

Seventy-Five Years on the Richmond.

James Ainsworth's Reminiscences
1847-1922.

(No. 4.)

SOME SHIPPING DISASTERS.

(From Ballina "Beacon.")

On a beautifully clear and sunny morning in the spring of 1851, nine schooners lay at anchor freighted with cedar and ready for sea in the bight of the old channel, which was about abreast of the present crane wharf of the south breakwater. There was scarcely a cloud in the sky, hardly a ripple on the bar, and the breeze—a favorable, though light one—came from of the nor' west. At 9.30. the able, Heroine, Lucy Ann, and Anna Maria lifted their anchors and, clearing the bar, stood out to sea. This was the signal for the remaining five to follow, but after raising their mud-hooks in turn they fouled each other in the crooked, fast-running narrow channel, and became hopelessly entangled. It was a fortunate mishap for

gled. It was a fortunate mishap for them, for the first escaping four were no sooner clear of the entrance than a small singular-looking cloud loomed up from out the west in the track of a fast freshing wind. It was the advance warning of a typhoon which charged down upon the bar with tropical rapidity.

Three of the schooners outside (the Bramble, Heroine, and Lucy Ann) were thrown upon her beam ends with the first crash of the storm and were never seen again. They foundered at once with all hands, in full view of the excited settlement ashore. Only one man was saved—the cook of the Lucy Ann—who swam away from the overturned hulk and was picked up by the dismasted and badly battered Anna Maria, which alone survived the blow.

When conditions moderated in the course of a couple of hours or so this schooner found herself helplessly adrift off the coast, unable either to cross into the river for repairs or to continue her voyage to Sydney.

The skipper (Harry Capps), however, was a man of resource, whose name, by the way, was perpetuated long years afterwards by another identity in the Wardell district. He anchored the badly winged vessel off the entrance and with wonderful despatch, and much labor and skill, converted a derrick he

LABOR AND SKILL, converted a derrick he had on board into a jury mast, to which he bent some spare canvas. With this rig he eventually carried on to Sydney, where he arrived without further mishap six weeks later.

The lost vessels carried five hands each in addition to the skipper, so that in all this early tragedy cost 17 lives.

It is of interest to add that the *Anna Maria* continued in the river service until 1852, when she likewise disappeared with all hands in an easterly gale between Sydney and Newcastle.

FURTHER LOSS OF LIFE.

Another bar tragedy about this time occurred in connection with the schooner *Madge Wildfire*, under the command of Jack Adams, or "Flash Jack," as he was colloquially called. There had been a flood in the river, and consequently there was a swift run of current seawards on the bar. Against a heavy sea and this whirling torrent, but with a favoring light breeze from the nor'-east, the little vessel bore up to sail in.

All went well until after passing the outer point of North Head, when she appeared to sheer towards the rocks. Then struck almost at the same time by a huge roller she was left half-cap-sized; a second heavy sea quickly following completed the disaster. The

blowing completed the disaster. The unhappy ship was overturned and engulfed and every man on board perished.

Almost as quickly as it takes to record it, all that was left of the Madge Wildfire was floating driftwood.

THE TRAGEDY OF TALLOW BEACH

Tallow Beach, which lies between Cape Byron and Broken Head, about 14 miles north of Ballina, was so called because of the large quantity of tallow washed up on it by the sea in 1864. There were 114 casks in all, which it afterwards transpired constituted the cargo of the schooner Volunteer, a 100-ton vessel bound from Baffle Creek (Qld.) for Sydney. This unfortunate ship, it was surmised, was blown upon the rocks at the base of Cape Byron

in an easterly gale, and was battered to pieces in a night with all hands.

The tallow floated ashore in almost equal quantities to the north of the headland in the Bay and to the south on Tallow Beach.

The first tidings of the tragedy were brought to Jas. Ainsworth at East Ballina—where he was at work building

ina—where he was at work building a small vessel—by a blackfellow in the employ of the late E. Ross, who then kept a butchery at West Ballina. The black and white man had been out on the northern beaches looking for a draft of bullocks coming from Mr. Fawcett's Ridges. They noticed the wreckage on the beach and carried the tidings back to East Ballina.

Ainsworth and his carpenter mate at once dropped their tools and tramped north to investigate. They found the beach strewn with casks of tallow, as reported, but not a sign of the ship beyond the broken splinters of wreckage washed up by the sea. Neither was there a trace of the missing crew.

Incidentally it may be recorded here that this tallow was the first freight of any kind to be shipped in Byron Bay. It was taken on board the schooner Wallaby, owned by Mr. Coleman, of Lismore (father of the late J. W. Coleman, M.L.A. for Lismore, and the first Richmond River native to enter Parliament), and Mr. Geo. Nicholls, of Bexhill, and despatched to Sydney.

ANOTHER CAPE BYRON TRAGEDY.

A MARVELLOUS ESCAPE.

In 1851 or '52 the headland of Cape Byron was the grim and silent witness of a sea tragedy that in its aftermath

OF a sea tragedy that in its aftermath at least is unique in coastal annals. It provides a story that at once taxes the most elastic credibility, while at the same time it challenges the most florid romance.

The small well found schooner George, which had been built on the Tweed, had left that river with a cargo of cedar for Sydney. Proceeding south, the little vessel ran into a stiff southeasterly gale and thick hazy weather.

When approaching Cape Byron night came down with pitchy blackness and a disquieting prospect for those on board of a forbidding, rock-bound coastline with a threatening lee shore.

After supper the gale stiffened with a bigger swing to eastward, and conditions on deck became so uncomfortable that Brown, the super-cargo, and Green, the sole passenger, resolved to sit it out below together in the tiny cabin.

At about 11 p.m. the skipper also dropped below to fill and light his pipe and to report the while to his companions some of his anxieties. "We're in a bit of a fix. We've got the headland on our lee with the gale hard on our broadside. I'll have to put the top-gallant sail on to get clear." With pipe aglow, he hurriedly re-ascended to the deck and, as events will show, to his doom.

to his doom.

“Almost immediately,” related the cabin confines afterwards, “we heard the skipper’s command to the crew to set the extra sail. Then the ship took a quick, and apparently responsive, lurch and canted over and yet over. She did not recover. The water rushed into the cabin in which we were imprisoned, and as our feet now rested on the roof of the cabin, as it were, we realised by the reversed position that the George had completely turned turtle.

“Our first momentary sensation was the awful blackness in which we were enveloped and the still more terrible silence. We stood in water to our arm-pits, but from a certain sluggish heaving movement we knew that although overturned the schooner was still afloat. We spoke to each other and that was a passing comfort. It was also borne in upon us that somehow or other we were getting air. Our one sustaining hope was that the buoyant cedar cargo would continue to hold up the derelict until in some providential way we were rescued. Our mental terror during the first frightful minutes following the capsize and the subsequent agonising hours of our tense situation can neither be imagined nor described. We also suffered physical tortures from cold, and cramp, and thirst, while always we

and cramp, and thirst, while always we were haunted with the dread horror of a protracted martyrdom—death by slow degrees—first of one and then the other.

“Mercifully after a lapse of incalculable hours and what seemed an age-long expectancy, our situation suddenly took a new direction. We experienced a series of heavy bumps in quick succession. Meanwhile also the hulk tumbled and rolled and heaved with such rapidity and to such an extent, that bruised and exhausted as we were, we finally lost consciousness and remembered no more. We had surmised that we were in the surf—but where?”

Old Steve King and Johnny Boyd had left the cedar camp inside Brunswick Heads to take a breather on the river headland after the gale. They noticed what looked like a big boat bottom up on the beach, distant about two miles to the north. As they approached it they saw that it was the overturned hull of a small schooner. Jack Boyd climbed to the top of the wreck and, knocking on it with a stick, said to King, “God help the poor souls who were on board this one.”

To their amazement, they heard what appeared like a responsive knocking from the inside of the hulk. Boyd, knocking again and listening, remarked to his mate. “I can hear something

to his mate, "I can hear something beneath here."

Jumping down, Boyd at once threw off his clothing, the better to run back to the camp for assistance, and returned with an axe. He and King thereupon hacked a hole through the bottom of the ship and pulled out the imprisoned men in a semi-conscious condition and in the last stages of exhaustion.

They were so weak that they had to be carried to the settlement, where they effected a speedy recovery, and in the end returned to Sydney via the Richmond. The hulk, after the capsizing, had drifted a distance of ten miles, and the two men had spent two nights and nearly two days imprisoned in the submerged cabin until striking the beach on the second day they were rescued.

(Editor's Note.—The particulars of this remarkable adventure were narrated to Mr. Ainsworth by Brown and Green personally on their way through from the Brunswick to Sydney.)

THE WRECK OF THE PEONY.

The next wreck with serious loss of life, prior to the disaster of the tug steamer Protector in 1900, was that of

steamer Protector in 1900, was that of the barque Peony on the South Beach in 1876. This vessel (700 tons), under the command of Capt. Kirby, whose wife accompanied him, was bound from Sydney to Shanghai with coal. The signalman at North Head at the time (the late Capt. Jas. Stanger) first sighted the barque one evening sailing north and apparently making heavy weather of the stiff E.S.E. breeze blowing astern. Strikingly low in the water and showing a far too scanty free-board, her general appearance excited the signalman's suspicions; but she continued on and faded out in the darkness beyond Black Head. Early next morning, however, to Stanger's surprise, he again sighted the barque—this time coming south. Passing the headland for the second time, the mysterious vessel made no signal, but her erratic behaviour determined the North Head look-out to closely watch her movements. At about 11 a.m. Stanger's interest was intensified when he noticed the ship suddenly put about and head direct for the South Beach under full sail. With gathering speed she struck the ground heavily in the outer break about three miles south of the present entrance, and subject then to the incessant attack of overwhelming seas she rapidly began to go to pieces.

Stanger immediately gave the alarm

Stanger immediately gave the alarm to the pilot, and in a very short time Capt. Easton and crew, the local police, and a number of residents, were on the scene of the wreck to render what help was possible.

Five of the crew perished in the surf and as the bodies were washed ashore they were buried behind the beach terrace opposite the wreck. From the survivors it was elicited that the barque had been leaking badly, and with the freshening wind and sea had become so water-logged as to be almost unmanageable. In this extremity the unhappy skipper deemed it advisable to beach the ship in order to effect a possible salvage and to save the crew.

It remains a coincidence that on the morning of this disaster Capt. Fenwick crossed the Richmond bar with the Francis Hixon on her advent to the river, but was unable to render assistance owing to the rapid breaking-up of the vessel. The Francis Hixon, by the way, was the first Richmond River tug to receive Government subsidy.

THREE MONTHS OVERDUE.

No list of sea tragedies connected with the early days of the Richmond, no matter how carefully compiled, can ever be regarded as complete, for the reason that there were many others in addition to those particularised, of

... those particularised, of which there are no available details. Many schooners, as a matter of fact, sailed from the Richmond for Sydney, and from Sydney for the Richmond, and were never heard of again. "Foundered at sea" or "Lost with all hands," was all that was ever known about them. They simply vanished from human ken without leaving so much as a trace. In this connection it will be in place, perhaps, to mention that one of the most protracted voyages from Sydney was made by Mayor Mobbs' grandfather (the late Captain Cambridge), who in the early "fifties" was in command of the schooner "Australian League." He was exactly three months off the coast from the time he cleared Port Jackson until he crossed the Richmond bar. Encountering a series of strong westerly gales, the little vessel was blown hundreds of miles to sea, and was not spoken of or sighted again until one afternoon she stole quietly and unexpectedly into view directly eastward of the Richmond entrance. Weeks before she had been posted "missing" by the navigation authorities in Sydney. The Australian League was finally wrecked on the North Head in 1856 or '57.

A RACE FOR TALLOW.

In 1845—or just three years after the settlement of the original

the settlement of the original pioneer party—it became known in Sydney that a load of tallow from the stations at the head of the river awaited shipment at Ballina. It was the practice then, by the way, to float the casks containing the tallow in the form of a raft down stream from the Pelican Tree to a receiving depot in Mobbs' Bay. When a schooner arrived in due course, the tallow was again rafted—owing to the shoal condition of the crossing between Pilot Point and South Beach—from the latter depot to Shaw's Bay, where it was finally taken on board. Skippers Ainsworth and Skennar, who were in Sydney with their schooners at the time, resolved to make a run for the offering freight.

Approaching the Richmond, Ainsworth, who was in the lead, in order to save time and outwit his rival in the rear, decided to carry on to Byron Bay, where he anchored, rowed ashore and doubled back on foot to Ballina to secure the cargo. His strategy, however, was of no avail. Skennar, on the other hand, suspicious of what Ainsworth might do, resolved in turn to leave his ship off Evans River, land through the surf, and foot it along the beach to Mobbs' Bay. Arriving at the depot first, he met the astonished Ainsworth, who came a good second,

... who came a good second, with the cheery intimation that he had secured the freight.

Ainsworth, who had to put up with a big share of chaff over the incident, had also to wait back for the next lot of tallow while Skennar sped merrily back to Sydney.

THE ADVENT OF STEAM.

It was not until the middle "fifties" that steam began to play a part in coastal shipping, and in '56 or thereabouts the first steamer made entry to the river. Whether the initial honor belongs to the Thane or the Rainbow is not now clear, but it was certainly one of these two—both were paddle vessels—which pioneered the way for the long line of steamers that were to follow in their wake down to the present day. The North Coast Shipping Co., which now handles practically the whole of the trade from the Manning to the Tweed, also traces its origin from about that period. It was not known then by its existent all-embracing title, but the late Mr. Clark Irving, of Tomki, who represented this huge northern territory at the time in the first N.S.W. responsible Parliament, was a moving spirit in the promotion of

improved river shipping ; and two of the earlier fleet units of the pioneer company—the Florence Irving and Agnes Irving—were named after his daughters. It was not until the late “sixties,” however, that anything resembling a regular steam connection with Sydney was established; and again it was not until the late eighties that the old sailing ships began to seriously give way to the competition. As a matter of fact they went out with the timber trade in proportion only as the latter became less and less a staple industry. On the other hand the rapid advance of settlement and agriculture in the “seventies,” and particularly in the “eighties,” called clamantly for a more efficient and expeditious means of ocean transport, and happily enterprise and money were not wanting when the necessity arose to meet the need. It was likewise in the middle “fifties” that the first move was made in the direction of Richmond River harbor improvements. The entrance conditions then, and for 40 years later, could scarcely be worse. The fore-shore of Shaw’s Bay from Pilot Point to North Head—as late as 30 years ago—was literally piled high with the wreckage of vessels innumerable which had been lost on the bar, while the South Beach and the beach immediate-

South Beach and the beach immediately to the north of the lighthouse headland were littered in every direction with the flotsam of broken ships. In '55 or '56 the late Mr. Moriarty was sent up by the Government to report on the entrances to the Clarence and Richmond, and as a result of the representations then made the construction of the Clarence breakwaters was soon afterwards commenced. The similar report in regard to the Richmond was pigeon-holed and forgotten until a much later day, when the late Sir T. T. Ewing (then plain Tommy, M.L.A.) bludgeoned the authorities of his time into desired action and a new era of river improvements was begun.