



**Abridged excerpts from
On Why The Quilt-Maker Became a Dragon
(1985)**

By past Poet Laureate of Alaska Sheila Nickerson
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*Let me tell
the story of the S.S. Princess Sophia.
She left Skagway for Seattle
on the night of October 23, 1918,
her hold kept horses and gold,
a summer's haul from the Yukon and beyond,
and Christmas parcels for soldiers in France.
She was the last ship out before winter,
glory and celebration,
bright lights on the dark way south.
At 2:00 a.m., in a blizzard,
she struck Vanderbilt Reef.*

*A sister ship, Princess Alice,
was on her way from Vancouver.
There was no immediate danger.
Standing by was a chain of Ships
like a song:
U.S. lighthouse tender Cedar,
U.S.S. Peterson, King and Winge,
Estabeth, Anita Phillips,
Amy, Excursion, Elinor,
Elsinore, Lone Fisherman.*

*In the first dark
of October 25, in raging snow,
Sophia rolled off the reef and sank.
No one survived. No one. But they didn't
drown. They died of exposure, or suffocated
in oil, along with the porpoises and murre.*

*The final conversation with Sophia
went like this:
Sophia: "Taking water and foundering.
For God's sake come and save us."
Cedar: "Coming full speed but cannot see
on account of thick snows and taking heavy
seas."
Sophia: "All right, but for God's sake hurry.
Water coming in the room." Soon after:
"Just time to say goodbye. We are
foundering."*

*When the frozen bodies from the Sophia
were stacked on the Juneau docks in October 1918,
in the days of influenza,
the town lacked enough caskets.*

*The Masonic funeral of John F. Pugh,
Customs Collector for Alaska
had to be held in private
because of the epidemic.
And during that time, it is said,
the prostitutes turned nurse.
During that time, much was said.*

*The Alaska Daily Empire read:
Saturday, October 26, 1918:
PRINCESS SOPHIA SINKS AND
350 SOULS PROBABLY PERISH
"This disaster wipes out
many of the best people of the Interior,"
said J. C. Rathbone.*

*The diary of passenger John Maskell
was found. It said, " We are surrounded
by a number of small boats, but it is
too rough to transfer. Realizing
that we are surrounded by grave danger,
I make this my last will."*

*In the Alaska Daily Empire
it was reported:
"Walter J. O'Brien, agent
for the Canadian Pacific at Dawson,
who with his wife and five children
was lost on the Princess Sophia,
[was] found clasping his son closely
in his arms when his body was found.
Difficulty was experienced
in releasing the child."*

*Playing at the Palace was The Pugilist
with Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle.*

*It was said that some of the bodies
carried considerable sums in Liberty Bonds,
War Savings Stamps, Bank Drafts, and Currency.*

*By November 5, the reports had dwindled.
divers recovered the body of Charlie A. Paddock
and a safe with \$62,00 worth of gold.
Diver Thomas Veitch found the body
of a horse near the safe.
The ship was broken in two,
the staterooms swept clean
by currents.*

*On the night of November 11, 1918,
in the dark of Armistice Day,
Princess Alice brought
156 bodies into Vancouver.
The Great War was over.*

*The English setter found at Tee Harbor,
only living thing to survive
(and which we talk about more
than the seventeen frozen Children),
went to live with the miners
at Last Chance Basin, safely
out of the reach of the sea.*

*Private Auris W. McQueen, Signal Corps,
to: "Dear Mama:
"The decks are all icy,
and this wreck has all the marks
of a movie stage setting.
All we lack is the hero and the vampire.
I am going to quit, and see if I can rustle
a bucket and a line to get some sea water
to wash in. We are mighty lucky
we were not all buried in the sea water."*

*There are only some packets
of personal effects,
escheated property,
left in the State Museum.
I have held them: rusted eyeglasses,
keys to mysterious doors,
tokens and trinkets,
naturalization papers and visas,
tickets for the ride to death.
And some were children's.
George Allen was a Turk,
Carl Knutson was a Swede.*