

THE news of the untimely death of Mrs. Mary Rogers, of Somerset West, on board her lovely three-masted schooner *Verona* at Malta brings back mixed memories for me. This ship was once the pride of Durban Bay, and she was the largest yacht on which I ever served—about 300 tons of perverse beauty.

There seems to be something about these big, powerful, classic yachts that appeals to South Africans. In view of the small population, a disproportionate number of them have been owned by fellow-citizens—A. W. Flitton with *Cariad* and T. B. Davies with his magnificent schooner *Westward* immediately spring to mind.

Verona is one of the famous yachts. Originally she was built for Mr. Singer (of sewing machine fame) regardless of cost at a time when fine design, the best materials and pride of workmanship were allied as never before or since—and even to-day, her lines and the quality of the shipwright's work remain to evoke admiration for an ideal which can scarcely be repeated again.

My acquaintance with *Verona* was during a time when she had a different owner, and although it was for one voyage only it was a voyage that I am not likely to forget. It would be easier to list the number of things that did not go wrong than the number of things that went right. I do not recall that we were struck by lightning, but that was just about the only thing that *did not* happen to us.

She was then rigged as a bermudan ketch, and with a main mast 120 ft. high, she carried plenty of canvas and was a hard ship to work. Her wardrobe included a fantastic great balloon jib with a luff from bowsprit-end to main-truck and the clew sheeting home abaft the mizzen; it was reputed to contain 3,000 sq. ft.

Accommodation was luxurious in a plushy Edwardian decor, and included such things as a sizeable bathroom and a huge main saloon panelled in bird's-eye maple and containing a large swinging table for the use of the owner and his guests and a smaller table for the skipper and mates—who were considered fairly lower-class in those days and did not mingle with the élite.

The idea was a cruise from Durban to Knysna, and as I had been a skipper of a commercial fishing vessel on the East Coast for a number of years and knew those waters fairly well, I was asked to join her as first mate. It was pretty well a pier-head jump, as I was signed-on just in time to take part in a most elaborate cocktail party to which all the socialites of Durban had been invited to wish us *bon voyage*.

The tables in the saloon were of the "swinging" type, weighted like pendulums to remain level no matter how the ship rolled. When in port they were locked in place by means of a pin and became immovable. One young member of our crew, showing off to his girl friend, removed the locking pin from the larger table to demonstrate, and forgot to put it back again. A minute later the same popsy decided to take the weight off her feet by sitting on the edge of the table, which promptly tilted ponderously and swept her to the floor, to be buried in an avalanche of expensive grub and liquor.

We dug her out uninjured except for her modesty, and spent a few interesting minutes fishing Vienna sausages and things out of her décolleté and elsewhere.

It was decided to leave under power, and the "engineer" started on the task of getting the ancient three-cylinder Gardener diesel to function. This large machine had three blow-lamps permanently mounted in brackets on each cylinder, and the initial procedure was to get these blazing away and heat the cylinder-heads (and environs) to a red glow.

The thing started eventually, and we shoved off to sea.

Once outside we began making sail, and in the middle of this operation the engine gave a sort of scraping screech and stopped. We investigated, to find that the heat, excitement, smells and the motion of the boat had been too much for the engineer, who had flaked out. He had also apparently neglected some detail of lubrication which the engine resented, because it had seized up solid.

It becomes necessary now to describe the sanitary arrangements aboard *Verona*. They were simple enough; the waste from the bath, wash-basins, sinks, toilets and so on simply drained into a large tank in the depths of the bilge, and from time to time this tank was pumped out by means of a small auxiliary diesel, which also provided electric current for

that BEAUTY CALLED VERONA

BY FRANK ROBB

of the trip whenever we were sitting and sewing. By the end of the trip we had hand-sewn the entire mainsail and most of the other sails.

3. Cricks in the necks. This complaint spread through the crew like an epidemic, sparing nobody. It was due to standing for long periods gazing at a burgee practically vertically overhead at the top of a 120 ft. mast. Among the passengers it was called fibrositis, and massage and unguents were prescribed for them; as far as the crew was concerned it was a crick in the neck which would doubtless disappear in time—which it did.

4. Tail-wag. Occasionally a sea would smack the long over-hang of the counter, which would vibrate like a drake's tail, causing the whole ship to shudder in sympathy for about 30 seconds. It was not dangerous at all—it would take more than a slap on the behind to disrupt that workmanship; it was simply one of *Verona's* idiosyncrasies, but it greatly alarmed the passengers and some of the crew, who insisted that we DO something about it.

5. The balloon jib. Getting this colossal sail hoisted was a herculean task. For one thing, it was beyond the powers of the entire crew even to lift it in one piece; it had to be inched out of the sail-locker and persuaded along the deck in sections—like a crawling caterpillar. It was then necessary to heave the tack out to the end of the 19 ft. long bowsprit with a handy-billy, and the lower hanks had to be dealt with in the same way. I must say that, once set and sheeted, it pulled like seven elephants, but I had considerable forebodings as to what would happen if we were called on to hand it suddenly in a squall of wind.

There were, of course, other minor matters, but we rolled along gradually sorting things out and occupying what spare time we had in trying to trace the source of a malevolent odour that was beginning to pervade the entire ship with ever-increasing virulence. I found the source more or less accidentally one day when I was in the bathroom. *Verona* took a long, slow roll to port—and through the plug-hole of the bath there welled up dark and viscous liquid the contents of which I would rather not describe.

You have guessed it. That sanitary tank, of course, had not been pumped since the engine broke down, and was now filled in over-flowing measure. I sent for the engineer and asked him why he had not pumped it by hand, and he said that it did not occur to him that there was a hand-pump. It seemed incredible to me that the happiness, health and sanity of the crew was dependent entirely on the small engine, so we scouted round the bilge tracing pipes and things and eventually found the pump—rusted solid.

We removed it and broke one of the valves taking it apart, but subsequently fixed it and emptied the tank.

lighting and refrigeration.

The next thing that happened was that this auxiliary engine packed up.

In any event I was busy enough with the deck department trying to cope with, among other things:

1. The main boom. This was a whacking great solid spar about a foot in diameter, and in any conditions except a fresh breeze and a calm sea it tended to take charge and rip things out by the roots. It had to be restrained by a whole system of forward and back preventer tackles which had to be constantly tended and which made going about a laborious business.

2. The sails. These started coming apart at the seams almost as soon as we hoisted them. They were new sails, locally made by someone who had used stuff like sewing cotton instead of seaming-twine, and for the remainder

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RIGHT: Once the pride of Port Natal, *Verona* is seen here making her way down the Bluff Channel about the time Frank Robb sailed in her.

When we put in at East London most of the passengers left for some reason almost as soon as we made fast. We had both engines repaired, and put to sea to return to Durban, it being now too late to reach Knysna in time for the regatta we were hoping to attend. We left in a hard easterly and a vicious short sea, hardened in sheets and jammed *Verona* on the wind under working sail on the port tack. The ship lapped it up, and bashed along grandly; you got a real thrill sailing her, but it was too much for some of the crew, who succumbed to sea-sickness in an acute form. Ordinarily one would have let nature work its cure in her own good time, but we were now so short-handed that the incapacitation of even two or three of the crew was a serious loss.

So we put about, started the engine, and headed for East London again.

Within a short time the small diesel packed in again, followed by the main engine. It took us a long, weary time to beat back against the strong Mozambique current, but eventually we crawled into port.

We sailed once more in better weather, and ran up the coast with a nice tail-wind until Bashee Point, when the wind swung so that we could just lay the course close-hauled. Now there is only one way to go north along that coast in a wind-ship, and that is to close the land to within less than a mile to get inside the current into slack water. The skipper did not fancy bringing a ship of that size so close inshore, so we stood out into the fringe of the current and, although we were bowling along at four knots, Bashee Light stayed on the same bearing for 14 hours; the current was also doing four knots—against.

In the evening I was off watch and went to my cabin to sleep, being fairly clapped out. Some time later I awakened by a tremendous CRACK!—like the tramp of doom. It was one of the most expensive noises I have ever heard, and the whole ship jumped like a shot rabbit. All of us who were below streaked on deck, and just about the time we got there something struck the ship forward with a most appalling crash; it was pitch dark, but it felt as if her bows had been knocked off at the very least.

Bashee Light was still away out on the beam, so we were obviously not aground, and I had just decided that we had collided with something hard and heavy when there was another fearful smash forward.

Obviously something had to be done quickly; no ship would stand that sort of thing for long. We took torches and investigated and, lo and behold—no bowsprit! Young Robin Standing was with me at the time and, warned by a sort of whistling overhead, we scurried back behind the main-mast just as the bowsprit and a mass of other gear descended from the sky to clobber poor old *Verona* another knock-out blow.

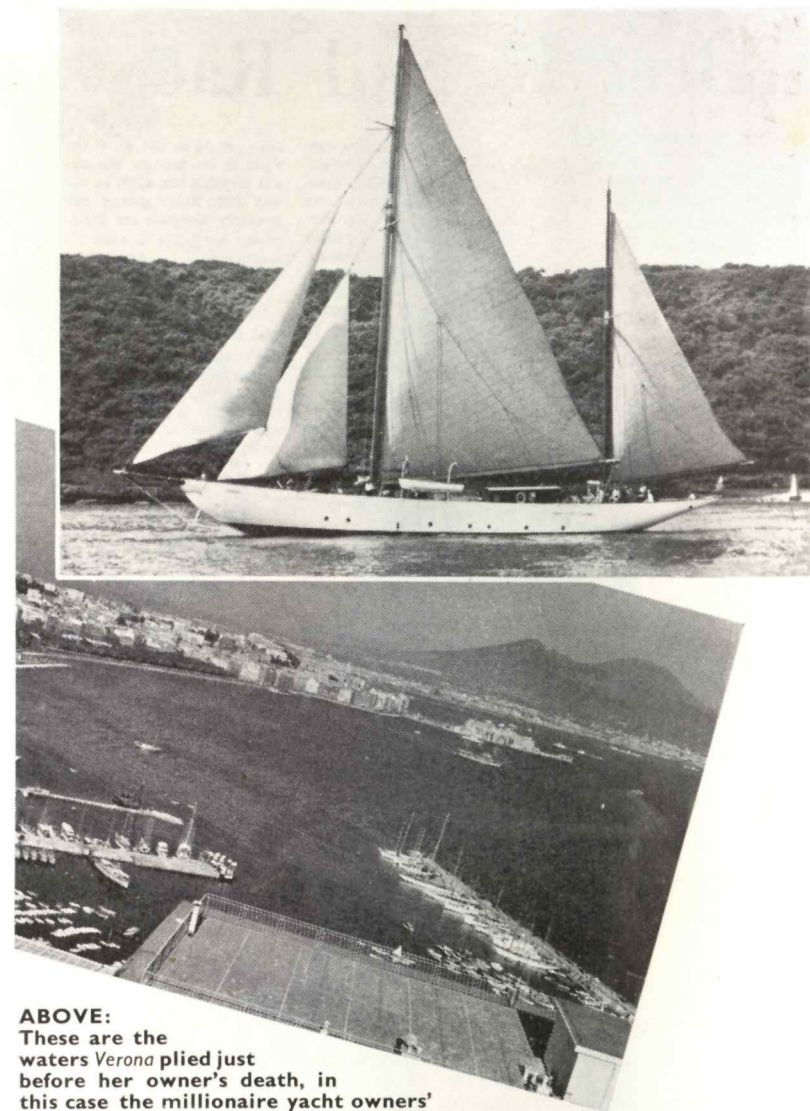
While I was asleep it had been decided to get a bit more speed, and so that balloon jib had been laboriously set. The breeze had freshened a little, and we were heading into a short lop. The gear stood the strain for a while and then—twang! The bobstay shackle at the fore-foot snapped and—CRACK! The bowsprit carried away at the gammon-iron and tore out the bowsprit shrouds with their deck fastenings.

And away went the whole caboodle into the sky—still attached to us at the truck of the mainmast by the fore-top-mast-stay!

In brief, we had, flying from our mast-head, a solid spar 19 ft. long by 1 ft. diameter flogging around at the end of a wire rope about 140 ft. long. Attached to this spar were about 23 ft. of $\frac{3}{4}$ in. stud-link naval chain, two wire bowsprit shrouds (whiskers) with their heavy rigging-screws and deck-fittings attached, and the rope safety-netting.

This little lot was flying around in the darkness powered by 3,000 sq. feet of canvas and a fresh breeze; a mere caress from it would have obliterated a rhinoceros.

It was necessary to do something about it. Huddled behind the main-mast, we considered the problem for a brief space of seconds, during which the Enemy swooped once again to score a near miss, whizzing across the fore-deck with the chain bobstay flicking across the anchor-winch with an impressive shower of sparks.



ABOVE: These are the waters *Verona* plied just before her owner's death, in this case the millionaire yacht owners' harbour of Mergellina in the Bay of Naples.

This display merely intensified the feeling that we should do something. The most hopeful solution was to pay off and run before—by the lee if necessary—in the hope of blanketing the rogue jib behind the main-sail.

However, on the next pass the broken bowsprit got itself wedged in the angle of the bow bulwarks. We jumped on it and twisted the bobstay, whiskers, and anything else attached to it to various holdfasts.

Running back to East London, we tied up at our now-familiar berth.

We repaired the bowsprit by sleeving it with a steel tube. We sewed and we spliced and we got the ship into commission.

Once again we sailed for Durban. This time the skipper, mindful of the opposing Mozambique Current, decided to go "outside" the current. Properly subdued, we got there this time.

You could see that Mrs. Rogers (who was daughter of the late Sir Abe Bailey) loved her ship, when the will was published. They had been using it for filming and she ordered that the yacht should carry out this work to the end.

And her skipper, one Ian Campbell Kemp, must have been a good shipmaster well able to tame the rigged beauty and give the owner the splendid sailing she deserved, for he was left £10,000. I hope he is able to keep up the good work; that this beautiful ship is maintained and sailed as she should be, and not allowed to run down in some shabby Mediterranean backwater.