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**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Islands in the Sky.**

Two things wherein our Lake Ontario is rich (not to mention oil pollution and its chlorine palliative) are corposants and mirages. In 1946 we saw five steamers piled on top of one another, waterline to waterline, funnel top to funnel top, and texas to texas, three upside down and two bottom up – all going the same way in the Straits of Mackinaw. This was a mirage, the best in our repertoire. The actual steamer was three miles away. The weather was dull, warm and fairly clear, the straits as smooth as glass. We have often told of the yacht fleet racing down the lake with pale green fireballs clinging to topmast rigging, trucks and spreader ends and of similar phenomena in trading schooners. M.le Capitaine Pouchot describes the same thing off Niagara in 1759. Static electricity is the stock explanation for corposants. Mirages are even commoner. The most frequent form is when as sailors say, the headlands put their hats on. This is usually on a still, warm day. The smooth water of the windless lake mirrors each projecting point or bluff in its depths, and headland and reflection are thrown up in a shape like a mushroom, apparently hanging above the horizon.

It's all done with mirrors, as the catch phrase goes. Layers of atmosphere of differing temperatures and densities and smooth water are the components. Sunlight helps, but is not necessary. Mirages work in the dark. Doubling of shore lights, so that they appear in vertical lines instead of points, is so common that stonehookers used to say: "Double headed lights I see. The wind tomorrow east will be." On Lake Ontario we do often get easterly or northerly winds, usually mild, after mirages. This may be because of changing temperatures. On a crisp bright December morning after a mild night from Port Dalhousie we could see the City Hall tower in Toronto, thirty miles away to the north, so plainly we could almost set out watches by the clock. The tower sank as the sun strengthened. By noon the northern horizon was a hard blue line, bare as mid-Atlantic. We could not see the tower, or anything of the northern shore, until we got within ten miles of it as we crossed the lake. Neither corposants nor aurora borealis nor mirages are "warnings." The weather following them is more often good than bad. Has anyone ever seen a mirage by moonlight? The mirage is another form of the dancing pavement shimmer, familiar to all who drive. The heated air above the roadway ahead reflects the sky. This often gives a convincing suggestion of a pond or lake, which vanishes on approach, or flies before you at car speed, according to elevation. We see this from the sidewalk on the undulations of Parkside drive, sometimes as if the street was flooded, although it is bone dry. Is it possible that static developed by the friction of motor traffic has anything to do with these pavement images?

That is certainly not the explanation for a lake mirage reported by Mrs. Erskine Duncan from Newcastle, Ont., fifty miles east of Toronto. This, Mrs. Duncan tells us, has been seen and commented on by many, like the vision of Hy Brasil from the coast of Galway which brought Brendan the Navigator to America long before the Vikings or Columbus. It seems that from a

hilltop at some distance inland from the vanished harbor of Newcastle a high island can at times be seen out in the lake where no island exists. The mirage or image is beyond that magnificent clay cliff between Bowmanville and Oshawa, the handsomest in Lake Ontario, known as Raby's Head. The phantom island has trees on the top. Sometimes it has a sandy beach at the foot, sometimes it hangs base-less in the sky. It usually appears towards sunset. There is no island in Lake Ontario between Gull Rock at Cobourg and Toronto Island, sixty miles farther west. The phantom does not look enough like Raby's Head to be an aerial duplicate of that promontory. Mirages are usually distorted. They often include both the primary object and its reflection, together or separate.

Once, in the *Gardenia*, we saw Gibraltar Point miraged so convincingly that only the fact that we had just taken our time and bearings when the Point was abeam of us a few minutes before assured us that a new island had not arisen. It was equipped with the same century old lighthouse and buildings and red – and – white radio masts as Gibraltar, and not in the air above the Point, but beside it, on the same level, with what seemed to be a narrow gap of deep water between. The vision lasted for fifteen minutes during which time we increased our distance by about a mile. Then it vanished. Not having seen the Magical island of Newcastle we hesitate to attempt an explanation. Might it be an aerial enlargement of Guy's Point or Bonnybrae, another fine headland just west of Oshawa Harbor? It would be about fifteen miles southwest of the inland hill at Newcastle which Mrs. Duncan loves to climb at sunset. We hope to hear more from Mrs. Duncan and other observers of Ontario appearances, for we have a grand heritage in this inland ocean of ours.

[Transcribed by G.B.M. 21 Sept. 1976.]