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Schooner Days CCXVI (216)
By C.H.J. Snider

MAKING PORT FOR CHRISTMAS

THAT was a grand old mariner who had just “made port for Christmas” and dropped his anchor for the last time in the hillside moorings behind the United Church in Cherry Valley, where so many of the Prince Edward County captains take their long-watch-in. When Mate Gabriel’s stentorian “All hands!” resounds, Byron Bongard will be the first to lay aloft, one may be sure. But there will be no stubborn gafftopsail to boot and fist, no kicking wheel to wrestle, no sleet-stung watch to keep, for we have it on the best authority then

“There shall be no more sea.”

Last April Byron Bongard was in the shortening row of lake captains who annually honor the mariners’ service at Cherry Valley, with their reverent blessing. The service is for all the sailors, engineers, firemen and fishermen who are, at the time, setting forth on their season’s calling. As ever, Byron Bongard’s appearance in the famous captain’s row was brief. Modest to a fault, he only took his place there to present the flowers in memory of those who, in the preceding twelve-month, had shipped for the last eternal voyage under the Great Captain.

As ever, he spent the precious farewell-time in the family pew along with his dear shipmate for life, Mrs. Bongard. They had been sweethearts and married for three score years. He was eighty-five, white – haired, bright – eyed, clear-headed.

My own proudest memory of that occasion is having helped him get the black cow into the stable, when he finished his chores before starting for the service. He lived almost opposite the church, in a neat white house fragrant with ship pictures and sea shells from the Caribbean. A couple of great grandchildren – perhaps nieces and nephews – were racing newly-caught mud-turtles in the lengthening shadows on the lawn that bright April evening.

Byron Bongard was best known to the public from his commanding the steamer *Turbinia*, that pioneer of turbine engines which was the alternate pride and despair of shipmasters. She was the fastest steamer that ever entered Toronto and the hardest to stop. Her system of propulsion, new 30 years ago when she came out from the *Clyde*, beat everyone but Byron Bongard. He knew how to handle her, and took her to the West Indies.

But it was as a schooner man Byron Bongard got his mastery of vessels and his grip on life. He was 50 years in sail and steam and never had an accident.

“I was fortunate,” he told me last April. “I sometimes think, when we old-timers get together telling about our hairbreadth escapes when the vessels went out from under us and all that, we might say a prayer for the poor insurance companies. They had to pay heavily for some of our experiences. For myself, I don’t think I ever cost my owners or the insurance companies a

cent. I was fortunate. And I tried to be careful.”

Byron Bongard went into sail when he was 15; that was 70 years ago. His first command was a little schooner whose name, if I recollect rightly, was the *H. I. Jones*, or something like that. He was a master and part owner. She was too small to make money. His next was the scow *Mary Fox of Bath*, which was rebuilt and renamed the schooner *Edward Hanlan* after the famous Ned. It was when she was the *Hanlan* that he sailed her, in 1878 or 1879. From her he graduated to the *Acacia*, his true love among the whitewings.

“I sailed her fourteen years for Oldreeve and Horn, of Kingston, and she never leaked or gave me the slightest trouble. Her outfit was good because the owners were sailmakers, and they gave me the best. I made some good passages with her in the barley trade – sometimes four hours across from Oswego to the Bay of Quinte. She made money from first to last. She was cut down for use as a towbarge about 1910, after I had gone into steam.

Capt. Bongard’s greatest adventure was in the *Acacia* on the first of July, 1900. Several Prince Edward County schooners were lying in Charlotte, on the south shore, loaded with coal for Kingston. It had been blowing hard, and the lake looked bad. Capt. Bongard went up to get his clearance papers. As he left the wharf he said to Capt. Sidney, of Belleville, sailing the schooner *Picton*, he didn’t see there was much hurry about starting out, for he didn’t like the weather prospects.

“When the *Picton*’s loaded she sails, weather or no weather,” said Sidley, who had been sailing big vessels on the Upper Lakes. One of these was the *Edward Blake*, which had crossed the ocean; and Sidley had lost her in Lake Huron the year before.

When Capt. Bongard got back the *Picton* had towed out and was streaking it down the lake. Capt. Savage, of the *Annie Minnes*, told him Sidley wouldn’t wait, so he thought he would go too.

“All right,” said Capt. Bongard, “but I don’t like the look of things.”

The same tug took the *Minnes* and the *Acacia* out. The *Minnes* ran away from the *Acacia*, for she set all sail, as the *Picton* had done, but Capt. Bongard stopped to haul out a reef in his mainsail. When he got squared away the *Picton* was four miles ahead and the *Minnes* about midway between her and the *Acacia*.

I myself well remember that day, for it was bitter cold, on shore with the strong bright northwest wind. On the lake it must have been close to freezing.

The wind came down heavy and blew a gale. Soon the gafftopsail of the leaders were clewed up. Then from the *Acacia* they could see the *Picton*’s lower sails settling down until only the peaks showed. Then, as though wiping a slate, these disappeared. Capt. Bongard swung the *Acacia* off for the spot where the *Picton*’s spars had vanished, and when he got there, twenty minutes after she had gone down, there was nothing to show that the schooner had ever existed, except a few floating caps and a box or two and a fender.

(Caption) THE ACACIA, which Capt Bongard sailed happily for fourteen years. From an oil painting hanging in his Cherry Valley home.