

Jonah on Board

To just what lengths will a sailor go to get the girl? Trouble was, the hot blonde's brother proved to be a Jonah.

BY CAPTAIN RON SCHAPER

IT WOULDN'T BE FAIR, REALLY, to blame the hurricane on him. After all, we'd set out from Fort Lauderdale on September 1, the heart of hurricane season. And the fact that the driveshaft coupling on *Eshowe*, a steel 46-foot ketch, broke shortly after we left, not allowing us to use the engine for propulsion, wasn't his fault either. But when you start to add up the series of adventures and scrapes and mishaps that turned a sail from Florida to Spain's Balearic Islands into a 66-day odyssey—well, there had to be some kind of reason for it all, right?

Superstitious sailors have long pointed the causative finger at the Jonah figures among them. Jonah, you'll recall the Old Testament telling us, was ordered by God to go to the city of Nineveh and preach against its wickedness. Instead, he sets sail for Tarshish. When a huge storm hits, the sailors learn that Jonah is to blame; when they throw him overboard, the storm ceases. Ever since, sailors so branded are associated with bad luck, foul weather, and all types of nautical misfortunes. Should such a sailor be found to have gone missing from morning chores, the remaining crew might justify his absence with "He got the Jonah's lift on the middle watch." His shipmates saw to it that he didn't continue to bring them bad luck. Now, we on *Eshowe* wouldn't have gone so far as to give a Jonah's lift to our ship-

mate—but there's no denying that we felt the temptation.

Who was this Jonah? He was the little brother of a smoking-hot blonde girl who I was trying to get closer to; she lived on a houseboat in Fort Lauderdale. When I told her of my up-

many fish that our freezer was full. Then many small, white, puffy clouds came streaming toward us, the barometer began to fall, and the breeze built.

We had no forecast of Hurricane Ginger, the famous wanderer. In 1971, boats didn't have single-side-



Non-seabirds often land on boats offshore. In the middle of the Atlantic, a small one came aboard *Eshowe* for a rest. The crew didn't know it, but an allegory was about to unfold.

coming delivery to Europe, she wanted her brother to go along "for the experience." It was my hope that by taking him under my wing, she would prove to be ever so grateful.

Eshowe surely would've benefited from some motoring or even motorsailing ability, but the driveshaft coupling was broken and couldn't be fixed at sea. We slowly plodded on through the Sargasso Sea, which was like sailing through a meadow. We caught so

band radios and high-seas weather reports. We shortened sail until we were running under bare poles while streaming long anchor warps in a loop over the stern to slow us down when roaring down the faces of huge waves. This drogue helped keep us from broaching and perhaps kept many breakers from crashing over us from astern. It was too dangerous for us to remain on deck, so we were mostly secured below, wedged into

our bunks with lee cloths, pillows, and blankets. But there are times when you just have to go to the head.

Our Jonah went to the head. He opened the locker above the toilet. A glass bottle of Listerine fell out and broke in the open toilet. Genius Jonah figured that the best way to fix this was simply to pump it out. Alas, broken glass does not through a head pump.

Rebuilding a head is always a treat. Doing so during a hurricane definitely brings new challenges.

When the storm abated, we found ourselves somewhere off Nova Scotia and socked into thick fog with little or no wind. I discovered then that nights spent rolling in the swell with zero visibility while straining to hear ships—and knowing that if we heard one, we couldn't maneuver out of the way—were more frightening than the shrieking winds of the hurricane.

Non-seabirds often land on boats offshore. In the middle of the Atlantic, a little chickadee-sized bird came aboard *Eshowe* for a rest. It worked its way be-

low and found that the best perch was on the fiddle of the gimbaled stove, where it drank some offered water and ate some crumbs and slept the night away. In the morning, when it's not uncommon to find these guys feet up on the cabin sole, our little sojourner looked fit and rested as it flitted up to join us in the cockpit. Four of us were watching as the bird again took flight, flying low to the water to avoid the buffeting winds. As we speculated about where it would find landfall, an enormous fish leaped from the ocean and swallowed it down in one fluid motion. We were dumbfounded. "Did you see that!?" we bellowed, unbelievably. We all felt as though we'd just witnessed the death of a shipmate. Do you remember the story of Jonah? Could there be a clearer allegory?

While this delivery occurred fairly early in my sailing career, I'd been studying navigation and was getting pretty good at celestial navigation, practicing with two others on *Eshowe* who were experienced at taking sights. So I was somewhat surprised one morning when I relieved

Jonah from his early watch to find that the sun was rising behind us. Generally, when sailing from North America to Europe, one expects to see the sun rising ahead of the boat, in the east. The sun was in the right spot. We weren't. *Eshowe* was fitted with a grid-type compass, with the course set on the rotating ring, which displayed parallel lines. To steer the set course, one simply kept the line on the compass card in line with and parallel to the grid. A simple glance at the compass, even from a distance, showed if you were on course. Unless, of course, you were 180 degrees off course.

With a freezer full of fish, Martin, the owner of the boat, decided to add a little variety in the preparation of the mahimahi by making fish and chips. Even when set on a gimbaled stove, a pot of hot cooking oil at sea is a bad idea. All was well until Martin opened the oven door, which jammed the gimbal and poured boiling oil on his arm and hand. After his shrieks of agony subsided, we wrapped his arm in ice packs and plied him with various painkillers. Several



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days later, when we finally arrived in the Azores—31 days out from Fort Lauderdale—he was treated at the hospital and, fortunately, had no infection.

Thanks to the efforts of a young engineer on a Dutch ship, we were able to repair our broken driveshaft coupling. This repair held until *Eshowe* was two days out of the Azores.

Finally approaching the Strait of Gibraltar, we found that the levanter was blowing. The unrelenting easterly winds from directly out of the Mediterranean increased the prevailing head current, making it impossible for us to make headway. After tacking back and forth between Gib and Morocco with no easterly progress, we decided to put into Cadiz, Spain, to wait out the weather. We gingerly sailed up to a commercial fishing dock, where we soon discovered another byproduct of our Jonah's presence: Cadiz was in the throes of a cholera epidemic. At least the local fishing-boat mechanic's expertise helped us finally to fix the shaft coupling.

With a large cask of local vino stowed below and a dry-cured pig rump—with

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hoof and fur intact—hanging from the mizzenmast, it was smooth sailing in the Mediterranean for us at last. With calm seas, we could do a bit of cleaning up about the boat. Jonah removed all the well-used, food-encrusted burners and grates from the stove and proceeded to give them a real scrubbing in a bucket of soapy water in the cockpit. The water immediately turned black with stove filth, so out with the old and in with the new, right? For Jonah, it became baby-and-the-bathwater time: He dumped the dirty water, along with all of the stove parts, over the side.

Under the burner of a propane stove, there's a tiny orifice that emits the gas. It's then usually distributed in a usable pattern by the burner. No longer for us. We were left to use only that tiny hole. With a great deal of care, a match could

be held near the hole when the valve was cracked open on low. When the 18-inch-high blowtorch of a flame shot up from the hole, a pot had to be placed quickly over it to squash down the flame. That, then, was how we did our cooking for the remainder of the vexed voyage. Thank you, Jonah.

Our 66-day voyage from Florida landed us on Mallorca in November. I wended my way through Barcelona, Paris, and London before heading back to New York, then on to Florida to join my next boat and head off on new adventures. The hot blonde in Fort Lauderdale? She moved out of state with no forwarding address. Jonah, indeed.

A lifelong sailor, Captain Ron Schaper holds a 100-ton U.S. Coast Guard license and sails his Sabre 402 out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

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