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## 16. The Little Black Cloud

Story of the continued chain of engine failures whenever *Tara* goes out on charter. The loss of the 1966 Bermuda Race and the Boston Yacht Club Centennial Race. Navigational errors in the Annual Race around Martha's Vineyard and partial success in the inaugural race to the Buzzards Bay light tower.

Do you ever read those enticing advertisements of boats for charter in the yachting magazines? Some even show bikini-clad nymphs basking on the fantail in the Bahamian sun. They extol the soundness of the hull and the competence of the crew. I have such a yacht. I like to charter her to people who will love her. They have to love her if they are to live with her. *Tara* is my perverse child. Perhaps this makes me love her more. If she doesn't improve over 1966, you would be out of your mind to charter her.

To show you what I mean, I offer the following comments on entries in the *Tara* log for the 1966 summer season. They may be of interest as an analysis of how a modern ocean racer should not be run.

After the Southern Ocean Racing Circuit, *Tara* started north for spring racing on the Sound. She made a quick offshore passage to Morehead City, North Carolina (April 30, 1966). My family and I flew down to join her for a tranquil passage to New York. She made an uneventful trip up the Intra-Coastal Waterway and into the Chesapeake (May 1). At Norfolk the weather prediction was for heavy northeasterlies, so we elected to go up the Chesapeake, through the Ship Canal, and down the Delaware. With our usual luck, the weatherman was wrong. Halfway up the Chesapeake, the wind came in strong, northwest, right on the nose. This made heavy going of it, but left us with the anticipation of a fair passage down the Delaware. As we came into the Delaware, the wind came around east, right on the nose but light. When the wind dropped to almost nothing, the main shaft thrust-bearing decided it was time to burn out. This left us without power to beat around Cape May against a foul tide. We went into Cape May to see if a yard might have a spare bearing. Not a chance, and the freight shipment down from Philadelphia would take two days. I decided to sail on to New York (May 3). As soon as we cleared Cape May the wind backed into the northwest, puffy and cold. That made New York City to windward, the entire length of New Jersey. We pounded into it for a night and a day and were rewarded with a memorable sail up the East River. I got hold of Huey

Long, of *Ondine*, on the radio telephone as we passed under his Sutton Place apartment and happily exchanged insults. The passage through Hell Gate was exciting and fun, for the wind was against us in very tight quarters. For once, the tide was fair.

The night of May 4 we put into a reputable yacht yard at City Island, bedded her down in a hurry, and hustled for the last shuttle to Boston. Out of consideration for the owner, the yard will remain nameless. *Tara* had a five-week, \$1,000 per-week charter commencing in another week. The yard mechanics diagnosed the problem and decided there was no need of a thrust bearing or a flexible coupling on the shaft. They couldn't get to it for another week, anyway, because of the press of spring launchings. On May 9 my professional captain quit in disgust, without warning. I called the charterer and told him the boat would be a week late. He was most understanding, having owned many boats himself. By the 16th the yard got around to the repair. Out went the thrust bearing and in went a yard-designed coupling. I was calling the yard owner daily, since it was costing me money two ways: repair bills and lost charters. He was very understanding, too, and did his best. They finished the job on the 21st and *Tara* went happily off to Oyster Bay on charter. The new coupling broke down on the 22nd, and back went *Tara* to the yard.

The charterer was still most understanding. The yard owner assured me that he would fix the coupling with heavier bolts and we would not have any more problems. They finished the job on the 27th and she went back on charter, in the Block Island Race. By *Tara* standards, it was a successful trip. They didn't need power and there was only one disaster in three days. She had a collision with another vessel in the fog and destroyed the bow pulpit. Things were improving. The new coupling lasted for two days after the race. It let go while she was over at Stamford getting fuel. By now, even my yard friend was upset. He had Bill Luders, her designer, come over to look and consult. The new diagnosis was that the entire engine had to be remounted and an entire new shaft installed.

She was towed back to City Island. This time, the New York yard was going to do the job right, once and for all. A new direct shaft and new bearings were installed. The engine was lifted and the German rubber mounts were replaced with new metal mountings. The engine was realigned and carefully checked. The yard assured me my troubles were over. The engine appeared a bit rough in a test run. Perhaps the filters or injectors were dirty? We cleaned the filters and the injectors. On June 16, six weeks and \$3,000 plus charter losses later, *Tara* set off for the start of the Bermuda Race. We made the start with half a day to spare. On June 19, the first day at sea, while the engine was generating electricity, it jumped completely off its new bed. Do you wonder I believe in black clouds?

I even lost a high place in the Bermuda Race, thanks to the little black clouds. On the last day of the race we had excellent company on the horizon — *Maredea*, *Ondine*, *Gesture*, and *Nina*. Toward twilight, I studied a dark cloud line on the western horizon. When racing at sea, I generally play for the darkest clouds. It usually means stronger winds. As it happened, by heading west and letting the others go south, we placed ourselves on the outside of a long gradual lift of wind to the south. In time lost, it must have cost us over two hours and possibly more. There are days on *Tara* when you can't even bet on black clouds. I should have acknowledged the trend and hitched into the lift early. Alas, racing is not built on hopes.

Bermuda, in the aftermath of the ocean race, is a hopeless place to get anything mechanical attended to. By chance, my yard operator friend from New York finished soon after us on another boat. This gave me the opportunity of expressing my pleasure at the sound and thorough job his men did. He told me to get the job fixed right and deduct it from his bill. I thought this fair. However, as you will see with succeeding events, I am still in a quandary what to deduct.

A repair mechanic in Bermuda rebolted the mountings and we started back for Marblehead. The Bermuda mechanic was honest. He didn't think the job would last. This candid declaration did not affect his bill: \$64 for eight-hours' work. *Tara* has thoroughly convinced me I'm on the wrong side of yachting. As you might guess, the mechanic was right. The second day at sea, the engine again jumped off its mounts. This time, it did a thorough job of bending the new shaft and mucking up the gears of the new transmission. *Tara* has taught me self-reliance. We made a four-and-a-half-day passage to Marblehead under sail.

We arrived at Marblehead late on Wednesday with a charter coming up, to Charles Hovey of the *Easterner* family, on Saturday. If you have any delusions regarding the efficiency of American industry, try to get metric-sized bearings for an English transmission with the 4th of July weekend coming on. *Tara* has also taught me wisdom in purchasing. I ordered the parts from three separate sources. The fellow in San Francisco who had all that we needed would ship them out air mail, special delivery, that after-

noon. They arrived three weeks later, by railway express.

Mr. Hovey, undaunted by the lack of power, decided to take *Tara* off on the Eastern Yacht Club Cruise. He fared very well, winning the ocean race from Marblehead down to Falmouth Foreside, Maine, and then going on to five successive day-race victories. The Race Committee gave him the Norman Cup for the outstanding performance of the cruise. This partially assuaged the ignominy of having to hitch a tow every day to the starting line. I evolved a theory that *Tara* was such a racing thoroughbred that she simply resented having an engine.

While the Hoveys were off racing, I had to scramble all over the northeastern seaboard to find the proper parts. We eventually got the transmission reassembled and I chartered a seaplane at Portland to fly the package up to Castine, Maine. We taxied away from the Portland Yacht Club dock and started into a take-off run. The plane refused to get up on the step and I noticed my feet getting damp in the co-pilot seat. I mentioned this to the pilot, who mumbled it was normal and tried again. This time it became obvious that something was drastically wrong. The cockpit floorboards were awash. We were rapidly sinking and, in desperation, ran the plane up on the beach in the nick of time. In the tranquillity of the cocktail hour at Waites Landing, this caused quite a stir. The problem was relatively simple. The bow doors for the nose had refused to close and became an extremely efficient scoop, funneling the waters of the bay into the hull. So there I sat, pumping out a seaplane on a Maine mud flat, wondering why I was in the boat charter business.

We eventually got airborne and after a near miss with a troop transport jet letting down on instrument approach to Brunswick Air Force Base, and dodging two lines of thunder squalls over Bath, I came to the conclusion that a bus was the only sensible way the transmission would get to Castine that night.

The engine must have sensed the depth of my frustration and its waning chance of tenure on board. It settled down to six weeks of reliable service. After the disbanding of the Eastern Cruise, I got *Tara* back on the eve of the Boston Yacht Club Centennial Race. This proved a most challenging course and one that I hope is raced again. The course was from Marblehead down around Cape Ann to Portland Lightship, 55 miles to Cashes Ledge Whistle, a long offshore leg from Cashes down to the tip of Cape Cod, and then back to Marblehead, for a total of 250 miles. The start was staggered, with the smaller classes starting off earlier at one-hour intervals. This was a bit unfortunate for all of us in Class A who got stuck under Cape Ann in the four o'clock lull while the smaller craft went on over the horizon. *Tara* sailed through them all by midnight and rounded Portland Lightship first. As the mountains of Maine dipped below the horizon, we noted a strong current setting to the south out of the Gulf of Maine. We started shooting hourly sunlines and they paid off handsomely. By noting and offsetting this current with course corrections, we must have opened a two-hour lead. The next dawn, on rounding the



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Cape Cod Whistle, we had stretched this to over four hours. The crew was jubilant, for it looked as if we had the race in the bag. We strapped in for the long beat home into a reasonable nor'westerly.

Off Duxbury the black cloud appeared. The wind went dead flat for two hours and then settled down to a light southerly that built ever so slowly. To keep our speed up we had to tack downwind, thereby lengthening our course. We finished at four, eleven hours from the Cape Cod Whistle. With a fresh fair wind, the smaller boats did the same stretch of water in seven and a half hours. We won Class A and first-to-finish, but got only a fifth in fleet.

Several weeks along in my truce with the engine, I began to consider *Tara's* sailing performance quite carefully and concluded that she was too stiff for summer onshore racing. It appeared that she was down two inches by the stern. Perhaps it was an optical illusion. Perhaps the boot-top stripe was painted on crooked. I had a measurer check the flotation. Surprisingly, the boot-top was accurate. *Tara* wasn't on her lines. I recalled that, in her first six months of racing, I had seldom seen her lee rail close to awash. Bill Luders had purposely designed her with a fifty percent lead-ballast ratio. When you combine fifty percent lead with a hard-bilged shape made of aluminum, you have an extremely stiff boat. I consulted with Luders and he calculated how much lead must be removed to bring *Tara* to her designed lines.

She went into the Tringale yard in East Boston and they set about the task of removing the lead with acetylene torches and pneumatic jackhammers. For the information of those with a statistical turn of mind, let me say a good workman can remove 65 pounds of lead with a jackhammer in an hour. We removed 1,500 pounds of lead. When you add the cutting and rewelding of plates, smoothing of the hull, and sundry other jobs, Carmen Tringale did a remarkable job and *Tara* returned to sea in a week.

Happily back in the water, we set off for the Edgartown Regatta full of hope. It turned out to be the biggest fiasco of the summer. We missed the first day's racing while *Tara's* surgery was completed and our pre-recruited crew went off on other boats. On the second day we raced with two men, two girls, a baby, and an eager twelve-year-old boy. Remember that *Tara's* foretriangle is the same size as a Twelve Metre's. We were a bit slow on the spinnaker drill, but efficient. It was definitely up and drawing by the lee mark. The twelve-year-old teamed with my bride in an even match with the mizzen staysail. They winched it up six inches and the next puff brought it down a foot. By the lee mark, they learned that modern winches work in a clockwise direction. The last leg was a light beat from Middle Ground up into Edgartown. The sou'wester got lighter as we approached the slot of the harbor. I anticipated the opposite and went into the beat with a flat, heavy, number two genoa. I knew we should change down to a lighter sail, but on looking around at my crew I gave the idea up. We still fared rather well, finishing second elapsed and third corrected behind Bob Stone in *Sayonara*

and James Farrel in *Impala*. I felt the change of ballast had picked up her light-air performance.

The next day, we put on a classic demonstration of how not to sail an ocean race. The course was the celebrated one around Martha's Vineyard. At the Yacht Club dance, the preceding evening, we recruited a strong roster of willing, available hands. The first leg was down the Edgartown slot to the Cape Poge Bell. *Tara* got off to a fine start on the east side, playing for the puffs off the heated sand of the beach. *Sayonara*, our major rival, took the other end. For the first two miles we looked golden, and then with our usual luck ran into a flat spot. The boats out to leeward carried right on. At the first turning mark, we were two hundred yards behind. Undaunted, we soon got that back by playing the mud flats off Cape Poge and then by ducking the foul tide in Muskeget Channel. By then I was convinced of *Tara's* improvement in the light going. We worked back through the fleet and got into a tacking duel for the lead with *Sayonara*.

Halfway up Muskeget Channel we came onto starboard, right in the breaking surf. Bob Stone of *Sayonara* was coming along on port. I gave *Tara* a full rap, so that it might appear to *Sayonara* that she would just clear us on port. Then I slowly brought *Tara* up close on the wind, closing the door and leaving *Sayonara* no option but to tack hard on our lee bow with little way. As *Tara's* bow slowly lifted, it was amusing to watch the look of consternation and dismay in their cockpit. Nothing was said. It is a dirty trick. I had learned it the hard way while match-racing the Twelves. A purist might call this a balk, but it can never be proved. I have never seen any Committee throw out a starboard-tack boat. With our carry, we overrode *Sayonara's* backwind and tucked her nicely in our lee. *Tara* was in the driver's seat and never let *Sayonara* back on the tide-sheltered beach without eating backwind or wind shadow.

As could be predicted, a mile later, when tacking off the beach, we piled high and dry on an uncharted sand bank. The fleet came prancing by as we backed the jib to weather to spin off. We were back at the bottom again. I felt like an elevator operator, we had seen both ends of the fleet so often. Slowly we worked back into the lead in the more windy going, to the south of Muskeget Shoals. By the southeast turning mark we had back a 100-yard lead on *Sayonara* and a bit more on Ed Kelly who was marching along in his white Cal-40 *Destination*. (I think all Cal-40's should be black.)

Success went to our heads. Our eager crew made a vigorous spinnaker set, but forgot to check aloft. The kite halyard was twisted under the headstay. When they dropped the genoa, the hanks of the jib opened the spinnaker leech as neatly as a knife. The sail went off to leeward in tatters while *Sayonara* came sliding by again with *Destination* in hot pursuit. By the halfway buoy to the south of No Man's Land she had us by more than 100 yards.

The next leg was a long light broad reach down to the Buzzards Bay Light Tower. I decided to do something

brilliant. I figured the southerly wouldn't last, with a change of tide in another hour. The change would bring a flooding torrent out of Vineyard Sound. That is what the tide tables said. I elected to tack downwind to the Vineyard shore under No Man's Land. When the change came, this would give us a beam reaching shot at the Buzzards Light Tower well down-tide of the fleet. Guess what? The southerly held, the tide tables were wrong, and *Sayonara* opened a mile-and-a-half lead. Matters were getting desperate; besides, I had a five dollar bet with Stone. As darkness settled over the fleet, I decided on another end run. This tactical approach is referred to by the experts as the nothing-to-lose play. Going up Vineyard Sound, there are two ways to duck the ebbing tide. The shorter and more logical course is to hug the southern shore of the Elizabeth Islands. The drawback is that you have to cross the strongest current when you come off the Naushon beach to get over to West Chop. The second route is to head right over to Middle Ground Shoal from Cuttyhunk and hug the shallow waters of Middle Ground Shoal. It is a bit trying on the nerves, as the fathometer bounces up and down like a yo-yo in the darkness. *Sayonara* took the first route and *Tara* the second. For some unknown reason, the second worked and by West Chop we had *Sayonara* back in striking range.

As we rounded West Chop and sheeted in for the long beat back to Edgartown, we plunged into a thick fog. I was delighted, for we had Omni on the masthead. It's an aircraft system which is extremely precise within station ranges of thirty miles. That is what the brochure said. I settled down to the beat, whistling happily at my work in the clammy dampness. Like a damn fool, I let our professional captain, the man most familiar with Omni bearings, take a nap. The navigator called up that in a few minutes we would have a bell abeam to starboard. We never saw it, but in a few minutes we passed a bell close aboard. Our navigator said he was getting excellent two-position fixes from the Vineyard and Nantucket Omni stations, but the bearing from Otis Air Force Base on the Cape showed us farther to the east. He didn't believe the current was running that fast. The mileage indicator confirmed his position. In another few minutes he recommended that we tack and pick up a red bell, and from there it was half a mile to the finish. We unhesitatingly followed instructions. He again muttered that Otis showed us further to the east, but we paid little attention, for when the depth-finder shallowed we tacked out and picked up the bell. *Tara* has the latest of navigational gear and it certainly seemed to be paying off. We charged down on the invisible finish line in the fog, tooting horns and shooting off bright red flares. We picked up the proper numbered black can and took our chronometer time, since there was no Committee Boat to be seen. This was understandable, with the fog so thick. We carried farther on starboard and piled up on a sand bank. After backing off under power, I decided to drop a hook and wait for first light. I went happily off to sleep, thinking we might have nipped *Sayonara* in the fog through the elec-

tronic precision of *Tara's* Omni.

My captain got me up at dawn. "Don, I've got bad news. There are sand banks along our west side." "West side," I replied, "Impossible." I sprang on deck and, sure enough, there they were. With our usual good fortune, instead of working up Edgartown Channel from the bell, we had overshot the first bell with the fair current and tacked up the Muskeget Channel by mistake. Instead of being at the finish we were half again around the back side of the island, with a cape in between. You can only do this with the most modern and precise gear.

The intersection of the Nantucket and the Vineyard Omnis was the same for either side of Cape Poge. At this point in the season I was inured to such events. I went back to bed.

A philosophic sailor would say that things were bound to improve. He just wouldn't understand *Tara* and her cloud. The next Friday, we joined the New York Yacht Club Cruise for the Astor Cup off Naushon. The entire fleet milled around in a glossy calm until two o'clock, when the race was postponed. *Tara* went into Padanarum for a scrubdown and refueling, while most of the fleet went back to Woods Hole. With everything bedded down for the night and the third round of gin and tonics passing in the cockpit, we happened to hear of the Beverly Yacht Club's inaugural race down to Buzzard's Bay Lightship. I turned to Dave Smith, "Want to go?" He shrugged, "Why not? I've got no plans." *Tara* cleared that dock and was under way in three minutes with a crew of five including a girl and a young boy. All we knew was the starting time and the course. Undaunted by this lack of details, and fortified by another round of gin, we plugged up Buzzards Bay to Marion. At nine o'clock, a mile off the Bird Island Bell, we encountered the twinkling lights of the racing fleet heading down-bay under spinnakers. We continued toward the Committee Boat and asked if they would accept a post entry. They said they would and asked our rating. We set off in pursuit a half-hour behind the fading lights. It was certain that we would never catch up by chasing down their sterns. We tacked downwind for the Naushon shore. Contrary to form, *Tara* got lucky, jibing into two beautiful wind streaks over by the islands. She went around the fleet in mid-bay, and coming upon the Light Tower we slipped to leeward of the leader, Harvey White in *White Caps*. That left us the last half of the course back to Marion to save our time. It was light and to windward. To catch the small wind and duck the ebbing tide, we went over under the New Bedford shore. By dawn, our rag-tag crew was so exhausted that we went down to one-hour, one-man watches. It is just possible, with coffee grinders. The horizon astern was clear. *Tara* finished first by over two hours. Her luck had turned? Almost. This time, the black cloud struck retroactively. The Race Committee tacked on a one-hour penalty for being under power after the five-minute gun, so we finished second on corrected time. This was fair, but the Committee forgot they started the race ten minutes early. (Point of interest: arguing with Race Committees is as useless as talking with traffic cops.)