

CHAPTER XII

About Poole Harbour

UNSHINE!" We stirred willingly from our bunks and turned out. A splendid morning, this, with a brisk north-westerly wind. We had to go up to Beaulieu for provisions; so the sail of the dinghy was set, and away we went. Shadow and shine chased each other over the New Forest landscape, and we wound our way, between the rushy borders, to Beaulieu.

Back again with the ebb, we were on board by afternoon and were making sail in earnest. The tide was too low to admit of escape by way of Bull-lake; we must therefore sail the full distance down to Lepe, and back again (in the Solent) on the other side of the long mud flat. It took us an hour and a quarter to sail from Needs Oar back to Needs Oar, via Lepe, hairpin fashion.

Outside, the Solent tide was against us, but we made good our way over it, though slowly. The afternoon was perfect, and the whole thing was a perfection of indolent sailing. We could just lay our course; and the distant downs began gradually to rise on the skyline to southward, behind the earth cliffs of the Island. Newtown River was passed, some miles distant, and Bouldnor Cliff. Then the downs rose again, beyond the cliff, and so on, until we were abreast of the Lymington Banks buoy, and the Needles were opened clear of the land. The time was now half-past seven, and evening was drawing on. On the Island side, Yarmouth town, with its little square church tower, was abeam, and there beside us was Jack-in-the-Basket.

Half an hour later we were beside that long shingle-bank of Hurst Castle.

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“The tide ought to be just on the turn; I think we’ve timed it pretty correctly. We shouldn’t get through the North Channel at all to-night against the tide.”

The tide is rather a complex affair. When one is bound for the North Channel and the wind is light it is necessary to jockey for position, and to get carried by the right stream. The ebb splits about a third of the way across between Hurst and Cliff End, one part setting fairly through the North Channel, and the other south of the Shingles shoal, and across it, to the Needles. Also, as the *Channel Pilot* says: “A strong eddy which runs between the junction of the tides and the point [Hurst] must be carefully avoided, for, in it, a sailing vessel becomes totally unmanageable.”

There were two lions in the path—the Shingles and that eddy. The stream would suck us towards the Shingles.

The eddy, moreover, sounds distinctly unpleasant in the Admiralty description, and it has more than once been a minor anxiety in very light airs. When the breeze is good the passage can of course be negotiated with decision.

The breeze this evening was not a strong one, and it would head us through the channel. With a fair wind, one keeps the shingle-bank close aboard, and romps through without touching the broken water at all. But to-day we should have to beat. We had steered close to the Point, but were set off beamwise at once; and we were soon in the broken water. The tiller was wrenched this way and that, and the yacht was only half-compliant; a stronger breeze would have been welcome here, even if it had knocked up a real tumble of sea. We watched the Shingles buoy critically, for in that direction—of all places—we must not allow ourselves to be drawn; inshore and offshore, we made short boards and worked through the Channel. Hurst Castle, with each tack, jugged out farther and farther astern of us, covering Sconce Point; we were through the narrow gut now, and our attention could again relax.

“That’s that.” We were fairly at sea, and glad to be there.

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Busy as we had been turning to windward, we had scarcely noticed the nightfall, but night was now really upon us. There was a sunset, already deadening, over Milford and Hengistbury Head, and the great moon had risen astern of us. We settled down to full enjoyment of it all, top-coated now, for the night had become chill. The sea was less smooth than might have been expected; the waves threw us about as we turned to windward over them. Under the moon was the path of tumbling silver glitter; and far away astern of us the chalk cliff of the Island, touched with moonlight, stood up, phantom-white.

The wind was more westerly and was breezing up. Lights now glittered into life here and there; the fort of Hurst had dropped below the shingle-bank, but the beam of the lighthouse was bright above it; the Needles light was red, away there astern of us, and a bevy of twinkling pin-points showed where Milford lay on the mainland shore on the starboard hand. We thrashed on.

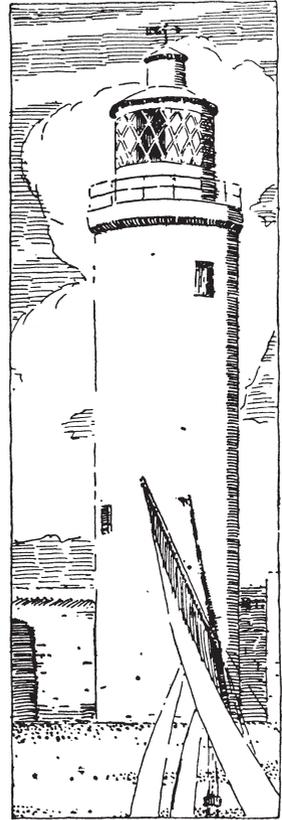
It was odd to step from the cold night into the cabin; the warmth of the day's sunshine still lingered there. The very smell of the hot sunshine on Beaulieu woodlands and the smooth Solent had been carried with us out here, where a cold lumpy seaway was about us, furrowed with a night breeze.

"We're getting on. We've obscured Hurst and turned the Needles from red to white."

"Yes," my companion assented, "and we've raised Anvil."

So we had. Away to westward, Anvil light (beyond Swanage) was clear enough, and the flashes from St. Catherine's far astern of us, were also visible as the beam wheeled round the sky; but the light itself was below the horizon.

Before midnight we had hauled Hengistbury Head abeam, behind which is the narrow entrance to Christchurch Harbour. The bar is apt to change with every storm, and the local men alone can be trusted for the latest details; it is useless to trust to pilot books. Not only the position of the entrance varies; its depth varies also. Thus a



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vessel drawing seven feet of water might successfully enter, but a day or two later—after a storm—she might find herself locked in, so to speak, unable to escape. The harbour is a delightful place for exploration in a small boat; and Hengistbury Head is a breezy foreland from which a view of the whole harbour is gained. Turning about, one commands miles of blue sea, with the Isle of Wight on the skyline.

“I can just make out the shape of Hengistbury Head. See the loom of it there?” I pointed into the darkness. “It’s barely distinguishable tonight, a couple of miles off.”

The yacht plunged and thrashed; she threw up sheets of spray which hid the horizon as she dipped, and then her bows shot upward into the sky again. The tiller was kicking, hard.

On a shoreward board, we were next able to make out the red light on Boscombe Pier. Bournemouth stretched beyond it in the night.

“We ought to be able to see the fairway buoy for Poole; it’s lighted.” I scanned the darkness towards Studland Bay, but the light seemed inordinately long in twinkling up on the broken sealine. To and fro in the night, on and off, through the dark seaway we sailed, board after board.

“There it is, surely.”

By its bearing the direction was right enough, and the flashing pin-prick was certainly there. I climbed from the well, and clung to the shrouds, watching, while the dark water churned and gurgled away, washing noisily, and the spray flew about me. No, the light had gone.

We thrashed on for half an hour longer, and I again hoisted myself up to look out. Yes, there it was; invisible from the well, it was clear enough from here; it *was* the buoy. But why, half an hour before, it should have made itself visible even from the well, and should then have disappeared *completely*, I do not know. Possibly a series of larger waves than usual had just brought it up higher at that moment.

The fixed lights at Poole entrance were clear enough, and they seemed to mock at our slow progress. Wide

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apart they hung, and we seemed simply unable to close them up and bring them into line.

“I want to turn in,” my shipmate yawned. “I want to get there; this is slow.”

“Yes,” I answered, both hands on the tiller as it kicked; “yes, and we won’t bother to make Poole this tide; we’ll let go in Studland and have a nap.”

Lights could be seen in Swanage now, and we had closed up the headlands so that Anvil light was lost. We were getting on. Then the first gleam of dawn stole into the sky to eastward, and the moon was setting goldenly over Durlstone (by Swanage). Nearer, nearer, at last—here was the buoy, and we seemed sailing swiftly enough as we passed it.

A tramp steamer lay anchored near the buoy; she had been vague in the dusk to windward, and was now bold against the dawn when we had passed her. I went below for something, and, as I emerged, my companion’s dark figure against the dawn was in silhouette. Dew was on the cabin-top, and the breeze was freshening as the light broadened.

A rose-red flush was over everything as we neared the shelter of the white cliffs of Studland, and the water had become smooth under the lee of the land. Close in to the Old Harry Rocks we stood before going about, and the seagulls were clanging in chorus about the deserted cliffs. A lonely world it was, in the half-light, all steeped in the pink glow. There was a strangeness about it all, a primitive quality. This was a fit setting for Alfred’s first sea-fight against the Danes, which occurred off these very rocks. Up into the bay we steered, close inshore, but clear of the rocks off the Red Cliff; and there, by the lead, we brought up. Down went the anchor, and the sails were furled in quick time. Nothing hindered now, and we were below and fast asleep in the space of minutes.

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We slept, I suppose, until midday. Then we turned out, in a wonder-world of sunlight, to a picture of white

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cliffs and smooth blue sea. We yawned, with a full sense of indolence and well-being, and we sat down on the cabin-top in complete contentment.

This was too supremely good to be bartered for any other anchorage just now. We could not go back into bonds again, even to the extent of entering a landlocked harbour.

The breeze came pleasantly from the shore, with a smell of sun-warmed turf, and it crisped the blue surface as it came.

When we had fed and cleared up, the afternoon was well upon us.

"I feel like a stretch ashore," one of us said, eyeing those smooth-turfed downs.

Agreed. We pulled ashore in the dinghy; and then, through the trees, and past the old stone cottages, thatch-roofed, we gained the open cliff-top. On Ballard Down we sprawled in the sunshine.

We did not drowse; but we had no wish to talk—simply to laze was enough, looking seaward. Sheep browsed on the lower slopes and an occasional butterfly flitted by us out of the gorse bushes.

We retraced our path to the shore with slow steps as the sun westered. The beach was deserted, save by a few fishermen; and evening was warm and pleasant.

"Won't be so warm, not to-morrow, I dare say," one of the fishermen said, as I gave him a hand with his boat, which he was dragging up the sandy beach.

One's eye instinctively scanned the horizon for some sign of change. The old-fashioned shellback-oracles were so swift to divine these things. But this fisherman dispelled the halo. "Forecast says fresh northerly winds," he added, and then, "We'll see what the wireless says to-night," he finished. *Tempora mutantur!*

Back on board we pulled.

"North wind, eh?" I said. "A blow from the nor'-east would catch us a little close to the lee shore for getting away." Rather grudgingly we made sail, and anchored somewhat farther offshore before we turned in.

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