

Schooner Underway



**A Found Poem
by Ted Olsson**

**from
“Wake of the
Coasters”
by
John F. Leavitt**

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Schooner Underway

Most seamen have learned to walk humbly before the Lord
Accepting a pattern of life as they find it
Only ashore is monotony and boredom's reward

Glad to get ashore after a sea-quest's end
Gladder to haul in the last dock line set
See the span of water again widen
Where schooner and wharf grudgingly met

Even waking in the morning is different
Slow, or fast with the dawn
Arising with ship's resonance

Lapping of water against the hull fast
Hum of the wind through the rigging lines
Slapping of the halyards against the mast
Sloshing cold water over one's head a few times

The smell of wood smoke mingles within
The aroma of frying cow beef and boiling coffee
Coffee will be stronger than love, blacker than sin

First cup tastes like nectar brewed for the gods
In a coaster, the coffee pot is always on the stove
Winter and summer, at all hours of the day, our rewards
For the hard work aloft and the weights we hove

“Dry no’theaster, boys — it’s a good chance along!”
The old man finds it clear and a fair wind making up
To take us as far as we need and then beyond

Our halyards are led forward through snatch blocks
Clear for hoisting, they are wound around the winch heads
Amidst the squealing of block wheels, mainsail starts aloft
Clicking of mast hoops, slatting of canvas, as up it’s fed

Mainsail and foresail are set tight
Foresheet is well overhauled and the windlass manned
Link by link the chain creeps through the hawsepipe

Pawls clicking in measured cadence until “Anchor’s hove short!”
The old man stands at the wheel, his reply immediate
“Break her out then!” “We’ll pay off on the port tack”
“Don’t forget the tail rope!” as if we’d forsake it

The tail rope from the jib to the weather forward shroud made fast, won’t roam
As the sail fills, it snaps like a rifle shot in the freshening breeze
Once the jib is hoisted “two blocks” the flying jib is set and sheeted home

Slowly at first, then momentum gains forward
The schooner pays off, gathers headway slow
The tail rope is freed and the jib slams across leeward
The skipper sings out “ Draw away” and off we go

Two of us turn again to the windlass brakes
It’s “Vast heavin’ “ on the windlass and engine
Hoisting the anchor as strained protests it makes

Slowly the anchor appears through
the welter of white water under her bow
Up it comes, then the anchor is catted true
Washing down and coiling the gear to stow

“Hey Jack”, the old man at the wheel sends me aloft
“While you’re up there, take a look
at them seizin’s on the topmost shrouds, gone soft”

The schooner is bowing more and more deeply
to the increasing swells that come rolling across
The breeze is freshening and dollops of spray seemingly
explode against the taut canvas like charges of bird shot

We are the first schooner out and behind trail the others
One of them a smart three-master overhauling us steadily
With her tall rig she drives through the fleet, has her druthers

Passes us just as I climb to the fore crosstrees
I brace myself between the masthead and the topmast shrouds
Watching her go plunging past racing free
close enough to hear the creaking of her gear loudly

Nonchalant, uninterested waves are exchanged with no care for her
We know we can take any two-master near our size
Secretly envious, galls us to play second fiddle to a swift three-master

I turn to my job, lashed to the mast to leave both hands alive
To prolong the pleasure of working aloft, my tasks leisurely done as I ponder
The outer bouy is cleared and we smartly gybe
to slide up by Bass Harbor Head, taking the wind from the starboard quarter

The seas get steeper, the rolling more violent aft winds drummin'
The dark islands are etched in silhouette against a clear sky
Sun rising, turns the water into a blazing cascade of diamonds

Dancing over wave crests, I sway up in the rigging
This seascape is magnificent as we sweep by the lighthouse view
looming high above the water on that heavily wooded setting

The keeper deserts his polishing chores in the tower to watch us go by...
And the wife appears on the porch of the house to wave her broom in salute.



Historic Bass Harbor Head Light, Tremont, Maine, U.S. National Park Service