

Across the Straits

Henry Lawson

We crossed Cook's Straits from Wellington in one of those rusty little iron tanks that go up and down and across there for twenty or thirty years and never get wrecked—for no other reason, apparently, than that they have every possible excuse to go ashore or go down on those stormy coasts. The age, construction, or condition of these boats, and the south-easters, and the construction of the coastline, are all decidedly in favour of their going down; the fares are high and the accommodation is small and dirty. It is always the same where there is no competition.

A year or two ago, when a company was running boats between Australia and New Zealand without competition, the steerage fare was three pound direct single, and two pound ten shillings between Auckland and Wellington. The potatoes were black and green and soggy, the beef like bits scraped off the inside of a hide which had lain out for a day or so, the cabbage was cabbage leaves, the tea muddy. The whole business took away our appetite regularly three times a day, and there wasn't enough to go round, even if it had been good—enough tucker, we mean; there was enough appetite to go round three or four times, but it was driven away by disgust until after meals. If we had not, under cover of darkness, broached a deck cargo of oranges, lemons, and pineapples, and thereby run the risk of being run in on arrival, there would have been starvation, disease, and death on that boat before the end—perhaps mutiny.

You can go across now for one pound, and get something to eat on the road; but the travelling public will go on patronizing the latest reducer of fares until the poorer company gets starved out and fares go up again—then the travelling public will have to pay three or four times as much as they do now, and go hungry on the voyage; all of which ought to go to prove that the travelling public is as big a fool as the general public.

We can't help thinking that the captains and crews of our primitive little coastal steamers take the chances so often that they in time get used to it, and, being used to it, have no longer any misgivings or anxiety in rough weather concerning a watery grave, but feel as perfectly safe as if they were in church with their wives or sisters—only more comfortable—and go on feeling so until the worn-out machinery breaks down and lets the old tub run ashore, or knocks a hole in her side, or the side itself rusts through at last and lets the water in, or the last straw in the shape of an extra ton of brine tumbles on board, and the *John Smith (Newcastle)*, goes down with a swoosh before the cook has time to leave off peeling his potatoes and take to prayer.

These cheerful—and, maybe, unjust—reflections are perhaps in consequence of our having lost half a sovereign to start with. We arrived at the booking-office with two minutes to spare, two sticks of Juno tobacco, a spare wooden pipe—in case we lost the other—a letter to a friend's

friend down south, a pound note (Bank of New Zealand), and two half-crowns, with which to try our fortunes in the South Island. We also had a few things in a portmanteau and two blankets in a three-bushel bag, but they didn't amount to much. The clerk put down the ticket with the half-sovereign on top of it, and we wrapped the latter in the former and ran for the wharf. On the way we snatched the ticket out to see the name of the boat we were going by, in order to find it, and it was then, we suppose, that the semi-quid got lost.

Did you ever lose a sovereign or a half-sovereign under similar circumstances? You think of it casually and feel for it carelessly at first, to be sure that it's there all right; then, after going through your pockets three or four times with rapidly growing uneasiness, you lose your head a little and dredge for that coin hurriedly and with painful anxiety. Then you force yourself to be calm, and proceed to search yourself systematically, in a methodical manner. At this stage, if you have time, it's a good plan to sit down and think out when and where you last had that half-sovereign, and where you have been since, and which way you came from there, and what you took out of your pocket, and where, and whether you might have given it in mistake for sixpence at that pub where you rushed in to have a beer—and then you calculate the chances against getting it back again. The last of these reflections is apt to be painful, and the painfulness is complicated and increased when there happen to have been several pubs and a like number of hurried farewell beers in the recent past.

And for months after that you cannot get rid of the idea that that half-sov. might be about your clothes somewhere. It haunts you. You turn your pockets out, and feel the lining of your coat and vest inch by inch, and examine your letters, papers—everything you happen to have had in your pockets that day—over and over again, and by and by you peer into envelopes and unfold papers that you didn't have in your pocket at all, but might have had. And when the first search has worn off, and the fit takes you, you make another search. Even after many months have passed away, some day—or night—when you are hard up for tobacco and a drink, you suddenly think of that late lamented half-sov., and are moved by adverse circumstances to look through your old clothes in a sort of forlorn hope, or to give good luck a sort of chance to surprise you—the only chance that you can give it.

By the way, seven-and-six of that half-quid should have gone to the landlord of the hotel where we stayed last, and somehow, in spite of this enlightened age, the loss of it seemed a judgment; and seeing that the boat was old and primitive, and there was every sign of a three days' sou'-easter, we sincerely hoped that judgment was complete—that supreme wrath had been appeased by the fine of ten bob without adding any Jonah business to it.

This reminds us that we once found a lost half-sovereign in the bowl of a spare pipe six months after it was lost. We wish it had stayed there and turned up to-night. But, although when you are in great danger—say, adrift in an open boat—tales of providential escapes and rescues may interest and comfort you, you can't get any comfort out of anecdotes concerning the turning up of lost quids when you have just lost one yourself. All you want is

to find it.

It bothers you even not to be able to account for a bob. You always like to know that you have had something for your money, if only a long beer. You would sooner know that you fooled your money away on a spree, and made yourself sick, than lost it out of an extra hole in your pocket, and kept well.

We left Wellington with a feeling of pained regret, a fellow wanderer by our side telling us how he had once lost a “fi-pun-note”—and about two-thirds of the city unemployed on the wharf looking for that half-sovereign.

A sailor said that the *Moa* was a good sea-boat, and, although she was small and old, *he* was never afraid of her. He’d sooner travel in her than in some of those big cheap ocean liners with more sand in them than iron or steel—— You know the rest. Further on, in a conversation concerning the age of these coasters, he said that they’d last fully thirty years if well painted and looked after. He said that this one was seldom painted, and never painted properly; and then, seemingly in direct contradiction to his previously expressed confidence in the safety and seaworthiness of the *Moa*, he said that he could poke a stick through her anywhere. We asked him not to do it.

It came on to splash, and we went below to reflect, and search once more for that half-sovereign.

The cabin was small and close, and dimly lighted, and evil smelling, and shaped like the butt end of a coffin. It might not have smelt so bad if we hadn’t lost that half-sovereign.

There was a party of those gipsy-like Assyrians—two families apparently—the women and children lying very sick about the lower bunks; and a big, good-humoured-looking young Maori propped between the end of the table and the wall, playing a concertina. The sick people were too sick, and the concertina seemed too much in sympathy with them, and the lost half-quid haunted us more than ever down there; so we started to climb out.

The first thing that struck us was the jagged top edge of that iron hood-like arrangement over the gangway. The top half only of the scuttle was open. There was nothing to be seen except a fog of spray and a Newfoundland dog sea-sick under the lee of something. The next thing that struck us was a tub of salt water, which came like a cannon ball and broke against the hood affair, and splattered on deck like a crockery shop. We climbed down again backwards, and sat on the floor with emphasis, in consequence of stepping down a last step that wasn’t there, and cracked the back of our heads against the edge of the table. The Maori helped us up, and we had a drink with him at the expense of one of the half-casers mentioned in the beginning of this sketch. Then the Maori shouted, then we, then the Maori again, then we again; and then we thought, “Dash it, what’s a half-sovereign? We’ll fall on

our feet all right. ”

We went up Queen Charlotte’s Sound, a long crooked arm of the sea between big, rugged, black-looking hills. There was a sort of lighthouse down near the entrance, and they said an old Maori woman kept it. There were some whitish things on the sides of the hills, which we at first took for cattle, and then for goats. They were sheep. Someone said that that country was only fit to carry sheep. It must have been bad, then, judging from some of the country in Australia which is only fit to carry sheep. Country that wouldn’t carry goats would carry sheep, we think. Sheep are about the hardiest animals on the face of this planet—barring crocodiles.

You may rip a sheep open whilst watching for the boss’s boots or yarning to a pen-mate, and then when you have stuffed the works back into the animal, and put a stitch in the slit, and poked it somewhere with a tar-stick (it doesn’t matter much where) the jumbuck will be all right and just as lively as ever, and turn up next shearing without the ghost of a scratch on its skin.

We reached Picton, a small collection of twinkling lights in a dark pocket, apparently at the top of a sound. We climbed up on to the wharf, got through between two railway trucks, and asked a policeman where we were, and where the telegraph office was. There were several pretty girls in the office, laughing and chyacking the counter clerks, which jarred upon the feelings of this poor orphan wanderer in strange lands. We gloomily took a telegram form, and wired to a friend in North Island, using the following words: “Wire quid; stumped.”

Then we crossed the street to a pub and asked for a room, and they told us to go up to No. 8. We went up, struck a match, lit the candle, put our bag in a corner, cleared the looking-glass off the toilet table, got some paper and a pencil out of our portmanteau, and sat down and wrote this sketch.

The candle is going out.

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