

Charles Gibbs-Beckett report of the Wreck of the Queen Bee

As reported in an English newspaper of the time:

SHIPWRECKED ON THE COAST OF NEW ZEALAND, NARRATIVE.

....[Charles Gibbs-Beckett], who was previously for some years engaged on the staff of this journal, was a passenger by the ill-fated "Queen Bee," a vessel which was wrecked off the coast of New Zealand in August last. Mrs Gibbs (an aunt) and her family were also passengers by the same vessel. The particulars of the catastrophe are only just to hand, and we give the following extract from a letter received by his father on Tuesday:

"Custom House Hotel, Nelson, New Zealand, August 18th, 1877. The Saturday before the wreck was a lovely day and we were beating up the coast of New Zealand against wind, all very happy. Everything was still and beautiful.

The tall snow-capped mountains from the distance looked so majestic that it had the appearance of a fairy scene. On Sunday the wind blew hard, but on Monday (the fatal day for the "Queen Bee") it died away slightly, but still we were going eight or nine knots an hour. We had been watching the land all day, at times being only four or five miles from shore. As evening drew on we were looking out for the Spit Light, the reflection from which was first visible about seven o'clock, the bright light not being clear till half-past eight. At nine o'clock we had a thanksgiving service. I remember that we sang the songs "Pull for the shore, sailor," and "Home, sweet Home," both of which afterwards seemed very appropriate. We had just finished supper when the ship gave a tremendous "lunge" and quivered all over. I could see what was the matter by the look on the mate's face. All the passengers ran on deck together. Everything and everybody at once seemed confused. The captain rushed up anxiously enquiring: what was the matter. I soon heard the words "She's hard up—she's lost—nothing can save her!" The vessel was enveloped in breakers and she was fast sinking in the sands. Mustering up my courage I went into the saloon. Here were passengers half naked, fainting and screaming—a fearful sight. Some were vainly endeavouring to cheer those most disconsolate. I offered up a prayer for myself and those around me and then felt prepared for the worst. I went on deck and helped in every way I could in firing signal guns and rockets and getting the ship's boats over her side. Signals, however, proved of no avail and at three in the morning the second mate was sent to Nelson in a boat to get assistance. The vessel jerked tremendously all night: It was a dreadful time for the ladies.

While firing the guns and letting off the rockets I could not help thinking of our 5th of November. When daylight dawned it was a fearful sight to see the women and children brought on deck to be lowered into the boats. They all looked very ill. We had four boats altogether. One had gone to Nelson for assistance, the lifeboat and cutter were filled with passengers, and the Captain's gig was left for two passengers and 13 of the crew. I remained on the vessel, and as the boats left the ship the passengers waved their handkerchiefs

implying a "goodbye." My heart was ready to sink within me, but I resolved to brave it out come life or death. The waves were breaking over the poop of the vessel and the ship was nearly full of water. Myself and a young man named Hillard were the only passengers left on board and walked arm-in-arm and watched the boats out of sight; occasionally sweeping the horizon with a glass to see if any assistance was coming to us. Our hopes were frequently raised only to feel more disheartened. At half-past nine, when the tide was at its highest point, I went into the saloon.

Chairs, tables, luggage, &c., were floating about in all directions. There was only one dry cabin, and therein the third mate, Hillard and myself turned in for a little sleep. We awoke at one o'clock and partook of cold pork and coffee took a little brandy and consoled ourselves with a pipe. At three o'clock the glass began to fall very rapidly, the heavens became black, the wind increased in violence, and a severe storm threatened.

We set to work with a will to construct a raft, and soon succeeded in our efforts, By the time it was completed the sea was very rough. Soon after, the Captain summoned all hands, and each one watched his chance to jump from the rigging. At length all were got either into the boat or on the raft. The boat towed the raft for nearly live miles, but at times the sea was so rough that it was thought all must perish. Those who were standing were at times up to their waists in water; others were lying down in a half-drowned state, clinging on like grim death. Capt. Davis said that all must come into the boat, perish or not, and after considerable difficulty they did so. I succeeded in pulling one poor fellow in by the hair of his head and thus saving his life. Two were constantly employed in bailing water out, but we were so crowded that we prevented, to some extent, the water coming into the boat. Our sail was a table cloth, and it steadied the boat considerably.

Fancy 15 big fellows in a captain's gig in such a sea! That was a night which will never be effaced from my memory. The thunder, lightning, hail and rain were terrific. It is said there are no miracles on earth now, but by what, short of a miracle, were we saved. What small boat, such as ours, could have lived in such a sea had not God so willed it? When the morning dawned I was cold, wet through and almost like a corpse; but, thank God, we could see land, although a long way off. Wasn't I hungry, thirsty, cold and miserable!—and yet nothing either to eat or to drink. Although the sailors were so tired and cold they pulled with a will for the land, which proved to be D'Urvill's Island. The captain urged the men on, promising them anything they liked to eat or to drink when they got ashore. As we neared the land we saw a steamer coming along, and we pulled out again some distance. A flag was hoisted, but they did not see us. This disheartened the men, and for a time they refused to pull. The captain and crew commenced quarrelling, and I feared that a fight would ensue. By this time the boat leaked fearfully, and it was as much as we could do to keep her afloat. We determined to beach her, it being late in the afternoon. Having picked out what we thought was a favourable spot, we prepared for the run. Seeing a tremendous wave coming, I shouted, "Pull, boys, this is the wave to wash her ashore;" but it proved fatal to our frail craft. Her nose stuck in the beach and she was sent clean over. I felt myself under

the boat, but she soon heaved up, and I got out and swam for the shore. A large wave landed me with considerable violence on the beach, but, immediately after, a second wave carried me back again. I remained in this plight for some time, my strength being nearly exhausted, when a very heavy wave washed me farther inshore, and Baillie (the mate) saved my life by pulling me out of the water. This was the first time I had been on land since leaving England, and in my prostrate condition I could not stand. Our boat was knocked to pieces in a few minutes after we had got ashore. When we mustered it was found that the poor carpenter was missing. He must have been washed away and no doubt eaten by the sharks, as his body was never seen afterwards. In all fourteen were saved. Darkness soon came on, and we had to huddle up together on the rocks. I never felt so cold and miserable in my life. Sleep I could not. Through fatigue I dozed for a few minutes, only to wake up feeling hungry and very thirsty through swallowing so much sea water. At three in the morning, Hillard was suffering so intensely from thirst that he ran barefooted over the rocks in search of water. He succeeded, but paid dearly in severe lacerations of his feet, from which he is now suffering. Later on I also went in search of water, and found a little stream running from a rock a short distance from our rude camp. Our clothes dried on us during the day, but in the evening we succeeded in making a fire. We caught a bird, and my share was to suck the blood from its head, which I did with much pleasure. There did not appear to be scarcely any birds to shoot or fish to catch, and we were almost starved. Had we stayed there much longer I fear we should have commenced eating each other. About the middle of the day I determined to scale the cliff, accompanied by two of my companions. After shaking hands with the rest we selected a good place and commenced to climb. The rock was very loose and we ran great risk of being knocked over by falling fragments. I was nearly stunned two or three times. I felt thoroughly exhausted while hanging on with both hands between life and death. I climbed till I nearly reached the top of the cliff, but could not quite manage it. I was in a most dangerous position, and prayed to God that I might be killed at once if my fate was to die there or, in his mercy, to show me a way of escape which he ultimately did. On looking round I saw a projecting rock which, if I could only reach, it would save me. How I managed to get on to it I cannot tell, but I did so, and, by this means descended again to the beach. The broiling sun made the perspiration roll off me, and I was completely fagged out but I managed to get back to our camp again. They were surprised to see me, and I laid down to rest on the rocks. I had not been in this position long when the captain shouted, "Here comes a steamer." Our joyful hopes were soon dispelled; for, although we set fire to the bush and waved a flag, she did not see us and turned away. A few minutes after, another vessel came in sight, and when we observed the ensign hoisted as a signal that they saw us, you may judge of our joy. They soon sent off a boat, and brought some brandy for us to drink. We literally wept for joy. But we had another perilous journey yet. The boat had to push off through a heavy surf, and we were nearly swamped again, but at last our troubles were ended, and we got on board "The Manawalu" a vessel sent in search of us. They only

discovered us by the smoke from our fire. We arrived at Nelson about midnight. I stayed on board till morning, when I followed Hillard on a stretcher to the hotel where Aunt and two others received us with out-stretched arms. We found them crying very bitterly as the boat from the "Queen Bee," containing my cousins, was reported to be lost. About noon, however, a telegram was received that they were safe and would arrive that night - which they did. Every preparation was made for their arrival and they had a most enthusiastic reception. I could not relate half the kindness we have received from the good people of Nelson, from the highest to the lowest. A subscription is on foot called "the 'Queen Bee' Relief Fund," and everything it is possible to do for our comfort is being done as we have lost everything. An official inquiry has been held as to the cause of the wreck, and I gave evidence before the Court. To-day the Judge summed up and passed sentence: the captain's certificate being suspended for three years and the second mate's for six months. Best love to all."

Charles Gibbs-Beckett.

The Nelson Daily Times, a copy of which arrived by the same mail, contains over 32 columns of the disaster and the official enquiry. It says, "The receipt of the welcome news that the passengers were saved evoked a spontaneous outburst of enthusiasm that eventuated in the determination to give the boats a reception worthy of the occasion. Accordingly, at the appointed time, the different volunteer companies accompanied by their bands assembled and in the presence of between two and three thousand people, and welcomed by rounds of ringing cheers, the first contingent of the survivors arrived at Nelson. The remainder, with the children, arrived in the Maori boat shortly after dusk and although ere this the crowd, hoarse in the shouting welcomes had departed, the reception accorded them was a very hearty one. About £400 has been placed in the hands of the committee for immediate distribution. Over £100 will be transmitted to London for the benefit of the widow and children of the carpenter, who was drowned, and the remainder will be judiciously disbursed among the needy survivors.

Thanksgiving Services were held in all the churches, and the afternoon of Monday, the 13th, was kept as a holiday to allow for a suitable public recognition of the services of the rescuers by his lordship the Bishop of Nelson." The same paper states that one family alone paid £500 passage money in the "Queen Bee," The family alluded to is that which is the subject of this narrative.