

“An Unfortunate Start”

A short sequel to 'In Valhalla's Muddy Wake', written and introduced by Richard Roadnight

The Editor
Bowsprit
Stour Sailing Club
MANNINGTREE.
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Dear Bob,

It would seem, reading Ken Steggle's exquisitely crafted letter, that, as Editor of the Club's magazine, you are short of contributions and would welcome offerings from members.

Now, it so happens I have frequently been on the point of forwarding an article. But, invariably, as my courage is screwed to the point of sending it off, a new Bowsprit appears. As I read it, my boldness fades. I marvel again and again at the expertise of its production, the deft irony of writers such as Bob Coles and Ken Steggle, and stay my hand. For I realise that in such company submitting my pitiful attempts at humour are not only pathetic, but unforgivable effrontery.

However, Ken's cri de coeur has stirred me to action. But what can I send? My imagination, dulled, alas, by fast advancing years, feels unequal to the task. Then I thought about the book I published some years ago - In Valhalla's Muddy Wake - and realised I might have something already to hand, as I have written a sequel, to bring readers up to date with my follies.

Of course, space does not allow for the whole of the new section to be included, but it occurred to me that the introductory chapter might give an insight, and form the basis of a short contribution. I am sure, as members read it, nothing will be evoked save my miserable incompetence. But I also trust, if they are honest, the experiences described could also, in smaller part, have happened to them.

Thank you for being so patient.

Richard

An Unfortunate Start

It is New Year's day, 2003. Ten years since I penned the first of these pages. Whether they have amused or not, ten years is a long time indeed, and the following excerpts from my memories may complete the picture of a man whose heroic ambitions were always more than his capabilities. Indeed, ten years - perhaps nothing to my younger readers - may be half my remaining life span. Although the latter can look forward with excitement to what lies ahead, I can only heave a bitter sigh. For the gloomy thought persists that little time remains, as an unremarkable life is past improvement, the remaining years hardly likely to redress the balance.

I make these musings as I survey the wintry scene from the dinghy compound fronting the Manningree hard. I have visited the Stour Sailing Club in an endeavour to shake off either a bronchial cough, a head cold, or the effects of celebrating the night before.

As I watch the incoming tide lap the hard where it disappears into the creek, my mind goes back almost three years - two years after I lost my dear wife, now at peace in Lawford's beautiful graveyard. It was then a typical English summer's day. That is to say, low clouds were scudding in from the west, whipping the incoming tide into angry little wavelets, and I was conscious the idyllic sail I had promised my companion may not turn out as peacefully as described. Although, in my opinion, I am singularly ungifted, I flatter myself I can find a flair for words when describing my hobby to the fairer sex. "Oh, do say you'll come!" I enthused. "It will be a great day for a sail. I've just installed a new genoa, the bottom of the boat has been anti-fouled, and we'll slip along in the afternoon sun for tea and hot scones at Harwich harbour!"

I noticed, with some alarm, that as I reviewed these words, spoken so confidently the night before, Shirley was donning an extra sweater and strapping her lifejacket over her waterproof jacket, but, I argued, such precautions would create a laugh as we donned swimsuits from the safety of the mother ship when the sun appeared. After all, no summer squall lasts for ever, although I have noticed that when caught out in one, that is what it seems to do.

Ignoring the little flumes of rain that caused me to bail out the Avon tender. I clamped the

Suzuki to its transom and prayed the little motor would not falter as we left the creek for open water. In the distance I could see my yacht, a 29 ft Snapdragon, swinging to face the tide. But, before gaining it, the Avon had to be launched. Shirley, not wishing to fill her gumboots by wading out, took my advice and sat on the inflatable seat to await the lift by the oncoming sea. But as fast as the tender lifted, the wind drove it back. Long past caring about my own comfort, as my gumboots immediately filled, I caught the painter and sought to drag the Avon into water deep enough to start the outboard. I boldly heaved, and managed to drag the tender a few inches.

Encouraged, I stepped further back, heaved once more, and missed the edge of the hard, sitting with a splash into a mixture of mud and water. Fortunately, I still had hold of the tow rope, and, as the

Avon was still firmly ground, was able to pull myself back. Musing this sort of thing was all in a day's work to a humble boatman, far removed from his yachting peers, who stepped aboard from pontoons, I moodily retrieved the oars just before they floated off, with which I was able to punt into deeper water.

Fortunately the outboard, now safely lowered, kept going with Japanese reliability despite the increasing chop, and I was beginning to feel almost happy, when I spied something twisting astern which froze my blood. I realised it was the trailing Avon painter, and any second about to ensnare the propeller, leaving us exposed to the will of God, wave and wind. And I also realised, in the same sickening second, that adrift

rowboats, from where it could be retrieved upon return, had caught in our propeller. We were anchored to the harbour bottom, and could neither make for a berth nor the exit.

Although, by then, Shirley was in a state of near panic. I did not feel particularly worried, as, like most boatmen, I had had experience of this before. Usually, with the aid of a knife, swimsuit and goggles, one could cut free, with little harm done except to one's dignity. I had always wanted to install a rope cutting device to my propeller shaft, but there was no space for this where it left the keelson. I lowered myself into the water, dived under the stern, and immediately recognised the hopelessness of the task. As the inch-thick warp was tightly wound, and working with a saw, three feet down and in the dark, was beyond my powers, decreased by advancing years.

By this time, the ferry skipper had boarded to help, and sensing a fee, offered to tow clear.

This proving ineffective, he radioed the local coastguard, who arrived in a large patrol boat. Once again, my admiration for these people swelled to a high point. The skipper, investigating to the limit of my stern boarding ladder, returned to his ship for a hacksaw, with which, holding onto the ladder with one arm, he made short work of the warp with the other.

But the tight coils around the shaft still refused to allow the propeller to turn, either ahead or reverse. Without more ado he threw me a rope, and towed me across the river to the marina at Shotley, where, equipped with a boat hoist, my vessel was soon out of the water and freed of the binding rope.

This was hardly the idyllic cruise I had described to Shirley the night before, and I noticed she was less than amused by the events which I attempted to brush aside as quite normal to the average boating man's day. Nevertheless, after a visit to the clubhouse, a drink or two, and a nice restaurant meal, warmer spirits returned, and we went to bed almost happy.

And here in lies a really quite amazing paradox. It seems, when boating, happiness is in direct proportion to the hazards experienced. The more hazardous the trip, the more jollity upon arrival at destination, whether this be club bar or the confines of the little ship's cabin. Thus when, the following morning, the sun broke through, and a delightful sail to the peaceful creeks of the Walton Backwaters gave total enjoyment, the horrors of the previous day were (I hoped) quickly forgotten. I almost began to feel optimistic about getting Shirley enthusiastic once more.

steel boarding ladder was bolted, and urged her to jump for it on my command. She missed her footing on the first attempt, but fortunately I had secured a rope through her harness, and she suffered no more than a wetting to her armpits.

One could, I suppose, say that once safely aboard, these troubles would seem as nothing, soon to be drowned in hearty laughter as we reviewed the hilarious episodes. Alas, I can give no such assurance. Surprisingly enough, for a member of the fairer sex who had had the good fortune to meet a boating man, able to introduce her to the unimaginable delights of sailing, Shirley almost gave the impression she was not enjoying the adventure. I started the Yamnnar while she went down below to seek something dry, discovering heavy coarse sweaters, oil-stained jeans, and a fisherman's sowester jammed in a locker. I consoled myself with the thought that, as we progressed down the river with the wind behind us, good spirits would return, and smiles replace features stretched taut as drum skins.

Never take anything at sea for granted. I soon had the main up, and was glad to feel the sun on my back as it broke out of a cloud. Shirley had taken the helm, and there was almost euphoria as we bowled along. I was particularly interested to see how my new genoa would perform, and was delighted to see it so nicely filled. But I began to worry that creases had started to spread from the luff. Hastening forward, I discovered the cause. The spindle, around which the sail wound or unwound, had parted, and the sail was slipping down its groove. No worry. I thought, I'll pull it right down, and bundle it on the deck. We'll carry on with main alone - no problem.

I should have known better. The sail, concertinaed in its groove, defied any attempt to be moved. As the wind was threatening to shake the mast over the side, I wrapped it as best I could round it's forestay, and feigned an air that this was normal procedure. Whether this ruse worked or not, Shirley's growing look of panic led me once again to believe she felt the trip less idyllic than described the previous night. Still, I reckoned, the harbour is in sight, we'll soon tie up, and then we'll have our tea and scones.

Perhaps a word should be said about Harwich yacht harbour. It is not really a yacht harbour at all, but a landing place for the small ferry which runs across the river to Shotley, and is equipped with a couple of pontoons to accommodate visiting yachtsmen. Thus it is small and cramped, and not really able to shelter more than half a dozen boats. Thus, when we entered, all the berths were taken, and I realized with sinking heart that the heartwarming prospect of tea and scones would need to be deferred. A tight turn in the little port was necessary. With engine barely at tickover, we manoeuvred, between the rowing boats tied to the fishermen's mooring buoys, and headed for the exit.

Again, disaster struck, with numbing force. We felt a shudder, and the engine cut in mid note. I suddenly spied the cause. A rope, left trailing from one of the fishermen's

without power in a rising wind, and a panicking female occupying the seat from which I would need to row, meant almost certain disaster. There was only one thing to do. The trailing rope would need to be gathered in.

But I was at the stern, Shirley up forward. The painter was fastened to a ring low down on the Avon's rubber stem. Someone would need to lie head down and reach deep, to grapple for the rope. Shirley looked startled when I suggested the manoeuvre. The whole episode was far removed from her experience of boarding her late husband's yacht, kept in a smart Spanish marina.

"But I'll get soaked!" she exclaimed, not quite understanding the implications. Oh, let's just wait until we get aboard. Just look at those waves! I'll probably get drowned!"

"Not half as drowned as if we're driven ashore!" I rejoined. "But..." Shirley began to wail, when she was cut short by my bellow: "Woman," I thundered, "get down and grab that ruddy rope, or we're done for!"

I think it was at that moment Shirley's romance with sail started to fade. But worse was to come. As she felt under the tender for the trailing rope, head down on the inflated bow, a fierce little wave caught her square in the face, emptying into her under garments the icy water meant for the floorboards.

The rope retrieved, we resumed our frightened way. By this time, Shirley, already wet to the skin seemed indifferent that her body acted as most welcome protection to the wind-tossed spray. Her alarmed shrieks were now no more than pitiful wimpers. Had I not been fortified by the prospect of a comfortable sail down the river to a cosy tea at the Pier hotel, facing the little harbour, I would have sworn she was not enjoying the experience. "After all", I recall telling her on one occasion, "no matter how dismal boating trips appear to be, they are character forming, and put iron in the soul," The way she held the iron she was using that very instant to press my trousers. I was convinced she was thinking of putting it into my soul there and then. But I digress. Despite the flooding tide, battling it out with the hard west wind, white horses breaking out, we neared the mother ship, rearing at the end of a bar taut chain.

It was then that the second sinister realisation broke. Like most boatmen, despite my years, I had acquired a certain agility, not unlike that of an ageing mountain goat, and had an uncanny knack of being able to hold on, even with my teeth if necessary. Which meant that quitting a prancing rubber tender for an equally prancing but more sedate yacht, was the work of an instant.

But I suddenly realised my partner had no such skills, and was moreover encumbered with a troublesome leg. Leaving the dinghy for the deck, clambering over the guard rails, would be an unacceptable risk, even with the solace of a life jacket and the help of a boat hook. I accordingly manoeuvred the tender to the stem, where a stainless