

EPICS OF THE SQUARE RIGGED SHIPS

CHAPTER TWO BREAKERS AHEAD

By
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In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, 16 degrees below the Equator, lies a large collection of coral islands known as the Paumotu Group or Low Archipelago. Though they vary greatly in size, these islands all have the same characteristics and appearance. They are low lying atolls - mere fringes of land bearing coconut palms and pandanus trees, and enclosing smooth, blue lagoons.

Some of the lagoons can be measured in yards; others have a length and breadth of as much as forty or fifty miles, by fifteen or twenty miles. The fringes of land surrounding the lagoons are composed of hummocky islets. Some of the bigger islands, such as Rapiroa and Fakarova, have as many as fifty islets along their narrow, oblong rims. Here and there navigable channels lead between the islets into the lagoons. There are eighty to ninety islands in the Paumotu Group; and they are all surrounded by treacherous coral reefs over which, even in fine weather, the ocean spouts and roars majestically.

The total land area of the group of islands, which extends over a thousand miles in a north-west, south-east direction, is 330 square miles. Its inhabitants are Polynesians, who possess the cheerful disposition, simplicity and hardihood of their race. In other Pacific groups of islands, where European adventurers have left their mark, the natives are known for their indolence and vice, but this taint has not spread to the Low Archipelago, whose sturdy inhabitants spend their lives with the thunder of the sea in their ears, always in fear of those violent hurricanes which between the months of November and March, occasionally roar across the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean.

In February 1906 one of the worst hurricanes on record swept over the Society Islands and Low Archipelago, causing a tremendous death toll and damage to property to the extent of a million pounds. Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, was inundated by a huge tidal wave and hundreds of houses and commercial buildings were leveled to the ground. The weight of wind here was nothing, however, to its fury among the unprotected islands of the Low Archipelago. Several of the smaller islands were temporarily submerged by the thundering waves, and hundreds of natives were swept into the sea or blown away from the coconut trees in which they had sought refuge. Several schooners that were out in the "blow" foundered, and when the wind abated the atolls were strewn with wreckage and dead bodies.

While the hurricane was at its height a large four-masted sailing ship, named the ***County of Roxburgh***, which had been blown out of her course, was driven ashore on Takaroa Island, ten of her complement of twenty-six hands all told being drowned. The story of the disaster and survivors' remarkable escapes from death is the subject of this narrative.

The ***County of Roxburgh*** was a Clyde built, Glasgow owned, iron vessel of 2090 tons register. She carried yards on her four masts and a considerably larger sail area than she would have had if rigged as a barque. She was a pretty fast sailer in consequence, but she needed a strong crew and careful handling. Her length was 286 feet, breadth 44 feet, depth 24 feet. Her lines were a credit to her well known builders, Messrs. Barclay, Curle & Company, Ltd., of Glasgow, who had turned out some of the finest sailing ships afloat.

On the 16th December 1905, she sailed in ballast from Caldera, a Chilean coast town about 400 miles north of Valparaiso, for Port Phillip Heads, Victoria, Australia, for orders. Her ballast consisted of 1000 tons of sand, which was stored fore and aft in the lower hold. Her draught of water on an even keel was 13 feet 4 inches. It was subsequently argued by some seamen that she should have had more than a thousand tons of ballast,

and been trimmed at least a foot by the stern, but the Court of Inquiry which investigated the circumstances of her loss did not find serious fault on this account, though its president expressed the opinion that the ballast was 'meagre'.

The County of Roxburgh was under the command of Captain James Leslie, a successful and popular shipmaster who had made more than one creditable passage in her. Her chief mate was a young man named Miller. Ochenden was the name of the second mate. Being a smart, well run ship, she also carried a third mate, whose name was Browne. Her afterguard was still further strengthened by four husky young apprentices, who were berthed in the after deckhouse. Her fo'c'sle hands were composed of half a dozen different nationalities, as was generally the way in 'sail'. Taken all round they seem to have been a very decent crowd.

After leaving Caldera, Captain Leslie shaped a north-westerly course to pick up the SE. trades. This was at right angles to the direct route from Caldera to Melbourne, but there was no alternative as it would have been impossible for the vessel to make her westing across the Pacific in the teeth of the strong westerly winds that prevail in high latitudes. Even if she had been bound from Magellan Straights to South Island New Zealand, she would still have had to make her way up into the tropics before attempting to steer due west. Only when she had reached the neighbourhood of the Fiji Islands would she have been able to shape a course direct for her destination. This semi-circular track added hundreds of miles to the passage of a sailing ship bound across the Pacific from west to east, but it was unavoidable.

Sometimes a fine, strong SE. trade wind along the southern tropical belt made amends in some measure for the additional mileage involved, but from the time she set sail from the Chilean coast the **County of Roxburgh** had persistent ill-luck. Calms and light baffling airs were her lot with the result that it took her nearly fifty days to reach the Marquesas. From here, as a glimpse at a map of the Pacific Ocean, will show, the chief difficulties of her passage began, as her track now lay through myriads of unlighted reefs and coral islands.

At midday on 5th February 1906, she was in latitude 11° 51' South, longitude 142° 50' West, approximately 180 miles north-east of Takaroa Island, belonging to the Paumotu Group. This position was the last her master obtained by a sun or a star observation, for shortly after noon the weather set in thick and wet, and by nightfall there was every indication, by the falling barometer and the greasy look of the sky, that a hurricane was working up. During the middle watch that night there was a brilliant display of lightning all round the horizon, and then, suddenly, the wind shifted from south-east to north-east and began to freshen.

So far there was no cause for serious anxiety, however. The **County of Roxburgh** was a staunch vessel; she was well-manned, her ballast was well secured, and though the wind had shifted eight points it was still fair. Provided she was able to maintain her westerly course for another twenty-four hours, she would be safely past the islands of the Low Archipelago. She would then, for the time being anyway, have ample sea room in which to heave-to, or run should the hurricane overtake her.

So much for Captain Leslie's hopes and optimistic calculations; but instead of remaining steady, the wind, in accordance with the law of circular storms, continued to shift against the hands of the clock. By midday of 6th February it was blowing a fresh northerly gale and a big, confused sea was piling up. The **County of Roxburgh**, with an effort, was still lying her westerly course, but she was making a great deal more leeway than could be safely afforded. Her canvas had been reduced to double topsails, and as the dull threatening day wore on these began to carry away one after another. The glass had fallen to 29.50 inches and was still tumbling rapidly downward. Captain Leslie had been on the poop for several hours, and the fact that he declined to go below even for his meals betrayed his deep concern.

The 7th February was a day of incessant toil and discomfort for all hands. The wind had not yet shifted any further to the westward but it had increased tremendously and was already hitting up to hurricane force in the squalls. Lying hove-to under what was left of her topsails, the **County of Roxburgh** was all but unmanageable. Drawing such a small amount of water she was like a balloon on the surface, and time after time she fell off into the trough of the sea, rolling with such violence that all hands feared she would shift her

ballast and capsize. How far she was from the land at this time was a matter of conjecture for Captain Leslie was working on dead reckoning and he and his officers knew that this might be a great number of miles in error. Serious as matters were however the skipper still clung to the hope that the ship would succeed in clawing her way safely past the dangerous coral islands lying to the southward of her.

This hope was dispelled at daybreak on the 8th February. During a terrific hurricane squall the wind suddenly whipped ahead to north-west, forcing the ship's head off to the south-west. The only thing for it in these circumstances was to get the vessel round on to the port tack without delay, and all hands were promptly ordered to the braces.

Owing to the fact that her fore topsails had blown away the **County of Roxburgh** refused, however, to pay off when her helm was put hard up. Lying in the trough of the big, thundering waves she began to roll more violently than ever, while sea after sea swept over her. Fearing that all hands would be washed overboard, and that the ship would be swamped, Captain Leslie ordered the helm hard down and quickly brought the vessel back on to the starboard tack. She now instantly began to ride more easily but it was apparent that she was still driving down steadily towards shoal water.

A second attempt to wear her round was made an hour later, but again she refused to answer her helm. In loaded trim she might have done so but with only thirteen feet of her hull submerged she behaved more like a flat-bottomed scow than a large 2000 ton clipper. Her bow and stern alternately lifted clear of the water, and each time her forefoot pounded the waves all hands held their breath, fearing that she would jump her masts clean out of their sockets.

Hitherto there had been a brief lull between the squalls, but now there was no cessation in the wind's long drawn, piercing shriek. There was nothing else for it in these circumstances – having regard to the fact that the vessel still refused to pay off – but to heave to on the starboard tack again, and Captain Leslie reluctantly ordered helm hard down.

The outlook at this stage was about as black as it could be. The sea had reached an alarming height, and even with oilbags trailing to windward, the **County of Roxburgh** was having her work cut out to stand up to it. If the barometer had been rising, Captain Leslie would at least have had the consolation of knowing that the storm's center was moving away from the ship, but it was still falling. Every stitch of canvas had blown away by now, and it was only by means of tarpaulins in the mizzen and jigger riggings that the vessel's head was held up to the wind. Summoning Mr. Miller, Captain Leslie confided to him his grave fears.

"We must get her round on to the port tack!" he cried, as the two seamen pored anxiously over a chart of the Low Archipelago, spread out on the table in front of them.

"Easier said than done sir!" replied the mate grimly, gripping the edge of the table as the ship took a terrific roll.

"I know" admitted the Captain. "But we still have a chance, if we can manage to get some fresh canvas on her. Get all hands on deck and try to bend a new fore-lower and main-lower topsail."

The mate answered, "Aye, aye, sir," and staggered out on to the reeling, sea swept decks to tackle the job. It wasn't an easy one considering that a man couldn't stand against the furious wind without holding tight to something. Realizing that their lives were at stake, however, the crew responded gallantly. A gantline and tail-block were sent aloft, and after it had been rolled up tightly and secured with ropeyarn stops a foot apart, a brand new fore-lower topsail of Number 00 storm canvas was dragged out of the sail locker and hove aloft.

It took the crew three hours to bend it, and another three hours to bend a new main-lower topsail. That they succeeded in their task at all was little less than a miracle in the circumstances. It was five o'clock in the afternoon by the time the two sails were set. As a result of their long, bitter struggle with the thrashing canvas, the sailors were well nigh in a state of exhaustion, and their fingernails were torn and bleeding.

Having cleared up the litter of ropes washing round the decks they turned expectantly towards the mate, hoping to hear the order: "All hands to sea." A disappointment awaited them, however, because Captain Leslie had decided to make a third and last attempt to wear the ship round on to the port tack before the dull grey day was swallowed up by a black, screaming night.

"Loose the foresail and fore-topmast staysail!" rang out his, stentorian command, and a groan broke from the weary, drenched sailors.

This was a lot of canvas for such a violent wind, but in view of the ship's refusal on two successive occasions to answer her helm it was justified. Directly its gaskets were cast adrift the big, double-reefed foresail began to thrash furiously, threatening to blow into a thousand ribbons. The sailors managed, however, to heave down its sheet and tack, and with a roar the wind rushed into the sail, stilling it.

Under its driving power, the **County of Roxburgh** began to plunge violently into the huge combers hurtling down on her. Time and again she seemed on the point of burying herself, but Captain Leslie was watching her like a hawk, gradually easing her off the wind.

Suddenly his voice rang out loudly again.

"Hard up the helm! Square in the after yards!"

"Yo-ho-ho! Haul a-wey-hey!" came the sailors' lusty response, as they dragged frantically on the braces. The long, tapering steel yards began to move.

"That's the style, boys" encouraged the mate, letting the lee brace falls run through his fingers. "Keep 'em on the move! The old girl's going to do the trick for us this time!"

It really seemed as if she was going to, but, having paid off to SSE. she suddenly hung fire, lifeless, refusing to bring the wind round on her port side. A big, curling wave roared down on her starboard quarter, and with the shock of an avalanche crashed aboard.

The sailors' cries were silenced on the instant. Only gasps and spluttered curses came from the submerged, struggling mass of half drowned humanity. The crowd hauling on the cro'jack braces were washed in a heap across the deck, and the ponderous steel yards above their heads, momentarily taking charge, began to swing violently to and fro.

"Steady tight those cro'jack braces!" roared the Captain in a frenzy. "Look alive men or we'll have the masts and spars down on deck!"

The sailors again responded, and as the water on deck drained slowly away through the wash-ports the loose play of the yards was checked.

But still the ship refused to come round on her heel. Yielding to the wind pressure on her starboard quarter she began to fall back on to the old tack. There was nothing for it in these circumstances but clap on still more canvas, and the Captain gave the order: "Loose the fore-upper topsail!"

Mr. Miller repeated the order vociferously, and dragging themselves into the fore rigging a couple of sailors began to clamber aloft. The wind flattened against the shrouds and almost wrenched their heads from their shoulders, but they gamely continued their perilous ascent.

Having reached the upper-topsail they were in the act of casting off its gaskets, when suddenly one of them, a German named Paachburgh, threw up his arm, and pointing over the bows, let out a blood-curdling shout:

"Breakers ahead!"

The sailors on deck instantly leapt up on to the bulwarks, where, clinging to backstay and shroud with one hand and shielding their eyes from the furious wind spray with the other, they stared hard in the direction indicated.

It was not an hallucination, Through the curtain of rain and driving spume and spray a veritable wall of white, broken water leapt to their gaze. Stretching from broad out on either bow it meant only one thing - a long coral reef!

The **County of Roxburgh** was doomed, for the wind was blowing directly towards the reef and the ship, lying helpless and unmanageable in the waves, was little more than a mile from it. Captain Leslie knew that in ten or fifteen minutes she would strike the reef, and fearing that she would roll over on it and quickly go to pieces immediately tackled the problem of saving life.

"Belay the braces! Lay aft and clear away the boats, all hands!" he roared, and as the sailors came scrambling up on to the boat-skids life jackets. were served out to them.

As they slashed adrift the rope lashings on the boats some of the older hands shook their heads pessimistically. What chance would an open boat stand in such a sea they asked one another. Captain Leslie shared this doubt, but he was of the opinion that by no means could anyone hope to reach shore alive.

The port boat was turned out first. Directly it was clear of the skids the carpenter, steward, four able seamen and two, apprentices, named Richardson and Stirling, scrambled into it. Other men were about to follow them when suddenly, through nervousness or excitement the sailor standing by the forward tackle let go his fall. The boat instantly upended and everyone was thrown out of it. Lines were flung to the struggling men in the water, but before they could get hold of them the poor fellows were swept away.

The thunder of the surf was loud in everyone's ears by now; and realizing the need for still greater haste the remainder of the crew scrambled across the skids and began frantically to turn out the starboard boat. This wasn't such an easy matter as turning out the lee boat, but after a tremendous struggle the sailors succeeded in thrusting it over the side. In the midst of the excitement and confusion a sailor named Diestel fell between the boat and the ship's side and was drowned. The poor lad was evidently stunned in his fall, for he floated away face downward without raising a hand to save himself.

The lifeboat was lowered to the rail, but before anyone had a chance of getting into it the **County of Roxburgh** struck the edge of the coral reef and rolled over on to her lee bilge.

The scream of torn and twisted steel and iron instantly rent the air and as the ship slowly righted, an enormous curling wave broke aboard over her quarter, smashing the lifeboat to matchwood and tearing, two of the crew, an able seaman and an apprentice named Parsons, from their hold and sweeping them into the sea. For a few seconds their heads were seen above the white, boiling surf, then they disappeared.

The ship lurched over on to her lee bilge again, tearing a still larger hole in her bottom, as she scraped and bumped along the jagged coral reef extending two hundred and fifty yards off shore. A second and a third. monster wave came roaring down on her, breaking aboard like an avalanche and tearing away ladders, ventilators, doors and poop fittings, which made a frightful din as they swept to and fro in the riot of water on deck.

Each succeeding wave drove the vessel still further on to the shelving reef; and realizing the desperate predicament of all hands a Norwegian sailor named Wagner volunteered to try to take a line ashore.

A coil of thin rope was brought out on deck, and its end made fast about his waist. With a cheery wave of his hand to his shipmates he lowered himself into the sea and struck out towards the waving coconut palms, just visible above the crests of the waves. The brave fellow had barely made a start on his errand of rescue when

the backwash of a big comber sucked him back under the ship's bottom. Ropes and a couple of lifebuoys were thrown to him, but he was never seen again. When it was hauled in there was nothing on the frayed and broken end of the line which had been made fast to him.

Night was falling by now, and fearing that he would lose touch with his men in the darkness, Captain Leslie ordered them all to muster in the saloon. There was nothing more anyone could do on deck, and the risk of everyone being killed by the falling masts and spars was imminent. Most of the survivors had sustained severe cuts and abrasions and after they had all been accounted for, and given a stiff tot of grog, their wounds were attended to.

The noise of rending steel and woodwork was infinitely louder down below than on deck and the rush of water sweeping to and fro in the hold seemed to shake the ship far more violently.

"She'll burst her sides open in a minute and fall to pieces on top of us like a pack of cards," said a sailor gloomily, giving voice to the fear that was uppermost in everyone's mind.

"Clyde built ships don't go to pieces as easily as all that," retorted the Captain sharply, but he spoke without much conviction.

Just before nine o'clock in the evening the ship was struck by an enormous breaker which rolled her over almost on to her beam ends. The backwash righted her, but fearing that a few more shocks of that sort would be her finish, Mr. Miller volunteered to make an attempt to swim to shore with a line. The Captain warned him that there was little chance of such an attempt succeeding, but he insisted that he should be allowed to make it.

"Very well," said the Captain gravely. "I admire your courage, I can only wish you good luck."

The coil of rope used by seaman Wagner had been lost. A fresh coil of small stuff was brought up on to the poop however, and after divesting himself of everything but his life jacket and a pair of trunks, the mate secured its end about his waist.

By now the **County of Roxburgh** had been carried across the coral reef to within a hundred yards of the beach, upon which the surf was pounding with such fury that the whole atoll seemed to tremble. The waves were running over fifty feet high and it seemed impossible that any man could stand a chance of surviving in them. Mr. Miller did not flinch in his gallant resolve however. Having rapped out a few orders to the sailors standing by to pay out on the line he leapt up on to the rail keeping one hand on the backstay. A big curler came rearing in over the reef, and as its boiling crest swept under the ship's counter he took a clean header into it. For a few seconds the men on the poop saw him swimming strongly; then he disappeared from their view. From the way the line continued to run out through their fingers, however, they knew that he was still making good progress.

Fortunately the mate was a man of fine physique and an exceptionally strong swimmer. Having timed his dive perfectly he was carried almost without effort on the back of the big breaker right up to the beach, and flung high and dry among some palm trees. His first act on struggling to his feet was to unbend the line about his waist and make it fast to a tree. While he was doing this a crowd of chattering natives came running towards him. He did not understand what they said, but so demonstrative were they in their friendliness towards him that his momentary apprehension was instantly dispelled.

He had been wondering how he was going to get the tail-block and endless rope fall ashore, but this problem worried him no longer. Twenty or thirty brown skinned, muscular islanders stood ready to do what they were told, and he promptly availed himself of their services. With a couple of vigorous tugs on the line he signaled the men aboard the **County of Roxburgh** to pay out the tail-block and rope fall, and then thrusting the line into the natives' hands, he told them to haul on it.

They obeyed with enthusiasm and within half an hour communication with the ship had been established and an improvised breeches buoy was in position. To drag the survivors one by one through the surf did not take long, but by the time they landed most of the poor fellows has been badly lacerated by the jagged coral. Captain Leslie came ashore last. His first question as he staggered to his feet was to ask the name of the island they were stranded on.

An elderly native, who spoke broken English, informed him that it was Takaroa Island; he went on to explain that the **County of Roxburgh** was ashore at a spot three and three quarter miles north-east of the native village, which stood on the eastern side of a channel, known as Tehavoroa Pass, through which vessels of shallow draught could enter the lagoon. Had it been possible for her to negotiate this channel the ill-fated ship might have found an anchorage in smooth, deep water. But having regard to the weather conditions and low visibility it would have been little less than a miracle if she had found its entrance.

The friendly Polynesians proved themselves practical people, for after a journey to their village a number of them returned to the scene of shipwreck with all manner of healing herbs, with which they treated the sailors' wounds, and also material for a tent which was erected on the beach. Under its protection Captain Leslie and his men spent the remainder of the night in an unbroken sleep of sheer exhaustion.

They awoke to find that the ship had been driven so close inshore that, had they remained aboard her, they would have been able to land with comparative ease. Despite everyone's conviction that she would go to pieces she had withstood her terrible ordeal so well that even her masts and spars were still standing – an eloquent tribute, surely, to her fine workmanship and material her builders had put into her.

A fresh surprise was in store for the castaways. Later in the morning Richardson and Stirling – the two apprentices who had been thrown into the sea, with six other members of crew, when the port lifeboat upended – put in an appearance. The lads had been washed ashore on a lonely strip of beach two and a half miles north-east of where the **County of Roxburgh** lay, and they had a remarkable story to tell.

For over an hour they had been dashed helplessly to and fro in the breakers, without knowing whether they were being taken in towards the beach, or away from it. Young Stirling could not swim a stroke, but his lifejacket supported him. When at last the beach loomed up in front of him he made a desperate effort to dog-paddle towards it, but time after time he was pulled back into the sea by undertow. He was pretty nearly at his last gasp by the time he landed.

Richardson could swim, and this fact helped him considerably in getting ashore. A big breaker on whose back he had managed to climb deposited him in a clump of pandanus trees, and covering himself with some leaves, he instantly went to sleep. He imagined that he was the sole survivor, for in the darkness and wilderness of driving rain and crashing water he could not see his fellow apprentice or anyone else.

Stirling, who spent the night wandering aimlessly up and down the beach, was under the impression that he was the sole survivor of the shipwreck and that he was on an uninhabited island. The exhausted lad was overjoyed at daylight to hear a lusty shout and to see Richardson running towards him. The two boys were quite naked except for their lifejackets, whose tapes had cut deeply into their bodies. Having related their experiences to each other they set off in search of the ship. Rounding a point of land to the south-west they suddenly caught sight of her, and the remainder of the survivors.

The hurricane blew itself out at midday, and that afternoon the islanders launched their canoes under the lee of the wreck and paddled Captain Leslie, his officers and some of the sailors out to her. The vessel was lying with a heavy list to port, with the whole of her bottom ripped open and several large holes in her sides, through which the ballast was washing out as the waves swept through her. She was undoubtedly a total wreck.

Most of the perishable stores in her lazarette were spoilt, but there was a sufficient stock of canned and bottled provisions to last the castaways for several months. These were brought up on deck and landed, together with the men's clothes the contents of the Captain's slop-chest, and some spare sails for tents. A second

expedition was made to the vessel next day, and every empty tin that could be found was filled with fresh water – fortunately the ship's fresh water tank had not been holed – and taken ashore. The islanders were allowed to replenish their supply of fresh water, which had run dangerously low, from the same source, and as a reward for their services were given a quantity of tobacco and ship's stores, which they regarded as a luxury.

A search was made along the beach for several miles in case any other members of the crew had reached the shore alive – but without avail. The body of Wagner – the gallant Norwegian who attempted to swim ashore with a line – was eventually washed up, but no sign was ever seen of the other nine men. The fact that the waters in the vicinity of the Low Archipelago are infested with sharks may have accounted for this.

A week after the disaster a schooner called at the island, and her master agreed to take Captain Leslie and his crew to Papeete. The schooner, however, went on the reef and was wrecked. A second craft – a small cutter – visited the island a week later, and the three officers and six other members of the **County of Roxburgh's** crew took passage in her to Tahiti. Captain Leslie and the cook remained aboard the wreck, while the remainder of the survivors took up their quarters in the native village, where they were treated with such kindness that they expressed their intention of remaining on there forever.

Captain Leslie persuaded them to change their minds, however, when a French schooner, the **Crois du Sud**, called at the island on the 19th March, with instructions to take them all off.

In due course the third mate and two other members of the **County of Roxburgh's** crew left Papeete in an American steamer for San Francisco. Captain Leslie and the remainder sailed from the Tahitian capital in the Union Steamship Company's **S.S. Tavuni**, bound for Auckland, New Zealand. From the latter port they returned home to England, bringing with them a story of South Seas adventure as stirring and romantic as will be found anywhere outside the realms of fiction.

The County of Roxburgh was subsequently put up for auction at Papeete, and realized a little over 40 pounds as she lay! During the next hard blow she was driven right up on to the beach where her red, rusty bones still lie under blue skies among waving coconut palms.