, not wanting to show fear, to help everyone else cope. Jim hoped the crew didn't see fear in his own eyes, that his eyes didn't betray how he really felt. The situation wasn't aided by the constant thump of the anchor chain against the hull, and the knowledge that the anchor was their only lifeline. If that's gone, well... It was better to not think about it. But Jim could tell the crew did think about it. Every minute.

After three long days and nights, the storm finally ended. Jim walked up the sodden steps and opened the hatch to the deck. Sun streamed into the hold making the crew, who hadn't seen sun in three days, all squint and cover their eyes.

The deck was unrecognizable. The main boom had indeed split and fallen into the sea, as did the wheel house, and the several dories they had had onboard were gone as well, their rope snapped and now hanging loosely and sodden from the brackets that they were in. The scuppers, plugged with debris, slowly drained the remaining water on deck.

But the big chain had held! The wood around the anchor chocks was scraped by the chain and was now splintered and useless, but the chain had still held. Jim ordered the crew to start a clean up of the deck and to get a full damage report as he stepped up to the destroyed wheelhouse.

He spotted a small dot next to the island and, curious, he pulled out his pocket telescope. It was the Eskimos! They were rowing towards the *J.&A.*! Within two hours they arrived, and with them came rope and supplies! Jim called to haul the anchor and, using ropes, the Eskimos helped to pull the schooner towards the islands and their village.

They spent weeks at the village repairing the schooner. Jim and the crew found out that the Eskimos had seen them coming and were worried when they saw them caught in the storm. They tried to come out, but the seas were too rough.

After several weeks the ship was in working order again, but was missing a winch motor, which had also sunk into the greedy maw of the sea. However, they finished the season of fishing before heading home to Indian Arm. As for the island near where the *J. & A. Humby* was almost claimed by the sea that fateful summer, it's been known as "Humby's Island" ever since.

The relieved families of the crew waiting on the land greeted the schooner. They docked and started unloading their cargo, the cod that they had salted and stowed weeks ago.

Anne flew into Jim's arms when he walked off the plank onto the dock and, gasping for breath between sobs of joy, said "We heard of the storm weeks ago Jim! I thought the worst occurred..."

An older man approached Jim and clapped him on the shoulders, and said smiling, "Well, me son, the good Lard saved yeh!"

Jim, grinning, pointed to the *J & A Humby*, and replied, "No indeed, sir, the good Lard had nuttin' to do wit' it! 'T'was the big chain!"

Winking at the man, Jim returned to Mick and his crew and helped unload their treasure, and their lives, for that year.