

WOODEN SHIPS AND IRON MEN

THE STORY OF THE SQUARE-RIGGED MERCHANT
MARINE OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA, THE
SHIPS, THEIR BUILDERS AND OWNERS,
AND THE MEN WHO SAILED THEM

BY

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"BLUE WATER," "THE VIKING BLOOD," "THE SHACK LOCKER,"
"SALT SEAS AND SAILORMEN"

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CHAPTER II

THE BOOM DAYS OF THE 'FIFTIES

And I saw a fast full-rigger with her swelling canvas spread,
And the steady Trade-wind droning in her royals overhead.
C. FOX SMITH.

THE 'FIFTIES—AN ERA OF FAMOUS SHIPS

SHIP-BUILDING was booming in Quebec in 1850, no fewer than 30 ships and barques of over 800 tons register being launched that year. John Munn built the *Martin Luther*, 1241 tons, which was the largest Quebecker of that season. Most of Munn's ships were built on his own account, and many of them were named after celebrated persons in religious reforms—thus, in addition to the *Martin Luther*, Mr. Munn also built the ship *John Calvin*, 884 tons, in 1850. Pierre Valin, a famous French-Canadian ship-builder, constructed his first 1000-ton ship when he built the *Australia*. Thomas Conrad Lee built the ships *Washington* and *Windsor*, of 1100 tons each, for Gibbs, Bright and Co., Liverpool—a well-known firm of British ship-owners.

In New Brunswick, Alexander Sime at Lancaster built the three-deck ship *Kossuth*, of 1260 tons, the largest N.B. vessel constructed in 1850. Two barques of 640 and 670 tons were built by Joseph Salter at Moncton, and Malcolm Cochran launched the 822-ton ship *Mersey* at the same place. A number of ships and barques ranging from 600 to 900 tons were built at other New Brunswick ports. Nine vessels of from 750 to 1026 tons were built at St. John,

the largest being the ship *Albatross*, built by William Olive for Gibbs, Bright and Co., Liverpool. Fernie Bros., of the Red Cross Line, London, purchased the ship *Admiral*, 811 tons, from her builder, Francis Smith, of St. John.

Nova Scotia still stuck to small craft—the largest built in 1850, as far as I can ascertain, was the ship *Montgomery*, 848 tons, by Captain George McKenzie at New Glasgow. McKenzie accomplished a notable feat that year when he built, launched, rigged, loaded, and dispatched the barque *Koh-i-noor*, 314 tons, to Glasgow, Scotland, with a cargo of black birch timber, within the space of 90 days from the time her keel was laid.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOLD RUSH

If the California stampede of 1849 brought fame and fortune to the builders and owners of American clipper ships, the discovery of gold in Australia in 1851 gave a tremendous impetus to ship-building in New Brunswick and Quebec. Emigration to Australia, which had been but desultory up to that date, swelled to a great flood, which all the ships available were unable to cope with. The fortunes made in California had set the world gold-mad, and when the news came of the Australian discoveries it seemed as though everybody outside the Island Continent wanted to get there—and get there quickly. "Ships, ships and more ships!" was the cry in the British ports, and regular packets were withdrawn from their accustomed runs and sent booming around the Cape of Good Hope packed with emigrants eager to set foot in the new Golconda of the South.

Orders for new ships were placed in British yards, but deliveries could not cope with the demand. Then the Liverpool ship-owners began to look over the big Bluenose

timber-droghers, which were coming in with their deal cargoes consigned to brokers with orders to sell vessel and freight for the benefit of the builders and shareholders in New Brunswick and Quebec. Great ships, most of them were, two- and three-deckers with bow and stern ports for timber loading, full-models for packing a big cargo, but clean-lined under water for fair sailing, even when piled to the rails with deals. Some of these vessels were purchased by enterprising ship-owners, hauled into dry-dock and refastened with copper and sheathed with yellow metal for the tropic seas, their spacious 'tween decks fitted up with berths for emigrants, and poop cabins extended and furnished as saloons for first-class passengers, and when completed they were sent flying out to Australia.

THE FAMOUS "MARCO POLO"

W. and R. Wright, of St. John, New Brunswick, laid down the keel of a large ship at their yard on the Marsh Creek in 1850. Named the *Beejapore*, she was designed to be the biggest vessel constructed in St. John, and had three decks and a half-poop, registered 1600 tons, and was 182.4 feet in length, 36.2 feet beam, and 29.4 feet deep. Her figure-head was a full-length figure of a male Indian.*

Shortly after Wrights commenced building the *Beejapore*, James Smith, in the yard adjoining, began planning a still larger ship, and laid the keel of a vessel to be called the *Marco Polo*. Her length from the inner part of the main stem to the fore part of the stern aloft was 185 feet, her breadth amidships 38 feet, and her depth of hold amidships 30 feet. She had three decks, with a height of 8 feet between each, and was very stoutly constructed with hard-pine beams, hackmatack, pine, oak, and other woods in her

* See Appendix.

frame and planking. She was built for sale, and doubtless the builder and shareholders in St. John and Liverpool owned in her.

The *Marco Polo* was not a clipper in the true sense of the term, but she was of sharper model under water than the usual craft built at St. John, and was regarded as a distinct departure from the common run of ships before her. Above the water, she was lofty and somewhat box-like—a great, roomy, heavily-timbered vessel designed to pack a huge cargo and yet sail well. The true clipper was too sharp to carry much cargo, but in *Marco Polo* James Smith combined carrying capacity with an under-water body of sharp entrance and clean run—the true hollow bows of the clipper model being embodied—but amidships she had the bilge of the cargo-carrier. She was equipped with the bow ports of the timber drogher, and was black-iron fastened and uncoppered when launched. Her upper deck was flush from stem to stern, with no poop or forecastle, but with small houses at each hatch.

The Marsh Creek in Courtenay Bay, St. John, where she was built, was characterised by a local chronicler as "the most God-forsaken hole possibly discovered, considering the fine ships that had been built there." At low tide, the place was, as its name implies, a marshy creek with little or no water in it. Launchings were made at high water, when the great flood of Fundy poured in over the mud-flats and swamps. The *Marco Polo* being the largest ship so far built there, it was decided to wait for the Spring tides ere launching her. To save time, her lower masts—great built spars fashioned of several pieces of wood and encircled by iron bands—were stepped and her topmasts were sent aloft and her lower and topmast stays and shrouds were set up.

On the flood of a Spring tide, the launching took place, with numerous spectators cheering the passage of the ship down the ways. But the great hulk took charge of those employed to check her progress and burrowed into the mud on the opposite side of the creek. All efforts to drag her off that and succeeding tides proved fruitless. When the water ebbed after launching, she fell over on her side, and it was thought that she was ruined. With financial loss staring them in the face, the builder and local shareholders began blaming each other for constructing such a big ship in such a place, but as recriminations would not save the ship, they got together and began considerable excavating around the *Marco Polo's* hull. Two weeks later, with the excavating and another high tide, the ship came off the mud undamaged and was fitted out for sea.

Her first voyage, I believe, was to Liverpool with timber, and it is stated that she made the run in 15 days. From Liverpool she went to Mobile for a cargo of cotton, and on arrival back in Liverpool, according to Basil Lubbock, in his *Colonial Clippers*, she was bought by one "Paddy McGee, the rag man and marine store dealer" there. This man must have specialised in buying British North American ships at that time, as I find him listed as the owner of the ship *Africa*, 1306 tons, built in 1851 by George H. Parke at Quebec, and which was also engaged in the Australian emigrant trade.

The *Marco Polo* arrived just when Liverpool ship-owners were hunting for ships to place on the Australian run. James Baines, of the Black Ball Line of Australian Packets, saw her, and decided that, with some overhauling and fitting up, the *Marco Polo* would make a splendid ship for his purpose. McGee, it is said, sold her at a great profit to Baines.

Into dry-dock went the big timber-drogher, and her iron fastenings were knocked out and replaced with copper, and she was sheathed with metal. Then she was fitted up for passengers, and the following account from the *Illustrated London News* will give an idea of what the Britishers thought of her:

"In strength she could not well be excelled. Her timbering is enormous. Her deck beams are huge balks of pitch-pine. Her timbers are well formed and ponderous. The stem and stern frame are of the choicest material. The hanging and lodging knees are all natural crooks and fitted to the greatest nicety. The exterior planking and ceiling is narrow, and while there has been no lack of timber, there has been no profusion of labour. Her registered tonnage is 1625, but her burthen will considerably exceed 2000 tons.

"On deck forward of the poop, which is used as a ladies' cabin, is a 'home on deck' to be used as a dining saloon. It is ceiled with maple, and the pilasters are panelled with richly ornamented and silvered glass, coins of various countries being a feature of the decorations. Between each pilaster is a circular aperture about 6 feet in circumference for light and ventilation; over it is placed a sheet of plate glass with a cleverly painted picturesque view in the centre, with a framework of foliage and scroll in opaque colours and gold. The whole panels are brought out slightly by the rim of perforated zinc, so that not only does light from the ventilator diffuse itself over the whole, but air is freely admitted.

"The saloon doors are panelled in stained glass, bearing figures of commerce and industry from the designs of Mr. Frank Howard. In the centre of the saloon is a table or

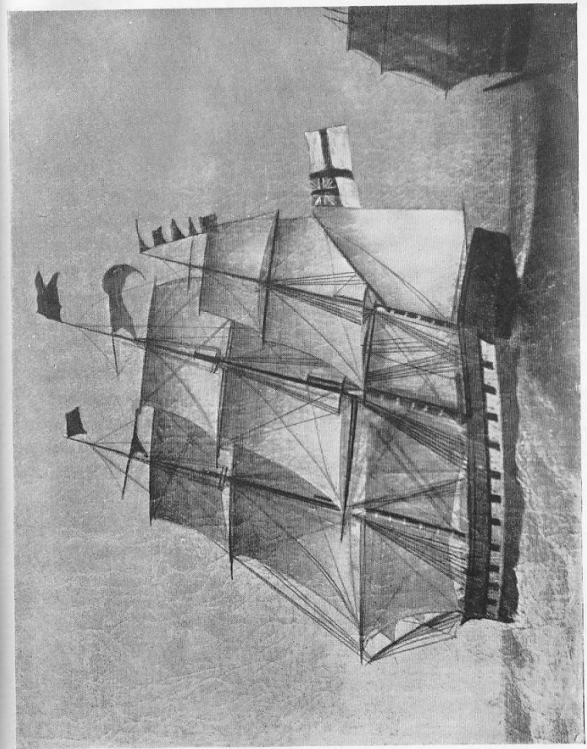
dumb-waiter made of thick plate glass, which has the advantage of giving light to the dormitories below. The upholstery is in embossed crimson velvet.

"The berths in separate state-rooms are ranged in the 'tween decks and are rendered cheerful by circular glass hatch-lights of novel and effective construction."

Thus they metamorphosed the big St. John timber ship whose only decoration at launching was the full-length figure of Marco Polo which graced her stem-head. Many writers have stated that she was a "clipper ship built for the Black Ball Line," and this has been passed on, but a timber ship she was, classed six years by Lloyd's, and even the fulsome "write-up" reprinted above mentions the fact that there was no profusion of labour expended in her original construction. Contemporary writers in St. John state that she was a fortunate "fluke," for, though duplicates of the *Marco Polo* were attempted, yet none ever came up to her in the records she established. I would hesitate to affirm that her speed was wholly due to her design—rather would I state that the skill and daring of her commanders were in a larger measure responsible for the extraordinary passages she made.

"MARCO POLO'S" FIRST VOYAGE

On Sunday, July 4th, 1852, the *Marco Polo*, under the command of Captain James Nicol Forbes—the famed "Bully" Forbes of fo'c'sle legend—left Liverpool for Melbourne, Australia, with 930 emigrants and a crew of 60 men—half of whom were working their passages out to the colony. Before sailing, Forbes boasted that he would have his ship back in the Mersey within six months, and his statement was received with tolerant amusement.



Ship "Marco Polo," 1625 tons.
Built 1851, St. John, N.E.
(From an old painting.)

(See p. 46).

But Forbes could figure out what such a ship would do in the high South latitudes when squared away before a booming gale which blew strong from the west day after day. Having had experience in sailing British North American ships, with a big and willing crew, good officers, a comparatively "light" ship, and plenty of nerve, Forbes knew that he could do some travelling with this three-skysail-yard St. John timber drogher when she got down in the "Roaring Forties" and running her easting. As he forecasted, she arrived inside Port Philip Heads at 11 a.m. on September 18th, 1852—beating the steamer *Australia* by a week, and making the passage in 68 days. When running her easting in South latitudes she covered 1344 miles in four days, averaging 336 miles a day. Her best day's run down South was 364 miles.

According to Lubbock's *Colonial Clippers*, Captain Forbes, to ensure that his crew could not skip out for the gold diggings, trumped up a charge of insubordination against them and had them clapped into prison until they were required again. On October 11th, 1852, the *Marco Polo* left Melbourne for Liverpool by way of Cape Horn, and arrived back in the Mersey again after a record passage of 76 days and but five months and 21 days out on the whole round voyage. Thus, he made good his boast, and the shipping world was astounded. Thousands of people came down to view her as she lay in the Salthouse Dock, and thrilled with pride when they gazed on the huge banner which hung between her fore- and main-masts and upon which was painted: "THE FASTEST SHIP IN THE WORLD."

THE "MARCO POLO'S" MASTER

James Nicol Forbes, master of the *Marco Polo*, was the British sailor's hero, and his offset to the celebrated Yankee

skippers of clipper ships. He was an unusual character, and all manner of exploits are credited to him and much embellished in the later years. It was stated that he hauled himself, hand over hand, from the spanker boom end to the shark's tail on the flying-jib-boom—a feat which called for strength, activity, and nerve—rather unusual acrobatics for a ship-master to perform. The saying, "Hell or Melbourne!" is credited to him—the yarn being that this was his reply to a deputation of frightened passengers who requested him to shorten sail one time while he was driving the ship in a strong gale. But the most characteristic tale of him is his boast to the *Marco Polo's* passengers when beginning her second voyage out to Australia: "Ladies and gentlemen, last trip I astonished the world with the sailing of this ship. This trip I intend to astonish God Almighty!"

Forbes was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1821. He was a man of unbounded nerve, sailorly skill, and bold initiative. While a young man, he rose to command, and gained notoriety by the manner in which he made fast passages in ships that had not the qualities for rapid sailing. As I have already mentioned, he is listed as being master of the Quebec-built ship *Wilson Kennedy* in 1849—at which date he would be 28 years of age—and he was master of ships before that. When he took command of the *Marco Polo* he was 31.

He was James Baines' favourite skipper, and after two record-breaking passages in the *Marco Polo*, the ship-owner sent him out to Boston to command the clipper ship *Lightning*, built by Donald McKay at his Massachusetts yard for the Black Ball Line. Captain Arthur H. Clark in his *Clipper Ship Era* states that he brought good letters of introduction and made many friends among the clergy,

as he was an enthusiastic churchman. While in Boston, Captain Forbes became acquainted with Donald McKay's brother, Captain Lauchlan McKay, "who likewise took a great interest in ecclesiastical affairs." Such close friends did they become that, when the *Lightning* was ready for sea, Captain McKay made the trip to Liverpool with his brother master mariner. It may be opportune here to state that Donald McKay—the most celebrated American builder of clipper ships—and Lauchlan McKay—the hard-driving master of the American clipper *Sovereign of the Seas*—were Nova Scotians of pure Scottish ancestry, both having been born and brought up in Shelburne, N.S., ere emigrating to the United States.*

Captain Clark tells of the *Lightning's* departure from Boston under the joint command of these redoubtable Scotsmen. "At 3 o'clock (February 18th, 1854) she discharged her pilot off Boston Light. Her commander, being a pious man, was attended down the harbor by a select party of brethren and sisters of the church, who at parting gave him their blessing. This is much better than the dram-drinking and vociferous cheering which usually make up the parting scenes of the unregenerated."

Knowing the reputation of both these hard-driving ship-masters when at sea, one is constrained to smile at the religious atmosphere which seemed to pervade the companionship of these two men, but, as sailors used to say, "There's no religion outside the three-mile limit," and whether it was because of excess of piety, or sheer hard driving and cracking on of sail with the crew on the jump all the time, the fact remains that the *Lightning* arrived in Liverpool after a passage of 13 days 19½ hours from Boston Light. And during the voyage, on March 1st, the ship made the

* See Appendix.

astonishing 24 hours' run of 436 miles, a run which has never been equalled under sail, and during which a brand-new foretopsail and jib were blown away and the ship logged 18½ knots with lee rail under water and rigging slack.

Captain Forbes took the *Lightning* out to Australia and made remarkable passages in her, and in 1855, as Commodore of the Black Ball Line, he took command of the splendid British ship *Schomberg*, built by Hall of Aberdeen clipper fame. This vessel was of 2600 tons, and was constructed as a rival to the big ships built in Canada and the United States. But she failed to come up to expectations, and Forbes got her ashore on a sand-bank near Cape Otway, Australia, and she was abandoned. Though exonerated by the Court of Inquiry, Captain Forbes was broken up by the loss and failed to "come back." Commanding obscure ships, he drifted around the world, and died in Liverpool on June 4th, 1874, aged 52 years. On his tombstone in Smithdown Road Cemetery is engraved the simple legend below his name—"Master of the famous *Marco Polo*."

"MARCO POLO'S" SECOND AND LATER VOYAGES

On her second voyage, the *Marco Polo* left Liverpool on Sunday, March 13th, 1853, with 648 passengers, and arrived at Melbourne on May 29th, after a passage of 75 days. Her best day's run was 314 miles. She left Melbourne on the return trip on June 10th, with 40 passengers, and £280,000 of gold dust in her strong room, and arrived in Liverpool on September 13th, after a passage of 95 days. The passage home was not extraordinary, but she had made the round voyage in the fine time of six months. Her best day's run homeward on this trip was to the westward of the Horn on June 19th, dead of winter, when she logged 324 miles.

Captain Forbes left her for the clipper *Lightning*, and the *Marco Polo's* chief officer, Charles McDonald, succeeded to the command. Her third voyage, under her new master, was made in the good time of 72 days 12 hours, and she came home in 78 days. Her fourth voyage to Australia was with Captain Wild as master, and she took 95 days to go out and 85 days to come home. In 1855, Captain Clarke took her out on her fifth voyage in 81 days and home in 86. She left Liverpool for Melbourne on her sixth voyage on December 7th, 1855, and arrived on February 26th, 1856—83 days. Her next outward passage in 1856 was made in 89 days.

In 1861 she collided with an iceberg down south and was badly stove-in forward. Making Valparaiso and leaking badly, she was repaired, and continued her voyage, arriving in Liverpool 183 days from Melbourne. She passed out from the Black Ball Line in the early 'sixties, but still continued in the Australian trade, and in 1867 she came into Liverpool from Melbourne in 76 days.

After this she trailed out from the company of the clipper packets—water-soaked and strained—and went into tramp-ing. For a time she was owned in South Shields, but finally went under the Norwegian flag and staggered across the Western Ocean, timber laden, and with the windmill pump discharging the water which seeped in through her strained and sodden fabric, which had to be held together by frappings of chain. And in August, 1883, timber-laden, she was caught in a Gulf of St. Lawrence gale and piled up at Cape Cavendish, Prince Edward Island—resting her bones on the shores of her "ain countree" after 32 years of making history and world wandering.