CRUISE TO THE PHANTOM LIGHT

PAUL W. IVEY



Martin Reef Light, the phantom which was visible to the crew of the Pathfinder for hours

LACK OF ATTENTION TO DETAIL BRINGS A SERIES OF MISFORTUNES TO A SMALL BOAT CREW

"I'LL agree to go to Les Cheneaux Islands if there is a light at the entrance," I said. "Let's look at the chart," replied Captain, unrolling this indispensable guide. "It's there," he continued, "a second and a half white flash." We accordingly packed our cooking equipment, re-embarked, and headed for open water.

Let me explain the events prior to this momentous decision. At 4 P. M. on Saturday, September 10, our good ship, Pathfinder II, left St. Ignace for Les Cheneaux Islands, twenty miles distant across the northwest corner of Lake Huron. Four persons comprised our party: Louis P. Walker, Captain and Chief Engineer; the author, first Mate; and a crew of two—consisting of the Captain's son, Howard, and the latter's chum, Marvin Winkleman.

Our boat, owned jointly by the aforesaid officers, was a staunch 32-foot day-cabin cruiser, capable of approximately 10 m.p.h. She had emerged with credit to herself from many a perilous storm; she could even handle herself adroitly in a running sea, with a grip from her keel which was most reassuring. But little did we know how she would be tested in the next few hours.

The weather was clear when we left port but large rollers, remnants of an eastern gale, lifted and lowered us gently as we headed into them.

An hour and a quarter out, four miles off Mackinac Island, the oil gauge showed zero. We stopped the engine, and as the boat rolled on her beam ends, Captain removed the oil pump and cleaned it of accumulated sludge. But the rolling was terrific, the bilge water offensive and out of the engine room Captain came, as white as death, to stagger to the rail for raucous relief.

Howard relieved his father, entered the fatal chamber, re-assembled the unit and commenced tightening the sixteen bolts, when the end of his working capacity was reached and he followed further in the footsteps of his father.

My entry into the evil-smelling hold was clearly indicated. I had tightened fully three-fourths of the bolts when I felt the inevitable symptoms. Since Marvin was inexperienced in things nautical, I felt I could not run the risk of total incapacity, so out I came and headed the boat for Mackinac Island—oil or no oil.

Captain remonstrated feebly from his sick-bed that we would burn out the bearings, but since I could not tighten all the bolts and we could not remain out in the lake, there was no alternative but to run for shelter. Besides, I surmised that the tremendous roll of the boat would splash some oil from the crankcase on some of the bearings—if there

Charts are among the most essential items which motor boatmen should carry. Coupled with the chart should be some knowledge of their use. Careful study often reveals much information not apparent at first glance. In this story the entire series of misfortunes can be traced back to the use of out-of-date charts, and a lack of care in reading them. There is a decided difference between a single flash and a group of three flashes, even though the time interval of the flash may be the same. Use only the newest charts and read the data on them with care. . . . Editor.

was lots of oil. So more oil I gave her and headed slowly for the point of Mackinac Island.

We rounded the point into calm water and docked at British Landing a short distance away. Equilibrium revived the invalids and Captain commenced work on the oil pump which proved successful as indicated by the gauge. In the meantime, the balance of the ship's company got out the commissary; built a fire on the clean white gravel and prepared a feast which succeeded in reviving the spirits of everyone.

It was now 9 o'clock and dark, and I was for returning to St. Ignace; but Captain sniffed disgustedly at this suggestion, exclaiming, "Les Cheneaux or bust!" It was at this point that this narrative commenced—when I inquired whether there was a light at the entrance to Les Cheneaux.

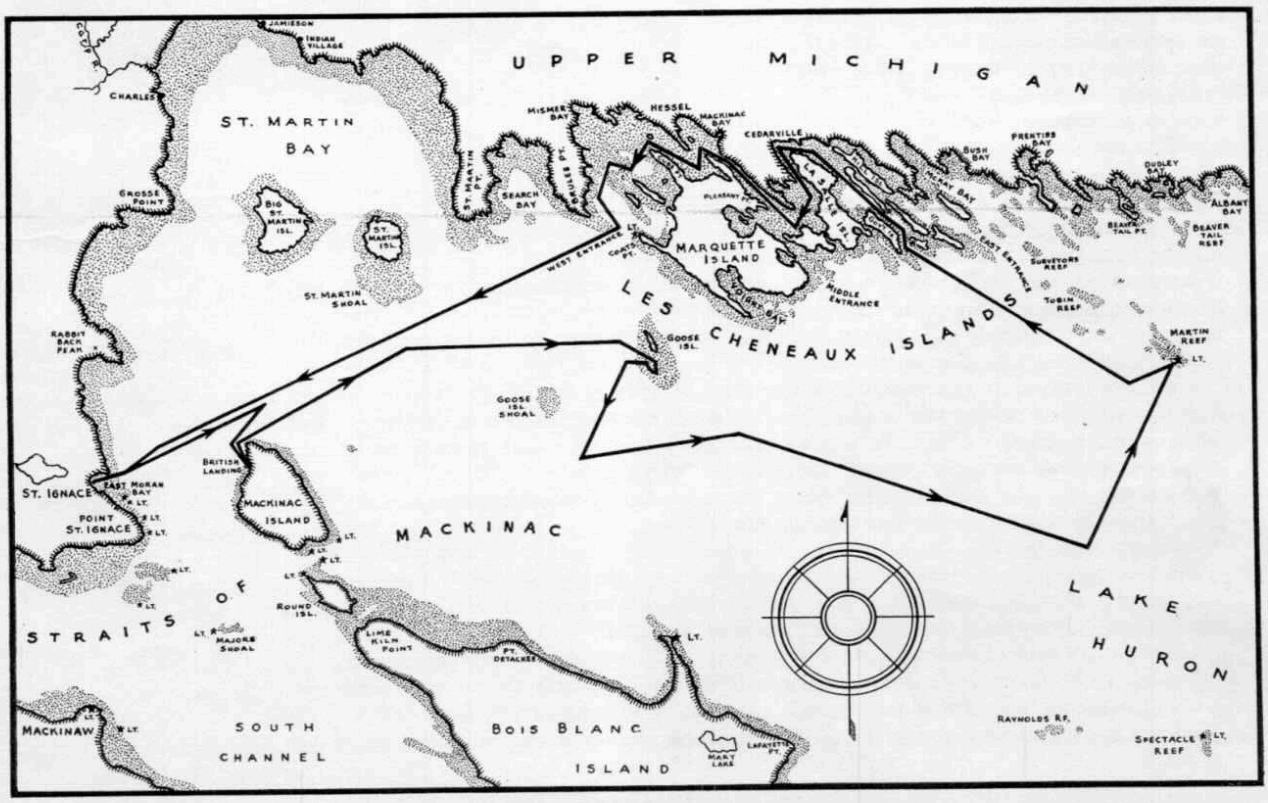
It was about twelve miles from the point of Mackinac Island to the entrance and no light was visible, but Captain selected a star which appeared northeast, and told me to steer for it. The moon was rising and with it a smart breeze from the northeast which transformed the tops of the rollers into sparkling spray. It was beautiful but unreal; we seemed to be tossing around on enchanted moonbeams. After a thirty minute run a light appeared off our starboard bow. It was a second and a half flash but appeared in groups of three. This confused me so I called Captain.

"It's east of our course," he admitted, "but it's the correct flash. We must have been driven north by these heavy seas." I didn't like this guesswork, for the northward drift was problematical, there seemed no alternative but to change the course. "Moreover," continued Captain, "there is no light further north so this must be Coats Point."

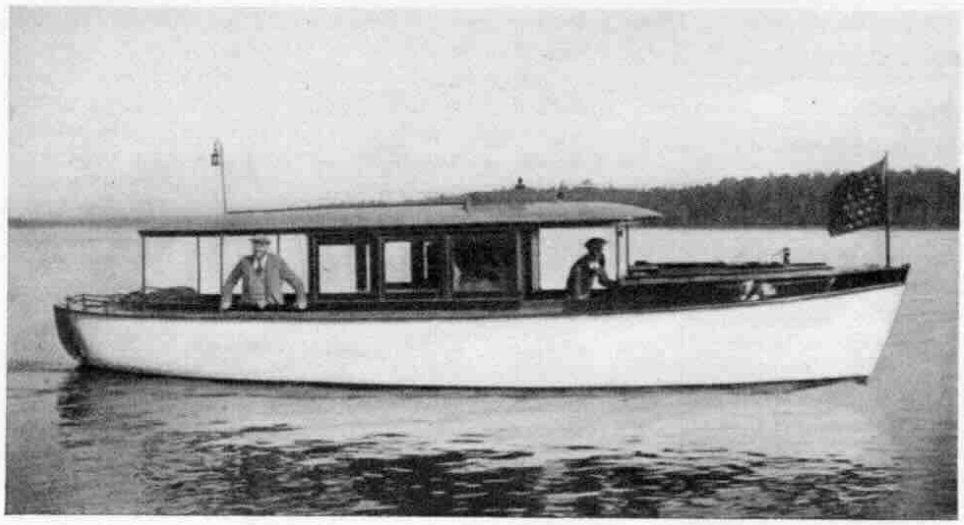
Fifteen minutes out on the new course the light disappeared. I couldn't account for it. "Must be some ship between us and the light," said Captain, carelessly. It reappeared in five minutes, but this strange phenomenon bothered me greatly.

No passing ship could have obstructed the light for that length of time. I knew it, and I knew that he knew it—but we were silent. That inexplicable occurrence should have sent us to the chart with misgivings; but, instead, we held the course.

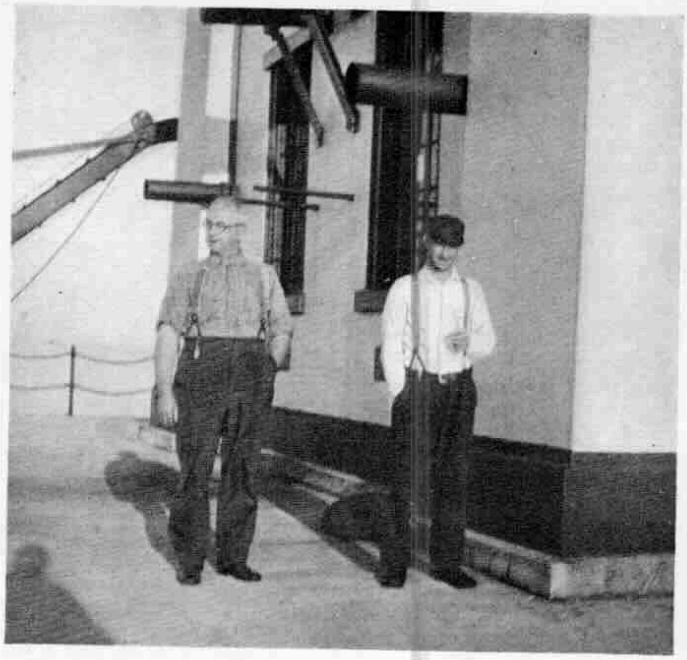
The sea was now flattening out and looking for the cause I discerned the faint outlines of land dead ahead. My cry of "Land" brought Captain to the wheel.



Lake Huron, showing how a relatively simple journey was prolonged into an all-night voyage



Left: Pathfinder II, a 32-foot day cruiser, which with a crew of four went astray on Lake Huron



Right: Captain Crittenden and his assistant, Proctor, in charge of Martin Reef Light, where Pathfinder finally got her bearings

"Must be Brulee Point," he said with finality. "This sea has sure pushed us north. Give her plenty of room," he continued "as shoals run out quite a distance from the Point. There—hold her there," he commanded, as I gave her three hundred yards clearance.

Possibly five minutes elapsed when —CRASH, CRASH. The boat rose clear of the water as if to fly, while a sickening shiver ran through her frame; then she sunk her nose as if headed for the bottom.

In the first impact I had been thrown clear of the wheel, against the cabin door, but simultaneously with the second crash I had cut the switch.

The captain and crew had picked themselves up from sundry parts of the cabin, and we looked at each other with horror, speechless, as we expected to feel the boat settling from the inrush of water through her broken keel.

But no such thing. She floated; she swam; she danced around a bit; she shook herself like some great sea bird that enjoyed such abrupt, startling levitation. It was incredible. It wasn't natural. SHE SHOULD SINK. Why didn't she do it and get it over with? Why torture us with suspense?

Finally, we roused ourselves. "I can hardly believe the shoal extends so far from the Point," quavered Captain. (He still believed we were off Point Brulee) "But she seems tight," he muttered, with a loving look around the boat which mutely expressed our unanimous admiration for the staunch, daring little craft.

Not only was she still tight but, with what elation it is difficult to explain, we discovered the propeller still functioned. I swung her slowly at right angles to the shoal and began to ease our way out.

Two minutes of this when the lookout shrieked, "Rocks ahead!" Before I could reverse her, we had struck again, but gently; and up to amidships she had climbed a boulder strewn bank. Full reverse brought her off but involved us in a quandry. On three sides we were hemmed in with boulder strewn shoals—only one possible opening remained.

Haltingly I turned her around and eased forward toward the open lake when the unearthly shriek of "Rocks ahead!" made me stop before we struck.

What a predicament! Here we were surrounded by rocks, with no way out. We had climbed into the basin over a ledge of rocks and it seemed only a (*Continued on page* 74)

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miracle could get us out. Our location was a mystery. Even Captain now admitted it didn't look like Point Brulee.

"The heavy sea must have thrown us farther north than I believed," he tentatively suggested. "We must be on the shoals off St. Martin's Point." If such were the case the only exit would be the way we came in, i.e., towards the southwest.

An attempt in this direction was discouraging—nothing but rocks. On the east side of the shoal the waves were booming and I could visualize only too clearly our situation if the wind shifted—a boat pounding to pieces, and its crew in life preservers milling around in icy waters among cruel rocks, battered to and fro, finally gaining an uninhabited shore, exhausted, without hope of aid.

WE HAD to get out. A further examination of our position disclosed a solid wall of rocks in all directions excepting the southwest where there were huge boulders with deep channels between them. Through these we began to edge our way; under power partly, partly with the pike pole.

Some channels were blind and we had to go back and try others. It was disheartening work groping around in the dark. At one point deep water appeared just over a close array of boulders but obviously we couldn't get over them. They slanted down on the outside rim into deep water, and I believe it was up this inclined plane that we were catapulted into the mysterious basin.

Further exploration disclosed a torturous channel between the boulders terminating in a gravelly shoal on the outside of which appeared deep water. Only two feet of water covered the shoal which appeared to be about a boat's length in width. Since our stern drew two and a half feet we thought we could pole her across—but our combined efforts could not even get the stern on the shoal.

The only hope, if it was a hope, seemed to be to drive her across by her own power. We knew only too well our position in case of failure—but there was no alternative.

Accordingly we backed a boat length—as far as the torturous channel would permit, started the motor and gave her full throttle. Onto the shoal she plunged, her full length—and stopped. The worst had happened. She was fast.

WE sounded the shoal around us and it seemed to fall away toward the bow. "If we can only get her across the hump of the shoal we'll make it," declared Captain. "Shift all cargo to the forward deck and give her full throttle," he commanded. "Her heavy shoe may save the screw."

With a lightened stern and aid from the pike pole, I gave her full speed ahead. How we held our breaths! She moved —not much—but she moved. "Hurray! Give her some more," encouraged Captain. Again she moved an inch or two.

Inch by inch we scratched along and with infinite relief finally had the great satisfaction to see her slide off into deep water—or rather—what appeared to be. Out we crawled, the way we had come in, soon feeling the satisfying swell indicating deep water.

But still I wasn't sure of it. Huge sunken boulders might be all around us. We were lost, that was certain, as neither Captain nor myself really felt we could have drifted so far north as St. Martin's Point. But where else could we be?

With this uncertainty gripping me I proceeded under checked speed toward Mackinac Island while Captain sounded the lead. Shortly, large rollers greeted us, but such was my demoralization that I continued for fully half an hour in this direction, with the one and a half second flash on our port quarter.

Then I headed her into the light again, still at reduced speed, and Captain still trying to reach bottom. The light appeared to be only a couple of miles away and we did not relish the idea of driving onto any more rocky shoals.

THIRTY minutes' running did not bring us perceptibly nearer the light. On this strange phenomenon Captain and I pondered solemnly. Moreover, a bright red flash had now sprung up on our starboard bow—and, still more demoralizing —a bright white flash appeared directly behind it.

"What does all this mean?" I shouted exasperatedly to Captain, who viewed with troubled eyes the new mystery. "The red flash must be on Goose Island, and the white on Martin's Reef," he grunted, adding as a satisfying after-thought, "but I never knew there was a light on Goose Island. It isn't on the chart. Must have been put there since this chart was issued two years ago."

The wind had freshened and the waves were now knocking us about with great determination. "If we are in the lee of Goose Island, I can't understand this heavy sea," I countered. "Goose doesn't give much protection in a strong east wind," he replied—and so we continued—on into the night.

Thirty minutes later, at 11 o'clock, still under reduced speed, and the second and a half flash was no nearer. "I don't like it," I growled. "We can't seem to reach it." "Head her half way between the second and a half flash and the red light," Captain responded. "These rollers are drifting us north all the time. And speed her up. We're in deep water now."

I gave her full throttle and drenching sprays responded. Another half hour and we were apparently no nearer our objective. "This is simply crazy," I exploded. "We should have reached that light long ago. If it wasn't for the spray I'd swear she had thrown her screw."

"Well, what is there to do but go ahead? You must remember that after hitting the shoal we went southwest a long distance before turning and heading for the light."

GRIMLY I proceeded for thirty minutes more. It was now midnight, and although the light seemed somewhat brighter it was a tremendous distance away. But I was through talking or arguing—so was Captain. We just did the inevitable—went ahead.

How that light backed away from us! It was uncanny. Only a sailor will appreciate our quandary. It was unreal; mentally disturbing! it was a phantom light. The smashing combers punctuated our dismal forebodings. Enervated by our former sea-sickness we were natural prey to strange forebodings.

But I held her on her course with a determination that she would stay there even if the mocking beacon backed off across the continent. I'd follow it to land anyway—at least as long as the gas held out.

Suddenly, up it rose out of the water—like some great dragon breathing fire. Mechanically I reduced speed. My mind tottered; I rubbed my forehead; I must be dreaming. Captain spluttered, "What the Devil!"

There—towering above us, a quarter of a mile away, was a majestic stone light house; it seemed a hundred feet high. We thought we had been heading for a beacon on a wooden derrick —with an elevation of fifteen feet.

We stared with incredulous eyes at this apparition. What could it be? Where were we? The moon came through the clouds disclosing a vast expanse of water. No land was visible. We were out in the middle of the lake.

Slowly we approached, fearful of treacherously concealed rocks. Silently apprehensive we searched for signs of life on the high rampart or in the lofty tower; for some lighthouses now have automatic lights with no attendants. Supposing it was inhabited! Where then should we go?

WE were now within hail. I pressed the horn; it was mysteriously out of commission. I reached for the rope on the fog bell and pulled it lustily. The light replied derisively with its group of second and a half flashes—all else was dark. Again I rang long and loud. "I see a light," yelled Howard.

Sure enough. Someone moved on the rampart. "Lighthouse ahoy!" I yelled. "What light is that?"

"Martin Reef," came the answer. "Keep to the starboard; there are rocks astern." With alacrity I headed away from the new danger. "Can we tie up for the night?" Captain yelled. "Yes. Watch for the line," was the reply that sounded soothingly on our ears.

Swish came the welcome line over the heaving boat. At

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last we had found a haven—even if it was in the open lake. I looked at my watch—it was one o'clock. Our anticipated hour's cruise from Mackinac Island had been extended four-fold. I only realized the tension I had been under when I began to climb the twenty foot iron ladder to the top of the rampart on which the tower rested; I felt strangely loose in my joints and the ladder seemed to sway.

A hearty greeting we received from the Keeper—Captain Crittenden, and his assistant, Procter. How satisfying the great concrete block felt under our feet, albeit our innards rolled perceptibly!

In a cheery, well-lighted room we told our story to an astonished and incredulous audience. "So you tried to go through Goose Island?" said Captain Crittenden slowly, between puffs on a villainous-looking pipe. "Well, you're not the first."

GOOSE ISLAND! Well of all things! How fuzzy brained we were. I looked at Captain—Captain looked at me. No words were necessary. Those looks expressed our unalloyed, unvarnished opinion of each other as navigators.

"How about that red flash with the white flash behind it?" finally queried Captain tentatively. "Why that's Spectacle Reef, ten miles away to the South. It's a red and white flash. It's marked on the chart." Captain and I gave each other another prolonged glare—a miserable mixture of indescribable emotions.

Captain seemed groggy. Slowly he came back, "But your light is a second and a half flash which is the same as Coats Point?" "No," said Captain Crittenden indulgently. "Coats Point is a second and a half flash but Martin's Reef is a group of three second and a half flashes. On the chart you will see 'gp' before the flash designation."

Back came Captain, "But how in the world could we confuse a light 20 miles away with one 5 miles away? I'll be hornswaggled if your light didn't seem nearer than 5 miles."

"Martin Reef light is of such strength and intensity that such a delusion is possible—especially on a moonlight night. Besides, our elevation is five times as great as Coats Point beacon."

Captain nearly went down for the count but came back with a final weak lunge, "Well, why didn't we see Coats Point light?"

To our combined astonishment the Keeper hesitated. Then slowly; we could hardly hear him, "Probably because it wasn't lit." The silence was oppressive. A beacon not lit! Who ever heard of such a thing? What about lighthouse tradition?

"Boys," the Keeper continued, "they have had trouble with that gas light and I'm afraid its just that." Captain and I exchanged glances of a different character. We had been hunting for the light that failed!

But we could not excuse our negligence in the use of the chart and the compass. Captain's only comment was, "We must have been loggy from sea-sickness." And he was right—we must have been.

A good bed, an excellent breakfast with Uncle Sam as our host, and away the next morning over placid water to the east entrance of Les Cheneaux; and on through the Islands where the fishing was excellent and the scenery superb—and hence back to the old home port.

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