

Lost at Sea

For two days the gale raged, piling a heavy sea before it, breaking and thundering on the shoals, and carrying with it thin whippings of spray far inland. All during these forty-eight hours the fishermen of Copper Hill worked tirelessly, never ceasing except to eat and to catch a few hours of earned rest, in securing their fish and boats from the ravages of the storm. On the third morning the sun broke through and the wind calmed down. The sea ceased to thunder and took on a steadier roll. Anxiously the fishermen set out in their boats, intent on salvaging whatever of fish and equipment the storm had left them. John Cummings, the oldest of Copper Hill's fishermen, was the last to leave, and his sail swayed giddily as he left the shore for open sea.

About noon a slow swell began to heave in and the more cautious of the fleet, mindful of the two preceeding days, headed landward. Faster than the passage of time a blanket of gray fog spread itself over the ocean, erasing all land from sight. An outgoing tide raised a treacherous chop at the channel entrance. Darkness found all the fleet home and accounted for. All——except Cummings.

The grey mist closed in thicker and thicker and Cummings, intent on mending a broken backline, failed to notice the slowly rising sea and the dense fog. Standing erect to ease his cramped muscles he felt rather than saw the tale-telling dizzy plunging of his little craft. Immediately he hoisted his mainsail and, only stopping for a moment to locate his position, cast off.

The fog by now had closed in and traces of land were obliterated from sight. Though there was no mark to be seen, no mark to be a friendly guide, nevertheless he knew his course. Staring straight ahead, he set his sail and swung the stern of his boat into the run of the sea. There was not a breath of wind. The spread of sail hung loosely, moving from side to side with the swaying of the boom. No sound in all the stillness except the splash of water against the side of the boat as she lurched along. Far ahead Cummings heard the roar of the waves breaking on the shoals and he prayed for wind.

Presently a faint breath of wind rustled behind him, and his heart swelled with joy as the mainsail filled. Here

was the wind for which he had prayed. God be merciful and send more to sweep this damp fog from the water. Wind and sea held no terrors for him, but fog struck fear into his courageous heart.

Suddenly the sea became shorter and choppier, and the flattening out of the long outside roll warned him of shoal water ahead. In the dark he peered ahead, straining his eyes for a single glimpse of land. A huge wave broke dangerously near, and there was a frothing of water all around his little craft. "Please God," he prayed, "send a stronger gale."

From out the vast oblivion ahead came the welcome sound of a bell-buoy.

"I am west of it," he said aloud, and then listened intently for its next warning.

Again the sinister sound rang out. This time more ahead and he steered his course more seaward. If he could but find the entrance to the channel he would chance the rest. But there was nothing to be seen. Nothing—except that grey, endless blanket of dampness. The bell sounded near now. True, that might be so; but were the reefs between? There was a mad roar of the sea behind, and Cummings, straining his eyes, saw it break astern. His heart contracted with fear. In that moment he felt the pains of fear probably for the first time. Life is a dear possession, and even the most courageous loath to die. The roar was followed by more of its kind, each following in quick succession the preceding one. His arms and back ached as he tried vainly to steady the boat. Now he could hear the clang of the bell distinctly. Yellow breakers appeared and thundered against the boatsides. He had missed the reef, probably by inches.

For a seeming eternity he strained at the tiller to keep afloat. At last all was well. Or was it? Was not the boat lifting? The next moment a massive wave towered above him, hesitated, then descended like a mountainous wall of stone. It caught the tiny craft fair. The boat swung, catapulted for a second, and the long boom swinging wildly caught Cummings heavily on the head. A mountain of seething, green water smashed over the body of the man into the little craft. Slowly she settled on her side, rising and falling with the sea, washing ever shoreward, and the limp body remained encased between her frail sides.

—S. J. G., '35.