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12.4 x 68.2 deep in the southern Caribbean

1962

God, it was dark. Spent lightning over the southern horizon illuminated the sullen squall clouds that dominated the entire southern sky. Traces of blue St. Elmo's fire played along the port shrouds. The *Valerie Queen* had an exposed helm; her dodgers had long mildewed out, but the remains were catching the tops of the oncoming sea. Gaffs slatted and a loose pail hammered the bulwarks somewhere forward. I hugged my coat tighter and pushed back the hood. I was falling asleep, and I needed the full impact of the squall to wake me.

In the confusion I imagined a periscope then the phosphorescent trail of an incoming torpedo. "Fish!" I screamed and rammed the wheel down; scuppers filled and the deck went awash. Then another wave drove my ship deeper into the sea. I heard Percy's body strike hard as it slammed into the high sideboard.

"Hey, concho!" a voice rumbled from the engine room where he had been sleeping. "Fish? Where da fish?" I instantly awoke and spun the wheel back. The bow swung to windward, and the 20 feet of bowsprit resumed its hammering of wave tops. I was awake and felt a fool.

Percy stumbled to the deck mumbling nonsense, looked around, pulled his watch cap down. Then, tightly hugging himself, spoke to me, to the ship, possibly to the wind. "It's cold." The glow of the running lights reflected on the pulling staysail. He glanced aloft and listened to the main gaff hammering at the thick copper mast plate.

I glanced at the compass, really not caring what it read as we sailed by the wind, not by an old compass card. We had been driving east for several days trying for Trinidad. From there a left turn and the Leeward Islands were ours. It was Nelson's Harbor in Antigua we wanted, a try at chartering, or perhaps even a few sport divers' coins to help fill the empty coffers.

My *Valerie Queen* was a ridiculously large ship for only a two-man crew, yet her size and initial slowness allowed more time to prepare her sail combinations. She had eight big, old, heavy sails. When all laundry was aloft, we looked like a vertical football field, and woe was us if I should ever miscalculate the weather or run into a squall that turned nasty.

This area reeked of history. I told Percy about the Inquisition flotilla that had sailed past here, Henry Morgan's army of plunderers, Black Beard, a Pirate's history at every wave top. Percy's eyes grew as I related these yarns. Then he added, "Captain Blood, Douglas Fairbanks, and Errol Flynn." Percy dreamed of being a pirate. Like another pirate wannabe I had met years before, plunder was not his interest as much as the excitement of a sword in hand, the tang of salt air, and fighting men at his command. The boy's eyes were forever searching for the elusive pirates' tall ship out there amongst the horizon's billowy clouds.

The following morning was a blustery day at best with conical whitecaps in every direction; I was seriously considering shortening canvas when Percy spotted a little fat boat, squat and pig-like off our port bow. It was wallowing its way down the coast, then suddenly changed direction and was heading toward us on a course that would intercept us in about half an hour. Black soot spewed from its short stack, and it came on with green water sloshing over its bow.

Percy quietly asked, "Coast patrol?"

I put the glass to her saying, "Not when it's painted black and with no flag." I recalled another black boat off the coast of Baja California, a memory that jarred me awake. "You just might have your pirate ship now," I hollered at the boy.

"They'll overtake us on our present course," I thought, "or if we tacked, we would put ourselves in a position with no escape." It became very clear we had to run for it, and I had no intention of running down-wind, losing two days of up-wind progress. That fat boat was coming on as if there were no tomorrow. Of course, if I were right about them being pirates, there might not be any tomorrows for Percy or me.

Now was the time I wished for my old San Francisco bohemian crew. I shouted orders and then ran to make it so, as Percy and I hustled to trim the sails for a starboard reach. The schooner was invented just for such a position to the wind, with it coming over the shoulder, so to speak, and the *Queen* flew. No little fat boat ever built, no matter how large her engines, could ever catch us now. Trinidad and Antigua were forgotten real estate.

My sloppy navigation caused a dilemma because I honestly didn't know exactly where we were. I did have a general idea of 50 miles this way or that so plotted a line that should bring us to within sight of a small Dutch island called Bonaire. Percy, when I told him of our new destination, simply shrugged, saying, "fish is fish and all of dem is waiting for my spear."

We were losing light rapidly, and I was becoming concerned about possibly making a landfall in the dark. We had no idea what awaited us. Then Percy's young eyes thought they saw a dark smudge on the horizon and was convinced he was looking at our new target. I felt

otherwise as there was other stuff sticking out of the ocean around here. We were already bandit bait, and I had no intention of becoming a shipwrecked sailor too.

Percy wanted to press on, but I became a cowardly Captain and insisted we hove to, meaning we put our nose to the wind. We would harden sails and hang around out here in the open ocean till we got some morning light. The wait was horrible. I was so tired that I was stumbling about like a drunk and just couldn't stay awake any longer. Before grabbing some much needed sleep, I told Percy to stay dark, no beacon for the little fat boat to find us.

First light brought us the sight of a distant mountain peak. Assuming it was the entire island, we put it well to the right and moved forward, never dreaming that the real island lay far to the right of the peak. The island proper was so low in the water that you would never know you were there until your ship was a dozen yards up on the beach.

I was not prepared for the excitement of fetching the shoreline of this new place. A bathtub had rougher water compared to the lee of this island. I felt as if we were sailing through air. The sea was so clear that fish, coral, and white sand patches seemed close enough to grab. Percy nearly wet himself with excitement at seeing so many complacent fish just waiting for his spear.

Percy was the hunter. I was the voyeur and ached for the moment I could slide beneath the surface to what I saw as a magical place. The wind was brisk and the sea was flat as we flew along this lengthy coastline. In the distance we saw the peak that we had first thought to be the island. To the right of the mountain, the land was flat and barren, strewn with bleached corals. Then came dirty little mounds of salt. Tall, colored obelisk-like things appeared every now and then and finally we rounded a point of land that exposed a vast bay which had a small

village nestled in on the right. My glass showed an old fort and a stub-like pier, so it was for this place we aimed.

We cleared customs main pier in the center of town at 1430 hours. Percy struck the bright yellow quarantine flag and some of the islanders came on board, eager to meet us and celebrate our arrival. We loved the welcoming carnival atmosphere, so different from other islands that had seemed eager to see the backs of us. With considerable luck we were able to coax a few revolutions out of our old engine, just enough to work our way up along the coast about a half mile, and there we anchored just off the place called Heit's Photo, at the insistence of Jules Heitkoning, a holdover from Bonaire's WW II internment camp. He strongly felt we should have a landing stage for our shore boat. It was only small landing, thrusting only twenty odd feet into the bay and missing just enough pilings to provide a little excitement. We set the hundred and fifty pound stream anchor on half-inch chain, a heavy sentinel of a hundred pounds for added security. The trade winds were constant and streamed across the island from the east.

The township looked neat and clean. I saw a strong Dutch influence and had never met such friendly people. They spoke Papiamento, similar to Spanish. I was told that the village was a former outpost of the Dutch West Indies Company.

The town stood on a plateau half a fathom above high water. The beachfront structures, houses, an old wooden bench, Heit's rickety old pier barely standing on worm eaten legs, a Fort, and the face of the dike were all still very sound and thus confirmed that no serious storms had ever struck this settlement from the West. Possibly this was the very reason the township came to be in this location in the first place. I knew we could sleep at night, not fearing a sudden draft of air from astern. This place was a perfect anchorage

The knocking of a block against the tall mast, a call from high in the rigging of a chafing line, the groaning of a strained timber deep within the hull, all of the wonderful sounds of a healthy ship. A light swell gave my *Queen* an easy roll motion that sent her tall mast gyrating smoothly through the warm evening air where low altitude clouds had long given way to a clear, moonless sky. The chronometer lid was secured; my *Queen* was now at rest, no longer a free hull racing through deep seas. She fetched at her anchor, then once again settled calmly to a comfortable roll. She was happy in this place with a warm, clean, and translucent sea. The bay itself was a spectrum of shimmering blues, extraordinarily clear. As I looked down at the carpet of corals, I felt that this bay was truly a field of gold. The place instantly felt like comfortable old shoes. That evening I wrote in the ship's log. "May 21, 1962, 1430 hours. Latitude 12.10 north, longitude 68.17 west. Kralendijk Bay, Bonaire. Dutch West Indies. Still en route to Antigua."



Then, I decided to do what I call a "word painting" of our landfall. I had done this before, but as I looked across the short span of water, I had the feeling that this place was unusual. I felt almost as if I were witnessing the birth of a land, new and pristine. I blinked and started to write.

"This island of Bonaire lies just over the horizon from the mountains of Venezuela. A small, sparsely populated piece of land, crescent shaped, barely thirty miles in length, possibly born over 30 million years ago from a cluster of volcanoes rising up from the ocean floor. A buffer to the trades which stream from the east, its massive humpback has made the western shore a protected lee, and here is a magnificent glass-like bay, flat and calm, limpid in appearance, a crescent displaying an extraordinary spectrum of shimmering blues.

I witness the coast is a mass of living corals. Near the center, lay a small island, round and flat. To the north, as seen from here, a small mountain, a craggy silhouette with the saddle-like profile of a blown volcano which presents its cradle to the intense blue sky.

And to the south, the hills gradually slope down to end in a flat spit of coral-rimmed beaches and here within spread to the far edge of the world, is a special sea. Magnificent, a splendor of calm with bright shafts of the late afternoon's sun reflecting from it. Even here, beneath my keel, I see coral gardens the likes which I have never seen before, and I somehow sense that here lays the future of this small island, and that I have to be a part of this destiny."

I reread what I had just written and was surprised by my sudden burst of poetic sentiment; then my attention was taken by the last sentence, and I wondered whatever had possessed me to write that.

I closed the cover of the book, carefully placing the pen in its holder. I looked at the book, recalling the day in the San Francisco bookstore

where I had bought it in 1957. I thought it expensive, more than I could really afford. But what the hell I thought, maybe I would enter the rest of my life between these leather covers. Yes, it had better be a good and durable book, regardless of the cost as there was no telling where it might wind up.

Evening was upon us and I had trouble re-reading what I had written so I quit the deck and went below. The watch lantern filled the salon with a soft yellow light that gave the interior the warmth of a rosewood womb. I stood at the chart table reading my entry. Then still feeling a bit poetic, made one last entry.

"Well," I thought, "Don, you're getting sentimental." I wondered to myself just how many more landfalls I would enter into this log, not knowing then that this would be the last. I had always known that there would come a day when we could go no further. I was thirty-seven, healthy, and probably could go on forever, but I couldn't say the same for my beloved old ship. She was leaking badly and needed much work. I closed the salt stained cover, turned down the lamp, and went back up on deck.

So peaceful. So quiet. So natural. An island adrift, a forgotten island with barely 4,000 souls. A goat bleated from the decks of an inter-island schooner heading out to sea. A pack of dogs over by Heit's pier was making a ruckus. I was hungry but no matter. It had been a wonderful day.

A few days passed as we came to know Bonaire. "Percy, I have to talk to you. These are the facts. Our 63 cents has been eaten; there are only a few cans of I don't know what in the larder, and we still have 23 cans of maple syrup. Tobacco is just what you've got in that box. But I think this afternoon's dive is one of the finest I've ever had, you know? Right there in the center of town has to be some of the best coral gardens in the world. And there are enough tropical fish here to fill a

million aquariums. I vote we give it a try. All you got to do is shoot that big fish hiding under our hull, and I'll find some divers, and we'll be in clover -- if I don't get deported first."

We never did shoot that big fish nor was I deported, but one day I had a conversation with the Governor. Many Bonaireans thought me rich because of the size of my boat, but in truth I possessed only 63 cents, now eaten, and the ship's papers in my pocket. Lt. Governor van Hesteren warned, "A nuisance you become," he pointed to the horizon. "However, if my island is a better place because of you, then..."

He told me a new 30-room hotel was to open next year at Playa Lechi, a long, wonderful sandy beach not too far from town, and soon Bonaire was to become involved in tourism. I smiled and told him "that's nice," but thought to myself, "This island is a rock. Just what are you thinking of selling?" We didn't discuss the specifics, but a deal in principle had been struck.

I discovered the sole hotel now on island was called Zee Bad and was built from the leftovers of a one-time German internment camp during WWII. I could fully understand the need of a new 30-room hotel but still wondered what was supposed to attract the tourists to fill it.

Spear fishing and the collecting of aquarium fish became our way of life. By the end of 1962, Percy and I were exporting fish from Jules Hietkonig's old photo shop, then we discovered a new fish the world had never seen before, *Chorististium carmabi*. We called it Ms. Mardi Gras, a Bonaire special. Before the end of 1963, with the new Lions Club we built an exciting Public Sea Aquarium in the basement of the old government house.

I hadn't meant to be snide during my conversation with the Governor when I thought his island was a rock. But let us be realistic about this. Maybe not a rock, but surely a million years of dried out

coral supporting 112 square miles of cactus, *lignumvitae* trees, the hardest wood on earth, goats, donkeys and hundreds of assorted varieties of lizards. They called it a desert island, but twenty-two inches of rain a year is no desert. Still, it had no jungle to tour or white water rafting trips and waterfalls either. Frankly, the most beautiful part of Bonaire was underwater. Hmmmmmm....

Reminiscing

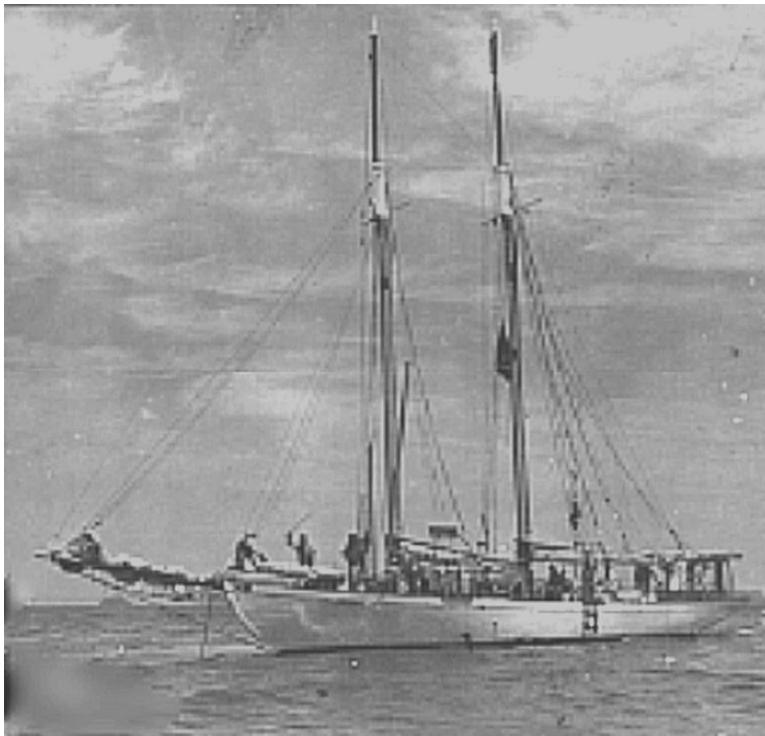
All that was over 40 years ago. Sitting at a small outdoor restaurant, which at one time had been Heit's Turtle Shop, I reminisce, looking out across the bay through a tangle of tall yacht masts rising above an assortment of small boats floating like toys. This is the same anchorage that had attracted Percy and me so long ago. Heit's wooden pier that was just out front is now gone. The waterfront bustles with numerous boats and businesses, a place so much changed, had I not been here from the beginning, I would have never known the site. In time I had come to think of Bonaire as *an island adrift*, leisurely floating through space in a warm tropical sea, an island without direction or purpose. Salt, goats and charcoal were her main commerce, tourism was non-existent.

I can't help but smile to myself as I recall our arrival that afternoon 40 years ago. Almost forced here by a little fat black boat, I owe that bandit my thanks. Our quarantine flag had been aloft as we ghosted up to the main pier on foresail alone, seventy feet of ocean going splendor, tons of timber with masts scraping the sky.

Bonaire is now my home, and I chuckle as I remember my last remark in the log. "The Governor actually had the balls to challenge me, Captain Don, to a **'produce you stay, a bum you're out.'** "

Well! A bum I never have been!"

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