The dead ship of Harpswell



I really forget just how I happened to be telling this story . . . and I do hope that I was not neglectful in refilling teacups and keeping the cucumber sandwiches and shortbread circulating.

I had asked the ladies of "the Point" in for a little tea. I think that we must have been reminiscing about the old days in Harpswell, for there were several, like myself, who had spent those wonderful summer days when they were growing up, returning some years later with their own brood.

When I had told my story . . . not without a few shivers, my nearest neighbor exclaimed, "Why, that must have been the "Dash!"

I had never heard of the "Dash" at that time . . . but here's my story.

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It was late August of 1915. It had been a rainy summer, blamed on the war in Europe, and the guns that had started pounding the previous August. "You know," everyone said, "how it always rains on the Fourth of July, with all that gunpowder in the firecrackers, salutes and such." In those long ago days, "the Fourth" was really something to reckon with.

The full moon of August, a beautiful thing, and really the first fine one of the drizzly, murky summer, prompted my brother Dudley and his good friend Ingr'm, to invite Ingr'm's sister and me out for a moonlight ride in the motor boat. I hasten to add, although it has nothing to do with my tale, that this was no "lovey-dovey" excursion. Not this!

There was a flood tide that night, the water coming well over the wide beach and up to the low bars of the pasture. In all my years in Harpswell, neither before this night, nor since have I ever seen or heard mention of a tide of such magnitude.

The boys brought the boat in and we clambered

aboard. There was a tremendous groundswell, instead of the nice "chopchop" that I preferred, so it really wasn't easy to get into the rocking and swaying boat. If the boys had said, "Let's not go tonight," it would have been quite all right with me, and with Laura, too.

But we were nothing if not sports, and after a few abortive starts, the engine purred and chugged alternately, and away we went. Under the influence of that beautiful, brilliant moon, we started to sing. Our first selection was, of course, "Moonlight Bay". Brother Dud, who was just fourteen, was like Penrod, "who hunted for the tune, but never in silence." And as for my vocal accomplishments ... I had none. Laura and Ingr'm were a little better, but what we lacked in harmony, timbre and so on, we more than made up for in enthusiasm and volume.

We had finished with "Moonlight Bay", "In the Good Old Summertime", "Schooldays", and were blithely warbling "I'm Afraid to go Home in the Dark". We just had the gentleman in the situation, "Sitting in the Y.M.C.A. singing just like a lark" when the motor conked out, as all motor boats do, it seems.

We were awfully close to a buoy, whose bell clanged dolefully and continuously, caused by the groundswell, I suppose. Laura and I were given the not too pleasant job of keeping space between the boat and the buoy with the oars, while the boys worked on the engine.

Praise be! They finally got it to turn over, and off we went again. We were now giving "Yip-I-Addie-I-Aye" (Spelling??), a try, when a cloud went over our beautiful, brilliant moon.

It was of course, in contrast, suddenly so dark; real India-inky black. This lasted perhaps about five minutes or so. We were still "Yip-I-Addying", when the moon shone again, and, Oh, so close, right in its brilliant silvery path was a huge black square-rigger! Absolutely black. No riding lights ... absolutely no signs of life. It seemed fully rigged and appeared to be anchored, so motionless it was.

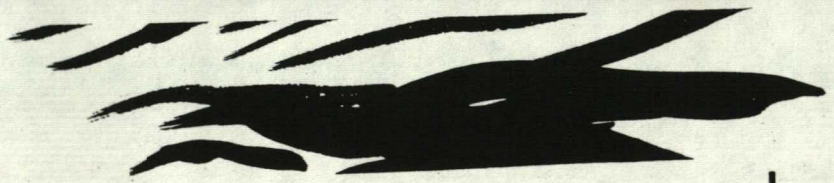
But, thank Heaven, we were not.

There was no more harmonizing ... or reasonable facsimile thereof. I don't think any of us said a word and barely breathed as Ingr'm swung the boat around and raced toward the lights on the Harpswell shore. And then we were so frightened all we could say and ask each other was, "What was it?"

"Where did it come from?"

"Where was it going?"

"Why weren't there any riding lights?"; a must as every seafarer knows.



as I remember it

We knew that there were no square-riggers around Casco Bay in the summer of 1915 ... or if there were, we had never heard of them, which was pretty unlikely.

When we got home (and I'm sure that four young people had never been so glad to "set foot" on the shore as we were) no one would believe us! Put it down to "bein' moonstruck," and "makin' it up out of whole cloth"... Whatever that meant!

So the day of the little tea-party was the first time that I had heard of the "Dash". It seems strange, indeed that no one had ever mentioned it. It seems odd, too, that the poem "The Dead Ship of Harpswell", by John Greenfield Whittier, was completely unknown to me until just a few years ago.

In it he mentions that "Old men still walk the Isle of Orr who tell her date and name" ... but Whittier doesn't. (Orr's Island is across the Sound from Harpswell Neck, and a part of the town of Harpswell.)

That fall, one of the neighbors on the Point, who had been one of the group at the little tea, sent the following clipping:

Who steers the "Ship of Death!"

"Now all the near ones of that crew of 60 have long since died. When the story is told now, the skeptics laugh and call it fancy and superstition. Some even call it nonsense.

"But every now and then, when they are very sure that the listener is not going to laugh, a descendant of one of those old-time coastal families will nod his head. Th Dead Ship of Harpswell? It was in before both wars, wasn't it? Came in, the Phantom Ship; back there before World War I and in the late 30's too. Let them laugh.

"The Dash, out of Freeport, so gallant and brave that even eternity cannot keep her off the Maine seas, comes in to see that all is well on the coast of Maine. She's a Phantom ship, but a kind one. She sails in as an omen, a warning, a sign."

The last time that I saw my brother, I asked him if he remembered that ghastly, ghostly ship.

"You bet I do," said Dud. "It must have been the State of Maine's "Flying Dutchman". It was my favorite nightmare for years."

"Mine, too," I agreed.

by Miriam Tenney Fox

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