XVII THE LONGEST NIGHT.

I warrant one ought be writing this episode in the center of a dark, raging, howling, stormy night, instead of hacking away in his garret, all in order to recall and hopefully achieve the proper animation for recreating what actually took place.

On our southward, homeward journey, the weather had been variously 'inclement' since leaving Prince Rupert. It was now the first week in September, the weather patterns were becoming more unsettled with an increasing amount of southerly flow causing winds to blow 'up' the Inland Passage channels, creating very choppy waters, especially when confronting an ebbing current. These conditions were crowding the edge of our limitations, which would find us withdrawing from the confrontation, 'on our nose' as it were, when the winds began to approach twenty-five knots. It was not wind per se, although cold and unpleasant, but the state of the water through which or over which we were obliged to pass. Atavist, of noble spirit, desirous of pleasing us, could be driven onward, but not as a sleek hydrodynamic creature incising the water akin to a blade, but more like a bucking horse in a very uneven rhythm - and as her bow plunged into a wave, it would displace copious amounts of seawater, dispersing the same into the air which the howling wind would catch, driving it headlong into the helmsman's visage - a rather vilipendentious greeting for one so enduring.

Despite the disposition of Mother Nature we could not linger awaiting the most propitious times, for these occasions might present themselves few and far between, and perhaps not in synchrony with tidal currents or the humours of the crew. Our objective, heeding the cautions of other travelers in these climes, was to make our Southing and exit from the Inland Passage around Cape Caution before the end of September. The current weather deterioration began to peak as we left Grenville Channel crossing Wright Sound and McKay Reach to enter Fraser Reach on our way to Butedale. Fraser Reach was a 'snot' on-the-nose from the moment we entered therein; steep-sided, a veritable funnel; a venturi of wind which we navigated by following the shoreline as closely as possible, having observed a smaller fishing vessel using this technique; the ferocity of the wind seemed lessened and the water perhaps somewhat mitigated in its violence by the proximity of the land mass along which its waves rolled paralleling the rocky shore.

Butedale became a soggy miserable place, utterly depressing in its dilapidated ruin, its meager rocky beach cluttered with the shambles of the abandoned Canadian Fish Co. Cannery. Although, for furthering our aims, the weather was anything but inviting, we decided Butedale was without redemption, and was no place for us, opting to head for Horsefly Cove located just off Graham Reach, a place we had anchored on our outward journey. We were, of course, in for another slugfest in Graham in fog, rain and twenty-knot winds, funneled as before; again using the same tactic of hugging the shore as much as possible, girded in our yellows utterly exposed in the wind-driven rain and spray. Atavist and the Iron Sail, their intrepid Captain at the helm, the First Mate stoking the helmsman with hot caffeinated elixirs; all held fast to win the moments and eventually the miles, with the thought of returning to Butedale acting as flagellant to our purpose.

Although it rained steadily the remainder of that day and night at Horsefly Cove, the following day proved somewhat more hospitable; what am I saying?; it was downright obliging, allowing us to reach Rescue Bay at the east end of Jackson Narrows, a rather enjoyable and scenic junket. However, once again it stormed, blowing twenty to twenty-five knots at Rescue Bay accompanied by torrents of rain. The weather predictions were forbidding, stating that gale warnings were in effect for the general area. After a whole day of wind and rain in Rescue Bay, the worst of the frontal activity had eased off permitting us to attempt another leg southward on the following morning, through Mathieson Channel and Reid Passage to Mouat Cove. We had stopped at Mouat on our northward journey, having the place entirely to ourselves, tying to some floats provided for the gill netters by the Canadian Fish Co. We left Rescue Bay with a slightly rising barometer, but with impending gales predicted. Indeed it was a dismally gray day; however, since we estimated we had only twenty-two nautical miles to travel, we had speculated, in the four hours it would require to transit the distance, the whole world would not be turned into a maelstrom. There would be places along the way we could slip into if anything really nasty developed. Our passage through Percival Narrows 'going with it' against a moderate swell coming in from Milbanke Sound into Mathieson Channel, eventuated into a thrilling passage, like running river rapids, and once through these huge rapids, a merry ride in the swells until safely behind Cecelia Island. Once again, in turning the corner into Seaforth Channel, we encountered the swell which was soon presented to our stern, following us all the way into Berry Inlet, to finally escape its effect in Mouat Cove.

Hah!, we had achieved our destination, but there were no floats; we learned later they had been towed away to another site on the other side of Seaforth Channel. In some ways it was disappointing, but presented us with no more of a problem than usual when confronted with an anchoring task, which we did by choice throughout ninety-five percent of our cruise. We set both a bow and a stern anchor in order to control our swing and maintain the set in the main anchor, as well as position the bow to hold it into any weather we had been expecting from the south.

While fishing from the dinghy in Berry Inlet, it began to rain heavily with the wind beginning to rise. Upon returning to Atavist, the worried First Mate informed me there was more chatter on the radio concerning gale warnings. To alleviate her concern, and thereby mine own as well, I set a second bow anchor that in the end created a sort of wishbone arrangement among the three anchors. While there was little fetch in the cove, the land thereabouts, although treed. was low, not offering much protection against a southeaster. The wind... er...obligingly seemed to ease off after our anchoring efforts; however, the barometer continued to fall rapidly.

We 'hit the sack' around nine-thirty or so with the precipitation still falling, and the wind blowing ten to fifteen knots, a rather exciting and not unpleasant, even somewhat soothing symphony of sound, as Atavist gently yawed in her breeches. The most alarming aspect consisted in the utter darkness, an absolute absence of a horizon; nothing separating water, land and sky. What had begun auspiciously, or inauspiciously, if hindsight plays any part, as a 'chanson de la mer' sighing us into a rock-a-bye slumber, soon began to metamorphose into Sturm and Drang. By eleven-thirty we were awakened with the rigging on Atavist beginning to quiver, setting up tremors in the mainmast; the whistle in the shrouds was recast into moans; the gentle yawing into a stiff straining on the rode. In illuminating the anemometer we read a fairly steady thirty knots.

Thus began the long night. Would the anchors hold? How much worse would this get?; how much longer would it go on?; we should have gone on to Bella Bella..... Black gloom outside - and ALONE. If the anchors were dragging we wouldn't have known until Atavist struck bottom. Time passed ever so slowly in the darkness; we lie in the dark, periodically shining the penlight on the anemometer gauge, now in response to stiffer gusting - increasing to forty knots, Atavist reeling as the gusts came from

different directions. Then around two thirty AM our canopy supports started coming loose requiring the Captain to suit up for the occasion; indeed why were we not dressed in any case; suppose we did get blown ashore, ought not we be prepared; surely we would not 'go down with the ship'.

I managed to retrieve most of the supports, tying things more securely; actually the canopy held on rather well. I suppose some subtle hope emanated from this fact; just imagine the opposite effect if the canopy had come loose, beginning to flap uncontrollably, maybe tearing and finally carrying away.

Whew!, the tension. After three AM, 'things' seemed to ease off somewhat; in checking the wind instrument, it again registered twenty-five knots gusting to thirty. It was raining in 'fits and starts'; we considered this a good sign, but the barometer remained 'glued to the floor'; I suppose one could be marginally consoled it was not proceeding on through the floor.

As soon as we began to feel comfortable with these new conditions, the whole scenario seemed to intensify once again; and sure enough there 'twas blowing thirty-five knots, gusting to forty. We could even hear the howling and roaring of the wind in the trees, or so we imagined, above the moaning of the rigging, the heavy tremors of the mast being transmitted to the deck as its butt-end rubbed and worked in its step, sounding for all like a huge insect knawing away, and the canopy flapping and slapping; frankly we were frightened, and tired - black, black, black - the rain now descending in a thunderous roar driven hard against the cabin and hull - Geeezzz - even fiercer gusts - there, Look! - forty-two, forty-four knots - that's fifty miles per hour - do you suppose that thing's accurate? - what if its really more? We were clocking the forbidding angel.

Four AM, still blowing thirty-five knots; at last some light of the new dawn is beginning to reveal a horizon, a separation of sky and land. Soon we are able to see!; our anchors haven't dragged - one relief; raining heavily - such a din - tired - exhausted from the strain. Finally around four-thirty the wind began to decrease; 'things' seemed less noisy, less violent. By five-thirty, it was blowing a steady twenty-five knots, gusting, only occasionally now, to thirty - daylight - we felt the worst was over - we needed to believe the worst was over; we had endured our trial and survived, somewhat ignominiously - we fell asleep.

But awake at eight at eight AM. The wind had all but died - now only a torrent of RAIN!! - a deluge!!. We were secure, we really had remained securely anchored. Marvelous gadgets, anchors, marvelous. Charline, the first Mate, had given them names: our newest and main anchor, a Danforth 20H, was called Curlew;

our second anchor, a Danforth 18H, was called Oyster Catcher; and our third, the stern anchor, a Danforth 13H, was called Phalarope. Curlew was secured to forty-five feet of five-sixteenths chain attached to three quarter inch braided nylon rode; Oyster catcher was secured to thirty feet of five-sixteenths chain attached to one half inch twisted nylon rode; and Phalarope was secured to thirty feet of one-quarter inch chain attached to one half inch twisted nylon rode.

Our two Sheltie canines, Yes!, two animals aboard for six months; don't ask me why? - these critters needed regular rowings ashore, sometimes being obliged to cross and recross their legs many times waiting out assorted inclemencies (that discomfited their master and mistress) to be ferried ashore. When it was raining like the beegeezzuzz, we lingered, hoping for a lapse in the rainmaker's attention. 'Twas not to be so this day. The ritual involved donning the raingear, the doggies of course not sporting yellows, bail the dinghy, call the dogs from the cabin, lift them from the transom into the dinghy below - and away we go. Upon returning, these beasts appeared for all as though they had been fished from out the deep, looking more like some drowned antediluvian specimen. Surely we attempted to dry them off as best we could before readmitting them to the cabin - at least we were able to stem the flow of water - but Agh!, nothing smells worse than a whiff of drying dog in a confined space.

Pertaining to dinghy bailing. I was 'astonished!' at the amount of water that had accumulated therein since the evening before when I last rowed the canines ashore, verily high enough to place the wooden seat awash, representing nine inches of the liquid stuff. It continued a downpour for most of the day and by evening, when doggy time arrived again, the dinghy had filled half again as much, another four inches or so.

Later, when in Namu, we learned they had estimated their rainfall at one foot and a half in a twenty-four hour period. Well, to us this sounded a bit exaggerated, but would you settle for a foot at least, in twenty-four hours, which our figures would easily corroborate. Imagine what twelve inches of rainfall in twenty-four hours would do to the world in which you live. Around Eugene, Oregon, three to four inches is enough to cause the riverbeds to overflow. Twelve inches would surely flood the whole Willamette Valley, wash away bridges and many roadways, destroy thousands of dwellings, farms, machinery and pollute water supplies, cut off electricity, drown many animals, and perhaps humans as well. Yet this country, in which we had anchored

seemed no worse for the deluge, although the lakes were filled to the brim, their spillways roaring, all the rocky hills a maze of cascading falls, all with but a short excursion to the sea.

Namu is the site of a fish cannery and a small settlement equipped with floating docks, located on an indent in Fitz Hugh Sound. As the 'crow flies' it is twenty-five miles from Mouat Cove, just off Milbanke Sound on Seaforth Channel. Namu had reported sixty knot winds. The floats were not attached to pilings but were secured by chains and cables to moorings somewhere in the deep below. Perhaps the wind velocity was greater here funneled by the mountains behind, which rise to three thousand feet. In severe storms Namu isn't all that protected from wave action. The combined forces of wind and wave caused the floats and fingers of the floating docks, all encumbered with fishboats, and wayward travelers seeking refuge, to yaw considerably, boats colliding as the fingers came alive squeezing together. And we had imagined we would have wanted to be tied up in Namu. We would not have gained any more sleep; we would have had company in our strife. For all the ferocity of the wind and compendious precipitation, there were no casualties, and hardly a dampened spirit; perhaps some chaffing, and some superficial scars. The docks showed many places of bright new wood and piles of wood dust, evidence of the severity of the storm. This was just one of the many gales that come this way each year.