



A SAIL *in the* ALERION

THE Editor now wants me to tell a story about a sail in a boat of the type and size of the H 28.

It seems as if I never could suit him and, not being a writer, I doubt if I can succeed in spinning a yarn of any great interest for, after all, a sail is an everyday

affair to many readers of THE RUDDER. The Editor is a queer fellow. He pays me more for a long yarn than a short one so, patient reader, if I take you around Robin Hood's barn a couple of times you must blame him and not me.

The sail that I am going to tell of took place nearly a quarter of a century ago now. It was in the spring of 1920, April or May, and if the dates are hazy in my mind some of the scenes are not.

As I remember the Alerion she was about twenty-six feet on deck, maybe eight feet beam, and only about two and one-half feet draft and, of course, a centerboarder. She was a gaff rigged sloop and much the same model as the H 28 but with the rudder inboard two or three feet. The Alerion was designed by my father for his own use at Bermuda, where he had been in the habit of spending some of his winters, and named after that famous fin-keeler he owned in the gay nineties. She was as well built and fitted out a small yacht as it has been my lot to see.

Well, one year he decided to have Alerion shipped home (to Bristol, Rhode Island). She was to arrive on the deck of the Bermuda steamer at New York. So one day I got orders to go down and bring her up. In those days I used to travel light so, wrapping an oilskin around a couple of charts, and thrusting a folded sou'wester in my starboard pocket, I took the train for New York where in due course I arrived and taxied over to the Bermuda steamer dock. The steamer had not shown up yet so, finding a small hotel in that region, I thought I would moor there for the night so as to be close to the scene in the morning. Well, when I approached the clerk to inquire for a room he said, "Where is your bag?" So

I said, "My things are rolled up in the charts under my arm." Then he said, "Well, I guess we can accommodate you, if you pay down first." That was easily arranged so I deposited the charts and sou'wester in the room and went out to spend the evening with acquaintances.

In the morning the steamer had arrived so, starting the complicated mechanism of going through the customs, we proceeded well. At that time we had prohibition in the land, so that though the revenue officer was quite satisfied, the prohibition agent had to examine every ditty box, sail bag and what-not, which made me quite nervous as the steam yacht Corsair's port launch was standing by to tow us to City Island.

In the meantime the slings were rigged and the cargo boom swung over us. Seeing this, the prohibitionist left post haste, not relishing an aerial ascension at that moment. So the bo'sun blew his whistle and up into the ether we went to the chorus of screeching winch engines and creaking cargo booms; then out and down into that brown, strange New York water sprinkled with dead cats, derby hats and other North River flotsam. Well, the launch was well managed and we were soon clear of our slings and cradle and on our way down the harbor, the launch man skilfully picking his way by the ferries, tug-boats and lighters till we reached Hell Gate, where with a fair tide we soon shot into clearer water. Then, taking account of things with mop in hand, I concluded we had done quite well, not having shipped anything worse than a couple of old shoes and an orange crate. How good Execution Rock looked off to the eastward, as we entered the sound! This seemed strange, for I had often considered it the last sentinel of decency, beyond which lay all the sordidness of the city. But now in the afternoon

sun its gray lighthouse took on more the aspect of the pearly gates to one who had just passed through Gotham and Hell Gate.

We swung into City Island harbor and moored alongside the steam yacht Xarifa which that summer was to be tender for the Vanity. Some of the afterguard of the Vanity were on board, including my good friend, Starling Burgess, who gave me a very pleasant evening, for his talks with me have always seemed more like poetry than plain conversation. In the morning the mate of the Vanity (I don't remember now whether it was Baltic Jack or Cocoanut John) called some of the boys from the forecastle saying, "Never mind about the cribbage board, ve gonto rig that Alegriion boat," so they swarmed on board. Now these were some boys who could lick their own weight in wildcats and knew the parts of a sailboat to boot, so the Alerion was rigged almost as rapidly as a gunner's mate would assemble a machine gun. The mast was stepped, standing rigging shackled, and running rigging rove, while some were bending sails, so that in about an hour there she was, flag halliards rove and tiller lines crossed. They passed me down a bottle of water, some sardines and a loaf of bread and I shoved off with no fixed destination in view, only to get to the eastward.

That day was light with baffling winds, but about sunset we were off Greenwich, so we moored way up in the head of that narrow harbor which the Alerion's light draft allowed. The Alerion had no berths or mattresses or even cushions, as I remember it, but to me her little cabin seemed quite snug and all I had to do to feel well fixed was to remember some nights I had spent in open boats in rain storms. Well, I folded and refolded

the canvas which had covered her on the steamer and made up something that looked like a mattress. Then I pounded over the storm jib in its bag so it made a pillow and, feeling all things quite shipshape below, I walked up to the town for a late supper. Then, thinking of an acquaintance who was a professor of art in a Connecticut college, I got him on the phone and, upon inviting him for a sail along the Connecticut coast, he accepted and, as Uffa Fox would say, came down like a shot, so that early next morning as I opened the cabin door there he stood above me on the wharf, musette bag in one hand and a paint box in the other.

We were soon under way with a rattling northwester over our after port quarter. Now if there is anything pleasant it is an all day sail with an artist (when they are good natured). The changing lights and colors are to them as thrilling as a symphony and much do they see that would have gone unnoticed, so that day as the shafts of light and shadows ran out before us under the broken wind clouds, we enjoyed ourselves, unbuttoned our overcoats and basked in the sun. It was pleasant under the lee of the weather coaming, for never does the sun feel so good as in those first false spring days. We had not yet had the May, or line, storm so the warmth was unexpected. My friend was a landscape watercolorist of no mean ability, and as we talked of many things and took turns at the helm, he told me of the time he had studied under Maxfield Parrish and of his days abroad working with the late followers of the Barbizon school. But we had forgotten to bring along lunch in our hurry to get started. At first we thought we could feast ourselves through our eyes, but this worked out much better in theory than practice, so about four o'clock we began

looking at the chart for snug and easily entered harbors. Now, after all these years, I can't seem to remember what harbor it was (for I have been into several of them along there at various times), but it may have been Southport. It was a small, shallow harbor. By the time we got everything snugged down it had turned quite cold, as it often does after an all day northwester, so we hurried ashore in the tender and inquired for an inn. Luckily for us there was one, though it was about two miles down the Old Post Road, so we started out half running and I thought I would perish of the cold before we got there. But if I can't remember the name of the port we were in, I can remember after all these years the steak smothered in onions and the steaming tea we had. Then of one accord we tumbled into bed and went sound asleep although it was still quite light to the westward.

The next morning it was very cold for the season, but we were up bright and early and had some lunches put up while we were having our breakfast. After our walk to the harbor we were warmed up and as the wind had gone down some it was quite pleasant, so we started at once. Out on the sound everything was sparkling bright and off to the southward quite a mirage. Stratford Shoal lighthouse stood up like a medieval castle, and the shore of Long Island loomed like the chalk cliffs of Dover. We could even see the seas breaking on Old Field Point and the Smithtown shore although the sound was nearly ten miles wide here. But this did not surprise me much for a few years before I had been on some of the high land of Block Island on a clear November day when all the land to the eastward stood up like a topographical model. Cuttyhunk, Nashawena and Gay Head were gigantic headlands and Buzzards Bay and its en-

virons were clearly visible although they are many miles over the horizon. It had been my experience that these days of looming headlands foretold a storm of some severity and, in fact, they now did as we shall soon see. We made good progress that day, so by midafternoon the Long Island coast reappeared and at sunset the high land on Orient Point was abeam. The sun made a lee set in a dark cloudbank which its dying embers lit up like distant mountain ranges, and in the twilight Plum Island reflected the last beams of the setting sun. Soon the many lighthouses of this region came into being, one after the other, and we told them off the chart to amuse ourselves. Right ahead was the lightship of Bartlett Reef; the powerful light on Little Gull Rock was on our forward starboard beam, and off to the eastward were the lighthouses of Race Rock, North Dumpling and Seaflower Reef. We had a strong head tide here and the wind was falling so that by the time we rounded Bartlett's Reef and stood up for New London it was pitch black but clear. How comforting it was to have the red sector of New London light to guide us by the outlying reefs of Goshen Point, for the cross tide and falling wind made me a bit apprehensive, but as I had lived in New London a couple of years, and with Alerion's shoal draft, we took some short cuts and soon entered the harbor where we came to anchor off the Scott Wrecking Company and a short way southwest of Powder Island.

I think it was near ten at night and we had been sailing some fourteen hours and had covered maybe sixty miles. I was dead tired so, after putting my friend on the beach, I put my oilskin on over my overcoat and turned in all standing with the jib for a coverlet and the boat cover for a mattress, but I lost consciousness almost

instantly and, in fact, slept so soundly that, although a bitter cold northeast storm broke that night, I was entirely unaware of it until awakened in the morning by the inner man grumbling with a certain rolling and rumbling, for we had not had any supper the night before.

As I was already clad for the elements, it was a matter of minutes to land on a small, sandy beach dead to leeward where I pulled the tender far above high water mark and walked to the city. There I hired a room and bath in a hotel where I was known. How good that hot tub felt, for there is nothing like a hot soaking to warm up one who has been chilled to the marrow, and donning a new suit of underclothes which I had purchased on the way up, and eating a three course breakfast, I felt like facing the world again. So, after buying a shave, I sallied forth to visit friends who judged people by other qualities than their clothes. One was a skilled watchmaker who was rebuilding an English chronometer; the other was a model maker making a fine model of Hendrick Hudson's D-Halvemaen.

Well, the northeaster blew for about three days, but I knew the Alerion was laying to a hand forged Herreshoff anchor with a practically unused anchor warp. Now, patient reader, I have taken you around Robin Hood's barn a couple of times and if you care to continue I will take you for a sail—and it was a sail.

Finally one morning it broke clear, with only a few fleecy clouds overhead such as you would see at Bermuda, and I hurriedly got under way. It must have been a lull near the storm center and the May storm at that. Well, I had only gone a few miles and was entering Fisher Island Sound when, looking back over New London, I saw the sky was making up with some lead colored

clouds. Soon these clouds seemed to churn around and show movement. We were about abreast of Seaflower lighthouse with a fair tide carrying us to the eastward, and a very light breeze. I doused all sail, took off the jib and replaced it with a small storm jib, and put the last reef in the mainsail (and the Alerion was very deep reefed for winter sailing in Bermuda). At first the wind came from the west and only moderate and I felt a fool for reefing so deeply, but it soon hardened to a whitecap breeze, so with the tide back of us we rushed through the sound and soon were in the Narrows of Watch Hill, which is a fearful looking stretch of water when a southeast swell is meeting an eastgoing tide. Well, we gritted our teeth and shot through and soon were breasting the easterly ground swell outside.

Now the flaws of wind, as they struck, had some power and bowled us along at a fine clip. The dark clouds were now overhead, but were breaking up into sections, each succeeding puff seeming stronger than the last and making the Alerion quiver all over as they struck. This was one of those spring days when "horse manure blizzards" course down the city streets and the pedestrians pull the brims of their hats over their weather eye to ward off the flying cinders and splinters. But out here it was quite different. One had a queer feeling of lonely recklessness—not a thing was in sight on the water, and only occasionally a gull could be seen having obvious trouble with his ailerons as he careened over one side, then the other. We were traveling along at a crazy rate with the wind over our after quarter, and this long stretch of beach seemed to glide by in no time at all as the dark shadows of the clouds coursed on before us. The ground swell was increasing as we worked to the eastward

and I began to be quite apprehensive about what it might be off Point Judy and determined to make for the break-water there, but when we got there, there came a slight lull and I thought we could make it so, keeping well off-shore to avoid breaking seas, we rounded the tall light buoy. But Neptune was putting on a demonstration and shouldering up great, greenish gray hills which fell in all directions as they met the eastgoing tide off the point. On shore I could see the men running between the life-saving station and the boat shed and I could well imagine their thoughts as they said "What—————fool is out there today?" And I was sorry for this, for old Captain Kenyon was a friend who since, alas, has passed over the bar where the lifeboats ne'er return.

Well, as we rounded up on our northeast course for Newport, a great gray bearded comber appeared astern and as it rose back of us our tender, as if scared of this apparition, darted up abreast of us so we went through the smother together. I then bent on her painter a line about fifteen fathoms long so she now trailed far astern and, in fact, was out of sight most of the time. Now this region is the rightful domain of the South West Wind and he resented the intrusion that the northeaster had made and the northwester was now making. So, marshalling his legions, the sky to the southward took on an ominous look. About where Clay Head on Block Island would be there appeared a luminous sector like a sundog or the colorless base of a rainbow. Now deploying his forces in formations of company straight into line, in a vast unwavering front from Gay Head to Montauk, the South West Wind swept all before him. If one had been on a high cliff looking down, this battle of the elements would have been awe inspiring indeed, but down here

there was no hope for escape and as the southwester rushed down on us it was heralded first by a rustling noise, then a hissing like ten thousand pythons. As it struck us the Alerion staggered and fell forward, but her backstays held and, raising her bow and shaking off the water forward, she started on a mad rush, throwing great wings of spray out before her. The helmsman, like one on a runaway horse, could guide but not control her. Onward we rushed toward the northeast where all the universe seemed moving. As each succeeding swell rose under us and we reached its crest, the wind sang like the reoccurring strong music in Erlkonig, and as we settled down into the valleys the higher notes in the rigging sounded like the child in his refrain seeing the Erlking.

The sun now brought his power to bear and pierced the clouds to the northward. A shaft of light came down out of the gloom. Whale Rock appeared as the seas hurled themselves halfway up its lighthouse. The send of each sea threw us onward and, as the combing crest rushed by, the centerboard and rudder hummed and chattered.

Now she yaws and the reefed boom end trails in the water. Now, with a crazy reel, she rights and the boom saws upward. How long can spar and sail stand this strain? There is no time to think of that, only hold her head to the northward. Steady now, keep your eyes always forward. I am beginning to tire with the strain and have long since thought the tender gone. How strange it seems to feel so indifferent—that beautiful tender I handled so carefully on the beach at New London. But all out to leeward now stretches that rockbound coast of Rhode Island, a seething cauldron of broken water. Onward we rush. The rocks come closer—Beaver Tail,

Kettle Bottom Rock. I'm glad I am alone. If anything parts we are goners.

Brenton's Reef Lightship now comes abeam. How different she looks from in the summer. But the seas are smaller! We head for Castle Hill. A miracle has happened—we rush on over smooth water, the ground swell has gone, the sun comes out. To the northwest the legions of the West Wind are piled up in white columns. That stretch of water from Point Judy to Newport seemed minutes rather than the hour it probably was. But our troubles were not over. As we made the entrance opposite the Dumplings, a white plumed knight with dark under trappings, a venturesome vanguard of the North Wind decided to make a last onslaught. Down he came, casting his dark shadow before him, making the bay feather-white in his fury. Fortunately for me this was some distance ahead, but right in his path was a tug and three barges. The squall had somehow got them tangled and the tug was making frantic signals with her whistle, short blasts of steam which could be seen but not heard. Now as they straightened out they reached nearly across this narrow channel, for the shores are bold on both sides. To weather them we would have to tack, and to pass to leeward endangered a gybe. In this heavy wind I didn't want to do either, but reasoning that the leeward barge would soon pull ahead, I bore off as broadly as I dared and very slowly the barge did pull ahead, but as I grazed around her stern the back wind threw the sails to windward so violently that the boom struck the weather backstay. Out again it went and now we shifted our course to nearly north up the bay so I had to turn around to haul in the mainsail.

Much to my surprise there the tender was about a hundred feet astern, dancing on the end of her dead-wood, with an expression like a terrier who has followed its master through all hell and high water. Ever since that moment I have loved the tenders built from her model.

It was a close reach up the bay and the sail was wet down to the gaff jaws. The flying spray from our weather quarter drumming a tune on the mainsail, we passed Sandy Point and headed for Hog Island light. There was some broken water here, but it seemed tame side of Point Judy. I was getting tired and numb but the thought that not much more spray would thrum on my sou'wester cheered me on till we entered the harbor. The wind was still blowing great guns so I reached well to the weather of the wharf, the home of Alerion, the young eagle. Then we luffed into the wind to lower the sail, for we were to make the last rush under bare poles.

As we shoot in the wind the mainsail splits about one foot above the reef earring or cringle. Around we spin with the halliards bowing to leeward. Now we round up under the lee of the stone wharf and shoot to windward. How good this shelter feels as we make fast to the spring line. As I climb up the ladder I realize how dead tired I am, for we have sailed fifty-two nautical miles in a little over eight hours. There has been no time to eat, or a minute to light a pipe, and as I walk up the street the land rocks and rolls on before me. How good it is to get on dry clothes and sit without bracing.

Often in life the pleasantest moments are in anticipation, but the recollections of that sail have always been a great pleasure. So the moral of this story, if any, is: Be careful how you put to sea in the springtime.

According to the last edition of Lloyd's Register the Alerion is still in service. She is 26 feet overall, 21 feet 9 inches on the water, 7 feet 7 inches beam, 2 feet 5 inches draft. She was designed and built by the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company, and is now owned by Amory S. Skerry of Barrington, Rhode Island.