

"And there was our dory just turning a back-handed somersault clear of the water."

## An Accomplishment of Sail

*A Stirring Incident of the Early Days of Biscayne Bay, Before Power Boats Were Known There*

By RALPH M. MUNROE

THE incident herein related occurred during the pioneer days of Biscayne Bay. It shows forcefully the simple, "likable" conditions of life there, when nearly all the interests of the community were mutual, and under which the spirit of helpfulness and quick response to emergencies so common among seafaring communities flourished, and the desire for financial compensation for services rendered was scarcely known. Such was Coconut Grove before any other Bay settlement was in being. To us New Yorkers it was a paradise. A few of us had even then become real settlers, identified with the community. Almost of necessity we owned a boat which we had sailed down the coast the year before. Built expressly for these waters, at Brown's Yard, Tottenville, Staten Island, a better model could hardly have been conceived, as was proven by her long record of service from Cape Cod to the Rio Grande, which came to an end in a memorable hurricane at New Orleans many years later.

*Presto* has already been described in YACHTING where she created considerable comment. She was 41 ft. 6 in. over all, 9 ft. 4 in. water line beam and 28 in. draft, just abaft midships, with flat rocker keel 12 x 4 in., having 1½ inches projecting below the garboards. A fin skeg ran from nothing amidships to within 3 ft. of the rudder, which was of the ordinary sharpie balanced type. This skeg was, however, an addition put on after five years of use without it, its purpose being to provide a longer base for beaching or docking, and also to relieve my anxiety regarding the crew forward; for, if not continually cautioned, in a fresh breeze they were in danger of being picked up astern in a moist condition if they did not heed my "Ready about!" I failed to mention that she had round bilges, a centerboard 11 feet long, and carried approximately four tons of iron ballast, cast to fit and fastened down in her lowest spaces. Now this description, in

view of *Presto's* many accomplishments, will, we think, be welcomed by many, and pardoned by the rest of our readers.

It was early summer and we were having our usual touch of an extra fresh east-north-east trade, bringing boats down to generous working reefs and kicking up a sea worth noticing along the coast. The weekly mail schooner from Key West to Miami was several days overdue and the settlement had begun to tire of watching the southerly skyline for the heads of *Dellie's* sails above the horizon. "Guess she's into a wreck," was finally the verdict and of course there was no use in looking for her longer. That business always preceded mail bags, unless the dinghy could manage inside the Keys with them. Suddenly someone sang out, "There she is coming in the Cape Channel," and after she had headed towards us, "Told you so! After more men; wreck must be close to Fowey."

As *Dellie* rounded up there was a rush for the dinghies and excited men were aboard before the mail could be handed on deck. A hush ensued, for the schooner's captain was telling a far different tale than was expected — one of driving the *Dellie* day and night up the Hawk Channel in order to take the keeper, Captain Larner, off Fowey Rocks Lighthouse and back to Key West before his wife died. He had reached the light that morning and found it impossible to make a landing — far less to have attempted taking the old captain off. This all hands conceded, for they knew well what that reef was like in a "rage." The captain had decided to go up the bay, deliver and take on the Miami mail, get back by dark, and go out to Fowey first thing in the morning, hoping that the weather might moderate in the meantime.

Dick Carney and I, sole crew of *Presto*, went on board, prepared a hasty dinner and decided that we would like to see Fowey Rocks in a rage. The mooring was cast off

about noon, after the *Dellie* had sailed for Miami. Soon we were at the Cape, making things snug for a washing crossing the bar. A few minutes later, under reefed sails and eased sheets, we were plunging into the first line of breakers and doing well. Breakers were just pie for *Presto*, but, without warning, the familiar sound of a parting rope, a look aft — and there was our dory just turning a back-handed somersault clear of the water and scattering her favors of oars, bailers, and sponge as if she were the horn of plenty.

Away went our hopes of bringing Lerner back with us that day. Without that dory and oars there was little chance for our well-laid plans. There were the essentials tossing about, visible only at intervals amid many acres of broken water. By the time we could have salvaged even part of that mess it would be getting late, and we had spare oars. Yet, while all this was passing through my mind, I had instinctively, and without further thought of possibly being boarded abeam by the sea, hauled that tiller hard up and before our friend

Jack Robinson's name could have been mentioned, *Presto*, with sheets still flattened, had jibed over and was going down wind in her old wake, easy and moderate as could be wished for. Dick had already spotted the flotsam strung out in line about right. He had the end of the mizzen sheet laid at his feet, also the boat hook and landing net snatched from off the house top. Now if the next sea would only break just right — and it did. We came first to the dory, with bow in right direction, but capsized. With a turn of his hand, Dick had a loop in the end of the parted painter and with the other hand he completed the bend; another move and he had a turn with the slack sheet over the quarter bitt. Rendering it handsomely, he had the water-filled boat following like a lamb — and by this time we were up with the oars and other fittings. Now if the sea would only behave again! It did, and Dick had an oar in each hand, the wooden scoop bailer next and then the sponge, just visible. The landing net did the trick. Dickey turned to me and said, "Any more things you want, Skipper? Say the word."

"You take those painter turns off the bitt and play that fish by hand until I get *Presto* out of this pickle."

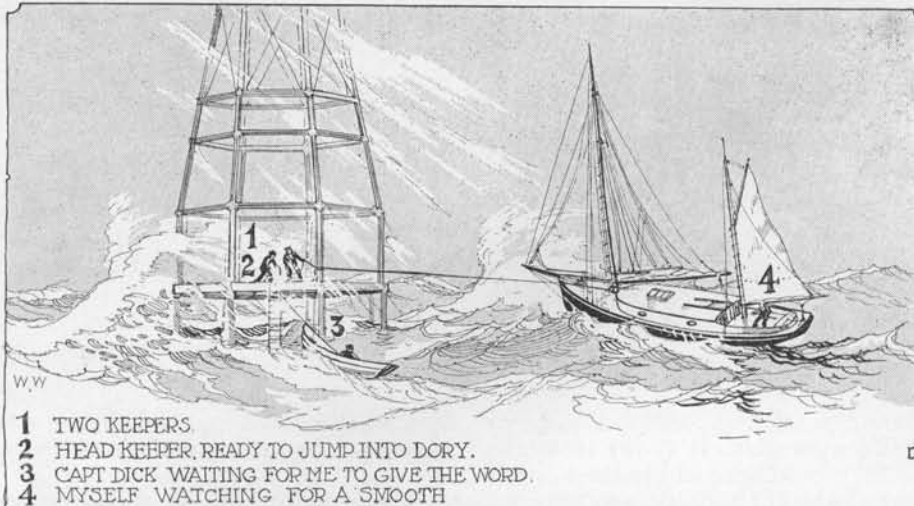
"Aye, aye," said Dick, and I put the tiller slowly to port. Round she came into the wind and onto the port tack, from whence we had started our former course in quest of flotsam. We hadn't touched a sheet or been boarded by a sea. How did she manage to "stay" so sweetly, with that waterlogged boat in tow and so little way on, while still in the breakers, I'm asked? Well, you don't know *Presto* and I haven't time just now to tell you, but I will say that we hadn't even hauled the mizzen a-weather, which would certainly have hastened matters if we had had any doubts as to her staying.

Another half hour and we were in the Hawk Channel, all clear. Bailing the dory was an easy job after a new

piece of line was fast to her. A few slack-ups on the painter and sudden tautening, after she was righted, got most of the water out, and Dick got the rest. About an hour later we were to leeward of the Fowey Light, some 75 yards, and hove to.

The keepers, from their morning's experience with *Dellie*, knew about what we wanted and sent a new heaving line on a buoy which was easily picked up, and we soon had a heavy line aboard and made fast around our mainmast, which was well parcelled. (I say mainmast because she was a ketch.) Then we took in the two forward sails and stopped them, but left the mizzen standing with the boom well guyed to starboard. There were some broken iron rods on the north side of the light, with none too much water over them, and our head line might part and let her head cant the wrong way, but we needn't have worried. The keepers began taking in the slack of this line as *Presto* surged ahead between the seas. Soon she was entirely within the breakers, her nose pole about 30 feet

from the piling, and nothing had happened. A good strong man could then have held that line after we reached this position. We didn't stop then to find out why, but accepted the situation. Afterwards we reached a solution which seemed sensible. There was a back draft from the superstructure of the light tower as well as from the piling and its braces below. Being so



- 1 TWO KEEPERS
- 2 HEAD KEEPER, READY TO JUMP INTO DORY.
- 3 CAPT DICK WAITING FOR ME TO GIVE THE WORD.
- 4 MYSELF WATCHING FOR A SMOOTH

"We soon had a heavy line aboard and made fast around our mainmast, which was well parcelled."

broken up by this more or less open structure, the wind pressure apparently became more equalized than if the obstruction had been monolithic. However, there will be no fuss about this; *Presto* lay behind that tower just as comfortable as could be, pitching at times to some extent and some rolling, but at no time excessively. Of course there was enough sea round the piling to be very dangerous at times, and spray was flying over the lighthouse platform from the weather side, but so different was it from what it seemed at a distance that Dick and I really felt sort of foolish. Still, every precaution had to be taken that no one would get hurt or the boat damaged.

By my standing in *Presto's* cockpit, and Captain Lerner getting down close to the center of the lower platform, each could hear very well what was said above the roar of the wind and breakers, and there we arranged further action, which was successfully carried out. The new heaving line was made fast to the bow of the dory, her long painter carried to *Presto's* main port shrouds with its slack in the cockpit beside me. Two of the keepers tended the dory bow line and kept an eye on the whole situation. Captain Lerner stood on the rungs of the iron ladder as far down as the sea would let him. Dick slipped off his coat and shoes and sat facing the bow in the bottom of the dory with a pair of oars handy. All set, we waited for a smooth. It seemed ages but it came. I gave the word by hand and mouth, as I could see below the platform. The dory was quickly hauled alongside the ladder, Lerner

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Proponents of the coastwise long distance race declare that it is often better seamanship to anchor temporarily in quiet water than to stick it out in the open. In ordinary cruising the truth of this contention will pass without the slightest question. He would be a lunatic who endangered ship or crew when the means to safety lay at hand. But for the life of me I can't see how this defeatist philosophy pertains to racing. We grant that ocean racing is a mild form of lunacy, and from this premise argue that ordinary standards of cruising do not apply. In racing, the prime consideration is to win, and the secondary consideration to carry on to the finish if winning is impossible. Seamanship must be adapted to these requisites, and if a competitor can gain an hour, or only a minute, over his rivals by staying out and taking the dirt he is justified in risking something to do so.

Again I am told that where shelter is available and the temptation to seek it is strong, it redounds greatly to a skipper's credit if he resists temptation and carries on. This may be true although I haven't seen any frantic attempt in the English yachting press to pin laurels on *La Goleta* for riding out a gale which *Tally Ho*, the winner of the Fastnet, weathered comfortably at anchor. True or not, it cannot alter my contention that a race which offers numerous havens to embarrassed competitors is not an ocean race.

An ocean race, as I view it, is one which takes place on the ocean, with land out of sight from the first day to the last. In such a race the problems of navigation are real and the opportunity for the display of seamanship is vast. With plenty of sea room a participant who splits his sails or carries away a spar can take time to effect repairs, and indeed, has no choice but to do so.

Despite the fact that it is not an ocean race, the Fastnet, sailed in gales and high seas, is the hardest battle offered to cruising men of the present generation — to those who choose to fight it out. To the rest, as sailed in 1927, it was an exciting adventure which could be comfortably and honorably terminated at any one of a dozen ports between the Wight and Lands End.

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jumped, landing fair, and went down into the bottom. Dick steadied her as the two keepers slacked her back. Abreast of *Presto*, I hauled her nearly alongside with the painter. Another wait for a smooth and a port roll of *Presto*. It, also, came just right and the boats were together. I reached over and grabbed an arm and a collar, while Dick parbuckled his other end and jumped aboard at the same time, cut the heaving line, passed the painter astern and let go our head line.

"Not a bruise or a chafe. How's that, Skipper?" asked Dick. Nowadays I might have said, "Fine and dandy," but I just shook hands with him. Sail on her again, we waved our hats to Fowey and with a quartering wind were "a biling" along on our way to the Grove. As we again crossed the sand bores Dickey shook his fist at them.

"Don't," said I, "they treated us decent, didn't they?"

"Yes, but that was *Presto*."

*Dellie* was waiting, anchor short. They had surmised what we had been up to and could see from away off that we had Larner aboard. Before sundown they were well on their way towards Key West and that stricken wife, 18 hours sooner than if *Presto* had not been able and willing. We were afterwards told that Captain Wright of the Lighthouse supply steamer *Fern* had landed case oil at Fowey by means of a sling and moorings and by using a power launch, in weather as bad, if not worse, but no effort to transfer men had been attempted.