

DECLARATION BY THE MATE OF THE "ROSENEATH" (1882)

Information has been received at Irvine by Mr Hall, late master of the Glasgow barque Roseneath, which foundered in the Straits of Magellan in May last, that the first officer of the ship, in charge of the second boat, who was supposed to have perished, had been picked up by a Pacific steamer, and was on his voyage home. This officer, whose name is Samson, has since arrived in London. It should be stated that the captain and Mrs Hall, with seven of the crew, were picked up by a passing vessel, after being seven days at sea in an open boat; and, as nothing was heard of the other boat or its five occupants for months, they were naturally given up for lost, a presumption which, in the main, now turns out to have been too well founded. One of the party, however, the first officer, Mr Samson, had the good fortune to escape from a terrible position, and has at length found his way back to his native land, after undergoing most painful and perilous experiences. His statement is as follows:—

"My name is Charles Samson, and I am thirty-four years of age. I belong to Portsmouth, and have been seafaring since 1861. I joined the Roseneath on April 10th, 1880, in London, as chief mate. She belongs to Messrs Hatfield, Cameron, and Co., of Glasgow, owners of the 'Bay' line. The barque, which was of 622 tons register, was built in Quebec in 1873. On my joining the vessel we went to Granton for a cargo, and took it to Buenos Ayres; from there we went to Java, and thence to Boston with a cargo of sugar, calling in at Port Natal in distress. From Boston we went to Georgia, New Brunswick, for a load of timber, which we conveyed from that place to Buenos Ayres. From that port we proceeded to Mejillones [port in northern Chile, Ed.], whence we took our departure on April 11th, 1882, with a cargo of grain [actually, guano, Ed.] for Liverpool. We experienced fine weather up to May 6th, when heavy gales set in from N.N.W., continuing until the 10th of the same month, when the ship had to be hove to. In doing that she sprang a leak, and started her sternpost.

On May 12th -- two days later — the barque was making so much water that we had to abandon her— she was, in fact, sinking. We took to the boats, of which there were two. The captain, Mr John Macmillan Ball, went into the long boat with his wife and his child — a little girl about two years and a half old — the boatswain (John Poole), the steward, and four able seamen. There was none too much time for getting into the boats, as night was coming on and the ship making water rapidly. There were two

bags of bread and several tins of preserved meat put into the captain's boat. I did not notice whether any water was put in, but plenty could be caught, as there was rain and snow. I have heard since that the captain and those with him were picked up seven days later, only one of his party having died from the exposure.

I took to the pinnace. I had with me the carpenter, two able seamen, and one ordinary seaman. I took two bags of bread, several tins of preserved meat, and one bucket of water on board. When we pushed off from the foundering ship we must have been about $54\frac{1}{2}$ South and $74\frac{1}{2}$ West; at all events, that was the position when I last took observations — at noon. It was nearly four o'clock when we found ourselves obliged to shove off from the ship on account of the boat being stove in. There was about tea feet of water in the barque when we abandoned her, but all her masts and spars were standing, and she was hove to. My boat drifted away to the southward, and in the haze we lost sight of the barque before she foundered, and also of the long boat, in charge of Captain Hall.

We made for the land, which we reached the following day, May 13th, but although anxious to find a place to haul the boat up, so that I might patch her up, as she had been badly stove in, I was unable then to do so. Next day, however (May 14th), I did succeed in doing this, but we thought it advisable to launch her again, and pull southward, intending to make for Cape Horn. All this time we were suffering dreadfully from cold and exposure, but our stock of provisions remained nearly intact.

We went on this way for three days, until, on May 17th, we fell in with three canoes manned by Indians. They gave us chase, and there being no wind we could not get along. I noticed that the canoes were each built of three pieces of wood — a bottom and two sides fastened together. There were about five men and two women in each. Two of the canoes had European-made oars. We were pulling with two blades of oars — that was all we had. We rowed as fast as we could, but the Indians soon came up to us, shouting and gesticulating for us to stop. They had fires in their canoes, made of a mossy substance, for it was very cold, it being then in the dead of winter, and there were thin sheets of ice upon the small inlets.

The Indians soon caught up to us, and came swarming into the pinnace, The sea was smooth at that time, I gave them some biscuits and tobacco, and I judged from their manner that they were friendly. After remaining an

hour on the boat, they turned forwards their canoes, and waved their hands, as if to wish us good-bye. They were apparently just about to step into their canoes when some of the women pushed into their hands axes, which had been previously concealed, and in a moment, before I could realise what was happening, they turned upon my four companions and killed them.

One of the Indians had been armed with, instead of an axe, a spear about eight inches in length attached to a stick. With this he struck one of my crew, a Frenchman, the spear entered his eye, and the point of it came out at the back of his skull. Another of my mates had his face chopped clean off. I cannot tell the particular nature of the wounds of the other two, but all four were killed instantaneously as it were, partly, perhaps through being in such an exhausted state when attacked. I was not struck. They apparently designed not to touch me, and afterwards I thought this might be because I had made them presents.

The bottom of our boat was full of blood and water. The Indians knelt on the dead bodies to strip off their clothing, which was not easy, the flesh being much swollen. This done, they threw the corpses into the sea, and rowed the boat to shore with me in it, their women taking charge of the canoes. Having hauled the boat on the beach, they made me disembark, and then followed my example. Afterwards they stripped me of most of my clothes, motioning me to stand still, and whilst I did so they turned the boats upside down and lit a fire.

The Indians were perfectly naked, except that the men had a covering round their loins, and the women sealskins over their backs. They were all copper-coloured, and ranged from 4ft. 6in. to 5ft. in height, being very stout in proportion to their stature. They slept near the shore that night, compelling me by signs to remain with them, although, of course, I could not understand their language. This was on one of the Terra del Fuego islands, which abounds with rats about the size of English cats. Early in the morning the Indians took to their canoes again, and rowed about, apparently in search of adventures, and to gather limpets from the rocks, these being, as far as I could see, their chief food, except when they managed to catch a seal. I lived principally on mussels; I had seal flesh only once or twice. At night we went on shore again, and my captors made a wigwam, in which we all slept together men, women, children, and dogs.

This kind of life continued from day to day. They were always on the move during daylight, and every night settled down in a fresh place. Before going to sleep the Indians always smoked. Generally they made pipes of a peculiar kind of seaweed found in the Straits of Magellan, with the quills of penguins for mouthpieces. They first put the tobacco in a big mussel shell and bake it into a fine powder, in which condition they smoke it. After taking four or five draughts their eyeballs project and turn upwards into their heads, their lower jaw falls as if they were paralysed, and they vomit horribly. Men, women, and children all seemed to indulge in this practice. There were only about half as many women as men. These people first took me northward and then returned southward through some narrow strait. After a time they gave me a jacket in place of the one they had taken from me.

When I had been living with them for about twenty five days, a party of them went off one night with my boat. Next morning they returned with a whaleboat in tow and a Portuguese on board. This man afterwards told me that the Indians had captured him in the same way as they did me, and that they had murdered all the rest of his crew, In fact, we saw the stripped corpses the next day when we were taken to an opposite island to fetch some provisions; and I ascertained that they had enticed the crew on shore there, and then assassinated them.

Two days later a party of the tribe brought an Indian sailor in a canoe, and I learnt from him by signs, for I could not understand his language, that he, too, belonged to a shipwrecked party, all of whom, except himself, had been treacherously murdered, so it would seem as if these savages always spare one of their victims. I can't account for this, unless it is because they wish to get some reward from the ocean steamers, which I know do sometimes give them tobacco and provisions for taking care of shipwrecked mariners.

Soon after the arrival of this poor Indian sailor we were all taken up through rocks and shoals towards the northward, to a point, as near as I can guess, about twenty-five miles from Sandy Point [Punta Arenas, Ed.], in the Straits of Magellan. Almost as soon as we arrived there I sighted a steamer, and asked the Indians to take me on board of her, but they refused. A day or two after I saw another homeward bound, and begged them to row me out, but they refused, and got behind an island to avoid

our being seen.

We had been in the Straits of Magellan about four days when another gang of Indians of a different tribe altogether came and built their wigwams alongside of us, and there was a great deal of smoking and chattering among them all night. Next morning I was down on the beach when this fresh gang came down to launch their canoes. Up to this time I had been in daily dread of being murdered like my comrades, and, having lived for weeks on mussels and an occasional taste of seal fish, I had become so weak that I could hardly stand.

This second gang of Indians, however, had been making signs of friendship to me, and as I found that my original captors were not disposed to let me get on any passing steamer, I thought I would try my luck with the new party. Therefore, when they were about to go off in their canoes, I motioned them to take my own boat, which they did, and I got into it with them. They put off in such a hurry that they left one of their gang behind, but he jumped into the water, and swam out 200 yards, and rejoined them in the boat. He had no sooner done this than the other tribe caught sight of us, and they set up such a yelling as was terrible to listen to — men, women, children, and dogs all joining in. They at once launched their canoes and put out after us but they were too late, for I hauled the mast and went out into the middle of the stream, and made for the strait.

There were nineteen in the boat besides myself. The Indian sailor was with us, but we had been obliged to leave the Portuguese behind us, as he was too exhausted to move near to the boat. Having left our partners behind, we made through the narrows, and were knocking about for ten days in search of a steamship. During that time I suffered terribly from the cold. At dusk every night we went on shore, and at daylight launched the boat again and went out to look about and to gather shellfish from the rocks. At last we sighted the Pacific liner Aconcagua, which stopped and took me on board, and conveyed me to Valparaiso, from whence I was sent home to England in the steamship Galatia by the British Consul.

I was treated very kindly by the passengers on board the Aconcagua. Of course, I have lost everything, and when I applied to the Board of Trade for my certificate to be given up to me, I found I had been reported as dead. I shall, however, get the certificate back again after certain

formalities have been gone through, and don't suppose I shall have any difficulty in getting employment.

The gang of Indians to whom I owe my release belong to the Patagonian side. I believe the steamers of the North Pacific are in the habit of stopping to conciliate the tribes by gifts of food and tobacco, with the view of inducing them to save the lives of any poor fellows who may be wrecked. I expect it was on this account they brought me to the Aconcagua to be taken on; and it shows what a little good treatment will do, for, from all that I know, I believe the occasional treachery of these natives towards the white men has been brought about by the ill-treatment they have had to put up with from the whites."