

CAPTAIN W. S. BYLES,

Master of the Edinburgh Castle, reports on . . .

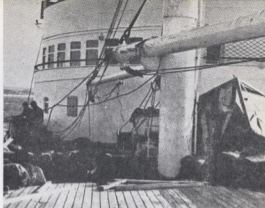
The One from Nowhere

THE NAUTICAL ADVISER has asked me to write of my recent unpleasant experiences on the South African Coast so that others may "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest".

Ever since the s.s. *Waratah* was lost without trace, having sailed from Durban to Capetown with 200 souls on board on 26th July, 1909 (and for ought I know before that), Cape coastal waters have been suspect, and especially in the vicinity of Port St. Johns. For there was a report that she had been "spoken" and reported "All well" off Port Shepstone. The year is important—she had a Morse Lamp, but no W/T.

Very well, then, let us get down to the facts of the matter. I will deal first with the weather and my ship, the *Edinburgh Castle*.

The weather at the time was a strong S.W. wind and a heavy S.W. swell, but the *Edinburgh Castle*, being 750 feet long and lacking only 1,400 tons of 30,000 gross tonnage, was such that these conditions presented no serious problem. As she dipped to the swell she was spraying forward a little, and (on the big ones) shovelling up a little water through the hawse-pipes. The reputation of the coast, however, my previous experiences, and my desire to avoid damage of any sort, decided me to abandon the benefit of the Agulhas current, put up with a later arrival, and close the coast. For the benefit of those who have no experience of the coast, I should state here that in soundings of 100 fathoms or less, the heavy swell is much less steep and has a longer fetch, so that you may keep the benefit of "Full Speed" or near it, but you have to sacrifice the help of the current which can be as much as 4 knots, but in which you may find that you have to "heave to" should the swell become too steep. The further to ensure that no untoward incident should occur I took a knot off her speed, and to close the coast I had, of course, put the swell "cosily" on the bow instead of driving into it "Head on". Under these conditions she was very comfortable for three-quarters of an hour or so. The fetch (distance between one wave top to the next) was about 150 feet and the ship was pitching and scending about 10 to 15 degrees to the



The scene on the foredeck of the Edinburgh Castle showing some of the damage caused by the freak wave which hit the ship off Port St. Johns.

(The Photograph, by TRANSOCEAN PHOTOGRAPHIC SERVICES, is reproduced from the EAST LONDON DAILY DESPATCH.)

horizontal. And then it happened. Suddenly, having scended normally, the fetch to the next wave top appeared to be double the normal, about 300 feet, so that when she pitched she charged, as it were, a hole in the ocean at an angle of 30 degrees or more shovelling the next wave on board to a height of 15 or 20 feet, before she could recover, as she was "out of step".

It was a hot night and so that the passenger accommodation might get some air the steel doors at the after end of the foredeck had been left open, and due to an oversight this was not passed on to the Bridge, so that not only was the fore-deck swept with a wall of water which unseated the insurance wire reel which damaged a winch in its travel, and the athwartship rails and the ladder to the well-deck swept away, but a great quantity of water flooded into the passenger accommodation.

The lessons to be learned are twofold. Firstly, that whatever the weather prevailing the forward steel doors must always be shut and remain shut on passage from Durban to East London because when this happens there will be no warning. The waves are no higher than their fellows, and in perspective the "hole" is not visible until the ship is about to fall into it! Secondly, that as this is out of keeping with the weather prevailing at the time such a thing could happen in conditions of little or no wind at all.

Inevitably one wonders about the cause of such irregularity and I call to mind that some years ago when the late Captain J. C. Brown, R.D., R.N.R., was Commodore of the Fleet and in *Pretoria Castle* he reported having discovered a fissure in the ocean bed somewhere off St. Johns. It was clearly shown on the echo sounder paper. He was in deep water at the time and possibly the report did not receive the attention it deserved.

For instance, it is common knowledge that the race of Portland Bill is caused by the uneven bottom and the strength of the tidal stream, and those wanting a smooth passage in a yacht must time their passage so as to pass

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