

Chapter 6

“We will row out toward the middle of the harbor before putting up the sails—one sailor at the helm and the other on the oars. First, get well away from the dock and the shore; then turn, row into the wind, and raise your mains’l.

“*Willow* will go first, so you ladies step aboard. One of you go up to the bow to receive the mooring line, and the other get your oars ready. I’ll cast off your lines.

“I’m releasing your bow line. The wind will swing the bow away from the float. Here’s the line; keep it out of the way and out of the water. Now, get those oars into the rowlocks and pull away from the dock. Here’s the stern line, helmswoman. You do the steering and let your shipmate concentrate on pulling the oars. I know, they take a little getting used to, but you will soon have the boat moving steadily forward.”

Four students had come for the sailing lesson—two women and two men—out of the five expected. That meant only three boats would be needed.

Earl’s fleet consisted of four sister sailboats, nearly identical except for their names: *Willow*, *Winner*, *Wind Chaser*, and *Walter*. They were seventeen-foot, classic, wooden, pocket-cruiser sloops with cuddy cabins and ample cockpits. *Winner* would be left at the dock today.

All students except Leila had attended Earl’s shore school a week ago. They knew how to handle the sails, in theory at least. This would be their first time on the water. Lacking the benefit of any prior instruction, Leila would accompany Earl in the instructor’s boat and learn whatever she could absorb as an observer. The two ladies, as we have seen, were assigned to *Willow*; the men would sail *Walter*. Earl would sail *Wind Chaser* with Leila being his passenger.

The lesson, as Earl had explained it, would consist of beating

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to windward and then running home before the wind. Each boat had an intercom radio, allowing the students to hear the instructor from a distance.

“*Walter*, you’re next. You saw how it’s done. Here we go.”

“*Willow!*” he shouted, for *Willow* was already several boat-lengths away, and the breeze made noise in one’s ears. “When you get a chance, bring the fenders in and stow them under the cockpit seat on the starboard side.

“I’ll hold onto the bow line while you get those oars ready. Okay, here we go, *Walter*—swinging away from the dock. Take the bow line back to the cockpit with you. ... Dig those oars in and pull; try to keep the blades vertical when they’re in the water, or they won’t do any good. Here comes the stern line. Now, get some headway on.

“Okay, Leila, let’s get aboard *Wind Chaser*. You can operate the tiller if you like, and I’ll do the rowing. Don’t worry: I’ll tell you what to do. Go ahead and step aboard while I cast off. I’m going to sit facing the bow, so I can see the other boats.”

“*Willow*, keep rowing!” he shouted. “And helmswoman, turn up to windward now, and hold your course straight into the wind.

“*Walter*, lift your oars clear of the water then reach forward, letting the blades swing toward the bow; then dip them in, keeping the blades vertical, and *pull hard*.”

Wind Chaser, having come around from the opposite side of the float, was leaving *Walter* behind under Earl’s powerful stokes with the oars.

“*Willow*, now raise your mains’l!” Earl called out to the leading boat. “Keep heading dead into the wind!”

Looking back over his shoulder, he directed more encouragement at the lagging vessel: “*Walter*, keep pulling! Steer a little more upwind because you’re drifting sideways!”

Earl was closing in on *Willow*, enabling him to give them directions without shouting so loudly.

“*Willow*, now turn to port slightly, heading off the wind just enough to steady your mains’l, and sheet it in. ... You’re sailing!

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Bring your oars aboard. ... Now, quickly unfurl your jib. ... Now, sheet the jib in, but not too tight, and haul the main in as close as you can.”

Earl shipped his oars, letting *Wind Chaser* coast.

“Leila, see the intercom there on the seat next to you? Would you hand it to me?” He reached behind his back, and she placed the device in his hand.

“*Willow*, head off the wind, a bit more to port, but not too much,” he said over the intercom radio. “You want to keep those sails pulling you forward. Ease the jib sheet if you fall off too much. It’s okay to have it luffing a little: you want to hold close to the wind until you get to open water.”

He looked over his shoulder, back at *Walter*.

“*Walter*, you’re doing fine. Concentrate on making long, steady pulls with those oars. And steer upwind more: toward me. We want to get you more to windward, away from the lee shore.

“I’m going to turn around and face the stern now, so I can row more easily,” he said to Leila. “Also, I get to look at you. Keep an eye on *Willow*. Here, take the intercom and hang the lanyard around your neck. Channel one is *Willow*; channel two is *Walter*. We need to get *Walter* to where *Willow* was when they raised her sails, but they should be a little more to windward in case they have trouble.”

“Aye-aye, Captain. ... *Walter*, you will need to steer toward the middle of the bay. And hurry! You don’t want the girls to get away from you, do you?” she taunted, smiling at Earl.

“That should have some effect,” said Earl, grinning.

“I’m not sure they heard me. ... Oh, I see: they’re switching positions. Evidently, the helmsman thinks he can do better at the oars.”

“How is *Willow* doing?”

“She’s off to a good start, making progress toward the lake.”

“*Walter* is coming along better now,” he observed.

“Shall I bring the fenders in?”

“Yes. Go ahead, please.”

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Leila left the tiller, scrambled over the oars as Earl continued to row, and collected the fenders from the port side, tossing them into the cockpit; then she stepped back over the oars and resumed her position at the helm.

“Tell *Willow* to come about before getting too close to shore.”

“*Willow*, be sure you leave room to come about. Remember, you will drift downwind fast if your sails are not filled, so be quick and always keep an eye on the shore.”

“When did you teach sailing?”

“It just seemed the thing to say. I must be absorbing it from you.”

Leila located the fender stowage under the starboard cockpit seat and put the two air-filled tubes away.

“Are they coming about?” Earl asked her.

“*Willow*, are you thinking about coming about?” she prompted.

“What do you call it when you switch over to the other side of the wind?” she asked Earl.

“The other tack. It would be the port tack.”

“*Willow*, go ahead and switch to the port tack. Put the tiller hard over to the port side; then when the bow comes across the wind, release your port jib sheet and quickly sheet the jib in on the starboard side.”

“Don’t tell me you figured that out by yourself.”

“It seemed simple from here, but I thought they might be forgetting what to do. That’s the way it always is with my employees before I get them trained.”

“Where did you learn about coming about?”

“I was watching you on Monday afternoon, remember? I heard you say, ‘Coming about.’”

“Let’s see if we can get *Walter* to put up her main.”

“*Walter* helmsman, go ahead and raise the mains’l. Rower, pass the—”

“What do you call it?”

“Halyard.”

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“—halyard to him; then keep rowing. Helmsman, keep steering while you hoist the sail, and keep your bow pointed into the wind.”

“How was that?” she asked. “It’s just what you told the other boat.”

“Except you embellished it considerably.”

“That’s because I thought *Walter* needed everything spelled out as you were doing with them when they were having trouble with the oars.”

“You did fine, Leila. You were right to keep them rowing, under the circumstances. How is *Willow* doing?”

“They’re trimming the jib on the port tack and picking up speed. I think the girls have gotten the knack.”

“I’m going to raise our sails. Keep an eye on *Walter*.”

“Shall I unfurl the jib while you raise the main?”

“Go ahead.”

“*Walter* has her main up,” Leila reported. “But it doesn’t look right.”

“The luff isn’t tight. It looks like they didn’t use the winch.”

“*Walter*, you need to get the sail all the way up. Rower, turn around and use the winch on the halyard. Helmsman, try to keep the bow pointed straight into the wind until the luff is tight.”

Wind Chaser’s sails filled as Earl and Leila adjusted the sheets. Leila was thrilled at the sensation of the boat’s response, gliding forward so easily, being pulled by the invisible wind—drawn by the wind into the wind itself.

“*Walter*, that looks better. Rower, keep pulling on the oars a little while longer. Helmsman, steer a little off the wind to the port side just until the sail starts drawing.”

“Nice call, Leila. Now, let’s see if we can get them to unfurl her jib.”

“*Walter*, ship your oars and haul your main in tight. Helmsman, unfurl your jib, but hold your tiller steady too. Use your knee.”

“Earl, please hand me the winch handle when you’re through,

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and I'll sheet our jib in closer. We're picking up speed already."

"You're really getting into this."

"It's fun! ... *Walter's* jib is flailing, and their main is luffing too."

"We had better go back. Tell *Willow* to slow down because they're leaving us behind, *Walter* being so poky here. Tell her not to point so high."

"*Willow*, you're leaving us behind. You don't have to point quite so high now that you've cleared the point. Ease your main and turn away from the wind a bit. You will go faster without making as much progress to windward, but keep an eye on the lee shore too."

"Let's jibe and sail back to *Walter*."

"Turning to port?"

"Affirmative. We'll be on the opposite tack. Say 'jibe ho' and watch your head."

"Jibe ho!"

The breeze having become brisk, the little boat shuddered as the boom quickly swung across the cockpit to the starboard side, and the mains'l filled again with a *crack*.

"Let the jib out; we're going to be running downwind," commanded the captain as he payed out the main sheet, letting the boom swing wide over the starboard side.

"What happened to the wind?"

"It's amazing, isn't it? Going with the wind, we're subtracting from its speed rather than adding to it."

"I see. We're still moving right along, but it's not quite as thrilling. ... *Walter* has gone over to the port tack, and her jib is back winded."

"Tell them to let her main out a bit. We need to get her moving ahead through the water."

"*Walter*, pull your jib sheet in on the starboard side, and release it on the port side. Then let your boom out a little more. Keep your present course until you pick up speed."

"As soon as we get even with them, we'll come around to a

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reach.”

“What’s a reach?”

“Across the wind. How’s *Willow* doing?”

“She’s disappeared behind the point—all but the tops of her sails.”

“Have her switch to the starboard tack now.”

“*Willow*, we can’t see you. Come about now to the starboard tack. Try to keep us in sight.

“Coming up to a reach!” she exclaimed to Earl excitedly. “I’ll trim the jib.”

“You’re not leaving much for me to do,” complained the captain.

“I’m having too much fun. Just haul that main in, and we’ll see how fast we can go. Does it look like *Walter* is ready to get back on her course for the harbor exit?”

“I would say so. They could point higher first, but that might be too hard for them. Just have them come about.”

“*Walter*, come about now—helm to the lee: to your right, turning to port. ... Now, release your starboard jib sheet. Keep the helm over, and bring your bow across the wind. ... Hold it there! Now, sheet in that jib and make those sails work!”

“Good job.”

“Hey, Captain, we’re sailing now!”

“You’re getting the hang of it, Leila. Soon you’ll have the rail in the water.”

“I’d better come about first. I wouldn’t want to ram the dock! Ready about?”

“Why did you say ‘ready about’?”

“Are you ready? I hope so because here we go. Helm’s alee! ... I thought it sounded good. What should I have said?”

“‘Ready about’ is correct, you sailor. So’s ‘helm’s alee.’”

“*Walter*, haul your mains’l in closer now, and steer as near the wind as you can while keeping it full. Sheet your jib in close too. Try to make the mouth of the harbor without spilling any wind.”

“I can see *Willow* now. They’re cooking,” she reported.

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“Let’s hold back until we get *Walter* out to the lake.”

“*Walter*, round up a little. You don’t need to have the rail in the water. I know it’s fun, but you’re not pointing high enough to make the entrance.”

“I’ll head off a bit; I’m easing the jib,” she announced to the instructor.

“No, not yet—unless you want to sail circles around them. Let’s remain close hauled and point high enough to let the sails luff some, which will slow us down. ... I think *Walter*’s main isn’t nearly flat enough. See how the top is twisted? It looks like they’re not making use of the traveler.”

“Is that the track where the main sheet attaches to the boat?”

“That’s right.”

“*Walter*, look at the top of your mains’l. See how it’s luffing? Move your traveler outboard, and put more tension on the main sheet. The top of the sail is important. Try to keep it full.”

“Now, look at *Willow*. She has the same problem with her jib. Tell them to move the fairlead forward.”

“*Willow*, since the wind has picked up, you can move your jib fairlead forward to flatten the top of the sail and keep it from luffing.”

“*Walter* is zigzagging. Tell the helmsman to hold it steady.”

“*Walter*, you’re doing better, but you’re oversteering. Try to keep your heading steady. Don’t move the tiller so much at a time. Just make little corrections.”

“Let’s go ahead and cut downwind of *Walter* on a reach; then we’ll take a port tack out of the harbor.”

“*Wind Chaser*, we’re going sailing now!” Leila exclaimed.

“Ease into your reach; I’ll let the main out gradually.”

“We’ll need a jib-sheet fairlead adjustment too,” she observed.

“You’re right. Give me a little slack, and I’ll slide it forward.”

“Look, *Walter* thinks we’re racing her.”

“Tell them to keep on the wind.”

“*Walter*, we’re not in a race. Your job is to get out of the harbor. Keep heading as close to the wind as you can without

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luffing your sails. And try to *steer straight!*”

“I think *Walter* envies our speed,” Earl said. “Will you run my boat for me in the next race?”

“I’d love to, you know that. Bring our main back in a little, just with the sheet; leave the traveler fully extended.”

“Now you’re showing off.”

“I’m sorry. This is such fun. How far is safe to tip over?”

“Don’t say ‘tip over,’ that sounds like ‘capsize.’ Say ‘heel over.’ These boats will come back up even if they’re knocked down—as long as the cockpit doesn’t get swamped.”

“I can let the rail go under, then?”

“Sure. But not too much, or we’ll be making too much leeway. The keel loses much of its effectiveness when we’re heeled over too far.”

“So we drift sideways?”

“Right. I’m surprised you’re not a little bit afraid, leaning way over like this.”

“Why should I be afraid when you’re my captain?”

Leila was on the starboard side of the cockpit with a foot braced against the opposite seat, holding the tiller with both hands and halfway standing due to the angle at which the boat was heeling.

“How’s the pressure on the tiller? It looks like you’re having some difficulty holding her down.”

“I love to see the water rushing by; I’d hate to let up on it.”

“I’ll try to balance the sails a bit better. I’m going to winch the jib in tighter to make the center of effort move forward.”

“That’s better: I can feel the difference. Do you think if we came about now we could clear the point?”

“No, I don’t. It’s deceptive. The boat will make more leeway than you think. But we can always take another tack if need be.”

“If we came about now, we would cross *Walter’s* course—behind her, I think,” Leila said.

“I agree. We can always fall off if we come too close. We definitely don’t want to cross her bow. So let’s come about now

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and give your arms a rest.”

“Shall we round up into the wind first on this tack?”

“That’s a good idea. Go ahead. You may be surprised.”

Leila turned up to about sixty degrees off the wind, and the sails started luffing.

“We weren’t on a reach! Is that the surprise?”

“We were, but you were making so much of your own wind by going fast that you were almost close hauled on the reach.”

“I was wondering about that, but it was exciting; I didn’t want to change anything.”

“As we slow down, you can follow the apparent wind and turn closer to the true wind.”

“Got it.”

“How is *Walter* doing?”

“Look at you,” she said, ignoring his question, “sitting there all relaxed with your back to the wind. You *could* turn around and look for yourself!”

“I’m enjoying watching you. For me it’s more fun than sailing.”

“If you’re trying to make me your slave, you’re doing it well. ... *Walter* is bumbling along; at least she’s on the same tack. *Willow* is out in the middle of the lake again.”

“Are we going to cross behind *Walter*?” Earl quizzed her.

“It will be close.”

“Hopefully they remember they have the right of way and will hold their course.”

“Shall I come about now?”

“Go ahead. Do I have to do anything?”

“Maybe not; we’ll see. The main is already pretty well close hauled. Ready about?”

“Ready.”

“Helm’s alee.”

“Here, let me take in the jib sheet. I was just teasing. You won’t be my slave.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

The waves from the body of the lake were coming directly into

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the bay at that point, and while they were on the reach they rode over them slowly. Now, as they turned, heading directly into the wind for a moment, the bow of the boat lifted, cresting a large wave, and then splashed down into the next trough, sending spray back to the cockpit.

“Did you get wet?” asked Earl.

“Just a little.”

“We’ll see how it is when we settle into the groove. There’s foul-weather gear below if we need it.”

“Is this what you call foul weather?”

“No, not really. But I want you to be comfortable.”

“I’ll let you know. So far I’m not cold.”

“That’s because you’re sailing the boat. I’ll be getting cold before you will at this rate.”

“You’re right. I can see we’re not going to clear the point.”

“Can you tell whether we’ll collide with *Walter*, the way we’re going?” It was a question he would ask a student after covering the technique in shore school.

“Her angle to us isn’t changing, so we’ll be coming close. Is that the right answer, teacher?”

“You’re acing the class, Leila. It’s still hard to believe you haven’t been sailing before.”

“If it isn’t you, then it must be the author. That’s the only way I can explain it.”

“Just in case *Walter* would become alarmed, let’s fall off and let ourselves pass behind them by a good margin.”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

“You don’t have to call me captain.”

“What shall I call you, then?”

“If we weren’t out here with so much to do, I would tell you. I guess it will have to wait.”

Every few seconds, a wave smacked the port bow and sent a plume of spray back, wetting the deck and sprinkling the cockpit.

“*Walter* is coming about, or trying to,” she informed him.

“It’s a little early. It means they might have to take an

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additional tack in order to get out of the harbor—if they ever do get out.”

“Shall we close haul again?”

“Yes. We’ll scoot out of the bay and out of their way. They’re far enough from the lee shore not to get into any real trouble.”

The wind had been gradually gaining strength, and *Wind Chaser* seemed to like it better. She leaped from wave to wave, throwing spray at every impact. Earl smiled broadly as Leila found just the right tiller pressure to keep the speed at maximum. In almost no time, it seemed to them, they were closing in on the point. They came about with the finesse of a racing crew and soon passed the point with the lake opening up on the starboard side, revealing the buildings on Lake Way arrayed along the shoreline and the little police boat bobbing like a cork a hundred yards distant.

Willow was not in sight. Earl leaned back to see more on the left side ahead, for a great segment of the view was blocked by the headsail. As he leaned back, the wind caught the bill of his hat and carried it away.

“Hat overboard!” he yelled.

Leila saw it fly by, and she immediately shoved the tiller to port, which swung the bow to starboard, into the wind. The sails fluttered and rattled violently, sounding as though they would shake themselves to pieces.

“See if you can hold her in irons,” Earl shouted above the racket. “I’ll furl the jib.”

Leila had never heard the term *irons* before, but it sounded like something preventing the boat from turning right or left, so she endeavored to keep the bow pointing straight into the wind as *Wind Chaser* coasted to a stop.

The tiller became lifeless. Earl had sheeted the main tight and was attempting to steer by moving the traveler and forcing the boom by hand to one side and the other.

“Keep the helm in the middle,” he said as the boat began to drift backwards.

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Leila was looking for the hat. She was standing on the cockpit seat, steadying herself by hanging onto a backstay, and keeping a foot on the tiller. The wind whipped her hair into her face.

"It's back there quite a ways, I'm afraid!" Earl shouted. "It won't stay floating for long."

"I see it!" Leila exclaimed, pointing to her left with her free hand.

"You can help me steer with the rudder. Turn it just a little: not too much or it will get away from you."

She was already feeling a renewed force on the tiller. She jumped down and grasped the long handle, holding it in the neutral position, and then tested the reaction as she moved it a little to the port side of the cockpit. It had an immediate effect, forcing the stern to starboard. She could not see the hat from her lowered position, but she thought she knew approximately where it was, and she gently nudged the stern toward the spot as the boat began sailing backwards.

"Can you see it from where you are?" she shouted to Earl.

"Not yet. It may have sunk."

The shaking and rattling of the mains'l was nearly constant.

"There it is!" he exclaimed. "We're backing straight toward it."

"I see it!" She needed to turn a little to the left. Then she had a decision to make: whether to back straight to it or attempt to come alongside of it. She decided it would be better if the hat came to the middle of the transom even though there was a possibility that the rudder might snag it first and cause it to sink.

The hat was now only a few feet away, but it had become submerged. Still, she could see it through the backs of the waves. She tossed the intercom aside and stretched herself out, hooking the tiller with her feet and hanging over the transom as far as she dared. She could reach the water but not far below the surface. Closer it came. In a few seconds, there would be an instant when she might be able to grab it.

Just then a bright aluminum shaft came down before her eyes. Earl had a boathook and had thrust it below the surface with its

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hook positioned perfectly to intercept his hat. The boat was swinging off course, but the hat was now in contact with the hook, and Earl raised it up. It slipped off. It was about to be run over by the drifting hull. He took a swipe at it, and it went to one side and then quickly disappeared under the transom.

“It’s gone now,” he said. “Nice try.”

“Won’t it come out on the other side?” she gasped.

“I’m sure it’ll be too deep by then.”

“Can you help me get back up?”

Leila was still hanging over the transom, precariously close to falling overboard herself.

Earl stepped back into the cockpit, dropped the boathook, and put a strong arm around her, lifting her gently up onto her feet. She tried to turn around and almost fell over, but he had grabbed a backstay to steady himself, and with the other arm he held her to his side. She looked up into his face, and he kissed her on the forehead. She put her arms around him, and he still held her close with the one arm. She stuck a foot back onto the cockpit seat, and raising herself up, she reached his lips and kissed him.

“That’s all right, Samson. You have another hat at my place. What was it you wanted me to call you?”

“I’ll tell you when we get to shore. We’re still in the classroom, you know.”