

# A LITTLE ADVENTURE IN IGNORANCE

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I OPENED the hall-jalousies to the glory of frangipani laden sunshine and tapped the barometer. The needle trembled and came to rest a hairsbreadth up.

"A fine day and bar rising," I sang out in my best sailorman's tone to Chris, who was leaning over the banisters above me. "And a fair wind to Sandys—Let's go."

"Isn't that an easterly wind, and isn't an easterly wind 'secret, full of wiles, meditating aggressions'?"

"That's Conrad" said I, "and so is this: 'As a rule, the east wind has a remarkable stability'."

I glanced up at her, and seeing her hesitate, cast a favorite lure:

The day, so mild, is heaven's own child,  
With earth and ocean reconciled.  
The airs I feel around me steal  
Are murmuring to the murmuring keel.

Chris came down stairs, a sweater on her arm, her eyes sea-blue.

In matters of seamanship, Chris was the happy possessor of the ignorance that is bliss. I was the equally happy possessor of the knowledge that is often misery. Together, we were the happy possessors of a Mahone-built, centre-board sloop, thirty feet over all, which had been formally entered on the books at His Majesty's dockyard, Ireland Island, as the *Arbutus* of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

In the little blue and white cove, *Arbutus* strained at her moorings invitingly. Scorning a reef, I ran up the mainsail, wishing, as I sprang the peak halyard taut and noted the native craft about us spilling the wind from their leg-o'-mutton sails and springing up again, that the heavy gaff was in Flanders.

I slipped the mooring bridle overboard, and held the jib to windward. The little yacht backed quickly away from her berth with a staccato tattoo of reef-points. The bow payed off, the jib filled away, the boom swung over to starboard, and, the wind sounding reveille in the rigging, *Arbutus* showed her slender symmetry to the watchers on the waterfront, and bore away to the west.

Cool and constant, the easterly wind swept the white sloop past island after island of the coral archipelago that dots the harbour.

Here, right under our lee, is the island where the Boer prisoners were confined in '99. Yonder, off that point, one of them was shot when swimming for liberty. The same island was used for German prisoners during the Great War. Peaceful and inviting it looks this morning; but what tales its cedars and oleanders could tell of homesick and broken hearts, for even to this remote and quiet paradise the wars of distant continents have flung their bitter spray.

I leaned back in the cock-pit and looked up at the little red and white pennant. Clear cut against the sky it pointed its slender finger over the bow.

"Meditating aggressions"! I scoffed, "It's the finest of fine days."

"He breaketh the ships of Tarshish with an east wind" murmured Chris, looking solemnly back at the dwindling city as though she expected to see a black tornado erase its creamy beauty of spire and arch in a terrible instant.

Having nothing with which to meet indubitable inspiration, I kept silence and watched the little coves along the shore unfold one after another, an exquisite panorama of white cottages with their green jalousies, pink oleanders and scarlet hibiscus, dreaming in remote and confident quietude—a far cry from the long buried glory of the ships of Tarshish.

"Chris, what are you listening to?" I asked.

"To the water under the bow."

We both listened a little while and then looked at each other, dissatisfied as usual. How often we had done this only to miss something! Nothing can be more expressive of the difference between North and South than the difference in the sound of the sea under the bow of your ship, whether she be big or little.

How often have I held *Arbutus*, close hauled, into a whacking chop off Fort Clarence, the gulls about me crying with the crying wind, the sharp spray stinging my face, and the heart of me keeping time with her rise and drop under my feet! How often have I brought her snoring to her moorings in the North West Arm with rattle of cordage and canvas, to lie through the misty night, still after tumultuous seas! How often, here in the South, has my little ship threshed out to sea, flailing the waves in pride, and, turning, come roaring home! But here, to windward or to leeward, we always miss the bright chime of waters under the bow and note, instead, a creamy smoothness in the sound. I think it communicates itself to our hearts. Perhaps it is our untravelled hearts which communicate something to the sea.

But now I notice *Arbutus* making slow deep curtseys to the horizon. The waves are plangent on the windward shore of the

island under the boom; the frail nautili have furled their translucent sails and disappeared. The Great Sound ahead of us tosses its dazzling froth to the hard, bright sky. A big trading sloop out of Southampton crosses our bow, double-reefed, on the starboard tack, plunging into the rising seas, the water streaming off her glistening sides. The black helmsman, a weatherwise old sailor, shouts something which we cannot hear and points to our sail and to the sky. His meaning is clear. We have too much sail, and the wind is steadily rising.

Chris moved to a seat amidships, the shining of her morning face a little dimmed.

"There arose a tempestuous mind called Euroclydon. . . . Was Euroclydon an easterly wind?" she asked, and chanted:

Euroclydon urges the bold riding surges  
That in white crested lines gallop in from the sea.

"Chris," I said, "You have quoted King David, and you have quoted Saint Luke, and now you quote Ben Taylor. Two of them were inspired, I admit, but none of them was a sailor. Euroclydon was an easterly wind, but Joe Conrad was a sailor and he says that an easterly wind is steady."

"Well, Saint Luke says they let the ship drive."

"That's just what I'm doing," I replied. But I did not tell her that it was for the same reason, and forthwith banished the comparison between *Arbutus* and the tubby old *Castor and Pollux*.

By this time the yacht had the bit in her teeth. I looked ahead. Over the rearing bowsprit I saw our destination. A little concrete wharf without a breakwater extended not more than fifty feet out from the dagger-like coral rocks of the shore. To the north of it, the breakers were too near to permit of sea-room in which to fetch her around. To the south, however, the shore fell away sufficiently, I thought, to bring the yacht alongside the pier without reaching beyond its head.

But I must shorten sail or things would begin to go, for *Arbutus* was steering wild. Suddenly she yawed and the end of the boom dipped several feet of its length in the sea. I glanced at Chris, but she had struck her flag and was crouching in the cuddy, not, thank heaven, as frightened as she was sick. Could she help me heave to and reef? I thought not, and without further delay, put the tiller over to starboard. Slowly *Arbutus* swung her head into the wind, and while she plunged grimly into the seas, I ran forward, hauled down the jib, threw the peak halyard off the cleat and, amid a tangle of ropes and rattle of canvas, ran back, seized the tiller and

put her away on her course with a throbbing but easier heart. "Any more quotations?" I sang out, but Chris's reply from the cuddy was perfectly original.

We were now halfway across the Great Sound. To the North the *Arcadian*, crack ship of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, lay in Murray's anchorage. Extending in a wide semi-circle, the western islands of the group lay to right, left and in front of us, Ireland Island, to the North, with the huge yellow floating dock looming up from the Camber where it lies peacefully after its long and risky journey across the western ocean. The white buildings strung themselves out like dominoes between blue sky and blue sea. Directly ahead, masses of green foliage with an endless narrow line of surf dividing them from the sea. And over and through it all, the fair still sunshine and the invisible screaming wind.

*Arbutus* swung down the dazzling seas in a smother of foam, the slatting gaff hanging dejectedly by the throat halyards, the gold ball and bright pennant at the masthead, flinging defiance to wind and sea.

I stood up and considered the problem of making port. The little pier, now within a mile, stood out plainly in the line of surf, but the prospect was unattractive. If I ran in shore too far before rounding up, the yacht would lose headway before reaching the pier and drift on the rocks, as I could not fetch out of the cove with a crippled mainsail. On the other hand, if I laid her about too soon, she would shoot past the pierhead, leaving me more sea-room and another chance.

I decided to risk the latter alternative. The worst of it was that I should have to carry my mooring line ashore myself, a difficult performance, because it was flood tide and the waves were breaking over the pier.

I was keeping off a bit, preparatory to the last act in our little comedy of errors, when a big negro stepped into sight from behind a cottage. He quickly took in the situation, and ran down to the pier, shouting and waving encouragement. I made the best calculation I could, and bore down on the tiller. *Arbutus* flung her bow into the racing seas as though glad to face them after a long retreat.

And now came the only moment of suspense. Would she make it?—Would she overreach? To my relief I saw that she would fetch past the pier. I dropped the tiller and, in excited gratitude, enveloped my waiting attendant with a snarl of rope thrown with more force than skill. Disentangling himself, he snubbed her and made fast.

Chris came out of the cuddy, a little wan, but plainly as much relieved as I, stepped gingerly ashore and hurried to dry land. Our companion looked us over deliberately and, I thought, with a kind of coldness. Should he confer with the foolhardy? In the kindly shelter of his cottage he decided that he would.

"I think that east wind is a little too strong to-day for that risk sir."

"But an east wind is a steady wind", I quoted.

"Yes sir, steady sir, but treacherous."

I looked at him sharply. He had used Conrad's very word, although he had never heard of him. Clearly, this man, in his remote island, in his struggle with elemental things, had drunk at the same spring as the Great Sailor.

I thanked my coloured benefactor heartily, and asked him when the duty-boat for the city called.

"She won't call to-night sir—too stormy." It was indeed. The sun had clouded over and the dreary wind, now a gale, enveloped everything in a streaming fog.

We took a carriage for the fifteen-mile drive home, motor cars not being allowed in the narrow roads of the colony. Leaning back in my comfortable corner, I was somnolently reflecting that it was probably in just such an easterly gale as this, three hundred years before, that Sir George Somers and his company were driven on the eastern islands of the group. The words of the old chronicler came to me out of the troubled night with the distinctness of a human voice: "In the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and four, Sir George Somers was cast away upon the eastern islands of Juan Bermudez in the midst of such a gale as when Jonah flew into Tarshish."

Whether a ghostly echo of the words brushed the consciousness of my companion, I shall never know, but she suddenly sat up, as though I had spoken, and exclaimed:

"Well, that point is settled beyond dispute."

"What point?" I asked.

"As to whether Shakespeare referred to Bermuda when he spoke of 'the vexed Bermoothes,' because he certainly did."