

CHAPTER X

Down on the Blackwater Ebb

RISING EASTERLY THE WIND WAS. After a fine afternoon, the breeze at nightfall was beginning palpably to stir; it came over the flats with a long sigh: southing across the dark water, it lost itself again over the land to lee. Night had gathered, and as yet the yacht lay at her mooring, for the tide was still flowing. There was no sense in starting to beat out over a contrary tide when the tide would soon itself turn to help us. The ebb seaward would begin just after midnight. Therefore, still moored off Heybridge Basin, we had lighted the cabin lamp and made ourselves comfortable in that drowsily comfortable domain below, there to wait. We should be off at midnight.

Sailing down a dark tidal river on the ebb has an attraction all its own. Partly it derives its savour from the fact that one brief mistake brings reflection prolonged beyond the ordinary; if the deep channel is missed and the yacht touches, she stays there. The water will be streaming away eastward all the time, and she will soon be left, towering solidly from the plashy levels, ignobly high and dry, and with nothing about her but miles of tide-forsaken banks.

Even by daylight it is no rare happening for a yacht to become a perverted example in this way. Through the glasses, before the light failed and the tide rose, we had been able to see two yachts listing forlornly on the mud lower down. Clearly they had gone aground in broad daylight. And there they were still.

The wind whimpered over the dark flats; rising in gusts, it possessed the darkness. To seaward of us some

dark blur greyly moved. Materializing gradually, the dim loom of it took form as a barge. A barge, running free and barely distinguishable, slipped rapidly by under a merest corner of topsail only, and let go as she swung to the tide. The rattle of cable was heard; then—blown in snatches—vague sounds of work and bustle came to us across the grey water, and words, deep-throated. After that the blurred form of the barge rode to her anchor as if tenantless in the dark; the men had gone below.

Starlight now there was none, for this easterly wind had piled up a grey darkness of cloud over all the sky; and night was unmitigated. Full night it was when the sails were set, and at 12.15 by the clock the sheets were hauled home and the yacht began slipping through the dark water. The foam of her wake and the bow wave of the dinghy glimmered astern, greyly-white in the dark level. The water was ruffled and creased by the rising wind. Some other dark yacht, moored and tenantless, seemed as if she slid by us as she was dropped astern; we were really under way.

Evidently that barge had been bound for the wharf by Salt Hall in Chigborough Creek. Had she been bound for Maldon, she would have held her course. Up through the darkness they come, mysterious dark-sailed objects, and work through the narrow fairway to Maldon, up to the old town where the lights of the Hythe and waterfront tremble reflected in the broken sea-tides. The blur of misty gas-light from the old streets is beyond.

“Maldon River” they all call it, and not without reason. Following the Blackwater up from the sea, those widely swept contours that contain the tide-way converge gradually, and the great spaces lessen. The land closes; the highway of the water narrows. That silver line is leading some whither, and has so led for nearly twenty centuries. Diffusiveness of sunlit landscape and of creeks fingering away aimlessly landward on each side is exchanged for the concentration and purpose of a slim waterway embanked and, at last, for the ancient town.

Clustering red-roofed up its hillside, Maldon is near kin of Rye. Like Rye also, Maldon is a town of depart-



TIDAL • FLATS • AT • MOONRISE •

ed supremacy. A Roman colony once, it became the chief seaport of Essex in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It has its mood of reverie, often enough, at twilight now, when brown dusk of the sunset is behind it. The barges' topmasts over the trees are slenderly-lined, beside the ancient church. Wreaths of chimney-smoke, blurring the west, will soften all the outlines. Then, at high water, there is sound of voices and clatter of blocks down at the water, and brown sails drift over; the fishing fleet is away with the tide.

Beside the Hythe the sprit-sail barges are warped nowadays, and the fishing fleet lies, listed landward, at top of a slope of beach. The tide, which has brought the ships in, goes seaward again and leaves them; the fairway is so shallow that it will barely float a dinghy; the long flat-bottomed local punts alone are adequate.

Often the yacht has herself listed over for one tide at Maldon, before she has slipped seaward again on the next. And now she was away seaward too, turning to windward in the dark.

Just visible in that abiding last glimmer of greyness (for water is still grey though the land be solidly black), Hillypool Buoy slipped clattering away astern of us, close at hand; and now—with long board and short—we

began to beat down the Ware. The smacksmen may be able to do this successfully by some inherited instinct, but personally I make no boast and use the lead. And on a dark night even the smacksmen have sometimes sent a gruff word of inquiry through the dark. The yacht will be lying perhaps at anchor in the fairway.

“Where’s the Ford Crik Buoy lay o’ you?” comes a deep voice over the water, as the dark-sailed smack, unlighted and vaguely seen, if seen at all, slides by on the ebb.

“Ay, I see you’re in the fairway, not the crik,” it adds hoarsely. “You ain’t far off the edge, where you’d lust over, come ebb. That’s dark, that is. Yes, yes, snug you are, snug if it blowed heavens hard, easterly.”

And the blur of sail is lost in the darkness.

As I say, I make no boast and use the lead. The channel just here is regular in contour, and the use of the lead is an indefectible guide and safeguard, when turning to windward, even on the darkest night.

Over the bows the flicker of a tiny yellow point of light glinted for a moment, and then darkness blotted it. Again the yellow star blinked, and revealed itself as a swinging lantern, which, after swaying actively for a few moments, came to rest and so remained. One of the stranded yachts had kedged off into the channel at top of the tide; she was now riding to her anchor, and her skipper was just putting up the riding-light before he turned in. Heeling to the breeze, we cut a grey line through the tide towards her, and slipped close past her stern with the quick sound of the ripple and rustle of water that broke from our forefoot. The gleam of the riding-light shone on his figure and on the deck of the anchored yacht; it picked out the deck and cabin skylight, yellowly lit against the sheer background of night. We were by.

“Good-night. Fine breeze,” came over the water in response to my own word; the darkness swallowed us and we were again away on port tack into the very soul of the night.

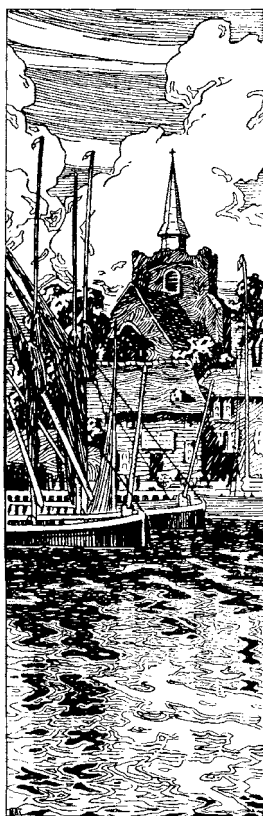
Like the smacksmen of these waters, we seldom trouble—unless virtuously inclined beyond the ordinary—to

show side-lights on our night work here. Elsewhere one may be punctilious enough, but it feels more congruous in some obscure fashion to steal through the darkness of our own home-waters unlighted, being thus more intimately part of the dark scheme of night, which indifferently possesses its grey solitude of unseen water and wide salting. That—as I take it—is the fanciful portion of the excuse; the remainder is sheer laziness.

Ramping full, she was close-hauled. She was heeling more and more to the sturdy power of the breeze as she cut her long clean tracks, unseen, across the deep-water channel. Northey Island itself had been passed, but the long mud spit, the Island Horse, was still stretching away under water on our starboard hand. That spit probably intercepts more yachts, to their own sorrow, than any other shoal in the Blackwater, but the lead unmasked it in the darkness and gave its position with the same certainty and precision as if it had been uncovered by the ebb and were visible in the sunlit day. The yacht stood away towards the Barnacle Horse and the island of Osea.

Reticent beyond its usual habit, the windward landscape had never a point of light upon it; shore-light or anchor-light, they had all gone to sleep, and darkness was unbroken. Ourselves, sailing unlighted in blindfold fashion, were at one with it all; and the wide inlet of the sea, this ragged-armed water-world, which now at high tide insinuated its long navigable creeks for miles landward in the darkness, was intimately about us. On such a night, if ever, it could yield its secrets.

Glimmering by farmsteads, dark among their trees, its tidal salt-water had furtively brimmed up and gathered, miles inland. Up to Maldon wharves, with their lights and clustering masts reflected, it had flowed—Maldon with its shore-murmur of life in the old waterside taverns. Secretly, by bend and curve and elbow, it had searched out its way—here to some lonely marsh forsaken in the night, there to some wharf in the countryside, grey-planked and rotten. The rutted track landward was the way of the shore-gang, and the same Essex mud was grooved and furrowed by wheels of the farm-carts that



Maldon

took the crops of barrels to hiding “a hundred sleeping years ago.”

Smugglers of a century or two ago, if they were on this yacht this very night, would have no difficulty in handling her gear; “a thought light” they might find it, and growl in their beards as they trimmed the sheets, but otherwise not very different from the gear that they too had used before they came to final anchorage themselves, in some overgrown village churchyard hereabouts. It was the growth of customs dues in the late seventeenth century which first stimulated import smuggling. In the grey unlighted years astern, were the tide but rising now, and our cabin and fo’c’stle crammed with little roped barrels, then the sturdy fellow at the helm, the smuggler, booted and ear-ringed, would need no pilot to tell him the channel up Lawling Creek; he would hit the narrow entrance to a nicety, finding the whole face of things unchanged since he left it. And before daylight his cargo would be cellared away in some farm-building at Latchingdon or Mundon, and he himself seaward on the ebb, or safe at home, before the first grey streaks of dawn were over the Blackwater.

The face of the waters and contour of the fairway have perhaps changed but little; the quiet countryside, too, is untarnished by the centuries. But the ships of Maldon River, and Maldon town itself, are not as they were. While London of the old years, the white-walled capital, has been exchanged for a province of town upon town and city on city, Maldon has fared quite otherwise. While the Thames, in place of vanished galleys and frigates, has begotten that modern traffic of liners, this ancient Blackwater, once a place of stirring business, has lapsed to quietude. Where barges and smacks come only now, there were once the King’s vessels of war. Norman ships, with their one sail, broadly striped, and their oar ports, or the old galleys of later years with shields and painted beakheads, have cut their line of foam down Maldon River, and the long pennons have floated above them. Maldon town was a ringing shipyard. From its slipways came the galleys of the Plantagenets, the carracks of Queen Eliz-

abeth's day, or the fourth-rates of the Republic. The 48-gun ship *Jersey* was launched at Maldon in 1654 and sailed away down this Blackwater tideway, bluff-bowed and sturdily rigged. She served with Blake in the Mediterranean, and carried the Maldon shipwrights' work to Guinea and the Indies.

The yacht was thrusting into the little dark waves and scattering their crests in spray. The water whipped across us out of the dark, it scattered like a little scurry of rain as she dipped and rose.

"Better keep the lead going," I said as we thrashed on port tack south-eastward, "the mud's wide and flat on this shore. The loom of the land is so vague it doesn't give a hint."

Those old craft have vanished. Yet the atmosphere and entourage are primitive enough even now to be fit setting for the earliest shipping of Maldon River. Through the thin mists of some still Blackwater dawn the old shields and steel caps might glimmer. Or the "Yuch-hey-saa-saa" of the Danes might echo as their snaky galleys, under the Raven, made landward towards the sun-down. Northey and Osea Islands still bear their Danish names, and the Danish invaders were for ever haunting these long-creeked tidewater estuaries, even before they possessed the Danelagh by treaty and right. Up the dark tideway of to-night their long ships brought them in the year 991, and they met the Saxon defenders at Maldon. The battle is said to have lasted fourteen days. It was all a confused hubbub, half in the water and half out of it, with flights of arrows and clashing spear and broadsword. Then the hoarse shouts and strangled cries began to ebb landward, when Brihtnoth fell and the Saxons were in flight. The Dragon was down. The battle is mainly memorable by reason of its celebration in ancient Saxon verse. "Were it written," said Freeman the historian, "in any other tongue but the native speech of Englishmen, it would have won its place alongside the battle-songs of ancient Hellas."

If now, instead of having that tarry smuggler at the yacht's helm (as we put him in fancy a moment ago),

we found some iron-limbed Danish sea-robber grimly watchful at the tiller, we should discover in him a less accustomed helmsman. Bracelets and corselet of the Earl would glimmer upon him, and the two-handed "goodly graven sword" would certainly be hitched to his belt, even while he stood at the helm. Superb seaman and instinctive navigator though he were, he would still marvel at the handiness of a modern yacht; turning to windward as at present, he would find her really uncanny. Evolution in boat building has not stood still since his day. The boat certainly has changed, but not so the water nor the seaman's art, and he would perhaps find the course and contour of the waterway nowise different from the old haven of his own Danelagh. And after a short mystified silence, he would soon be even handling the yacht as if he had known her all his life.

"Good job the Osea mooring-buoys have gone," came the voice from beside me in the dark cockpit, breaking my dreams.

"We found one of them useful enough," I chuckled, "that night after you'd pitched over into the drink."

"The drink" was merely the plentiful salt element about us, and not that other liquor scantily hoarded in a bottle. The mooring-buoys which the Admiralty had laid in the middle of the fairway off Osea were—to the yachtsman—something of a nuisance by day and a terror by night. Unseen in the dark, unless revealed by a lather of foam, they were capable of inflicting real damage. Sometimes, clogged with seaweed, one or two of them dragged wallowing to their cables in the strong tide, virtually submerged, and only breaking surface like a dolphin's back for a moment and then gone again. They are now happily gone for good; the place thereof knoweth them no more, nor does it desire to know them.

Their sole benefaction fell on this wise. The yacht had been beating up against a westerly wind that had gradually fretted and lashed itself into a gale. Close-reefed, she was working up well and truly. She went about off the hard beach near Osea Pier, having stood comparatively close inshore. "*Whoosh*" and the reefed foresail, which



was backed to blow her head round, slit across and she missed stays. There was no space to try again nor even to wear, she was flying beam-wise ashore. The anchor was over in a second, and the two of us on the cable to take up the shock; my companion's foot caught as the cable snubbed and he was overboard, oilskins, sea-boots and all, in a second.

I can still see him, with his thigh-booted legs oaring in the ugly grey water as he bettered his grip on the cable. He was soon hauled in, with great wetness, out of the ditch, and I subdued and furled the flogging canvas while he poured the water out of his boots. But the yacht—safe at present—would be in danger of grave damage on the ebb, as she would take the hard bottom. A Sheerness lighterman, the only soul in evidence, came up and offered assistance. I sent him back for a good anchor (if he could find one) and a stout warp; the yacht's kedge would be inadequate, and we must somehow get her anchored further off-shore. The good fellow returned with a sturdy anchor and a coil of wire rope. But try as we would we could not get that anchor laid out; the man and I lacked neither muscle nor experience, but we were puny against that fury of wind and water, and he—not in oilskins—was wet to the skin with spray. Then it was that the Royal Navy stepped in. A steam launch,

manoeuvring in as close as she dared, offered to put us on a mooring-buoy—an offer gladly accepted. The hawser was made fast, and we were towed off, attaching ourselves to that despised mooring-buoy by our anchor chain run through the ring. It was not a peaceful night.

To the Naval Mess (ashore in a large house on the Island) I paid my respects next morning and rendered thanks. “Pretty lively last night for you, eh? Thought the windows here were going to be blown in; that little boat of yours must have stood on her head.” Beyond noticing that the cabin was abnormally active and rebellious while the steak and onions were being cooked, we had been little conscious of this alleged ill-behaviour. Afterwards, tired out with the wind, we had slept like logs.

Here again to-night, with the perverse wind in the opposite direction, we were plugging to windward once more. It would be quite likely that—unlighted like ourselves—some of the Maldon smacks might be trawling in this water. The ground off Osea is favourable, and the Maldon men grumbled in their deep throats when their liberty of trawling was curtailed because Osea had become a Naval base during the War. “Hunderds o’ pounds worth o’ fish in there, and us chaps mustn’t touch ’em.” But the oppression is now removed. For that reason our eyes sought jealously to probe the darkness as we slashed our long course across the deep-water gut. But the trawling ground was empty to-night.

Between the East Point of Osea Island and the smooth mainland shore the deep channel is contracted into a narrow passage, through which the ebb tide sluices with remarkable conviction. When—as to-night—the wind is scurrying up in the opposite direction with equal confidence, a disputation between the two elements arises, and the boat-sailor finds himself involved in the argument. The waves are steep and ill-natured; but we pounded through them with little more display than a few resolute showers of scud, sheets of spray that tingled on the face and rattled on the oilskins. To smaller boats, this “gut” can be a formidable passage.

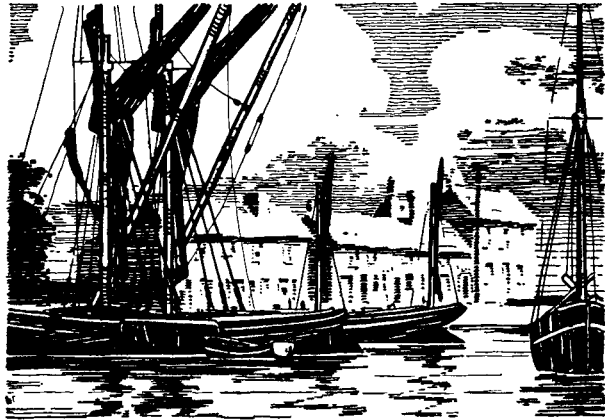
Visible merely as a shapeless hump, vague on the shoreline, the farm buildings at Stansgate could just be identified. This land also has its story, the gentler appeal of

*Meadows breathing of the past
And woodlands holy to the dead,*

for the subdued landscape over the starboard bow was the land of Stansgate Abbey, a Clugniac Priory dating from 1176, and neither smuggler nor sea-robber should so fitly haunt the wind-fretted darkness here as those sorrowful figures of the monks, grey and pallid and ghostly enough in their age and poverty. Wolsey had turned them all adrift on suppression of the monastery. It had been a rich place, with field and wood of nearly two thousand acres; but little is left. A portion of the ancient walls is incorporated in the farm buildings, and until recently a stone coffin was used as a water-trough in the farmyard. Abbey and monks and fat manors alike have faded into the shadows.

This stirring weather, apt enough and tunable with memories of Dane and smuggler, was less in harmony with the ghosts of Stansgate, be they gracious or sorrowful. Had some still starlit night, with a soft breeze, favoured our going, we might easily have stolen seaward ghost-like ourselves. But there were too much strain and rattle, too much battering of broken water, too much *noise, noise*, for the delicate character. These steep little waves in the dark, maned with grey spume, were no phantoms, and the bows that met them were solid wood. *Thud* came the wave, and with a *whish* there followed the torn shower of spray, flying aft as the staunch bows battered through it; the foam glistened in the dark on each side of us, thrown back from the little tumult at the bows.

The chief obstacle here would be Thurslet Spit. If a vessel lays a straight course from Tollesbury Pier to Osea—a failing to which many powerboats (including tugs) have shown themselves innocently prone—she is likely to locate the exact position of the shoal with unexpected precision. Also, should the tide be ebbing, she



HEYBRIDGE BASIN

will have considerable leisure. A full-bodied hull, like that of a steamer, will take the mud comfortably; and the ship will sit there, tide-forsaken and high up in the world, suffering little save in point of dignity; but a yacht of the plank-on-edge type will debase herself so utterly as to make her master swear firmer allegiance to his chart for the future.

Discreetly anxious ourselves, lest we be a sorry spectacle at peep of dawn, for admonition of others, we watched our course with jealousy; we were frankly glad when the position of that troublesome whale-backed spit had dropped astern. In the meantime we turned to windward in the main tide-way. The water would be less rough when this bustle of seaward tide had relented, but for the present it was steeply-broken; the waves *thumped, thudded*, against us. The short ugly sea on the weather-going tide is characteristic; it is apt to be much more disconcerting than the open sea outside, where the waves are longer and less steep. And in the darkness, rough water seems rougher.

“Jib flown,” I shouted.

I could barely see it; but, dominating the noise of the wind and water, the sound forward was unmistakable. “*Thurra, thurra, thurra, thrash, thrash, thrash, thurra*,” it sounded alternately as it flapped and then flogged and

then flapped again. A sail thrashing in that way is apt to tear, and I was out of the cockpit in a moment. It is my belief that I am always careful when the yacht is bucking and plunging like this; I pass myself cautiously from the runner to the shrouds, more especially at night; but somehow my foot slipped on the wet deck and down I went with such headlong completeness that I positively struck the rail with my *mouth*. It was due to no virtue of mine that I did not furnish a case for the doctor, or perhaps even for the coroner. In precisely this way the casualty which was classed during the War as "missing" can so easily arise. Things happen rapidly at night. I was chatting to a fisherman at Maldon whom I have known for years, and I had the ill-fortune to inquire after his son, a promising lad who had just turned twenty. "He run forrard to the jib-sheet in a squall one night, and we never see him go over and never see him agen. He had his sea-boots on."

In the meantime our own jib was thrashing and snapping like a demented whip-lash somewhere up in the night. It was adrift at the clew, for the sheet was still cleated. Any job is difficult when the deck is trying to turn itself at every possible angle at once, and the jib will not gracefully descend of its own accord when the halliard is slacked; it waits to be pulled. The clew was tossing itself out of reach in the darkness; even if caught and pulled, the sail would promptly pull the puller into the ditch; and it was for that reason that I was grovelling down at the bows and identifying the right cleat by touch. The traveller-inhaul would soon bring the rebel in. So the sail was re-sheeted and re-set.

The red light on the port hand would be Tollesbury Pier; its area of visibility is limited. By this time it was two o'clock in the morning and there was an isolation in the wind-scoured night that allied one more closely for the moment to the obscure forces of nature than to the gloss of civilization. That darkness of the past, interminable shadow, becomes almost oppressive at moments. The province is there of "eternal process moving on" which denuded the land and fertilized it with plant and beast. One can fancy, almost with a shudder, this dark es-

tuary surrounded by a wilderness of swamp or heath or forest, a place of inaccessible wildness under the clouded night, and untrodden except by the wicked-eyed brutes that haunted it. Then that obscene caricature of man, creeping in the dark places with his stone axe, began the strange course of evolution which has altered the whole face of the habitable earth.

Earth and its dark waters cover up the broken relics. Yet both alike will sometimes return them, a prey to curious eyes. The trawl or dredge brings them up. So here, out of the keeping of these dark waters, strange objects have been brought. The dredge will perhaps bring up a barnacled vase, once a thing of unsullied beauty, virginal from the hands of some Roman craftsman. There it has lain, for space of twenty or thirty short lives as his—left with the rubbish and changing life of the sea-bottom, and now brought to light once more. Or hints of life more ancient yet are disclosed. A stone axe-head, an elephant's skull, a mammoth's tusk, brought from the same hiding-places, each has had its own place in the forlorn distances of the past.

The white light ahead would be the riding-light of a barge at Bradwell Creek mouth. Bradwell itself, lying at the back of Peewit Island, had extinguished its last bead of lamplight long ere this. And the little place has often in the past been obtrusively and virtuously asleep in the dark nights of a century ago. Tradition persistently associates the "Green Man" at Bradwell with the smugglers, but there seems to be no picturesque deed of daring or wickedness recalled. Perhaps the smugglers were too crafty or the revenue officers too clumsy. Smugglers are said to have been armed "with swingels, like flails, with which they can knock people's brains out." But evidently at Bradwell they were content to leave the brains unknocked; had they succeeded in emptying a head or two and strewing the brains untidily on deck and gunwale, the story would certainly have been hoarded in memory and declared through the centuries with local pride and unction. In later days Bradwell would have been an ill-

chosen venue for the smuggler, for a revenue cutter was permanently stationed there before the first hulk was established at Stansgate.

Until 1831 the Coast Blockade was charged with the duty of frustrating the smugglers; the Blockade was then succeeded by the Preventive Water Guard, out of which grew the Coast Guard. The early revenue men lived in hulks, stranded on the shore, like that old hulk previously at Stansgate. Before 1870 it was the *Richmond*; then it was the Watch Vessel (W.V. 21) which one used to know. But it too has now gone.

Despite their sins of violence, the old-fashioned smugglers enjoy quite as great a share of modern sympathy as the harassed revenue men; few of us but chuckle at their finer misdeeds. It was in its way an achievement (and I believe that the fact is well authenticated) to prevent service from being held in a church one Sunday morning by the compelling argument that the pews were full of kegs and the pulpit filled up with tea. They are picturesque enough figures in memory, with their "crops" of barrels, their ready cutlasses and their midnight Sittings. They have gone.

The old fancy for free-trading, however, is not yet dead.

"No, no," said an old coastguard of these waters to me some years ago, "there's some on 'em tries it yet."

I spoke vaguely of the prosaic adventurer on the packet-boats.

"I've heerd the class of 'em," he admitted. Then he looked squarely round at me.

"What'd you say of a yacht, like as one might say the white yawl out there? She sail about, same 's you gemmen will; chance times she go furrin, and come in, cleared all right enough. That's all c'rrrect."

His eye wandered off to the causeway for a moment, and then he recalled himself to his story with a slow smile.

"One dark night a boat come ashore at the hard. Same's anyone might. Me and my mate we heard her keel

a-gratin' as she touched, and thought nothin'. But we jes' hailed her."

The old fellow looked mischievously at me and lowered his voice confidentially, but he spoke with emphasis. "We hailed her, as I sez. Now he was a fool; *he didn't answer*. If he'd a-called up, 'That you, Bill?' or summat nat'ral that way, we sho'ent have tuk no heed. *But he didn't answer*. And we found 'em, sweating their guts out to git two packin'-cases up. Two packin'-cases. All contraband."

A revenue officer, young and unwise, who came aboard the yacht elsewhere told a yarn to a quite different purpose. Smart in his blue reefer and gold braid he sat in the cockpit and lit up his cigarette.

"Funny dodges they're up to," he said, between the initial puffs of smoke.

By his own account he was a past-master of detection; and he ingenuously sketched a groundwork for us of the science of subterfuge and evasion.

"Easily done," he concluded. "Now I went the other side on holiday last year. I wanted to see if their chaps were as fly as us; we may get told off by the public because we're a set of duds and all that tosh; but we know a thing or two." He told it all in his graceless modern slang. Happily for his own reputation and future chances of State service, he was not detected; and in pride and virtue he strutted on the continental soil with a large bottle, neck downwards, impeding each leg of his nether garments.

Close past the anchored barge we thrashed, and turned seaward on a long board into the darkness eastward. Not a glimmer of light was visible anywhere; it was empty and desolate night. The seas, as we began to leave the confinement of the estuary astern, were easier, and the tacks were long; the dark sea-horizon beyond Sales Point would be opening, for now at last the beams in the sky from the Swin Middle and other sea-lights began to be seen. An hour slipped by, and another hour. It would soon be dawn.

In the meantime it was difficult to locate our exact position, and some precision would be needed, as the free space between the Knoll, Bench Head and Bar Shoals is not generous, and the old N.W. Knoll Buoy (which would have solved all difficulties) has been extinguished. The sea was sufficiently rough to infuse a spice of anxiety into the problem: it would not do to come down with a bump on any of these shoals.

For that reason the first faint glimpse of the little stabbing point of light of the Colne Point Buoy was welcome. One fixed mark on a dark night is precious. Steering by compass was well-nigh impossible, for this seaway had so far demoralized the compass-card as to make it barely worth consulting. It sometimes failed but little of swinging round the complete circle.

In the ordinary course cross-bearings from the Colne Point and Knoll Buoys would have given the position. But the Knoll was not yet visible. Later on I could see it by climbing the mast; but it was still invisible from deck level, and a bearing was impossible. This was in some measure an anxiety, for the east wind was bringing up a sea, we were thrashing and pitching on through the night with shoals on three hands in close proximity, and I was a trifle shaky as to my exact position. I was making for the Colne, as it was useless to go further against this wind without the help of tide.

“Dawn.”

“Yes, it’s certainly coming. Pretty desolate it looks too.”

It was all iron-grey and bitter cold. Nothing was visible but the grey broken sea.

“Let her come now,” I sang. If we steered north, I computed, we should just reach up between the shoals.

The mainsheet was eased off, and she romped away northward. Unable to get a reliable compass-bearing, I was frankly worried. Both shoals are hard, the sea was rough. If only it were light enough for us to see the buoys! Off the wind, she was sailing really fast; yet it seemed a long time, and she *must* now be level with the shoals.

SHOALWATER AND FAIRWAY

“What’s that?”

A rounded object was heaving and tossing some distance away on the port hand, indistinct in the grey half-light. It was the Bench Head Buoy. We had hit the channel right in the middle, and were now raging in through the deep-water channel to the Colne.

Under shelter of Colne Point we anchored. Bound coast-wise as we were, the tide would now be against us for six hours. As the grey dawn coldly broadened into day we turned in, to sleep out the contrary tide 🐣