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"ANNAVANN" in the GREAT GALE of 1880.

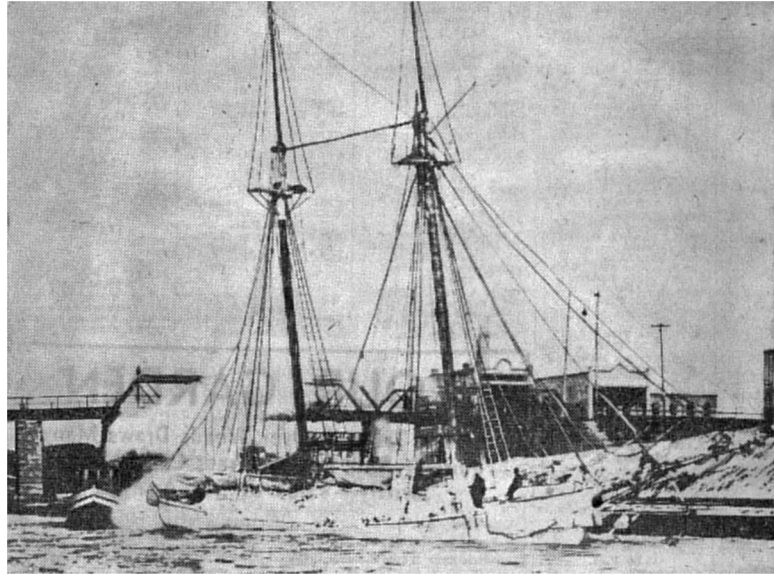
ON Guy Fawkes Day, Nov. 5th, 1880, having loaded 234,000 feet of lumber and shingles at Muskoka Mills, the *Otonabee* towed out as far as the Giant's Tomb, and anchored there for wind, eventually steering across Georgian Bay for Cabot Head, on her voyage to Sarnia, at the far end of Lake Huron.

It was dark next evening, at 5.30, when she got abreast of the Head, and by this time she was beating against a nor'wester, with light sails stowed and two reefs in the mainsail and the captain wishing he had one in the foresail as well. The wind was backing and increasing, with showers of hail, and a heavy sea had risen, forcing the crew to pump continuously to keep the water down. They could not be spared to reef the foresail.

The Great Gale of 1880 left thirty sailors there and sank six vessels and drove a dozen others ashore. It was no gentler on Georgian Bay.

Trying to wear her around, the sheet of the standing-jib parted and that sail split, too, followed by the fore staysail. When she paid off before the wind the mainsail jibed, and the 60-foot boom hit the shrouds and both it and the 40-foot main gaff broke and the reefed mainsail went to join the rest of the canvas in the stormy sky although they had taken the precaution of squatting it well down before wearing around.

It was now pitch dark and all that could be seen alongside was the longer part of the splintered mainboom, launching itself against the ship's side from time to time like a battering ram as she roared through the waves under bare poles, with nothing to drive her but the smash of the seas and the pressure of the wind on her deckload of lumber. With great difficulty they hacked and hewed at the remnants of mainsail and main-sheet tangled on the quarter. At last the battering boom, towing along by the mainsheet, lifts, and remains of canvas was cut adrift, and she began to answer her helm. Malcolm McLeod, of Sarnia, himself an old skipper, was at the wheel, and when 8 bells came and his trick was up he refused relief, believing that he was best able to keep her going before it.



"ICED TO THE EYEBALLS," THE OTONABEE makes port after three days tossing in the Great Gale.

HOBSON'S CHOICE

Laboring still at the pumps, the mate, Charlie Hawkins, of Collingwood, and the rest of the crew, strained their eyes in the darkness to see whether they were going to crash on the Flowerpots or the Bear's Rump, but by God's mercy she cleared both. Capt. Birnie's hope was that he could keep the water down so that she would not capsize with the weight of it swashing back and forth under the deck, and that he might run her back to Collingwood.

Below, in the cabin, his good wife "Annavann," Ann of the Fair Hair, sang to her two children and kept the firewood dry from the water that came swashing down the companionway. The seas were travelling faster than the sailless schooner and every other wave burst over the transom and around stout Malcolm McLeod at the wheel and assaulted the cabin door. Even the binnacle was flooded. Much water found its way below, but Annavann and her older child Minnie (later Mrs. T. J. Dault of Alliston) mopped it up or broomed it to the scuppers. When spelled from the pump, Capt. Rorie Morrison, of Goderich, then a foremast hand, tried to get below to reassure the mother and children. A sea caught him and drove him down the alley between the cabin and the quarter rail till he fetched up against the butt ends of the deckload planks. Bruised and almost drowned, he fought his way to a cabin window, the snow, now falling thickly, freezing on his wet oilskins. The port shutter was thrust back and a cup of scalding coffee appeared with Mrs. Birnie's compliments: "Come back for another for Malcolm there at the wheel!" and then the shutter banged closed before the next wave burst.

"Yer a graun' wumman, Annavann!" was Rory's pious tribute, echoed by every man aboard.

Annavann was never a friend of the Demon Rum but every man in the *Otonabee* that night smacked his lips over the hot coffee she kept boiling on the dancing stove, and well he might, for it was laced with carefully rationed mountain dew.

Dawn revealed the *Otonabee* masked to the crosstrees in ice and snow, lurching heavily before wind and sea, her hickory treenails groaning and shrieking with every plunge as they bit on the tamarac planks and timbers which they fastened. There is an old wooden wall adage: "While she creaks she holds." Judging by the amount of creaking, the *Otonabee* was holding together till Kingdom Come. But – she had not a stitch of serviceable canvas left and she was being driven deeper and deeper into Georgian Bay, getting a lee shore on every side. It was only a matter of time until she would be landlocked and grinding on the granite somewhere.

In the steel grey gleam of early morning Alex Birnie and his wife could see the snow on the roof of their shieling in the hills behind Craighleith as the *Otonabee* reeled past the surf-lined shore. An hour later they were abreast of Collingwood, six miles farther to the eastward. The smoke of the wood-burning town was whirling off in straight lines from the chimneys. The *Otonabee* was weaving along in quarter-mile zigzags, her torn and frozen sail cloth streaming ahead of her in useless ribbons. Capt. Birnie ordered the forward deckload thrown overboard to let her rise more easily to the sea.

TRYING FOR TRYSAILS

“Could we get a wee bit of canvas on her I could still mak’ the Hen and the Chickens,” called Alex. Birnie above the gale. “They gaff-tops’ls is still hale. If we had them doon we could rig them for trys’ls. It’s a chance.”

Rory Morrison and a shipmate named McRae volunteered to go aloft. Up the frozen ratlines they climbed, the small ropes brittle as icicles, snapping under their seaboots, the broken pieces of the foregaff still flailing about like clubs on the peak halliards. But they climbed through the lubber holes into the crosstrees and attacked the topsails, lashed to their jacob’s-ladders with stout rope gaskets. Alas, sails and gaskets were a solid mass of ice, though sixty feet above the water, for rain, sleet and snow had frozen as they fell. No sailor’s knife could penetrate the coating and they were afraid to use axes, lest they destroy their last sails.

DRIFTING PAST PORT

Meantime it became doubtful if she could head up even for Collingwood harbor inside the Hen and Chickens. She was drifting past.

All hands concentrated on clearing the flying jib, which, furred on the jibboom, had been plunged under so often that it had not got frozen as hard as the topsails. After a fight, they got it free and rigged a purchase in place of its frozen halliards. By superhuman efforts they got it half way up the stay. Before they could trim the sheet that sail, too, split.

It looked as though the *Otonabee* was doomed. Alex. Birnie played his last card. He sheered her as near the harbor entrance as she would come.

“Overhaul saxty fathom o’ the big bower chain,” he said, “and forty fathom o’ the ’ither.”

He let go the first anchor. They thought she would tear the windlass out by the roots when she rounded up. The wrung wood groaned as though the heart was bursting out of the barrel, and whang! parted the chain.

“Gie her the ither!” roared Capt. Birnie through his windblown beard, and down thundered the second anchor from the starboard cathead.

“And the kedge!” bellowed the brawny Scot. “Shackle on what’s left o’ the port chain cable and eke it out wi’ the big towline!”

With a quarter of a mile of chain’ and rope out ahead the battered *Otonabee* faced the smiter, backing away from the blast all the way across the face of Collingwood harbor. The flukes of the kedge broke on the boulder bottom, and it dragged, but the starboard bower held. There the *Otonabee* leapt and dived, in sight of safety and equally in sight of destruction.

Capt. Alex. Clark with the timber tug *Mary Ann*, fat and feeble with not enough power to pull a hen off a roost, ventured out to the rescue.

Annavann was not panicky. She was coolly calculating the risks of the *Mary Ann* getting them into port.

If the anchors held they would not need her. If they didn't, the *Mary Ann* couldn't save them. She would never be able to tow them clear of the rocks of Fisherman's Point. Whether she succeeded or failed there would be a ruinous bill, for this would be "salvage" not just harbor towing.

"Eleck Birnie, Eleck Birnie," cried she. "Gin yer gangin' tae droon me, droon me in deep watter. I've no mind to hae my bairns' brains dashed oot on the black stanes o' Fisherman's P'int."

Alex Birnie understood the conjugal high-sign perfectly. He had, of course, to maintain his dignity as master, both of wife and schooner. "Haud yer whisht, wumman," he cried, with a wink. "Thank ye for cornin', Alex. Clarke, but we'll no be needin' ye the noo. I'll strike the fly when I want to tow in."

So the *Mary Ann* turned back.

Then was some dreadful plunging and diving within sound of the church bells of Collingwood, with the anchor chains twanging like the harps of hell, and after each sea broke on the snowbound shore the black rocks of Fisherman's Point seemed to come racing out to the undertow to grab Annavann and her babes, but the anchors held. Following her successful protest she made no more remarks but stirred the galley fire and got breakfast ready, singing, "Weel may the keel row!" till the cabin carlins danced.

All day the *Otonabee* rode that way. When the wind died at evening, the tug *Mary Ann* again ventured out and took a line from her to ease the strain on the chain cables while the crew hove the anchors up. Before the windlass pauls had begun to clink this line parted.

Capt. Birnie gave the tug another bigger line and that parted, too, so heavy was the heave of the sea. "Ye was richt, Annavann," said Alex, Birnie simply.

So the *Mary Ann* again went home empty-handed and the *Otonabee* crew spent the night at anchor watch. Next morning, the sea having subsided, they hove up both anchors and the *Mary Ann* towed the schooner in.

"THE BEST MAN E'ER HAD"

Long years afterwards, when the family was grown up, and the Birnies, retired from sailing, were settled in Courtright on the St. Clair, Capt. James W. Baby, now master of a large steam freighter, paid a visit of ceremony to the home. There was crape on the door, for Annavann had gone to the land o' the leal. Alexander Birnie, the fire of his square beard quenched in the grey ash of age, and his bright blue eyes faded with tears and years alike unshed, gropingly grasped the younger man's hand.

"Eh, Jamie lad," said he. "You and me's lost our old shipmate, the best man e'er had."

Capt. Baby choked.

"D'ye mind, sir," said he in the old formula to his old captain, "how you and she used to sing on the quarter, in the dog watch of a summer evening?"

"I lo'ed best her singin' the 'Keel Row,' " said Alex Birnie slowly, as though talking to

himself.—

Weel may the keel row,
The keel row, the keel row,
Weel may the keel row.
And better may she speed.

“Ay, Annavann. Better may she speed. God’s will be done.”