

Mable Wilson

after 2:30 P.M.

Top floor Lewis Bldg

MAINE ISLAND

We stood in the brittle morning air watching the boat as it came around Peak Island and headed over towards us. Neither of us spoke. We had heard the sharp quick beat of its motor for quite a while from the other side of the islands, but now we could see it, a dark speck bobbing over the short waves scuffed up by the brisk wind. It came down the broad path of the sun the usual values reversed, as in a photographic negative, by the white specular glare from unmerous shifting facets of the waves. The breaking crests were dark against the intense light. The white boat itself appeared black and the spray from its bow, slapping the tops of waves, fanned out dusky translucent wings on either side studded and boardered with glistening drops that caught and projected to us the multiple rays of the sun. In spite of the sharpness of the scene all detail of the boat was obscured by the contrasting brightness that surrounded it. During the summer months a boat at this time of day and in this place would not have been unusual but it was still early May and a cold spring. In another month lobsters would be crawling out of their winter retreat in the deeper warmer water down the bay. With them would come lobstermen with their strings of traps to be attended daily. Then motorboats would be frequent putting in and out among the ledges and rocks around these inner islands.

Finally I asked who it was. Rupert, the farmer, a stocky islander who knew the goings on in the bay through a combination of instinct, experience and a talent for gleaning information from everyone he met, Replied, "Its Earl. He said the other day he thought he might come over to dig clams."

The boat came on losing ~~its~~ indistinctness, whitening and growing bigger. As it moved out of the glare of the sun it could

be seen to be a small open craft without cabin or spray hood and to be towing a punt that was yawing from side to side in its wake. A man standing in the waist holding a steering lever circled the boat into the harbor, swung it up into the wind, brought it up cutting the motor, and ~~slid~~ alongside Rupert's ^{NEREID, a} black cabin boat. It rapidly lost headway and came to rest, without having to be checked, within easy reach of the ^{other's} stern (of the NEREID) to which the man deftly made her fast. He then untied the punt drew it up alongside and stepped in. Without sitting down he paddled himself ashore with one oar. When the bow touched he stepped over the side into the water for he was wearing fishermen's black rubber hip-boots. He pulled his punt a few feet up onto the beach but did not otherwise fasten it since the tide was going and it would soon be left high and dry.

In the meantime we had walked down to the shore. Earl Brown, who came from Eagle Island, stood by his boat a moment watching us, then he started up the ^{beach,} sloping slightly bent forward, his long arms hanging loosely. He did not have the easy stride of a young man but his weather-beaten face gave only slight clues as to his age.

"Hi Earl."

"Well, how are ye?" His voice was slow, deliberate, almost a drawl. "Its been a long time. Laura said you were coming down early this year."

We shook hands briefly but firmly, loose armed, grinning. He was wearing an old gray sweater over a faded blue cotton shirt and a discolored stained corduroy cap with a limp visor.

"Seen any swamp robins?" he asked.

This was a standing joke with us. Swamp robin is a colloquialism for certain thrushes, but Earl used it to describe a shifty-eyed well-driller's assistant of a few seasons back who managed

somehow never to be sober while he was working on The Island. He would disappear into the woods periodically to drink secretly from his hidden cash, reappearing evasively but always unsteady.

"Not this year. I'll never forget how Rupert handled that guy."

We all laughed.

"That was pretty good," said Earl. "Wish I'd seen it."

It happened when the well drillers were leaving. Rupert was taking them to the mainland and the helper, being more drunk than usual having had to finish off his supply of liquor quickly, became argumentative and threatening. Losing patience Rupert finally had picked him up by the collar and the seat of his pants and thrown him into the tender where he mutteringly subsided.

"There's a big flock of sea ducks ^{the} on/side of Sugar Loaf towards Big Barred Island. ~~Saw them~~ *superbly* on the way over. They were feeding in the tide rip where the bar makes off. You might get some pictures by hiding on the point and catching them as they work in on the flood tide, but if they're at all suspicious they'll never come near you."

"Maybe I'll try it. Do you think they're nesting yet?"

"I doubt it. Its still rather early, too many drakes around still. Its been an awful cold spring you know. Kept'em back. This south wind that comes up every afternoon - its right off an ice cake. The mornings will start out nice like this and you think its going to be a fine warm day but by afternoon it blows up ~~from~~ from the south and you are just about froze to death." The prevailing winds along the coast are southerly. ~~They~~ *They* blow in off the Bay of Maine bringing fog in the summer and warmth from the Atlantic in the winter. But in the spring when the land is warming up faster than the ocean they blow chill and cheerless.

"Never seen anything like it," said Rupert. "I don't believe we'll have any garden this year. The seeds'll rot. Any sprouts as do come up 'll get discouraged and turn right around and go down again. That's what I'd do." Rupert always predicted a crop failure but every summer we had more vegetables than we could eat.

The three of us had gone back to the farm house and were sitting on the front step in the sun. Earl and Rupert spoke of the boat that had burned up last February. It was an old story to them, discussed many times. Now it was brought up again largely for my benefit. Nobody knew how it started. She was one of those untidy fishingboats, powered with a converted automobile engine, owned by Winslow Hardie who was scalloping at the time off Baldi Island about two miles down the bay. There must have been gas in the bilge. Probably a spark from a back-fire or an overheated manifold set it off. The cabin was closed and Winslow was watching the taut drag line because the bottom was rough and he was afraid the drag might get caught. The first he knew she was all aflame forward. There was nothing much he could do then even with an extinguisher. It was a wonder he had one at all. He did manage, however, to disconnect the gas tank, which was under the combing on one side of the cockpit, and heav it overboard. That's what saved his life. Then he had to go over the side himself because he had no tender. He is powerfully built and, what is unusual for a Maine Coast fisherman, a good swimmer. (Neither Earl nor Rupert can swim and both have always maintained that it is better not to know how because then you drown quicker. The Maine water is so cold and the tides so swift that even a good swimmer has ~~little~~ little chance of reaching shore.) Fortunately, Winslow was wise enough not to try to make land but clung to his boat as long as he could. People on Eagle saw the smoke and went to his rescue. He

was just about all in when they got to him - he had been in the water for more than an hour. His boat burned to the water line and sank; he lost everything and besides he had borrowed money on her to buy his gear.

The scalloping season is from November to to March; during the rest of the year scalloping is illegal, except offshore, because of the scarcity of scallops and because they spawn in summer. I asked about getting a few, ^{might be found} where they ~~/~~, how strictly the law was enforced, and whether the fish warden came around very often. ~~and~~

~~where they might be found~~ Later, in the summer I knew it was possible to fish them up with a rake in some places at low tide. A half dozen of this large variety is almost enough for a meal. ~~Rupert~~ Rupert volunteered: "If you want some scallops take my small drag and go down off Black Ledge in the fog. The bottom is good there. You can get more'n you could eat in half an hour by dragging close in to the ledge between it and the red spar where it drops off deep. There's a little pocket there that's hard to get in with a big boat but you could do it easy in that life boat of yours. Don't drop the drag too soon or it'll get all fauled up with kelp or caught in the rocks and you'll lose it. I'd drag only about fifty yards above and below the bouy."

"Sure, but what if I got caught. Not much I could say."

"Tell him you're dragging for an anchor. That's what I said once. Quite a few years back, must have been. I was out in the fog and had been dragging for some time but hadn't found a good place yet. Suddenly before I realized who it was there came the warden's boat right alongside. 'Wha'tcha doing,' he asked. 'Dragging for an anchor,' I told him. 'Funny place to lose an anchor, way out here. How'd it happen?' 'Last winter. I was coming up the bay just about sundown and it came on to snow -

regular soueast snowstorm - could'nt see the anchor chalk. the engine wasn't doing too good either so I decided I better lay to 'till morning. I put out the big anchor and when morning came I could't get it up. Was caught on something solid. When I tried to break her out with the motor the line parted just above the sha shackle where it had chafed all night.' 'Well,' he said, 'It seems strange to me you'd come out here on a day like this to find it.' 'Cant do any haying in this weather. Might as well be doing something.' 'Wha'cha got on the end of that line?' 'A ~~scallops~~ scallop drag, of course,' I told him, 'Didn't you know that's the best thing to find an anchor with?' 'All right, but I'd like to see it. Haul her up.' So I hauled it up. And as luck would have it, it was chuck full of scallops. They were the first I'd got. 'Wha'cha know about that,' I said, 'If I were trying to get scallops I'd probably get all kinds of anchors.' The warden didn't say nothing - nothing much he could say - but he made me dump 'em out and told me he guessed I better get a grapple."

Earl got up laughing. "Those fellows don't bother you much, though, as a general rule, if you just take a few now and then and don't try to sell 'em." He started back down to his boat to get his clam hoe. The tide was pretty well out now.

Rupert went into the house to have his third breakfast of coffee and doughnuts. He had his first breakfast when he got up at three or four o'clock.

I sat alone on the step looking down along the sweep of the beach, past the boathouse, to the place where rocks began and the spruce forest above, ~~dark in its concentrated assemblage~~ dense and dark, grew to the very limits of the land. Like a cordon of police with interlocking arms the marginal trees hold back the forest from spilling over into the sea. This confining band is here and there burst asunder where

the attacking waves have undermined the braced and sinuous roots of its most advanced members and they have been toppled over onto the shore. This is not the Pine Tree State of travel bureau advertisements. It is not a gentle friendly quality which one feels in these pointed trees but fierce austerity challenging a pioneer spirit. My first memories of The Island are of this beach, but it was different then - it was summer. The picture is still vivid in my mind's eye, persisting, as do after-images of the sharp outlines of objects seen in the flash of an intense light. I see dark spruces above a shore; a white beach below the trees where I collected pale green sea urchin shells. I remember starfish on the beach, the smell of the sea and the warmth of the sun. I was ten years old then.

But no softening signs of spring were perceptible here yet. My eyes left the cold gloom of the woods, repelled by their forbiddingness, and moved away across the glittering water. It was quite rough but it was only half a mile to the Barred Islands. If I rowed over now the wind would not be against me as it probably would later in the day. I got up and followed Earl down to the beach. Perhaps I might find an early duck's nest after all, contrary to Earl's prediction. It was worth investigating.

Once in the rowboat and away from shore I changed my mind. Instead of rowing straight across to the nearest of the islands I veered to the northeast into the eye of the wind and headed back the way Earl had come, towards Peak Island. It would be harder work and would take longer but I was in no hurry. The blades of my oars, every now and again on the forward stroke, sliced into the tops of on-coming waves cutting off clusters of drops that jumped up and over and came pelting down on me, heavy and wet. I shivered. My skin, cold in the wind, became all knobby with goose-flesh. But in the bright warm sun, tempering the crispness

Since childhood I had been going to Maine in the summer with my parents and brothers and sister. It became routine ~~the~~ ^{the} going ^{and} but the experience ^{remained} was endlessly new. We spoke of THE ISLAND and MAINE as people speak of inevitable events like the seasons and holidays. Life without them was unthinkable, and I, at least, wasted much time during the winter dreaming about them.

^{IN} From the very beginning I conceived a passionate love for The Island, which sprang fully mature from a romantic ^{as well as realistic} concept of islands that our island only confirmed and magnified. Besides the qualities of mystery and adventure of which the sea ^{an inseparable part} was part and parcel The Island ~~embodied~~ ^{embodied} by its smallness embodied the essence of insularity confining its marvels to a comprehensible ^{space} quantity. Because I was not born by the sea, contact with its ^{protean physical} ~~associated features of sight and sound and smell~~ ^{protean} were experiences I was never able to take for granted. A ~~content~~ ^{content} of significant vitality is apparent in all its aspects, ~~as an~~ enigmatical quality inherent, not only in the abundant marine life which has adapted its development in amazingly intricate patterns or in the numerous sea-bird population, but is also more powerfully and terrifyingly manifest in the ominous, dim outlines and flowing kelp of a deep water reef, which becomes in heavy weather a fierce danger - a growling ~~beast~~ ^{monster} rearing its streaming back in a lather of foam between the towering waves. Underlying ~~all these physical entities~~ ^{my} my romantic ideas found substantial support in the ^{experiences embracing} ~~sensations~~ embraced by The Island and the sea of which the whistling cries of the osprey after a catch, the balsam perfume of the springy, needle-carpeted forest, the fishy smell of the shore at ebb tide, the silent dripping fogs or the calm starlit nights when each star has its virtual counterpart sunk in the depths of the inky bay are ~~a part of their~~ an intrinsic nature. ^{part}.