

# Throne into disarray

**Briar Jensen** comes head to head with her own personal waterloo

Being head-less can cause serious discomfort, even if only for a few hours.

I was reminded of this the other day. Just as I was about to visit the head, the skipper emerged brandishing the toilet pump-handle. Exactly how he came to be holding it, I was afraid to ask. The desperate look on his face (of a man condemned to another bout of hard labour in the solitary confinement of our torturously small WC) was enough to silence me.

Attempting to submerge my anger at being cheated out of yet another afternoon's family cruising by a toilet, I resigned myself to the thankless task of keeping our inquisitive children as far away from the skipper as possible. Not any easy job, as the appearance of the skipper's toolbox attracts them like a large jar of lollies.

I was extremely grateful it hadn't been me that broke the pump; perhaps that's why the skipper was so furious, he couldn't vent his anger by blaming this sanitary disaster on someone else. Nothing irritates the skipper as much as problems with the toilet. Continuous motor failures, ongoing refrigeration problems and a never-ending leak, while endlessly frustrating, seem insignificant when compared to the rage caused by a problem with the head.

(At least he is in good company; even Kay Cottee rates a blocked toilet as worse than a boat high and dry on a sandbar or a rope around the propeller!)

Don't get the impression that I'm not sympathetic. I know a thing or two about the unpleasantness of dealing with marine toilets. I've had a fearful respect of them since, as an impressionable young teenager, I joined a sail training ship for seven days on the high seas. I was horrified when the captain announced that if we blocked the head we would have to clean it out ourselves. When I saw one poor girl actually having to do it, it was enough to make my bowels clamp shut. I was constipated for the rest of the trip.

Our previous yacht had a portable toilet and it became



Illustration by John Strunin

my responsibility to empty it since I used it most. (As if it's my fault I can't stand on the stern and let flow!) On one occasion, after towing the boat home following an Easter holiday, I had to empty the Port-a-Loo in our own toilet. After nervously carrying it through the house I made it safely to the water closet, only to lose control as I heaved it up to empty it. The resultant mess defies description and even now my stomach churns at the memory of it. It took months to get rid of the odour. I was thankful that we had brown-toned, patterned wallpaper.

Therefore, I respect the skipper's utter distaste for repairs of a sanitary nature. However, I thought our toilet trauma had ended with the installation of a new model. I should have been warned when the installation itself turned from a half-hour job into a half-day job.

An hour after emerging with the pump handle the skipper was still squeezed into the bathroom, dripping in perspiration and uttering unprintable profanities. (Our attempt to refrain from using swear words in front of the children goes out the porthole at moments like these.) When requested to fetch the socket set from its secret stowage spot (secret only because we couldn't remember) I finally found it swimming in a puddle of water, compliments of the never-ending leak. Whether the new bout of profanities from the skipper was because he couldn't find a socket the right size or because they had rusted beyond use, I wasn't sure and wasn't about to ask.

With legs crossed and buttocks clenched, I was too scared to inquire how much longer he would be. Instead I concentrated on trying to remember where the emergency bucket was stowed and wondering if I could retrieve it without uncrossing my legs. (Knew I should have done more of those abdominal exercises after childbirth.) Disaster almost struck when the mini-mariners, who I was valiantly trying to keep out of the skipper's way, decided to play a game that involved leaping into my lap.

As my buttocks began to sweat the skipper finally emerged and proclaimed the toilet temporarily fixed. Relief! Another toilet trauma over. For today, anyway. ↓