

A black and white photograph of a rocky beach. In the foreground, a wooden raft made of planks is partially submerged in the water. Several people are standing on the rocks around the raft. The background shows the ocean with waves breaking against the shore. The text 'Chapter 25 of The Little Fellow' is overlaid on the top right of the image.

Chapter 25 of
The Little Fellow

Edward G Williams

Ranui was a kauri passenger launch of 45ft. It capsized returning to Tauranga with a party of campers and fishermen from Mayor Island and was wrecked in tempestuous seas at North Rock, Mount Maunganui on 28 December 1950. Nineteen holiday makers and three crew drowned. The sole survivor was nineteen-year-old Phillip H. G. Smith of Tauranga. The launch had been in service only a few weeks. Court found the disaster was the result of an exceptionally high wave which capsized the Ranui when well into the channel at the entrance to Tauranga Harbour.

A detailed account of the sinking of the Ranui is found within the unpublished manuscript titled "The Little Fellow" by Edward G Williams. The Little Fellow covers the life and times of Jerry Williams, owner of the Ranui. The manuscript is with Tauranga City Libraries' Research Collections (Sladden Room). Chapter 25 of this manuscript follows. It may contain some minor errors. Photographs supplied by Tauranga City Libraries Research Collections.

"The Little Fellow"
by Edward G Williams

Chapter 25

The "Ranui"



Image in Tauranga City Libraries Research Collections. Possibly given by the Bay of Plenty Times around it's Centenary.

During the first flush of enthusiasm, when the "Tiare" had but newly arrived in Tauranga, Jerry revived his idea of having another "Ratahi" build the replace the "Lady Bess" which was now becoming quite old. To implement this scheme he arranged for a large boatbuilding firm in Auckland

to construct an exactly similar craft, to be used for the same sort of work towing over the shallow waters of the harbour — fishing and general transport.

Early in December 1950 the idea became a fact and the brand new launch stood at a berth at Coronation Pier, and her name - the "Ranui". The blue hulled fleet had now increased to four "Ratahi," "Lady Bess", "Tiare", and now the "Ranui"

Christmas holidays and the Mount Maunganui are synonymous. As of yore the crowds began to gather at that favourite spot, tents appeared in droves, the placid tenor of life began to speed up. People came by the thousands to fill every available flat, house, and bach. The air was filled with laughter, and frivolity, white skins took on golden tan, healthy and attractive.

At night the sound of dance hands and revelry added to noise of this seething mass of men and women, boys and girls, gay and carefree, bent only on enjoying themselves. By day the miles of lovely beaches - thronged by sun worshippers, with the surf filled with lithe swimmers.

The track around the Mount, the walk out to the end of the "blowhole," the mild struggle to the top of the Mount itself, all received its quota of strollers. It was summer, it was Christmas time, it was Mount Maunganui.

On Sunday the twenty fourth of December, Christmas Eve the "Ranui" made her first trip out to Mayor Island, taking passengers some of whom were to camp ashore in South East Bay, whilst the remainder were to carry out a spell of fishing in the fruitful waters just off the island, and return with the ship later that day to Tauranga.

Christmas came and went, the tempo of holiday making on the Mount moved up to the crescendo. Thursday the 28th of December 1950, arrived with an overcast sky and light rain falling during the earlier part of the morning. The wind was from the north east to north, blowing at about nineteen knots. The sea slowly increased from moderate, as the hours past until it became moderately rough.

At seven o'clock that same morning the new "Ranui" a launch forty three by fourteen feet wide and with 3 draught of three foot three inches, moved away from the Coronation Pier, and travelled down harbour to Salisbury wharf to collect a few people to take over to mayor Island where they were to camp. It had been originally intended to also make a fishing excursion of it too, in the prolific waters over there. There were several folk on the wharf, too who wanted to go for this sport.

The new blue hulled craft was under the command of Geoffery Harnett Jerry's son-in-law, a man of many years' experience in ships, and for his forward hand he had one of the half dozen fisherman who had boarded the craft at the Tauranga jetty, a youth by the name of Phillip Smith. Captain Harnett stopped the fishing enthussastics from coming aboard off the Salisbury Pier with the remark:

"I can take only a few of you over, as it is probably too rough for fishing, and if it was not for having to take these campers across I would not make the trip."

But some of the fishing party were particularly anxious to go so a handful of them stepped on board, and included in this number were three girls. A moment or so later the ship slipped her moorings and

the skipper opened the throttle sending the vessel on her way.

She steamed out of the entrance into a lummy sea setting course for the island shoring vaguely on the murky horizon. At 8.36a.m. the local marine radio station called the "Ranui" and received a message from Skipper Harnett that the ship was on her way to the Mayor with campers, and that he had turned down most of the fishermen.

The launch encountered head winds and a head sea which was rough and became progressively worse as the island was approached. Most of the passengers were seasick on the way over and were thankful when the "Ranui" slid into South East Bay at about 11:45 a.m. Here only the campers were taken ashore and the ship then left the bay to move around the island in the lee where the party attempted to fish for about a quarter of an hour, but as it was far too uncomfortable the vessel returned to the shelter of the bay.

12.17p.m. and the skipper again called the Tauranga marine radio reporting that he had landed the campers and was going fishing. He expected to leave for Tauranga at about 3 p.m. As the launch lay at anchor waiting her departure time none of the fishing party landed on the shore.

Meanwhile on a private launch anchored nearby a young couple in the party aboard, argued as to whether they would return home on the "Ranui" or wait until their own party went back in the private launch on the following Sunday. They had been enjoying their stay at the island and were loath to leave, especially as there was no desperate reason for an immediate return.

Their skipper had rowed over to the "Ranui" to ascertain the departure time of that ship and as the hour approached the couple tried to make up their minds. A small portable radio nearby gave out a background of classical music, and as the moment of decision drew close, from the radio came the strains of the well-known Chopin's funeral march.

"Do you hear that." said the boy. "We'll stay."

"No. I must go; some people are expecting me at the Mount."

The die was cast. A couple of minutes before three o'clock the small dinghy again rowed over to the waiting "Ranui", and the couple were hauled on board the blue hulled craft.

As soon as these young folk had touched the deck, the anchor was taken up and the "Ranui" turned and headed out of the bay watched by the skipper in the dinghy, who, with the remainder of his party waved to the two friends until the "Ranui" disappeared around the southern arm of the bay.

The sound of her motor ceased and the bay was silent except for the slap of the small wavelets on the shore and the raindrops falling gently from the trees. Clear of the island the launch found the weather no wit improved and the seas were if anything higher.

4.20 p.m. and again the skipper called the Tauranga radio reporting that he would call again at 5.25.p.m. There was a big sea running, all on board were safe and well.

The shore station replied informing the Captain that there was a heavy sea breaking right across the entrance to Pani Pani, the wind as North West, and the tide had been running in for about two hours.

Since ten o'clock that morning a continuous rain had been falling however in the afternoon this had become intermittent with the veering of the wind. The seas continued to be moderately rough throughout the afternoon and it was expected that conditions would improve later when the wind would ease.

Five o'clock came and the "Ranui" was then a couple of miles or so off the entrance to the harbour, the seas seemed to be building up further as the launch neared the land. In the wheelhouse with the skipper and the forward hand were three of the four girls among the passengers, the fourth being on the after deck.

The girls in the cabin with the skipper were frightened and to keep up their spirits they were singing, encouraged by the Captain, whilst the remainder of the passengers were in the after cabin out of the weather, one of the men however had been caught by a wave and has gone down into the warmth of the engine room in an endeavour to dry out his clothes.

Late that afternoon, on shore three school boys knowing that the "blow hole" situated on the seaward end of a small promontory lying off the Mount Maunganui beach generally put on a fine display under these stormy conditions strolled out to see for themselves the awe inspiring sight of the huge mass of spray flung savagely skyward with a tremendous thundering roar.

Several Auckland yachts had come down earlier in the well-known Auckland to Tauranga ocean race, and one of these was due to return north the following day. As the weather was by no means good the master of this yacht, together with his three crew members walked around the base of the Mount on the outer side so that they might have a better idea of the layout of the entrance and the passage through it.

It was around about the same time at the Coronation Pier at Tauranga that one of the local and largest harbour ferries lay waiting to pick up her passengers for her scheduled run across to the Salisbury Wharf at the Mount.

5.25 p.m. the operator of the shore radio turned on his set to receive the anticipated call from the "Ranui". He heard the microphone in the Wheelhouse of the launch click and then he heard the folk in with the Captain singing, a little nervously perhaps but singing. Two minutes later Captain Harnett spoke mentioning that the sea was very rough and things were hectic. He was about a mile off the entrance, so he would call again as soon as the ship was through the entrance.

The three boys had reached the "blow hole" but instead of watching the magnificent display of pent up fury of the sea, they found their attention straying to the launch making for the harbour mouth. It seemed to them that it was far too rough for any boat to be out so they watched the craft with close interest. When they first sighted her, she was fairly close to the "North rock", a large rock marking the extreme entrance to the passage through to the inner waters, and this point was surmounted by a light.

The ship was labouring in the heavy seas and at times was lost to sight, she appeared to be moving

slower than the waves and crept gradually in towards the mouth, coming along just past the North Rock light. Having released her mooring lines and allowed the last straggler to leap on board, the ferry cleared the Coronation Pier, and with her throttles opened headed towards the Salisbury Pier, which the Skinner could make out faintly in the distance.

With his three crewmen the yacht skipper stood near the shore at the base of the Mount opposite the North Rock. He noticed that a north-westerly wind was now blowing, causing a confused sea with the waves breaking on the rocks, crashing down from a height that looked to him from twenty to thirty feet, driven by a wind that might touch thirty five knots.

He noticed too the launch coming in, and took particular interest as he wished to note the course taken by a local craft. The "Ranui" progress appeared to be normal under the conditions which existed, she had successfully weathered a bad patch directly off the North Rock, and continued on for about a quarter of a mile. When she was approximately one hundred yards off shore slightly inside the light, the group on shore were appalled to see a very large sea catch the blue hulled launch on her starboard quarter lifting her stern right out of the water, so much so that they expected to see her bury her nose. The wave made her now plane, swung her broadside to the sea on her beam ends, then with a ghastly finality rolled her completely over.

At Salisbury wharf the ferry drew alongside and cast on her mooring lines, and the passengers swarmed across on to the wooden wharf.

"The "Ranui" has capsized outside the entrance" a voice shouted. A local constable came rushing down to the skipper of the ferry with the request that the craft go out to the scene immediately.

At his radio set of the Tauranga Marine Station, the operator, waited for the prearranged call from the "Ranui" - it never came.

Horried the three boys watched the launch capsize and then with trembling knees they dashed back, as one along the beach end and made for the base of the Mount.

With a fine sense of organisation the yachtsmen, immediately dispatched two of his men around both sides of the Mount, not knowing which was the shorter route, with instructions to find help and quickly. Keenly he watched the upturned launch and could see the propeller still grotesquely spun by the sixty three horse power diesel motor. The life rafts had been flung clear as the ship rolled, and were soon swept out of reach. For a moment there were about fifteen people in the water. One person managed to reach a raft but was almost immediately washed off again.

For about half an hour the "Ranui" floated until at last the angry waves caught her and dashed the blue hull to matchwood in the ragged fore shore, scattering the pieces for hundreds of yards.



Image from Tauranga City Libraries Research Collections

Aftermath.

The ferry had arrived at the wharf at 5.50 p.m. about eight minutes after the time of the capsizing. She had left almost immediately, the passengers having been discharged, and steamed out to the entrance and then through to the scene. Here she found conditions rough with big seas running, although by now there were signs of improvement the skipper saw the "Ranui" piled up on the rocks and being pounded to pieces, in the water was a jumble of personal luggage and gear belonging to the persons off the wrecked launch.

Although the ferry stayed as long as she dared in the vicinity in the difficult conditions she could see no signs of any people in the sea so the craft returned to the Salisbury wharf where the Constable rushed ashore to attend to a multitude of tasks.

Around the base of the Mount help arrived as if by magic, seeming to have risen from the very ground itself. The yacht skipper climbed down on to the rocks to assist as the bodies came in shore and a large wave picked him up and in a mad flurry took him about one hundred yards further on before he could scramble out. The rocks were sharp, rough, and jagged and even in calm conditions made walking on them a problem, but now this was magnified a thousand fold; man after man trying valiantly to pull bodies from the raging sea received nothing but ugly lacerations and bruising for their pains.

It had become obvious that even if any of the passengers on the "Ranui" had survived the capsizing, they would almost certainly have been torn to ribbons on the cruel shore line, but this did not in any way daunt the rescuers who made every effort to pull the people, dead or alive over the rocks on to dry land, and safety. Time after time they tried, without success, time after time the rescuers themselves were swept away only to be themselves rescued by their fellows.

Fortunately no fatalities arose from this task, in the ranks of those who came so willingly, and prepared to give of their best, but many did receive terrible wounds and injuries. At last came the ghastly realisation - there were no survivors. But this was not so — not quite - for out of that maelstrom, of the whole load of passengers came one person to tell the tale, one and one alone, - the forward hand — Phillip Smith.

He had been in the Wheelhouse at the time of the accident where two of the girls appeared to be trapped as the boat rolled over, but he managed to struggle out and being a strong swimmer made towards the open sea. He saw an old man floundering about and managed to gain hold of him and support him for a few minutes until a large wave tore the man from his grasp and out of his sight. Phillip Smith kept swimming and managed to keep his head above the breakers, although many times he went under. Whilst in the water he could see the launch completely upturned with the propeller still revolving, and he could hear the motor running, which it continued to do until the craft went ashore. Eventually he swam right up to the rocks about twenty yards from where the launch touched, a wave threw him right over the outer rocks, and he was able to climb on to the inner painful stones, from where he was assisted ashore by three men.

Now came the dreadful task of finding the poor, mutilated bodies and recovering them from among the

rocks alone the foreshore. For the Police too, came the work of trying to ascertain just how many persons were on the "Ranui", for the craft had left Tauranga with some folk, picked up others at the Salisbury wharf, dropped a few at South East Bay and taken on two more in the Bay, as she left on that fatal trip.

After hours of painstaking searching and inquiries the final figures emerged. There had been twenty three people aboard and only one survivor. Twenty two souls lost their lives in that terrible disaster — making this one of the worst tragedy in the boating world, on the New Zealand coast for very many years.

The hubbub of mirth at the Mount ceased immediately, news of the accident became known. Gone was the air of frivolity. A shocked, hushed atmosphere took its place. Many folk left the area for home without delay fleeing from the scenes of this piteous occasion.

For some distance around the base of the Mount itself, a pile of tangled timber bore mute testimony to the event reminding anew, any who viewed the remains. Silent groups of people looked at the mangled piles, amazed that a launch could be so quickly reduced with such devilness preciseness, by the powerful combination, a stormy see and jagged rocks.

So deep was the blow of sorrow upon the Mount that it was almost years before it recovered its erstwhile gaiety, for some of the wreckage lay, obvious to all, for some long time high upon the shore, and it required but a glance at this to recalls again the terrible loss of life so recently, and at that spot.



This image was in the original manuscript.