

Heavy Sea

The wind howled. There was a little rain, and the waves beyond the harbour entrance did not look particularly inviting. Mark Flitley, skipper of the Aphrodite, looked grim.

“It’s going to be a hard race, Carol. Are you sure you still want to come on board?” he asked.

Carol was thoughtful. She had offered to crew the yacht. She had never sailed on one before, but had always wondered what it would be like. She’d never been seasick in her life, and had given up the day for the experience. She had no idea what she was in for, but no particular wish to hang around the harbour either.

“I’ve told you: I’m coming,” she said.

“Very well, you’re welcome.” She climbed onto the boat from the pontoon rather unsteadily. Skipper and crew were encased in smart waterproofs and wearing life jackets. She was wearing a grey anorak, the thick, red pullover she had bought for the occasion, and a pair of smart, expensive jeans. In her mid-forties, her long greying hair still kept its youthful lustre, and her face had few lines. She was tall and slim and looked good for her age.

“Let me introduce you,” he said, as he offered her a life jacket. “This is Carol. She’s coming along to see if she fancies joining the crew.” Then, turning to Carol, he added: “This is Bob and this is Pablo. They’re not just crew. We’re all lifelong friends. Just call me Mark.”

She examined the two friends. The one called Pablo had short grey hair and a dark complexion with a look of sheer determination on his face. Bob looked more laid back with a gentle smile, longer hair, and a neat moustache. What she could see of the clothes they wore under the waterproofs suggested they were old and tired. She noted that Bob’s waterproof suit looked more stylish than the others.

She was glad they clearly did not realise she knew them. She was

vaguely aware of a puzzled look on Mark's face, as if she resembled someone he might have known before.

Once introduced, Mark lost no time in giving instructions. "It's strong winds today – a five going on to a six, and it's going to be rough," he said. "So we'll need to be fully reefed, and we'll use our smallest fore sail. Carol, just lend a hand where you can."

Once prepared for sailing, the Aphrodite slid from her berth and motored across the harbour. She was a sleek white 25 foot long light weight yacht with a fibreglass hull, fractional mast, and outboard engine. The crew untied and stowed the fenders.

"Now then, Carol," said the skipper, "you must stay in the pit – that's down there." He pointed to the hatch down into the cabin. "Just stand on the steps, and do what you can to help. Whatever you do, stay down there, please. It could get a bit hairy on deck in these conditions."

Carol did as she was bidden and stood on the steps below the hatch, with her head and shoulders well above the cabin roof, looking out to sea.

As they left the harbour, they could see the sea more clearly. There was a flat patch where the yachts hoisted their sails, and, just a little further out, rows of fast moving sinister looking tall, dark waves. The skipper pointed the yacht into the wind, and the sails were hoisted. They could hardly hear each other speak for the wind.

The yacht turned out to sea, with sails filled and the motor switched off. She soon reached the waves. A mountain of water surged towards them, almost half the height of the mast, and lifted them up to face others that came rolling after it. As Aphrodite plunged into the trough of the wave, the spray flew past them and splashed all over the cockpit deck.

Carol could see other yachts heading round the harbour wall in the same direction. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"We're off to start," Bob replied, as he was nearest. "That's line between buoy with black flag over there and those two posts on harbour wall."

Carol looked for these marks. She could just about see the black flag, but could not make out which of the many poles or posts on the harbour Bob was referring to.

"Ready about?" called Mark. "We're going to turn back and sail down the line."

"Ready," the others replied.

"Go," said Mark.

The yacht began to turn and slowed as it did so. There was a gust of stronger wind, and she turned back to her original course.

“Ready again,” called the skipper, “and this time, back the foresail, please, to bring us round.”

“Ready,” they said.

Aphrodite started her turn. Bob eased the foresail sheet.

“What are you doing, Bob?” cried Mark, bringing the boat back to her previous course. “Keep the sheet tight – otherwise the jib won’t back.”

Bob did as he was bidden. Mark waited until they were almost on the top of the next wave, and then pushed the tiller over. Bob held the foresail sheet tight, and the boat span round. As she passed through the wind, he let go the sheet, while Pablo quickly tightened the other sheet for the new course.

“Well done. We’ll do that again,” said Mark.

They did and looked more confident.

Just then a voice called from the cabin. “That’s the radio,” Pablo said. “Carol, can you go down and find out what’s being said?”

Carol held on tight as she lowered herself into the cabin. The boat was tossing about, and loose flares were rolling on the floor. She looked for the radio. A voice said calmly: “Race control, Race control, this is Moon Raker.”

“Come in, Moon Raker,” said race control.

“Race control, we have just had damage to our rudder. We’re going to have to retire.”

Carol climbed the steps and called: “Moon Raker’s retired. They’ve got a broken rudder.” Then she turned to Bob and asked: “What about us? Are we all right?”

Pablo heard this remark, lowered his voice and glared at her. “Don’t say such things!” he cried. “If you don’t shut up, skipper will get cold feet, and we’ll miss the race!”

Another voice from the radio. It was race control: “This is race control. Good afternoon, racing fleet. Today’s race is a bay race. There will be one lap. The course is South about to the Outfall buoy, then to the Harbour Wall buoy, and then back to the start.”

The hoot from the race station could not be heard, but they could see the lights change on the race control hut. “That’s the five minute gun,” Bob remarked, looking at his watch.

By now, Aphrodite and five other boats were manoeuvring for position by the black flag, sailing up and down the line and waiting for the start. Bob looked at his watch. “Thirty seconds,” he said.

“Tighten sheets,” said Mark.

Aphrodite began to pick up speed, as she approached the invisible start line.

“There’s not many boats out today,” Mark observed coolly, as he struggled to keep Aphrodite on course and avoid collisions in the confusion of the waves. “If anybody doesn’t want to do this, we can go back and have a pint.”

No-one spoke. Pablo glared at Carol once more, willing her not to spoil their fun.

Aphrodite was third across the line. They had not gone far, when there was another call over the radio. Carol went down to listen.

“Race station, race station,” came the voice. “This is Spaceman. We’re not happy with racing in these conditions. We’re going to retire.”

“Brilliant!” cried Bob, as Carol reported this. “That takes care of two of the competition!”

Aphrodite sailed past the first buoy and then set off for the Outfall Buoy. After a while, the wind dropped considerably, as the yachts came under the lee of some cliffs. The other boats unwound their foresails, and soon the two behind Aphrodite had passed her and left her lagging behind.

“Is there nothing we can do?” Bob asked.

“We could change the sail,” Mark mused, “but that would take time.”

“How about the spinnaker?” Pablo suggested.

“Isn’t that a bit risky in this weather?”

“Oh, what the Hell? We’ll be all right. Just give me the small one!”

Carol moved aside, as Pablo dived into the cabin and came back with a spinnaker bag. He took it to the prow, and he and Bob launched the spinnaker. It opened with an explosive bang. Pablo took down the foresail, and then fairly leapt to the back of the yacht; Bob took hold of the spinnaker sheets.

“Just look at the speedo!” Bob exclaimed, as the log measured a speed increase from six to nine knots, and the spinnaker filled, a beautifully patterned bright red sail.

“That’s three knots more than hull speed,” Mark observed.

“What’s hull speed?” Carol asked.

“It’s the fastest a boat can go without planing or lifting her prow out of the water. If her prow goes down, we’ll broach.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’ll spin on her prow and go over, and that could be nasty!”

Aphrodite was catching up. None of the other yachts had hoisted their spinnakers. She passed two of them and began to overtake the next one. The outfall buoy was not far now. The wind was growing again. They hoisted the foresail and took the spinnaker down. The two leading boats rounded the buoy, with Aphrodite in third place.

Carol could see the name of the boat in front of Aphrodite. It was Fire Cracker. On their way back and sailing up wind, both yachts zigzagged back to the harbour. Carol could not make out which of the two yachts was in front, as they zigzagged across each other's courses, smashing through the big waves with the spray stinging their faces as they raced on.

At last they reached the penultimate buoy, which was not far from the harbour wall. Fire Cracker got there first. She continued sailing for some minutes before turning. Aphrodite followed close behind, but did not turn. The harbour wall was coming fast at them.

"What's going on? Why aren't we turning?" Carol asked as the wall loomed straight ahead.

Bob explained: "The current is against us. The closer we can get to the harbour wall, the weaker the current. We'll have a better angle with the wind for speed too."

She heard Mark shout: "Ready about?"

"Ready," they replied.

He raised his voice above the wind and shouted: "Don't forget: please make sure you back the jib to bring her round."

Aphrodite was still making straight for the harbour wall. Carol could see a huge mountain of water rising up and surging along the harbour wall straight towards them, looking as though it might dash them to pieces against it.

"Go!" shouted the skipper.

Pablo tightened his sheet. Mark pushed the helm over. Aphrodite paused, as she slowly started her turn. Bob's face turned white. Pablo looked concerned. Then the yacht span round, just as the wave caught her. She rose with the wave, while Mark fought with the tiller to keep her on course. The wave began to break, and Aphrodite was suddenly surfing down it towards the line.

Bob looked for Fire Cracker. "We're overtaking her," he said.

He turned the other way and watched the two poles on the harbour wall, as they slowly came into line. "We're nearly there," he said. "That's it – now! I think we've beaten Fire Cracker – just!"

Pablo raised his fist and punched the air. "Yes!" he cried.



They motored back to Aphrodite's berth, stowed the sails, went to the club house, and ordered drinks.

Carol looked at her two crew mates, somewhat disdainfully, while they waited for Mark who was at the bar chatting with other skippers. "Does everyone here always wear shabby clothes?" she asked.

Pablo was wearing an open tee shirt and jeans. He laughed: "Only at sea," he said. "The sea ruins good clothes. If he's not sailing, my friend Bob here, is a dedicated follower of fashion, aren't you Bob?"

Bob said nothing.

"Have you known Mark long?" Carol asked.

"Since we were students over twenty years ago," Bob replied.

"Did you go sailing together then?"

"Oh no! It was potholing."

"Potholing?"

"Aye, you should ask Mark about that."

Mark came and sat down with them. They started talking about their homes and families. It turned out that both Mark and Carol were divorced.

"It's the boat that's my pride and joy now," Mark said. "So what did you think, Carol? Would you come again?"

"It was scary."

"It's not often like it was today."

"I don't know what use I could be. I just don't know what to do."

Mark smiled: "I could give you some tuition."

"Perhaps – yes I'd like to learn to sail." It could be an interesting way to start a relationship, she thought.



One evening a few months later, after a hot mid-summer day, Carol and Mark were sailing on Aphrodite. The sea was flat, the sky was clear, and there was a very light breeze. The yacht was going very slowly. The Sun had become a red ball, which gave the town and the castle above it a red glow. Dusk was approaching. It was very romantic.

"How beautiful," she said.

"And you're beautiful too. What a perfect evening!"

"I could fall in love with you."

"I have already fallen in love with you. What do you think about that?"

“I’m not sure. I hardly know you.”

“You know,” he said, “it’s strange, but you remind me of someone I used to know a long time ago.”

“Really?” she said dismissively. “You seem to be a man of many secrets, Mark!”

“That’s too true. In fact, I think it would be unfair for us to go any further unless you know my story. You see, when I was very young, I was in grave personal danger.”

She was surprised and laughed. “In grave danger? What kind of danger? Was it life-threatening?”

He frowned and looked very serious. He paused, and then said very slowly: “It could have been worse – much worse.”

“I’m interested. Please tell me about it.”