

"GLOUCESTER TOWN—WHERE THE FISHING FLEETS PUT IN"

PHOTOGRAPH BY H. H. MOORE

GLOUCESTER—OFFSHORE

BY HAROLD T. PULSIFER

HAVE come back to the office from a day in a shipyard—a yard that harbors for the winter a hundred or more. There bright mahogany motor yachts are neighbors to trim white sloops. Spoon bows and clipper bows, straight stems and stems that were straight, vessels whose paint speaks their perfection and vessels whose paint is, to the careful observer, a transparent attempt to conceal the ravages of time—there is room for them all as they lie waiting their turn to put to sea. There is room for them all, even for the plainly finished sailing vessel within whose black and beamy hull I make my summer home.

As I sat in her cockpit and watched her decks brighten under the ministrations of varnish, as I worked over the coils of her running rigging, laying open the strands here and there to test for signs of decay, as I watched the clean savings fall from the new spar destined to replace a badly sprung mainmast, I lost myself, as I have often done, in the philosophy of shipyards, of ships, and of recreation.

We sometimes talk of recreation as though it were a discovery of our own time. The craft that sail the seven seas must laugh at such presumption. They not only discovered recreation long ago, but simultaneously they must have discovered its real meaning. Most of us poor landlubbers think of recreation as a synonym for pleasure and amusement. No ship will tell you, recreation time is a re-creation time—a time to survey your timbers, a time to cut out

dry rot, a time to test your rigging, a time to overhaul your spars.

The trouble with us mariners of life is that there are very few able seamen among us, men who can tell when a rope is overstrained, men who know straight grain from crooked, men who can tell at a glance sound wood from painted putty. If we were all able seamen, we would know the real meaning of recreation—re-creation not only of our physical selves but also of that intangible reality which has been the despair of philosophers and theologians to define since the days of the first tremulous "why." Whether one be a follower of Berkeley or William James, whether one turn to St. Paul or the precepts of the Friends, whether one looks back to Sinai or forward to a New Jerusalem, the need is always the same. To re-create, we must first survey. We must search out for our own selves the existence of those fundamental principles upon which the structure of faith and society has been reared. The more elemental those principles, the more incontrovertible we will discover them to be and the surer our foundations will stand.

It is hard sometimes to get back to the elemental in the confusion and tumult of our daily lives. The mind exhausts itself in labor (to desert sea comparisons for land) like the field which is continuously and unwisely tilled. A fallow time is needed for re-creation and understanding.

Some find this time of re-creation in the silences of the dark woods, some in the aloofness of great crowds, some be-

side the eternal march of clear brown waters toward the sea—I find it most surely on the salt waves to which those sweet waters are eternally hurrying.

It was in late August of last year that I set sail from Martha's Vineyard, even before the sun rose out of the Atlantic, for the long run around Cape Cod. Fair winds and fair tides carried me to the end of the Cape by the late afternoon. We rounded the tip and laid our course for Gloucester, forty miles, if I remember rightly, across the mouth of Massachusetts Bay. While the sun was still above the horizon, I went below and brought up a poem which has moved many who have never even felt the breath of salt air in their lungs—William Vaughn Moody's "Gloucester Moors." It was towards

Gloucester town

Where the fishing fleets put in

that our course was laid—Gloucester town from whose boulder-strewn hill-sides generations of my name had eked a living and from whose harbor men of my blood had set out to farm the sea and bear its fruit in triumph to the forbidding shores of Cape Ann.

The breeze freshened and the seas from the bay lent an added force to Moody's unforgettable comparison:

This earth is not the steadfast place
We landmen build upon;
From deep to deep she varies pace,
And while she comes is gone.
Beneath my feet I feel
Her smooth bulk heave and dip;
With velvet plunge and soft upreel

She swings and steadies to her keel
Like a gallant, gallant ship.

SUDDENLY the light faded, and as I sat with my back to the main hatchway I noticed that the sailing master at the wheel was watching the western sky with an awakened keenness. I turned to see that the sun had disappeared in a bank of clouds, and that along the horizon gray fingers of fog were reaching out over the water.

"Looks like a bad night to make a landfall," said my sailing master. "I doubt if we can pick up Thacher's Island light."

When dusk had fallen, I went aft and took the wheel and the sailing master went forward to trim and put up the lights. When they were made fast, he stood at the fore shrouds for a while. I could not see his face, but I knew that his seaman's eyes were watching the narrowing horizon with the keenness of a soldier awaiting an expected attack.

Overhead and to the east the stars now shone clearly, but to the west there was a veil that hid them from our view. Gradually the veil grew, blotting out the heavens, star by star. There was the damp smell of fog in the air and then its breath upon our cheeks. At last the heavens vanished and the blackness closed around.

"We must be ten or fifteen miles off-shore," I said, "and we will never pick up Thacher's to-night. What do you say to shortening sail, laying an easterly course which will clear all the shoals and ledges, and then head in for Portland in the morning?"

"I was just about to suggest the same thing," said the sailing master, and he disappeared forward to carry out our plan. We had already put on our oilskins, for the fog was almost a drizzling rain. In the light of the binnacle I plotted our course, and when the sailing master had finished with his labor we were ready to bear off and set out for the open sea.

With the wind now abaft the beam, we took turns in breaking the silence of the night with three blasts upon the raucous horn which sailing vessels must carry to give warning in a fog. We speak of lights which make the darkness visible; a fog horn at sea makes the silence audible.

Our world had narrowed to a little circle of yellow light from the binnacle. Overhead the mainsail melted into the night. The sky hung a hand's breadth over our heads. To port and to starboard there was a dark suggestion of advancing and retreating waters. In the center of this hemisphere of mystery we sat in our yellow garments and listened for what the sea gods had in store.

There is no isolation like the isolation of a foggy night in a small boat on the open sea. The remote world of men and women seems like a half-remembered dream. What does it matter if out of such darkness we pass into that darkness which we cannot hope to comprehend? What does it matter if fate answers for us Hamlet's age-old ques-

tioning, "To be or not to be?" What are books, lives, hopes, fears, even love, to the inexorable darkness in which we move and have our being?

But thou, vast outbound ship of souls,
What harbor town for thee?
What shapes, when thy arriving tolls,
Shall crowd the banks to see?

Out of the night came a voice from that ship-world like an echo to our own plaintive horn:

"Whroo! Hoo! Hoo!"

We blew our three blasts and waited for the answer. The fog plays tricks with sound and it is hard to know whence it comes. Some ways to port the signal was repeated a little louder and a little nearer.

"Must be a tow out of Portsmouth," said my sailing master, "going to wester'd. Sounds like Cap'n Ferguson's tug *Gladiator*. He went east while we were in the Sound. He's about due to start back now."

"Whroo! Hoo! Hoo!"

This time the sound seemed to be a little abaft the beam on the port side, and closer, much closer. Philosophizings vanished at the approach of the menacing sound. I blew our horn and peered with nerves aquiver into the night.

"Whroo! Hoo! Hoo!"

The blasts fell upon our ears like the voice of the tramp of doom. There was the sound of rushing waters close astern, and then directly under our counter, it seemed, the fateful blast again. We peered astern, but there was no sign. Conscious of a presence on the waters, we waited. The next signal came to starboard and less strongly. A few yards had separated us from disaster on the prow of one of the ships which pass in the night.

When even the sound of the signals had vanished, I knew that I, an atom in the vast outbound ship of souls, had found surely the answer to Hamlet's questioning—the answer which myriads of mankind had found before me. The fog-born doubt of the necessity of living was blown out of my brain as the fog itself was destined to vanish with the rising sun.

MORNING does not break after a foggy night at sea. The circle of visual perception imperceptibly widens—that is all. The sails loom more grayly, the binnacle light seems dimmer, the waves turn from velvet black to slaty green.

Overhead, with the coming of the day, the fog thinned and from an impenetrable wall changed into towering opalescent clouds. The blue sky broke through and then the fog rose from the water until our world became again a great ring bound by the sky and the sea. Only now and then did a mountain barrier of mist bar our path over the waters, threatening to engulf us as we headed in for the land. Sometimes we sailed into these mountain barriers and out into sunlight on the other side. Sometimes they lifted in a gigantic arch of impalpable mist through which we

passed like magicians triumphing in sorcery over natural powers.

We had gone far to sea in the night for there is more safety in open water than in narrower channels where tide and rocks compete for the mastery of man. So it was many hours before the far blue coast-line lifted from the horizon.

Scattering wide or blown in ranks,
Yellow and white and brown,
Boats and boats from the fishing banks

Come home to Gloucester town.
There is cash to purse and spend,
There are wives to be embraced,
Hearts to borrow and hearts to lend,
And hearts to take and keep to the end,—

O little sails, make haste!

In that moment there was an answer to a doubt which even the night has not dispelled. To be? To be is not enough. The mystery of wild geranium and scarlet tanager; the stout hearts in which Cape Ann has given birth; the scattered fleets from Gloucester town must have some other answer than the command "to be." Homes and ships

And hearts to take and keep to the end,—

come only from the call "create!"

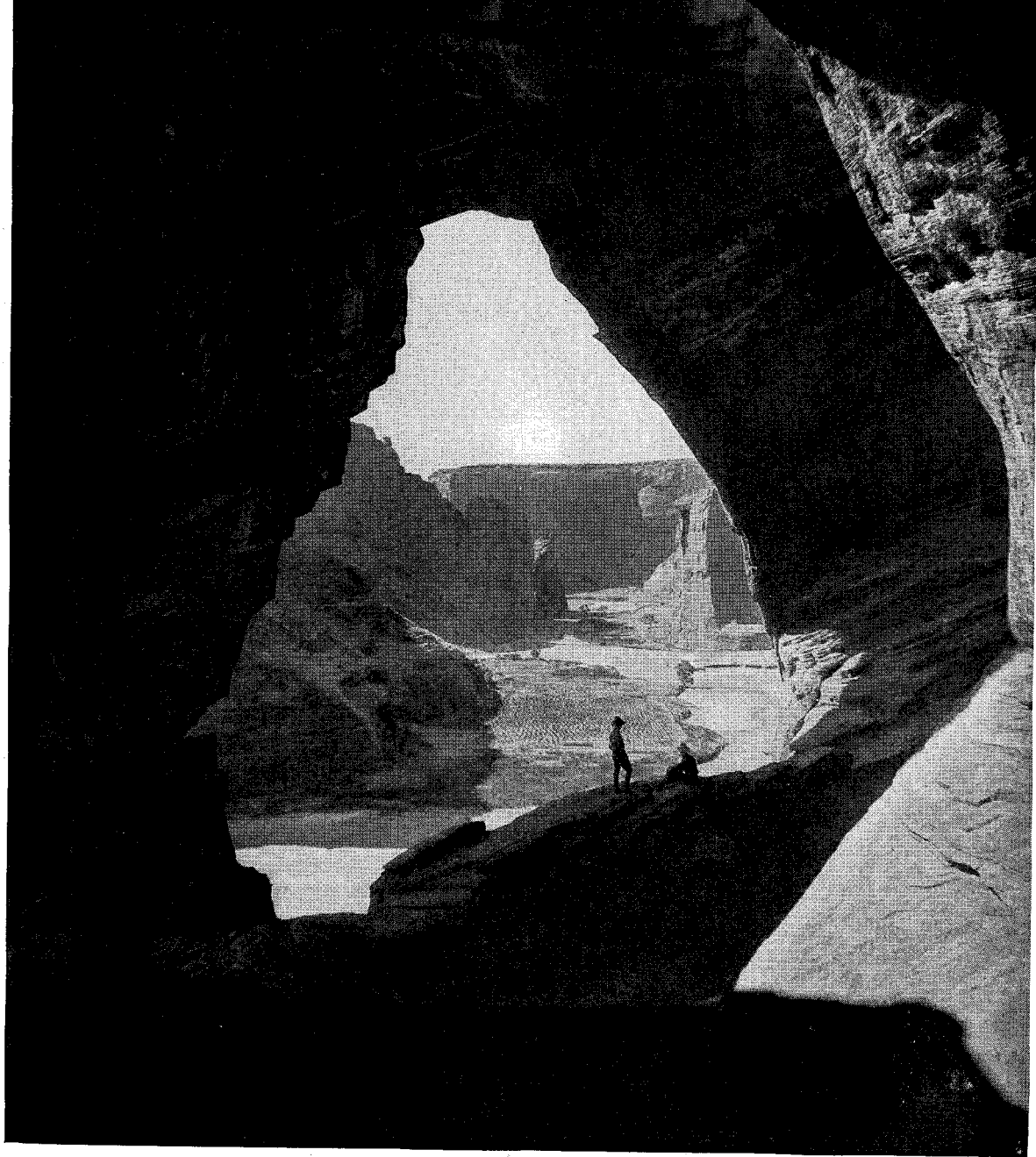
Be and create. The mystery of those words, unspoken sometimes, but always felt and inwardly understood, has turned the barren hillsides of Cape Ann into farm lands and the dwelling-places of man; it has carved the trunks of trees and set them afloat on the rivers of the world; it has changed those crude craft into lofty ships with a beauty which close to tears; it has torn iron from the earth and bent it to our will. It has lifted the very water out of the sea and forced it to carry our vessels to far lands.

On the face of the dangerous blue
The star fleets tack and wheel and veer,
But on, but on does the old earth steer
As if her port she knew.

God, dear God! does she know her port,
Though she goes so far about?
Or blind astray, does she make her sport
To brazen and chance it out?

We know the port for which she sails though the strange seas through which she passes are to us all, at times, a bewilderment and a despair. On the way to the mysterious beauty which it is in us to create there lie many dangers ahead and many rocks behind. There have been false makers of charts and treacherous captains enough. There will be false makers of charts and treacherous captains until the end of the voyage. But whether we live below the "battered hatch" or our hands are on the wheel, there are stars in the heaven whereby our courses may be laid. Make if you will, a thousand sects and a thousand philosophies, there are some things that we know, as we know that we breathe.

AMERICA FROM COAST TO COAST



Courtesy of Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Co.

ARCH IN ROCK-CANYON DE CHELLY, NAVAJO INDIAN RESERVATION, ARIZONA

A WESTERN WINDOW CARVED FROM LIVING ROCK