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Schooner Days XVII (17)
By C.H.J. Snider

In the Magdala

Magistrate O'Connor tells of how he "talked back" and made a friend of Captain Farewell, in the days when he was a boy in the grain trade; and of how he almost drowned him.

The schooner *Magdala* in which I had my first experience of St. Elmo's fire, was built by McKay and Sons at Quebec, in 1870, for the Gulf trade and was deeper than ordinary lake vessels. She had a beautiful model, beamy, with fine runs fore and aft, and very lofty topmasts and a long boom. The hull was of tamarac, with iron knees, among the first of the kind, and the only ones I ever saw, although the barquentine *Jessie Drummond* came out with them six years earlier.

Her canvas was linen. All her blocks were of the old-fashioned iron strapped variety, therefore, she was "heavy," the hardest vessel to make sail on that I was ever in. Her capstan – as we used to say – was the same one Noah had on the Ark, or its twin sister. It was no help in time of trouble, and not much any other time.

The topmasts were so lofty that when we took in the gaff topsails, it was like reefing her down.

With her graceful sheer, clipper bow and beautifully molded quarters, she was a picture that appealed. She was painted white and looked particularly jaunty because her masts "raked" or sloped backwards so sharply that a ball dropped from the main truck would fall plump into the water over the taffrail.

She was a good sea boat, a bit wet midships when deeply loaded, but always with two dry ends, and could be steered with one hand in any weather. I never knew anything like her in this regard.

At the time I shipped in her at Whitby in 1872 she was owned and commanded by Captain George Farewell of Oshawa. Funnily enough Farewell bore a "hard name" among sailors. He had come, "in through the cabin window, instead of the hawse pipes," "fed you on handspike hash," etc., etc. So I shipped with a natural predilection against him.

I went aboard on a Saturday night. A heavy easterly gale was blowing as we lay alongside the dock at Whitby until it blew out Monday morning, when it shifted into the northwest and increased eventually into a gale.

She had a cargo of barley for Oswego. When we left Whitby about 9 a.m., the wind was moderate, and we were under full sail in a nasty cross sea, between the old wind and the new.

We were soon obliged to take in our light sails, and I had rather a severe jolting aloft on the fore crosstrees stowing the fore gafftopsail as she pitched in the sea. I was assigned to the captain's watch. Jim McAllan, as I mentioned when telling about the St. Elmo's fires, which

came later, was mate.

We staggered along under lower sails until about 2 a.m. The night was dark and the sea heavy. I was at the wheel when the skipper oddly enough, asked me if I had run down that shore recently, saying he had not for three years and was more or less unfamiliar with the south shore lights. He wound up by asking me to go aloft and see if any were showing, as I had said I was in touch with them. He took the wheel. I went to the main cross-trees, which was no easy climb in the sea then going, and I sighted Big Sodus light abreast. I descended to the deck and told him of the light I had located.

"Can't possibly be so. We're not that far down the lake!" he snorted.

He spoke in a manner that I thought altogether too deprecatory. This is where my prejudice – and my Irish – come in. I was only a boy, but it would never do to let him treat me like a boy.

I demanded to know why the — he had sent me aloft, if he was not prepared to accept what I saw, and I added that we would sight Little Sodus (Fairhaven) in a half hour and Oswego in about two hours.

My reply was not all that it should have been, and not what it would have been had I been older and known my man better, but it expressed my exact feelings of the moment.

Capt. Farewell said nothing, but a half an hour later he himself went up the main rigging about half way, when he sighted Little Sodus abreast and Big Sodus now over the quarter. He came down and genially confirmed what I had reported.

In due course Oswego light showed up as predicted, and we made Oswego after a smashing run down the lake.

I was with him for the balance of the season, and on many occasions while on deck, had occasion to consult over a land fall or a light. He never after contradicted me. and we became pals in so far as our positions would permit, and ever after friends. He was a martinet, but that is really a good quality in any man in a position of responsibility. He became a ship owner and a gentleman of means, and before I parted company with him we had formed a friendship which proved lifelong. He died only two years ago in Oshawa.

I shall never forget one morning when we were beating up Lake Ontario in a brisk nor'wester. We were on the port tack. The schooner *West Wind*, sailed by the McSherry family, was coming up on the starboard tack. I was at the wheel.

The skipper took in the situation and decided we would safely cross the *West Wind*'s bows. He told me to "Keep her as she goes!" while he went below and had breakfast.

A little watching showed that the *West Wind* was likely to cross our bows or ram us, but that we certainly could not cross hers. She had the right-of-way. Knowing Captain Farewell's strong sense of discipline I kept the *Magdala* on her course, until it was evident there would be an immediate collision if we held on.

I then shouted. "Captain, on deck! " He rushed up. The situation was clear to him. He ordered "Hard up the wheel!" and let go the main sheet by the run.

We cleared the *West Wind* by about 50 feet, passing under her stern. He said. "It's all right, you did right, but if I were on that other vessel, I would swear!"

It was like one of those automobile situations all the time coming before me now on the bench which never should occur.

Right-of-way or wrong-of-way everybody should use common sense and keep out of the risk of collision. But we always have one excuse.

Knowing my skipper's view as to "olders," I had brought him and two whole ship's companies within fifty feet of a watery grave.

Well, we live and learn.