

Buoy on a Mountain Top

P. 3
(of 3)



for that matter, is it likely that any particularly religious remarks were uttered when the rock was found—quite unintentionally—back in 1855. The California clipper ship *Stilwell S. Bishop*—Isaiah Sherman, master—of Philadelphia, was shaping her course in to the coast from the sailing lanes leading up from the Horn when she bumped the tip of the submarine mountain. Apparently she wasn't badly hurt, for she got on to San Francisco, where Captain Sherman no doubt ended his voyage in a blast of verbal pyrotechnics about the need for a buoy, a lightship—or merely better charts. Yes, the *Stilwell S. Bishop* is one ship which named a rock by striking it, and lived to tell the tale.

The year after Captain Sherman's mishap, the bank was sounded out to the extent of 130 square miles; Bishop Rock, so far as could be learned, was the only pinnacle constituting a menace to navigation. But many years passed before anything was done about marking the spot. Finally, the lighthouse people were able to wangle enough money to provide, install and maintain a buoy there, and there was rejoicing among the maritime people.

It may be simple to imagine the superintendent of lighthouses calling in the skipper of a lighthouse tender and telling him to go out and hang a buoy on Bishop Rock. The skipper says "Aye, aye, sir!" as he touches the visor of his cheese-cutter cap, shifts his quid over to the other cheek, hitches up his trousers and proceeds to do so. But it isn't as simple as all that.

Remember, that for practical purposes, that rock is out of sight of land. That means finding it by dead-reckoning, checked by an astronomical observation—if it is clear enough to get the sun. Even with the finest sextant, and with an excellent chronometer checked by the wireless "time tick," your most careful computa-

tions only put you within a mile or so of the place. But don't look askance at navigators, if you think that they should come closer. Just remember that you are bringing the image of the sun—93,000,000 miles away—down to the horizon with an instrument having a radius of perhaps six inches, and held in your hand while you stand on a deck which may be anything but level and motionless. An error of two miles really isn't so bad, considering the factors.

However, the buoy was placed there, after a careful check by soundings, and all was well. Every six months, a light-house tender would go to Cortes Bank, "relieve" the buoy with a new one and steam back to the coast, to give the original buoy its overhaul. But then, one day, the tender arrived to find no buoy; it had gone adrift, and a new one was set in its place. Months later, the master of a steamer bound from San Pedro for the Hawaiian Islands was greatly scandalized to find the buoy, serenely floating along near Hilo.

Another story is told of a tender which closed in with Cortes Bank on a hazy day, with extremely poor visibility. They sounded, got the required depth—and found no buoy. Muttering imprecations about flaws in anchor-chains, they set another one, and went home. Six months later another tender was sent to relieve the buoy—and, the day being fine and

clear, found two buoys, about a mile apart. So there was added to the chart a second shoal spot, previously unknown, with a depth almost identical with that at the spot where the regular buoy belongs, but not close enough to the surface to be dangerous. Now two buoys are maintained at Bishop Rock, the regular whistling buoy and a silent, plain "station buoy".

Strange tales have drifted back from Cortes Bank, where in many places you can look down and see the bottom. It has been described as California's Lost Atlantis, and there are those who fancy that they have seen, in the jagged rocks and swirling streams of kelp, the ruins of a bygone civilization. And there are yarns of the tolling of bells, and of the shadowy forms of clippers and galleons which—quite properly—vanished when a searchlight was turned on them. Such tales recall the freighter skipper, a grizzled Scandinavian, who snorted in scorn at the reefs marked "Position Doubtful" or "Existence Doubtful" which you will find on deep-sea sailing charts.

"I call dem 'yin reefs,'" he said. "You find 'em by taking de sun's altitude t'rough de bottom of a yin-bottle instead of t'rough a sextant!"

Perhaps that accounts for the strange tales of Cortes Bank. And then again, perhaps it doesn't. A lot of funny things can happen, out of sight of land.