

THE CRUISE OF THE OCEAN BELLE

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CAPTAIN MIKE WRAYTON was a well-known figure along the Halifax waterfront in the early years of this century. Like most sailors he could spin a yarn or two, and of all his experiences at sea during fifty years as boy, man and master, he thought none equaled one cruise he took on the schooner *Ocean Belle*—forty miles to sea in a blinding snowstorm, no splinter of his vessel touching water and all but one of his crew sick in their bunks. 'Not many men have made such a voyage and lived to tell it,' he'd say.

The story of this cruise was passed on to me by one who heard Mike Wrayton tell it in the captain's cabin of the *J. L. Nelson*, Halifax fisheries protection cruiser, after its skipper's more adventurous days were over and he wore the gold and blue of the Canadian government service.

Mike Wrayton was born at the western end of the province and early ran away to sea. The ebb that tugs the boys out of Barrington Bay sets strong to the westward, towards Boston and Gloucester, and before Mike Wrayton stemmed the tide back to Halifax he had learnt his trade on Gloucester vessels, the mackerel "jiggers" off the Nova Scotian coast and the cod-seekers on the Newfoundland Banks. He had also served as first officer on the Red Cross Line between New York and St. John's and earned the name of being the most reliable pilot of the waters between Cape Cod and the Straight of Belle Isle.

After a time as master of the passenger steamer *Sybil* from Halifax to Boston, he returned during the 1880's to Newfoundland and Labrador waters in the *Ocean Belle*, a 70 ton trading schooner out of Halifax.

At the time of her eventful cruise the *Ocean Belle* had lost her youthful lines, but was still staunch and had a dozen times cheated Davy Jones and the Newfoundland rocks that slavered for her ribs. Mike Wrayton, her skipper, was known aboard American, Nova Scotian and Newfoundland vessels alike as "a great one for getting in and out of scrapes."

When, counting on the luck of the Irish and his hard-won skill and knowledge, Mile Wrayton set out in December, 1891, to bring back a cargo of frozen herring from Bay of Islands,

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half-way up the west coast of Newfoundland, his seagoing friends predicted that for once he was biting off more than he'd be able to chew: the winter is no time to go fooling around the icefields in Cabot Strait and flaunting the savage storms of the Newfoundland shores. He reached Bay of Islands safely, but the return voyage was a series of incredulous situations and miraculous escapes.

The first January storms with their bitter cold found the *Ocean Belle* well up the mouth of the Humber River, loading the last of her cargo. The river and the bay froze solid, but Captain Wrayton was not dismayed: he hired a hundred men who cut and sawed a way for the schooner through ten miles of ice to free water.

There could be no waiting for a fair wind then; it was sail or be caught by ice or the lee shore, so they sailed. They had scarcely cleared the Bay of Islands when a storm roared down, bringing tremendous seas. The *Ocean Belle* took them green over her fore-castle, and they swept her clean. Then it grew colder and the seas froze as they washed her decks, while the crew fought with new desperation to save their ship and their lives. After several days of perishing cold and heart-breaking labour they worked the *Ocean Belle* into Bay St. George, where, almost as lifeless and unmanageable as the iceberg she resembled, she wallowed through the gale to smooth water and anchorage, her boats gone and her sails torn out of the bolt-ropes.

The men were nearly dead on their feet from weariness and exposure, but they set to work again with their axes and mallets, and the fishermen from the near shores came aboard and pounded ice beside them, as a token of their admiration for a vessel and crew that could ride out such weather. When the last ice was over the side, the captain and his hands decided to "take things easy for a spell" before setting sail again.

There was no rest for the weary, however, for a gale struck almost before they had tumbled into their bunks and the *Ocean Belle* was driven into the very head of the bay before her anchors held. Again the boarding seas froze, and again the dogged crew chopped and threw ice all night to keep their vessel afloat.

In the morning the seas were flattened by ice-cakes heaving in from the outer bay, but the thermometer went to 30 below and clear ice formed between the schooner and the shores. The following day was clear and crisp, a day for optimism and action, so Captain Wrayton walked ashore over the frozen bay in search of men to chop the *Ocean Belle* free, as had been done earlier in

Bay of Islands. Not so lucky here, he returned to the vessel with only four men.

They were scarcely aboard when tearing up the open-mouthed bay came a fierce blizzard with heavy seas that telescoped the ice-floes and piled them into a "raft" about the vessel. This was an anxious time; the captain knew all too well how those pressing pans could nip the schooner, crush her sides until the black water and the ice poured in, and then close over her as she sank. But the unpredictable ice lifted her bodily so that within a few hours she was sitting high and dry upon it, as if she lay in a marine slip. There was no hope of chopping her out now, and the four Newfoundlanders walked home over the ice.

Captain Wrayton stood at the rail and stared down at the ice piling up, ragged cake upon ragged cake, and solidifying in the increasing cold. He admitted to himself that things looked none too hopeful for the *Ocean Belle* and her cargo. One of the crew approached him from the forecastle companionway, and something in the man's face made the captain brace himself.

"Most of 'em's sick, Cap'n," the seaman announced, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the forecastle hands.

"Sick!" ejaculated the captain. "Why, what in the world's wrong with 'em?"

"Mumps, Sir, fur's I can tell."

Then as the other stared at him in disbelief of this new development, he added, "Some of 'em's pretty sick too, Cap'n, what with the cold and bein' wet an' all."

And to complete the unhappy picture, "Seems like I'm the only one aboard's had the mumps."

His skipper found a grin then. "You'n' me, son," he said, "You'n me. Well, this caps the climax." But it didn't.

So Captain Wrayton went over the side and into the storm for the nearest doctor, eight miles away, and piloted him back across the ice to do what he could for the sick men. One of the miracles of the voyage was that the *Ocean Belle* didn't lose a man to sickness or storm. After the doctor had made the men as comfortable as possible and left medicine and instructions, Captain Wrayton accompanied him ashore.

The captain had no intention of perching all winter on an ice-raft, mumps or no mumps, and so now he turned to the meteorological station for information. (I am assured that Mike Wrayton was not the only master then cruising those

waters without even a barometer and that nothing but the baffling combination of circumstances in which he now found himself could have forced him to consult one.)

The agent at the meteorological station bluntly advised him to get his crew ashore with all possible haste and then to enter his "protest" with the proper authorities, for the *Ocean Belle* would never see Halifax again.

Captain Wrayton showed little appreciation of this obviously sound counsel. "Never you mind my crew and my vessel. I'll see to them. YOUR job is to look at that glass and tell me what the weather's going to do."

On this he was informed with cool politeness that the wind might be expected to go out as far as south and then back into the northwest with another blizzard. All this meant more ice between the *Ocean Belle* and her freedom.

By now it was growing too dark to return to the vessel, so Captain Wrayton spent the night with Captain Guerney at Sandy Point, just seaward of his imprisoned *Belle*. No doubt after long hours of discussing the predicament in which the Halifax master found himself, Captain Guerney went to bed shaking his head at the stubbornness of people who never knew when they were licked.

Next morning when Captain Wrayton wakened he felt his lack of faith in weather-glasses and the men who study them had been justified, for during the night the wind had gone to the east, a quarter unmentioned by the meteorological agent, and was rapidly freshening. Already the black sky was spitting a few hard flakes, and these would become blinding squalls if he knew an easterly. He almost ran to the shore for a glimpse of his schooner.

To his utter amazement she was moving towards him down the inner bay, still high and dry upon the ice, but heading for the open seas and making several knots under bare poles, the crew in the rigging and the flag Jack-down

From all the wide Bay of St. George's the east wind was pushing the ice, and as the other floes moved offshore and the pressure at the seaward edge of the pack was released, the huge tilting rafts were breaking up and flattening, while lanes of slush and water appeared among them, opening and closing briefly at the whim of wind and tide. The ice, across which Captain Wrayton had walked unimperilled the previous day, was now a death trap of shoulder deep slush and grinding cakes. The pan that bore the *Ocean Belle* held firm, but he could not

bear to picture what must happen when it broke. He only knew he had to get aboard his schooner somehow before she passed Sandy Point and carried her sick crew to sea, or to the bottom.

People gathered along the shore, silent and stricken as news of the vessel's plight spread, but when Captain Wrayton asked for a boat, there was none to be had. These men knew salt-water ice as only Newfoundlandsrs could know it: the vessel and her crew were beyond help. Why push another soul out to perish in the growling ice and freezing water? Everyone showed him all sympathy in his tragic loss of ship and crew, but skiffs and punts were suddenly as scarce in this fishing village as in a Manitoba wheatfield.

As the ice-borne vessel drew near the watchers on the point, the crew caught sight of their captain and they waved to him from the rigging. It was a gesture of reassurance to themselves and to any who cared, that they would face whatever Fate brought them, but their captain saw in it an appeal for help and a reproach to him in his safety.

He increased his efforts to find some means of rejoining his men; running along the shore to keep abreast of the schooner, he rounded a small point and there were two fishermen pulling a punt out of the reach of the ice!

They refused to put off with him, pointing out that if the ice should not crush their little craft, it would carry them all to sea to freeze or drown. But at his frantic pleas they sold him the punt for the six dollars he had in his pockets, and he grabbed the oars as the money left his hand.

Then came the fight against ice, that implacable enemy that daunts the strongest oarsman. He pushed the cakes from under his bow and thrust the clumsy punt through the ribbon of water thus cleared, gaining a few inches at a time and taking advantage of every lane that the ice momentarily left open. No one knows how he ever made it, but when at last he gained the edge of the pan holding the *Ocean Belle*, some of the crew, sick as they were, helped him haul the punt over the ice and up to the deck. Meanwhile the wind had increased and whined through the rigging, while savage gusts of snow piled the decks and sheeted houses and rails, masts and spars. But the skipper was back on board, and the men took heart. So the *Ocean Belle*, Halifax, Mike Wrayton master, set out to sea in a blinding snowstorm, high and dry on an ice-raft and her crew down with the mumps.

When snow and distance had blotted out all sight of the schooner, the watchers on Sandy Point turned from the shore

as from the side of the grave. They had done all they could to hold the captain from his doom, and yet they could understand how a man would want to be with his vessel and his crew at the last.

On board the *Ocean Belle* Captain Wrayton gave little thought to those he had left behind. He discovered that through some ill-chance all the fresh water had leaked away. If they made the sea they must not be without water. The snow and ice now on the rails and decks was free from spray, so he and the one mumpless seaman brought it to those of the crew who were able to stay on their feet and these melted it at the galley stove and filled two casks. Then before the storm and approaching night blotted out the last grey daylight, captain and one-man crew set a double-reefed foresail to steady the schooner.

All night in the intense cold and slashing snow the ice drove seaward and the *Ocean Belle* rode above it. She must go wherever the ice took her, and there were nearly forty miles of greedy reefs and frowning shores before she cleared Cape Anguille at the mouth of the bay. Captain Wrayton never left the deck, while below the sick tended the sick.

When morning broke the captain judged himself fifteen miles inside the Cape and there was still nothing to be seen but ice. Before long, however, he caught sight of a line of breaking water and set about preparing for the plunge when the *Ocean Belle* would either carry them all to the bottom of the bay or she would free herself at last of the ice.

He and his seaman set sails, battened down the companionway and helped the sick men into the rigging, where they themselves followed swiftly as the ice beneath the schooner began to growl and crack ominously.

The *Ocean Belle* rocked and staggered, and then as the ice parted she plunged stern-first into the black depths. Twin cataracts of ice and water poured down from either side to fill the space she had left until the decks were covered by several feet of water and swirling cakes. But the sturdy vessel held on an even keel, she stopped her downward plunge and with the help of her lifting sails she rose at last to the surface, spilling a flood of ice and freezing water from her decks.

Now they double-reefed the sails and set the schooner on her course. At three in the afternoon she passed Cape Anguille, the wind still blowing a gale. When the *Ocean Belle* on her raft had left Sandy Point word was flashed to the telegraph office at Codroy, and as the valiant schooner drew abreast of that point,

the shore was lined with people who cheered her as she passed.

Then the vessel struck a fair wind and made a good offing, so that after setting a storm sail, Captain Wrayton was able to go below and get some rest. He admitted to being "pretty well blowed" by this time.

His troubles, however, were by no means over. The schooner was imprisoned for six days by an icefield in Cabot Strait and began to leak from the relentless pressure. The leak was found, the vessel listed and the leak plugged, a feat in itself, but by now most of the crew could lend a hand and, compared to those posed by one cockled atop an iceheap, a vessel with her keel in the water presented normal and familiar problems. Once clear of the ice, they squared away for Halifax.

Off Scatari the *Ocean Belle* spoke to the American fleet, bound for Fortune Bay but running now for shelter in Louisburg. They urged Captain Wrayton to follow them in, but he held to his course. Before long, however, he would have given all he owned for another chance to take the advice of the Yankees. A living gale sprang up from the south-east, and by midnight, Mike Wrayton, lashed to the wheel in an 80 mile gale, feared, for the first time during all the misfortunes of the voyage, that he and the *Ocean Belle* had come to the end of their sailing.

But he kept her head to the giant seas and the faithful *Belle* staggered up their snarling faces and down their boiling flanks, wallowed and twisted in their troughs, and lifted her bowsprit to meet the next roaring monster. By the following midnight they caught the lights of Devil's Island and crept past the smother of the Thrum Cap Shoals into the shelter of Halifax Harbour—with the first cargo of frozen herring ever taken from Newfoundland waters.

It had been a voyage of cold and sickness and long gazing into the frozen face of death, of seamanship and courage and self sacrifice. It had been another short cruise of another small Halifax craft. So many brave ships, so many famous men have entered and cleared to its cheers, that Halifax is apt to forget that not the ocean queens and the heroes so much as the many small ships and their workaday crews have from the first kept the life blood of the city coursing.

Engines have replaced the canvas of the 1890's but the sea still pulls at those who have its brine in their veins, and the sturdy *Ocean Belle's* of today with their stouthearted Mike Wraytons still slip in and out of Halifax Harbour.