



FROM THE AUTHOR OF TOTAL LOSS
PAUL GELDER

SUNK WITHOUT TRACE

30 dramatic accounts of
yachts lost at sea

SUNK
WITHOUT
TRACE

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

TOTAL LOSS

Dramatic First-Hand Accounts of Yacht Losses at Sea

3rd edition

Paul Gelder

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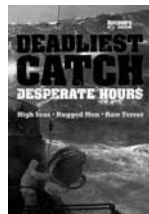
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PAUL GELDER

SUNK WITHOUT TRACE

30 DRAMATIC ACCOUNTS OF
YACHTS LOST AT SEA



**ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL
LONDON**

TO MY WIFE ANNE, WHO HAS KEPT ME AFLOAT, BOTH ASHORE, WHERE
A TIDE OF PAPERWORK THREATENS TO OVERWHELM ME, AND OFFSHORE
WHERE, AS THEY SAY, 'WORSE THINGS HAPPEN AT SEA...'

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PREFACE

Disaster at sea comes in many disguises. This collection of 30 dramatic accounts of yachts lost at sea covers several decades, and crosses the Atlantic to the Pacific and Indian oceans, venturing to Australia and New Zealand, as well as the Caribbean, America's East Coast and closer to home in Holland and the UK, including the Solent, Suffolk and Scotland.

Most of the stories date from the 1970s to the 1990s and involve a wide variety of craft, from cruising yachts, ranging in size from 23ft to 45ft, as well as Open 60 ocean-racing yachts, multihulls (both catamarans and trimarans), sloops, yawls, gaff-cutters and a barge yacht.

The disasters include storms – in one case a terrifying hurricane of 130 knots – as well as equipment failure, involving, among other things, broken anchor chain, failed bilge pumps, an unsecured mast and broken rudders. There are also incidents of faulty navigation – resulting in deadly encounters with reefs and harbour entrances.

There are fires, explosions, capsizes, encounters with UFOs (unidentified floating objects), a yacht which sinks in mid-Atlantic after being struck by a whale and yachts that spring mystifying leaks and slowly sink, despite the desperate efforts of crew to find or fix the leak. Finally, there is the human element as sheer exhaustion or seasickness take their toll on skipper or crew.

Advice from the long-suffering skippers involved in these tragic tales varies from 'never change the colour of your boat' to unselfishly questioning their own judgement or preparation before putting to sea.

If your yacht was dismasted, would you have the tools to cut away the rig? As one skipper found, 'a mast becomes a horrific hammer which can puncture a hole in your hull'. If your rudder dropped off, would you have the equipment and the ingenuity to fix things and create an emergency steering system? When did you last check your liferaft and lifejackets?

Do you carry a knife? Three skippers in this book survived, thanks to having a handy knife – in one case, he had to cut his personal lifeline, when it became a death line, trapping him on a capsized yacht. In two other cases, it was needed to cut the painter on a liferaft which threatened to sink, dragged along by the yacht they had just abandoned.

How secure is your anchor chain? In one incident grippingly described in these pages, the anchor chain broke after been 'sawn' through by coral. In another, the chain ran out of the anchor locker and disappeared overboard when the bitter end lashing simply snapped. The yacht was a total loss.

For the single-handed sailor aboard a badly-leaking monohull, there is the dreadful conundrum of choosing between pumping for your life, stopping to search for the cause of the leak, or abandoning ship while there is still time to launch the liferaft and collect essentials. In the case of Peter Tangvold (*Mystery Collision, Miraculous Survival*), he had no liferaft aboard his 32ft yacht *Dorothea*. Instead, he made a remarkable 55-mile voyage to safety in his 7ft plywood dinghy.

Self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-preservation are absolute essentials of good seamanship. Qualities that, in this modern age, seem endangered by too many of our rule-makers.

You have to admire the resourcefulness, pluck and fortitude of the 30 skippers and their crew on these unlucky yachts. They include legendary sailors, like the late H W Tilman and Malcolm Robson, as well as acclaimed contemporary writers, like Peter Nichols, author of *Voyage for Madman* and *Evolution's Captain*.

Nichols had wanted to be a writer since he was in his 20s. But it took the sinking of his leaky, engineless 27ft wooden boat, *Toad*, to inspire the memoir of the twinned sinkings of his boat and first marriage as described in *Sea Change*, his first highly praised book from which our extract is taken. As Nichols dryly observes aboard his sinking boat with her unstoppable leak: 'The bilge is V-shaped, so what looks half full is probably only a quarter full. I normally see half a glass of water as half full, but I have just become a fervent half-empty man.'

Malcolm Robson's laconic account of abandoning his 38ft cutter, *Banba IV*, reminds us of the rewards of maintaining a calm and phlegmatic grace when confronted with crisis. Faced with his sinking yacht 450 miles away from the nearest land, Robson did his sums: 'Total fuel about 90 hours in calm.... Total Trinidad rum: about three cases... say your prayers, lads, and away with prohibition!'

Spotting a rescue ship on the horizon, he called the crew aft, read them chapter 23 of *Hornblower*, put on lifejackets and sent up a red flare, announcing: 'Passports and money only!' since once near the freighter, it would be 'Jump!' and then would come the crashing of rigging, splintering of planks, etc. Robson's trousers fell down at the critical moment, but all were saved.

Peter Combe, the only crew member aboard the ill-fated *Windstar*, describes his skipper as 'a man of astounding imperturbability and apparent nonchalance' who seemed sublimely and blithely content to sail on, so long as there seemed to be water under his keel.

There are some truly remarkable accounts in these pages, plucked from yacht club journals and newsletters. Some appeared in earlier editions of the book *Total Loss* and deserve not to be lost to the passage of time. Herein lies

courage, wit and dogged determination, all wrapped up and recorded with literary verve. More importantly, there are some thought-provoking and indispensable lessons from which any modern sailor can learn the art of survival – saving lives, if not yachts.

We go to sea for adventure and as one survivor says in this book: 'If you can't cope with this, then don't go to sea. But don't get in a car either, and don't cross the road to get your morning paper!'

PAUL GELDER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like any collection of stories, this book could not have been compiled without the assistance and generosity of many people who were willing to share their tales of disaster at sea so that others might learn some of the lessons.

Happily, no lives were lost in any of these dramatic disasters and the skippers and crew survived even if their vessels did not.

There are stories here that never made the pages of *Total Loss*, a sister volume of first-hand accounts of losses at sea. And there are stories that were squeezed out of the third edition of that anthology as new disaster accounts took their place. But those stories deserved not to be lost and forgotten. I have added new, extended lessons where appropriate.

The late Jack Coote, who wrote the first edition of *Total Loss* more than 20 years ago, acknowledged Julian van Hasselt and the late Peter Tangvald (whose story, *Mystery Collision*, *Miraculous Survival*, appears in chapter 16) for their contribution in preliminary research into many of the accounts in these pages.

The editors of sailing magazines on both sides of the Atlantic have also given permission to use extracts from their publications, including Andrew Bray, editor of *Yachting World*.

I am particularly indebted to the author Peter Nichols for his permission to use an excerpt (chapter 4, *The Leak that Wouldn't Stop*) from his book, *Sea Change*, a heartfelt account of his single-handed voyage across the Atlantic in a leaking wooden boat. It's one of the most intimate, in-depth and thoughtful survival stories I have read and justifiably launched Nichols' career as a successful author. I am also grateful to Jack Gush for his gripping shipwreck tale, *Bluewater Castaways*, which gives a unique insight into the celebrated solo sailor Tom Follett. It took Ross Ireland 22 years before he could share his traumatic story, *The End of the Affair*, about the loss of his beloved 42ft classic Nicholson wooden sloop, *Inkoosaan*, which was dropped from a ship's crane. I would also like to thank Geoffrey Toye for his story *Storm Force 10 in the Irish Sea* about the loss of *Gwendoline*.

Solo sailors Isabelle Autissier (chapter 5, *Sea Dark Sky Crying*) and Josh Hall (chapter 15, *When Fear Came in Waves*) both gave me valuable time to interview them about their ordeals in the Southern Ocean, where both their yachts sunk within a few weeks of each other.

I was assisted on my own 'voyage' through these 30 traumatic tales by Janet Murphy, editorial director at Adlard Coles, and Hannah Leech, my book editor. I am also grateful for help from Jane Fenton at *Yachting Monthly*. Finally, I am indebted to my wife Anne for her patience on the 'lost weekends' while this book was taking shape, as well as her encouragement. She's 'bailed me out' metaphorically, more than once!

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Yacht	<i>Inkoosaan</i> (Nicholson 42 wooden sloop)
Skipper	Ross Ireland
Bound from	Palma, Majorca to Muscat, Oman
Date of loss	March 1988
Position	approx. 120 miles from the Egyptian Port of Berenice

It's taken 22 years for Ross Ireland to tell the story of his brief and traumatic love affair with his first yacht, Inkoosaan, a Nicholson 42, which he lost in a tragic accident in 1988.

WAS IT LOVE AT FIRST sight, or just a moment of boat owner insanity? I really wanted a Contessa 32 but in March 1985, I mysteriously ended up buying *Inkoosaan*, a classic 42ft wooden cruising yacht.

That summer I took a five month sabbatical to sail her from Ireland across the Bay of Biscay, to Spain, Portugal and the Mediterranean. *Inkoosaan* (Afrikaans for 'little chief' or 'little master') was a one-off, designed by John Nicholson and built in 1953 by Clare Lallow's yard, in Cowes, of Burmese teak on oak frames. Maybe it was the exposed, varnished planking and frames in the forecabin that turned my head. As well as being beautiful her hull was black and, as the old saying has it, 'Black boats never go to Hell'.

That March we were both 32 years old, which made me relatively young and inexperienced, while *Inkoosaan* was getting quite old and tired. We ended that summer's voyage in Palma, Majorca. It had been eventful. Halyards broke, blocks parted and sails split. We sprang a leak in the middle of the English Channel and were nearly dismayed

in Portugal, where a dredger ran a steel wire across the main channel at Figuera da Foz. But I was learning fast, or so I thought, and *Inkoosaan* was getting a new piece of kit in every port. At the end of our first summer together I put her to bed in the marina in Palma and went back to work in Muscat in the Oman.

Two years later, after a succession of big bills and poor workmanship and many frustrating trips to Majorca, I decided to bring *Inkoosaan* closer to home and arranged a mooring in Muscat harbour. In October 1987 we set off on the first leg of the journey, to the Egyptian city of Port Said at the entrance to the Suez Canal. A faulty alternator meant we lost engine power and couldn't charge the electrics. We sailed by paraffin lamp and sat out the frequent calms.

We left *Inkoosaan* at Port Said Yacht Club until the following March, when we began the second leg of the voyage to Muscat. I had an experienced crew via Crewseekers and two friends from Muscat, Steve and his girlfriend Maija.

Once we cleared the canal we sailed south in the sunshine. We passed the Straits of Ghulab and entered the Red Sea. Nothing broke, parted or split. Apart from some minor seasickness we were enjoying a great sail. But 100 miles further south we had a problem.

At 0500 on Friday, 18 March, one of the crew woke me to say we had lost steerage. The wheel felt okay, but there was a clunking sound under the cockpit floor and whichever way I turned the wheel, nothing happened. The clunk was the steering box moving under the floor.

As dawn broke, the seriousness of our position and the words of a shipwright in Palma came back to haunt me. I'd been warned that the steering gear box was fastened by coach or carriage bolts, which could work loose, causing a steering failure. I accepted his advice to change them for through-bolted fastenings with external pads, but I'd run out of time and money, having just spent a small fortune on painting the hull white and new cushion covers. But I always made sure that the wheel was lashed securely in port.

In Port Said, *Inkoosaan* had been moved while I was away and when I returned, the wheel was untied. How long had her rudder been flopping from side to side over the winter? Why hadn't I checked the bolts? Why hadn't I replaced them? Why hadn't I listened to the man in Palma? Self-blame and recrimination were overwhelming me.

We dropped the sails, put out a Mayday on the VHF radio, and being British, made a cup of tea to calm us while we discussed our situation. Wallowing in a lumpy sea and a 20 knot breeze, everyone was sick. I'd read a bit about rudderless sailing but never practised it. We were well offshore, 120 miles from the nearest feasible Egyptian port of Berenice. If we got close and contacted a local fishing boat I wondered what sort of salvage terms would be agreed and then reneged upon.

We had plenty of fuel, food and water, maybe we could fashion a jury rudder and get into Berenice ourselves for repairs? It was when I went below looking for tools (and inspiration) that I discovered we were sinking. Dashing back to the cockpit, it dawned on me that, of course, the rudder stock would sooner or later fall through its skin fitting, leaving a neat round hole in the hull. Grabbing an armful of tools and bungs, I yelled to Maija to change the Mayday from 'drifting without steerage' to 'sinking'. The tone of her voice turned from a calm monotone into a scream for help as I began unscrewing floorboards.

Half an hour later, bung in place and boat pumped dry, I sat in the cockpit trying to regain my breath and composure. We tried making a jury rudder by lashing boards to the end of the spinnaker pole and tying it to the stern. But the person on the end of the pole was lifted off his feet – you can't steer a 15 tonne yacht that way. While we were rethinking our strategy, a response to our Mayday came over the radio from the watch officer of an oil tanker. Although this was before the days of GPS, I had a satellite navigation system which gave a position every few hours from passing, rather than geo-stationary satellites. We were able to give our position to within a mile or so. The Scandinavian-owned VLCC (Very Large Crude Carrier) soon appeared on the horizon.

We took a bearing on the ship and told them where to look for us. Even with binoculars they couldn't see us, nor could they pick us up on their radar. They didn't even see the parachute distress flare we launched a little later. We used an orange smoke flare on the foredeck, but the breeze blew away the smoke. Finally, as they got closer, we launched another parachute flare, which they saw.

Less than an hour after we first saw her, the tanker was alongside.

She approached us to windward, so we were sheltered from the swell. They lowered a line and towed us gently at 3–4 knots about halfway along their hull. If they had stopped they would have turned to wind and the swell would have had us bouncing against her side.

In ballast, the ship's deck was about 60ft above us. A rope ladder was lowered and I climbed on deck to be met by an officer who invited me to join the captain on the bridge. It was about midday by now, seven hours since we lost steerage. I was grateful to be on the air-conditioned bridge, where the captain explained he was under orders to cruise at optimum speed for fuel efficiency to Khorfakkan, at the entrance to the Arabian Gulf, in the UAE.

He had not radioed the oil company he was chartered by for permission to stop, as he didn't expect it would be given. But he was willing to help us, providing we agreed not to discuss the matter with the media or draw attention to him or his ship. Obviously, I agreed.

The tanker's deck crane was rated for 15 tonnes and *Inkoosaan*, fully laden, probably weighed about 17 tonnes. The captain said he could spare another couple of hours if we wanted to try and lift her aboard and he would then 'drop us off' in Muscat, where we could pre-arrange a tow into port. I had friends there who could help.

Towing *Inkoosaan* behind the tanker at 14 knots for 2,000 miles was not an option. The alternatives were to cut her adrift (a potential danger to shipping), scuttle her, or use the ship's more powerful radio to arrange a tow to the nearest port in Egypt, still about 120 miles away. But would our new rescuers be able to find us? The tanker could not wait around. Would the rescuers claim the boat as salvage, or demand a very inflated fee? It was not a difficult decision to accept the captain's offer of a crane lift.

First a stairway was lowered down the side of the tanker's hull so we could get up and down to *Inkoosaan* more easily to transfer crew and personal possessions aboard the tanker. Then canvas lifting strops were lowered by the deck crane. We disconnected the fore and backstays and pushed the strops into position under the hull – not easy as we were still being towed at 3–4 knots. The stairway was hoisted out of the way.

The crane took the strain and as the strops stretched and settled in position we realised we wouldn't have enough height to clear the

tanker's rail. We lowered her again and rearranged things so the crane hook was lower. Satisfied it might work this time, we climbed back up the rope ladder to the deck. The heat and activity taking its toll, we were, by now, very tired. *Inkoosaan* was lifted clear of the water, the strops creaked and groaned as they took the load. The crane slowly lifted her up the side of the tanker. She swung and bumped her way higher until she was almost at the rail. Then, suddenly, one of the strops broke and *Inkoosaan* fell. Seventeen tonnes dropping 50ft makes quite a splash!

I felt numb – too exhausted to feel much emotion. Somehow I think I'd been expecting her to fall. As I looked down, I saw the cabin roof had collapsed, along with the mast, but she was still afloat and still attached alongside the tanker.

A brief and slightly bewildering conversation followed with the officer in charge of the lift. Did we carry any electronic emergency signalling devices that might need to be disabled to prevent a full-scale rescue alert? Did the liferaft have a hydrostatic release?

With *Inkoosaan* severely damaged and her hull full of water, the officer was explaining to me that I would have to scuttle her. A bosun's chair was hooked to the crane and I was lowered back into her cockpit. The saloon was flooded with several feet of water. As waves broke over the side, more water ran into the cabin. The yacht's freeboard was only a couple of feet now and, even in the lee of the tanker, waves were washing aboard. Finding and opening a seacock underwater was difficult and it was clear *Inkoosaan* would sink soon enough in open sea. I climbed back into the chair and gave the signal to be hoisted up.

We cut *Inkoosaan* adrift. Three years to the month since I had first set eyes on her in Carrickfergus, my love affair with her ended so abruptly. I walked to the stern rail and watched my boat slide past and recede into the waves as the tanker steamed back on course. Sitting low in the water and with no mast she was soon lost from view. My tears didn't help.

We spent a week on the tanker, eating, drinking, jogging round the deck and playing table tennis. The captain and his crew looked after us very well. The chief engineer gave me a tie with the shipping line's logo, which I've kept but never worn.

It was over ten years before I could easily discuss what happened.

The question I was asked most often was ‘Did the insurance pay up?’ which, thankfully, it did. But not before asking me to write to the tanker’s owners holding them responsible for the loss – I refused.

The most important question should have been ‘Was anybody hurt?’ – which no one ever asks. Thanks to fate, kindness and the competence of the tanker’s crew, no lives were lost or injuries sustained.

■ LESSONS LEARNED

- Never change the colour of your boat – it’s considered unlucky.
- Always lock or secure the wheel or tiller with the rudder amidships when not in use.
- If you are planning to cruise long distances, or outside areas that are geared up to service sailing boats, you need to be as technically self-sufficient as possible. Make sure your boat is structurally and mechanically sound. A surveyor’s report isn’t enough. Get to know your boat’s systems well. The steering gear can be a common cause of problems.
- Practise rudderless sailing. Do you have a plan for a jury steering system in case of a broken, lost or disabled rudder? Consider fitting a windvane self-steering unit and choose one that combines an emergency rudder, then you’ll have a permanent spare.
- In the event of a Mayday situation, has your liferaft been serviced regularly? Do you have an EPIRB? Fit a decent radar reflector.
- Always keep a good lookout and fit an AIS receiver. They are cheap, and with ships travelling at up to 25 knots one of the best bits of safety kit you can have.
- Remember, a liferaft is a tiny dot in the ocean for any approaching rescue ship. Carry lots of distress flares or a Very pistol and cartridges.

BLUEWATER CASTAWAYS

Yacht	<i>Arcularius V</i> (35ft US Kaiser Gale Force loop)
Skipper	Tom Follett
Crew	Jack and Lella Gush
Bound from	Playa Blanca, Lanzarote Island in the Canary Island to Fort Lauderdale, Florida
Date of loss	2 February 1986
Position	off Great Inagua in the outer Bahama group of islands

Jack Gush tells the story.

IT WAS A RESTLESS SORT of night. For some reason, which I could not define, I had a strong premonition that all was not well. Twice during Lella's watch from 0400 to 0600 I got up, went to the cockpit and asked her if she was steering the courses Tom had given her.

Tom Follett, our American skipper, claimed to be familiar with the area and had laid off a series of courses to take us from Ambergris Cay in the outer Bahamas, round the southern limit of the vast Caicos Bank and then north-west to Acklins Island, a passage of 200 miles.

We were delivering *Arcularius V*, a 35ft sloop, from Vilamoura in Portugal to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and were now nearing the end of what had been a harmonious and successful voyage.

The three of us were following our customary night watch routine, two on and four off. Normally, I had only to put my head to the pillow to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep. But that night sleep would not come. Before we set sail from the shelter of Ambergris Cay, Tom had spent a long time poring over the chart. The islands along our route

were low-lying and the currents between them strong and unpredictable. In those days, 1986, there was no GPS, and even if there had been Tom certainly wouldn't have had one. Tom had his chart, his compass and his sextant – his wrist watch was his chronometer.

Tom was short, thick-set, with cropped grey hair, a smattering of white stubble and very blue eyes – which readily took on a mischievous twinkle.

He was a celebrated single-hander and had made several solo Atlantic crossings, including taking part in the 1968 Ostar (Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race (see footnote), in which he came third. It was typical of Tom that he sailed in one of Dick Newick's somewhat unconventional proas. He took the longer southern route and came third. Tom was Spartan – to say the least.

Lella and I (in our late fifties) were amateurs. We planned one day to make an ocean voyages of our own. We had signed on with Tom to get further experience and also because he had misled us over the size of *Arcularius V*. We had crossed the Atlantic with him in his own boat, a 28ft Hereshoff, again with just a chart, a sextant and Tom's wrist watch, and he knew we had had enough of small boat sailing. This time, in his invitation to join as crew, he wrote that the *Arcularius* was a 53ft sloop – a luxurious yacht, he said: but when we got to Playa Blanca, Lanzarote, we found that she was only 35 ft.

'What happened?' I asked Tom.

The mischievous twinkle appeared. 'I reversed the digits,' he replied. 'I had to; I knew you wouldn't come otherwise...'

Towards the early hours I must have dozed off. It seemed to me that I had hardly slept at all when there was a tremendous crash and a jolt from underneath that shook the yacht from truck to keelson. Then, to my relief, she seemed to sail on, but only to strike again and yet again.

As I struggled up, I could hear Lella calling for Tom from the cockpit and by the time I came into the saloon from the forward cabin his stubby figure was ahead of me, mounting the companionway steps. By this time the yacht had come to rest on her beam ends. As I climbed into the cockpit, I could hear the roar of the breaking seas. Lella had been thrown about and was bruised but not injured. The next wave sent spray all over us and the yacht lifted and then pounded, but she

had stopped driving across the reef, or whatever we had hit.

The time was 0520. The moon had gone down and the night was pitch black. Tom discovered that on our lee side, where the stanchions were half awash, we were in 2ft of water. Breaking seas hit hard on the weather side of the yacht and broke over us into the cockpit. We were soon drenched, but at least the water was warm.

We were not sure what we had hit or where we were, and it was too dark to see anything. So we went below to await daylight and assess our situation. The yacht still lifted and pounded in an alarming manner, but more than half an hour was to pass before we heard the ominous cracking and splitting of the glass fibre hull. Water then started to trickle in and was soon slopping round our feet.

In the meantime, we drank some rum and sent out a Mayday on the VHF radio, though we knew we were in a sparsely populated area and were certain our call would go unanswered.

As I perched as best I could on the upper side of the saloon in dripping oilskins, sipping the rum, I was overcome by a feeling of deep disappointment. What had been a happy, harmonious voyage had ended in a shambles. Cushions, clothes, bedding and books had tumbled onto the lee side, and already Tom's bunk and much of his gear was half under water. Lella was up forward, attempting to pack our clothes into a large red canvas bag. As soon as she opened a locker on the upper side, everything fell out on top of her; the lower side was already under water.

At the first glimpse of light, Tom and I were in the cockpit straining our eyes shorewards. Gradually we could make out the land, low-lying and sandy, about 300 yards away. We decided it must be one of the Inaguas, either Great or Little Inagua, two islands that form part of the outer Bahama group. We were on a reef on which the seas were breaking heavily. The Trade Wind was blowing steadily at 20 knots. The reef was insufficient to give much of a lee and the sea inside it was choppy.

Tom climbed gingerly over the lee rail and stood up to his thighs in the water. He decided, unwisely I thought, to try to wade ashore and make a reconnaissance. I insisted on putting a line round his waist and paying out as he went. This was just as well, for after a few yards he disappeared with the waves over his head. A raised hand appeared,

which I took to be the signal to haul him back to the comparative safety of the yacht. Lella had always been unable to swim, perhaps due to negative buoyancy.

In all her years of sailing Lella has never learnt to swim, so it was decided that Tom should now row her ashore to terra firma in our inflatable. We could see that there was a long, sandy beach running off to the south, backed by low scrub and stunted palm trees. Before Tom left, we inflated our six-man liferaft and attached it to a stanchion that was not quite under water.

While Tom was away, I began to gather up the gear and provisions we would need as castaways, and load them into the liferaft. At the angle at which the yacht lay, buffeted by the seas, moving around was something of an acrobatic feat and progress was slow and wet. I was concerned only with our immediate future. I collected tins of food, two 25-litre jerry cans of fresh water, a sail to serve as a tent, an awning as a groundsheet, a small camping stove, spare gas containers, plenty of lines, a ball of twine and an axe. I did not forget the tin opener, the cutlery, a sharp knife, matches, mugs, loo paper, soap, the binoculars, a torch, a few tools and some fishing gear. But I discovered later that I left behind my wallet, containing money and credit cards, though more than once my hand must have been within inches of it. Subconsciously, I must have been aware that for the time being other things were of more pressing importance.

Tom returned after a hard row against wind and sea. I could see he was grey with fatigue. We loaded the bag Lella had thoughtfully packed into the liferaft. The interior of the yacht was now chaotic. The water was over the batteries, which were giving off acrid fumes. We sloshed about and gathered up our documents: the ship's papers, insurance policy and our passports.

We attached the laden liferaft to the inflatable with a short line.

By the time we were ready to cast off, the inflatable dinghy was full of water from the spray that came right over the yacht, but we climbed in and, while Tom rowed, I bailed with a saucepan. Downwind it was relatively easy going.

On the beach we took stock of our situation. It was now daylight and we found we were on the east side of Great Inagua. The island's northern extremity, a low sandy headland, was only a few hundred

yards away. The green scrub and the sprinkling of stunted palms covered the island as far as the eye could see. Just north of us, the beach ran into rocks that continued as far as the headland. The reef ran roughly north-south, parallel to the beach, about 300 yards offshore. Inside the reef were a number of nasty-looking coral heads, which became more prominent at Low Water.

We were clearly miles from anywhere, in a lonely sea-area, and it might be days before we were rescued. We began to carry the gear from the liferaft up to the scrub and organise a camp. The beach was littered with exactly the kind of bamboo poles that were needed to make the framework of a tent. The ball of twine came in handy for the lashings and the lines became guys for the tent poles.

Finally, we pulled the liferaft up to higher ground, from where we hoped its orange canopy might be spotted by a passing vessel. In it we left our scant emergency gear: a few flares, a torch and two small cans of water. The bushes round the tent soon became decorated with our wet, bedraggled clothing. At about noon we crowded into the tent to get out of the heat. I made a salad with a few bits and pieces, but none of it was eaten. We each had a drink of water and began to discuss our situation.

The island of Great Inagua is pear-shaped and is about 65 miles long. There is one settlement, Matthew Town, at its southern end, near extensive saltings. We were at the northern end, the tip of the pear. The rest of the island is uninhabited. None of us was enthusiastic about a 60-mile walk through the prickly scrub, carrying a load of provisions. The alternatives were to try to get to Matthew Town in the inflatable, or stay where we were in the camp. I seemed to remember reading somewhere that as a general rule castaways are better off to remain encamped in one place and try to attract attention.

In the afternoon, Tom rowed out to the yacht, still on the reef, to get our charts to help make a better assessment of our position. Lella and I set off with binoculars to reconnoitre our immediate surroundings and walked up to the sandy headland. We could see where the reef petered out at the point. Had our course been 50 yards to the east, we would have cleared both reef and headland and sailed between the two Inaguas. We could see Little Inagua about five miles away, also

uninhabited. A current in the night setting strongly to the south-west had put us several miles off course.

We sat down and minutely scanned the interior through the binoculars for any sign of human activity, however small. About two miles away rotting trees protruded at crazy angles from a big lake or swamp, which we judged to be salt water, or at least brackish. As we walked slowly back to the camp we came across some dung, dried out but not that old. But what sort of animal? We have never before studied dung with such keen interest.

Our first night in the camp was a misery. Tom, perhaps out of respect for our privacy, chose not to sleep in the tent, but under the bushes. Lella and I lay down in our oilskins using our other clothes as a makeshift pillow. We had thought that because the ground was sandy it would be soft, or at least yielding, but we soon found it as hard as concrete. The wind got up and swung to the north-east, so that the tent became a wind tunnel and the sail flapped noisily. The palm fronds rustled, and more than once I thought of the dung and the wild animals that must be somewhere about. Two or three times in the night I got up and went down to the beach. I peered seawards, but there were no lights, only darkness and wind.

At dawn I found Tom standing above the beach, gazing out to sea. He had not slept either. The yacht now lay over, her mast in the water. The previous afternoon, Tom had found the cabin flooded and had been unable to rescue our charts. It looked as if we would not salvage much more from the yacht, though things that floated might get washed ashore. The tide was out and the beach was devoid of footprints. A flock of sandpipers, unafraid of humans, tripped unconcernedly across the sand, only feet away from us.

We made coffee on the tiny stove and then moved the tent. This time we were more thorough. We chose a sheltered hollow, uprooted all the bushes and stacked them as a windbreaker and wild animal fence. We gathered palm fronds and made a mattress of them, several inches thick. We collected driftwood and made a galley protected from the wind, and with shade for our tins of food.

We calculated we had food for at least 20 days, plus 40 litres of water, which we intended to ration with great care. Though there were probably animals about, we could not count on finding fresh water.

In the afternoon I donned mask and flippers, hoping there were no sharks about. I swam lazily among the coral heads, some with rusty antlers. There were mounds of mustard-coloured brain coral 3 feet high; waving fans, long-spined urchins and dead men's fingers – all in a confusion of colour. And there were fish everywhere. We were not likely to die of starvation, I thought, as I swam among them. I had no gun and began to ponder the question of catching them. We had a few hooks and we had our dinghy, or perhaps I could fashion a spear.

That evening, we cooked ourselves a decent meal: a tin of stew and a tin of sweetcorn. Except for our torches, which we were anxious to conserve, we had no form of lighting, so before it got dark, at about 1900, the meal had to be cooked and eaten. It was not clear whether it was supper or high tea. We washed it down with sips of water.

After breakfast the next morning Tom went for a walk to explore to the south, and I set about making further improvements to the camp. Lella later went to the beach to wash the dishes in the sea. Suddenly, I heard her shouting, 'There's a ship, there's a ship!'

As I ran, it seemed an incredible stroke of good fortune that a vessel had come into these waters so soon.

But sure enough, there she was, about 2 miles away to the south, outside the reef, the black shape of a small ship. Lella ran to our tent and came back with a mirror. I placed her on the beach a few yards away, facing the sea, so that the ship appeared to me to sit on the top of her head. I trained the mirror until the flash fell on her back and then moved it up to the top of her head, and then flashed it repeatedly up and down. After a couple of minutes I stopped and we waited, straining our eyes for any sign of response. Tom had walked along the beach in that direction. Would they see him?

'It's going further away,' Lella said, despair in her voice. I tried to line up the distant boat with some part of the reef to discern which way it was moving, but without a definite result.

I started flashing the mirror again. Watching carefully, I noticed that the ship was approaching. For the moment I said nothing to Lella. I wanted to be certain.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. We saw Tom striding back along the beach, and a small wooden boat appeared inside the reef, powered by an outboard, with two men in it, moving quickly

towards us. We stared in disbelief.

Tom and the men in the boat arrived at about the same time. The two men, one inky black and the other brown, both dressed in tattered shorts, spoke Spanish; a language with which we have no difficulty.

They explained that they were from the Dominican Republic, fishing illegally in these waters. They had seen Tom on his walk and our signals, but had come to explain that they could not help us. If caught by the Bahamas police they would go to prison. The brown one stressed this by crossing his wrists, as if handcuffed. But surely, we replied, they were not going to leave us on the beach, two men and a woman, to die of thirst.

They spoke of their poverty. They had not yet started fishing. In a few days time, with their catch, if they were lucky, they would return to Santa Domingo. They were sorry, they could not help us.

Could they take just one of us to Matthew Town, we asked. It was a long way off, they answered. They would lose fishing time. We replied that we would be prepared to pay their expenses.

I saw them glance towards the reef and our stricken yacht, as if to assess our financial standing. They then moved away, towards the bow of their boat, and conferred among themselves. After a few minutes they came up with their figure – 5,000 US dollars.

We received this figure in stony silence. The wavelets slapped gently against our legs. I think that all of us were aware that we were about to bargain in earnest, perhaps for our lives, but we were not going to pay a ridiculous price. We put our heads together at the stern of the boat.

Our offer was for them to take Tom to within a few miles of Matthew Town at night and land him on the beach. For this we were prepared to pay 200 dollars. They conferred among themselves for quite some time, and eventually came up with a figure of 500 dollars, a tenth of their original asking price, and as I pointed out to Tom, not a bad figure when worked out on a per person basis.

Tom went back to the camp to get ready. Lella and I stayed talking to the fishermen. We thought it wisest not to let them see our stores. I asked them about the wild animals. There were wild donkeys, they told us, hundreds of them, and they could be aggressive. We ought to watch out for them, they said. There were also wild cattle and boar.

Tom returned and we said goodbye, and they took him out, through the reef, to where their fishing boat lay rolling horribly.

Left to ourselves, Lella and I settled down to camp life. We continued to ration ourselves as regards both food and water. As I pointed out to Lella, it was not certain when, or if, Tom would return. The fishermen might not take him to Matthew Town; they might take him to Santa Domingo, in which case he would be weeks getting back to us. Or they might suspect that he had more than 500 dollars on him, which he had, cut his throat and toss him overboard.

In the days that followed there was plenty to do. Again we improved the camp and thickened up the surrounding prickly bushes, our wild donkey defence. We left the inflatable handy on the beach in case the donkeys came in force; in which case we planned to row out a short distance, on the assumption that they could not swim.

The mattress of palm fronds was now over a foot thick and was, Lella declared, as comfortable as our mattress at home. But often I could not sleep. This may have been because, without lighting, we went to bed so early. But I would lie awake, listening to the rustling palms, and a plan began to form in my mind to get us out of our predicament if Tom failed to return.

This plan entailed cutting a path through the scrub and carrying the dinghy to the lee side of the island, where the sea was flat calm. This would take Lella and I some time, perhaps two or three days, but we could cover the distance in stages, returning to the camp every evening. We could then sail down the 70 miles to Matthew Town on lee side, anchoring or beaching the boat at night.

Our inflatable was a Tinker and could be sailed, except that its centreboard, mast, and sail were under water in *Arcularius V*. But its rudder and tiller unit had, by a stroke of luck, already been washed ashore. It would not be too difficult to make a centreboard, and, with the bamboos lying around, a mast.

Beach-combing soon became an important part of our daily routine. Early every morning and last thing before our evening meal, we carefully searched the beach, and were usually rewarded for our pains. One day we found a box of a dozen eggs, which we had bought in the supermarket in San Juan, Puerto Rico – only two eggs were broken. Another time it was an almost full bottle of good quality