ABOARD MYTH OF MALHAM

By IAIN

THIS year the Fastnet race started on the morning of Saturday, 6th August, which very conveniently coincided with a full moon but also with some very unsettled weather.

On the Wednesday I was still lying in bed with a bout of enteritis and my doctor said he thought that by Saturday I might be fit enough for some yachting—little did he know the sort of yachting I was going to experience during the gale which struck us on the second day of the race; yachting at Cowes conjures up a picture of sunshine and white flannels; just the sort of pleasant relaxation to put a man on his feet after a few days in bed!

It was with some misgivings that I took the train south, for I myself had no illusions about the Fastnet, having sailed in the 1935 race; but I felt that I could hardly call off at such a late hour. As the night train roared its way over the border I knew the die was cast and that it was a case of kill or cure. I arrived at Hamble in time for dinner on Thursday night and met the other members of the crew who must be introduced individually if this account is to give a picture of life aboard the Myth during those five days and nights of the race.

THE CREW

THE SKIPPER.—Captain (E.) John Illingworth, R.N., Commodore of the Royal Ocean Racing Club and author of the already famous book Offshore. John is probably one of the two most knowledgeable men on ocean racing in the world and also one of the most pleasant skippers with whom I have sailed. A man who knows all the answers, yet full of tact and good humour, he is a skipper who gets the last ounce out of his crew without having to ask for it, and that’s a thing that can’t be said of many.

COMMANDER BATELOR.—Mate of the starboard watch. Batch, an experienced seaman, had worked like a badger fitting out the Myth at a few days’ notice and, being slightly older than most of us, was usually called Old Batch. Although the rough and tumble and the nervous strain of the race perhaps bore hardest on Batch, his determination to keep his end up surmounted the odds and his good humour was proof against the ribaldry of the port watch.

IN THE FASTNET RACE 1949

RUTHERFORD

M. BLEDIT.—Tremendously well informed on all ocean racing matters, full of confidence and savoir faire, this girl was our navigator and surprised us all by her skill and nonchalance under the worst conditions. When things were at their beastliest and sea-sickness was taking its toll, Maria remained at her chart table as cool as if she were in harbour. But that is another story.

PAM RYAN.—A watch keeper under Batch, Pam was also unruffled under all circumstances. With Pam one felt that it was sheer determination and guts that brought her through—a sort of bloody but unbowed spirit which enabled her to tackle any job at any time with a quiet reliability which would win her an honoured place in any crew. In her quiet and almost phlegmatic way Pam was an inspiration to us all.

A. C. SANDSON.—Known as Sandy, a native of Unst (Shetland Isles) with a job in the Bank of England. Sandy started by watch-keeping in the starboard watch and ended by taking over as cook. A man of few words, very experienced and an absolute tower of strength. Slow but sure, Sandy would voluntarily undertake the foulest jobs such as clearing the limber holes in the bilges at the height of the gale—I would choose such a man if I ever wanted to sail round the world.

COMMANDER (B) HAINES, R.N.—Known as Bill. Small neat and efficient, Bill seemed to be an expert at most things, his skill at cooking was only exceeded by his skill at sail-repairing, which latter quality stood us in great good stead. Bill suffered from sickness more than the rest of us and yet never let it interfere with the job on hand. On that account I should say that Bill really showed the greatest guts of anyone in the crew. Bill started as cook and ended in the starboard watch.

CORYTH CROMF.—Known as Cory. Very young and enthusiastic, a first-class hand on deck. Cory had just crossed the Atlantic from his native land in Bobby Somerset’s Iolaire. The strength and agility of this young American were of immense value. Quick as lightning and as sure-footed as a cat, Cory took the whole race completely in his stride. At times I think that Batch found him rather like an undisciplined and highly active puppy, but the crew would have been a much weaker one without him.
THE YACHTSMAN

PETER STANFORD.—From Boston, known as Pete. As in the case of Cory, Pete had just crossed the Atlantic in Isalbre and was fighting fit and as strong as an ox. To work with Pete, as I did, on the slipping plunging foredeck of the Myth changing jibs was a real pleasure. I would be willing to go anywhere in a small boat with Pete.

Finally there was myself, feeling greatly honoured by being Mate of the Port Watch and fully conscious of my poor physical state. The only contribution I felt I could make to this gathering of talent was in the capacity of a helmsman, but whether I really succeeded in this is quite another matter. I only know that I obtain more pleasure out of trying to get the last ounce of speed from a boat on the wind than almost anything else under the sun.

THE RACE BEGINS

On Friday we sailed over to Cowes where all the ocean racers were moored and where in the evening we met all our competitors at a cocktail party given by the R.O.R.C. After dinner Sandy, Bill and I rowed out in the Myth's curious little pram to watch the really wonderful display of fireworks which coloured the summer sky. I remember we had to row very slowly to keep Sandy's bottom from getting wet. Saturday morning brought a nice westerly breeze and sunshine, but the wireless forecast promised much stronger winds to come. We sailed over to the starting line after the skipper had been ashore for a last minute "Met" Report, and there we jibed about among the other yachts each looking more formidable than the other. Why is it, I wonder, that one's opponents always do look so devastatingly efficient before a race?

Bang went the starting gun and we crossed the line to an excellent start, hardening in on the headsheets for the beat out to theweather.

Full of enthusiasm, I was winching in the staysail when the wire sheet parted with a loud report, leaving the sail flapping in the breeze. Not a very good beginning, but we quickly got the weather sheet round and I started winding in again. A second report and there was the sail again flapping with two parted wires dangling from the clew. This was where Bill's neatness and method paid a dividend, for we dived below and in a moment we had a new set of wire sheets shackled on; then we really settled down to sail.

The skipper was at the helm and Myth was going very nicely on the port tack when Bloodhound overhauled us to weather and then when her bow had crept up level with our mast she ceased to overtake. "We've got an S.L.P. on Blooders," said the skipper with obvious relish. For the uninitiated I might explain that S.L.P. stands for safe leeward position, and with boats of roughly the same size and speed going to windward, a boat which is in this relative position—just ahead and to leeward—has the advantage of back-winding the overhauling boat and slowing her up. For quite some minutes we stayed off the threat, but in the end the beautiful dark blue yawl broke through the invisible barrier and forged ahead in triumph. Not exactly surprising seeing that she was about three times our size.

I was interested to watch Pleiades of Rhu an ex-8-metre of which I was once part owner, for, to my surprise, she had been entered for the race. I say "surprise," because two years ago I was forced to give up when racing her from the Clyde to Dublin, and I knew that a race round the Fastnet would be no place for her if it came on to blow. The combination of long overhangs, which cause the most terrible pounding when driven into a sea, and the light standing rigging of the rather frail mast, together produce a state of affairs which makes great inroads on an owner's peace of mind. As we crossed tacks with Pleiades I noticed that her mainsail was not sheeted in as close as an 8-metre requires and we soon left her far astern. It was also interesting to note how amazingly stiff the Myth was in comparison with Pleiades, for my old "8" must have been heeled over at least 10 deg. more than we were.

Gradually the fleet began to string out, with Latifa in the lead, followed by

WINTER, 1949

Myth of Malham, winner of the Fastnet Race, 1949.

Bloodhound, and then the only Scottish entry, Ronald Teacher's Mariella—the lovely Mylne designed 68-ton yawl from Fife's famous yard. The Myth was holding a higher wind than any other boat and we had the great satisfaction of seeing such formidable rivals as Gudovin and Fandango gradually falling off further and further to leeward.

The lovely St. Barbara of the Royal Artillery Yacht Club was sailing neck and neck with us and we crossed tacks with her several times. During my trick at the helm I remember straining every nerve in an attempt to outstage St. Barbara and for about an hour I could make nothing on her at all, then quite suddenly I noticed that she was falling off to leeward and this she continued to do for the rest of my spell. I may be wrong, but I have the feeling that this change was caused by a different helmsman taking over, and oddly
enough, exactly the same thing happened later on that same day. It is a curious thing how in a race round the sticks an owner would never think of handing over the helm to one of his crew when turning to windward unless he was very certain of the fellow’s skill, yet in an ocean race everyone has a crack at it more or less as a matter of course.

Physically there does not seem to be quite the same feverish urgency when you are settling down to beat for 200 miles, yet I am sure that bad helmsmanship might easily cost a boat half a minute a mile. The fact that St. Barbara is a much larger boat than the Myth made me realise that I was steering a very exceptional little ship, and as the race proceeded this became even more apparent.

Evening found us still beating into a comparatively calm sea with a nice whole sail breeze; as darkness fell we crossed Olivier van Noort, whose crew gave us a tremendous cheer, jumping up from below and waving with great gusto. When dawn cleared the horizon on Sunday morning we could see three sails ahead, one of which was only about a mile and a half away. As the light increased we realised that this was the Dutch-owned Corabia, a boat only slightly larger than Myth, from the design by Sparkman & Stephens. We were rather surprised that she should have done so well, and I must say that this was the only boat which we saw close to the Myth’s performance relative to her size, though we heard later that Argentinean Joanne, who rated only 2 ft. higher, had been close ahead at about that time. But that was before the gale.

FRESHENING WIND

The wireless forecast that morning promised us a gale from the S.W. if I remember correctly, later to veer to the W. Certainly the sky had all the signs and already the wind was increasing. Our genoa staysail, which had started to split earlier and had been beautifully repaired with a Ratsey-like patch by Bill, was now doubled and the intermediate one set in its place. This was the beginning of a steady series of headsail changes which became more and more of an ordeal as wind and sea increased. I remember Steve and I changing three in succession.

The Myth is not fitted with a pulpitor forward, a fact which we attributed to the skipper not having been brought up in the Presbyterian faith! It certainly made changing a jib a very exposed proceeding; perhaps I am getting old, for after all, any foredeck is a picnic in comparison with a bowsprit. Many years ago I had to take in a blown-out jib at the height of a gale in the Irish Sea aboard Torridon ex Lo III and I remember literally being winded, as well as completely immersed by the sea, as she plunged her bowsprit under. Still, the Myth, as she shortens canvas, has six—or is it eight?—headsail changes to make; by the time that’s over those who have been doing the job are pretty thoroughly wet. I know I was never dry again until after rounding the Rock and I think several others were in a like condition.

By the time it was blowing about 5-6 Beaufort Scale, we saw Corabia hand her mainsail and set a trysail in its place; at first thought she must have split her mainsail. As we began to overhaul her we realised that she was merely taking a seamanship precaution in readiness for the gale that was to come. I must say she still sailed remarkably well under her reduced canvas, but inevitably the Myth overhauled; as the wind increased and visibility diminished we lost her astern.

Our skipper had decided to make up windward of our course for the Wolf Rock, which we were now easily laying on the port tack; the wind had already backed considerably, and he wanted to get further to the south before a probable veering of the wind might make it impossible to weather the Lizard without another tack. It was well that we did this for the visibility was now only a mile or two and the wind was rapidly reaching gale force.

While I was below, the skipper called down from the cockpit for the latest barometer reading, and the following rather amusing conversation took place.

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Navigator: “Tell him it’s fallen one-tenth in the last quarter of an hour.”
Pete: “Maria says it’s fallen one-tenth since last reading, sir.”
Skipper: “Impossible; she must mean one-hundredth.”
Pete: “Skipper says you must mean one-hundredth.”
Maria: “I don’t mean one-hundredth. I mean one-tenth.”
Pete: “She means one-tenth, sir.”
Skipper: “Tell her to look again.”
Pete: “Maria, skipper wants you to look again.”
Maria: “Tell him I said one-tenth, and I mean one-tenth.”

The Gale

Not having the log beside me I cannot remember the exact time that all hands were called to reef the main, but I think it must have been at about 1300 hrs. that afternoon (Sunday). Without shifting from our course the boom was lowered into the permanent gallows, which cunningly rise out of the bridge-deck between the two cockpits when required. The mainsail was then lowered completely, the ship being kept going on the headsails. Using lacing, two reefs were tied down very neatly indeed.

I always think there is something rather dramatic about reefing, for it marks that moment when we reluctantly admit the strength of the wind which has demanded our respect. In the same way, a mountaineering party arrives at a certain stage in their climb where the severity calls for roping-up.

Of course most boats would have been reefed long before the Myth for her mainsail is a comparatively small part of her total sail area and we had already considerably reduced what was being carried in her fore-triangle. A little while later the jib was handed, so there we were under double-reefed main and working staysail, with the wind blowing Force 7-8 and the sea rising steeply.
As for visibility, that was deteriorating steadily, so that we were confined to a very small and stormy world.

Below decks, things were getting decidedly damp, partly because of some rather persistent deck leaks—Myth had been commissioned at very short notice and there had been no time to caulk the coamings—and partly because of the entry of very wet people, some of whom were now in the habit of turning into their bunks in wet clothes. Added to this, some of the holding down of the fore hatch had been broken, and a fair amount of water was entering from this source, which was a particularly annoying feature. When one went to the heads before turning in, it was exasperating to get drips down one's neck from which a sodden towel had been nobly staving them off for the last few hours without.

The wind had now veered and we had come close-hauled. As was almost inevitable, sea-sickness began to take its toll; not that I was surprised to succumb myself in my already poor internal state. Bill had for a long time been waging an unequal battle with the pest, manfully brewing hot drinks and food in spite of a rather grey face. The skipper began to make forced visits to the "heads," and I have a suspicion that "old Batch" was not feeling his best. Nevertheless, no one allowed illness in any way to affect his job somehow that would have been unthinkable, such was the atmosphere in the Myth.

Talking about atmosphere, reminds me that the unique ventilating device in the false bow of the ship worked very well indeed and the air remained quite sweet below. It was an astonishing experience to watch the water pouring in a continuous shower down through this false bow before it drained out into the sea. With that water also came air and although the water dropped without entering the ship proper, the air was able to filter through the peep holes cut high in the dividing bulkhead. What beat me was how anyone should have thought of such an extraordinary arrangement.

When my watch was called at 1600 hrs. I could tell the wind had increased, but I hardly expected to see quite such a scene of wild crows and hollows as met us when we climbed out of the comparative peace of the cabin. The wind was blowing very hard indeed, a full gale probably describes it. The seas were (in the skipper's estimate) about 20 ft. high. Now 20 ft. in a long Atlantic swell is nothing much, but these seas were short and the resulting hills which came at us and at which we forced our little ship, were as steep as steeper than any I have ever seen. Added to that, the tops were beginning to come off and although the Myth cleverly avoided most of them, there were some which were not to be so easily evaded, and it was one of these which hit Pete fair and square. He was knocked backwards over the cockpit coaming so that he lay on his back with his head on the lee rail. I caught one leg and Sandy caught the other, and we pulled him back into the cockpit. I don't suppose he would have gone over the side, for knowing Pete, I am confident he would have caught the wire life lines, but to be lying on your back head downwards, and feet in the air is an unpleasant position, even for an athletic young American.

While pulling Pete in, I had inadvertently let the Myth come round; in fact she was caught aback. Fortunately the runners are operated by Highfield levers and I was able to have the sheetfall filled on the wrong side. To be involuntarily "hove-to" when you are endeavouring to keep a ship to windward is most ignominious and I at once bore away with the object of getting enough speed on the ship to bring her round again on to her proper tack. Three times I tried to bring her about, but always that backed staysail held her just as she came head to wind. Normally one would not hesitate to let the headstay draw and then come about in the normal way, but it was blowing so hard that one thought twice about tampering with the sheets at all. I had, in fact, decided to gybe her round, as I have done with my own boat Sulteen in similar circumstances, when the skipper came up to see why his bunk had suddenly changed from a lee to a weather one! Rather than gybe, the skipper ordered us to let her draw on the starboard tack; when this had been done we gathered full way before tacking ship back on to our original course. That was doing it the hard way and was probably the right thing to do, although I still think I could have gybed her round straight away without harm. With mainsheet hard in and both runners set up I don't think there would have been any difficulty at all, even in that strength of wind.

Although we didn't know it at the time, we learnt afterwards that we were the only boat in the whole fleet which kept driving into that gale. Lutifa, Michael Mason's great Fife-designed yawl was down to double-reeded trysail, with jib hoisted 3-point. Bloodhound, the lovely Nicholson yawl, reduced to mizen and staysail, then pulled a mizen shrouded splice and finally parted the flexible wire of the foostay leading to the release lever so that she ended up with a nine-foot jib alone. As for the others, no less than nineteen had given up and the remainder were hove-to. But we had no knowledge of all this and I remember thinking of all our competitors driving on even harder than we were, and wondering how many other yachts were suffering from sickness as I was.

In all this welter of sea and spray and bad visibility the skipper made his decision to go through the gap between the Scillies and Land's End, fortified by radio bearings from Round Island. The little American wireless set on its calibrated turntable was a godsend throughout the race; with its help at the height of the gale we had a check on our D.R. position; and no doubt an aid to the peace of mind of the skipper, though it would have been more valuable had the beacon been on Land's End.

We had seen no land since Prawle Point, near the Start. As the wind veered it had become clear to the skipper that though close-hauled we could not make round Land's End on the port tack. We held on, until just before dusk a mass of land came up out of the clouds and mist; high and fairly close. It is steep-to here, half-way between the Runestone south of Land's End, and Mount's Bay. The Myth was put about on to the starboard tack, for perhaps an hour and a half. She stayed ready under these full gale conditions. On this board the seas again seemed steeper. Then, when it was judged we could clear Land's End with a leeside, we came back on the port tack.

Looking back on it, I suppose it blew hardest during that first dog when we were on watch, for it seemed to have eased a bit when we came up at zero and the Diva logged the wind as Force 9 at 1700 hrs. The seas were still rather frightening with solid lumps coming over from time to time as we sailed on our course for the Wolf Rock. We passed quite close to the east of the Wolf, for I did not risk trying to weather it even though there was a westerly set of tide. Wet and cold, the four hours of that watch passed very slowly. I remember
we discussed the squalls within the squalls and wondered what the wind speed was; we agreed that of all the yachtsmen round our coasts, perhaps only one in fifty had an experience of wind and sea such as had been ours in the last six hours. Actually we were told when we got home that the Eddystone lighthouse had recorded wind speeds up to 68 m.p.h. during the gale.

The astonishing thing was the performance of the *Myth* during the worst of this blow, for she never pounded to speak of and she never put her lee rail under. Now both these facts are quite remarkable, and say a very great deal for her design. And I might add that she never put her bow under.

Our speed after reefing had dropped from 8.5 to 6.5 knots and by 1400 hrs., about the time when we came close-hauled, was down to 5 knots, at which rate it remained until 1800 hrs. when it increased to 6. These were only estimates as we were not streaming a log, but our D.R. checked up correctly, so I think it may be said that we really did keep driving throughout the worst of the blow. However, enough of this blow, for it didn’t last long, even if it did cause the retirement of nineteen out of the twenty-nine yachts in the race.

We had the Wolf Rock aboard at 0930 hrs. Soon afterwards we hoisted the storm jib which had been hanked on to the fore-top-stay, and lashed down, as a stand-by. Later we changed this for the second jib. By 0730 hrs. we had shaken out our reefs and increased our speed to 6. I kicked myself for not having called the skipper and suggested this a little earlier, but it’s so easy to wait too long before increasing sail—all part of the “flesh is weak” business I suppose.

At 1015 hrs. Cory shouted out, “Holy smoke look at that spreader, it’s all adrift.” Knowing that the lee spreaders were free to wave about as they pivoted on the mast fittings, various voices from below shouted out, “Didn’t you know they are meant to do that.” “Yes,” came the reply, “but not at the inner end.” We all sat up with a start, realising the full implications of his remark.

To have a lower spreader adrift from the mast in open water while beating into quite a sea is a pretty unpleasant predicament, but our skipper was completely unperturbed and at once set about collecting materials for the job of repair, stainless steel wire, screwnails, and a boat’s chair. Then Cory and Pete took turns working aloft, sitting on the lower weather spreader and leaning round the fore side of the mast. They could only use their left arms on the job and they took a lot of punishment up there as the *Myth* bucked into the head sea. After several hours they had completed what proved to be a very fine seamanlike job which stood up to all the strains of the next three days and nights at sea.

All that day we remained close-hauled on the port tack making speeds of 6 to 7 knots until at 0200 hrs. on Tuesday morning we tacked ship about two miles east of the Daunt light-vessel which lies off the entrance to Cork. One of the things which stands out in my memory of all this period of the race, was the almost permanent position of Sandy harnessed to the galley so that he could use both hands. His pipe constantly alight while he cooked and washed-up at all hours of night and day. The little two-burner Calor gas cooker pivoted on a fore-and-aft axis worked very well and the Prestige pressure cooker certainly paid its passage, for it and the kettle seemed to monopolise the stove.

As the sun rose and the day advanced we had a beautiful sail along that magnificent piece of coast, bold and open with the fields sloping down towards the sea and the barren hills rising behind. The wind, which had fallen rather light in the small hours, now pipped up to about Force 5 and at midday we handed the genoa staysail, setting the first staysail in its place. A steep short sea came in which we punched at 6½ to 7 knots produced occasional fairly heavy pounding, which was the only time in the race that this happened. Not that we paid any attention to it, nor did the *Myth* seem to object.

**ROUNDING THE ROCK**

It was not till 1445 hrs. that we rounded the Rock, and fine it looked with the lightkeepers waving from the lantern platform, and the blue seas breaking white in the bright sun. One of the keepers signalled by lamp the following message: “You are third. *Loftia* passed at 0930 hrs and *Bloodhound* at noon.”

That seemed too good to be true; only 2½ hours behind *Bloodhound*—*Bloodhound* who had sailed away from us after the start like a 12-metre sailing away from an 8. Yes that was terrific.

The keeper then left his tower and ran out on to the flat concrete shelf at the base, and there he proceeded to signal in semaphore. By that time we were freeing sheets and preparing to set the large mast-head spinnaker and we were all too busy to get his message; but I vividly remember the way his clothes flapped in the wind for all the world as if he were on the flight deck of a carrier and that made me realise that it was blowing a good deal fresher than the *Myth* would have us believe.

With that great blue nylon spinnaker set we raced away from the Rock at 8 knots plus, running pretty well dead before the wind on our course for the Bishop. And there at the helm was Pam. Steering a short-keeled racing boat dead before the wind when it’s blowing Force 6 or so in open water rather an exciting pastime, and I remember thinking that there must be few girls to whom an owner would entrust the helm under such conditions.

I kept thinking that the spinnaker must inevitably burst for it seemed as light as a silk handkerchief; yet in the end it was not the nylon but the boom end which gave way. A particularly large sea happened to cause the *Myth* to luff which, with the spinnaker coming across the wind, put an enormous strain on its boom with the result that the end fitting was torn clean away. This did not worry the skipper, at all, and he at once set to work on the repair himself.

As the wind was increasing, the small spinnaker was then set with the repaired boom, but after two hours of work its head pulled out leaving the bolt ropes naked to the sky. With the large yankee set in its place we proceeded at 8.4 knots wondering what further troubles were in store for us.

It was now about 1930 hrs. and from that time until close on midnight Bill worked on the spinnaker, stitching in a complete new head with his almost professional skill. It was a long non-stop job not helped by the poor light in which he worked—an electrical failure having necessitated the use of a torch.
I have not mentioned what I think we all experienced on rounding the Rock. There was a wonderful feeling of elation and joy at having at last, after constant beating against the wind, achieved our outward goal. After days of flying spray and wet decks, salt-sore eyes and sodden clothes we were now able to shed our oilskins and dry out in the following wind and sun. It was our heaven after what at times had seemed fairly close to hell. The contrast was so complete and the exhilaration so tremendous that I, for one, shall never forget the experience of the gale for anything—the race without the gale would have been like a rock climb without a severe stretch to test the party’s skill. A gale also unites a crew in the same way that a war unites a nation and the feeling of working together as a team is probably stronger than that experienced in any other sport.

While setting the small spinnaker, the skipper was nearly overboard. Not that he was in any danger, for he was holding on to the halyard and merely swinging outwards like a pendulum and back again, but I must admit being rather surprised as I looked up to see him momentarily suspended over the sea.

Not content with the yankee in place of the spinnaker, the baby staysail was set underneath, tacked to the rail, and may, I suppose, have added some small fraction of a knot to our speed. The next trouble was the fouling of the top mainsail batten under the topmast shroud; this necessitated an exceedingly tricky manoeuvre. By shortening in on the mainsheet and deliberately flitting with a gybe, we managed to flick the batten clear in a sort of partial gybe without the boom coming over at all—quite an exciting little bit of seamanship.

**RUNNING BACK TO THE FINISH**

Through the night the wind eased somewhat and after getting back to the small spinnaker we set the large blue nylon one at 0400 hrs. by which time our speed had dropped to 5½ knots. Wednesday morning gave us some quiet peaceful yachting with speeds as low as 1½ knots, peaceful that is, apart from one rather exasperating trick which the spinnaker played upon us. For this piece of devilry it was necessary to have the combination of the wind and a leeward roll. In these circumstances, the spinnaker would fall abait the topmast forestay and then swing round it, so that in less time than it takes to tell, it had one or more complete turns round that innocent piece of rigging. Very easily done, but exceedingly difficult to undo; as often as not the spinnaker had to be lowered altogether and then reset. I was told that in America Rod Stevens uses a jib made of fishing net and such a gadget would have undoubtedly saved us a lot of trouble.

By 1430 hrs. we had rounded the Bishop and as the afternoon wore on the wind increased, the sky becoming overcast with rain. The wind dogs I had noticed in the sky earlier had not been there for nothing and although my forecast of strong winds had been received with a certain amount of good-natured scorn, the sight brought us all we wanted. The sea was, of course, quite calm at first, and with the large blue nylon drawing well, each hour saw an increase in our speed as darkness closed in. By 2300 hrs. we were doing 7 knots, by midnight 8 knots, by 0100 hrs. 9 knots and by 0200 hrs. 10 knots.

That was quite the most fantastic piece of sailing I have ever experienced in my life and all the members of the crew said the same thing. The visibility was about a mile, it was as dark as pitch with very little tell-tale sign of the horizon or stars to be seen, so that the helmsman only had the glowing compass card to steer by. We were tearing over the water, leaving a wake like that of a destroyer, the water fanning up from the bow as if we were being towed at twice our maximum speed. As each wave came up from astern we started to plane and remained for long periods (15 sec. or more), poised on the top almost as if we had developed wings. You could feel the ship quivering and vibrating as under the strain and we blessed the stout double masthead preventers which took the enormous pull of the spinnaker. How the nylon stood it I don’t know, for we were being drawn through the water far in excess of our theoretical maximum speed—there was something awe-inspiring, almost frightening about the whole thing.

The job of helmsman had become exacting to say the least, and we took it in quarter-hour shifts. Gradually the wind veered and we eased the spinnaker boom guy to the bitter end (it had been led round the large centre line winch in addition to the smaller side one, for the strain on that rope was immense). In spite of all this there was no slacking for the spinnaker to get partially aback as we yawed to weather and at such times the danger of broaching lay ahead. At last it became impossible to hold our course. I was at the helm, and to counter a luff, I managed with every ounce of my strength to force the tiller behind my back, until it was hard up against the cockpit side. In this position the Myth did not respond, and for an agonisingly long time she held her course not quite decided whether to broach-to or not, before eventually falling back on to her proper course. When this happened a second time, I shouted to the skipper that I couldn’t hold her safely on her course and he told me to bear away as far as I had considered necessary and to report my new course.

I see from the log that the time was 0257 hrs. and it was soon after that we had a rather unpleasant experience. A fishing trawler on our port hand was steaming on a broadly converging course and, as her relative bearing never altered, we realised that something would have to be done about it. It was almost impossible for us to alter our course to any large extent nor could we alter our speed. Our navigation lights which rather surprisingly had been working satisfactorily throughout the race, had at last given up the struggle, so it was a case of sail illumination. Pete was at the helm and a more reliable cool-headed helmsman I have never known to meet. I asked him to try and get as far as he could and at the same time shine a powerful torch on our mainsail. The trawler’s coxswain must have been asleep for she took not the slightest notice of our presence, but proceeded relentlessly as if determined to run us down. Feeling rather desperate I shouted for the skipper, advising those below of our position, but Pete, in spite of imminent risk of gybing, was holding the Myth so far off that the trawler’s bearing was slowly drawing aft. I suppose we crossed her bows with about half a cable to spare, but it was too close for peace of mind.

In a surprisingly short time we were off the entrance to Plymouth and all hands were called on deck for the handing of the spinnaker, a job I had been inwardly dreading. However, with the drill carefully planned in advance, we had no trouble at all and, with the billowing mass of blue nylon out of the way, the order was given to set the staysail. As we luffed up for the Plymouth breakwater light, the real strength of the wind could be felt, and I marvelled at the toughness of that spinnaker which was now safely below. No sooner had we got the staysail drawing and with only, perhaps, three cables to go, the skipper ordered us to try and get a backcloth of the blackest night. This was pitch dark with driving rain shutting down visibility and we were already travelling at about 8 knots and put out the jib for those last few yards to the breakwater. “And this,” I said to myself, “is how ocean races are won.”

Pete from the after cockpit was hurriedly striking at damp flares until one spluttered into life and we were dazzled by the brilliance which lit up the deck. Pete had only a wire and a blackboard sort of set up to steer by. The time was 0446.16 hrs. on Thursday morning and we were told by the watchkeeper on the Breakwater that Latifa had crossed at 1725 hrs. and Bloodhound at 2335 hrs. on Wednesday night.

We sailed quickly into the outer harbour and the grey light of dawn brought with it a tenseness of many conflicting feelings, elation, satisfaction and, at the same time, a sad feeling of anti-climax. After so many hours with a purpose there was now nothing more to do. That night I left for Scotland and said goodbye to a truly remarkable skipper, and a truly remarkable ship.