

**Toronto Telegram, March 7, 1931**  
**Schooner Days, VI (6)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Scarlet Whiskers**

*Magistrate J.J. O'Connor, of Port Arthur, tells of meeting the Prime Minister of the Queen of the North.*

Coming down the lakes a few years ago on the palatial passenger steamer *Huron* I made the acquaintance of her commander, Captain Robert Foote, no longer young – like myself! – but clean-shaven, immaculate, and full of energy. Since I made this trip with him he has gone over the horizon. We got talking of the old sailing days on the lakes. He was surprised to find that I, like him, had been before the mast nearly sixty years ago, and as may be imagined we had many a session on the bridge ere the trip ended.

One yarn I told him was about going into Port Burwell one stormy day in the fall of 1874.

I had shipped in the schooner *Bermuda* with Capt. John Allan, out of Whitby. Capt. Allan was a Cornishman. In times of peril and excitement instead of swearing like a flapper or roaring like a Red he would just give a cough.

This *Bermuda* was a pretty little schooner, a fore-and-after of about 400 tons carrying capacity. She was painted green, and had a clipper bow. There was another *Bermuda* owned in Oswego. This one belong to J. H. G. Hagarty of Toronto. She was smart, and sailed well when loaded, but she was a crank when light, and that made her steer wild in the puffs. She was the second vessel I had shipped in, and it took me some time to get on to her kinks.

The first morning out in her, when I came aft for my trick at the wheel it was blowing hard in little squalls. Capt. Allan stood at my shoulder for awhile watching her wriggling wake as I tried to keep her straight. He cleared his throat as she lay down to a particularly vicious little gust, swiped off her course, and came back again as I spun the spokes.

"Jimmy, my son," said he, "thee be fine at laying rail fences, but do not drown us in pride of it."

I turned red as a turkeycock when I caught a glimpse of the zig-zag track I was leaving. Captain Allen knew I was doing my best, and left me to learn better.

He was drowned, as it turned out, but not by me. He bought the *Marysburg*, of Picton, a clipper-bowed fore-and-after later than the *Bermuda*, and brought her to Whitby, painting her green, like his former vessel. Green was his undoing, for he lost the *Marysburg* off the Highlands one night. He sighted the old Grand Trunk semaphore light at the curve for Port Union, and mistook that for the pierced light of Frenchman's Bay, with was the only green lighthouse on the lake. Steering for it with confidence the schooner was soon in the breakers, and beat to pieces at the bottom of Scarboro Bluffs. Pieces of her were found by the stone hookers raking the bottom there twenty years afterwards, and some of her timbers used to lie

under the railway bridge over the Highland Creek.

Capt. Allan, however, was not drowned in the *Marysburg*. He escaped from her wreck, and got command of the schooner *Ida Walker* of Whitby, taking his son with him as mate. On a passage from Oswego to Toronto young Allan was knocked overboard by the main-boom, while they were reefing. His father sprang into the lake after him, and both perished. The *Ida Walker* was brought in by her sailors, with two flags at half mast and neither captain nor mate aboard.

My story zig-zags as much as the *Bermuda* did, my first morning at her wheel. We loaded 11,000 bushels of barley in Whitby, and took that to Erie, Pa., on Lake Erie. From there we sailed for Pigeon Bay, at the western end of the lake, on the Canadian side, up at what sailors called the "O", and the guide books named Rondeau. We had a swept hold and were to load white ash timber there. Fine straight-grained ash forests flourished at this time in Essex County and we were loading the cargo for the Cedardale Works at Oshawa, where they make rake and hoe and fork handles by the thousand for Ontario farmers.

We left Erie in light weather, soon increasing to a hard southwest breeze. Close-hauled on the port tack we pounded away at it for several hours, until force by the increasing gale to put her under close-reefed canvas. In her light condition she was scarcely holding her own in the sea that had made up, so the skipper decided to run for the nearest harbor of refuge.

This was Port Burwell, on the north shore, astern of us. The gale increased in strength as we scudded before it, daring only to show our forestaysail and the squatted foresail. Late in the afternoon we were off the snug little hole in the bank, with a howling gale behind us and the shore all a-lather with bursting billows ahead. Farther up the lake, against the sun, we could see another vessel coming, a big one, but as anxious as we were to get in out of the blow.

At this time there was an extensive shoal in front of the most of Port Burwell piers. These ran north and south, with the village to the east. There was a narrow cut of deep water between the pier-ends and the shoal, but the obstruction stretched from a little west of the lighthouse on the west pier to a long way east of the east one. The west pier was much the longer of the two.

Our problem was three-cornered. We had to keep far enough windward of the shoal to clear the west end, but, we had to come close enough to it to avoid hitting the lighthouse the next flying leap she took. And yet we had to hug that pier like a sweetheart to save ourselves from being swept by the scend of the sea past the end of the short east pier and on to the beach. While still miles out, we could see the billows spouting white and high as they burst on it. Many a stout ship had left her bones there through making the miss, well we knew. And as we came on we could see the wreck of one pounding to pieces in the surface ahead of us, to the eastward of the entrance.

It looked as though we were in fore it. We lashed our dunnage bags to the pine fenders, so that if the worst came to not quite the worst, and we got ashore wrecked but alive, we would not lose our clothes. They would float through the breakers and wash up on the sand thanks to

the fenders.

Capt. Allan put two of us at the wheel. I was one. The mate and the rest of the crew stood by the mainsail halliards. He himself went forward and climbed into the port fore-rigging, holding on by one hand and raising the other like a choir conductor. We eyed that upraised hand as if our lives depended on it. They did. I can see his whiskers streaming in the wind. I can hear his nervous little cough. All fancy. We really could hear nothing for the roar of the reef and the thunder of the water on the beach beyond the piers.

"Starboard! starboard!" signalled the outstretched hand, and starboard-the-helm it was. The crew manned the peak halliards and got a patch of the mainsail on her at exactly the right moment. We roared past the west end of the shoal, looking up fine for the pier-head, helped by the main sail's pressure.

Then "Port! port!" the skipper's fist gesticulating and we spun the spokes around like a buzz-saw, as a big sea caught her.

She paid off just in time to miss the corner. Capt. Allan could have jumped from the rigging and landed in the lighthouse. But the sea picked her up bodily and hurled her across the gap between the two pier heads, like a bum leaving a sailor's saloon. Would she make it, or miss it? Right ahead of us, in the smother past the east pier, loomed the black hull of the latest wreck.

"Port! port!" Capt. Allan signaled. It was right towards destruction. But port we hove the helm. Next second we saw why. She went into the channel mouth sideways headed almost north-west. Her bow lapped the east pier end. In one of those strange silent seconds which occur in the greatest uproar I heard Capt. Allan cough. Then women, screaming and wailing. I could see a score of them on the pier-end, wringing their hands. A crowd of men started to run for the beach where the wreck writhed and pounded. A thundering crash almost threw me over the wheel.

We had hit the corner of the pier. But about amidships. And we were coming like a train of cars. Our momentum and the impulse she had from the helm hard a-port, made her break round, as sailors say, the right way. That is, she went shooting on into the harbor scrubbing the east pier, instead of twisting around the end of it and backing stern first in to the breakers on the beach. Men cheered as we tore past the crib work with the snubbing posts running by like a picket fence.

All hands jumped to the job of getting sail off and mooring lines out, and we snaffled her before she she had torn clean across the harbor and up into the shipyards at the west end. Dozens of vessels were built in Port Burwell while the white oak growing there lasted, and several were on the stocks when we came in. One of them, the *W.J. Suffel*, was just ready for launching. While we lay in Port Burwell there was a dicker to trade her for the *Bermuda* but nothing came of it.

If course we sounded the pumps as soon as we got our lines out. The *Bermuda* was not making any water. She had splintered the rail where she struck on the pier corner, and had

scraped off a lot of green paint, but the schooner was soundly built and was practically undamaged.

People swarmed about us, to help us with our lines. The whole village was down on the east pier. We soon learned why the women were crying, and why the men had started to run around to the beach. The schooner *Tom Wrong* had tried for the entrance, missed it and gone ashore in the breakers, and all hands aboard her had been drowned as the seas swept her and people looked on helplessly. That was the wreck we saw on the shore.

Capt. Allan came forward, cleared his throat, and thanked the two of us who had been at the wheel. He was as nervous about doing this as he had been about coming in. More so.

"Jimmy, my son," said he, "thee has straightened out all the rail fences."

We turned to watch the distant vessel which had been following us. She too, was now making entrance. She was a three master, and a grand sight she was, with the last rays of the sun lighting her puffed-out canvas as she hauled up and the flies at her topmast heads stood out like crimson swords. She was well handled, and came through without even touching; and in a few minutes we were busy catching her lines and helping her to snub up alongside the wharf. On either bow her name was painted boldly – *QUEEN OF THE NORTH* – and I knew she was the vessel I had so often heard of that had been built in the wilderness at the mouth of the Nottawasaga River.

To her first mate I took a particular fancy – a fine burly upstanding young fellow, still in his twenties, but with a flowing beard, positively scarlet, brushing his leather belt.

"You did, eh?" asked Capt. Robert Foote, commander of the Northern Navigation Co. steamer *Huronic*, as I got the last of this off my chest. "So you're the young fellow who went orchard-robbing during those three days we lay windbound in Port Burwell? And now you're district magistrate in Thunder Bay. You ought to give us each thirty days!"

"Yes, Mr. O'Connor," he went on. "I was the scarlet-whiskered mate of the *Queen of the North* fifty years ago."