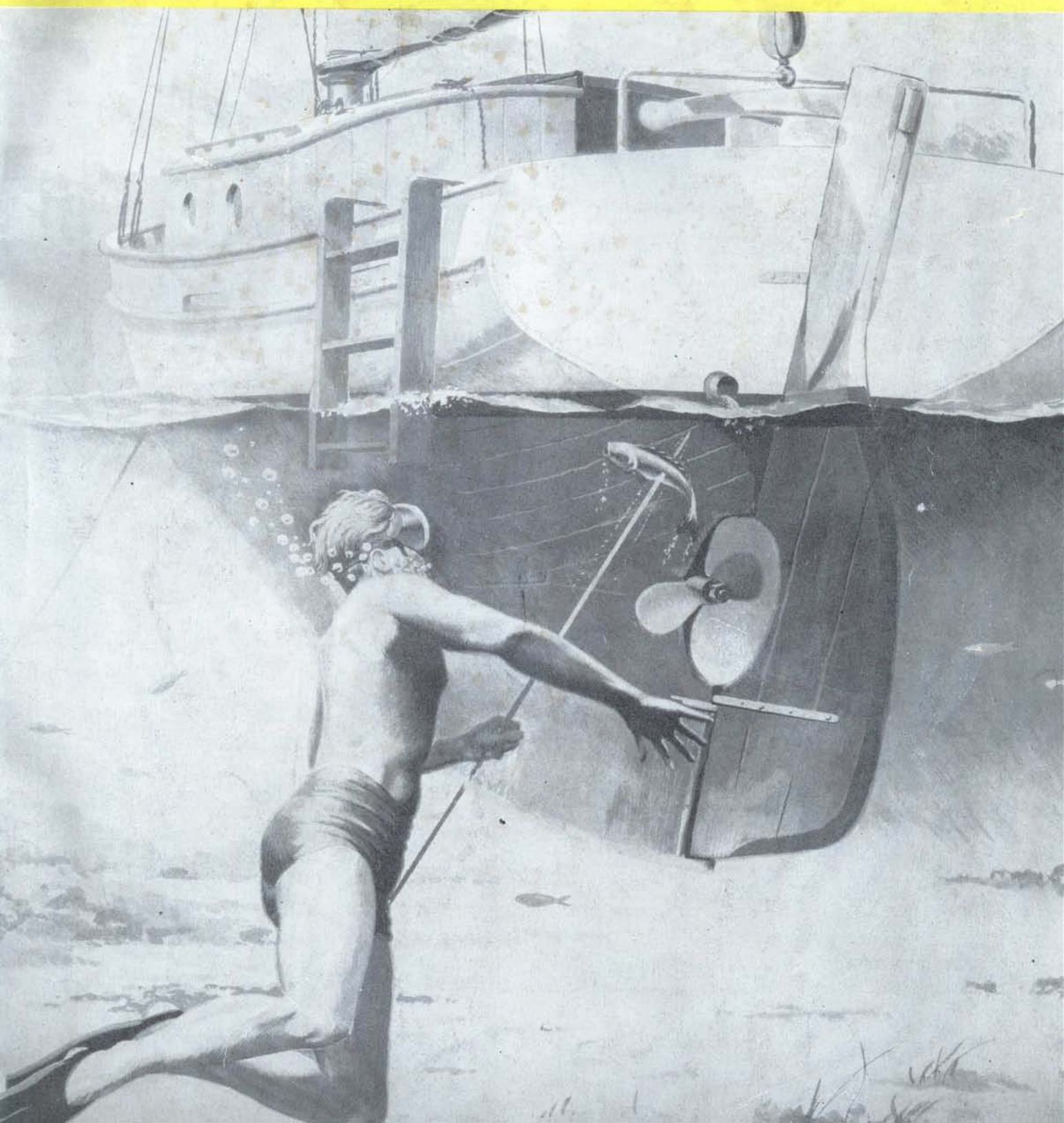


The Rudder



AMERICA'S FIRST BOATING MAGAZINE

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Island Trading Schooners

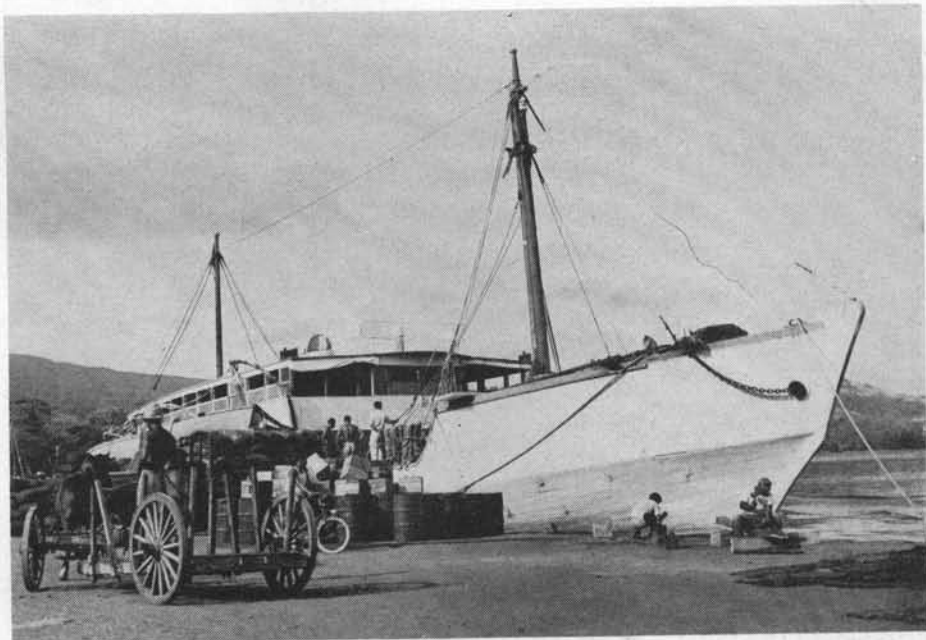
By CONSTANCE HITCHCOCK

THE romance of the South Sea Island trading schooners is not dead. Every day the little snub nosed, heavily laden trading schooners come into Papeete with cargoes of pearl shell, copra, vanilla and palm thatch. Each day, with their Plimsoll marks lost below the water, they leave for Bora Bora, Huahine, Tekapotu or even the far islands of the Marquesas or Gambier groups.

It is still a fascinating and a perilous business, for every month or two a vessel goes on a reef, sometimes to be salvaged but often lost. In the three months we have been here the schooner Rosita went on the reef outside Papeete and five hours later there was only a pile of wreckage left in the heavy surf. Also the ketch Fleur d'Ocean, which came here from France four years ago, and the small sloop Manuroa were lost in the Tuomotus. No lives were lost.

However sometimes a heavily laden craft leaves port, as did the 150 foot schooner Teriora in January a few years ago with ten passengers and a dozen crewmen, never to be heard from again. A widespread search for that vessel failed to reveal so much as a piece of wood.

While we are tied up in relative safety at the quay in Papeete during the three month stormy season the little schooners night and day continue to ply the rough waterways be-



The Benicia, Nicholai Fagu owner and master

tween islands—islands that are reef bound and unlighted, where the seas break continuously in the passes or where there are no passes and the loading must be done in the boiling surf over the reef.

In the interisland trade there are several large handsome schooners such as the Tiare Taporo, the Vaitere, the Tagua and the Oiseau des Isles, company owned and beautifully maintained, that make a monthly run to the larger island ports. Yet the majority of the commerce of the islands is carried on by the squat little work horses of the sea that make any port of call for a few sacks of copra, a few pigs or a passenger, beating their way under sail and power to any outlying atoll or *motu*. Whether ketch, schooner or sloop rigged, their main power is in their diesel engines.

The amount of cargo they pile on deck after their holds are full astonishes us. Then with passengers sitting on the rail, cattle or goats amidships and timbers lashed alongside, they lumber through the pass into the stormy seas bound perhaps for a tiny coral reef hundreds of miles away.

A spirit of complete informality prevails among the small boats. Recently we visited a little vessel just in from a 400 mile run to learn that the skipper had no charts or navigation instruments except an ancient compass tucked away in a dark corner. We asked him how he finds his way to a distant atoll with visibility of five miles if he is lucky. We were impressed when he explained that he knew the sea so well and had made the run so often that he just pointed her in the right direction and knew he would make the pass. We were not so impressed when a few days later we discovered that this captain was now navigating his fourth ship. He had lost the other three.

Recently the government tug raced out through the Papeete pass to rescue a small island vessel in distress, her engine disabled, four miles away and dangerously close to the reef. The tug towed her in. When she was safely tied up the towboat skipper asked, "What's the matter with your engine that it broke down?" The other skipper replied, "We ran out of fuel oil."



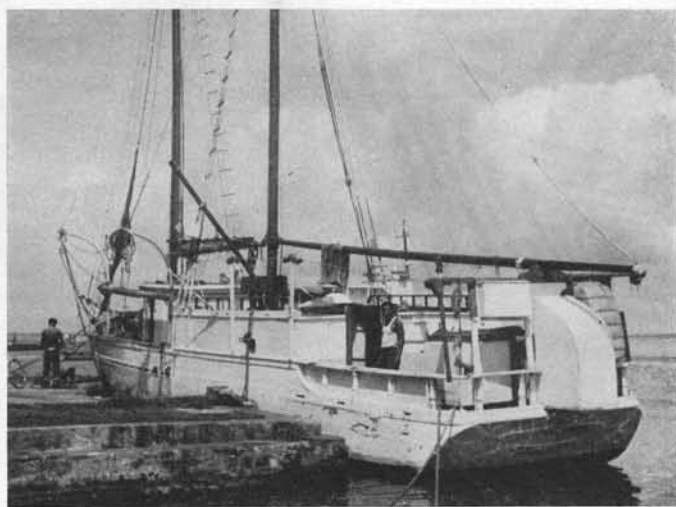
Captain Fagu in Benicia



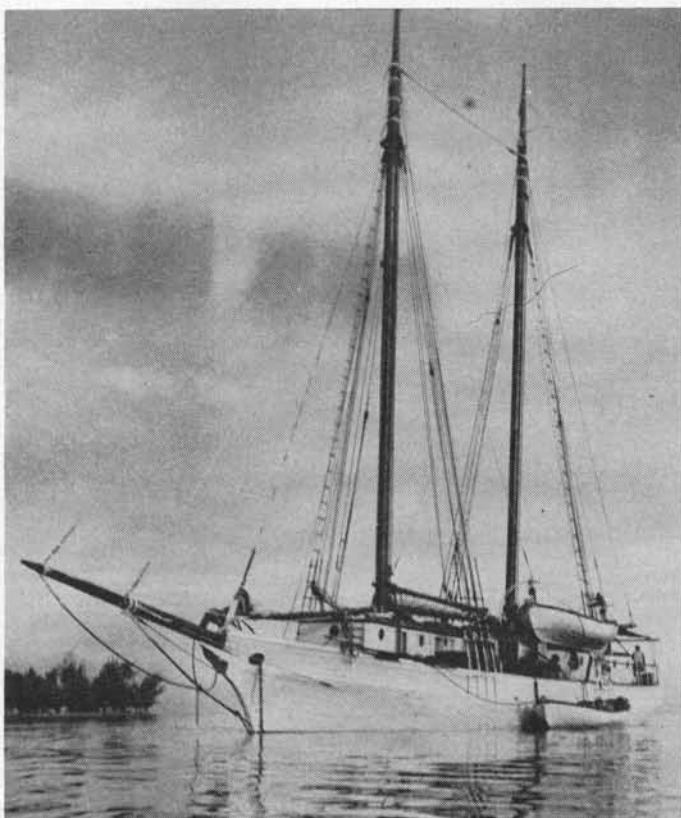
The only boat with a steel hull is the phosphate trader Oiseau des Isles. She is shown coming up the government ways at Papeete



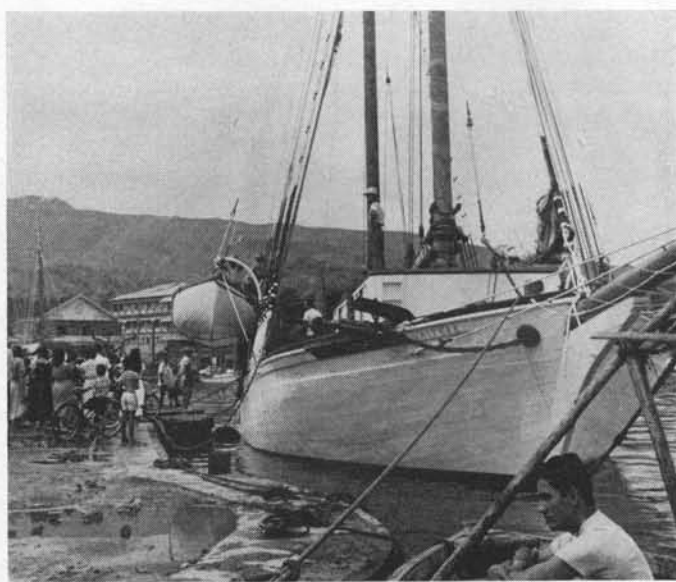
The government owned schooner Tamara



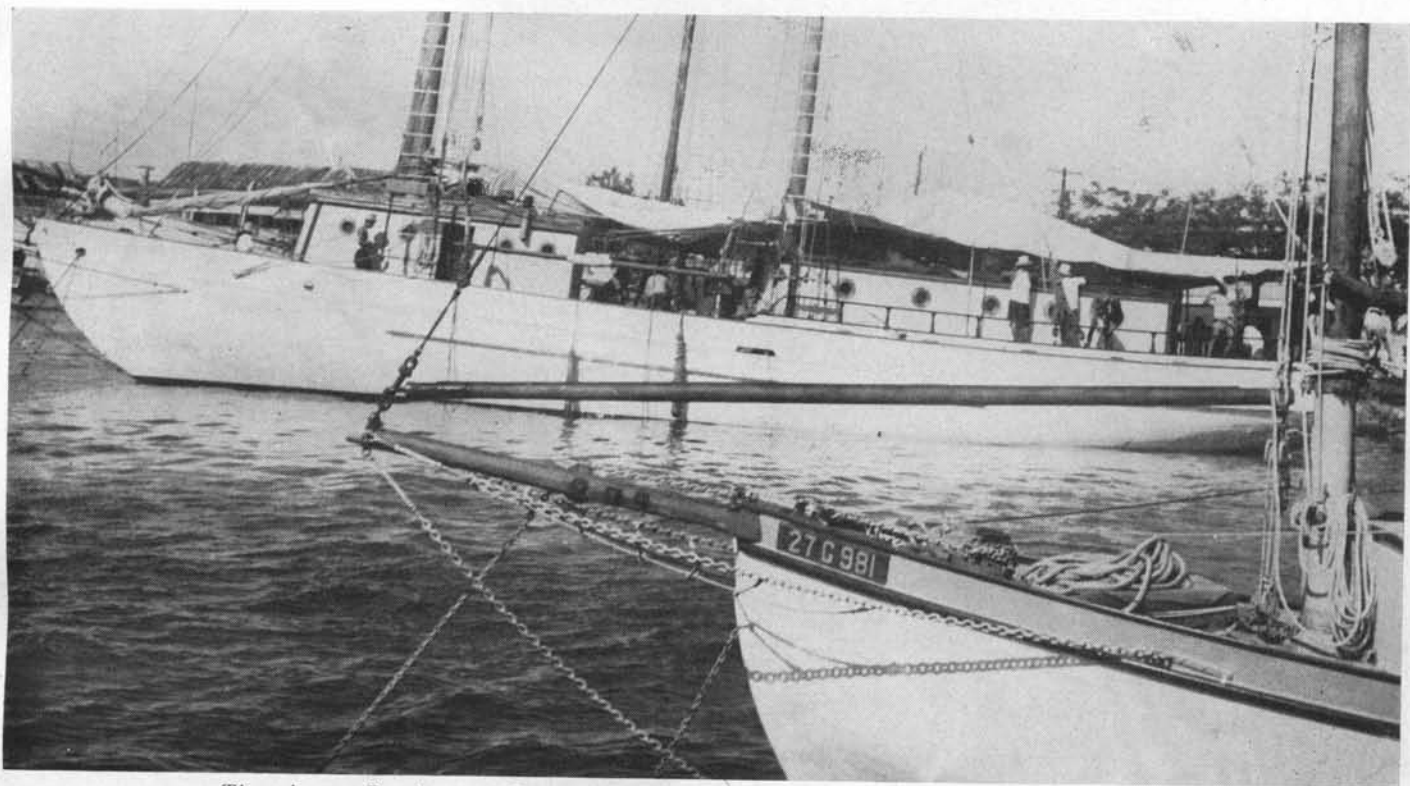
A typical trading schooner is the Vahine Tahiti. Note the toilet over the stern



The schooner Togua drops anchor at Coconut Island



The Vaitere preparing to leave Papeete



The schooner Paraita owned by the Mormon Church engages in trade in the islands. She was formerly the yacht Fandango on the West Coast of the United States

In spite of the fact that the drying bones of a vessel decorate nearly every atoll, the masters of most of the schooners are able seamen, good ship handlers and resourceful men who know these treacherous islands, their tricky winds and changing currents like the palms of their hands. Such a man is our friend Captain Nicholai Fagu, skipper of the most profitable vessel plying these waters. Island born and trained, Captain Fagu had a master's papers when he was eighteen and has sailed these waters as a captain for twenty-six years.

He holds many records. His most recent accomplishment was to be the only island skipper to bring his boat safely into Papeete harbor during the January cyclonic storm. His boat, the Benicia, named for the California town where her builder learned his trade, is a cranky 200 foot diesel powered river boat. She makes the run through the leeward islands of the Society group carrying an average of 1,000 tons of freight a month, more than double the amount his closest competitor carries, Captain Fagu says.

She usually has from eighty to a hundred and fifty passengers bedded down on sleeping mats on her top deck and copra in her hold along with cattle, lumber and general cargo piled deep on her main deck.

Captain Fagu, Nicky to his friends, says he learned seamanship the hard way. His father was a captain in the islands in sail. As a youngster Nicky spent three years in the French navy, coming out an officer. He was mate and navigator of the schooner Tahitian which set a sailing record of eleven days for the 2,300 mile run from Papeete to New Zealand in 1934. He also was on the schooner Papeete which made the record run under sail of 3,800 miles from San Francisco to Papeete in seventeen days. Because of his fine seamanship Captain Fagu with two French officials constitutes the examining board for licensed personnel here.

Early in January of this year when the Benicia was on her run to the leeward islands we on the seawall in Papeete were warned that a cyclonic storm was headed

straight for us from the northwest. At first this brought a southeast wind that swung gradually to the east and northeast. Usually as the storm passes across the island to the south the wind switches to the north and northwest. No easterly wind is dangerous in Papeete, but a northwester makes this wide open harbor a lee shore. The seas boil through the pass and if the storm is severe they roar across the reef and crash over the seawall where we are tied.

For several days we waited anxiously. It was rough in the backwash from the quay, but we all hung on. Then at dawn one morning the port authorities warned us of the approaching gale and we, along with all the island schooners in port, hurried to drop our lines from the seawall and get out in the lagoon on a hook. With 230 feet of chain down on our big Danforth anchor we readied a second anchor and prepared the motor to aid us when the westerlies hit.

The Papeete pass was a mass of tumbling white breakers. The radio constantly warned that it was impassable. Most small craft had run for cover at the start of the storm. It was blowing hard, more than fifty miles in the gusts. Rain descended in such volume that it hung like a curtain between us and the shore a quarter of a mile away.

Then on Friday morning, the fifth day of the storm, we looked out to see the old Benicia come lumbering along the crooked passage inside the reef. Clad in rain gear, we rowed ashore. Her bulwarks were broken where the great seas had battered the cargo on her foredeck. The davits hung empty where one of her big landing boats was missing.

That day the storm changed its path, turning to the southwest, and the Cook Islands instead of Tahiti caught its full fury. The Benicia had come through its center, with Captain Fagu, after fifty hours without sleep, still on the bridge. He said it was the worst storm to hit the leeward islands since the last full cyclone in the 1920's.

(Continued on page 44)

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ISLAND TRADING SCHOONERS (Continued from page 17)

He estimated the force of the wind at its worst at between eighty and one hundred miles.

"I contacted Papeete by radio," he said, "before I left Raiatea at one in the afternoon. That was three days ago. It seemed possible to get home ahead of the storm. Before dark that night, however, the barometer had dropped from our normal here of 29.90 to .70, then .60 and was still going down. I knew we were in for it. By that time the wind from the northeast was blowing forty miles or more. I believed it would switch to the north and northwest and then we'd really get it. The sea was up. Tremendous waves were striking us abeam and crashing clear across the vessel.

"My passengers were sick and terrified. When a great sea smashed our reef boat clean from the davits I knew it was time to heave-to. Before dark we lashed the other boats so they couldn't break away. Then we crossed two timbers more than thirty feet long, lashed a big anchor where they crossed and dropped it over the bow on 300 feet of heavy manila.

"The early part of the night, with the engines going ahead, she held her bow up into the gale and made fairly easy weather of it, but by ten o'clock the wind had increased until she began to fall off. She took sea after sea across her waist. Her bulwarks were smashed, her deck cargo beaten to kindling. We had to do something more to help her. Working in that smother of sea and wind we lashed three oil drums together with chain through holes in the drums and dropped them overboard on another long line. They acted like big buckets and with the sea anchor and the engine held her bow into the wind.

"It was a dreadful night. The seas were like mountains, huge breaking and running fast. Toward morning the wind lessened and by daylight dropped to nothing, but the seas were still enormous and wild, coming from every direction. The barometer dropped to 29.50 and I knew we were in the center of the storm.

"When we could we took in our gear and started for home. It wasn't long until the wind came up again and headed us. All day the Benicia crabbed across huge seas with her bow headed into northerly winds, fighting for position to get around the island of Moorea and home across the channel."

The darkness came early. Rain came down in such torrents that although Captain Fagu knew he was close on Moorea he could not catch a glimpse of that 3,000 foot high island. So for the second night he hove-to in his unwieldy craft. Next day the storm veered to the west. He was blown off course to the south, but in the lee of Moorea he was able to fight his way back and across to the south coast of Tahiti. He knew he could not get through the narrow Papeete Pass so he took the Benicia through the Punaauia Pass twenty miles to the south and brought her up the narrow crooked passage through the lagoon, beset on both sides by reefs and coral heads, and safely into the harbor.

Only a month ago the Benicia started home from the Leeward Islands with a tremendous load of copra in the hold and on deck. Amidships cattle were penned. At that time of the year Captain Fagu expected the northeast trade wind that sweeps across the equator during the late summer and fall clear down to the Society Islands. Instead he ran into a southeaster which made him hard on the wind. Shortly he was shipping seas that swept him from end to end.

The dried copra became soaked and took on three times its weight. The vessel settled so badly that her decks, constantly awash, opened up and let water into the hold. The cattle were drowned and Captain Fagu saw that he must jettison his deck cargo or be swamped. His men passengers were recruited to help the crew on the pumps and to dump copra until the Benicia was able to stagger into port. The owners said, "But you lost fifteen tons of copra." "Yes," he replied, "but I saved seventy-eight human lives and brought you back your boat." Two days later the Benicia, patched up and undaunted, was back on her run.

Daily we watch the trading schooners come and go—the Vainano back from the Australs 1,000 miles to the south or the Aorai down from the Marquesas 800 miles to the north. Snub nosed, backhouse over the stern, Plimsoll mark lost to view, they chug along in the stormy South Pacific during the hurricane season. The helmsman aft on these strange little vessels cannot see forward because of the house and cargo, but the shipper stands aloft and directs him in and out of harbor with gestures.

These masters who double as supercargo and trader are a vanishing race, but they are still able, resourceful officers and magnificent seamen.

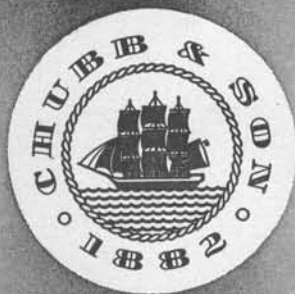


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