



Red Stars in the Sky

The most improbable things seem to happen when you mix up two adults, two children, a dinghy, a barge yacht, and a jeep. . . .

By PHILIP HAYS

(Illustrated by Fid Harnack)

IT seemed a little odd, afterwards, to have got aboard the family barge yacht by dinghy on one side of the Thames Estuary, and to have been taken off on the other side a few hours later by an Army jeep. And odder still for Joan to have been making cocoa that evening for the sergeant, in the married quarters at the barracks. People said later it was the kind of thing to be expected if one was reckless enough to have a wife, two children, and two boats.

The previous winter, one of the yards at Whitstable had been building for me a National 18-footer. While she was still being planked up, I had been looking through the advertisement columns of the papers for a friend who had said he was thinking of buying a barge to live in. My eye was caught instead by the mention of a 30 ft. barge yacht built by Frank Shuttlewood of Paglesham in 1936.

I knew the Nancy Grey from the same yard, built a year or two later; her owner had occasionally brought her to Whitstable harbour and I had admired her shallow draught and her sturdiness. A barge enthusiast—and who at Whitstable isn't?—had once told me that this was the kind of boat to have if I wanted to take my small family to sea with me.

I went to see Dione where she lay, at West Mersea. Maximum headroom was 4 ft. 6 in., but in all other respects there was plenty of room in her. There were four berths, ample galley space, and room for the installation of a w.c.; there was a coal stove, an oilskin locker, and much extra locker space around the cockpit. An 8 h.p. Stuart Turner, newly overhauled by the makers, looked quietly confident in its own abilities. The gaff cutter rig, and its sail-

ing qualities, we were prepared to take on trust. Joan and I said to ourselves that the barge yacht could tow the 18-footer to regattas and Weeks, and act as accommodation ship while the other raced. We could save money on boarding-house charges and eating-out in restaurants—enough, almost, to pay for her annual upkeep. This argument impressed my bank manager at least, and Dione (pronounced, we found, Dye-oh-ny) duly became ours.

So it happened that on a morning at the end of August we were setting off on our first joint passage across the Estuary. We were a small part of the annual pilgrimage to Burnham Week. Lesley and Anthony were just old enough to be able to regard Burnham as an undiscovered wonderland of boats: 6-Metres, Dragons and much else besides.

"Shall we see Uffa Fox" Anthony, aged six, had asked. "Of course not," Lesley said. "He'll be too busy." Having reached the ripe old age of ten she could appreciate that Uffa Fox's duties, like those of royalty, would necessarily circumscribe his pleasure activities.

The sky was grey; a light North-East wind was ruffling the water. We lined the boats up as Dione lay at her mooring off Whitstable harbour. Behind her came the dinghy, and after the dinghy came the 18-footer, Bluecap. It had been found that the 18-footer towed best with her rudder in, and the tiller lashed amidships. This led to a small contretemps immediately after casting off.

She drifted alongside with her stern facing where we intended to go. As Dione's engine came into action and we began to go forward, Bluecap remained steadfastly and stern-firstedly alongside, her rudder permitting no divergencies. All minor shovings were unable to deflect her from her backwards

course. Eventually an immense push with a boat-hook got her to resume her place in the cavalcade, with her stern where it was supposed to be.

Joan—"one hand for the ship and two for the children"—helped me to hoist the sails after we had threaded our way through the anchorage. Lesley, under remote (verbal) control from the foredeck, gingerly held the tiller. We were now passing the yawls; at their moorings in Whitstable "deeps"—a comparative term, this—lay these enigmatically-named craft which are innocent of a mizen.

I have heard it suggested that the yawls' crabwise progress through the water when dredging could have been termed yawning, and that their name was so derived; but the etymology of this seems very shaky. An alternative solution is that the local smacks were yawl-rigged in former days, and that the name has remained while the rig has gone. The best solution of all is to take into account the Whitstable propensity to follow the same line as Humpty Dumpty. "When I use a word," he had explained scornfully to Alice, "it means exactly what I want it to mean, neither more nor less."

We lowered the port leeboard. Close-hauled on the starboard tack, we slowly drew away from the shore. Preoccupied with their own pursuits, Lesley and Anthony had retired to the fo'c'sle and were already showing that complacency towards a new experience which no longer surprises us. Joan and I have told each other that on the day the Queen Elizabeth runs on a mudbank a few hundred yards ahead of us, the children will be too busily engaged with a study of passing jellyfish to look up and see what is happening. On this occasion they were apparently intent on making a quick end to the ten days' store of papers and magazines they had brought with them. It was perhaps just as well, for a thin rain was beginning to fall.

We had crossed the "offer" line of barrel buoys which marks the Northern extent of the grounds of the Whitstable Oyster Company. I had once asked an official of the company why it was so called, and he had replied genially: "Means what it says. Good old Anglo-Saxon word." When it became evident that my grasp of Anglo-Saxon was inadequate he was able to explain that the off-er line was inescapably the seaward, or farthermost, boundary.

I thanked him for the information. Where nomenclature is concerned there is no knowing what flights of originality might have been achieved if Whitstable had been left to itself. Until the South-Eastern and Chatham Railway brought the doubtful benefits of a wider civilization and an alien scale of weights and measures, one could order one's oysters by the nifkin and the half wash. (The half wash was found to equal two gallons, two quarts, and one-and-three-quarter pints. The nifkin was—well, just a nifkin. It means what it says.)

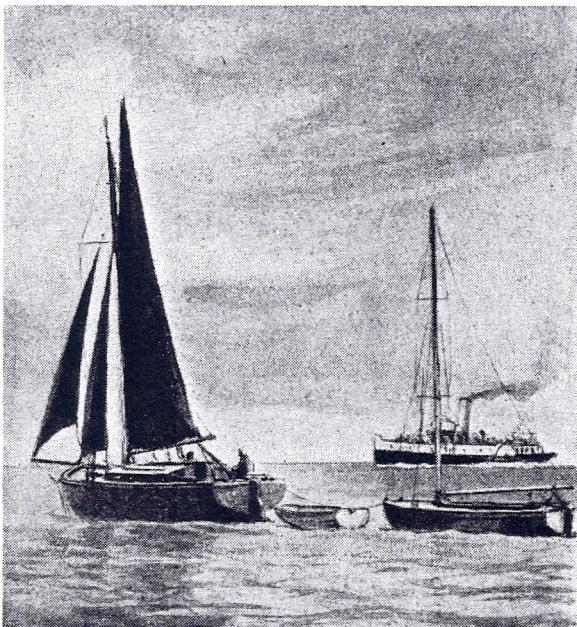
In any event, it was the cultivated grounds of another company over which we were now sailing. On this quiet grey day the water looked reasonably peaceful; but underneath it, by all accounts, the oysters were engaged in their endless battle with hungry crabs and starfish, shrimps and sea-urchins, dog whelks, slipper limpets, and heaven knows what else. The oysters' only friends are the men from the oyster companies who want to preserve them so that they can be eaten by humans instead.

(On the "free grounds" East of Whitstable Street the oysters have to struggle on without even the

protection of the companies. They are, almost literally, anybody's meat.)

With the tide flooding and high water near, we had crossed the Columbine Sand with plenty to spare. Away to the East a pleasure steamer had left Herne Bay for Southend and was heading our way, its passengers no doubt exhilarated by the thought that they were on their way from the second longest pier in England to the longest. In barge lore Herne Bay pier is best known for the cockney skipper sailing to Margate for the first time, who had been told he "couldn't miss it" if he held his course close to the shore. He had never before ventured Eastwards of the Medway, and the day was misty. When the long iron structure suddenly confronted him, he and his mate smartly lowered the mast and "shot" the pier, under the impression that it was "another of these blessed bridges."

I announced the approaching steamer; heads popped out of the cabin door. "Oh, it's raining!"



A PLEASURE STEAMER WAS HEADING OUR WAY

said Lesley, and the heads duly popped back again. As it happened, the one event which never fails to arouse interest on board Dione—a meal—was getting underway. Once again, only the oilskinned helmsman was to be seen above deck as Dione, dinghy, and Bluecap made their leisurely progress Northwards.

On a day like this, sedateness was inevitably the note of Dione's progress, but in fact I had hardly yet encountered the weather in which it wasn't. People who spoke of the bad habits of barge yachts—their pounding, their wrenching at the helm, their tendency to roll when at anchor—seemed to be talking of some other kind of craft, craft that were perhaps of a pre-Dione area.

I had found that in a breeze she could bowl along at anything up to six knots in a manner that was entirely unexcited; and, almost, unexciting. Any inclination towards windward helm could be corrected by reefing the mainsail before reducing the

headsails. It was true that performance fell off when going to windward. Dione was far from being able to point up as well as the racing centreboarders that I had been used to, but as she was a barge yacht there was no reason why she should. After a long acquaintance with smaller craft, all this quietness in her behaviour had at times seemed unsettling. Except when going to windward I generally left the tiller to anybody who would take it, and looked round for something to do.

The rain had now lifted. There was a small increase in the wind, and as the tide began to turn and ebb away to the East, the sea in mid-Estuary became a little choppy. We had passed the line of Spaniard buoys which mark the Four Fathom Channel; Anthony, now on deck, had been promised a penny for a first sighting of the next buoy on our course, the South Oaze. We had all been looking ahead for some minutes. It was Anthony who glanced astern.

"Bluecap's broken away!"

And so she had. Her tow line, straining over the transom of the dinghy, had parted under the stress of being continually slackened and tautened by the effect of the waves.

Bluecap looked very solitary as she rose and fell with the waves, about a cable's length astern of us. Our seamanship in Dione was not practised enough to allow us to round up the straggler without the help of the engine, so down came the sails. Even with the engine, manoeuvring alongside the 18-footer in the lumpy sea was difficult; it was at the third attempt that we grabbed hold of the forestay with the aid of the boathook, and finally got a line aboard once more. So as not to expose it again to the risk of parting where it crossed the dinghy transom, we led it direct to Dione's quarter.

Anthony put in a rapid claim for salvage. If he was to get a penny for seeing the next buoy, he asked, how much did he get for seeing that Bluecap had broken away? We told him it was a good point, and promised to look into it.

The operation had taken over half an hour. It was now late in the afternoon; the prospect, like the weather, was bleak. We were now near the Black-tail Spit on the Maplin Sands. At the other end of the Swin, twelve miles away to the North-East, was the Whitaker beacon which had to be reached and rounded before we could set course for the Crouch and Burnham.

The tide was in our favour, as we had planned it to be, but the wind was right in our teeth. Tacking against it was evidently going to be slow. For a mile we tried the engine, but our little procession of boats was evidently not streamlined enough to make good progress in a head wind. Because of the short and steepish seas and Dione's shallow draught, her propeller was racing noisily every few minutes as it came out of the water. It would evidently be dark long before we reached the Whitaker. For the children it would be a cheerless initiation into the pleasures of cruising.

Four miles away to the North-West was the entrance to Havengore Creek, the short cut to Burnham for all who sail in (very) small boats. I had been unwilling to take Dione through as I was not sufficiently sure where to find the channel. Now the tide had been ebbing for over an hour, and I knew that by the time we got to the creek we would find it impossible to cross the bar. But desperate occasions require desperate remedies. I set course for Havengore.

Soon the water over the Maplin Sands was shoaling fast; there was only a fathom when we were more than a mile off-shore. Five feet, four feet, three feet—we could now clearly see the entrance to the creek which we knew was firmly closed to us until the next high water. A few minutes later there was little more than two feet of water, and we were due to ground at any moment. With about a quarter of a mile to go we came gently to a halt. I jumped overboard to fend off Bluecap and the dinghy.

Thanks to Dione's almost flat bottom I knew that we should lie comfortably on the sands for the next eight or nine hours. Before dusk I would make a reconnaissance of the approach to the creek so that we could go through it on the night tide. It was pretty dark already, even though it was not far past six o'clock, and it was strangely cold. We decided that the first thing to do was to light the coal stove.

At cabin-top level the stove chimney was blocked by a wooden stopper, to keep rain and sea from descending on the stove when it was out of action. The wood had swollen with the rain and was completely jammed. I began attacking it with chisel and hammer. Joan was getting ready our belated tea.

The sea had now completely left us, and the children were exploring our immediate neighbourhood. They were intrigued by the infant cockles which the ebbing tide had left in the lee of any small obstruction such as a stone; scores of them were lying huddled beside our anchor.

The jeep that came bowling along the sands towards us was unnoticed until it was little more than a hundred yards away. Sitting beside the driver was a sergeant; both were in white denim battledress. The sergeant got out.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir. But you can't stay here."

I had known we were within the limits of the Shoebury gunnery range; and I knew too, because I had on board the book which said so, and I had just consulted it, that "vessels are forbidden, except for stress of weather, to anchor or ground on any part of the Maplin Sands North-Eastward of Shoebury, under penalty of a fine." But this was stress of weather—of a kind, at least. And anyway, I had said to myself, shooting took place only during normal daytime working hours. The sergeant quickly put me right.

"We're having a night shoot. It starts in about an hour-and-a-half."

By now the sergeant could fairly be described as having an attentive audience. We visualized Dione being blown to pieces by artillery fire.

"There's not much danger of that, sir. But the rules don't allow us to leave anybody on the range while the firing's on."

The rules apparently indicated that we should be put in the hands of the War Department police until the firing was over. But the sergeant was evidently contemplating a milder fate for us. What he could do, he said, was to take us to Shoebury Barracks. He finally said he would call for us in another hour. In a flurry of splashes the jeep drove away across the sands.

We were feeling more than regretful as we locked the cabin doors an hour later and prepared to leave. With thoughts of ricochets and of shells falling short, and with opportunity now to notice the signs of former shell holes in the sand around us, we wondered if an entry through the cabin door on our

return might not turn out to be unnecessarily formal. Anthony, somewhat significantly, was clutching his teddy-bear when the jeep returned for us. We climbed aboard for the journey to Shoeburyness.

We had our first experience of travelling across the sands along the ancient Broomway. After a somewhat bumpy half-mile the track rejoined the shore; here we encountered the War Department police. We were gravely scrutinized, and the sergeant made a long explanation on our behalf. Then on we went. We were half-way to Shoeburyness when there was a flash in the sky and we heard a loud cr-r-rump. The night shoot had begun. We kept our fingers crossed.

At the barracks the sergeant took us to a block in the married quarters. His wife was away in Yorkshire—it was a Yorkshire regiment—but we were welcome to make ourselves at home. Domesticity had soon asserted itself. In a few minutes we were exchanging family snapshots, and Joan was in the kitchen making cocoa for five. Lesley was getting acquainted with the sergeant's cat. Anthony wanted to know why he couldn't go and see the guns.

The night shoot, which was apparently the first for two months, was due to last for only an hour-and-a-half. Eventually we were bundling ourselves into the jeep again, and on our way to the sands. The last shells were still flashing across the sky at half-minute intervals. At the police point, torches were flashed on us and we were again examined carefully.

Then the bumpy journey along the Broomway, with the jeep twisting and turning as its headlamps lit up large water-filled holes in the track before us. And so to the boats; they were still in one piece. We said a grateful farewell to the sergeant. If we were ever in Yorkshire, we said, we should hope to look him up.

After the children had been put belatedly to bed there were still two hours to go before the tide would reach us. From Shoeburyness I had spoken on the telephone to the Havengore bridge-keeper, who had estimated that we could be on our way by 1 a.m., nearly two hours before high water. He said that as soon as he could see Dione coming he would raise the bridge and put up a lantern as a signal. Before Joan and I turned in for a brief sleep I made a torchlight survey of the way to the creek.

We were awakened by the noise of the waves slapping gently against Dione's sides. We made ourselves a hot drink and sat talking in the cockpit in the light of a magnificent full moon as we waited for Dione's stern to swing to the tide as a sign that she was once again afloat. I set up the side lights in their brackets in the shrouds.

When we got underway there was little difficulty in picking up the posts which marked the channel. We touched the ground once but were soon off again, and it was not long before we were motoring along the creek towards the bridge. The keeper, true to his word, had opened it. We shortened the



A LIGHT EASTERLY TOOK US UP THE CROUCH TO BURNHAM

tow lines, particularly the 18-footer's, as we passed through. The keeper gave us a cheerful hail.

The exchange of shouts with the bridge-keeper had awakened Lesley; her pyjama-clad figure appeared at the cabin door to find if all was well. She was soon reassured, and disappeared.

The world seemed very much at peace with itself as we chugged along in the moonlight for another mile, to a point where the creek was wide enough and deep enough for Dione to lie for the rest of the tide. There we let go the anchor. The chain rattled noisily out; but it was a friendly sound, and the two children, with their heads only a few feet from it, slept firmly on. Joan and I, after a last look round to absorb the serenity of our anchorage, were soon following their example.

We woke to find the sun shining genially. There was still another hour or two of ebb tide; we raised anchor, and a light Westerly wind enabled us to sail on, between the creek's widening mudbanks, into the Roach. When we had reached the Crouch we anchored again to await the flood tide.

The smell of eggs and bacon was coming from the galley as I pointed out to the children the forest of masts, with the gleaming white club-house of the Royal Corinthian Y.C. beside them, that were our destination. Away to the East, a white-sailed craft was coming in from the sea, close-hauled. There was a clear blue sky above us, and already it was a warm day. It seemed an auspicious start to our first Burnham Week together.

