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Romance Log

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TALL SHIPS and HURRICANES

In the summer of 1984, ROMANCE made her first deepsea voyage since our '79/'81 circumnavigation. Instead of the broad and gentle Pacific, Romance butted her long jibboom into the cold and foggy North Atlantic, bound for Quebec's 450th Birthday Celebration, and one of the largest Parades of Sail ever assembled. Although always invited to these gatherings, this summer was the first time we were free . . . and eager to go! We finished a college marine biology seminar the morning of May 31st, installed a radar, and sailed from St. Thomas at 5 PM, glad to be going offshore again. It was a beautiful passage, sparkling tradewind days and soft star filled nights, time to settle comfortably into the routine of seagoing life again . . . quiet moments alone with the sea and sky.

We experienced none of the extreme weather which overwhelmed and sank the barque Marques in less than 60 seconds, with the loss of 19 lives, north of Bermuda, the first fatalities in 28 years of sail training events. Approaching Nova Scotia, Romance encountered a fair gale and fog, an eerie world of white gulls wheeling silently into grey infinity. On radar and RDF, we ran inside Sable Island, that monstrous graveyard of ships, and into Cabot Straits, between Cape Breton Island and the rockbound coast of Newfoundland. After three days of fog and gale, the veil lifted to reveal a smudge of land beneath the setting sun--landfall, after 2,160 miles and 20 days at sea. Into the broad Gulf of St. Lawrence, glassy, heaving swells, whales rolling and blowing; as cold and remote as Cabot himself must have found it. Dusk lingered and blended into northern lights, so that the June-winter sky was never really dark. Before 2 AM, a rosy tint promised an early dawn, craved for the meager warmth the sun would bring to frozen hands and seabooted feet. On June 23rd, Romance marked her highest latitude since her cargo days in Icelandic waters: 49° 23', off Gros Morne on the Gaspé Peninsula. (The classic Cape Horn rounding is figured at 50°S to 50°S, and here we were on nearly as high a latitude at the other end of the earth.)

Now the St. Lawrence narrowed rapidly, as we ran southwestward into the continent, far from the sea. Mountains rose above us, layered in cloud, tiny villages each with its white church spire, trains ran alongside us and disappeared into dark tunnels; the scent of pines. Past the rocky mouth of the Saguenay, and down the final narrow traverse behind Ile d' Orleans. There beneath the guns of the Citadel, the historic battlefields of the Plains of Abraham, and the gleaming copper turrets of the Chateau Frontenac, lay the fleet. Perhaps not even in the heyday of sail, had the old fortress city seen such a forest of masts, yards and bunting. Ships from a dozen nations, the proudest, biggest sailing ships of the world, in all their glory and perfection. The mighty four masted barque Kruzenshtern of Russia towering over all, commanded the largest crowds, though thousands waited hours to board every one.

and waited hours to board every one. What an exciting week that was! The crush of crowds, the snap of flags, the martial music and cadets parading through the narrow, medieval streets of Old Quebec. Romance had her own cadets, Susie Kenney's Girl Scouts from Louisville, Kentucky, who manned the ship all that whirlwind week, and helped crew Romance on her Big Day. What a thrill it is to parade your own brigantine in that magnificent company of ships, amid horns and whistles and cheers and the boom of ancient cannons saluting! Small boats darting in and out like waterbugs, helicopters buzzing overhead, and the hills alive with colorful throngs of people. And ahead and astern, up and down the river, the unforgettable sight of square sails piled like a summer storm of white clouds against the blue sky, more sails than most of us had ever seen before or would ever see again.

When the largest training ships sailed, a ten ship Armada remained in colorful display at the Vieux Port, and we had a summer to explore Quebec. Old grey stone buildings supporting each other down narrow ski-slalom streets. Parks and flowers, sidewalk cafes and surreys drawn by high stepping horses; street artists and acrobats. The neat strawberry farms on Ile d'Orleans, deliciously cool mists below Montmorency Falls, and the radiant white basilica of St. Anne de Beauprey, dedicated to the Grandmother of the Infant Jesus, and guardian of those who follow the great river to the sea.

Romance began her homeward journey Sept. 1st, waiting out hurricane Diana in the Straits of Canso. As we put to sea the following morning, we met the Canadian brigantine, Belle Blonde, limping in dismasted, a frightening tangle of spars and rigging. She had lost a man overboard during the night. Of the three Quebec vessels with us in Canso, we heard one was later dismasted also; and another sunk in the stormy North Atlantic, with an ex-Romance crewman aboard. They were very, very lucky to be picked up shortly after, and landed in France.

Our own good fortune continued to hold. We dry-docked in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, beside the ways that spawned the famous fishing schooner Bluenose, immortalized on the Canadian dime, and the Bounty replica. The whole town is a living monument to a bygone schooner fleet numbering in the sixties in old photographs. We had blocks made to order on 1900 machinery, in an old two storey loft, by a third generation block maker; and had our deadeyes restrapped by a third generation blacksmith just down the street. Forges leaping flames in dark corners, bellows and anvils, and anchors hanging over the big barn door. Next came Lunenburg Foundry, for windlass parts. Up into a dusty loft to pick out wooden molds of gears and shoes, to be cast in iron for the Romance. Lunenburgers are legendary seafarers, fishermen or rum runners, the latter an honest and highly respectable trade immortalized in the museum. We sailed from Lunenburg the morning frost first appeared on deck.

Our visit to Mystic Seaport was a homecoming and a special thrill to bring our own brigantine here. Skipper was Chief Rigger at this 19th century museum village, when we bought Romance in 1965. She was given the place of honor alongside the old whaling ship, Charles W. Morgan. With her 1840 rig, she looked like she belonged there. Like Brigadoon, Mystic has a special magic, especially for those fortunate enough to stay overnight on a ship. In the twilight, after the crowds have gone, a real sense of the past awakens, and it is as if the friendly spirits of long ago generations stroll the cobblestone streets. Out of the handsome old homes they come, past the Spouter Tavern, down by the wharves, counting house and cooperage, looking in at the shipcarver's shop, where a stately lady would be taking shape out of sweet smelling wood, to grace a new clipper. It is said the Morgan has its own ghost, but if so, he is a friendly neighbor. In the

morning, the young crew of the old whaleship sway her tops'ls aloft with the chantey, "Were you ever in Quebec, loading lumber on the deck?" Yes indeed! Only we loaded tourists. . . In the glow of glorious fall colors on the Mystic River, we waited out yet another hurricane, Josephine. We sailed from Mystic in thick-a-fog Sunday October 28th.

October 15th, Hurricane Thanksgiving Day, a bank holiday in St. Thomas, marks the official end of the hurricane season. By November 9th, Romance was well east and south of Bermuda, the weather fine, but with persistant southerlies. This wind now went light enough to motorsail into; the day unusually overcast with light rain, and a north-south swell building. About mid afternoon, a sudden windshift, and before we could complete tacking, a violent squall hit out of the featureless sky. Somehow, the watch clawed down the jib and stays'ls without blowing them out, while I fought the ship off before the wind, thinking of the Marques. Skipper, off watch below, was instantly at the wheel, fighting increasingly violent squalls from ahead, changing direction every 15 seconds, until we had gone in 3 complete circles. The sea was now a boiling caldron of opposing seas and swells. The wind settled down to blow in earnest now from the northwest, and we ran off before it, first under bare poles, then with the square fores'l, under which she rode comfortably enough.

We ran before the gale through the night, and by mid morning, the seas astern had risen to astounding proportions, welling up in an endless train of close spaced, fast moving mountains of water, flanks streaked with more white than blue, and crests breaking in an avalanche of foam. We dug out our canvas oil bags, last used in rounding the Cape of Storms (Cape of Good Hope) in 1981, and streamed one from each bow. Only a very light, thin streak of oil seeps through the heavy canvas, but its effectiveness is wonderous, breaking up the crests, so that the ship may ride safely over.

As Romance's speed before the gale approached the danger point, Skipper streamed our 2" diameter, 600 foot emergency hawser in a bight from the steel quarter bits. Then he added a large tire fender on a slip rope, which ran out along the hawser until it was tugging stubbornly fully four wave crests behind. On she ran, with seas roaring and biting at our flanks like white-maned lions. By early afternoon, it was becoming obvious that this gale was only the forerunner of something very much more dangerous, and it was soon time to round up and heave to, and snug the ship down before dark, which would come at 5 PM. The crew furled the fores'l in speed born of urgency, and set instead, our heavy new Duradon mainstays'l.

Skipper had the yards braced up to meet the wind, and then ordered all hands to the safety of the after deck during the crucial moments bringing the ship across wind and sea. What difference, I thought, is there between rounding-to in these seas, and broaching??? Gazing aft, Skipper said quietly, "You can bring her up now." I gave her the wheel automatically, and she responded so willingly, I was amazed. "Meet her," he said as she came beam to the seas, then "Steady." Not a drop of water on deck! He took her then, and brought her slowly all the way up. Satisfied, he lashed the wheel. We were now lying with the seas a couple of points on the bow, and seen head on, these towering mountains which swept down on us, were appalling in their size and confusion. There was little doubt now of the identity of our adversary. Despite the lateness of the date, Nov. 10th, the impossible was happening. This could truly only be an unprecedented late season hurricane. For the first time in 19 years of cruising the world, we were going to face a hurricane at sea -- and it was going to be at night.

Darkness came darkly and almost unnoticed, as we marshalled our defences, securing, double lashing, extra oil bags, the emergency pump to meet the ingress of water which would surely come. Food and rest forgotten, we would all be on deck through the long night, ship and crew fighting the hurricane together as one. Spray stung our eyes, and the deck ran with water, as we waded about our tasks in sodden clothes, but little solid water came aboard unless the oil bags became clogged and in need of pricking with a sail needle. One enormous sea higher than the foreyard, crashed heavily on the jibboom, causing a moment of alarm for the spar, but everything held. An occasional rogue sea would collide with us like a locomotive, and in moments like these, we poured oil right from the can. The double mainstays jumped alarmingly, and it seemed inconceivable that the new sail, any sail, could stand. If it went, there would be nothing to hold the ship up into the wind. Skipper built a drogue, a sea anchor, out of a spare jibboom and 4 big tires. We had to unlash the heavy spar, rig a bridle, and wrestle it over the side without injuring anyone, a difficult operation had not Romance laid so steady in the seas. We trailed our drogue aft until the need for it was past.

WWV weather warnings are broadcast one minute an hour, and at this distance, can be heard only at night. It took three tries to decipher, but at 2 AM, reception was clear enough: our hurricane, Klaus was his name, was then 300 miles east of us, and moving away at 25 knots! This was a very large hurricane, with gales 600 miles out-- how close had we been to the center? From his tables, the direction and force of the wind, the rapid fall and violent pumping of our barometer, which had gone quite mad, Skipper estimated 80 miles.

Now a patch cleared in the sky overhead, and a full moon illuminated the endless procession of moving mountains, blocking out the stars. When all was well under control, Skipper stood back by the lashed wheel, and watched his ship. "I've always liked this ship," he said, "but now I'm in awe at the way she's handling these seas. I've never seen anything like it!" Romance rode like a little wooden duck. She gave us the confidence to ignore the wild scene around us, and get on with the business of defeating a hurricane, with a calm that belied the fact that some of our number were making their first trip to sea.

Coconuts are a part of the Romance, even on this northern voyage, stowed behind the spare spars, to be used in island cooking. They had gotten loose, and joined us on deck, rolling everywhere like wooden bowling balls, attacking our bare feet and ankles. We would remember these friendly killer coconuts as a lighter side of the night.

When dawn came at last, we stood at the rail, watching an unforgettable panorama of oceanic grandure--a hurricane seen from the inside out. It was as if the whole watery world had tipped, and was avalanching down on us in crests a half a mile long. How high they were, roaring and tumbling in their haste to engulf us, yet they never did. We watched the long, thin fingers of oil reach out to them, as in a gesture of peace . . . and saw the mountains collapse, confounded, to slide beneath the ship. "You'll never fear a big sea again," Skipper said, for Romance had weathered them all, like the champion she is . . . we had seen her in her finest hours.



Klaus struck the Virgin Islands without warning, wrecking over 100 yachts in St. Thomas alone, before attaining hurricane strength. Both yachts and large commercial vessels were still strewn on the beaches from Dominica northward, when we cruised Down Islands in December -- grim reminders of a savage storm.