

STORM AND SHIPWRECK:
LAKE ONTARIO, AUGUST 1813

James Fenimore Cooper:
from Ned Myers; or, A Life Before the Mast

Born in Canada in 1793, Edward “Ned” Myers left home at age twelve to work as a cabin boy on the U.S. merchant ship *Stirling*. By the time of his death at age fifty-six, he had served on the crew of scores of vessels and had spent “a full twenty-five years out of sight of land.” In the winter of 1806, on one of *Stirling*’s passages from New York to Liverpool, Myers met a young James Fenimore Cooper, who in 1842 penned his memoirs. In two early chapters, Myers describes his adventures aboard USS *Scourge* on Lake Ontario in the summer of 1813. He recalls that the schooner, launched in 1811, was “unfit for [military] duty, but time pressed, and no better offered. . . . Her accommodations were bad enough, and she was so tender, that we could do little or nothing with her in a blow.” The “blow” described here came in the early hours of August 8, 1813, near present-day Hamilton, Ontario, after a long day’s patrol of the lake.

I was soon asleep, as sound as if lying in the bed of a king. How long my nap lasted, or what took place in the interval, I cannot say. I awoke, however, in consequence of large drops of rain falling on my face. Tom Goldsmith awoke at the same moment. When I opened my eyes, it was so dark I could not see the length of the deck. I arose and spoke to Tom, telling him it was about to rain, and that I meant to go down and get a nip, out of a little stuff we kept in our mess-chest, and that I would bring up the bottle if he wanted a taste. Tom answered, “this is nothing; we’re neither pepper nor salt.” One of the black men spoke, and asked me to bring up the bottle, and give him a nip, too. All this took half a minute, perhaps. I now remember to have heard a strange rushing noise to windward as I went towards the forward hatch, though it made no impression on me at the time. We had been lying between the starboard guns, which was the weather side of the vessel, if

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there were any weather side to it, there not being a breath of air, and no motion to the water, and I passed round to the larboard side, in order to find the ladder, which led up in that direction. The hatch was so small that two men could not pass at a time, and I felt my way to it, in no haste. One hand was on the bits, and a foot was on the ladder, when a flash of lightning almost blinded me. The thunder came at the next instant, and with it a rushing of winds that fairly smothered the clap.

The instant I was aware there was a squall, I sprang for the jib-sheet. Being captain of the fore-castle, I knew where to find it, and throw it loose at a jerk. In doing this, I jumped on a man named Leonard Lewis, and called on him to lend me a hand. I next let fly the larboard, or lee topsail-sheet, got hold of the clew-line, and, assisted by Lewis, got the clew half up. All this time I kept shouting to the man at the wheel to put his helm "hard down." The water was now up to my breast, and I knew the schooner must go over. Lewis had not said a word, but I called out to him to shift for himself, and belaying the clew-line, in hauling myself forward of the foremast, I received a blow from the jib-sheet that came near breaking my left arm. I did not feel the effect of this blow at the time, though the arm has since been operated on, to extract a tumour produced by this very injury.

All this occupied less than a minute. The flashes of lightning were incessant, and nearly blinded me. Our decks seemed on fire, and yet I could see nothing. I heard no hail, no order, no call; but the schooner was filled with the shrieks and cries of the men to leeward, who were lying jammed under the guns, shot-boxes, shot, and other heavy things that had gone down as the vessel fell over. The starboard second gun, from forward, had capsized, and come down directly over the forward hatch, and I caught a glimpse of a man struggling to get past it. Apprehension of this gun had induced me to drag myself forward of the mast, where I received the blow mentioned.

I succeeded in hauling myself up to windward, and in getting into the schooner's fore-channels. Here I met William Deer, the boatswain, and a black boy of the name of Philips, who was the powder-boy of our gun. "Deer, she's gone!" I said. The boatswain made no answer, but walked out on the fore-rigging, towards the mast-head. He probably had some vague

notion that the schooner's masts would be out of water if she went down, and took this course as the safest. The boy was in the chains the last I saw of him.

I now crawled aft, on the upper side of the bulwarks, amid a most awful and infernal din of thunder, and shrieks, and dazzling flashes of lightning; the wind blowing all the while like a tornado. When I reached the port of my own gun, I put a foot in, thinking to step on the muzzle of the piece; but it had gone to leeward with all the rest, and I fell through the port, until I brought up with my arms. I struggled up again, and continued working my way aft. As I got abreast of the main-mast, I saw some one had let run the halyards. I soon reached the becketts of the sweeps, and found four in them. I could not swim a stroke, and it crossed my mind to get one of the sweeps to keep me afloat. In striving to jerk the becket clear, it parted, and the forward ends of the four sweeps rolled down the schooner's side into the water. This caused the other ends to slide, and all the sweeps got away from me. I then crawled quite aft, as far as the fashion-piece. The water was pouring down the cabin companion-way like a sluice; and as I stood, for an instant, on the fashion-piece, I saw Mr. Osgood, with his head and part of his shoulders through one of the cabin windows, struggling to get out. He must have been within six feet of me. I saw him but a moment, by means of a flash of lightning, and I think he must have seen me. At the same time, there was a man visible on the end of the main-boom, holding on by the clew of the sail. I do not know who it was. This man probably saw me, and that I was about to spring; for he called out, "Don't jump overboard!—don't jump overboard! The schooner is righting."

I was not in a state of mind to reflect much on anything. I do not think more than three or four minutes, if as many, had passed since the squall struck us, and there I was standing on the vessel's quarter, led by Providence more than by any discretion of my own. It now came across me that if the schooner should right she was filled, and must go down, and that she might carry me with her in the suction. I made a spring, therefore, and fell into the water several feet from the place where I had stood. It is my opinion the schooner sunk as I left her. I went down some distance myself, and when I came up to the

surface, I began to swim vigorously for the first time in my life. I think I swam several yards, but of course will not pretend to be certain of such a thing, at such a moment, until I felt my hand hit something hard. I made another stroke, and felt my hand pass down the side of an object that I knew at once was a clincher-built boat. I belonged to this boat, and I now recollected that she had been towing astern. Until that instant I had not thought of her, but thus was I led in the dark to the best possible means of saving my life. I made a grab at the gunwale, and caught it in the stern-sheets. Had I swum another yard, I should have passed the boat, and missed her altogether! I got in without any difficulty, being all alive and much excited.

My first look was for the schooner. She had disappeared, and I supposed she was just settling under water. It rained as if the flood-gates of heaven were opened, and it lightened awfully. It did not seem to me that there was a breath of air, and the water was unruffled, the effects of the rain excepted. All this I saw, as it might be, at a glance. But my chief concern was to preserve my own life. I was cockswain of this very boat, and had made it fast to the taffrail that same afternoon, with a round turn and two half-hitches, by its best painter. Of course I expected the vessel would drag the boat down with her, for I had no knife to cut the painter. There was a gang-board in the boat, however, which lay fore and aft, and I thought this might keep me afloat until some of the fleet should pick me up. To clear this gang-board, then, and get it into the water, was my first object. I ran forward to throw off the lazy-painter that was coiled on its end, and in doing this I caught the boat's painter in my hand, by accident. A pull satisfied me that it was all clear! Some one on board must have cast off this painter, and then lost his chance of getting into the boat by an accident. At all events, I was safe, and I now dared to look about me.

My only chance of seeing, was during the flashes; and these left me almost blind. I had thrown the gang-board into the water, and I now called out to encourage the men, telling them I was in the boat. I could hear many around me, and, occasionally, I saw the heads of men, struggling in the lake. There being no proper place to scull in, I got an oar in the after rullock, and made out to scull a little, in that fashion. I

now saw a man quite near the boat; and, hauling in the oar, made a spring amidships, catching this poor fellow by the collar. He was very near gone; and I had a great deal of difficulty in getting him in over the gunwale. Our joint weight brought the boat down, so low, that she shipped a good deal of water. This turned out to be Leonard Lewis, the young man who had helped me to clew up the fore-topsail. He could not stand, and spoke with difficulty. I asked him to crawl aft, out of the water; which he did, lying down in the stern-sheets.

I now looked about me, and heard another; leaning over the gunwale, I got a glimpse of a man, struggling, quite near the boat. I caught him by the collar, too; and had to drag him in very much in the way I had done with Lewis. This proved to be Lemuel Bryant, the man who had been wounded by a hot shot, at York, as already mentioned, while the commodore was on board us. His wound had not yet healed, but he was less exhausted than Lewis. He could not help me, however, lying down in the bottom of the boat, the instant he was able.

For a few moments, I now heard no more in the water; and I began to scull again. By my calculation, I moved a few yards, and must have got over the spot where the schooner went down. Here, in the flashes, I saw many heads, the men swimming in confusion, and at random. By this time, little was said, the whole scene being one of fearful struggling and frightful silence. It still rained; but the flashes were less frequent, and less fierce. They told me, afterwards, in the squadron, that it thundered awfully; but I cannot say I heard a clap, after I struck the water. The next man caught the boat himself. It was a mulatto, from Martinique, who was Mr. Osgood's steward; and I helped him in. He was much exhausted, though an excellent swimmer; but alarm nearly deprived him of his strength. He kept saying, "Oh! Masser Ned—Oh! Masser Ned!" and lay down in the bottom of the boat, like the two others; I taking care to shove him over to the larboard side, so as to trim our small craft.

I kept calling out, to encourage the swimmers, and presently I heard a voice, saying, "Ned, I'm here, close by you." This was Tom Goldsmith, a messmate, and the very man under whose rug I had been sleeping, at quarters. He did not want much help, getting in, pretty much, by himself. I asked him, if he

were able to help me. "Yes, Ned," he answered, "I'll stand by you to the last; what shall I do?" I told him to take his tarpaulin, and to bail the boat, which, by this time, was a third full of water. This he did, while I sculled a little ahead. "Ned," says Tom, "she's gone down with her colours flying, for her pennant came near getting a round turn about my body, and carrying me down with her. Davy has made a good haul, and he gave us a close shave; but he didn't get you and me." In this manner did this thoughtless sailor express himself, as soon as rescued from the grasp of death! Seeing something on the water, I asked Tom to take my oar, while I sprang to the gunwale, and caught Mr. Bogardus, the master's mate, who was clinging to one of the sweeps. I hauled him in, and he told me, he thought, some one had hold of the other end of the sweep. It was so dark, however, we could not see even that distance. I hauled the sweep along, until I found Ebenezer Duffy, a mulatto, and the ship's cook. He could not swim a stroke; and was nearly gone. I got him in, alone, Tom bailing, lest the boat, which was quite small, should swamp with us.

As the boat drifted along, she reached another man, whom I caught also by the collar. I was afraid to haul this person in amidships, the boat being now so deep, and so small, and so I dragged him ahead, and hauled him in over the bows. This was the pilot, whose name I never knew. He was a lake-man, and had been aboard us the whole summer. The poor fellow was almost gone, and like all the rest, with the exception of Tom, he lay down and said not a word.

We had now as many in the boat as it would carry, and Tom and myself thought it would not do to take in any more. It is true, we saw no more, everything around us appearing still as death, the pattering of the rain excepted. Tom began to bail again, and I commenced hallooing. I sculled about several minutes, thinking of giving others a tow, or of even hauling in one or two more, after we got the water out of the boat; but we found no one else. I think it probable I sculled away from the spot, as there was nothing to guide me. I suppose, however, that by this time, all the Scourges had gone down, for no more were ever heard from.

Tom Goldsmith and myself now put our heads together as to what was best to be done. We were both afraid of falling

into the enemy's hands, for, they might have bore up in the squall, and run down near us. On the whole, however, we thought the distance between the two squadrons was too great for this; at all events, something must be done at once. So we began to row, in what direction even we did not know. It still rained as hard as it could pour, though there was not a breath of wind. The lightning came now at considerable intervals, and the gust was evidently passing away towards the broader parts of the lake. While we were rowing and talking about our chance of falling in with the enemy, Tom cried out to me to "avast pulling." He had seen a vessel, by a flash, and he thought she was English, from her size. As he said she was a schooner, however, I thought it must be one of our own craft, and got her direction from him. At the next flash I saw her, and felt satisfied she belonged to us. Before we began to pull, however, we were hailed "boat ahoy!" I answered. "If you pull another stroke, I'll fire into you"—came back—"what boat's that? Lay on your oars, or I'll fire into you." It was clear we were mistaken ourselves for an enemy, and I called out to know what schooner it was. No answer was given, though the threat to fire was repeated, if we pulled another stroke. I now turned to Tom and said, "I know that voice—that is old Trant." Tom thought "we were in the wrong shop." I now sung out, "This is the Scourge's boat—our schooner has gone down, and we want to come alongside." A voice next called from the schooner—"Is that you, Ned?" This I knew was my old ship-mate and school-fellow, Jack Mallet, who was acting as boatswain of the *Julia*, the schooner commanded by sailing-master James Trant, one of the oddities of the service, and a man with whom the blow often came as soon as the word. I had known Mr. Trant's voice, and felt more afraid he would fire into us, than I had done of anything which had occurred that fearful night. Mr. Trant, himself, now called out—"Oh-ho; give way, boys, and come alongside." This we did, and a very few strokes took us up to the *Julia*, where we were received with the utmost kindness. The men were passed out of the boat, while I gave Mr. Trant an account of all that had happened. This took but a minute or two.

Mr. Trant now inquired in what direction the Scourge had gone down, and, as soon as I had told him, in the best manner

I could, he called out to Jack Mallet—"Oh-ho, Mallet—take four hands, and go in the boat and see what you can do—take a lantern, and I will show a light on the water's edge, so you may know me." Mallet did as ordered, and was off in less than three minutes after we got alongside. Mr. Trant, who was much humoured, had no officer in the *Julia*, unless Mallet could be called one. He was an Irishman by birth, but had been in the American navy ever since the revolution, dying a lieutenant, a few years after this war. Perhaps no man in the navy was more generally known, or excited more amusement by his oddities, or more respect for his courage. He had come on the lake with the commodore, with whom he was a great pet, and had been active in all the fights and affairs that had yet taken place. His religion was to hate an Englishman.

Mr. Trant now called the *Scourges* aft, and asked more of the particulars. He then gave us a glass of grog all round, and made his own crew splice the main-brace. The *Julias* now offered us dry clothes. I got a change from Jack Reilly, who had been an old messmate, and with whom I had always been on good terms. It knocked off raining, but we shifted ourselves at the galley fire below. I then went on deck, and presently we heard the boat pulling back. It soon came alongside, bringing in it four more men that had been found floating about on sweeps and gratings. On inquiry, it turned out that these men belonged to the *Hamilton*, Lt. Winter—a schooner that had gone down in the same squall that carried us over. These men were very much exhausted, too, and we all went below, and were told to turn in.

I had been so much excited during the scenes through which I had just passed, and had been so much stimulated by grog, that, as yet, I had not felt much of the depression natural to such events. I even slept soundly that night, nor did I turn out until six the next morning.

When I got on deck, there was a fine breeze; it was a lovely day, and the lake was perfectly smooth. Our fleet was in a good line, in pretty close order, with the exception of the *Governor Tompkins*, Lieutenant Tom Brown, which was a little to leeward, but carrying a press of sail to close with the commodore. Mr. Trant perceiving that the *Tompkins* wished to speak us in passing, brailed his foresail and let her luff up close under our

lee. "Two of the schooners, the Hamilton and the Scourge, have gone down in the night," called out Mr. Brown; "for I have picked up four of the Hamilton's." "Oh-ho!"—answered Mr. Trant—"That's no news at all! for I have picked up *twelve*; eight of the Scourge's, and four of the Hamilton's—aft fore-sheet."

These were all that were ever saved from the two schooners, which must have had near a hundred souls on board them. The two commanders, Lieutenant Winter and Mr. Osgood were both lost, and with Mr. Winter went down I believe, one or two young gentlemen. The squadron could not have moved much between the time when the accidents happened and that when I came on deck, or we must have come round and gone over the same ground again, for we now passed many relics of the scene, floating about in the water. I saw sponges, gratings, sweeps, hats, &c., scattered about, and in passing ahead we saw one of the latter that we tried to catch; Mr. Trant ordering it done, as he said it must have been Lieutenant Winter's. We did not succeed, however; nor was any article taken on board. A good look-out was kept for men, from aloft, but none were seen from any of the vessels. The lake had swallowed up the rest of the two crews; and the Scourge, as had been often predicted, had literally become a coffin to a large portion of her people.