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The Koombana Blow

On Tuesday, March 19th, 1912, Depuch Island anchorage was busy. Lighters of the Whim Well Copper Mining Company were delivering ore to two large sailing ships at anchor. The 1800-ton iron barque *Crown of England* had recently arrived from Natal.[1] She had been built at Workington in 1883, but after years of service to Britain had been sold to Norwegian interests. Her new owners decided that although she would fly the flag of Norway, she could keep her imperious name.[2] German-built *Concordia* was a little smaller and a few years younger, but her path to this remote place was remarkably similar. She too had been built to carry cargo that few steamships could accommodate, and she too had been sold away from her homeland.[3] On both ships, Norwegian was now the language of the mess room.

The crews of *Crown of England* and *Concordia* had time on their hands, because loading copper was a tedious business. At the mine twelve miles inland the heavy green ore was crushed, bagged and loaded onto flat rail trucks. From there it rattled across marshland to the railhead at Balla Balla where a short jetty jutted into a mangrove-lined pool of a tidal creek. At the jetty the bags of ore were slung, hoisted and manhandled into the company's lighters for open-water transfer to the holds of the waiting ships. It would be a month at least before either ship would hoist sail.

During the morning, the company's lighter *Steady* broke from its routine; it returned to the jetty to collect stores and passengers. Several Whim Creek locals, who had witnessed a fatal fight at the Federal Hotel, were under instruction to proceed to Roebourne for the trial of two Italian miners.[4] At the anchorage they would wait for the steamer *Bullarra*, which would divert from its regular track to collect them.

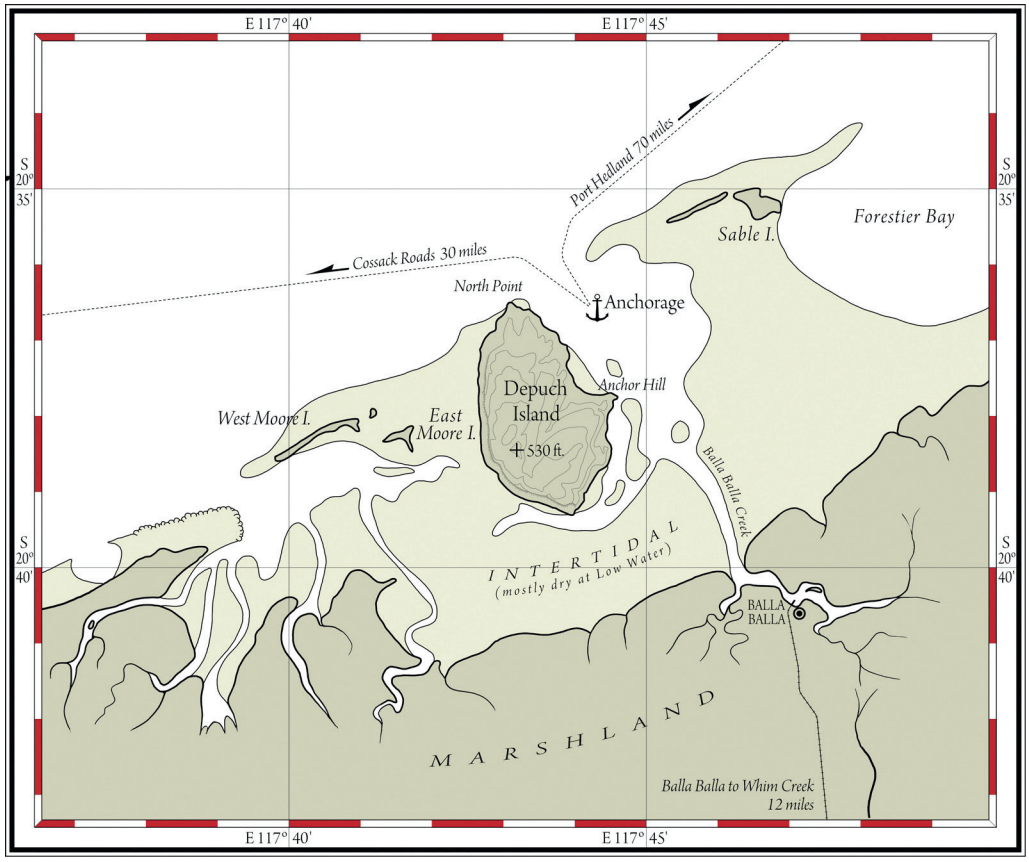
With a light easterly wind, *Steady* made easy passage. She delivered stores to *Crown of England* and then dropped anchor to wait for the

steamer. *Bullarra*, they believed, was due that evening, but after *Steady* had left Balla Balla the postmaster received a wire from Port Hedland. *Bullarra* had missed the morning tide and would be delayed a full day.[5]

Steady was a heavy workboat; she offered little in the way of comfort or protection, even for a crew of three. She now had eleven aboard: three Norwegian sailors, seven witnesses to alleged murder, and one intending *Bullarra* passenger, Charles Turner, making his way home to Perth. When the steamer failed to appear, all settled down for an uncomfortable night among bags of copper ore.

In the early hours of Wednesday morning, a breeze sprang up from the north-east. It was stronger at sunrise and rose further as the morning passed. There was little to do but sit tight and watch the comings and goings. At lunchtime, all loading of copper ore ceased. The lighter *Clyo* dropped anchor a little way away from *Concordia*, and the schooner *Enterprise* remained near *Crown of England*. Three pearling boats arrived and also dropped anchor, but after an apparent change of mind, moved on. They rounded the southern tip of the island and disappeared.

MAP 6 • *Depuch Island and Balla Balla.*



Aboard *Steady*, eleven men were now hungry and cold. During the afternoon, two attempts were made to beat back to Balla Balla but the boat twice missed stays while attempting to come about. On the first occasion the boat drifted dangerously close to rocks; on the second, she came so close to *Clyo* that she was obliged to drop anchor once more. *Clyo* and *Steady* were now only fifty yards apart. By day end, none aboard either vessel was in any doubt that they were in for a rough night. Charles Turner would recall:

> A heavy sea was running, and to crown everything rain began to fall. The lighter had no hatches, and we therefore had no place in which to shelter. The copper which we carried was loaded on the deck, and there was only a small hatchway down the forepeak which we had to nail up in order to keep the water out. We tried many times to fasten the mainsail over the deck but as often as we did so the force of the wind broke it adrift again. The rain soon drenched us to the skin. Through the storm we could see the two ships, Concordia and Crown of England, being tossed hither and thither much as we were ourselves. We next discovered that the Steady was dragging her anchor, so we dropped another, which held her again. Still the wind increased, and the raging seas continually broke over the vessel's bows, and wet us again and again. There were on board only sufficient provisions for one day, with the result that on the second day we had only one tin of salmon and one potato each. During the afternoon we had a chance of getting ashore in daylight, for if we had let go the anchors the wind and tide would have taken us in. But the skipper thought he could save the boat, so we held on. With the rain came a thick mist, and it was only at intervals that we could see even the Clyo.[6]

As daylight faded, the men were surprised to see a motor boat approaching. *The West Australian* later explained:

> On Wednesday afternoon, the motor launch which is used for towing and carrying mails and passengers from the steamers to Balla Balla left the wharf at Balla Balla to take out the last of the passengers and mails for the Bullarra. Amongst those who went out were Messrs. Maginnis (wharfinger), Slaven, Thomson (of the mine staff), and Hill (licensee of the Federal Hotel). When the launch left a very strong wind was blowing, and some doubt was expressed as to whether it would be possible for the launch to reach the steamer, but as the news of her departure had been received from Port Hedland, and no intimation given as to her not coming in to Balla Balla, Mr. Maginnis considered it necessary to keep faith with the steamer, more especially as the witnesses concerned in the case at Roebourne were under a penalty to appear.[7]

After a difficult passage the launch reached *Clyo*, which sent a dinghy to collect the passengers. Maginnis, Thompson and Hill were the first to go. They boarded safely but all those who watched the transfer thought it too dangerous to be repeated; indeed, some of the trial witnesses said they would have none of it. While waiting for conditions to moderate, the launch made the short crossing to the schooner *Enterprise*, where Captain Vallianos had been discussing the weather with Captain Eriksen of *Concordia*. The two men, who had been watching their barometers for 24 hours, knew that no abatement was likely. In fading light, they boarded the motor launch to warn of worse to come. By their action the two captains were simultaneously vindicated and confounded: conditions deteriorated so rapidly that neither was able to return to his own ship. At about 9 p.m., Eriksen hailed *Clyo*. The launch was in danger of swamping, he said; they would return to Balla Balla.[8]

The men aboard *Steady* had seen boats come and go but were isolated from all conversation. It hardly mattered. There was little prospect of any rendezvous with a steamer, and nothing to be done but to batten down. Charles Turner described the evolving ordeal:

> Night brought down with it an inky darkness. I do not think one soul on board will ever forget it. All the while the storm was gathering in fury. Very few words were spoken except when a wave would sweep over the deck and nearly swamp us. The cold was intense. There was no galley on the ship, and all we had was a firepot to light a fire in, which was impossible. So we spent the night. Just after daylight the gale appeared to lessen, but the next moment it was blowing harder than ever. We could hear the cables straining against the boat, and feared every moment they would carry away. There was one thing to be thankful for; we had no croakers on board.[9]

On Thursday morning, with the wind gusting to seventy knots, there was one simple objective for every vessel at the anchorage: to hold fast. All would endeavour to keep their vessels off the shore. All would fail. *Concordia* was the first to drag her anchors but her early surrender was doubly fortuitous: not only did she come to rest upon sand rather than rock; she settled beside a little headland which would provide some protection from the hurricane still to come.

A little to the north, *Crown of England* had two anchors out, but at about 8 a.m. she also began to drift toward the shore. A third anchor was let go. This held for a while, but within an hour she began to drag again. More chain was let go, and a heavy wire hawser was played out along one of the anchor lines. At 11 a.m., when the drift recommenced, there was nothing more to be done. The lifeboats were made ready. Close to the rocks, the drift stopped; a strong ebb-tide current was working against the wind. Although his ship hung in this precarious balance for a long while,

Captain Olsen knew that she could not be saved. When the tide turned, wind and water would co-operate to drive her ashore.[10]

Aboard the schooner *Enterprise*, first mate Nicholas Pappastatis had reached a similar conclusion. By mid-afternoon the easterly wind was beyond resistance. In the absence of Vallianos, he made a master's decision: while daylight remained he would sacrifice the schooner to save the passengers and crew. At 4 p.m. the anchors were slipped, but the landing was not what he had hoped for; *Enterprise* caught rocky ground and stopped short. With the tide falling, it would be dark before she moved again. After some discussion, Greek sailor John Scordese volunteered to swim ashore to secure a lifeline. Somehow, against the odds, he succeeded. Across the gap he took a light line which he then used to pull a heavy rope from ship to shore. Once the heavy rope was secured to rocks, the human transfer began. The three sailors still aboard were sent first; all completed the crossing and joined Scordese onshore. Pappastatis then matched the courage of his countryman: leaving *Enterprise* to her fate, he took to the water with the schooner's two passengers, both poor swimmers afraid to face the ordeal alone. All landed safely.[11]

As Captain Olsen had predicted, *Crown of England*'s fate was sealed by the turn of the tide. At 6 p.m., under the combined action of inflowing water and onshore wind, the vessel took rocky ground stern-on. Olsen told his men that there was nothing any of them could do to save the ship; she was doomed. Lifebelts were issued and the men were asked if they wished to swim ashore while there was still daylight. Together, they decided to wait until morning.

Aboard *Steady*, eleven men were keeping close, damp company at the bow of the boat. An hour or two after dark there was a sharp crack as one of the anchor cables parted. The lighter then dragged its one remaining anchor and drifted stern-first toward the shore. The men had been wet, without sleep and almost without food for 62 hours but all knew that concentration and composure would be needed for the next few minutes. The shore of Depuch Island is predominantly a rocky scree, with little sandy beaches between blunt headlands. *Steady* was already half-full of water. If she were to ground upon rock, she would not ride up; she would break apart. But if she found sand, the men's prospects would be good. Their drift in darkness was a simple heads-or-tails wager with the highest possible stakes. The men gathered near the stern, ready to jump when the crunch came. The lead was kept going, and the first calls were encouraging: "Sand . . . sand . . . sand." And then, recalled Turner:

> All at once the lead gave rock. For the first time I felt my heart sink. But only for a moment. I remembered that some of the others could not swim, whereas I could, so I began to think that after all matters might have been worse for me. We drifted on, passed over the rocky

> zone, and in a trice grounded on the sand. The ensuing wave shot us up to within 10 yards of the beach, and the next within a few feet of dry land. More than one of us said, "Thank God."[12]

Aboard Crown of England the men now gathered in the mess room. As the drama unfolded they must have regretted their decision to stay aboard. The ship had a thousand tons of copper in her holds; after an hour of heavy bumping, water began to seep in. All the while the wind kept rising. At 11 p.m. it reached a screaming pitch that none could ever have imagined. After the lifeboats, the chart-house and everything loose on deck had been torn away, Captain Olsen issued to each man a short length of rope to secure himself in the mizzen rigging. He then stripped naked and advised his men to do the same. The advice was sound but all declined, each man acutely aware of his vulnerability but none prepared to make so primal an admission of it.

The men took to the rigging, but after two hours, the masts had swollen and the pounding from below had damaged their steps. Olsen ordered them down. Within minutes, his judgment was vindicated; in rapid, cracking succession the three masts failed and went overboard. The men now clung to the rail and to each other, but briefly. With a great groan the iron hull divided, both forecastle and poop departing before the hull split down the centre into two. Some men were thrown into the sea; others chose their moment and jumped.[13]

Several of the *Crown of England* men would never be seen alive again, but the deliverance of first mate Matthias Holst was, by his own account, miraculous. Thrown into the water on the weather side, he found himself in the worst of predicaments. Caught between huge breaking waves and a wall of iron, there was every possibility that he would be knocked unconscious and drowned. But the first wave that picked him up was so large that the iron hull rolled over as it struck. Holst was swept clear over the top of what remained of the ship. As he surfaced on the lee side, a second great wave swept him high onto the rocky shore, beyond the reach of those that followed.[14]

By contrast, Captain Olsen's struggle was painful and protracted. After saluting two men who declared that they would not leave before him, he dived into the sea. In quick succession, three huge waves caught him and took him under. As he came up he managed to get hold of some timber, but was sucked down again. He managed to get the timber beneath him but even with some support, several attempts to reach the shore failed. After being tossed about like a cork, he was unceremoniously dumped upon the rocks, bruised and badly cut. He crawled to a sandy spot and sat naked and cold from 2 a.m. until daylight, with the rain and sand beating in his face. It was too dark to move, he later said, and the wind too strong to stand against.[15]

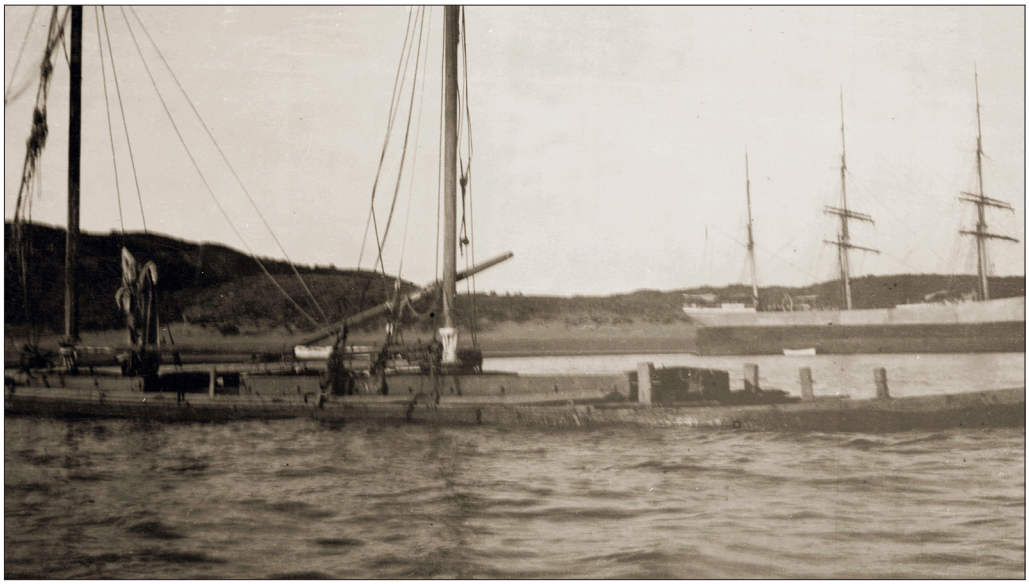
On the shore of Depuch Island the men of *Steady* had much to be thankful for, and more to confront. Charles Turner would recall:

> The flying sand and shell travelled with such speed through the air as to almost bury themselves in our flesh. We climbed over the sand ridge with difficulty, and with some wet blankets over us lay down to await the dawn. It seemed an eternity before daylight appeared. Somewhere about three in the morning I heard voices calling out, but could not tell from which direction the sounds came. All through the night we could hear the Crown of England breaking up on the rocks. It reminded one of some big foundry and steam hammers at work upon steel plates.[16]

At first light, Turner woke to a grey sky and a north-westerly gale that seemed like no wind at all. Mounds of sand, each marking a spot where a comrade lay asleep, surrounded him. Climbing to the crest of a sand ridge, he looked down upon the little beach and headland. *Steady* was high and dry where they had left her. A hundred yards offshore, the masts of sunken *Clyo* stood clear of the water with scraps of sails flapping toward Balla Balla. On the beach, *Concordia* was aground but not fast; she would swing parallel to the shoreline and be carried higher when the tide turned. A little to the north, upon rocks in shallow water, lay *Crown of England* unrecognisable: a contortion of skin and spine, picked and parted like the frame of some great, fallen carnivore.

From the beach Turner saw on one of *Clyo*'s masts what appeared to be a clump of sail. It was not; Greek crewmen Con Celezis and George Carlos still clung to the rigging. With men on the beach ready to assist, the exhausted men were encouraged to leave their perches and to swim ashore. On the beach, they were reunited with their countryman Dimitris Chandros who, having fallen from the rigging at the height of the storm, had managed to wrap his arms around a floating spar. He and his consort had come ashore together.

From fragments, *Clyo*'s pitiable story was reassembled. At around 5 p.m., on the last of the ebb tide, her anchors had also been let go. It seemed that the wind would push her directly onto the little beach but, like *Enterprise*, she did not reach her destination. About a hundred yards from shore, *Clyo* stuck fast on a sandbank. There was some consolation: the lighter was intact and perfectly upright. The men climbed into the rigging; here they would stay, clear of the waves, until the incoming tide lifted her. Although *Clyo*'s deck was above water, she was swept by breakers that partly filled her hold. She floated again, but only briefly. At 7 p.m., having moved just a few yards, the lighter settled down on the same bank with her deck still visible below the water. For the moment, the men felt safe in the rigging. Two hours later, chaos reigned. One crewman lost his grip and went overboard. Captain Maginnis was struck on the head by



Clyo *sunk and* Concordia *ashore, Depuch Island, March 1912.*

some part of the rigging; without any cry of pain or anguish, he simply fell and disappeared. A little later, Thomas Hill apparently decided to swim; he freed himself, called out "Good-bye" and jumped. Of Robert Thompson or John Pitsikas, nothing was known.[17]

Having helped the *Clyo* survivors to come ashore, the men from *Steady* walked toward the wreck of *Crown of England*. Turner would recall:

> We had not gone far before we came across the first body, that of the only Englishman on board, who had a life belt on. A little further on we found another body, also fully dressed and with a lifebelt. Further on again we picked up what was left of the unfortunate cabin boy. Then we came to a pile of rocks on which were huddled together the captain and the remainder of his crew. They presented a pitiable sight, and had been very roughly handled by the waves and rocks. They had another body with them on some timber just below where they were sitting.[18]

In grey morning light Martin Olsen had assembled what remained of his crew. While staring in disbelief at the wreck of their ship, someone had seen movement. To the amazement of the men cast ashore, the two seamen left clinging to the stern rail had survived the night. They were helped to dry ground, utterly exhausted.

From *Crown of England*, eight men were missing. All were found dead on the shore. The survivors, close to exhaustion, needed help to place the bodies of their shipmates beyond the reach of the sea. Charles Turner again:

Crown of England *wrecked, Depuch Island, March 1912.*

> The bodies were removed above high water mark, and we set about collecting some of the provisions which had been washed in. Returning to camp we had our first good meal for four days. We had not known that tinned dog could be so appetising.[19] After a brief spell we renewed the search for bodies, and found those of Messrs. Macguiness and Hill, and the steward and second mate of the Crown of England. The last two named had evidently come ashore on two hatches, which were lying beside them. Mr. Hill, a fine specimen of manhood, had only his boots on. He must have put up a game fight.[20]

A FEW MILES AWAY, the settlement at Balla Balla had met the full force of the storm. The jetty had been seriously damaged, but for the most part the town still stood. The government buildings, razed to the ground in April 1898, were now made of sterner stuff. North and south, the telegraph lines were down, but the news most keenly sought—and the subject of greatest anxiety—was the fate of the fleet at the anchorage.

On Friday afternoon, the stranded captains of *Enterprise* and *Concordia* teamed up with four locals to ascertain the fates of ships and men. In the mangroves near the settlement, a pearling lugger was found to be seaworthy but its Malay crew refused to make the trip. The boat was commandeered.[21] The straight-line distance to the island was only three miles, but a hard nor'-wester now blew directly into the mouth of the creek. Tacking all the way, the lugger made the crossing in three hours.

By chance, the inquirers came ashore just a few yards from where the bodies of Maginnis and Hill lay high on the beach. A little further

along, they found the bodies of two men they did not recognise. Only after carrying the four bodies to the lugger did they learn the greater scale of the tragedy; only then did they realise that it would be impossible to bring all of the dead to the mainland. After a brief conference with the two Norwegian masters, it was decided that six men would be buried immediately. Charles Turner recalled a simple, improvised observance.

> A spot for the island graves was selected on the highest part of the sand ridge under a hill of rock, and with shovels taken from the Steady a number of us soon had an extensive grave dug. The bodies were then carried up the hill, and placed side by side, the two skippers reading the burial service in Norwegian. As the bodies were being placed in the grave I noticed that the Englishman seemed almost to clasp hands with the Norwegian next to him. The thought flashed through my mind, "Brothers in death." The grave was then filled in, and a door from one of the ship's cabins was erected to mark the spot. It was an awesome sight to see those poor mangled bodies lying side by side. I shall never forget the scene, neither I think will any of the others.[22]

In fading light and upon a falling tide, the lugger carrying the bodies of Maginnis, Hill, Andriasen and Gron set out for Balla Balla. Although the wind was now following, the water was so thick with sediment that it was impossible to distinguish deep from shallow. The lugger ran aground. After four hours with the larger waves breaking over the stern, the boat was released by the incoming tide. It was after midnight when the bodies were finally brought ashore, but for assistant wharfinger Hugh McDonald and the others, the long day was not quite over. There remained the awful duty of calling upon Maude Maginnis to tell her that her husband was dead.

The death of Captain E. P. "Eddie" Maginnis was especially poignant. Maginnis had lost his first wife in 1902, when he was only 26. The young widower continued his seafaring career on both sides of Australia, as an officer of *Grantala*, *Yongala* and *Koombana*. But in November 1909, remarried and with a child on the way, the popular sailor took a 'shore job': he accepted the position of wharfinger for Point Samson and Cossack. There he remained until the end of 1911 when H. R. Sleeman, the manager of the Whim Well Copper Mining Company, offered him the role of wharfinger at Balla Balla. Sleeman's offer was too good to refuse: the salary was more than Maginnis had been accustomed to, and the accommodation excellent. Maginnis wrote to his mother in Queensland, whom he had not seen for several years, to suggest that at summer's end she should come to Western Australia and live with them. Ellen Maginnis arrived at Depuch Anchorage on Monday, March 18th, 1912. Five days later, on a little rise between the Balla Balla jetty and the flooded causeway, her son was laid to rest.[23]

Late on Sunday morning, two Japanese crewmen from the missing lugger *Clara* walked into Balla Balla. The diver Nagga Nitsia and sailor Yama Cooa had taken advantage of a very low tide to walk and swim from the south-western corner of Depuch Island to the mainland. They had then trudged through marsh and mangrove to reach the settlement. Another story was told.

After coming into the anchorage on Wednesday morning, *Clara*, *Karrakatta* and *Britannia* had sought protection on the western side of the island. They had been close together at anchor when the storm came. *Karrakatta* and *Britannia* had been seen in great difficulty before being lost to sight. *Clara* had capsized. After three hours in the water and three days alone on the western shore of Depuch Island, the two Japanese believed that they were the only survivors of the little fleet.[24]

The news was shocking; a further loss of twenty lives was now feared. *Clara* had carried six Japanese and a Malay. *Karrakatta* had carried James Scanlon and a crew of six; *Britannia*, skippered by his brother Hugh, had the same. Worse still, it was thought that Scanlon Senior was with them, on one or other of the boats.[25]

After four days without food, the two *Clara* men could fairly have expected a little rest. But even this relief was to be postponed. After water, brandy and a few sandwiches, Constable Fred Growden asked the men if they would come aboard the cutter to assist in the search for the Scanlons and any other survivors of their fleet. They agreed.

At 6 p.m., a dinghy was sighted near East Moore Island. In it were three other Japanese sailors from *Clara*, naked, emaciated and taking turns to row the boat with broken deal boards. Like Nagga Nitsia and Yama Cooa, they had spent some hours in the water but they, along with much of the wreckage of the lugger, had been swept south-westward over the shallows to the mainland. After two days wandering here and there, they had found the dinghy, full of sand but intact.

From *Clara* there were still two men unaccounted for. In broken English the Japanese explained to Constable Growden that their Japanese shipmate Shi Raata was almost certainly dead. When the storm came he refused to put on a lifebelt. He went below and never returned to the deck before the lugger capsized. Of their Malay shipmate Bin Ahmat, the news was a little better. After hours in the water, he had met up with them on the shore, but when the salvaged dinghy was ready to be launched he refused utterly to set foot in it. He would walk to Roebourne along the telegraph line, he declared.[26]

The five Japanese believed that *Karrakatta* and *Britannia*, like *Clara*, had been overwhelmed, but by day end there was cause for optimism. Having instructed his deputy to take the starving men back to Balla in the cutter, Growden teamed up with local beachcomber Fisher to continue the search. In failing light the two sighted four luggers, including one

dismasted and in tow, sailing eastward toward Port Hedland. In their haste to intercept, they ran Fisher's boat onto a sandbank and failed to make contact. Time and tidings await no man.[27]

By Sunday night, news of the disaster had reached the capital. The following morning, *The West Australian* printed all it had gleaned. Its long report began:

> Once again the Nor'-West coast has been brought into sad and sudden prominence by the visitation of one of those terrible cyclones which from time to time sweep down so ruthlessly and play such havoc with life and limb as well as with property on land and sea. It is barely fourteen months ago since a gale off Cossack sent the fine barque Glenbank to her doom, permitting one man only out of her crew of 21 to reach the shore alive. And only four months before that Broome was visited by the most awful cyclone the town has ever known, causing damage estimated at over £30,000 and a loss of life that in the case of one small fleet alone accounted for 23 men. On that occasion practically the whole length of the 90-mile beach was strewn with wreckage, and for many days after the sea continued to give up its dead. And now again the roll has been called, and to the name of many a sailor, perchance not a few landsmen too, there is no response.[28]

The chronicle of destruction included some good news. At noon on Saturday a battered S.S. *Bullarra* had limped into Cossack. Her passengers and crew were all safe. Captain Upjohn was later asked if he considered *Bullarra* lucky to have survived. "We escaped by a miracle," he said.[29]

Bullarra, southbound, had called at Port Hedland to load 190 bullocks. After missing Tuesday's high tide, she found herself sharing the jetty with *Koombana*, northbound for Broome and Derby. The next morning, *Bullarra* had left Port Hedland about twenty minutes behind *Koombana*, and had kept the larger vessel in sight for a time before turning south-west for Depuch Island. Over the next few hours, conditions deteriorated dramatically. A "very nice fresh breeze" at the harbour entrance stiffened to an east-north-easterly gale and continued to rise. At 4 p.m., in horizontal rain and with the glass falling, Captain Upjohn discarded any thought of calling at the anchorage. He turned *Bullarra* around and made for the open sea.[30]

Four weeks would pass before the first detailed account of the *Bullarra*'s ordeal appeared in *The Western Mail*.

> At 8 o'clock that night the ship was labouring in a full hurricane with tremendous seas buffeting her about. The crew were kept at work hoisting canvas sails on the weather main rigging aft to keep

the ship's head to sea and so prevent her from turning broadside on to the storm. The work was hard, and the blinding spray and rain cut the men's clothing, while the wind tore the canvas sheets in the rigging from time to time. At midnight the funnel crashed down on the deck, and created havoc among the superstructure. Luckily no one was to leeward of the funnel when it fell, but the third mate was steadying himself on the weather wire when it snapped as the gear tumbled to the deck and commenced thumping about as the ship lurched to and fro.

With the cyclone hustling in from the east, at 2 a.m. on the 21st, the ship was helpless in the grip of the storm, and Captain Upjohn ordered the port anchor to be let go, and 120 fathoms of cable run out to keep the ship's head to the wind, the engines being set at three-quarter speed steaming up to the anchor. Everything regarding the hatches, was done commensurate with safety, and in order to give the frantic cattle below every chance, four of the hatches were kept open for ventilation purposes, men being stationed alongside to be ready to batten down if necessary. There was no rest for anybody aboard the tortured ship, and all hands were at work, constantly engaged in securing fittings, which were torn away by the weather and in replacing the canvas screens aft, which had to be renewed every hour or so in order to keep the vessel head-to.

At noon the glass read 28.00, and the hurricane was blowing with unabated force, darkness being everywhere. The blinding rain and spray from the mountainous seas battered the bodies of the ship's company with a constant tattoo and stinging like "a handful of pebbles flung in one's face." It was impossible to face the weather, and speech was only practicable by shouting in one another's ears, while progress along the deck was made with the utmost difficulty. The seas were running two and three times the size of the ship itself, which resembled to the officers "a pigmy in a mountain range." Five men were engaged constantly in passing oil from the engine room forward to where a bucket perforated with holes was used to pour oil into a downpipe. The oil streamed out on to the sea, and had a wonderful effect in preventing the waves from breaking. A huge wave, however, struck the bridge and the captain's cabin 34ft. above normal sea level, and strained the superstructure. The impact started the drawers in the captain's locker, and the sextant was tumbled out from one of the apartments on to the floor, where it was washing to and fro in the water until rescued. From stem to stern the fittings of the ship were sodden, and water percolated everywhere.

At 2 p.m., with the glass reading 27.80, the force of the wind ceased, and the vessel was in the centre of the storm, where light variable breezes were encountered. The seas, however, were high and

> dangerous, and instead of rushing down on the gallant ship from one quarter they hurled themselves in conical shape from all directions, "flopping up and down." The engines were slowed down, so that the ship would be ready to meet the second half of the storm when it should, as it inevitably had to, hurtle in from the other direction. At 6 p.m., wind and sea rose again from the W.S.W. to W., increasing in force until at midnight the cyclone in all its fury had the ship again in its toils. All night long it blew, the Bullarra labouring heavily in the mountainous seas. At 6 o'clock the following morning the ship was lying like a derelict in the troubled waters, thrashed about in the gale which was abating. From 8 a.m. the weather cleared up, and the crew were engaged all day in dumping dead bullocks overboard.[31]

From *Bullarra*'s bridge the wild sea had been something to behold, but for the men below deck the maelstrom could only be imagined. One fireman declared:

> We thought we were gonners pretty nearly every minute, for a long while. But we sang no hymns. We did have some sing-song when she looked like going down, but it was not hymns—no d--- fear. It was more cheerful. I forget what it was now, but it went all right.[32]

Here was a lead that cried out to be followed. After probing a little deeper, the correspondent for *The Northern Times* was able to report:

> In the thickest of the hurricane, when a sudden and calamitous end to the desparate struggle of the ship for life seemed inevitable, some called for a hymn. But it appears that none of them knew any hymns—none of those who had any opportunity for singing, at any rate. Then, in the midst of the terrible anxiety, a fireman struck up, "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now?" And to the accompaniment of the roaring of the hurricane, the crew joined in most lustily, and howled the chorus in the vigor of men seeking distraction from desparate peril. And as they sang they grew cheerful. "But I never want to hear that tune any more," said the man who told me about it. And he looked as though he meant it.[33]

On his return to base, Constable Growden wired Roebourne with the latest information and asked his colleagues in the neighbouring town to render assistance to a Malay seaman proceeding to Roebourne on foot along the telegraph line. Impossible, they replied; the rivers had broken their banks and the land was impassable. Floodwaters notwithstanding, Bin Ahmat covered the forty miles unassisted. At seven o'clock on Monday evening, after five days without food, he walked into the town and asked for something to eat.[34]

In some respects, the storm that had annihilated the Depuch Island fleet was like no other, but the characteristic bloom of rumour and speculation had been seen before. At first the imagined death toll rose sharply, only to fall steadily as battered boats reached port and resourceful men rejoined the ranks of the living. And when repaired telegraph lines brought news from neighbouring towns, the broad landscape could again be seen.

From Port Hedland came the news that *Karrakatta* and *Britannia* were safe.[35] Moreover, the wind that had caused such havoc to the north and to the south had somehow bypassed the town. Although Cossack had suffered some damage, there was mischievous satisfaction for those who had wagered that the Point Samson jetty would fall to the first great storm that struck it.[36] In Roebourne, two Italians charged with murder had faced trial but had been spared the harmonised testimony of men who wanted them dead.[37] And in Perth the Norwegian consul, upon learning of the tragedy of *Crown of England*, had offered to receive the personal effects of the dead men, only to be told that there were none, that the ship and all it contained had been destroyed utterly, and that the living and the dead had come ashore naked or nearly so.[38]

Place by place, piece by piece, the elements of a great disaster were quietly interlocked. But just as coastal accounts reached stark consensus, the focus of public attention shifted from the known to the unknown, from the irresistible will of the wind to the stubborn silence of the sea. Of *Koombana* there was no word. The pride of the fleet had failed to reach her destination.