

Under the Swiss pennant across the Irish Sea

Autor(en): **H.R.B.**

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UNDER THE SWISS PENNANT ACROSS THE IRISH SEA

At long last an occasional pale stab of light showed over the horizon. At first, it was only a faint glow when- ever 'Turtle', our 26-foot Atalanta Sloop lifted on the crest of a wave. But there it was, reassuring us that our navigation had been correct with Strangness Lighthouse which guards the S.E. coast of the Isle of Man, dead ahead. Or so it seemed at first.

My wife and I had left the safe shelter of Conway in North Wales at 7 a.m. on Friday, 13th September, slipping with retracted keels over the very low bar at the entrance of the estuary. Once outside, the keels were lowered, Mainsail and working jib set and the engine stopped. The course had been worked out the previous evening, clearing first the sands between Puffin Island and Great Ormes Head and then towards Port S. Mary in the Isle of Man. Soon the crew lowered the jib and hoisted the big Genoa and before noon the Welsh hills and later the shores of Anglesey disappeared behind 'Turtle's' stern from which the Swiss Pennant gaily flew. We were crossing busy shipping lanes and the occasional Tanker or Cargo Steamer could be seen on their way in or out of Liverpool. In daytime and in good visibility, these encounters are very pleasant and relieve the feeling of loneliness experienced in an empty sea. But at night or in fog, the modern practice in these big ships to navigate almost entirely by Radar renders a small, wooden (and therefore 'invisible') yacht liable to being rammed and we kept wondering how much the radar reflector, hoisted high up on the mast, would make us conspicuous on their screens.

As the afternoon wore on the wind dropped more and more until in the end our speed through the water became one knot or less. We knew then that our chance of reaching port before dark had gone and we began to prepare for a night at sea. My wife had been busy in the galley, an excellent goulash and one or two glasses of 'Féchy' provided a further proof that this was a Swiss boat with a Swiss crew.

Soon after eight, daylight began to fade and at the same time the wind increased again, making it necessary to shorten sail. The navigation lights were lit, from now on constant vigil became vital especially since some fishing trawlers tended to pass uncomfortably close across our bow. Once I had to shine my strong flashlight several times into the sails to encourage one of these fellows to take avoiding action.

But now, sometime after midnight and after seven- teen hours at sea, the first signs of the new shore beckoned. But any pride over our navigational achieve- ment was shortlived. Strangness light, according to a newly purchased set of charts, flashed once every ten seconds. Furthermore, on our port bow, a weaker light on the Chicken Rock should have been visible, with two flashes every twenty seconds. However, the latter was indicated on the charts as unmanned and therefore liable to fail and its absence did not cause me any alarm. What did puzzle me very much indeed was the fact that dead ahead of us, the powerful light flashed not once but twice in quick succession followed by a long period of darkness. A hurried check in the index of navigation aids for this part of the Irish Sea showed no such Light. Where were we? Had the tidal currents, the increasing wind and sloppy navigation during darkness driven us off course? Had we perhaps missed the Isle of Man altogether and were we off the coast of Ireland? Surely, it couldn't have been that extra glass of "Féchy?"

There was only one thing to do: leave the unfriendly coast, head back on a reciprocal course and cruise offshore until daylight allowed reliable orientation. And so, in increasing wind and in a choppy sea we spent a miserable four hours with the occasional rainy squall helping to keep the helmsman awake. Slowly, dawn revealed detail after detail of the coast on our beam and soon there was no doubt any more: this was the correct landfall only a few miles from Port S. Mary, our destination. And so, 24 hours after leaving Conway, we dropped anchor behind the breakwater. The bliss of being able to relax with the prospect of a long sleep is impossible to describe.

Later that day, after a few hours rest, we went ashore to find out that other yachtsmen had experienced our trouble: the Strangness Light had been modified only six weeks previously and the Chicken Rock Light had been removed altogether. It had been replaced by a modern, powerful one on the Calf of Man but in such a way as to be invisible from our course.

How we were subsequently stormbound on the Island, what a wonderful, friendly welcome we enjoyed by local yachtsmen and what happened afterwards to 'Turtle' is part of another story. One thing is certain: wherever we cruise in our boat with the Swiss pennant flying from the stern, barriers between people break down and we seem to make new friends in every new harbour.

H.R.B.



"Arnold House", 36-41 Holywell Lane,
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