



17. The Last Harass

A tale of the near-sinking of *Tara* and the "Charlie Brown Memorial Race." The resolution of *Tara's* engine problems.

Unbowed by their previous experiences, the Charles Hovey family took *Tara* off on another two weeks of cruising in late August. On the second day of charter, the reverse mechanism of the transmission let go. This was progress over July. This time, at least, they had a forward gear and electricity.

While the Hoveys were bringing the boat back to Marblehead on the last day, the black cloud struck below the waterline. Around noon the professional captain, Howard Webster, went below to set about making lunch and found the main cabin floorboards mysteriously awash. The engine started to sputter, then coughed into stillness. Upon opening the hatch, Howard found that the water level was too high for him to see the source. The alarmed family ran to man the pumps; and, as could be predicted, a small stick had punctured a hole in the rubber diaphragm of the main bilge pump, rendering half the sucking stroke useless. (The intake hose now has a protective strainer screen.) Just before the water level reached the top of the battery bank, Webster got off a May Day call to the Boston Coast Guard, stating that a hull plate had let go and *Tara* was sinking.

Meanwhile, I was glumly driving back to Boston after losing the Mallory Cup finals to Bill Cox the previous day at Riverside, Connecticut. I should have known that black clouds come in a series of three. When I arrived at my office, my secretary informed me that the Coast Guard rescue office had called and that *Tara* was sinking off Minot's Light in the middle of Massachusetts Bay. By then, nothing *Tara* chose to do came as a surprise. I called my insurance agent, Billy Burke, and gave joy to his day. If the face value of my policy had been greater, I might have been cheering for the ocean. Billy had been my crew at Riverside, so the latest news came as no great shock.

Several hours later, *Tara* was safely lashed to the Tringale Shipyard dock in East Boston. The Hovey family had formed a successful bucket brigade until the Coast Guard arrived with rescue pumps and towline. Now, electric pumps drew the water level down far enough to study this latest problem in the engine room. It appeared that the welds on the stuffing box had parted. There we were, drawing into the late afternoon of Friday before Labor Day, with both of the yard railways filled with fishing trawlers scheduled for a Tuesday launching. Howard called me with the good news. The tide had ebbed too far for a hauling that day,

anyway. Carmen Tringale was of the opinion that the pumps could stay ahead of the water through the night, if we got something into the cracks. He could get his work force back for a Saturday hauling at double-time rates, but was uncertain about finding a watchman to place on the trawlers, whose crews were off for the holidays. My Labor Day weekend was off to a typical start.

Somehow, the Lord lets a boat-owner build up a protective shell against the absurd, and by then I was an armored veteran. For some subconscious reason, I even had a filled aqualung in my office. Why would anyone keep an aqualung in an oil exploration office? You would have to own *Tara* for several months to even approach an understanding. I took my gear over to East Boston for the pleasurable task of swimming under the boat and locating the trouble. The liquid ooze of Boston Harbor is the least attractive place in the world to swim. I plunged in with a gasp and found the visibility limited to a turbid foot. Groping down the rudder post, I located the problem more by feel than by sight. Somehow, the joining collar on the "trouble-free" New York-installed coupling had vibrated loose. This let the propeller work forward on its own thrust, and it neatly buzzed away three-inch-long gaps on the joining welds of the propeller aperture.

When I swam back to the surface, Carmen Tringale handed me some malleable putty used principally for filling cracks in swimming pools. After working strips of this putty into the cracks, I shoved the propeller forward on centerline to hold the mass in place. Howard then wired the shaft down in this forward position to insure the propeller's staying put. I scrambled back to Beacon Hill to shower for an hour.

The next morning, held afloat with swimming-pool putty and baling wire, *Tara* set forth to race in the Boston Yacht Club's Gould Bowl off Marblehead. With her usual luck, the wind was right on the nose, strong and cold out of the northeast. We only had a crew of four to tack out of Boston Harbor against a foul tide. There were more crew waiting for us in the starting area off Marblehead, but we didn't get there until after the five-minute preparatory gun. The rules prohibit taking on crew after this, so our badly-needed extras turned back for the harbor in their launch.

Having arrived late, we were uncertain of the course. Our competitors were milling about with more certainty, so

we lined up in the same direction on their weather quarters and stumbled into a perfect start on the weather end going like hell. Suddenly one of our two winchmen bellowed, "Boat on the bow!" I dove to the lee side of the wheel for a look. Sure enough, there was a blue sloop right under our bow and on port tack. We could cleave her anywhere from the shrouds to the transom. I hauled down the wheel on top of me and narrowly missed her stern. As I regained my feet, I read her transom. It was another new *Robin* with Ted Hood at the wheel. Up went our Baker flag and out went Hood when the race chairman notified him of *Tara's* protest.

The remainder of the race passed uneventfully. *Tara* pounded into the heavy seas of the first beat to Gloucester Bell. John Clayman, our thirteen-year-old navigator, was a bit shaky on plotting a magnetic course. Halfway up the leg, he had the course laid out. *Tara* rounded the first mark with a substantial lead and opened plenty of water on the two free legs, to win by fifty-five minutes elapsed and seventeen corrected, over a twenty-three-mile course.

The Gould Cup is a two-day cumulative series, the cup going to the yacht with the lowest corrected-time total for the two races. The next day, Sunday, some heavy southerly squalls came through with winds up to 35 knots. There was no provision in the race circular for a one-day postponement, but the Boston Race Committee decided to postpone anyway. This annoyed me no end, for it was an obvious big-boat day. The race was advertised for ocean-going yachts, and for most of the summer in the smooth light going the little boats had had things all to themselves. Along comes a heavy day when the little ones have to pay the price of their smooth-water victories, and the Race Committee protects them from the big bullies. I ran up "The Race Committee is chicken" in international code flags and left it flying all day. That's called public relations.

You can't fight City Hall, even in yachting. The following day we went out for the second and, in my opinion, illegal race. In the cockpit discussion on the way out, my beloved Ann Louise ("Charlie Brown" on *Tara*) learned we had a seventeen-minute lead going into this race. With this surplus, she decided this was her day to skipper. She had put up with *Tara* all year and, as I said, you can't fight City Hall, especially if you like to eat. I handed her the wheel and stationed myself by the mainsheet. In addition to being held up by baling wire and swimming-pool putty, we now had a girl at the wheel.

It is amazing what the power of a wheel does to people. Charlie Brown drew herself up to full height and took command in a loud squeaky voice, "O.K., you guys, I've listened to a lot of stuff all summer long. You're going to shape up or ship out." The heads of the winch gang swivelled aft, pop-eyed, in unison. The following race is entered in the *Tara* log as the Charlie Brown Memorial Race.

The starting guns commenced. She whispered, "Donny, Donny, what do I do?" I quietly told her and she let go in a shrill bellow, "All right, you guys, ready about." With beginner's luck, it worked out all right. *Tara* picked

off two competitors at the weather end of the starting line, shoving them well above it. Following instructions, her helmswoman was happily shouting, "Get out! Get out!" — looking, however, in the wrong direction. The skippers out to leeward must have thought she was nuts.

Tara got to the Boston Lightship a close first, after a windshift, but opened enough of a lead by tacking downwind to have her handicap well in hand going into the last reach home. This leg was from the Newcombs Ledge Whistle off Bakers Island to the Tinkers Island Bell off Marblehead. The light southerly wind in which we raced all day was dropping slowly with the lowering sun. Close to Marblehead Neck, a new nor'wester was starting to poke out. Between the two winds was a mile-wide belt of glossy water. I studied the problem through binoculars and concluded that the nor'wester, being a pressure-pattern breeze, would be the survivor. To get into it, we had to tack away from course and work our way through the belt of calms.

Our competitors came around Newcombs behind us and happily reached along for the finish in the last of the southerly. For awhile it looked as though they would beat *Tara* to the line. The frowns in our cockpit turned to smiles when the calm belt moved slowly offshore and grasped our rivals two miles short of the line, leaving them dead in the water. Inshore, *Tara* had worked herself into the new wind. Charlie Brown had her sliding along beautifully just on the ridge of it. It required very delicate steering, because less than twenty yards out to lee was the edge of the flat spot. She handled it well and we came up on the finish line, doing over 4 knots, as our offshore rivals sat becalmed.

The line was parallel to our course, requiring a tack to cross. Charlie Brown took *Tara* by the Committee Boat and swung her slowly into the wind. They gave us the winning gun and Charlie Brown shrieked with glee — but just for an instant. Our foredeck crew with unusual efficiency had been tying the skirt of the jib along the rail to catch the last gasp of wind. When we made that final tack, someone forgot to untie the skirt. Our jib backed hard, stopping the boat dead, half across the line and very close to the Committee Boat. I couldn't turn on the engine or we would sink. Inexorably, the tide took us down on the Committee Boat and there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it. *Tara* fouled out having won the Gould Cup. Poor Charlie Brown was in tears, for it was her first race and she had sailed it beautifully. To add insult to injury, our finish extended the time limit an hour, enabling the second boat to get across with but three minutes to spare.

After the Charlie Brown Memorial Race, *Tara* came out of the water for six weeks of repair and polish in East Boston. The engine and transmission, having been thoroughly submerged, were hauled out of the boat and completely rebuilt. The mountings inserted in New York were studied by Mr. Tringale, the yard owner, who concluded they were all wrong. And so they were taken out, and solid new aluminum mounts were welded in. We also ripped out some of the original interior and set about making the interior look more like a yacht.

The Boston Diesel Company, who were refurbishing my favorite engine, had great difficulty in locating English replacement parts for the transmission. I could have told them about English parts after my Fourth of July weekend on a Maine mudflat, but I kept quiet. This time, all *Tara's* problems were to be solved by professionals. When they began checking the catalogue numbers of replacement parts, they did resolve part of the vibration mystery. The bloody engine that I had to rescue from the clutches of German Customs, and pay for twice, turned out to be the tractor model. Only a German ordering through an English firm for an American yacht would put a tractor engine in. Who says the Second World War is over?

Tara was repainted, inside and out. The sails were sent off for seam-check. The overhauled engine came back painted fire engine red, the color I insisted on in retribution for what it had done to my check book. A new American Paragon transmission was installed, and everything checked, aligned, and bedded down with micrometers. For two days the engine was test run in the water. Carmen Tringale is a man who likes to do a job right. There were still certain speeds that caused slight vibration, but I was informed that these were inherent in any diesel, especially one mounted in a rigid metal hull. All our problems were over, and we set forth for the Chesapeake full of hope on October 20. That left nine days to get to the Skippers Race at Annapolis.

We made an uneventful two-day passage to Long Island Sound. Then on the second night, off New Haven, the new coupling shaft joining the transmission to the main shaft sheared off clean. (Having gone to Harvard, I should have known my perverse child would choose New Haven.) Tringale had a mechanic on the spot the next day. It appeared there was a metal flaw in the shaft where the last gear had been pressed on. No one could have seen it without an x-ray, but if it can happen, it will happen on *Tara*. We had no choice but to send the shaft over to its New Jersey manufacturer and wait two days for its replacement. *Tara* finally left New York late on Monday, the 24th. Time was short, if we were to race on Saturday.

The captain took her down the Jersey shore, and checked in from Cape May on Thursday. Since we were on schedule, our racing crew flew to Annapolis that Friday night. As you could guess, there was no *Tara*. We waited and waited. In desperation, I called the Army Engineers' control station at the Delaware Ship Canal. The answer came back, "Yes, a green yawl passed through the canal late in the afternoon." We drove up to the western shore in search of her. Not a trace. We purchased all the race provisions and took motel rooms in disgust.

At seven-thirty the next morning, *Tara* sailed sheepishly into the Annapolis Yacht Club. Her black cloud had struck at the western end of the Ship Canal when the engine vibrated off its brand new mounts. It looked as though we could just make the nine o'clock start, but there was a second problem. Her huge three-bladed cruising propeller was still on the shaft. I donned a bathing suit and jumped into the late October waters of the Chesapeake. I was back on

the dock ten seconds later with a squeak for a voice. To hell with that. We'd race with the big prop. This created a third problem. We couldn't let the propeller spin free, because the front end of the engine wasn't fastened to anything. We not only raced with the big prop, but it was locked as well.

The Skippers Race became another fiasco for us. Dragging the prop, we could barely hold our own with the 40-footers. We were well down in the fleet by the halfway mark off Point No Point. At sunset a howling cold front came through with winds up to 60 knots. *Legend* lost her stick. *Challenge* and *Royono*, plus nine other boats, had their mainsails torn to tatters. On that beat home *Tara* should have chopped up almost any racing boat within ten feet of her size. Instead, I could barely get her up to 6 knots. Her normal speed to weather in those conditions is 7.3 knots. Our old rival *Gesture* slugged away to a well-earned victory. We struggled in, a bad sixth, and then went off to another new shipyard.

I decided a British diesel with an American transmission in a German hull owned by an Irishman would never work. No matter what the diplomats would say, there is simply too much feeling. What we needed was a good German diesel in a good German hull. I had the Trumpy Yard take out the English diesel and ordered a new Mercedes from New York. The delivery time would be ten days. When I got back to Boston, I called Tringale and told him what had happened. He was crestfallen.

Three nights later, Carmen Tringale got me out of bed at home to tell me he hadn't slept for two nights, worrying about what went wrong. He had checked with every diesel expert available and thought he had a slim clue. Since the engine had cracked the forward welds of its new mounts, this indicated to him that the source of the vibration problem must be at the opposite end, the back half where the flywheel is. This was the only item on the rebuilding job that had not been checked. No one ever checks a flywheel balance. It is usually done once by the manufacturer, and that is that.

I called my captain at Annapolis and had him send out the flywheel for balance testing. It was worth the try, like \$1,000 versus \$5,000. Sure enough, four days later, the report came back that the flywheel was 1.4 foot pounds out at 500 r.p.m. and three times as bad further up the scale. Tringale told me this was enough force to lift the front end of a Cadillac off the road at 50 miles per hour. The British had paid back the Germans by sending over an unbalanced flywheel on a tractor engine. They got an Irishman along the way. Well anyway, eleven months and \$14,000 later, *Tara's* engine has been laid to rest. Each day that passes without a phone call, I heave a sigh of relief.

Tara has gone South in search of new black clouds. As I prepare to go down and race her this winter, I know full well that with the engine at peace, the rig will fall over the side. If the rig doesn't, the sails will, and if the sails don't the steering will. I know this, and I am going anyway.

Want to buy a boat?