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"CRATES"—BY YACHT DESIGNERS

By

CHARLES RAWLINGS

REFUGEES are steadily moving through a place like this but usually there is little mystery about them. Mothers hurrying their children inland, grateful that they have been able to get them on this side of the Atlantic, away from the bombing, or kids without mothers traveling alone or in large groups with nurses. There was a pair of girls who came in a few weeks ago, however, cloaked in intriguing mystery — a pair of dirty faced but well-born girls.

This is a convoy place, "an Eastern Canadian Port" is the way the censors let it pass. Its big harbor, on a chart, looks, roughly, like a vast ewer. Its bell mouth opens to sea. Across its narrow neck stretches the submarine boom. Its belly is a large anchorage surrounded by peaceful green hills. Over its confines and over all the sea outside, floats that

NOTE: At the author's request, the British Navy having confiscated the only copy of "Lloyd's Register of Yachts" where he was writing, we find "Sinbad" to be listed as an auxiliary cutter, 28' l.w.l., 9.0' beam and 4.5' depth, built by White Brothers, in Southampton, in 1910, owned in Copenhagen. "Gemitra" is not listed at all. [EDITOR.]

battle-wise and happy bunting, the white ensign of the British Navy.

The place's yacht squadron is located a short distance inside the harbor. There has been a small amount of harbor sailing inside the net but no races on the outside courses this year, with half the roster in the services and the courses restricted and possibly mined water. But the squadron house has been kept open and the fleet went out to moorings in the spring just as it always had. It was nice to sit in the wardroom and look out and see them floating there as if the world wasn't rocking on its bearings. The wardroom is a busy place because all commissioned naval officers are welcomed as members *pro tem*. The poor Frenchmen out of the *Dunkerque* were happy there once and the gold braid out of the *Jeanne d'Arc* and the carrier *Bearn*, now tarnishing in Martinique, drank there for that month it took to load those international incident airplanes. There has been a jolly period of late with the wardroom tables crowded with the United States Navy up with the "packets of fags," the four-funnel, flush deck destroyers.

William J. Roué, the naval architect, and I were there one

afternoon, basking in a bit of the watery sunshine that filters now and then through a southerly window.

"What's that out there?" asked Bill.

My first glance called her an Eight-Metre. She was just about that size. They had hung her to an inshore mooring, the guest mooring. In previous peaceful seasons, there would be one visiting craft after another using it. This visiting girl did not look as if she had come in on a junket. She was floating corky and light, stripped of her spars but with what looked like some of her standing rigging in a hurrah's nest on deck. Lord, she was dirty! She was floating high enough to see a fringe of her red underbody and she had a blue boot-top and what had once been nice white topsides. They looked as if pigs had been rubbing their itchy backs against them and there were two strange series of perpendicular welts, one on her quarter and the other just at the luff of her bows.

"What do you know about her?" asked Bill. "She's new to me."

"There was nothing on that mooring yesterday," I said.

Bill picked up his drink and took it with him and I tagged along outside and then down the veranda steps onto the boat wharf. Bennet, the anchorage man, was there.

"I don't know a thing, sir," said Bennet. "They brought her up from Pickford and Black's this mornin' and said they'd arranged with t' commodore to moor her. I've broke my back tryin' to get those slings out of her. No, sir, they're not standin' rigging. Those are big wire cable slings. Some steamboat man spliced t' eyes big enough for a battleship crane — and in a big hurry, looks like. Why sir, they slung her off the freighter that bore her in, no doubt."

"She came off a freighter?"

"No doubt of that. A Norwegian boat, the lad towed her down said."

"Then she came — from the other side?" marveled Bill.

"Must be, sir. Why, God knows. Canvas and riggin's there, sir. That's a fine big spar, too, Mister Roué."

It was a fine spar, indeed. The careful Bennet had it on three horses. It was fat and stout but light and alive as I picked up one end of it. It was pear-shaped and the track in the stem-end was a good track, made of bronze, not brass. It had had plenty of sailing and it had been careful, well-tuned sailing. You could tell by the way the shroud eyes had hugged and tightly scuffed the varnish atop the cheek blocks, the same on all the cheek blocks.

We sculled out to the hull. There was her name and her club on her stern. It gave me a start. *Gemitra* was her name and "R.C.Y.C." was her club. "R.C.Y.C." said "Royal Canadian Yacht Club" to me. She was nothing I had ever seen in Toronto and the two Hill brothers, from Kingston, had gone through a week or two back on their way to a navy berth on the other side and we talked for hours about everything old and new up there in Toronto and Rochester. They would have mentioned this baby.

"Royal Clyde, maybe," explained Bill. "It's at Hunter's Quay, on the Clyde. Mister, she's a honey."

We backwatered slowly around her. She was indeed a honey. Every time I had ever cruised in an Eight-Metre boat I had dreamed about this boat. "If somebody would only make one just a little tougher, a trifle huskier and heavier and higher, wouldn't we have a fine little coastwise cruiser?" I thought. Here she was. She wasn't an Eight-Metre boat but she was an Eight-Metre's tough sister. Bill measured her later. She is 42' 9" by 9' 4" by 6' 0".

Up on deck she was covered with soot and clinkers and small rubbish drifted up against her rails like trash against a slum fence. But it was a splendid deck. It was a deck a good man, with possibly just one good wild woman to help him, could work in anything. There was a phony floor in the deep

open cockpit. It had been hurriedly made of tongue and groove flooring and caulked with dry white cotton. She had a rudder post like the stem of a tree and a tiller husky enough to swing it. All her metal was galvanized and good. We traced out her main sheet rig and where her jib sheets led and found block mountings and a winch that could only mean a big Genoa.

"Scotch stuff," said Bill. "The hardware is — but that doesn't mean anything."

He had the floor boards of the cockpit up by this time and there was the transmission of her small two-cylinder Diesel. It was a Scotch transmission and Scotch motor. That didn't mean anything either, explained Bill. He was making up his mind what she was.

He decided, once we were below. There were no women in the family when the cabin was built. There was just good drinking headroom under the skylight (a big one, with rabbit wire cast in the glass) and sitting headroom elsewhere. There were two big shelf bunks and another big one forward for the paid hand. I started searching for some intimate details that would sketch in her people. There was nothing. Some cheap knives and forks with a Sheffield imprint. Thick white plates and cups and one thick soup bowl. Under one of the bunks, I rustled up a scrap of paper and my fingers thought I had something down in the dark. It was the label soaked off a Black and White Scotch bottle.

"Now what do you suppose . . .?" wondered Bill.

He was staring up at the bulkhead where the builder's name plate had been. There was the brighter patch on the varnish where it had been. It had been pried off, none too gently, and there were splinters where the nails had pulled out. They were fresh splinters.

"Well, anyway," said Bill, "do you know what she is?"

"Someone wanting to get his boat out of Scotland shipped her over," I said. "Didn't he do it strangely? They'd have had time to prepare her better than this, you'd think. If a man made up his mind to ship his boat he'd . . . No grease on that engine. I think it's frozen. No cover to protect his deck. A jackleg cradle, by the looks of her rail. Lousy slings. That's what chafed her on the quarters and bows. They didn't think those slings out or parcel them for a damn. Apparently, they lead through holes cut in her lead and the eyes were spliced afterward, with no thought of ever getting them out again. Bennet will have to cut those slings in two with a cold chisel. I've seen Scotch yachts shipped before."

"She's not Scotch," asserted Bill. "Anker! Johan Anker! The Norwegian designer! She shouts his style to me. I like her. I like her as much as anything I've ever seen of his."

"But the name?" I protested. "The Royal Clyde Yacht Club?"

"There's something funny about that. They didn't mind that staying on. They didn't mind all these Scotch imprints on the gear staying on but they ripped out her builder's tag. That would be Norwegian. I dunno. She's a mystery. Maybe that freighter's still in dock."

She wasn't. Jim Edmonds, of the big shipping firm of Pickford and Black, couldn't help us, either. They — he said "they" — had come in on the deck of a small Norwegian tramp. There were no accompanying invoices, no consignee. Nothing! Who had paid the freight on them? Nobody, as far as Jim knew.

"What shall I do with them?" I asked the Norwegian skipper," Jim explained.

"It doesn't matter to me," the skipper said. "Treat them like what they are — crates. Break them up. Burn them up. I'm putting them over the side." Yeah, the freighter's gone. How can I tell you where she's gone? This is wartime. You fellows know I can't talk about things like that."

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"Sure, Jim," said Bill, "we see you can't talk. But you're saying 'them' all the time. Them? Are there two of them?"

"Oh, yes," said Jim. "There's the other one right down there. We're keeping her here. Say, go see the Norwegian consul if you've got to know about these yachts. These are screwy times. You understand I can't talk."

Bill and I were on our way to the other little waif. She was another small, dirty thoroughbred.

"Fife! Fife lines, anyway," said Bill before we were half way down the wharf. "Good God, a little Fife cruiser, pretty as a rocking horse."

Once she had been shining bright mahogany all over. Underneath the soot was a teak deck that had once been bright. *Sinbad* was her name but there were no club initials to further it. She was smaller than *Gemitra* — 28 feet water line. The same steamboat-rigger slings had been under her. All other evidence indicated that both boats had been plucked out of the same water in the same frantic fashion and gone through the same hard venture.

What had that venture been? This is the first war in history that has made yacht stories. We'll be writing and reading them about Dunkirk for the next ten years. Here was a yacht mystery story — or the background for one — and I couldn't get it out of my mind. There was something appealing and pathetic about the little *Sinbad* and the *Gemitra*. Small, dumb fugitives! Lord, they were lonesome and forlorn! I'd see Bill out sitting in the cockpit of the *Gemitra* all alone, just keeping her company. Bennet had swabbed the cinders out of her eyes and pulled those rusty slings free and done what he could for her topsides.

The story began to come together. It came in fragments. The Norwegian Purchasing Commission in New York owns the *Gemitra* and the *Sinbad*. They were acquired in Norway. They were acquired in emergency and used as shipping crates to carry gold, kegs of gold.

There appeared a Lieutenant-Commander of the British Navy who had seen them towing slowly down the fjord at Trondhjem. It was during the evacuation and everyone, stated the Lieutenant-Commander, including himself and the German forces closing in, was moving smartly save the *Gemitra* and the *Sinbad*. They were chugging down the fjord astern of a small motor boat. Right then, it is safe to assume, they were loaded with their precious cargo. The Lieutenant-Commander remembers that their spars were stowed on deck and they seemed to be riding quite deep.

"That's the beginning, all right," says Bill. (He's a naval architect with an imagination and he can tell it better than I can.) "We know the end over here, when they arrived safely on the deck of the little Norwegian freighter. Here's what happened in between. I can see it. They didn't have the slings in them towing down the fjord. That meant that they had to give them a quick haul out some place, some little yacht ways handy to where the freighter was docked. They hauled them out and then, because there was no time to cut through the lead, they went through the deadwood for a place to thread their slings. The holes are through the deadwood. Bennet proved that when he pulled some splinters out on the wire ends when he unrigged them last week. All right, they rove the slings and spliced the eyes and hoisted them on deck.

"Sure, with the gold in 'em. The gold stayed in them all the time. Why would the Germans bother a little Norwegian freighter with a pair of yachts on her deck when there was a big chunk of the British Navy and a whole fleet of transports to hunt?"

"A keel yacht isn't such a dumb place to keep anything you desire to save. See this cockpit floor? Who put that in? No yacht shipwright ever did that. 'Chips,' on the Norwegian freighter, nailed that floor together. His object was not to keep out the rain. It was to prevent this hull we're sitting on right now from filling through the open cockpit if she was dumped suddenly into the sea and was adrift and awash in it. Suppose the Norwegian freighter hit a mine or a sub slugged one into her? What would the yachts do? Those sloppy cradles you complained about, because they had chafed the rail, were open cradles. They were made so the two gold-balled hulls would float off or be pitched off. No matter how they hit the water, they would right themselves and stay afloat. They would keep that gold afloat — it's more precious than life to men fighting to save it; it always is. Maybe they couldn't get back to it but there was at least a chance.

"Gold crates! Gold crates by Anker, and White of Southampton. Remember what Jim said the Norwegian skipper told him to do? 'I don't care what you do with them,' the skipper said. 'Treat them like what they are — crates.' That's what they were to him. He'd saved his gold. It was safe ashore and in the Bank of Montreal or some place.

"Good Lord, we've been calling boats we didn't like that derisive name for years but this is the first time I ever heard of it being literally true. I wonder if we couldn't buy this one? I'd like to own a gold argosy, a gold crate. A nice piece of irony for a yacht designer these days, eh?"

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