

SAGA OF A NAUTI SAILOR

Part One

Getting Started

Back in the eighties, when my small plumbing and heating business was making good money, I built a detached, four-bedroomed home for my family. When I say 'I built', I mean it. Although I used specialists for things I could not do, I led the project and completed much of the work myself.

It was a proud moment in 1986 as I leaned back on a fence one sunny evening talking to a neighbour who told me that I deserved a very large pat on the back. “More than that,” he said. You should treat yourself to something really nice. A friend of mine is selling his yacht.”

That is how I came to meet Hugh Evans a few days later. We got on well. I liked the look of his boat, made an offer and soon found myself the owner of an 18ft cruising yacht called *Charazard*.

Because I knew absolutely nothing about boats, Hugh threw in some sailing lessons. We sailed from *Charazard's* base at the Arun Yacht Club in Littlehampton, not far from my 'mansion'. As luck would have it, the club had organized a race that day to Brighton, about twenty miles down the coast, so we decided to enter – Hugh, me, and my nine-year-old daughter Natalie.

As we motored down river from the moorings and out into the English Channel we found the sea, in a light southerly

onshore summer wind, flat and almost blue – just right for two novices. As the yacht reached the start line, Natalie and I heard a noise that sounded like a cannon.

“Here we go,” shouted Hugh. “That's the starting gun.”

Natalie and I smiled broadly as Hugh steered *Charazard* over the line. To our surprise – but not to Hugh's, as I was to find out later - we were first across, then headed along the coast for Brighton, with the mainsail bulging and small waves whacking *Charazard's* side. How wonderful that race was in that gentle beam breeze that gradually stiffened to a steady Force 4-5. The exhilaration and excitement as we sped along made me feel very happy with my purchase, as did the smiles of my crew. I kept looking back at the fleet, unable to believe we were ahead, and that we were still in pole position as we crossed the finishing line off the entrance to the ever-so-posh Brighton Marina.

“How come we came first?” I asked Hugh. “You said you were selling me a cruising boat, not a racer!”

“It was a *pursuit* race,” he said, with a mischievous grin.

“Meaning what?” I asked.

“The yachts had to cross the line in order of previous performance. As the boat with the biggest handicap, we had to cross it first, and the other yachts had to try to catch us.” He looked at his watch. “We were pretty quick, though. We'll just have to wait for the elapsed-time results.”

That night, in the Brighton Yacht Club, our own Commodore made the announcement. “The winner of this year's pursuit race is *Charazard* with her new owner, Harry!”

I was overjoyed as they presented me, still a complete novice, with a large and shiny trophy!

After that, nothing could stop me. About a month later my brother-in-law Ulrich paid us a visit from Germany. He had never sailed and, although by that time I could handle the rig and had learned how to leave and enter the river safely, I was

still ignorant of the sea and the skills required for all-weather sailing. I knew little about tides, even less about meteorology, and had not yet made a passage as skipper to another port. Now I found myself one morning, full of fool's confidence, bobbing west towards the Isle of Wight, thirty miles away, with landlubber Ulrich as crew!

I knew that it was a *long* way to the island, and that there was also a much shorter way. The short way was a quick trip through shallow water called the Looe Channel, with treacherous rocky shoals on either side. The long way was around Selsey Bill, passing south of a buoy well outside the dangers. The sea was kind and the south-west wind gave us a comfortable reach towards that mark seven miles away.

There was no GPS in those days – not even any Satnav – so navigation meant working out a compass course, sticking to it, and checking where you were now and then by dead reckoning. I was not aware of how strong the tides were and how much they can knock a yacht off course.

We got round the buoy OK, but then we seemed to come to a stop. The tide had turned and was now coming straight at us from our destination – Ryde, on the Isle of Wight, some twenty miles distant. It was very strong, and pushed *Charazard* sideways towards the shallows.

Suddenly Ulrich shouted in alarm, “Ze rocks, ze rocks!”

I peered over the side and saw rocks close under our keel, ugly looking things. “Damn and blast,” I said.

From Ulrich came a somewhat subdued, “Ja, Donner und Blitzen!”

Luckily the wind held and I was able to turn the yacht away from the danger in a more south-westerly direction towards the eastern end of the now visible island.

A few hours later, just before nightfall and without further incident, we entered Ryde, and berthed in the small dock against a number of other yachts across which, after tidying and

cleaning up *Charazard* and ourselves, we scrambled for a pint or two at the nearest pub.

Even now, after all my adventures, I rarely get drunk, but Ulrich was a champion German beer drinker who liked nothing better than British beer and whisky chasers. Come closing time we made our way back to the yacht. Ulrich had a huge belly from consuming all that beer and *bratwurst*. Singing British pop and German marching songs as we undulated unsteadily on the decks of the yachts that separated us from our much-needed berths. Ulrich would have rolled overboard if I had not kept a steady hold of him. Angry heads popped up from various hatches as sailors, disturbed from their slumbers, cursed our return. The following morning we left as early as we could for our next destination, Chichester Harbour.

I had set a compass course for Chichester but, after a good brisk sail, the visibility dropped, so things became tricky. Eventually I spotted what I thought were the approach channel markers. How wrong can a *nauti* sailor be? “What in heavens?” I asked no-one in particular.

“Ich weiss nicht. I know where we are, not!” said Ulrich.

Ahead of us was a large stretch of water with low-lying land on either side. It didn't look anything like what I was expecting, but I pressed on, and soon we ran aground on a sand bank, the swell bumping *Charazard* up and down until the transom-hung rudder jumped off and was washed towards the shore, with the now unsteerable *Charazard* rapidly following.

I was stupefied. Ulrich looked at me with alarm on his usually smiling face.

“Was gibt's? Was ist los, what is happening?”

I spotted a fishing boat motoring towards us. The skipper had noticed that we were in trouble and, his boat being of shallow draught, was able to get quite close.

“Catch this line!” he shouted. I made it fast to our bow and his strong engine pulled us off that sand bank with ease.

I told him that we had lost our rudder, so he shouted for me to release the tow line and then pulled it back onto his boat. Then he came alongside, tied the two boats side-by-side with fenders in between, and 'drove' us to Chichester Harbour, which turned out to be much further along the coast. Thank goodness for fishermen!

Darkness made it impossible to search for the rudder, so I called Ulrich's sister – (my now ex-wife) Gudrun - who collected us by car. Next day I returned and, luckily, found the rudder.

After that sorry experience I decided to get 'heducated' about tides, weather, and passage planning, and attended the Arun Yacht Club's Saturday morning R.Y.A. sailing courses, persevering until I obtained the Yacht Master Theory and Practical Qualifications.

Each Sunday I had fun racing, and became very good, winning the annual Round the Isle of Wight Race in my class against other club members' yachts, a real achievement. Eventually, I bought a new yacht, a 25-foot Beneteau called *Passing Wind*, in which I won the club's Cruising Cup.

My confidence grew until I made a single-handed passage to Weymouth to where a very good friend, William Paine who worked in the City of London, travelled by train to meet up with me. He arrived late so we decided that, due to time restrictions, we would make a night passage towards Cowes on the Isle of Wight.

It was a good trip with a strong but favourable wind, and we reached Cowes as planned the following day. We wished we could stay that night, but had to get back for work, so, after a quick meal in a restaurant and a short rest on *Passing Wind*, we set sail for Looe Channel.

The wind died as we approached the bouyed channel, so we turned the engine on. Despite the fact that it was getting dark and foggy, I felt confident as I spotted the leading lights of

that potentially dangerous passage and entered its turbulent waters. William was no help as he had already turned in.

To my dismay, just as we entered the channel, the fog thickened. We were now sailing 'blind' towards the buoys at the other end of the channel, a mile or so away. The tide was running fast, sweeping us along with just my glowing compass and beeping depth sounder to help.

I had sailed through the Looe many times, but never at night, so I decided to wake William from his slumbers to give me some support and to make use of his greater experience. I left the autopilot in charge, went below, shook William and told him to come up into the cockpit.

He staggered from his cabin, unsteady, dreamy and exhausted from lack of sleep. With his back to the hatch and, without warning, he collapsed, hitting his head with a sharp and scary 'crack' on the saloon table, then keeled over face down on the cabin sole.

I went to him immediately, leaping through the companionway and down the steps. He remained on his back, staring up at me with only the whites of his eyes showing.

My first thought was that he was dead, but I saw that he was still breathing. He needed help but I could not give it as my priority had to be to get the yacht through the shallows. I decided to make a PAN PAN call, one step down from a MAYDAY, and especially useful in emergency medical situations when a vessel itself is not in imminent danger.

After I had called again and again, each time getting no reply, I put a wet sponge on William's face to try to bring him round. It did not help. I must have been in shock then, because I just stood and looked at him as perhaps five minutes went by.

Then I remembered where we were and what was happening, and climbed up into the cockpit to check the course, only to find to my utter horror that the yacht was now heading towards Selsey Bill *across the shallows*. Despite the thick,

swirling fog I could see white water rushing passed the boat, and submerged rocks spitting hungrily at *Passing Wind's* hull.

I had to do something, but what? I adjusted the autopilot to an 050 degree course which, with luck, would see us past those awful dangers. We had to escape and I had to get William some help.

After what seemed a lifetime of anxiety and fear, the depth meter seemed to let out its own sigh of relief as it indicated that we had somehow reached deeper water.

After quickly consulting the chart, I set course for Littlehampton. The fog had begun to lift, and now I had time to attend to William. Again I tried to revive him, but without success, so I made another PAN PAN call, and this time got a reply from the Shoreham lifeboat station. I told them of the accident and gave them my estimated position.

Soon a lifeboat loomed out of the mist, and came slowly alongside so that two of its crew could climb aboard. They carefully carried William out of the cabin and lifted him into the lifeboat. My last sight of him that night was his head and shoulders bobbing away in the seat that his saviours had strapped him into, as the boat roared away.

I found my way to Littlehampton, berthed *Passing Wind*, and phoned the lifeboat station. The duty officer gave me the name of the hospital that William had been taken to, so I drove there in haste. I found him sitting up in bed with a huge smile on his face. They released him that day, no worse for wear.

My eight years as a member of the Arun Yacht Club were a real pleasure, not just in gaining experience of the practical and technical sides of sailing, but for the joy of the friendly atmosphere and the company of other sailors. There were great social events and a friendly and entertaining bar.

Every year the club held an end-of-season dinner and dance, at which prizes were awarded to deserving members. One of the awards was known as 'The Admiral's Boot', and a

big boot was the actual prize. That year the Commodore stated, in his speech: “Members, it is my great pleasure to give this prestigious award to Mr. William Pain who, while in the Looe, knocked himself out on *Passing Wind*.”

William took it all in good spirits, and raucous laughter resonated around the clubhouse.