

A Bird Told Me

An Excerpt, Chapter 3

Jacque and I are the last generation of star navigators. Today, it is all electronics. Even the magnificent names of the orderly stars are forgotten

We learned the hard lesson that the ocean has no sense of humor! With only a sextant, a fathometer, a chronometer, and a fine Ritchie compass, the Sea Spider began her quest on a southeasterly course down the coasts of California and Baja.



We sailed dead downwind in the coastal monsoon, but when we sailed out of sight of land for the first time, trouble began!



As I raised the mainsail, Jacque steered Sea Spider on her course for Manzanillo, 554 miles across a trackless ocean. The first real dependence on our celestial skills did not produce accurate results.

The tropical twilight is of short duration, so I knew that I would have to work quickly. At the instant that the sextant brought the star down to touch the horizon I cried out, "MARK." Jacque responded, "Got it." I read the degrees on the sextant, called them out and Jacque called back, "Roger that."

Jacque began working by the oil lanterns above her chart table, calculating and drawing her line of position (LOP) on the chart, then checking and rechecking her work.

At midnight when I came on deck to begin my watch, I found Jacque—tears on her cheeks were reflecting the glow of the lamps. "Did we get a good fix?" "No," she replied, fighting back the tears. "These three LOPs make a triangle so big that we could be anywhere."

Though in no immediate danger, we would be if we did not solve our navigation problem. Attempting to cheer her up I laughed, "I've got it! We're in a mountain lake in central Mexico." Again, I examined the chart carefully and said, "I can't accept that position." Then I gave Jacque a hug and got a small smile in response. "We'll try again at dawn."



At dawn I took 3 more shots. At noon I got shots of our own star, the sun at its zenith. Shooting the sun, I knew that I could not be measuring the wrong star by mistake.

I feared, we could be getting dangerously close to land. It was then that my own past memory began to haunt me... the memory of sinking my sail boat on the rocks years ago.

We were optimistic by day in bright tropical sunshine on a blue sea, but at night in the dark of the moon, with the blackness around us as impenetrable as the fear in our hearts, we were not so confident. "Jacque, if we are way off on our reckoning and still north of Cabo Corrientes, we could still be sailing right for the Tres Marias Islands, or the rocks off of Banderas."

"Did you hear that? BREAKERS!" Jacque's voice betrayed her concern as she yelled down the hatch to me. I had been unable to shake the anxiety and go to sleep, so I was listening just as intently as she was. The wind has picked up, and the tops of waves are beginning to break." I said in a calm manner to ease her concern. But all of a sudden—BAM! It sounded like a massive



cannon ball slammed into us. Sea Spider was violently shaken. She hesitated, the mainsail backed with a boom, and then the sail filled again and the Sea Spider glided on as if nothing had happened. "We hit something," Jacque shouted. I was on deck in one jump with a flashlight in my hand. I shone a light below to look for water rising in the hull. Suddenly I was startled by a loud SHOOSH right off our port

quarter, like a boiler letting off steam. A warm mist struck my left cheek and the smell of fish briefly filled the air. Then I realized a whale had just spouted right beside us. We struck a whale – probably a Gray Whale."

I checked Sea Spider's swinging center board that extended several feet below the keel, and found it in the full up position. It had been secured in the half down position with a 3/8-inch nylon braid that I saw was now shredded. The loud bang must have been the centerboard striking the whale and breaking the line. If the centerboard was hit, then the rudder might have been struck too. I harnessed up, snapped in and hung over the transom. I was relieved that my spotlight revealed no damage to the rudder. We never spoke of it again, but we knew that there were dangers in these waters, breaking reefs, and submerged rocks that could end our lives.

The perilousness of our plight filled us with fear. After three anxious days, I had to admit that I had come to the end of my ability to get us out of this situation. I could not think of anything else to do, so I sat down in the cockpit and prayed.

Extreme circumstances require extreme measures, so I prayed. But I asked, "Why would He notice me?" Nevertheless, I felt compelled to pray. "God, if you can hear me please send me a sign to show me which way to go." I prayed aloud. I doubted that God would hear a whisper. How arrogant was that? Telling God just how to save us, and practically accusing Him of not hearing me!

But within ten minutes a little bird flew right over my head. I could feel his little wing beats in my hair. It flew a hundred



yards to the North and then returned to hover over my head. Then, he again flew to the North and returned to hover over my head once again. This time I thought, “Well, I did ask for a sign.” So, when the bird flew to the North the third time, I took a compass bearing on the direction of his flight.

The bird seemed to sense that his mission was accomplished. He perched on our bow rail. I called, “Jacque, on deck, Now! We’re going to tack the boat. “What’s wrong?” she asked sleepily, “Why tack?” “**A little bird told me!**”

As her senses wakened and she began her coming-on-watch survey of Sea Spider her eyes widened in surprise, “Look! There’s a black bird on the bow pulpit.”

We followed the bird’s exact course through the night and through the next day. I do not know why I had the faith to follow that course, especially through a dark night. It could just as well have led to disaster, but I felt compelled. After all, I didn’t have any better plan. As darkness neared, once again, with no identifiable land features in sight, I realized that we could soon be sailing right onto the rocks.



It wasn’t long before a black prominence of land rose up on the horizon... as we approached, features became discernible. A tall, offshore rock appeared off the north side of the point and a breaking reef materialized extending from its southern tip. “Look” I said, handing the binoculars to Jacque, “That could be Cabeza Negra, black head. The headland looks about 600 feet tall, and there’s a tall mountain behind it. That rock could be Pelican Rock.” From the chart table Jacque replied, “It’s just like the chart. This is Cabeza Negra.” “We’re found, Jacque! God must have sent that bird. He answered our prayer.

We discovered that we had passed our destination by 44 miles. How could we have passed Manzanillo without even seeing the glow of its lights? How could we have possibly come so far?”

As I spoke, a shaft of sunlight penetrated the clouds and turned the ominous black head into an inviting vivid green. For a moment, the foot of a rainbow shimmered in that sunbeam. Call me a superstitious sailor, but that was all that was needed to erase my hesitation and lure me into the cove past the roaring breakers on the south reef.

I teared up at the realization that God had heard my prayer. “That meant that God knows me,” I thought, “He knows me!” I still did not know who He was, but I knew that He cared about me.