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## A Sailor's Life on the Rappahannock

*Excerpt from the Memoir of Ivy Wood Hunt (b. 1874 d. 1962)*

Submitted by Wit Garrett

*"...I had, after the first summer of sailing, been the Garland's captain and had many experiences, some of which were by no means pleasant, and I had learned that the life of a [19<sup>th</sup> Century] sailor was varied and sometimes hard if not indeed punishing."*

*the Author*

At first, it is lonesome, but one gets used to this and accepts it as the life of a sailor. When the weather is normal, it is for the most part pleasant. My sailing experiences were confined to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, except on one occasion when I took a cargo of oysters to Philadelphia. Sometimes we experienced calms of one, two or even three days, when, there would not be enough air stirring to move a sail, and if in the bay we were at the mercy of the tides. If in a river, we would drop anchor. In such times, we would do painting, splice a parted hawser<sup>1</sup>, put on a set of new halliards<sup>2</sup> [*sic*], mend a sail or whatever need be done to keep every thing in ship shape, for when the wind is in the water, the life of the ship and its crew is dependent on trustworthy rigging<sup>3</sup> and tackle<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> A *hawser* is a large rope used for towing, mooring, or securing a ship. Splicing the rope was the exercise of repairing damaged rope, or joining two ropes together by intertwining the strands.

<sup>2</sup> *Halyards* are the ropes or tackles for hoisting and lowering the sails.

<sup>3</sup> *Rigging* is the general term for all the ropes of a vessel, the two primary categories, Standing and Running. Standing rigging is permanently secured and immovable. Running rigging are the ropes that run through blocks, and used for pulling and hauling.

Sometimes a squall strikes suddenly and without warning but usually of short duration. However, sail must be shortened, and quick, and sometimes entirely furled and hatches battened down. A storm usually comes gradually enough to allow an experienced sailor to make a harbor before it gets too violent. There are times, however, when you are caught out in midship channel of the bay and the wind dies down to nothing. There is a murky overhead and visibility is poor. The barometer is falling fast and is down to nearly 29. Call all hands on deck with oilskins and sou'westers<sup>5</sup> on. Batten down<sup>6</sup> hatches, run down your foresail furl<sup>7</sup> snugly and tie it tight.

<sup>4</sup> *Tackle* includes all rigging, cranes, etc. used to load or unload cargo.

<sup>5</sup> Oiled waterproof cloth (*oilskin*) is used to make the coats, trousers and raincoats worn by seamen. *Sou'westers* can refer to either the long oilskin coat, or the waterproof hat with wide slanting brim longer in back than in front worn at sea during stormy weather.

<sup>6</sup> To *batten down* is to close all openings on deck and tie down all loose objects both within the hull and on deck.

<sup>7</sup> The *foresail* is the triangle shaped sail forward of the mast; the jib. To *run down the furl* means to take down the foresail fold or roll and secure it to its main support. This is an often hazardous undertaking in a severe storm at sea.

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Get a double reef<sup>8</sup> in your mainsail<sup>9</sup> and tie your topsail<sup>10</sup> tight. Now get a reef in the jib<sup>11</sup>, and stand by. A heavy black fog is the only thing that will run your barometer down to 29, other than a storm. If the fog comes, it is a relief. If no fog, you are in for a scrubbing and soon. When the wind strikes, your procedure of action is governed by your position, the visibility, the access to a harbor and the intensity of the wind. It is a time that taxes your experience and your ability to maneuver your craft to safety.

I remember one time in late October, Mr. [Julian] Clarkson went to Baltimore to buy his fall stock of goods for the store. I left the Rappahannock River loaded with lumber a short time before he took the steamer for Baltimore. After unloading my cargo in Baltimore, I contacted him and docked at the public wharf to take on his stock of merchandise. We finished loading late in the afternoon, and as his steamer would not leave until the next afternoon, he decided to come down on the vessel with me, thereby saving the cost of his transportation. We got under way about sunset and the next morning, were well down the Patapsco River near Sandy Point. As the day wore on it began to become overcast and a northeast wind kindled, which increased to a strong wind. By night fall we were off the Patuxent River and getting murky, so we went in the river to harbor overnight. The next morning it was thick foggy with a strong northeast wind blowing. Visibility was only a few hundred yards. He [Mr. Clarkson] wanted us to get under way, as we had a fair wind down the bay. I told him it was not fit weather to start out, but he kept insisting.

He was nervous and walked the decks continually. Finally I told him, if he wanted to risk his life and his cargo of goods, I would try to make the entrance to the Rappahannock River, but it would have to be done purely by sailing by

compass. He said it was a shame to lose that fair wind. I told him it was against my judgment, but we would comply with his request. So, we got under way and I sailed out to where I calculated was ship channel and set my course by compass, as it was still thick foggy and the wind was very heavy. He walked the decks continually which gave the entire crew the jimjams.

Late in the afternoon we began throwing the lead<sup>12</sup>, sounding<sup>13</sup> for depth of water, but found no bottom. Finally, as it was beginning to get dark, we got a sounding of six fathoms<sup>14</sup> of water with mud bottom. Soon we had four fathoms with a hard sand bottom. We knew this was Windmill Point, at the north entrance of the Rappahannock River and marked by a lighthouse, but we did not know whether our course would take us inside the lighthouse or off shore of it. Sounding for depth of water was our only guide and salvation and we kept the lead line going as fast as it could be hauled in and thrown again.

All hands were on the lookout for Windmill Lighthouse, although visibility was not more than one hundred yards, and to catch the sound of the lighthouse bell. [The] depth of water never got less than four fathoms and the bottom continued hard sand. It was tense moments. I was at the steering wheel and had not altered my course, as we still had four fathoms of water. Both Lewis Gowin [ship's cook] and I heard one toll of the lighthouse bell, which was to our leeward<sup>15</sup>, but never saw the light. None of the rest heard it. The sound of the bell coming from the leeward assured us we were outside the lighthouse and safe. In a few minutes, water deepened to six fathoms with mud bottom, and we knew to a pinpoint our location. I held my course for about five minutes,

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<sup>8</sup> A *reef* is the rolled up part of a sail, tied with the reef lines. Rolling up a sail will shorten or reduce the size of the sail.

<sup>9</sup> The *mainsail* is the principal sail that is set on the main mast, the *mast* being the long pole set upright from the deck to support the rigging and sails.

<sup>10</sup> The *topsail* is the second sail above the deck.

<sup>11</sup> The *jib* is the triangular sail set foremost of the mainsail.

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<sup>12</sup> A *lead* is a piece of lead (a weight), in the shape of a cone or pyramid, with a small hole at the base, and attached to a line, which was hand-thrown into the water to measure the depth of the water.

<sup>13</sup> *Sounding* is the process of measuring of the depth of water. At the time represented in this article, this was a manual process (see footnote 14); also called shouting out the depth.

<sup>14</sup> One *fathom* equals six feet.

<sup>15</sup> *Leeward* is the side of the vessel sheltered from the wind; opposite of windward.

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[and] jibed<sup>16</sup> our sails when I changed to a due westerly course for entrance into the Rappahannock River. I know Mr. Julian had walked ten miles on deck that day and was relieved as we steered into the mouth of the Rappahannock. After a few minutes he came aft and looked at the compass. He said, "Ivy, why don't you head into the mouth of the river?" I told him I was. He said, "You are heading due west, and will run aground any minute." I told him the channel course into the mouth of the river was due west, [and] he said, "I have lived on the Rappahannock River all of my life and I know the direction of the river is N. W. and S. E." I told him that to draw a line from Fredericksburg to the mouth of the river, it would be N. W. and S. E., but in order to clear Mosquito Bar, which runs out for about one half mile, and is hard sand with only three feet of water on it, it was necessary to steer a westerly course. He replied, "You are the captain, but you are going to run aground any minute now."

Later I learned from one of the crew that Mr. Julian approached him and told him that I was about to run the vessel ashore and that he could not prevail on me to change my course. Mr. Julian wanted him to try to persuade me that I was steering a wrong course. He [the crewman] told Mr. Julian that he had better leave me alone, as I knew what I was doing and that he would not go to me offering advice. So, Mr. Julian, in all sincerity, came back to me and said he hated to disagree with me, but he disliked to see the vessel lost after having made such a wonderful fete of locating Windmill Lighthouse over a ten hour period of blind steering in a dense fog, and urged me to try to realize my mistake before it was too late and change my course. I realized his honest conviction and sincerity, [for] he meant well and personally had much at stake, his own life included. He thought he was right. Nevertheless, I KNEW he was wrong. I knew from actual experience, over and

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<sup>16</sup> To *jibe* the sails is to change *tack* (direction) while going downwind; bringing the boat from one tack to the other, so that the sail is flown in the opposite side by turning through the eye of the wind.

over again, I had chartered this course in day light and fair weather.

The day had been a tense one in every respect. It is a strenuous situation under such conditions and circumstances. Then, in the final and crucial minutes to be unnecessarily disturbed and frustrated, I was forced to have to tell him that I knew what I was doing and that I wished he would not further disturb and annoy me by trying to force his own opinion on me. I would not listen to it and was personally assuming all responsibility myself in performing a duty that was entrusted to me and which involved the safety and preservation of the vessel, its cargo, and the lives of all on board. I hated to have to do it, but it had to be done. He did not say any more, but continued to pace the decks, and doubtless still upheld his own opinion.

It had now been about ten or twelve minutes since we jibed sails and pursued a westerly course. I figured we had gone about far enough to clear Mosquito Bar. I told the boys to stand by to trim<sup>17</sup> our sails as I eased into the wind with about one quarter sheets<sup>18</sup>. I headed a northerly course for Butler's Hole under the north shore for anchorage. In a few minutes the water began to become smoother as Mosquito Bar was breaking the heavy seas, and which verified my position. We soon anchored in four fathoms of water, where it was comparatively smooth. We went down into the cabin and I took a pin and stuck it in the chart at the point I figured we were anchored, and said, "We will see in the morning how near right I am." The next morning Mr. Julian was up at the crack of day and called me out of a deep sleep to say, "Ivy, by golly, you are right." We got under way and dropped anchor at Bowlers Wharf that afternoon.

I have gone into more detail in this than was necessary, but wanted to give a true and accurate account of an actual experience in a sailor's life. I still say it was against my better

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<sup>17</sup> The sails of the vessel are adjusted (trimmed) to the best advantage to improve the fore- and aft- balance of the vessel.

<sup>18</sup> A *sheet* is the line attached to the lower corners of a sail to either extend the sail or to alter its direction.

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judgment that I left harbor in the Patuxent River that morning because it was a gamble, or, a chance. The odds were against me, and there was

no excuse for taking chances, except that I was over persuaded, and should have stood PAT.

*"... I have spent 'Dog hours' in the old Rappahannock River, when caught out in rough weather and the seas were rolling high and the raw cold wind would blow the spray...with such force as to make my cheeks sting."*

*the Author*

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### *Author Biography*

**Ivy Wood Hunt** was born in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri on January 5, 1874. At the age of seventeen, he was encouraged by his uncle, James L. Clarkson, to migrate to the state of Virginia, specifically to Center Cross, where he would have the opportunity for training and gaining business experience in the mercantile establishment of Mr. Clarkson's son-in-law, Julian Clarkson, who had married Ivy's first cousin. As further inducement to persuade Ivy to take advantage of the chance to ensure his future welfare and success in life, Mr. Clarkson paid his nephew's steamboat passage and additional traveling expenses for the trip to Center Cross. Carrying only a small trunk, Ivy caught the local train to St. Louis, where he purchased a second class ticket to Baltimore MD. In Baltimore, he boarded the steamer *Richmond* headed for the Rappahannock River in Virginia.

When Ivy first viewed the Chesapeake Bay from that steamboat, *"...I got my first view of a large body of water. It was a wonderful sight for me to look upon. It was a new world to me, a new experience, a new pleasure."* The *Richmond* was a side-wheeler with a paddle on both sides. She accommodated 125 first-class passengers, and 175 second-class passengers.

David C. Holly, *Tidewater by Steamboat – A Saga of the Chesapeake*, photograph courtesy of Alice Forbes Bowie, reprinted with permission of Calvert Marine Museum, Solomons, Maryland.



On September 1, 1891, Ivy arrived at Bowler's Wharf. There he was met by Mr. Julian Clarkson who drove him to Center Cross and a new life. At the Center Cross mercantile, he was introduced to a little girl, *"apparently ten or twelve years old, daintily dressed, blonde, very reserved, quiet, and shy. She had freckles on her cheeks and nose, and the most beautiful golden blonde hair I had ever seen, done up in a dozen or more curly rolls, streaming down her back to her waist."* At that moment, Ivy could hardly have imagined that he would someday marry this little girl, Lulie Hundley Garrett, the daughter of Mr. Clarkson's sister, Lucy Garrett. Lucy was married to C. P. Garrett, Mr. Clarkson's brother-in law. Although Ivy began his interesting and colorful career in Center Cross, the water soon beckoned once again. He returned to Bowler's Wharf in 1895 to work in the oyster business owned by Lulie's father, who was in poor health at the time.



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Summer hours for the Essex County Museum are effective through Sept.  
10 am-4 pm on M, Th, F, S and 1-3 pm on Sun  
*Admission is always free*

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Individual	\$20
Family	\$45
1692 Society	\$50
Tappahannock Society	\$100
Corporate Sponsorship	\$150
Essex Circle	\$500

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“Faith of Our Fathers”, a new exhibit, is now on display. The exhibit will officially open with a reception to be held in **September**. Watch for invitations, newspaper notices, and the museum website for more information.

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