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**Schooner Days, XII (12)**  
**By C.H.J Snider**

## **A Sailors' Strike**

*Account by late Magistrate J. J. O'Connor, of Port Arthur, of how he almost started one and certainly stopped it, when he was before-the-mast in the Toronto grain trade – "Big Money in the fall, sixty years ago, and how it was earned.*

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On a fine bright early December day, 1873 or 1874, just after dinner, when a sailor's belt is at the stretch, and he feels that independence which fills him with power beyond anything during the twenty-four hours I was one of the crew of the brigantine *Fleur-de-Marie*, a French vessel then engaged in the lake trade.

The *Fleur-de-Marie* was not built in France, but at Lanoraie, on the St. Lawrence in 1853. She was an old-time brigantine, with black top-sides and scarlet petticoat; hemp-rigged, with thick shrouded, and stays of tarred rope, and four yards crossing her foremast, her forward sail-plan culminating in a royal. She had the old style single topsail, which hoisted up on its yard to the top-gallant cross trees, and had to be reefed. She only measured 156 tons register, and was less than 100 feet long on deck, but with her square rig was quite a handful for acre of four men forward and captain, two mates and cook aft. Capt. Robert Kent, of Port Whitby, my home port, bought her when she was new, and traded out of Whitby harbor in her for years.

We were lying at the old Hamilton wharf in Toronto near the foot of Church street, and had just finished a cargo of wheat for Ogdensburg down the St. Lawrence at a freight of "12 1/2 cents gold." American money was then at a discount of 16 percent, and shippers had to pay in gold or its equivalent. It was no uncommon thing for captains to sailed their own vessels to come home with baking powder tins from the cook's galley filled with gold half-eagles and have doubles.

As we had ten thousand bushels under the hatches this cash freight rate of \$1,250 looked good compared with our own \$2.50 a day, which is what we were getting as "big money" for the fall of the year. In the summer able-bodied seamen worked for \$1 a day or \$25 a month. Even in the timber trade and the stave carrying, two of the hardest rackets lake sailors ever had to stand, wages of \$14 to \$16 a month was common pay.

After due consideration I, being the youngest pup of the lot and still in my teens, was deputed to meet the captain, my fellow townsman, and demand an increase of pay to \$4 a day!

On my way aft to where the Old Man smoked in state in the cabin I got out on the snow-covered wharf and walked up and down, rehearsing my speech, hoping to get my courage up, and backing and filling all the time.

Suddenly my mind was made just for me. The first mate, a typical one of his order, came out on deck and bawled to me to let go the spring-line, which led from amidships clear across the wharf, and was, like everything else, thickly crusted with snow. It flashed on me that it was now or never. If I let go that snow-clad line the next order would be to strike the fly for the tug and lay aloft and cast off the gaskets of the fore topsail; and we would be bound away on a voyage at \$2.50 a day, from which there would be no chance of change.

"I've got to see the Old Man before I do another hand's turn," said I, as gruff as I could in my boy's bass. "We may be quitting this hooker."

He let go a few expletives and other kinds of things about d- sailors and the general weaknesses and wickednesses of their kind. But being imbued with the importance of my mission, I proceeded to the seat of the mighty and presented – well as I could – our modest demand.

The old man glared at me, and with the power that was his, as master of the vessel, proceeded to explain to me just what he thought of us as a miserable crew that did not know when we were well off, and added that we were now getting more than we were worth, which was very likely the fact.

I insisted that all before-the-mast had decided to quit unless we were granted the advance. The fact that it was late in the season, a good freight was in his hold, and the brigantine was ready to sail, had more to do, I am sure, than my feeble arguments. He finally sent me forward agreeing to pay us \$4 per say; accompanied by language more flowery than the ship's name, with particular application to myself, my forebears and descendants to many generations. All of which appeared to do him good.

I came out of the cabin and on deck to meet another explosion from the mate, who still had his mind on that spring line, and again, with many encouraging epithets, ordered me out to let go the snow-covered rope. This I now did with alacrity and in my best form as a sailor who was being duly compensated for his highly technical efforts.

My report forward immediately afterwards was so satisfactory that everyone including the captain and mates were forthwith in good humor.

We got away with a tug, towed-out through the Western gap, and went spinning down the lake in a soaking nor-wester, spitting snow. We arrived off Kingston in about 16 hours, flying a pilot flag for the river, and with little delay made our destination at Ogdensburg, N.Y. The *Fleur-de-Marie* returned up the river with an easterly slant, loading coal in Oswego and was over in Kingston within a week, making her earnings about \$1,750 for the round trip.

Of course it might have taken a month, or might never have been completed, for she could have been frozen in for the winter or lost in the late gales. But that was how these little vessels made big earnings in the schooner days-high freights and a run of luck.

I have known the *Antelope* to make a seven thousand dollar freight of a fortnight run from Chicago to Kingston with grain. The little *Homeward Bound* made nine trips in three weeks between Whitby and Oswego with barley, and her freight on it was \$2,430. The schooner herself was only rated at \$4,000 insurable value. She was old, built in 1854 as the *R.O. Lake*, and rebuilt ten years later. She was a pretty little thing – white, with green covering board and wale strake – not much over 90 feet long, with a clipper bow and figurehead.

On the other hand, it might take three weeks to get one way, and one trip in the fall might blow out a thousand-dollar outfit of sails. It was always a gamble, both for the schooners and crews. The boys in the *Undine*, a smart black schooner out of Hamilton, were offered \$25 for the run to Oswego and back, or \$2.50 a day. It was in the fall of the year, and three of them figured headwinds either way would spin the trip out to ten days or longer, so they signed on at two and a half. One took the \$25. She left Hamilton that night, was in Oswego the next day in time to be towed out again that night, caught a hard easterly blow and boomed through the piers of Burlington Bay the next night. Three men left her at the coal trestle, cursing at the \$5 bill they had. The fourth stood the drinks at the nearest bar and had \$20 and some change.

We fought forward for the *Fleur-de-Marie* and drew \$40 each, after stripping her and laying her up for the winter at Kingston. We dispersed on our various ways feeling like millionaires. I returned to my home at what is now Haydon Park at Whitby having to strut about until the sun warmed things the following spring.

Home coming in the fall was for us sailors like summer holidays to the business man. We looked forward to it all season. Men without homes, who had saved up enough money to pay for a winters keep deposited the whole shot with the old-time Esplanade hotels, such as the Armouries on West Market street, or George Williams' or Andy Tymon's, at the corner of Church street, and the other sailors' lodgings on the old Toronto harbor front; now high and dry behind the viaduct, very dry indeed, and far inland.

Here they took it easy, sure of three square meals an odd drink and a pipeful until spring struck into the snowdrifts and they were drawn to the outfitting schooners, of which Toronto had a good quota. I always spent my winters at home, and early spring would find me along the well-filled wharves of Whitby on the same quest as those who haunted the Toronto Esplanade – a "site."

The old time sailor's spring still looks good, and I would like to be in it all again. Its charm and glamor I have never found in any other calling. Then the future had to take of itself, but the fond hope beckoned that I would some day tread my own quarterdeck, as the proud possessor of a lake schooner.

That to my mind – and I haven't changed it – was the height of achievement and enjoyment of life. I never got there – but I have had the vision. I went off on another slant, into drugs, and insurance, and vessel agencies, and have wound up on the bench, peddling justice; something that is needed, and lots of it.

But I would like to have been master of a schooner!