



Storekeepers Afloat

Digging in the Water

"Epics of Salvage," by David Masters (Little, Brown, 234 pp. \$3.50), offers a number of tales of heroism quietly performed by salvage men and divers to keep ships afloat and channels clear during World War II.

By Thomas E. Cooney

ONE NIGHT in December 1941 the British battleships *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth* lay quietly at anchor in Alexandria harbor. Almost directly beneath them three Italian underwater crews were maneuvering astride tiny submarines that carried demolition charges to be fixed to the battleships' hulls. One was successfully fixed, and another was planted on the bottom a few feet from its target. Some minutes later two of the Italians were captured hanging onto the *Valiant's* anchor chain. Refusing to tell where they had planted the charges, they were ordered below by the British captain to sweat it out in compartments in the very bottom of the ship they had just mined. Shortly afterward the mines exploded, and the two ships settled a few feet to the bottom, each with a huge hole in her hull. There were no casualties, even among the Italian frogmen.

At this point the patient, clever salvage men who are the heroes of David Masters's "Epics of Salvage" enter the picture. How they succeeded in refloating the ships while fooling the enemy into thinking they were undamaged is one of a score of stories of the dangerous, obscure, and essential work of ship salvage in World War II. Without the efforts of British salvage crews the Suez Canal would have been blocked while Rommel was driving toward Cairo, the *Valiant* and the *Queen Elizabeth* would have stayed in the mud at Alexandria to be plastered by Italian bombers, the vital channel of the Tyne would have been closed by wrecks, and the mouth of the Thames itself would have been choked with the victims of Goering's blitz—all before Pearl Harbor. As the war ground on, hundreds of other ships went

down in places that had to be cleared or with cargoes that could be saved, and salvage men and divers, British and American, rallied around to do the toughest rear-area jobs of the war.

Starting with the ignominious dockside foundering of the *Normandie* in New York and the fantastic job of pumping her out and refloating her, Mr. Masters takes his readers through a catalogue of drudgery and ingenuity that lights up the destructiveness of war with the brilliance of creative effort. He tells how 20,000 men toiled for eight months to construct portable breakwaters for the artificial harbors flung up along the invasion coast of France. They built eighty-odd steel and concrete units fitted with valves and tanks so that they could be towed across the Channel and sunk, and each unit was as big as a small apartment house. Twenty-three million tennis balls were used to float a million yards of electric cable towed behind minesweepers to set off magnetic mines, while in harbors and roadsteads all over England divers worked at the exquisitely dangerous task of feeling around sunken mines to relieve them of their detonators.

BUT perhaps the most heartbreaking job of all was the attempt to raise the Belgian freighter *Brabo*, which collided with another ship and sank in the Tyne channel. In six months of terrible labor the salvage men sank a cofferdam of steel pilings all the way around the sunken hulk, pumped her out, and were ready to raise her when a gale came along and in one night swept away the cofferdam completely. Not until after the war was the ship finally broken up and removed.

Simply, even awkwardly written in some places, "Epics of Salvage" bristles with fascinating technical lore and breathes authenticity in every sentence. It is good that printed history has caught up with the salvage men and divers who toiled in unnoticed bravery to keep ships afloat and channels clear wherever the enemy struck.

"The China Trade Post-Bag: The Seth Low Family of Salem and New York," edited by Elma Loines (Falmouth Publishing House, 324 pp. \$12.50), is a collection of letters and journals written by members of a Yankee family that owned a fleet of clipper ships and prospered in the trade with China. Robert Payne, who reviews it below, is the author of "Forever China" and other books.

By Robert Payne

NO ONE remembers any longer the shipwrights who built the great China clippers, but their names would be worth remembering: they built the most beautiful of the works of man. Those princely ships, with long black hulls and raking masts and towering skysail yards, flew across the oceans like impersonal and godlike mediators between the earth and the heavens, flawless and chaste and swift in their machined perfection which even the airplane has never been able to rival. Their lives were short, for the best of them were launched during the Forties and Fifties of the last century, and by 1869, when the Suez Canal was opened, they had outlived their usefulness. Soon the steamship ruled the seas: instead of wood and silken sail came iron and belching smoke from squat funnels. And now the glory has passed forever.

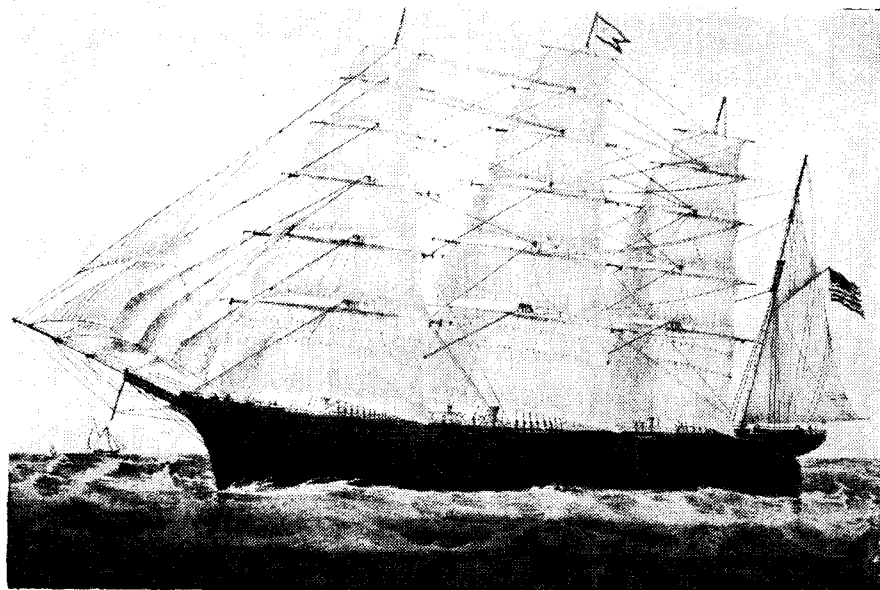
The Lows of Salem and Brooklyn owned a stable of clippers. The *Great Republic*, largest and most beautiful of all, belonged to their stable. She had burned to the waterline shortly after being built, but with one deck removed, and a thousand tons knocked off her, she could still sail to China in eighty days from New York, and Longfellow wrote a poem about her, the same poem that Franklin Roosevelt quoted to the Former Naval Person not so long ago. Between 1844 and 1873 the Lows had sixteen clippers and barkentines, and sent them out to the isles of Javan and Gadier with all their bravery on. The Lows were merchants and dealt in tea, silk, and spices, and seemed unaware of the romance of the thing. Certainly their surviving letters and journals, now capably edited by Elma Loines in a volume called "The China Trade Post-Bag," show them wonderfully matter-of-fact, without a stitch of poetry in them. They are concerned with the price of silk, the difficulties of trading, the absurd behavior of

the British, who were attempting in those days to twist the dragon's tail, all the dangers of living in a strange land, for most of the Lows went out to China to supervise their cargoes and sign the manifests: a few made fortunes.

The men were deadly dull, but Harriett had the spark of life, and well rewards us. At age twenty she set sail from New York on the *Sumatra* for Macao, for no other purpose than to amuse herself and perhaps find a husband. She had a pretty face and an abiding faith in the Unitarian religion: happiness kept breaking through. She wrote artlessly, and it is not always possible to know whether she is writing with her tongue in her cheek. "A typhoon threatens! Oh dear suds! What a stormy day!" But she is not always so silly, and she wrote admiringly of the phosphorescence in the tropics "like seas of diamonds for yards astern" and of storms in Macao, the chair coolies in their enormous hats wading up to their knees, the sky like a single sheet of flame, all Macao transformed into a drowned Venice. Once she saw a naked Malay and watched him imperturbably, confiding to her journal that she agreed with Bishop Heber that his color served as a covering.

Four years in Macao left her a little breathless. She could never make up her mind about the Chinese. There were moments when she was weighed down with misery at the thought of living among "those despicable Chinese who are not worth our notice," but she has the sense to regard them at another time as a singular people "who will do anything for their countrymen." She has her portrait painted by George Chinnery, who "cut mutton chops" out of the flattery she wisely poured on him. She attended the Macao opera, fought a losing battle with cockroaches, read commentaries on the Bible, danced through the night, and even disguised herself as a boy for a three-week visit to Canton, from which all foreign women were excluded by order of the Emperor. At the age of twenty-two this agreeable creature complains: "It is so hard to learn when one is old."

FOR the rest, there are the solemn letters of traders, the profit and loss, brief descriptions of the skirmishes between the British and the Chinese in the years before the Opium War broke out, the merchants' inflated letters filled with moral precepts and a jumble of figures. The best is Harriett and the clippers, taking sea cucumbers, sandalwood, and Spanish dollars to China, returning with their treasure chests of tea.



—Culver Service.

The *Great Republic* — "Longfellow wrote a poem about her."

Another Nautical Crusoe

"The Voyage of the Hérétique,"
by **Alain Bombard** (translated by
Brian Connell. Simon & Schuster. 214
pp. \$3.50), is a French scientist's re-
port on his crossing of the Atlantic
alone on a fifteen-foot craft. Percy
Knauth, who as an American foreign
correspondent in France covered Bom-
bard's departure, here writes him an
open letter about his book.

By Percy Knauth

July 5, 1954

My dear Alain:

It is two years now since I first met you; yet that hot, sunny morning in Monte Carlo does not seem so far away. I had come up the coast from Le Lavandou to cover your departure on a voyage which—so the newspapers said—was to take you from Monaco to Trinidad or Cuba, all the way through the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic Ocean; and this in an inflatable rubber life raft, without food or water beyond what you could get from the sea. Though you described it as a scientific experiment for the benefit of shipwrecked sailors, it looked like a stunt, the crazy kind of stunt that would make entertaining reading and funny pictures of the cottonheaded French professor with his crack-brained theories about living off the sea—and that's about what

I expected to find when I met you.

That was a wild day. The wildest thing about it was that, somehow, you convinced me that you were serious and that you knew exactly what you were doing. In that carnival atmosphere on the quay of the Vieux Port de Monaco the strength of your conviction shouted down that cheering, jeering crowd that came to see you get away; and that in itself was an achievement. I remember how everyone was laughing, as though it were a great big joke. There you were, a round and sprightly little butterball of a man with so much on your mind that you almost forgot the plankton nets which were supposed to be one of your major providers of food; there was Jack Palmer, that lanky, serious, red-headed British sailor who was to be your navigator and companion; there was the *Hérétique*, a fifteen-foot, blown-up parody of a sailing craft that scarcely looked as though it could get outside the breakwater, let alone sail across some 4,000 miles of empty ocean—and you didn't even have a tow to start you on your way.

What convinced me, I think, was the talk we had with the skipper of the American destroyer lying in Monte Carlo harbor—Lieut. Harold Thomas Walling of the U.S.S. *Hale*. Of all the fool things a foreign correspondent was ever called upon to do, asking the U.S. Navy to tow you

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