

THE WRECK OF THE CRICCIETH CASTLE

by

Jocelyn M Greenway (April 1958)

This is a tale told by one of the most recent members to join the British Section of the Cape Horners. It is told by a woman. She is the widow of Captain Robert Thomas, who, in 1912 was Master of the "Criccieth Castle" on her last voyage round Cape Horn. This narrative describes how the crew were forced to abandon the vessel, and take to the boats. It was mid-winter, in what is perhaps the stormiest region of the world, and for the next eight days the ship's company endured the most terrible sufferings. Seven men were drowned, and one by one the others died of hunger, thirst and the fearful cold. Day after day the captain sat at the steering-oar, watching his wife and four-year-old boy lying helpless in the water at the bottom of the leaking boat. Finally, when the survivors were too weak to pull on the oars or to hoist the sail, deliverance came. Despite the terrible ordeal she passed through, Mrs Thomas recovered completely, and two months after the landing she presented her husband with a daughter. Stories such as this, stories of long-continued hardship and dogged endurance, are rare in these days of fast ships and radar.

It was a happy crew that sailed on the good ship Criccieth Castle from Ballistas, an outlying island off the coast of Peru, on June 10th, 1912. We were loaded with a valuable cargo of guano and were bound for Antwerp direct. Little did I dream then that in a few short weeks we should have to abandon the vessel in mid-ocean, after battling against the severest storm I had ever encountered while accompanying my husband on his voyages. My four year old son was with us. He was used to the life on board ship as we had been living aboard for three years and during that time had twice circumnavigated the globe.

On this occasion nothing unusual happened until we were abreast of Valparaiso, when we encountered a very heavy south-west gale, which lasted for forty-eight hours, during which we lost several new sails - literally torn to ribbons by the force of the wind. Hardly had the storm abated before the weather again turned black and another gale beat down upon us. Then, for a period of three weeks on end, we had a succession of fearful storms with hardly a break between them. Nevertheless, we safely weathered the Horn, and were looking forward to better weather. The strain upon us all had been considerable.

The sky was still overcast and the seas were running high when, on July 14th at about 11 pm, a tremendous gale sprang up from the north-west. At midnight all hands were called out to reduce sail and the ship was hove-to. The gale steadily increased in violence and there were mountainous seas running. My husband knew we were in for a rough time, and it was not long in coming. About two o'clock on the Monday morning, a tremendous sea struck the ship. The noise was terrific and I feared at first that we had struck a submerged wreck or an iceberg. Then it was discovered that the rudder-stock was broken, and all attempts to repair it proved futile on account of

the heavy seas. Water began to rush into the vessel. The chief officer reported that the ship was leaking badly all the way down the stern-post, and there was nothing to do but man the pumps. This was impossible as the ship was now low in the water and the decks were continually flooded by heavy seas. Accordingly all hands were ordered on deck to start jettisoning the cargo through the poop ventilators, as it was impossible to remove the hatches in such a high sea.

After some hours, when several tons had been thrown overboard, it was discovered, to our dismay, that the weight of water which had come in was in excess of the weight of cargo which had been thrown overboard. This was most disheartening, but at four o'clock the sea moderated sufficiently to allow the pumps to be manned. To our horror it was then discovered that they were perfectly useless, having become choked with the guano. No amount of effort could clear them.

It was now evident that the ship would not stay afloat for very much longer, and if we were not all to go down with her we must take to the boats. But how were they to be launched without damaging them? The gig had already been smashed, and we only had two boats left.

Although the weather had moderated considerably since the time of the accident, the sea was still running high and the vessel was rolling fearfully. Accordingly, my husband gave orders for the side to be padded with a view to making a soft bed for the boats in case they were dashed against the hull by the heavy seas. Sails were taken from the sail-locker and lashed to the side of the ship, and provisions and stores were brought out ready to be placed in the boats.

I had wrapped my little son in the warmest clothes he had and I had also prepared myself as well as I could for what lay before us. My husband now placed us in our largest boat, the lifeboat, together with the sail maker, steward and carpenter. Unfortunately the guy ropes to this boat were new, and just as the davit tackles were being pulled upon, and while the boat was swinging, the ship gave a tremendous roll. This caused the new guys to stretch so much that the boat crashed against the davits with terrific force, straining the little craft in every plank. This sudden and unexpected crash nearly threw us all into the sea.

After further efforts the boat was lowered into the water, and now it was repeatedly dashed against the padded side of the ship, and it was fortunate that the precaution of providing a soft bed for it had been taken, as otherwise it would speedily have been pounded to pieces. The violent motion of the little craft on the high sea that was running caused me to become very seasick, as I was in a delicate condition, and my little son and I lay helplessly at the bottom of the boat, submerged in icy-cold water up to our waists. One minute the lifeboat would be level with the rail of the ship, and the next ten or fifteen feet below, tossed up and down on the great waves like a cork.

My husband shouted to us to be brave, and then turned to superintend the launching of the other boat. This was no easy task, night was coming on and there was every appearance of the weather again worsening. The wind and sea were gradually rising, the sky was overcast and a cold drizzling rain was falling. My husband placed the mate, Mr W A Gale, in charge of the longboat, with six of the crew, and he himself came aboard the lifeboat together with ten seamen, making a total complement of

seventeen. The water was up to his knees as he stepped aboard, for the boat was leaking as a result of her planks having been strained.

We pushed off and pulled away, and when we last saw our gallant ship through the darkness she appeared like a huge living thing struggling for life rolling and pitching violently with her decks aft nearly awash. Had we stayed even a little longer aboard her, we should have all gone down with her.

There were two kegs of water in the lifeboat, enough bread for ten or twelve days and a case of tinned meat. The nearest point of land was the Falkland Islands a hundred and eighty miles away, and we were all full of hope of reaching it. It soon dawned upon us, however, that another gale was springing up. By nine o'clock that night it was blowing a hurricane and the sea was running literally mountains high. It was impossible to make any progress, and my husband ordered the boats to heave-to with sea-anchors to which were attached bags full of oil. In the darkness we lost sight of the longboat, but expected to see it next morning. However, when the dawn came, after a miserable and anxious night, the mate's boat was nowhere to be seen. We scanned the horizon in every direction and speculated as to what had become of our companions, surmising all sorts of things. First of all we thought that they had been picked up by some passing ship, but finally came reluctantly to the conclusion that their frail craft had been capsized in the storm and all of them drowned. Probably their boat drifted some distance away from us before the catastrophe occurred, and any cries for help would have been inaudible amid the roar of the storm.

Needless to say this tragedy saddened us beyond description. We were now left to fight for our lives alone, and a grim fight it was destined to be - against hunger, thirst, mountainous seas and the freezing, numbing cold. Snow was now falling, accompanied by stinging showers of hail, and we were wet through to the skin, despite heavy clothing and oilskins. Indeed it is nothing short of miraculous that we did not all perish the first night, huddled up as we were in the icy flood rushing hither and thither in the bottom of the labouring boat. The sun had hardly risen, however, before our troubles were temporarily forgotten, for we caught sight of a big four-masted barque running before the wind under topsails and foresail. A blanket was quickly hoisted as a distress signal and all hands raised a shout. The men got very excited, seeing help so close, and worked themselves up into such a frenzied state that my husband was compelled to remonstrate with them pointing out that if they acted so foolishly the disappointment, if we should not happen to be seen, would only tell upon them.

The barque drew steadily nearer, 'til she was only about a mile distant, and we could plainly see her men aloft getting in the upper topsails. We shouted and waved our garments, but the big vessel passed on unheeding. It is only charitable to suppose that we were not seen; anyway, the barque gradually drew away and was lost to view.

Bitterly disappointed at this blow to our hopes, worn out with toil and suffering keenly from the cold, most of the men sank into a semi-conscious state, from which three of them never rallied. The horrors of the next few days can be better imagined than described. At dusk, while it was still blowing a whole gale of wind, with a terrible sea running, we all began to suffer from delusions, apparently caused by the intense cold. A remarkable fact about these delusions is that one and all of us

imagined we saw the same things at the same time. At first we thought we were all safe on our ship. The sail-maker remarked gravely, "I am going to the galley for my coffee". Another man said he was going for a walk on deck to take the stiffness out of his legs. Then we thought we saw a long white building close to the starboard side of the boat.

One of the articles which we had been using to bale out the water was a white enamel basin, about twelve inches in diameter. Presently the second officer called out to my husband, "Look at this basin, captain. What a monster, isn't it?" As a matter of fact, I had noticed it before he spoke, and it seemed to me to be some three feet in diameter instead of one; it appeared to my disordered imagination like an immense white tub. A little later my husband drew my attention to the face of one of the crew, which appeared to be three or four times its normal size. As he leaned down to me his face appeared to have grown to four or five times its usual size. In the same way we imagined we saw a lot of other strange things - houses, streets, roads and so on.

It was strange that we should have experienced these delusions after having undergone only twenty-four hours' exposure in an open boat, bitter though the exposure was. Stranger still, we experienced the hallucinations during part of one night only.

My husband had now been at the steering-oar since we left the ship, and he stuck to this post for a whole week, with the exception of a few hours' respite. Fortunately he now managed to retain his reasoning powers and was able to manoeuvre the boat with the steering-oar. If he had once let it go for a moment our little craft would have got broadside on to the tremendous seas which were running, which would have meant an instantaneous capsize.

At seven o'clock that night came the first tragedy - it was reported that one of the seamen had died. Ten minutes later someone reported the steward as dead, and soon after came the tidings that the cabin steward had passed away. It seemed that this was the beginning of the end.

One of the seamen suggested throwing the bodies into the sea, but my husband kept them in the boat for another five hours, 'til about midnight, when, as reverently as the circumstances would permit, we committed them to the deep, after their oilskins had been removed. These the men wrapped round my little son and me, as we lay, more dead than alive in the bottom of the boat, half buried in water which washed this way and that with the movement of the boat.

When Wednesday morning dawned we were, indeed, in a sad plight. Our bread had become soaked with sea water and was like so much pulp. Our stomachs turned against the horrible stuff and it only made us sick to eat it. Our stock of water, also, was getting very low. Unfortunately, one keg had been consumed during the night. While my husband was steering, the men were busy baling out the water with any receptacle they could get hold of, and during these operations they drank the water, unknown to the captain. When he discovered this, he took the remaining keg and placed it at his feet, doling it out afterwards a cupful at a time twice a day. As a final piece of bad luck, we had been compelled to throw our case of tinned meat overboard to lighten our over-burdened craft in the heavy seas.

At eight o'clock on the Wednesday, my husband was washed clean overboard from his post at the steering-oar. A tremendous gale was still raging and there was a particular heavy sea. Fortunately the boat had no headway at the time, as it had been hove-to, and was merely kept head-on to the sea with the oar. The sail maker made a rush toward the oar immediately he saw what had happened, for it was very important that the boat should be kept bows-on to the great waves that were running, or else it would have capsized.

The next sea that came along nearly threw the boat on top of my husband but fortunately he managed to get one arm over the gunwale and the other arm through the life-line. His hands were too badly frost-bitten for him to hang on by them, and at this critical moment they proved quite useless to him.

All the men were in the same cruel predicament, their hands frost-bitten, swollen out like puddings, black as ink, and so numbed that they could not use them. When they baled out the water, they had to use their wrists. None of them stirred to help the captain into the boat; they were so numbed and exhausted that they could hardly move. The second officer and I, however, appealed to them to make the effort, saying that unless he were saved none of us would ever get ashore. I knew he could not hold on much longer. He had on his heavy top-boots and his wet clothing was literally frozen to his limbs.

But after our appeal, the men gallantly came to his rescue, and by superhuman efforts managed to get him into the boat by clutching hold of him with their teeth and arms. Once inboard, they placed him face downwards on the oars, until he recovered from the shock and once more resumed duty at the steering-oar.

By daylight on Thursday, two more men had died and been consigned to the deep. The weather had now moderated considerably and it kept fairly fine until that night, when once again it began to blow a tremendous gale from the north-west, with a terrific sea which continued until the afternoon of the following day, when the wind veered round suddenly to the south-west, rising at times to a hurricane force, the sudden shift of wind being responsible for a fearful cross sea, making it difficult for our little boat to live. Sometime during Friday night the gale moderated, and by four o'clock on Saturday morning the wind had dropped to such an extent that we were enabled for the first time to set a small jib on our craft.

At dawn on Saturday I was the first to sight land right ahead of us. This gave us fresh courage, and we thought our sufferings - and we had now spent six days in the boat, practically without food - would soon be at an end. My husband thought it was the Falklands, and in consequence took in the jib and waited until daylight before attempting a landing. Then, to our sorrow, we discovered that it was the uninhabited Beauchesne Islands, about thirty miles south of the Falklands. We were bitterly disappointed, needless to say, but set sail at once and made for the Falklands, and no one can imagine our jubilation when, about noon, we sighted our goal.

At four o'clock in the afternoon we landed on a part of the East Falklands, in a beautiful creek. Surely now, we thought, we should find succour, and our trials would

be over. We were all suffering terribly for want of water, our last keg being now exhausted, despite the fact that we had reduced the ration to less than half a cup a day.

The ground where we landed was covered with snow, and we fell upon our knees and commenced sucking it, but unfortunately it turned every one of us sick. Then we discovered a pool of brackish water, which we greedily drank. Finally we fell down, on the snow, utterly exhausted, and remained there all night.

At daylight on Sunday my husband, accompanied by the carpenter, the strongest man in the party, went inland to look for help, as he knew we could not hold out much longer, and none of the others were fit to travel. They had an exceedingly trying journey over the rocky ground, and for most of the way they had to crawl over the rough boulders on their hands and knees, their feet being so numbed that they could not walk properly. After great suffering they managed to cover five miles, by which time it was clear to them that we were on an uninhabited part of the Falklands, where we could get no help.

When they returned to us about noon and reported this fact our disappointment was intense. My little son and I were by this time so frost-bitten and ill that my husband was surprised to find us still alive when he returned, but there was nothing he could do to alleviate our sufferings.

About two o'clock that afternoon, a small coaster was sighted in the offing, and my husband determined to try and catch her. Preparations were at once made to embark, although we were much hampered by our weak condition. An hour had elapsed between the time we first saw the vessel and when we were ready to put off. Night was coming on, and in addition the sky presented a wild and terrifying appearance, heralding the approach of another storm. The wind was now blowing off the land, and we made good progress towards the distant sail. But fate was against us once more. After sailing right out to sea for about an hour, we found it impossible to overtake the vessel and had to abandon the effort. Worn out with toil, hunger and thirst, we now began to feel the effects of the brackish water we had drunk, and the snow we had eaten. Some of the men presented a terrifying appearance, foaming at the mouth like mad dogs.

The wind was now fast increasing and the sea rapidly rising. We were from six to eight miles from the shore, and it was desirable to get back to land again. As I have said, the wind was blowing off the shore, necessitating the use of the oars instead of the sail for the return journey. When my husband ordered, "Out oars and pull for the shore," the men, with the little energy they had left, put out the oars, but failed to pull, having no feeling whatever in their hands, which had by this time swollen to three and four times their normal size. However, they gallantly and pluckily did their best with their arms, being fully alive to the danger we were in, for the fast increasing wind threatened to drive us right out to sea again.

After some time it became clear we were making no headway - were not even holding our own. Very soon the men became utterly exhausted; they could do no more. Dropping their oars, they fell back one by one, completely played out.

Our little craft was leaking badly as the result of having been buffeted about for so many days. All Sunday night we were shipping water, and every moment I thought the boat would sink under us. We were kept busy baling all through the night, our poor lads holding the balers as best they could with their wrists and teeth. When morning dawned, things did not improve; if anything, they became worse, and I felt certain this must be our last day, we had reached the limit of human endurance. My husband, haggard and worn, looked round at his men who were in a terrible state and at me and the child lying helpless in the water in the bottom of our craft. He realized that we all looked to him to pull us through, and he determined to fight to the last.

At about two o'clock that morning it was reported that another of the seamen had died. It was now blowing a whole gale, with squalls of hurricane force. The glass of the compass had been broken to pieces through being washed about in the boat when she shipped a huge sea, but we were under the impression that the gale was still blowing from the land, and I think none of us ever expected to see the shore again. The wind, however, had providentially changed round during the night, and shortly after daylight we found, to our intense delight, that, instead of being out of sight of land, we were only three or four miles from it. We were, nevertheless, in a very critical situation, lying helpless in a little open boat on a lee-shore- the coast of one of the rockiest regions in the world.

We were now faced with a terrible alternative; either to drift ashore before the raging gale on to the cruel rocks, or set sail and try to weather a point of land about fifteen miles away, where we should get a little shelter from the wind and raging sea. My husband chose the latter course. Seeing that the men were too weak to set up the mast, too weak even to move it, he decided to use the sprit of the sail as a mast, and this saved the situation. The boat's bow was turned towards the headland, and she began to edge away from the danger.

After sailing for some three or four hours we sighted the wireless poles of Port Stanley, and about noon came into view of the lighthouse of Cape Pembroke. The gale was still raging, and our difficulty was to find a spot where we could land safely. It almost looked as if at the last moment we should be lost, just as a haven of refuge came in sight. The coast here is very treacherous, studded with dangerous rocks, and we were absolutely at the mercy of the wind and waves. Presently we were driven close in shore, and my husband ordered out the oars, though the men had little strength left to manipulate them, and steered for a small creek at the base of the cliffs on which the lighthouse stood. There was a big sea running, and a particularly heavy swell. A wave caught us, and landed us upon a shoal, where we were nearly swamped, but a second wave carried us over this reef, and deposited the boat right against the rock where the lighthouse men land. At that moment one of the keepers jumped into our craft and quickly made it fast, and then he and his assistant dragged us out of the boat, one at a time, as opportunity occurred.

The brave lighthouse-keepers worked hard and took many risks before they deposited us safely on the shore. Then they carried us bodily - we could not stand, let alone walk, over the rocks up to their tower. First they took my little son and me, and put us in a big room, lit a blazing fire, and gave us hot coffee to drink and bread and butter to eat. Oh, the delights of the warmth and the good food!

Meanwhile, the lighthouse keeper had telephoned to Port Stanley, advising the authorities there of the rescue and our sad plight. The governor at once dispatched a doctor, with a guide to the lighthouse, some four and a half miles away, not an easy journey over the rough boulders with the tremendous wind that was blowing at the time.

At the same time the governor ordered the Government launch to proceed to the lighthouse, bringing a nurse and a plentiful supply of warm clothing and blankets, to take us back to Port Stanley. The doctor cut our clothes off with a knife, for they had literally frozen to our poor bodies. My little son's feet had swollen to such an extent that they had burst through his boots, and when the doctor had cut away the leather he remarked that the little lad might have to lose his feet, as he feared blood poisoning. To our great delight circulation returned during the night, and the little chap's feet were saved.

As soon as we had been dressed in warm clothing and wrapped in blankets, we were carried down to the launch, and at half-past eleven that night, were put to bed in the hospital at Port Stanley.

Here we remained for several weeks and finally returned home by the steamer Oropesa to Liverpool. Until he reached home, my little son was not able to put his feet to the ground and walk.

A Board of Trade inquiry was held to inquire into the loss of the ship, and my husband was completely exonerated from all blame, and congratulated on our wonderful and miraculous escape.