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Schooner Days, XIX (19)
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Dusty Diamonds

It's all over and done with now, but this is how we used to get our coal cargoes when the schooners went to Cleveland for them, in pre-prohibition days.

The *Little Hooker* – for no matter what her tonnage, if she is one of the vanishing race of Canadian lake schooners she is but a small affair compared with the enormous steam barges that surround her– slips into her berth with the eagerness of a shop girl going to her first situation. She has waited long, has the schooner, surrounded by the grimy trestles, the foul water of the greasy river, and the green-painted or smoke-stained fronts of the squatters' shacks strung along the bank behind the Irishtown coal dock, for first come first served is the rule at the coal chutes, and five or six barges of two or three thousand tons capacity ahead of you may mean a week's waiting.

So, night or day, when the schooner's turn comes she hurries into her berth. Darkness makes no difference. The great electric lights of the trestle beam with a piercing radiance amid the inky shadows. The smoke and steam of the hoisting engines rise heavenward unceasingly. The coal trimmers swarm aboard as soon as the schooner's lines are out. They are Swedes, Finns, Greeks, Norwegians, Italians or what not, but their speech is flavored with a rich Irish brogue, and the foreman is sure to be Irish; great brawny fellows, most of them, looking fierce as pirates, stripped to the waist, and with the whites of their eyes glaring by contrast with the grime of the coal dust.

The captain of the schooner, if he is a wise man, will have a bottle or two handy. The bottle or bottles will contain a certain Canadian product, much prized in foreign lands. A gift of the same to certain persons goes far towards producing that greatly to be desired thing, "a good trim."

The great iron chutes are adjusted over the yawning hatches. "Let'er go!" shouts the foreman, semaphoring with his arms at the same time, and then with a crash and a grinding roar an avalanche of coal descends.

The dense pall of dust blots out the electric lights. The vessel reels under the shock, as though hit by a squall. The hatches quickly choke. The coal heaps up in glittering piles around the square apertures, or bounds along the deck like huge black hailstones. The noise is deafening, the dust stifling; but all the time the gnomes below in the hold are plying their shovels with might and main, trimming the coal back into the wings of her from the huge heaps it forms under each hatch.

The uproar ceases with a suddenness as appalling as its commencement. The scratch, scrape of the shovels comes out with startling distinctness. The cones of coal at the hatches slowly subside. Figures like fiends from the pit emerge from the hold. They roar at one another

in outlandish tongues, but you distinguish the names of the fighting race – Kelly and Burke and Shea. And another fifty-ton car swings into the giant cradle overhead.

"Much more'll she take in that midship hatch?" asks the captain of the foreman of the gang.

"Half-a-corr," is the answer.

"Want 'er shifted yet?" asks the mate.

"Not yet," says the captain.

As soon as the piles at the mouths of the choked hatches subside to the trimming of the shovellers below, the giant cradle swings, and the car, bottom up, empties half its contents into the maw of the chutes. Then again the signal, and pandemonium again ensues, the coal piling higher and higher on deck, because the hatches are now sooner choked. And again comes the awesome hush, and the scratch, scrape, of the shovels, wielded by candle light in the mine below, and this time the midship hatch is pronounced full.

There is an interlude then. The schooner's crew toil, with the aid of the friendly donkey engine, whose cheery fire has warmed them in their waiting. They heave her ahead until the chutes are over another set of hatches, and they pennant out the great booms to accommodate the iron monsters that thrust their snouts enquiringly inboard. And then the thunder begins again, and again the vessel reels to the shock, and all the time the scratch, scrape of the coal-heavers' shovels trims the dimly glittering cargo back from the choking hatches.

And so car after car, "the whole night long, with their battle thunder," but without flame, is poured into the vessel. Lower and lower she sinks. Back and forth toil her crew, dragging the heavy mooring lines about amid the glaring light or intense shadows of the coal dock, as the vessel requires shifting so as to bring the chutes over the proper hatches. Now over the bows, now over the taffrail, the captain lowers his lantern, to see, by the draught-figures out on her stem and stern post, how deep she is floating. The mate, a grimy angel, with a homely batten for measuring reed, figures out how much of a list she is going to have one way or the other, and hurls pointed instructions at the foreman of the coal-heavers.

There is a sudden cessation of the scratching, scraping of the shovels below, and one after another begrimed figures, stripped to the waist, and with rolling eyeballs, emerge from the hatches.

"What's up?" demands the captain. "No spik English," answers the first man addressed.

"Out o' candles," growls the foreman, "and we ain't got the money to get more, forbye."

It may be a hold-up, but a delay for daylight is not to be dreamt of. "Any place around here you can get 'em?" asks the skipper.

"Sure now," says the foreman, "there's a poor woman kapes a bit of a store beyant the second trussel, fur the Irishtown folk. She may be open so airly in the mornin' and she may not

but run, Casey, an' see, if so be the gentleman's happenin' to have a dollar on him he can loan us."

It is a gift, not a loan, but the captain produces the dollar and the tallow dips soon appear. There is also evidence of a can. The scratch, scrape resumes, the last fifty-ton car hurls its crashing contents down the chutes and the schooner has her load aboard, but not stowed.

The breaking of the weird dawn finds her with her decks piled to the rail with coal, the heaps at the hatches slowly sinking, the trimmers fighting the last of the lumps back to make room for the litter on deck the captain pounding it into the foreman's head, with mighty vehemence, that all the stuff has to get under the hatches. He'll be something unfit for publication if he's going to carry a deck load. It may be even necessary to inspect the contents of a third bottle before the foreman can be made to understand that "no deck load" is the irreducible minimum upon which the captain stakes his eternal spiritual welfare.

And over those decks, strewn with coal and dust begrimed, the sun at last throws his light; and the schooner's crew, after a night of exertion, without sleep, stare at each other and marvel. It is different with the coal-heavers; they are the night shift, and just now they are finishing their "day's work," and they are used to the coal dust. But the sailors, although they have seen it all a hundred times before, feel a certain thrill or shock as they look on the faces of their own shipmates, haggard with grime and the lack of sleep.

"Fine mornin'; hope ye slept well?" grins the mate.

But his pleasantry is received in solemn silence.

And then, like a part of the bright sunshine, appears the cook. She is fresh from a night's sleep – more or less sound, for the lake cook is used to noise – and looks dainty, ethereal, with her galley wrapper, white apron and clean face.

She is a smart girl and knows how to take care of herself. She picks her way over the lumps of coal that litter the deck everywhere and fills her bucket with water from the carefully covered cask.

But the pail is too heavy for her to carry back easily over the precipices of coal.

"Let me," mutters a voice hastily, and the mate, who has combatted the natural perversity of men and things – including breast lines and donkey engines – all night, seizes the bucket in one hand and the cook's fingers in the other and swings the lady and her burden over the obstruction, landing both safely at the galley door.

"Thank you, Dick," she says, and vanishes.

It is the first time she has called him by his Christian name, and maybe it is that, or maybe it is the rush of sunlight, or maybe he is feeling a bit queer after his lack of sleep, but he catches his breath and finds himself blushing under his coat of coal dust.