

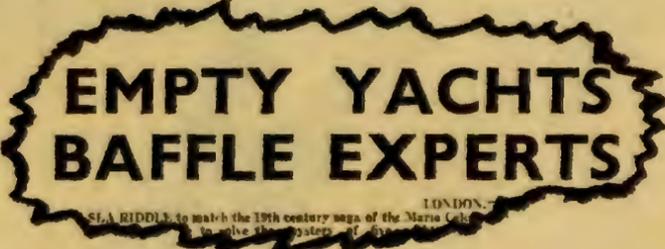
Missing yachtsmen: No big riddle—veterans

Daily News Correspondent

CAPE TOWN, Monday.

VETERAN SINGLE-HANDED and long distance yachtsmen in the Cape believe the long arm of coincidence is responsible for the mysterious disappearance of the four lone round-the-world mariners who vanished from their yachts in the same area of the Atlantic this month.

The yachting fraternity generally scoffs at the notion that the sea has presented the experts with another riddle to equal the baffling 19th century mystery of the Marie Celeste. Disciples of Captain Joshua Slocum hold the theory that the missing yachtsmen simply fell overboard, either through carelessness, overconfidence or pure mishap.



LONDON.—
A RIDDLE to match the 19th century saga of the Marie Celeste to solve the mystery of the missing yachtsmen.

There is not a single subscription to the theories gripping imaginative minds filled with fearsome visions of sea monsters or space ships filled with Martian kidnapers.

"Monsters," snorted Laurie Harder, "forget it. That's completely out. It's more likely that they either became overconfident and fell overboard or slipped with the same result."

Mr. Harder, a rugged Australian who sailed his 25ft. cutter-rigged boat Ohra from New Guinea to South Africa, said it was unlikely that the yachtsmen succumbed to fatigue or physical and mental strain.

"In that area they would have been in the trade winds — which means they would have plenty of time to sleep.

"Most of the time on long distance voyages there is little to do but eat and sleep so I would rule these possibilities out. "Once you fall overboard at sea, especially if you are sailing solo, the chances of getting back to your boat are pretty slender."

Theory

Col. S. H. Jeffrey, chairman of the Cruising Association of South Africa, discounted a popular theory that the men dived overboard for a swim and were left behind by their boats in mid-ocean.

"It is more likely that the rigours of the voyage, meagre rations and the intense strain, took their toll. I can only assume that through some mischance or misjudgment they found themselves in the water and had the unpleasant experience of watching their boats sailing away without them."

He said that the strain on a lone sailor after a long period of complete isolation from the rest of the world was incalculable.

Colonel Jeffrey, who sailed his crewed 33 ft. cruising ketch Corsair II, around the world between 1964 and 1967, said that "by no stretch of the imagination," could he see how an entire crew could disappear from a yacht.

Mr. John Goodwin, lone transatlantic yachtsman and former skipper of the famous South African ocean-racing yacht Stormvogel, said the weather charts for the area in which the men disappeared showed a low percentage of gales.

"This means it's unlikely that their disappearance could be due to bad weather," he said.

"Obviously on a round the world trip the strains and stresses build up and your gear gets worn out towards the end of the voyage.

Mishap

"These are things which could account for a mishap to one man. But more than one is the most extraordinary coincidence I have ever heard of."

Mr. Brian Lello, technical adviser to the South African Ocean Racing Trust, said there was a tendency to make a mystery out of something which simply illustrated the risks of small-boat sailing.

"The greatest single risk in small craft is that of falling overboard. This, I think, is the very ordinary explanation for the disappearances.

"It does not need rough sea. In the calmest weather a small craft is a most unstable platform.

"Once over the side, there is not the ghost of a chance of getting back unless you are wearing a harness. It is difficult even for a crew to pull a man back aboard — it's like pulling up a sack of mealies.

"Falling overboard is one of the most difficult things to plan or guard against, for a man to get back on his own would be virtually impossible."

Mr. Lello discounted strain as a factor. He said he had made a particular study of the letter French yachtsman Bernard Moitessier sent to Cape Town announcing his withdrawal from the round-the-world race.

"I looked in particular for signs of mental strain or aberration," he said, "but it was clear that it was not strain or a brain storm which made him decide to abandon the race when he was winning.

"Nor do I consider it likely that the missing yachtsmen succumbed to strain. The whole bunch in the race were pretty level-headed chaps."