

Indentured Servants

Nothing can be more deplorable than the situation of those poor Irishmen who migrate annually, in great numbers, from the mother country, to Newfoundland. In order to procure for themselves a passage across the *Atlantic*, they enter into a bond with the master of a trading vessel; whereby they stipulate to pay him a certain sum as passage-money, immediately subsequent to their having obtained employment at *St. John's*. The emigrants are compelled to find securities in *Ireland*, for the due observance of their agreement; and when the vessel reaches Newfoundland, they are suffered to go at large, in search of an employer. It must be allowed, that many of them are not over scrupulous in returning to fulfil their contract; as they hope, by absenting themselves, to avoid paying their passage-money. In such cases, the master of the trading vessel publishes the names of the absentees; with an intimations that, on a failure of appearance, their *Irish* securities will be sued for the amount of the debt, costs of suit, and interest. The fear of involving their parents, or other relations, in a law process, seldom fails to draw forth the fugitives; when their employer instantly pays down the amount of their passages-money, and places the sum to his new servant's *debit* account.

From this moment the unfortunate emigrants become the vassals of their employers; as it is but rarely that they can succeed in working out their emancipation: for the slavery of the Newfoundland fishermen, thus commenced upon their first entering the country, is perpetuated by a system of the most flagrant and shameful extortion. Every merchant, and master of a *fishery*, is the *huckster* of his whole establishment; and the servants are compelled to purchase their supplies of food, raiment, and every trifling necessary, of the person in whose service they may chance to be engaged. No money passes between them; but the account of every article that is supplied to the fishermen is entered in the books of their masters. The prices are so enormous, that the original debt due for the passage-money of the emigrants, instead of being *diminished* by the hardest and most faithful servitude, continues rapidly to *increase*. It is in vain that the unfortunate debtor complains of the barefaced imposition, by which he is forced to pay three times the value of the most trivial article: having no money, he cannot go elsewhere to obtain what he may want, nor can he subsist without the necessaries of life. Thus, then, the Newfoundland fisherman toils from day to day, with no relaxation for the present, and without the least hope for the future. His exertions, labours, and industry, serve but to swell the purse and the pride of a rapacious master, until death happily intervenes, and cancels all accounts betwixt them. Those only are gainers by the *fisheries* who are able to employ people on their own service, and have the means of conveying the produce of their labours to *St. John's* for a market.