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Schooner Days V (5)
by C.H.J. Snider

More About The *Malta*

If the reader's memory goes back so far as to recall (per last week's Tely) how David Hunter hurled his crew through the courtroom window and the Collingwood police force after them, in order to avoid irritating delays in the Malta's clearance for Chicago, it may be believed that this first mate's "solemn oath" and his captain's were worth listening to.

Faded blue foolscap three-quarters of a century old, fastened with green tape in place of the customary "red," and obligingly lent for this occasion by Capt. Jas. McCannel, of Port McNicol, embalms the mighty swear of the long-ago King of the Welland Canal "in the matter of the protest of the barque Malta."

When a shipmaster meets trouble afloat his first act on setting foot on dry land, if he is lucky enough to do so, is to find a notary public and enter a "protest."

For corroboration he takes with him his first officer, or some other mariner who has been through the perils described. The making of such a document is the first line of defense for the owners of the ship against damage claims by consignors or consignees, and is the first step towards collecting insurance.

For centuries "protests," as these records are called, have followed the same style. They start with stiff legal phraseology. The makers swear that their ship was staunch, tight, seaworthy and well manned and equipped at the commencement of the voyage. Then follow the events of the passage in dreariest detail.

Epics of the seas are often found so encysted, like fire opals in lumps of clay. But flat or flaming, all marine protests end in the same quaint way:

"Wherefore, I, the said Notary, at the request of the said deponent, as well in his own behalf as in the behalf of the other Owners, Freighters, Officers and Crew, have protested, and by these presents do most solemnly protest.

"Against all and singular the cause and causes operating as aforesaid to the serious detriment of the said ship or Vessel, her Sails, Rigging and Gearing, or any part or portion thereof.

"And more especially against the Storm and Heavy Winds and Gales and High and Dangerous Seas experienced in her late voyage...."

There is something ludicrous in this indictment of the weather, as there is in that other piece of insurance humor which describes disasters as Acts of God, instead of blaming them on human stupidity, or the devil. It makes one think of Xerxes or Alexander flogging the water for breaking his bridge.

But listen to the "protest" of the Barque *Malta*, backed up by her master and mate – and by the obliging notary, George Moberly, of Collingwood, who wrote out hundreds of protests at five dollars a throw and two dollars a copy in the roaring days of sail on the lakes.

"By public instrument of protest be it known and made manifest to all whom it doth or may or shall concern.

“That on the 4th of November in the year of our Lord one thousand eight and fifty-six, before me George Moberly, a Notary Public by Royal Authority duly appointed in and for that part of the Province of Canada formerly constituting Upper Canada, and residing at Collingwood in the County of Simcoe and said province.

“Personally appeared William Carradice, master and part owner of the said barque Malta, of 321 tons burthen, of the Port of Saint Catharines, Canada West.

“And brought with him David Hunter, the first mate on board the said barque each of whom being duly sworn according to law on their solemn oaths did depose, declare and say as follows:”

A leaden sea of commonplaces here submerges the fine fire of the notary’s inspiration. The facts recorded are that the *Malta* engaged in the grain trade, left Chicago on Oct. 10th, 1856, with a cargo for Collingwood, 560 miles away to the northeast.

Although she had once made this passage in the remarkable time of 50 hours her bluff bows and barquentine rig were anything but handy when the wind was forward of the beam.

Headwinds, calms, gales and fog kept her baffling to and fro across Lake Michigan for 10 days; sometimes not even holding what she had gained. It was Oct. 20th before she got past

“Skillagalee and Waubashanks
At the entrance to the lake”

as the old song goes. From here she had to pass through the Straits of Mackinaw into Lake Huron and cross that lake and Georgian Bay before she could reach Collingwood.

After lying three days at anchor under Old Mackinaw, windbound in a drizzling rain, she again got underway, but the breeze was light and ahead, whichever way she turned, and she had to put into Round Island for provisions. Her crew of 12 had “eaten her out” in all this delay.

By Oct. 24th, two weeks after leaving Chicago, she had beaten as far as Cockburn Island in Lake Huron, at the west end of Manitoulin. She tacked back and forth there all day in a hard breeze. At night the sea was running so high that she could not even fetch back in her tracks, so they hove her to, heading offshore with all Lake Huron to drift in.

Two o’clock in the morning the fore topmast staysail “went to pieces,” as William Carradice and David Hunter deposed. So did the mainsail. As these two areas of canvas were essential to keep her hove to shouldering the sea there was no recourse left but to run her off. Otherwise she would have rolled her spars out in the trough.

So they squared her away with the goose wings of the fore topsail, back for the Straits of Mackinaw, and anchored again with the best bower when they picked up the shelter of what the redoubtable David deposed was “Bob Low.” That is, Bois Blanc Island. All of the 26th they spent at anchor, drying their sodden sails and sewing at their split ones. Next day, in the afternoon, then again started, and at length got into Georgian Bay and headed directly for Collingwood, their long deferred objective.

On the 28th, passing Owen Sound in heavy squalls from west-southwest, they split their mizzen, and had to take that sail in. By dark they were up to Nottawasaga Island, and could see the lights of Collingwood. But not the pier lamps. It was too dark and squally to risk going it

blind for the harbor entrance, with the mizzen in rags and the mainsail in patches. So the *Malta* came to under Nottawasaga Island, with the best bower down in 13 fathoms of water.

Here, a few miles from port – so close that the house lights twinkled over the wave tops – King David and his weary watches, port and starboard, might have expected repose. Not so. She dragged. She went from 13 fathoms to 15, from 15 to 20. The sea got rougher with every foot she edged from the shelter of the land. Ping! went a link of the cable – leaving the best bower and nearly 300 feet of chain at the bottom of Georgian Bay.

In the screaming dark they loosened the foresail, canted her head round and drove out to sea again, turning their backs on the teasing lights of Collingwood and the sheltering shore. The foresail split in ribbons. Under the reefed fore topsail and the patched mainsail, also reefed down, they kept her dodging. They had to wear every time to get around. The sea ran so high she would not tack. Towards daylight the wind moderated. Just soon enough to save the vessel from blowing on to the lee shore on the north east side of Nottawasaga Bay.

All that day the *Malta*, minus her mizzen and foresail beat back towards Collingwood. By night she was again in sight of the place.

Then once more then wind whooped up to gale strength from west-southwest, with heavy squalls. Hour after hour in the dark she stood off and on under shortened sail. At the end of the middle-watch, 4 a.m., the patched mainsail went out of her, followed by the jib and the fore topsail.

Collingwood was hopelessly to windward and the Christian Islands were desperately on the lee. For them the *Malta* swung, under her flying jib and remnants of canvas. Just clearing the Lighthouse Point she rounded up under its shelter and let go all, the ground tackle she had left – her second anchor, with 75 fathoms of chain, and a kedge to which was bent a six-inch rope warp.

One or two days were now left to the month and not two effective sails in the ship. For the 30th and 31st of October and the 1st of November the *Malta* lay under the lee of Lighthouse Point, with all hands wearily stitching on the frozen rags of canvas, while the gale blew ceaselessly from Collingwood and the west-southwest. On Nov. 2nd the wind went round to the north. The anchorage now began to be exposed, but the breeze was light. The *Malta* spread her tattered wings and hove up the kedge and the anchor and began to creep through the freezing fog which the north wind had brought down.

At 11 a.m., on Nov. 3rd, twenty-five days after leaving Chicago, she arrived in Collingwood harbor.

“Without further disaster and further these despondents say not.”