

MISCHIEF AMONG
THE PENGUINS

H. W. TILMAN



Mischief among the penguins, Baie du Navire, Possession Island

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First published 1961 by Cambridge University Press
This edition published 2015 by Tilman Books
www.tilmanbooks.com
a joint venture by
Lodestar Books www.lodestarbooks.com
and Vertebrate Publishing www.v-publishing.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-909461-20-8

Typeset in Baskerville from Storm Type Foundry
Printed and bound by Pulsio, Bulgaria
All papers used by Tilman Books are sourced responsibly

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Foreword

Libby Purves

I DISCOVERED BILL TILMAN'S BOOKS when I was young, new to offshore sailing, and expecting a first baby. During that pregnancy I found it helped to think of the child as a voyager, because a wonderful task I was given was to edit selections of the Tilman sailing books, then woefully out of print, into one volume.

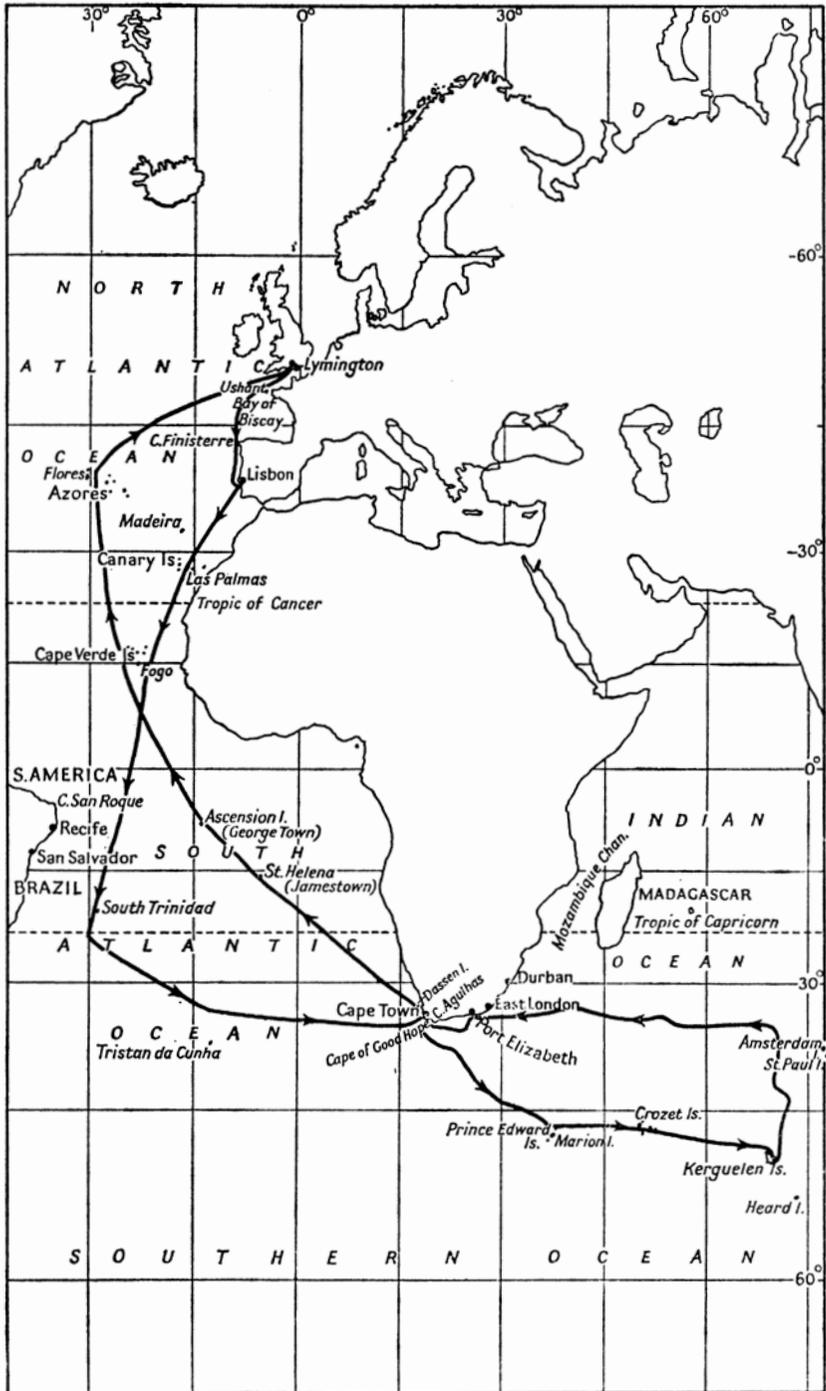
So the unborn child and I lived alongside this great, adventurous, observant, sometimes curmudgeonly figure for a while. And it was, ironically given his singlehood, a remarkably good way of readying myself for the birth and future family and working life. His famous response to a cadet asking 'How do I get on an expedition' was 'Put on your boots and go!' That's bracing. He had, after all, scarcely had his boots off in six decades, as soldier in both world wars and notable mountaineer in the 1930s and 40s: it was only when he hit his ceiling as a climber, with older lungs, that he decided to take to the sea and replace the challenge of great height with that of remote inaccessibility, in Patagonia and Greenland.

He was not only an adventurer, brave and only rarely reckless, but a tremendous writer. He has that educated, unselfconscious late-Victorian facility and economy with words, sharpened further by his military youth. The sailing chronicles cover 140,000 miles of Arctic and Antarctic travels, and two shipwrecks, the loss of his beloved *Mischief* being the most wrenching. But he sailed on, in his late 70s attempting to thread through the pack-ice in Baffin Bay, instructing his crews to jump onto floes and hack out an ice-bollard to tie up to.

Here, we find him still in command of his beloved *Mischief*—the first of his three hardy, wooden veteran Bristol Channel pilot cutters, Victorians themselves. He gave her name to a mountain in each hemisphere and a cape in the Southern Ocean; in her he covered more than

100,000 sea-miles, and wore out the patience of several crew members. They either adored him or excoriated him, there seems little ground in between; to him they were either worthy, or 'young squirts' with none of the hardihood and determination which had marked his own journey through wars and mountain expeditions. This voyage was one of his finest: 20,000 miles of it to the Îles Crozet, where few have been and fewer still have sailed under their own mast.

That his work is fascinating to travellers, and to sailors with a taste for simple, strong traditional boats, goes without saying. But, as I found long ago when it helped to form my youth, the Tilman narrative has other benefits. A favourite saying, ascribed by him to an Arab proverb, is 'the camel driver has his thoughts, and the camel he has his.' It has assisted me through many professional disagreements.



Map 1: Mischief's Route

THE CREW AND THE SHIP

‘**H**AND (MAN) WANTED for long voyage in small boat. No pay, no prospects, not much pleasure.’ Thus ran the advertisement I inserted in the Personal Column of *The Times* about a month before the day I hoped to sail. In planning a second and, fortunately, more successful voyage to the Crozet Islands in the Southern Ocean, I had run into the usual difficulty of finding a crew. A minimum of four were needed, five would be better, of whom one at least must be a mountaineer or at any rate capable of moving freely and looking after himself on easy rock, ice or snow. Ideally, of course, all should have had some sailing experience. One of them, I hoped, would have an invincible stomach and a turn for cooking on paraffin stoves in cramped quarters in a stuffy, unstable galley; and another should have some knowledge of small marine engines and the numbing effect upon them of sea air and salt water. All must be of cheerful, equable temper, long-suffering, patient in adversity, tolerant of the whims and uncouth manners or habits of others, neat and cleanly, adaptable, unselfish, loyal—in fact, possessed of most of the qualities in which the majority of men, including myself, are notably deficient.

Six months before sailing day such ideas and ideals are all very well but they cannot be long maintained. As the months pass and the men one had in mind fail to come forward, while others change their minds and drop out, such ideals are one by one relinquished until at last the modest aim of filling up the muster alone remains. Indeed, the final stage is reached when one is happy to take almost anyone who offers, regardless of his experience, ignorant of his temperament. After all, we should be away a year, time enough one might hope to demonstrate the truth of what Browning proclaimed:

The only fault’s with time;
All men become good creatures: but so slow.

For a really long voyage has the advantage that however inexperienced both skipper and crew may be, they begin learning at once and go on learning until the last day of the voyage. One expert, who has written a book about ocean cruising, starts with the premise that either the crew must be found to suit the voyage, or the voyage arranged to suit the crew. If circumstances are such that neither of these is feasible, why then, the crew must in time make themselves fit for the voyage.

Nevertheless, a voyage of long duration rules out many who would be fit to come and would like to come. And experience had already shown me that it was idle to expect any mountaineering friends to join in such ventures as 'sailing to climb.' The keenest mountaineer is not likely to relish the prospect of enduring several months at sea for the sake of a month or two spent in climbing some obscure, unknown mountains. Nor were volunteers from among the yachting fraternity really to be expected, most of whom would have their own boats and their own plans. Very long ocean voyages are not enjoyed by all yachtsmen, and the few who do like them prefer to choose their own cruising grounds. Sun, warmth, exotic faces and places are generally more attractive than uninhabited, barren islands, set in stormy seas under drab skies. For a voyage to the West Indies or the South Seas there might be more than enough volunteers.

But the time factor is the biggest snag. Most men have to take life seriously, and although a knowledge of the art of sailing is pleasant and possibly useful, there is no future in it. A year's absence from bread-winning or getting on in life can be contemplated only by a man who has not yet settled down, or perhaps has no intention of doing anything so humdrum; or by a man of such carefree spirit that he is ready to throw aside everything at the rare prospect of making a long voyage under sail to remote places. I like to think there are still many such in this country—the difficulty is to make contact with them. Thus, rather late in the day, all other means having failed, I had resorted to the above advertisement.

At that time the only certain starter I had was W. A. Procter, who, having refused an early invitation, later changed his mind. As he is a married man with three children, his wife's consent to his going

showed admirable complaisance on the part of a wife towards her husband's whims, as well as confidence in old *Mischief's* ability to look after herself and her crew. Procter had been with me as mate in *Mischief* in Patagonian waters in 1955-56. A Civil Servant, who had been retired prematurely on account of ill-health, he was not really robust then and was not any stronger now; but a long sea voyage, he thought, might set him up, in spite of Mr Woodhouse's conviction* 'that the sea is very rarely of use to anybody.' He was keen on boats and sailing, something of a ship's carpenter, and a curious and enquiring traveller of an adventurous spirit. True, this enquiring nature and adventurous spirit of his had all but brought about the wreck of *Mischief* in the Patagonia fjords, but I was now forewarned against it. Above all, he could be relied upon to put the interests of the expedition above everything else and to see it through to the end, however rude the weather or unreasonable the skipper. Both of us knew pretty well the worst of what each was capable, knew each other's bad and good points, and on the whole were seldom surprised by the one or disappointed in the other.

Besides Procter, there were two probable starters whom for good reasons I had not met, for at the time they were in the Antarctic. In July 1958, when on the way home after the failure of our first attempt to reach the Crozet Islands, when I was unwell, more than a little discouraged, and in half a mind to sell *Mischief*, and swallow the anchor, I received in a letter a welcome, bracing tonic from the Antarctic. One Lee Rice, a surveyor on one of the F.I.D.S. bases in Grahamland, who had heard of our attempt and the difficulty I had had in finding a crew for it, wrote to offer his services in any such future venture I might have in mind. Besides being a mountaineer and a surveyor, he had made a long ocean passage in a small boat—ideal qualifications for my purposes. Moreover, he had a friend in the Antarctic who would be glad to come too. Roger Tufft had had no sea experience but, having spent three years in Grahamland, was well practised in travelling on ice and snow in rough, mountainous country. They were due home in the spring of 1959. Such an offer from out of the blue was most refreshing and too good to ignore. With two such men I should

* In Jane Austen's *Emma*—Ed

have the nucleus of a strong crew for a second attempt starting in the summer of 1959.

In the end things went wrong. Owing to its being a bad season for ice, the relief ship *John Biscoe* in which Lee Rice was returning did not reach Southampton until mid-June. Such a late arrival, allowing him a bare six weeks to sort things out before sailing at the end of July with me, seemed likely to prevent his doing so. But when I met the ship at Southampton, Rice told me he would not in any case be able to come, having injured a knee on the way home. He did not think there was time for this to be put right and did not care to run the risk of becoming a passenger in *Mischief*. With him I lost my most likely man and at the same time had to drop the idea of doing any survey work on the islands.

The *Shackleton*, in which Roger Tufft was returning, arrived even later, for she docked at Southampton at the end of June. It was, therefore, with small expectation of success that I went to Southampton for the second time. Amidst the confusion of welcome by relatives, friends, and the Press, the turmoil of disembarkation, and what seemed to me the ungrateful and unnecessary scrutiny by Customs Officials of men arriving from the Antarctic, I began searching for Tufft. Having at last found his cabin, where, by the way, the bookshelf, slightly to my concern, held nothing but poetry, I learnt that his knees were all right and that, in spite of his friend's decision and of his own very late arrival, he was still game to come: I might add that Tufft's ability to do a quick turn-round and the very slight regard he has for the blessings of civilisation are exceptional. This was one instance, and I have since learnt of another. Within ten days of our return to England in July 1960, Tufft was on his way to join a party in Spitsbergen.

Thus, about a month before sailing day, fixed provisionally for the end of July, I had only Procter and Tufft. For the remaining two or three I relied upon whatever strange fish might be hooked by the advertisement. I had worded it in a slightly discouraging way in order, as I thought, to save me from being overwhelmed by too many replies. And the carefully inserted stipulation, 'man', would disappoint the surprisingly large number of married couples, women, and girls who lurk in the background waiting to pounce upon just such an offer. Although girls are often more enterprising and some of them more

capable than men, I did not care to run the risk of being talked or ogled into an act of folly. For I had already had experience of the truth of the Chinese sage's remark that discord is not sent down from heaven but is brought about by women.

A member of the crew, a man, who turned out to be, in my opinion, a misfit or a bad bargain, would probably be regarded with equal disfavour by the rest of the crew; whereas, in the case of a woman, where one man's meat is another's man's poison, there might be some difference of opinion, and I might well find myself in a minority of one. Sanguine though I was, I did not flatter myself that any of the top people who read *The Times* would apply, but when the replies began to arrive I was surprised to learn how far apart, geographically and socially, are some of its readers. As well as the idle rich and the idle poor, there are the romantics and opportunists, who, while scorning the solid fare in the news columns of that venerable journal, make a habit of scanning the Personal Column of the front page in the hope of finding something to suit or something bizarre enough to attract them. That class of people, in fact, upon whom I, and perhaps others with more dubious ventures in view, rely for company—the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ready, as they themselves sometimes advertise, 'to go anywhere and do anything (legal).'

I had over twenty replies, some of them serious, and owing to the limited time available, even that small number had to be dealt with arbitrarily and hastily. It may well be that good men were unwittingly turned down, for it was out of the question for me to make long journeys to interview all the prospective candidates. Inevitably those replies that came from within easy reach received most attention, while those that came from places like Saigon, Madrid, the Channel Islands, or even Scotland and Ireland, had to be dismissed out of hand. The first letter I opened, written apparently by a man of great self-assurance, with a sense of humour, and light-hearted to the point of insanity, seemed to me to be rich in promise.

Dear Sailor, [it began],

Been looking for something like this for years. No worry job—only life at stake—capital. No anxiety as regards shore pay. My qualifying

credits: no sailing experience—not my worry but yours, no cook—you’ll find this out. We are, therefore, mated for twelve months by virtue, your “No” items being counter-balanced by mine. Everything equal—when do we meet for discourse?

Yours affectionately, B F....

P.S. Twelve months hence will tell you to go to hell.

If he had nothing else, he had unlimited cheek, which is often an asset, so I gave this brisk character some further details and appointed a meeting place. The rest was silence.

Of the replies from distant places I made an exception in favour of one from The Hague. Jan Garnier wrote at length to say that though he knew little about sailing, he was familiar with petrol engines, that he could cook, and that, being a Dutchman, his habits were, therefore, cleanly to the point of fastidiousness. He had knocked around a lot. He had spent seven years in the French Foreign Legion; had deserted in order to join the Free French, been caught and imprisoned in Morocco; and had eventually succeeded in joining the British Army, where he had collected a Military Medal as well as a Dutch decoration. Since neither Procter, Tufft, myself, nor any of the other applicants professed to know much about engines, Garnier, in spite of the difficulty of meeting him, deserved consideration. Finally, after a further exchange of letters, I decided to take him unseen. A man with his background would certainly be useful, would mix well, and would not expect much in the way of food or comfort. For presumably the Foreign Legion, in its normal habitat, the desert, lives largely on dates; and in a Moroccan prison one lives, I imagine, on even less.

Our number was now four and two others remained to be interviewed, John Lyons and J. G. Osborne. Judging from their letters, neither had any qualifications whatsoever, apart from great eagerness to go. Osborne had sailed a canoe and Lyons had crossed the Atlantic fifty-one times in the *Queen Mary*, playing the double bass in the ship’s orchestra. When he produced a Sailor’s Discharge Book, one realised how numerous are the various callings with little or no flavour of the sea comprehended by the significant word ‘Sailor’. John Lyons’

keenest ambition was to make an ocean voyage in a small boat. He had a cheerful and likeable disposition. Moreover, he stout-heartedly volunteered to try his hand in the galley, a thankless and often unpleasant job. The cook is the only man on board with much work to do and his sole compensation is that of having all night in. John Lyons was a retired schoolmaster of fairly advanced age. But I am no chicken, and I did not discover until we arrived at Cape Town, where we had to produce our passports, that he was the older of the two.

Osborne, on the other hand, was youngish, big and strong. He was at the time employed in an office, from which job he was quite willing to give himself a day's notice. Having failed to get a degree, he had not been able to find the work he wanted as a geologist, but he was an ardent amateur of that arid profession, accustomed to tramping many miles over moor and fell, mountain and valley, under a constantly growing burden of rock specimens. Provided it is promptly applied in the right place, brute force is valuable in a seaman, especially so in a boat with such heavy gear as *Mischief's* is. Another of Jim Osborne's qualifications was taciturnity. Silence, the Chinese say, is worth buying. That it is particularly valuable at sea is shown by the words addressed to his new mate by the skipper of a coasting schooner: 'What I want from you, Mr Mate, is silence, and not too much of that.'

Thus, if I were to take only five, it was a toss-up between Lyons and Osborne. The latter, though no mountaineer, could fill a place in the shore party in the event of Tufft or myself having for some reason to drop out, for he was used to hill-walking and would no doubt carry a gigantic load. On the other hand his strength would be wasted in the galley, for which he was anyway too large and insufficiently nimble. I solved the problem by taking both, making up in numbers what we lacked in skill. For we needed more hauling power on deck, and by having five men available for watch-keeping the long passage out would be less arduous. True, I should have one more mouth to feed, but I was not then aware of how large a mouth Jim Osborne had.

So much for the crew. When it comes to the ship and her fitting-out, where everything depends upon one's own exertions and upon being able to pay for the exertions of professionals, there are not the doubts and uncertainties that surround the finding of the crew. From this brief account of how I got together five men it might be thought

that a little patience and common sense is all that is involved. Much is left to be imagined—the alternating hopes and fears as the months go by, the feeling that all the fitting-out and buying of stores may ultimately be in vain, and finally, the last despairing efforts when one feels compelled to make up the required number with no more discrimination than that of a press-gang.

After our return in July 1958 from the abortive attempt to reach the Crozet, *Mischief* spent the winter in her usual mud berth at Lymington. It was not until about November that I had gathered sufficient confidence to decide upon fitting-out for a second attempt, and as a preliminary had her hauled out for survey. Though the hull of an old boat like *Mischief* (built in 1906) may be generally sound, one needs to be always on watch for any slight symptoms of decay. Faults and weaknesses that might be safely overlooked for a season's sailing in home waters must be put right before undertaking a deep-sea voyage. A few days after she had been hauled out I heard the bad news that part of the hull had been damaged by teredo worm. I went at once to Lymington, where with Humphrey Barton, the surveyor, together with a shipwright armed with chisel and mallet, we spent a gloomy morning ascertaining the extent of the damage.

It was mostly confined to the planks forward of midships to about three feet below the water line. The planks had to be examined one by one for small holes no bigger than those made by a one-inch nail, the only visible signs of the worm's ravages. At all these suspicious holes a blow with the chisel would open up a small groove running along the plank, increasing gradually to the size of a man's finger. Each groove had to be followed up to the end until the full extent of the damage was exposed. Sometimes a whole plank had to be condemned, sometimes only part. Some planks were so riddled as to resemble a honeycomb, leaving a bare half-inch of sound wood in planks that were one and a half inches thick. Ignorance is bliss. Whether the attack had started back at Durban or at intermediate places such as Beira, the Comoro Islands, Aldabra or Aden, we must have sailed most of the way home in an unusually fragile hull.

In the days of wooden ships, the teredo worm was rightly dreaded as a deadly menace in tropical waters. No unprotected wood can resist it. In its home-made burrow it grows to a length of a foot, and some

species are reputed to grow to six feet. No worms remained in any of the burrows we opened up, the only trace left being a coating of a hard, shelly substance. They rasp away the wood with minute teeth, visible only under a microscope, and the wood dust, after being acted upon by digestive ferments, is their food. As the hole of entry is so small it seems that the teredo gains its first footing when in the embryo stage, and consequently its existence and subsequent growth depend upon its finding a piece of wood as host. Why then are there such multitudes in being in the sea when suitable hosts are comparatively rare ? I have had occasion to ponder over a similar question when being sucked dry by leeches in the Himalayan foothills. How do these revolting creatures survive when there are no men or animals to prey upon ? For really bad leech-infested country is normally deserted for that reason, and no one travels through it if it can be avoided.

It was odd that we found no worms still in the burrows, for no full-grown worm could get out through the tiny entry hole. They must have died on reaching colder waters and their bodies dissolved away. The only teredo worm I have seen was one solitary specimen which we found lodged in *Mischief's* keel when I first took her over at Palma, Majorca. At that time her hull was coppered but we had to remove the copper in order to examine the hull, and it was so badly torn in the process as not to be worth putting back. This worm, five inches long and a half-inch thick, had got in where the copper had been torn by touching on a piece of coral rock. Copper sheathing is the complete answer to teredo worm danger so long as it remains in good condition. But it is not a thing you can fit and forget, for if there is a hole the teredo worm will find it.

Anti-fouling paint is an effective defensive measure if the paint is good of its kind and frequently renewed. But it is expensive, the best quality costing as much as £12 a gallon, while the amount needed to cover *Mischief's* hull is nearly three gallons. When we had last painted the hull at Cape Town on the previous voyage in November 1957, I had on board a 5-gallon drum of anti-fouling paint of unknown origin which had been given me by a friendly shipowner a year earlier in Valparaiso. Naturally we made use of it and as things turned out we might as well have used face-powder. Two months later bare wood began to show along and just below the water-line. We ought to have

done something about it but at none of the places we touched at on our way up the Indian Ocean to Aden were there any facilities for hauling out. So we pressed on regardless and ultimately had to pay for this penny-wise pound-foolish policy, and our subsequent neglect, to the tune of two hundred feet of new planking at a pound a foot.

This wormy digression, painful to write and painful to read, must be forgiven. Most people, especially the elderly, are too ready to discuss their ailments. I feel that *Mischief*, with the garrulity of age, would have much to say about her manifold complaints, the expensive operations she has undergone, the face-lifts and other attempts at rejuvenation. For it is with ships as with men:

There is no fortress of man's flesh so made
But subtle, treacherous Time comes creeping in.
Oh, long before his last assaults begin
The enemy's on; the stronghold is betrayed.

After taking advice I had already decided that *Mischief* should have a new deck fitted; and the cost of this so overshadowed everything else that the bill for teredo damage might be considered as merely 'a trifling sum of misery new added to the foot of the account.' But both Humphrey Barton and myself were fearful of what the removal of the old deck might reveal, of how extensive had been the ravages of time, rot and general decay in places that are normally hidden from view. They proved to be less than expected, but while the deck was off the opportunity to stiffen and strengthen the old boat was taken. Extra beams were put in; the half-beams in the way of the mast replaced by through beams; the half-beams each side of the cockpit were tied to the carlines with steel plates; and steel brackets were fitted to the ends of the main beams to tie them to the shelf. When suggesting these improvements Barton wrote: 'The general condition is better than I expected but there is not much holding the two sides of the boat together as the ends of the beams are in poor condition. The brackets should hold her together for many years to come.' To which I could only say, 'Amen, and so be it.'

As all this work had to be done in the open air, the dry spring and summer of 1959 were the greatest of blessings. Work went on uninterrupted by rain, the interior of the boat remained dry, and by

the end of May she was back in the water with a new coat of anti-fouling paint and newly enamelled topsides. Throughout the winter I had been able to work on her at odd times, scrubbing out lockers, painting the cabin and galley, rubbing down and varnishing mast and spars. The mast had been taken out and examined, and a soft spot at the heel had had a piece of wood graved in. For the size of the boat the mast looks thin. It is only seven and a half inches in diameter, and normally it carries a long topmast. When the gaff is slamming about, the upper part of the mast twists in a way that is terrifying to look at. In strong winds the whole mast assumes a graceful curve. But in the course of time one comes to believe wholeheartedly in the theory that what bends won't break.

Besides fairly frequent forays to Lymington, I did a lot of home-work such as oiling and wire-brushing all the wire standing and running rigging, renewing block strops and reeving a new net to go under the bowsprit. One could not take the main shrouds home for treatment, for they are not the sort of wire to be coiled up and put in the back of a car. They are of two and three-quarter inch circumference wire, and being fitted in so small a boat are rightly wondered at for their rugged, uncompromising strength. The theory that so long as these stand, the mast, too, will stand, may well be wrong, but it is none the less reassuring. Thus, when the crew joined there should have been nothing left for them to do but to put on board the stores and gear. As is usually the way there remained a multitude of small jobs to be done before *Mischief* could be regarded as in all respects ready for sea. Luckily I had arranged for Procter and Jan Garnier to join me on board ten days before sailing. A few days later John Lyons and Jim Osborne arrived and finally, two days before sailing, Roger Tufft joined.