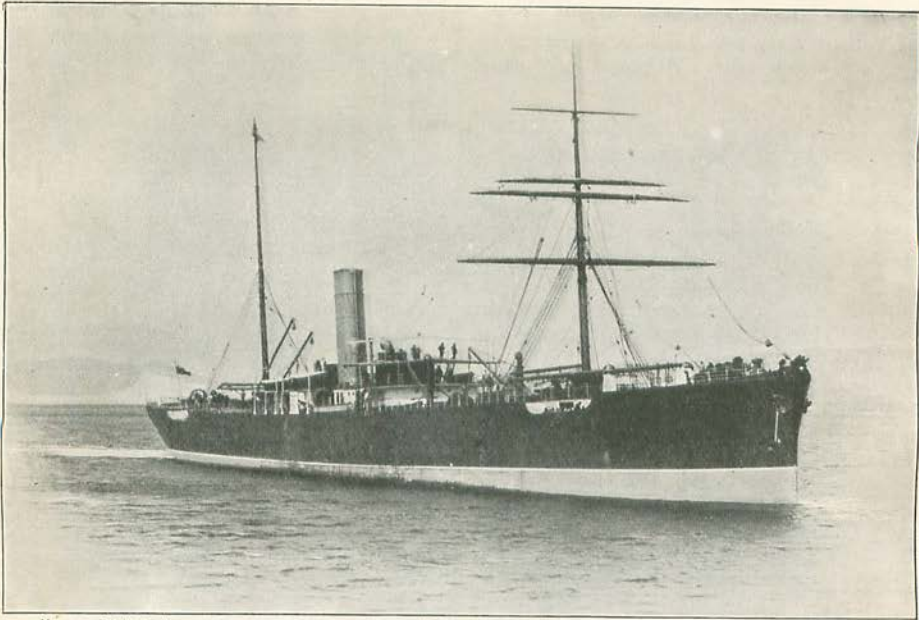


In Search of a Derelict.

By A. P. BULLER.



From a Photo. by]

THE "PERTHSHIRE."

[Danaus, Dunedin, N.Z.



F all the events of recent years connected with the sea, perhaps the break-down and disappearance in mid-ocean of the steamer *Perthshire*, and her ultimate rescue after drifting helplessly for forty-five days, covering a distance of over 1,400 miles, affords one of the most interesting and remarkable.

This splendid steel screw steamer was built at Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1893, at a cost of some £80,000, for the Shire Line, and is one of a fine fleet trading between London, Australia, and New Zealand. She possesses a gross tonnage of 8,000 tons, being built almost entirely for cargo purposes, her usual shipments from the Colonies consisting of frozen mutton.

On the 26th day of April of the present year she left Sydney for the Bluff (her first calling point in New Zealand) with a large and valuable cargo, to be completed at the principal ports prior to her departure for London. She carried a few passengers and a crew of about sixty, making in all some seventy souls on board.

The trip ordinarily takes from four to six days at the outside, and her non-appearance at the Bluff, as week followed week, naturally gave rise to much anxiety and surmise. Vessels plying between Australia and New Zealand kept a sharp look-out, and some

"zig-zagged" in their course in the hope of finding the missing ship. No tidings came to hand till the 26th May, when a scow of 150 tons, called the *Whangaroa*, arrived in Sydney, from New Zealand, and reported that on the night of the 12th of May she had seen on the horizon signals of distress, in the shape of blue lights and a continuous fire of rockets. Altering her course she sailed down, and eventually discerned the loom of a huge steamer, which proved to be the *Perthshire*. The scow signalled that she would stand by till daylight, and the answer came back, "Thanks." As soon as it became light, communications were established between the two ships, and the captain of the scow then learnt that the propeller shaft of the *Perthshire* had broken clean off in the tail-tube, and that in consequence she was absolutely helpless, her spread of canvas being too limited to give her even steering-way.

The little schooner could, of course, render no assistance, and continued her voyage to Sydney. The *Perthshire* had up to that time been drifting for fourteen days without sighting a sail. Another fortnight elapsed ere she was seen again, when, on May the 25th, a barque, *The Northern Chief*, sighted her in lat. 33 S., long. 164 E., still drifting to the northward, and to the region of reefs and islets, and now quite out of the track of steamers. Then for a further period of eighteen days

she passed out of human ken, and vanished as completely as if the ocean had engulfed her.

By this time, as can be well imagined, the public anxiety was becoming intense; the question, "What *has* become of the *Perthshire*?" was asked in every quarter, and the mystery of her disappearance became a universal topic throughout Australasia. Tug-boats and private steamers were out in all directions looking for the derelict, both in the interests of humanity and the prospects of heavy salvage, and at last the apprehension became so great that two of Her Majesty's ships on the Australian Station were prepared to join in the search. The steamers of the Union Steamship Company's line, running weekly between Australia and New Zealand, had all deviated in their courses, expecting to find her, but without success, one after the other arriving only to report "no tidings of the *Perthshire*."

Then one of the company's boats, the ss. *Talune*, of 2,000 tons (on board of which the writer was a passenger), left Wellington on the 9th June, presumably for Sydney direct. On the following morning, however, the passengers were informed that she was going to make a lengthy search, and had taken in an extra supply of coal, rockets, and towing hawsers; we also noted that she was going far off her track, towards the north, instead of shaping on the usual westerly course.

On the second day out "a crow's nest," in the shape of a coal-basket, was swung up to the fore-topmast head, and from this elevated perch two-hourly watches were kept—a lonely vigil for the look-out man; but the hope was ever present that while sweeping the trackless waste of waters with his telescope he would at last descry the derelict.

Till now we had sighted neither sail nor steam, and, but for a rear-guard of never-tiring albatrosses, we had the ocean to ourselves. In fact, the endless expanse of moving water rather reminded one of the first lessons in geography, when we were told that "the ocean occupies a very large part of the

globe on which we live!" An electric beacon light, in the form of a double shield, was rigged up at the mast-head, fitted with twelve electric burners, giving a power equal to 300 candles. This shield arrangement enabled an arc of light to show from either side of the vessel a distance of twenty-two miles; that is to say, a tract of forty-four miles was covered by our beacon.

On the evening of the third day the probability of being in the neighbourhood of the *Perthshire* increased, and the rockets were brought out for use. The first two, in their anxiety to speed into the heavens on their errand of help, burst prematurely when some thirty feet up, but the third left the deck with a screech and roared its way into space, leaving behind its fiery train of sparks. Its far-off explosion could just be heard above the noise of wind and wave, followed by the beautiful meteoric shower of bursting stars high above us.

Throughout this and the following night rockets were thrown up hourly, but met with no response. Monday passed uneventfully, and we were beginning to fear that our ocean tramp would prove fruitless. At noon on that day our course was still lying to the N.W. (or, to be absolutely accurate, N.W. $\frac{3}{4}$ N.), our latitude 30.20 S., longitude 167.19 E., and, roughly speaking, some 600 miles out of our course. Our commander



From a Photo. by]

COMING UP TO THE "PERTHSHIRE."

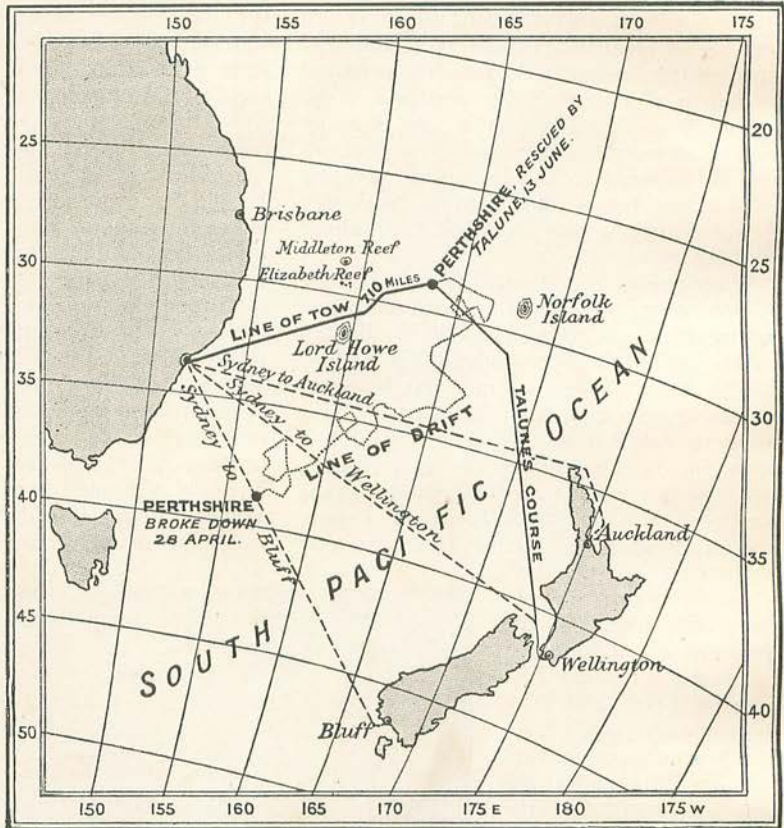
[Sir Walter Buller.

(Captain Spinks) had spent many anxious hours poring over the chart, studying the trend of the ocean currents, and plotting the courses of the other searchers in order to get at the proper position of the *Perthshire*. He ultimately decided to run up within fifty miles south of Norfolk Island and then take a zig-zag or triangular course from there to Lord Howe's Island, his opinion being that the missing vessel would be found somewhere towards the apex of the triangle, and subsequent events proved how correct he was in his surmise.

Towards three o'clock on Tuesday morning (13th June) passengers awoke on missing the now familiar "drum of the racing screw," and to hear the sea thrashing against their port-holes as our steamer rolled from side to side in the swell. Lightly clad, one hurried on deck to hear the cheering news that we had "found the *Perthshire*!"

Away on our starboard hand we could see her head-light blinking, and as the first shaft of day broke in the east, there lay our derelict silhouetted dark and large against the horizon. The second officer had sighted her shortly before three, a blue light burnt on the *Perthshire* having attracted his attention. We then drew close and stood by until daylight enabled us to communicate with her. At the time of finding her she was slowly heading on the same course that we were on, viz., W. by N. $\frac{1}{4}$ N., the latitude being $29^{\circ}3'$ S., longitude $163^{\circ}38'$ E. By referring to the accompanying chart one will get a fair idea of her position, some 750 miles off her course. It was a most fortunate

circumstance that we sighted her when we did, for Captain Spinks had decided to alter his course within the next hour to the S.W., in which case we would certainly have missed her. About 7 a.m. her captain boarded us, meeting with a hearty cheer as he reached our deck. His expressions of relief and delight at such welcome succour can be left to one's imagination. He informed our captain that the day before he had almost



SKETCH CHART—SHOWING THE TRACK OF STEAMERS FROM SYDNEY TO NEW ZEALAND. THE POSITION OF THE "PERTHSHIRE" WHEN SHE BROKE DOWN—HER LINE OF DRIFT AS SHOWN ON HER CHART—THE COURSE THAT THE "TALUNE" TOOK TO LOOK FOR HER—WHERE SHE WAS DISCOVERED—AND THE LINE OF TOW TO SYDNEY.

given up hope, and had remarked, "Shall we ever be found?" He told us that on the day of the break-down (28th April) a terrific crash was heard on board the *Perthshire*, just as if she had been struck by a tremendous wave, followed by great shaking of the engines. The mischief was very soon discovered, and it was found that the propeller was hard up against the rudder-post. As the task of repairing the break seemed insurmountable, and it was impossible in any way to navigate the ship, he decided not to attempt it, trusting to be soon picked up by some passing steamer.

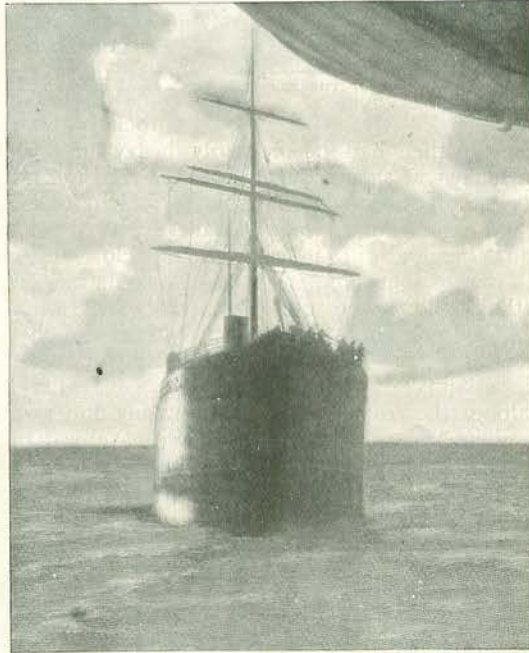
Week followed week, however, without assistance coming; by this time they were far off the track of vessels, drifting towards the South Sea Islands, and the hope that always springs eternal in the human breast at last began to fade. At one time his ship was in great peril of being blown towards the dreaded Elizabeth reef (lying to the north of Lord Howe's Island), a strong gale taking him in that direction, but fortunately the wind shifted to another quarter, and for a time the danger was averted. Gale followed gale, and he was quite unable to fight against the currents, drifting in one day alone no less than seventy-five miles.

How completely helpless the ship was can be gathered from the fact that, while drifting, she described three complete circles. Every effort was now made to get the fractured shaft in something like working order, and it proved a matter of the most extreme difficulty and danger. Owing to the fact that the shaft had broken off in the after-tube, those working at it had very little space to move in, and were continually exposed to the danger of the water suddenly rushing in and drowning them all before they could leave the compartment. At last, after fourteen days' incessant work, the broken shaft was reached (after cutting through the three-inch stern-tube) and patched up by means of immense couplings, sufficient to enable the ship to steam very slowly in calm weather, although quite unable to face a head wind or sea. On hearing these particulars one could not fail to admire the silent heroism and indomitable perseverance of the *Perthshire's* engineers, working so steadfastly at what appeared at first to be an almost hopeless task.

After mutual congratulations had been exchanged between the two commanders and arrangements had been discussed, we

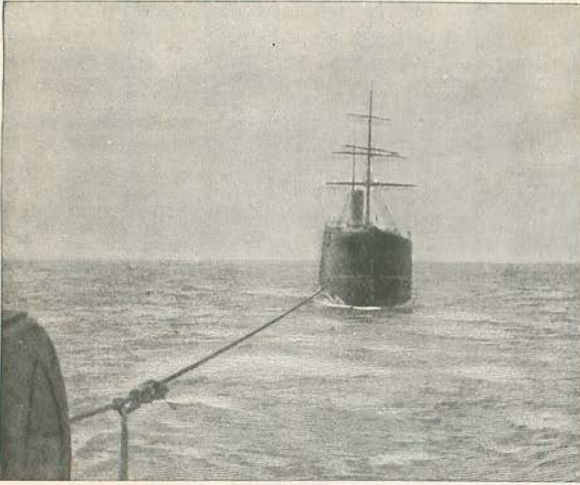
ran up the signal to "Prepare for towing," and the captain of the *Perthshire* then left us. Forthwith preparations were made on our ship. Mighty hawsers were brought along our deck, and the sailors went about the business as if they had graduated from steam tugs, and that towing an ocean liner a matter of 700 miles was quite an every-day occurrence with them. A light Manila hemp rope was brought over from the *Perthshire* by boat, to which was attached a 14in. hawser, and, the supply being insufficient, a wire hawser attached to that, and then made fast on the *Perthshire*. Our end of it was brought through the after-chocks

on the starboard side, a turn taken round the stern bitts, then brought along the upper deck, passed through the hawse-pipes amid-ships, and finally made fast to the bitts on the main deck forward. A 10in. hawser was then bent on to the other, and veered out some fifty fathoms astern, the other end being carried along the port side and made fast in the same manner as that on the starboard side. By this ingenious method the strain was equally divided throughout the whole ship.



THE "PERTHSHIRE" PREPARING FOR TOWING.
From a Photo. by Sir Walter Buller.

At 8.30 a.m. all was ready, and a string of bunting fluttered gaily up on the *Perthshire*, conveying the message, "Tow slowly, and good luck to you." The two ships swung gradually into line, and at 8.40 the telegraph rang out its instructions to the engine-room. Simultaneously the responsive screw throbbed out its answer, and cheer after cheer went up from both ships as they pointed their bows to the south-west and forged slowly ahead. It was a spectacle to be long remembered by those fortunate enough to witness it, and for the remainder of the day everyone was intent on watching the great liner straining at her cable, and plunging her mighty bows into the deep, 100 fathoms astern.



SHOWING THE V-SHAPED ARRANGEMENT OF THE ROPES.
From a Photo. by Sir Walter Buller.

Up to this stage the weather had been singularly fine, but our lucky star seemed to wane as soon as we started on our long tow. The wind now freshened on our beam, and finally went dead ahead, bringing with it a very lumpy sea, and towards evening it became evident that the cable would not stand the strain much longer. The steam winches then came into play, and from the chain-locker forward fathoms of anchor cable were brought along the deck and added to the hawser, giving an additional length sufficient to considerably ease the tension. This necessitated a stoppage for about an hour. By noon the following day we had covered 120 knots with our captive, travelling at the rate of about five or six knots an hour. By this time, however, wind and sea had considerably increased, and our speed diminished to two or three knots. Thursday morning brought no improvement in the weather, and as the ship's bell struck 8.30, a mighty sea lifted us like a cork, striking the *Perthshire* a minute later. The 14 in. hawser snapped in the middle like a fiddle-string, and our charge, after a tow of 194 miles, became a derelict once more.

The space between the ships widened rapidly, and half a mile lay between us in a few minutes. Signals were run up on board the *Perthshire* notifying that she had "lost command," and that they would tighten up the couplings before re-towing. To husband our coal we shut off steam, and at three o'clock the *Perthshire* signalled that she was ready. She was now some distance off, drifting at

the rate of about two miles an hour, or as the bo'sun remarked, "going to leeward like a crab!" Those seven hours of waiting helped us more easily to realize the dreariness of drifting, even though we possessed the power of steaming at any moment. By this time a tremendous sea was running and half a gale from the south-west was blowing, with occasional squalls sweeping down, accompanied by stinging sheets of rain. A line had to be got to the *Perthshire* by some means or other, and as an open boat could not have lived in such a sea, it was decided to steam up to her and endeavour to effect the connection by means of a ship's rocket. To do so necessitated a very close approach, for we found that the rockets weighted with a neces-

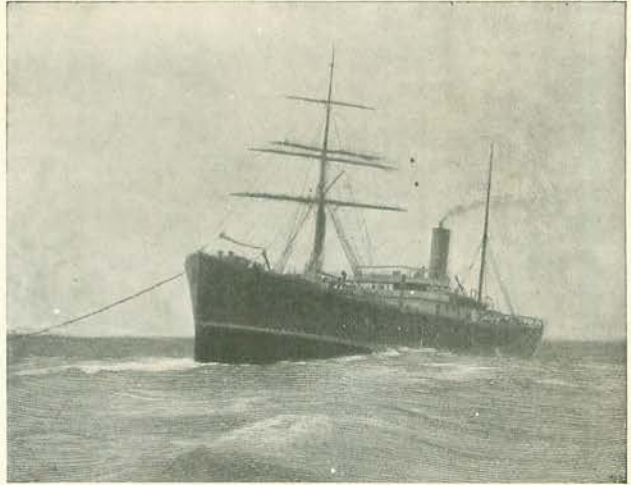
sarily heavy line would only fly a short distance. Then came an incident in seamanship to which it would be hard to find a parallel in the records of the South Pacific. Running close up to the *Perthshire* we loosed our first missile: it ran a true course, but struck her fore-yard, and the line fell back. For the next twenty minutes a running fire of rockets took place between the ships, one after the other falling short and bursting under water, giving one the idea of mimic naval warfare. At length a rocket from the *Perthshire* became entangled in one of our rocket lines, which was secured, and



THE "PERTHSHIRE" IN TOW.
From a Photo. by Sir Walter Buller.

the fusillade ceased. These efforts to get our line on board, and eventually to receive the *Perthshire's* wire hawser in return, necessitated constant manœuvring on the part of our steamer, at one time a space of only some 40ft. dividing the two vessels. On reflection for a moment it is easy to realize how fraught with danger such a rescue was. A helpless leviathan, drifting, rolling, and plunging in an angry sea, a thrust from whose towering iron bows would have sent us to the bottom, was a dangerous customer to tackle. However, it had to be done, and our captain did it, though it was patent to all that only a man of iron nerve, and one that knew his ship and knew his men, would have essayed the task.

By four o'clock we had the *Perthshire's* wire hawser on board. Our cable was now unshackled from the anchor and brought aft along the upper deck, sufficient cable being laid down to allow of its being paid out when the two cables were bent. It was then made fast to the forward bitts on the main deck. A heavy tackle, comprising two 16in. treble blocks with a 4in. Manila fall, was then rove, lashed to the towing cable, and taken up to the bitts and capstan on the fo'c's'le head, this arrangement acting as a "spring" to relieve the weight from the bitts on the main deck. The after end was then bent on to the *Perthshire's* wire hawser, and again we had her in tow and were heading once more on the home trail. Against the heavy sea and head wind we now made very slow progress, tugging sullenly at our burden, and only registering seventy-four miles by noon on the following day. By midday on Saturday the gale was pretty well spent, and we had added another 130 knots. Shortly afterwards the wind veered round, and enabled the *Perthshire* to shake out her canvas, and thus take some of the strain off our engines. We now made splendid progress, and by twelve o'clock on the following day had reduced the distance by 194 miles, but the fates were determined to have a parting kick at us, for ten minutes later the *Perthshire* signalled that the



THE "PERTHSHIRE" JUST AFTER THE BREAKING OF THE HAWSER.
From a Photo. by Sir Walter Buller.

couplings on the shaft had broken, and we were again brought to a standstill. While waiting, a pilot boat sighted us afar off, steamed alongside, and then sped off to Newcastle (some thirty miles distant) with the news. A few hours later and the telegraph would be clicking its message far and wide that the *Perthshire* had been saved! A delay of seven hours, while the couplings were being tightened, and we were off again, this time without further mishap.

Sydney Heads were reached early next morning (June 19th), and a flotilla of steam-tugs, launches, and all sorts and conditions of craft came out to give us joyous greeting. Our triumphant entry down the harbour was a touching and impressive sight: steamers and ferry-boats blew their whistles incessantly as they passed, and cheers went up from every side. We took the *Perthshire* back to her own moorings in Athol Bight, and there left here. Her anchor rattled out in the placid waters of Port Jackson, to the accompaniment of a parting cheer, and the long tow of 710 miles was over!

Thus the drama of the "missing *Perthshire*," to which only a Clark Russell could do justice, closes. Her helpless drift of over 1,400 miles, the plaything of wind and wave for forty-five days, and her varied experiences from the time of the breakdown to her ultimate finding and rescue, furnish the Pacific with a romance hard to equal in the annals of the sea.