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Schooner Days CMXXIX (929)
by C.H.J. Snider

HESPERUS on ONTARIO

This *SUFFEL* – there were three of them, and this was the middle one, the *W.J.* – was getting on in years. She had been a good ship, but had been laid up for a while. Captain Wm. Van Vlack of Toronto – everybody liked Billy and called him that – had taken the plunge and bought her at a bargain, as he thought, thus, after years of struggle with the lakes, he became an owner. He didn't let it go to his head. He remained master of the steam-barge *VAN ALLEN*, at a good wage, and got Capt. Steve Taylor of Cat Hollow to sail his property. He hoped to establish a coal yard eventually. Full of zeal, Stephen brought the *W.J. SUFFEL* into Fairhaven, N.Y., for her first load. He had the sail covers on and the hatch covers off before she was under the trestle. He told the mate to get the booms swung out so the shutes would lead to the hatches, and hopped up to the D.L.& W. office to tell them to pour 500 tons of anthracite into her, pronto. An hour later he was back, crestfallen. Pull in them booms, he said and put on the hatch covers. There's no insurance on the vessel, of course and the underwriters for the cargo wont let 'em load her. Seems the inspector said last fall he'd class her down if there wasn't a lot of repairs done her, and it wasn't. Billy knew nothing about this, I've wired him but – Why don't you telephone Dad? Asked Steve's young daughter Jessie, it's a lot faster. And dearer, demurred Stephen. But he did it. Jessie had been brought along for good luck on the first voyage. Her father always felt luckier while she was around. Besides she was a good little cook.

The outcome was that poor Billy had the coal consigned to himself. To get it shipped in his vessel he had to hypothecate everything he had or hoped for. Virtually bought the cargo. All he had now was in one uninsurable basket. If the schooner got to Toronto – well. If they didn't, he would be barefoot at 50. Steve Taylor watched the loading and the trimming ton by ton, foot by foot, as the *SUFFEL* settled down to her 10 ft, draught marks. The wind was light and fair, from the south-east. He saved a \$10 tow bill by sailing her out from the dock. She floated up the lake serenely, not enough water in the pump-wells to make the plungers wet. Next morning, in midlake, at the change of the watch, the pump-wells were tried for the fourth time. The lanyard above the 18 inch sounding rod, with its nicked inch marks, came up wet. All hands to the pumps!

After an hours steady clanking the water was even higher in the well. The Captain put his daughter at the wheel, telling her it would do her good to try a long trick in this nice, light, quiet air. He said nothing of trouble. Far all she knew they were washing down. They all kept pumping, the Captain and two men on the aft pump, the mate and another man forward. The water kept on rising in the wells. The lee side of the deck was level with the lake. A little water lay over the scuppers, unable to run off. A few more inches and down she would go. "Boys," puffed Steve under his breath, so Jessie wouldn't hear, I hate to do this, for everything Billy Van Vlack has in the world is right under our feet. But we've got to leave her, if we're going to keep

our hats dry.

One of you help me get the yawl boat down and alongside. The rest keep a pumping, to give us time. What are you doing dad? asked Jessie, as he threw the davit tackle off. The falls whined in their sheaves, and the boats keel splashed in the wake.

We're leaving her Jessie, Steve almost sobbed. We're ruining Billy Van Vlack, but we can't keep her afloat. We may be in the yawl a long time, Jessie, and, you know – hadn't you better go to the toilet, before we get into the boat? Jessie blushed scarlet and went. The *SUFFEL* was a well found lake schooner, and had a toilet for the cabin. In most vessels all hands but the cook used outside plumbing – very much so – over the bows, sheltered by the high bulwarks, on the jibboom guys, bowsprit shrouds and such head-gear as afforded hand hold or foot hold. It had the merit of complete ventilation, with the whole lake to sluice it down. The cook had the privilege of a slop bucket in her room. She reappeared after a suitable interval, still blushing, and whispered to her father holding the yawl-boat painter: I'm ready dad. Why the waters roaring under the toilet like one of those city hydrants bursting.

Perhaps – let me look – began Steve. He dove into the cabin. Boys! he yelled immediately. We've found the leak! Keep pumping. Maybe we can fix it. Who'll try, I'll take his place at the brakes! I'll try, cried Alexander Cameron Taylor, scotch man-of-wars in the old sailing navy, and no relation to Steve. But sing out if she starts to go while I'm below. I wouldn't like to miss that yawlboat. He pried off the after hatch cover and crawled over the wet coal under the cabin floor, which was sunk a few feet below the cabin deck. The corroded discharge pipe of the toilet had broken off completely, and the water was boiling up like water out of a fire nozzle. Miraculously, working in the dark, he drove a wad of tarred waste into the gaping wound with a sailmakers fid. Most of the time his head was under water. He had to catch his breath like a marathon swimmer. He got two pieces of oak plank and some canvas, and wedges this over the waste, and spiked all fast. All this in the dark, under the deck, under water, with the probability of 500 tons of coal taking him to the bottom of the lake, a 100 fathoms below. When Alex crawled up, black as Satan and dripping like Niobe, the water was running through the lee scuppers again, not standing in them. The pumpers were gaining on the leak. No more was coming in.

Jessie left the wheel, and got busy in the galley. Captain, mate, Alex, and the two other hands, took half hour tricks at the wheel in turn to get the cramps out of their arms from the everlasting pumping. Jessie brought bread and butter and meat and coffee, and they ate and drank with one hand on the pump brake or wheelspoke and food in the other. By God's Mercy the wind stayed light. A little puff would have blown the *SUFFEL* over, with all the water in her. At the end of 12 hours both pumps sucked dry. Everyone but Jessie flopped on the wet deck and slept. She steered. She called them 2 hours later. The light on Gibraltar Point was coming up strong and the street lights of Toronto pin pricked the sky. Bill Van Vlack met them with the tug *NELLIE BLY*, owned by Joe Goodwin. He had sold the coal cargo to Paddy Burns by telephone, the hour the *SUFFEL* was sighted. They towed to Burns Dock. When the lines were out he

asked Steve Taylor one question. Who did it? And he handed Alexander Taylor five \$5 bills.

Got to go now he explained, to take the *VAN ALLEN* down the lake. When you get unloaded, Steve, have a survey, and get all the work done that needed to re-class her for insurance. This trip'll pay for it all. No, don't lay the boys off. Keep em on full time till she's ready to sail again, and then sign em fresh. And double whatever you're paying Jessie. So long.

[Transcribed G. Mauthe, 26 September 1979. NMA ref. binder: gl-snider-0]