

# Cruises of the Joan

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W.E. SINCLAIR



*The Passage to Vigo*

WHEN WE TOOK our departure from Bishop's Rock light at 2 a.m. on June 8th, leaving the Scilly Isles and going out into the unknown, I confess I felt afraid. Such is the weakness of mind left me by my ancestors that bad weather seemed able to be much worse here than within sight of land. Belief in the soundness of the arithmetic which was to find our position and which we had been trained to trust vanished with the light of Bishop's Rock. After all there really was some magical mysteriousness in starting with a machine-found angle; doing curious operations that changed angles to huge numbers, which in their turn were added and subtracted, turned this way and that, and called by half a dozen different names; and ending with a result that wasn't an angle at all. It was magic; and experience only could prove whether our incantations would work.

But by good luck we were let down gently at the beginning of our cruise; for we had calm seas and soft favouring airs during the first week out from Falmouth. This gave us ample time to settle down to work. We got used to a system of four hours' steering and four hours' not steering; and I got rid of my feeling of scare thoroughly during this period.

Then the constant sun and excellent horizon gave us just the opportunity we wanted to learn how to use our sextant. By the time the wind blew and the waves grew big and the *Joan* was tossed violently about, we had learned the most important secrets of its manipulation. We had then become able to snap an

altitude in a few seconds and feel confident that the angle was as accurate as circumstances and our sextant permitted.

And although we both knew how to calculate our latitude and longitude from noon and morning sights we found that chasing logarithms and haversines up and down the *Joan's* cabin was a different exploit from looking them out in comfort at home. We made many mistakes this week and we argued about each one. The mate was the winner of most of these arguments and he grew far too proud of being able to make seven and eight come to fifteen every time. One day I put my head out of the cabin in a great hurry.

“Put the helm over quick. Make all the easting you can. We're miles away to the west; a great deal further than we ought to be.”

The *Joan* was then travelling at about two miles an hour so that there was plainly no need for hurry. The mate coolly suggested that I must be wrong in my addition or that I had mixed the latitude with the longitude. He offered, if I would take his place at the tiller, to put my work right for me. As he was too large to be bludgeoned I returned to my calculations and discovered the mistake.

We used different formulas and this provided an excellent check upon accuracy of working. He used low-class second-mate's methods, while my ways he scorned as being absurdly highbrow. But when as weeks went on and we could arrive at the same cuts with position lines, using the moon, Jupiter, and some of the bright stars with something like familiarity we began to respect one another. Now bad seas during the first week might have rendered any attempt at taking sights and calculating positions quite impossible, and this would probably have disheartened us. We were certainly lucky in the start.

During these early days we saw our first Atlantic swell. The waves were big and gentle. You could tell there were waves

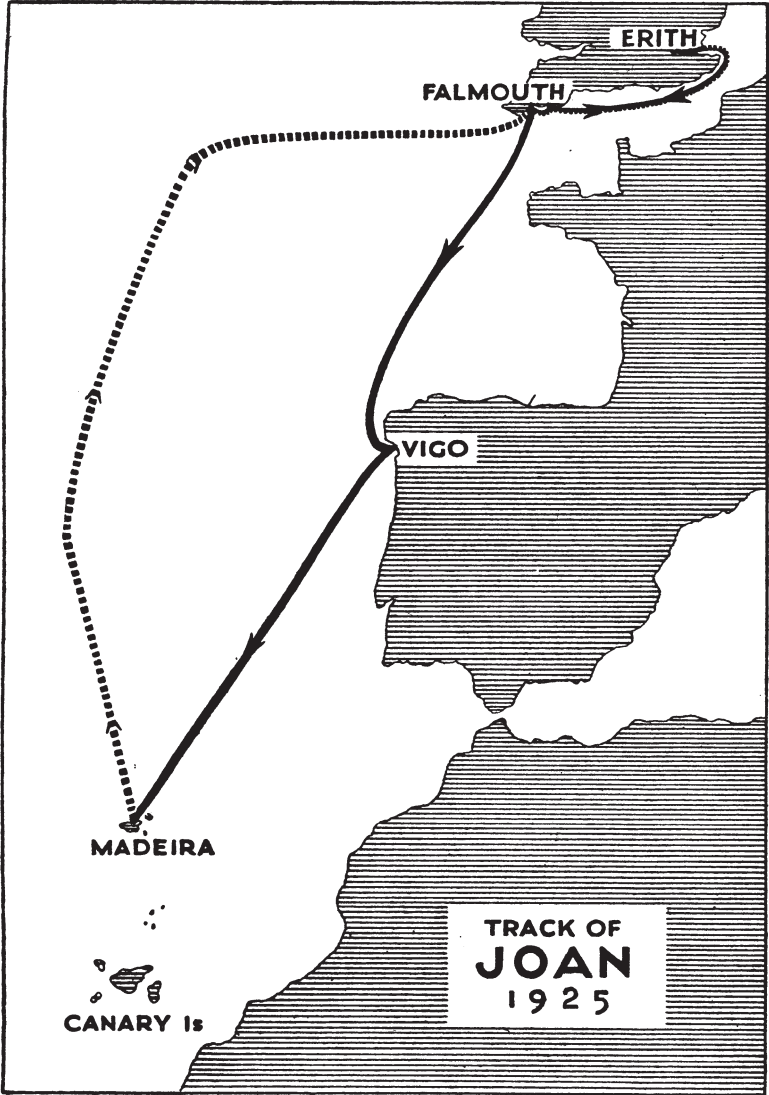
only by seeing the field of water around slope gently in another direction. They were imposing in appearance because we had never seen them before, but we quickly became used to them. They were perfectly smooth, calm, and harmless. In their troughs, however, we lost the wind and this caused the sails and spars to fall frequently from one side of the boat to the other.

One day I lost my best hat. It was Byford's fault. He wanted what he called a life-line rigged round the boat. To me it seemed more like a death-trap; for I was everlastingly getting caught in it, and either half-strangled or tripped up. It caught my hat and tossed it overboard, and although we turned back and searched part of the Atlantic for it we never got a sight of it again.

After we had been at sea a week the weather changed. A northerly wind sprang up, which quickly grew strong. At noon on June 14th we were a hundred miles northwest of Vigo Bay. The wind was blowing hard by that time. The *Lancastrian Prince* passed close to us as I was holding on to the shrouds and making desperate efforts to shoot the sun. Her crew and passengers must have viewed us with amusement or compassion according to the way they had been brought up. We fought out our position and set our course.

Two hours later I decided to heave to until the weather improved. Stowing all the sails which the *Joan* was then carrying, we hoisted a reefed trysail and let her alone. Byford estimated the wind force as No. 9, and said it was as bad as on the last day of the previous year when we were on the *Annie*.

The next morning we rescued a pigeon with labels attached to his legs – 22E NURP 3946 on the one, and U 854 on the other – a racing pigeon. He came aboard during the night. Byford saw him when he looked out at dawn. The bird flew



FALMOUTH TO MADEIRA

away in terror, but returned when the frightful object had disappeared. Later on without knowing he was there, I threw overboard a pail of refuse. The bird, lacking in judgment, flew off again, but this time he fell into the water and being unable to rise he scrambled and fluttered after the boat. When he came alongside I reached over and picked him up. He ate of our biscuit and drank of our water, but in return he made a great mess in the cockpit. Later we had enough water over us to soak him again and again after he had begun to get dry, and so we brought him into the cabin and put him in a box. He at once showed that he was a well-bred bird by leaving the box to perch upon the edge of our pail face outwards.

The boat had to be pumped out every 4 hours or so; for the water under her, over her, and round her had found all the chinks that required re-caulking.

During the third day the wind became a bit easier and the water appeared to be smoothing a trifle, but it was not good enough to set sail. We were both tired of it, for the *Joan's* motion did not encourage you to relax. The boat remained mostly broadside on to wind and sea.

The pigeon did not remain well bred. I was disgusted with him and I determined not to go in for pigeons. He was ungrateful too; for you'd think he'd have laid an egg or two. Not he. He ate his fill and he drank his fill and then objected to being chucked into the cockpit while we cleaned up his garden manure. True, he got soaked and bedraggled by the first wave that splashed aboard and I suppose he had not been brought up to it. You can't imagine how voluminously that bird excreted.

The fourth night was worse than ever. We nailed up the doors of the cockpit lockers and fastened strips of wood along the edges of the trap-door. We got the sea anchor ready as a pos-

sible last resource and I thought at one time that the trysail had better come down. We concluded, however, to leave it alone till matters grew worse.

In the morning it eased again and the sun came out. I got a noon altitude under conditions that made it possible – easily possible – to get it wrong. It was out of the question trying to sail the boat and I did not like even the job of gybing to get her on the other tack. Perhaps at that time we were passing over a bad patch, for waves were smashing upon us and leaving their tops over us every five minutes.

As far as we could make out we were blown sixty miles southwest during these last three days; and we made ourselves a hundred miles west of Muros Bay which is ten miles south of Cape Finisterre.

The dicky-bird ate biscuit like a hungry man and would take it from my hand. If he had but controlled his stern I should have liked him better.

Our bunks were still comfortably dry, but a deal of water got in all round the covering board and through some of the seams. Whenever a wave hit the cuddy-top the water squirted across the cabin under the roof in two places on my side; and as we hove to on the starboard tack that was the only side which had been tested.

That same day we gybed her round to the port tack, set the storm jib, and moved slowly on a south-east course.

The pigeon was a nuisance – not wilfully, of course – he looked miserable under the bridge-deck and the place he occupied was fit only for pigeons. I wondered if I might make a little money selling guano. Although we fastened a handsome bamboo perch for him and placed our largest pail under the middle of it, the guano machine refused to stay on the perch or to deposit in the pail.

We hove to again at 7.30 p.m., put up our riding-light at the mizzen, and turned in for the night. It was almost like bringing up in the "Haven." The wind seemed as bad as ever and that mode of heaving to (with jib as well as trysail) was less comfortable than the last. It may be that we took the waves at a worse angle. But at any rate we had got back a bit of our lost easting and on this tack I hoped we should not lose any more.

The sea was confused and the waves were big. They rose up like hills of water, many of the tops being breakers or leaping pyramids. While I was steering that afternoon one of them broke at the shrouds and smothered the boat from there aft. I got wet, for a pailful ran up my sleeve and never returned. The cockpit was half-full of water and I thought a great deal had gone into the cabin. Thinking that the *Joan* was about to sink I began to pump hard, but when Byford said he had not seen more than splashes, and when I found that the pump sucked in two minutes I went back to the tiller.

We rode with our jib till four o'clock next morning. The wind blew harder than ever and the seas were bigger. She rode well all night, but we took in our jib at four o'clock to ease her. I don't know whether the change made any difference or not. We got our warps out for the sea anchor and prepared to let it go if necessary, but I did not want to do this; for we had no tripping-line, so that if the sea anchor had proved a failure we thought we should lose it and our warps as well. Our next step was to make ready to lower the trysail. But we were still determined to wait.

I sat in the cockpit and watched. The waves were becoming a bit smoother and bigger and when the *Joan* took them at an angle of 45° her behaviour was perfect. When she swung round to take them abeam or a little aft her motion was more unpleasant, but at no time did she take any water aboard except, first,



what she scooped up on her foredeck and, second, what came aboard when the top of a wave actually broke on her. Each wave whose top tumbled roared like a surf on shore, and under the white foam I could often see the shimmering green of light shining through the lifted water. A wave might break or foam within a few feet of the boat, but none of it reached our deck. It appeared to be necessary for the waves to break on the boat before we got wet. We were all three wet. One wave I estimated at 15 feet from trough to crest. Many of them looked fearful, but they could all be admired in safety from the *Joan's* cockpit.

We did not attempt to take an altitude that day. The difficulty was too great.

The pigeon was still miserable; I wished he was constipated.

We were hove to, altogether, for five days in this bad weather. It was not till 6 p.m. on June 19th that we were able to hoist our mainsail. Then we set off in a good northerly breeze which lasted for twelve hours.

At the end of that spell the wind dropped, the sea was calm and a heavy mist lay everywhere. The pigeon hopped off the boat into the water then, but he immediately paddled back again to be picked up.

On Saturday and Sunday (the 21st) we took numerous angles and worked with many struggles at position lines. They fixed us in all sorts of places and it was not till we got a noon altitude that we felt anything like positive about our latitude. We then sailed E. by N. for Europe, and on Monday morning we caught sight of the high land south of Vigo Bay. It was pleasant enough to see land again, but being uncertain which part of the continent we were looking at we sailed in closer for further information. When later in the day we saw the islands that lie at the entrance of Vigo Bay I offered the mate my congratulations upon his excellent landfall and of course he did the same to me.

It was dark when we drew near the entrance, there was little wind, and there was an uncomfortable roll. We hove to till daylight came so that we could see our way in, and then under a warm sun and with a fair wind the boat sailed gently half-way to Vigo. We made the boat tidy and brought out our anchor which we shackled to the cable in readiness to let go, and then we took it in turns to clean ourselves.

On the way in the pigeon promenaded about the deck and finally established himself forward. I was afraid that he would be hurt by the sheets there and went forward to entice him to come aft. But he took umbrage at this and hopped into the air off the yacht. He flew up in the sky and out to sea, and the last we saw of him was as a speck in the sky sailing northwards.

The mountains and lovely shores of Vigo Bay made the pleasanter picture in the brilliant sunshine, and we enjoyed that sail immensely although we were both tired and sleepy from being up all night. The wind died away and we drifted inshore until we could anchor and wait for another breeze. It came up by noon and we went on till we at last brought up on June 23rd at the end of the little bay where the town of Vigo stands. We refused all offers to land until we had slept a couple of hours and then we went ashore, straight to the nearest thirst-quenching café. And I can still, in imagination, sit there under the shady trees, and gaze delightedly at the high purple hills over the bay and the blue water beneath them.