

MAINE • BAHAMAS • ATLANTIC VOYAGING

CRUISING WORLD

AUGUST 1988

\$2.50

Canada \$3.00

U.K. £2.50

After 15 years of plying the world's oceans,
a California family moves on to new challenges

A Farewell To Duen

by Jimmy Cornell

The satisfaction of a completed trans-Atlantic passage behind them, dozens of boats swung gently at anchor in Carlisle Bay on Barbados. Even with all the different shapes and sizes, and the fluttering flags of so many nations, my eye was immediately caught by the varnished hull and graceful lines of a large boat of classic beauty. My heart skipped a beat as I recognized *Duen*, which I had last seen five years previously on the other side of the world in Sydney, Australia.

Hitching a ride with a passing dinghy, in no time at all I was on board embracing Dottie and Albert Fletcher. Tripping over our words, we immediately tried to cover all that had happened in the intervening years and describe the thousands of miles that had flowed under our heels. All cruising people know the special joy of meeting old friends in unexpected places, the warmth that

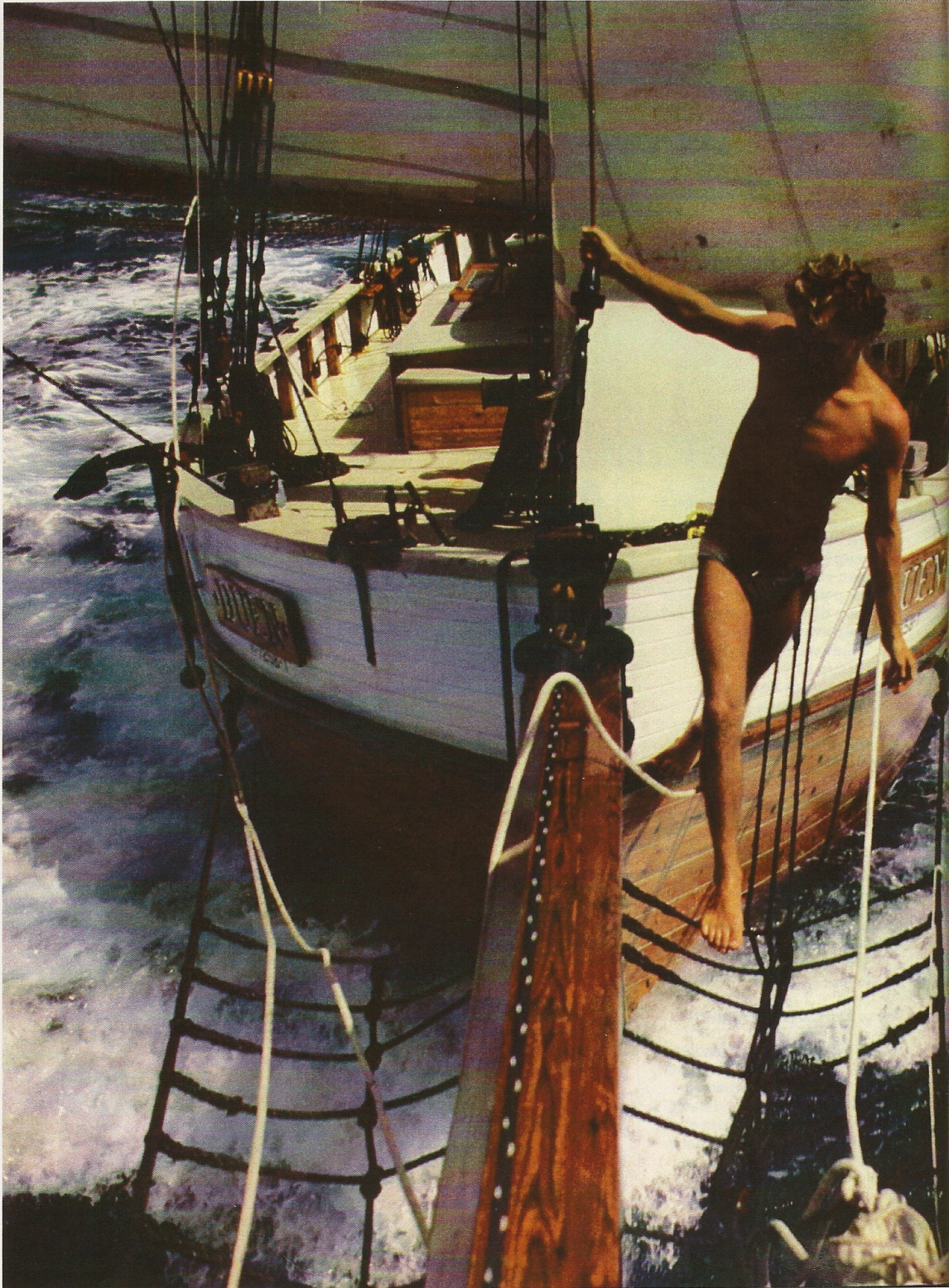
comes from memories of shared anchorages and the common love of the freedom of the seas.

Of the many cruising people I have met, the Fletchers and their distinctive *Duen* are among the most remarkable. With the easy going attitude and spontaneity that characterizes them, Dottie and Albert immediately suggested I join them for a cruise in the Grenadines. Over several pleasant evenings, they recounted the story of the transformation of *Duen* from a shabby fishing boat to a graceful sailing lady.

In the early 1970s in California, Dottie and Albert enjoyed a comfortable easy life. They had everything they wanted except one thing – adventure. Working as a trucker plying the highways of California and Nevada, Albert, who spent his spare time restoring old boats, was really fascinated by bringing their defunct engines back to life.

Reflecting this interest in engines, the Fletchers cruised up and down the California coast in a small motorboat until one day their eyes fell on a Colin Archer double-ender cruising out of Seattle, Washington. They suddenly realized that the solidly crafted vessel was the kind of boat their dreams had hinged upon and that nothing else could be more suitable for the world voyage they were already planning.

The change of style must have been dormant in Albert's genes, for his family hailed from Maine and had had a long association with sail during the regions bygone maritime era, having owned several Grand Banks schooners. Albert's great-grandmother had also been a unique character, the captain of her own lumber schooner trading the East Coast with timber.



Stepping gingerly, Toby Fletcher makes his way forward along the 14-foot bowsprit to hand the jib.

It took the Fletchers some time to discover the origin of the Colin Archer boat that had taken their fancy, but as soon as they did they packed their bags and set off for Norway. In a small Norwegian fishing harbor their long search came to an end when they caught sight of *Duen*, condemned to rot away beside scores of other fishing vessels whose owners had been encouraged to quit the sea by government incentives. Strongly built in 1939, *Duen* was one of the last local boats built before the outbreak of war and the 50-foot hull exemplified the best in Norwegian craftsmanship. Albert looked beyond the rusting fishing gear on deck and

saw a solid, well-maintained hull whose double-ended traditional lines, built for the rough conditions in the North Sea, promised the making of a sea-kindly cruising boat.

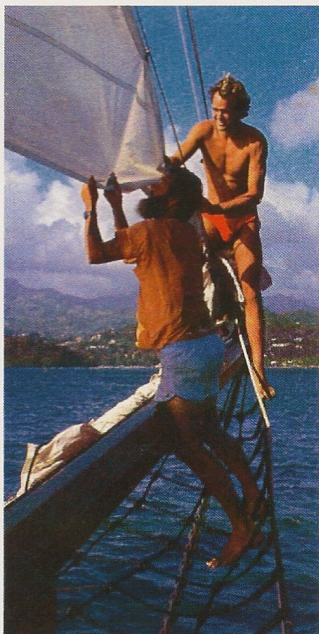
Powered by an ancient one-cylinder Rapp engine and sporting a large wheelhouse and no sailing gear, *Duen* belied her Norwegian name of *Dove* and was obviously in no state to cruise anywhere. Albert and Dottie decided to make their base in Norway. They worked from dawn to dusk to tear out all her equipment and completely gut *Duen's* interior. The strength of the hull was impressive; her nine-by-nine-inch frames were only seven inches apart and the two-

inch pitch-pine planking was held together by four double sets of stringers. During the freezing winter months they worked on the interior and when the weather turned warmer they turned their attention to the spars and rigging. Initially *Duen* as rigged as a gaff ketch with two stubby masts; this short rig, adapted to the rough North Sea, suited the Fletchers lack of experience in handling such a heavy vessel on their own. Step by step *Duen* slowly turned into the cruising boat they had dreamed of and, after 18 months of hard work, they were finally ready to set sail.



Duen requires continuous maintenance to keep her gleaming and in top shape.

They learned to sail *Duen* as they went along, coast hopping southward in search of warmer weather before the onset of the next winter.



Father and son take in the jib at the entrance into the Blue Lagoon, St-Vincent.

After exploring the Mediterranean and now confident both in their vessel and their seamanship, Dottie and Albert embarked on their first ocean crossing. Their slow trans-Atlantic passage and subsequent leisurely cruise in the Caribbean reinforced their initial impression that they had indeed acquired a comfortable and seaworthy boat, though at times an infuriatingly slow one. A radical solution was called for so, on the beach at Bequia, *Duen* underwent a complete metamorphosis.

The most painful decision for Albert was to get rid of the ancient engine, aptly nicknamed



When a fresh Caribbean breeze harnessed by her full press of sail, *Duen* charges along as if arriving from another era.

Rapp the Monster, that had to be started with a compressed air bottle and hardly qualified as a cruising auxiliary. Every hour on the hour 17 points had to be oiled, 12 grease cups turned and five wicks filled, a time-consuming and unpleasant job at sea in a hot, smelly engine room. The Monster was duly banished and replaced with a modern diesel.

The tall pilothouse went the same way as Rapp to save both weight and windage. With more space on deck the boom and gaff could be lengthened, and the sail area was further increased with the addition of a topmast. Albert adzed all the new spars on the beach with the help of some Bequians, who regarded the burly Californian as one of their own. I saw how true this was when we sailed *Duen* into Bequia 12 years after her first visit and the locals, who seldom take more than a passing interest in visiting sailors, greeted Albert like a long lost brother. A man who fashioned his own spars was obviously a man to the liking of these descendants of the New Bedford whalers of yesteryear.

During her 14-year circumnavigation *Duen* went through several more transformations as Albert continued his search to improve the rig and performance, while still keeping the boat within traditional lines.

With countless trials and no lack of errors he reached for perfection, finally declaring himself satisfied with her present rig that sets some 2,400 square feet of canvas with the full complement of topsail and jibs. When this distinguished lady of uncertain years gets moving in a breeze, it is a picture to behold; she romps along at 10 knots and overtakes fiberglass youngsters that could be her grandchildren.

Maintaining such a large wood boat requires a lot of hard work but Albert and Dottie never shirked the task. "Keeping *Duen* in tip-top condition not only protects our investment, but also our lives," observed Dottie. It was not all hard work, however, as the Fletchers knew very well how to enjoy themselves. For 14 years they roamed the oceans of the world, spending several years in the South Pacific, relishing the adventure they had set off to find. Often their children, and later their grandchildren, sailed with them. They also took on crew, usually young people who wanted to learn how to sail a traditional vessel whose topsails had to be set by hand perched precariously on the crosstrees.

The atmosphere on board *Duen* was always relaxed and happy, centering around Dottie with her infectious sense of humor and constant laughter.

A typical example of how they could turn even the frustrations of sailing into pleasure is when they were completely becalmed in mid-Atlantic during their last crossing. Down came the sails and out came the musical instruments. They played the night away, Albert singing to the guitar, Dottie strumming the ukulele, son Toby on the bongos and the rest of the crew on whatever they could find.

In the same way that Albert was remembered in Bequia after so many years, the Fletchers left fond memories in countless other places around the world. Describing himself as a compulsive tool collector, Albert fitted out *Duen* with a complete workshop that enabled him to carry out repairs in many remote islands and villages, whether that meant working on other cruising boats or fixing an islander's broken outboard engine so he could go fishing again. *Duen* left a wake of goodwill everywhere she sailed, an unsung ambassador for the American flag she flew. Children of the 1960s, an era when people hoped enough love might change the world, Dottie and Albert remained true to this philosophy, their kindness and humanity being genuine.



At the end of a long day of sailing under the Caribbean sun. *Duen's* crew relaxes in the shady main saloon for a hearty dinner.

Even at the close of their cruise they refused to be changed by a materialistic world. This was borne out while we were in Bequia when the Fletchers made the painful decision to sell *Duen*. The adventure had come to an end. It might have been easy to carry on, gently cruising with a perfect boat, but they both felt the time was ripe to do something else and look for new challenges. But after such a long love affair they wanted to be sure *Duen* was going to be sailed to the full and not end up as a toy in a marina. True to their idealism and principles, Dottie and Albert turned down a substantially higher offer from a wealthy Swiss sailor who

had fallen in love with *Duen* at first sight, and sold her instead to a Canadian foundation* that is giving underprivileged teenagers a chance to learn how to sail.

Leaving the boat they had lovingly created and that had carried them safely over 100,000 miles of ocean was painful, but the separation was softened by the fact that under her new owners and with Toby Fletcher in the crew, *Duen's* first assignment was to grace Operation Sail in New York City on July 4, 1986.

British circumnavigator Jimmy Cornell, whose articles appear often in *Cruising World*, is the founder and organizer of the Atlantic Rally For Cruisers and the author of the best-selling book *World Cruising Routes*.

* *Duen* was actually sold to the present owners: Michael and Manon Hobbis, who at the time worked for a Canadian foundation.

