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Schooner Days DCCLVIII (758)
By C.H.J. Snider

TALE OF TWO DOORS

It was the 22nd August, 1827, the little schooner *SOPHIA*, of Pultneyville champed at the wharf, impatient to be away. No less impatient was Horatio Nelson Throop her young master; just turned 20, and already Captain and owner of a schooner he had himself built. It sounded great, but what a world of struggle lay behind that outboard harbour entry in the fore-runner of the Commercial News: *SOPHIA*, Throop master, for Oswego, with corn. Left an orphan 8 years before when his father was drowned off the *NANCY* going into Great Sodus Bay, young Horatio had hewed, and planed and hammered and sawed at boats for others, making a living for his mother and younger brother and sister and himself. After a spell building barges for the new Erie Canal he had sailed over to the wild Main Duck Island in Canada and picked out a load of natural crooks of cedar and tamarac and the ship timbers necessary, and brought them back to Pultneyville. Here on the beach, working for himself without wages, he had put together this 30 ton schooner, a little larger than the one his father was drowned from, and, as Horatio felt with youths confidence, an abler sounder vessel than the ill-starred *NANCY*.

Why did he call her *SOPHIA*? That was his secret. His mother's name was Ruth and his sister's name was Rachel. There was more than one lady on the old South Shore of Lake Ontario named *Sophia*. But only one had a schooner named after her. No one would ever know, he thought with satisfaction, what it had cost to paint *SOPHIA* on the stern of his vessel, neither his little brother Washington, nor Ruth, nor mother, nor Sophia herself. Not for him the luxury of the annual Sailor Return ball at Christmas Eve at Gazleys tavern, every red cent he had saved in 8 years had gone into the vessel. He still owed \$800 for her sails, gear, anchors, blacksmith work, and material he couldn't make with his own hands or for which he couldn't trade his skill or labour, but she was his own, and she was good for it. All her earnings so far had been swallowed as fast as they could for the hundred finishing details every new craft shrieks for, once she has left the launchingways. A compass for protection against fog; flags; rope; wages for the crew, though none for himself; food for them; wharfage; harbour dues; and a home to keep up besides. She was big enough for her time and trade but she did not need what landmen called a lifeboat and lake sailors called a yawl, a tender of some sort, to run lines or carry out an anchor, and tow her when the lake was too deep for poling or too rough for sculling with an oar over the taffrail. He had not been able to pick up a yawl-boat yet, or even a punt. But this trip he promised himself, the freight would pay for one – or for the lumber for one he could make. After that her outfit would be complete and he could be able to get his mouth above the surface of debt and save money.

She was swimming scupper deep with a whacking cargo of early Ontario County corn, why, there was more than a thousand bushels of it, which meant a really big freight. He hoped the grain wouldn't sweat and swell, for she was crammed to the hatch covers with it. His crew of

two came aboard picking their teeth after a massive breakfast at home. Horatio was ashamed to have to encourage this dining out. Provisions made such a small hole in the earnings. They pulled her out, and hoisted sail to the freshening breeze. It promised to have them in Oswego before sunset. The sea was coming down the lake before the wind in great swells. Once her sails filled the *SOPHIA* ran like a scalded cat; a wall of water roaring on either corner, her leebow buried at every roll. He wondered if he had too much sail on her, or too much corn in her. Some vessels he knew became cranky when loaded too deep. He didn't like the way she ploughed in. She was a good sea boat too, but, she did not seem to recover from these lee rolls, and she was steering hard. The bow wave broke on deck and swirled around the foot of the mast, and she took a greater and greater angle. "Try that pump again!" he shouted. The pump vomited a stream of swollen corn and bright lake water. "Must have sprung a topside plank!" growled the older man. "Lower away the foresail and I'll bring her around on the other tack to get the lame side out of the water!" called the young skipper.

They had not reached the halliards when she plunged under. It was as quick as that. The lake poured over her bulwarks and swept aft in a torrent. One man grabbed an empty barrel and was swept overboard with it. The other was whirled away, clawing for the big sweep or sculling oar. Horatio, heaving the helm to wear her around, was thrown against the companionway of the tiny trunk cabin by a wave that flooded the quarterdeck knee high and knee deep. As he fell he grasped on the leaf of the cabin door. It came away in his hand, for it was hinged on like a rudder, and as his ship dropped from under him the wood rose on the iron pintles. In five second that was all that Horatio possessed of his *SOPHIA*. The vortex of her sinking swirled over his head like the bottom weeds covering the prophet Jonah. When he came up gasping, he saw only his crew, nothing of the ship. One man was clinging to the headless barrel with great difficulty. The other had the oar. It might have saved him but he threw his hands and sank. The three men were a considerable distance apart.

The cabin door was small and heavy, a mere end of oak plank, 16 inches long, 8 inches wide and 1 1/4 inches thick. There was little area to it and less buoyancy. But with this flat hand paddle the 20 year old sailor oared his way through the raging billows to the shore, hour after hour, mile after mile. He spent a long time doing it for the *SOPHIA* went down 4 to 5 miles below and off Big Sodus Bay, at this junction with the bluff on the west side of said Bay, which could be at least 6 miles from the spot where she foundered. For 2 hours he lay gasping for breath on the beach below Big Sodus Bluff, unable to crawl farther than beyond the line of breakers. He wanted to sleep, and did sleep, and woke revived. He staggered along the beach looking for his crew. No sign of them, nor of the *SOPHIA*. Except for the side of the cabin door, and the wooden tiller, which had jumped out of the rudder head. They had washed in, a mile apart. Young Horatio tucked the door leaves under his arm, using the tiller as a staff, trudged homeward towards his native Pultneyville in his shirt and trousers. These and the tiller and the door was all he had left in this world. Not even shoes. He had kicked them off to get his head above the billows. He remembered with a grin that he would have to kick off \$800 of debt before he could get his head above financial water.