

WHAT THE SEA CAN DO TO A SHIP—

The Disappearance of the Samkey

(Written for "The Listener" by S.D.W.)

MANY years ago an old shipmaster, a veteran with nearly half a century of service in sail and steam, wound up his tale of voyages by saying to me: "You don't know what the sea can do to a ship." I was reminded of those words the other day when I read that the steamship Samkey, which was in New Zealand waters less than six months ago, had been posted at Lloyd's as "missing."

After delivering her cargo of New Zealand wool, the Samkey sailed from London on January 24 in ballast for Santiago de Cuba, where she was to have loaded sugar. She reported to the Azores by wireless on January 31. Since then, nothing has been seen or heard of her. Exceptionally heavy gales in the North Atlantic were reported during January-February. It is possible that when the Samkey, in light trim, was labouring in a heavy sea, her ballast might have shifted, causing her to capsize and founder.

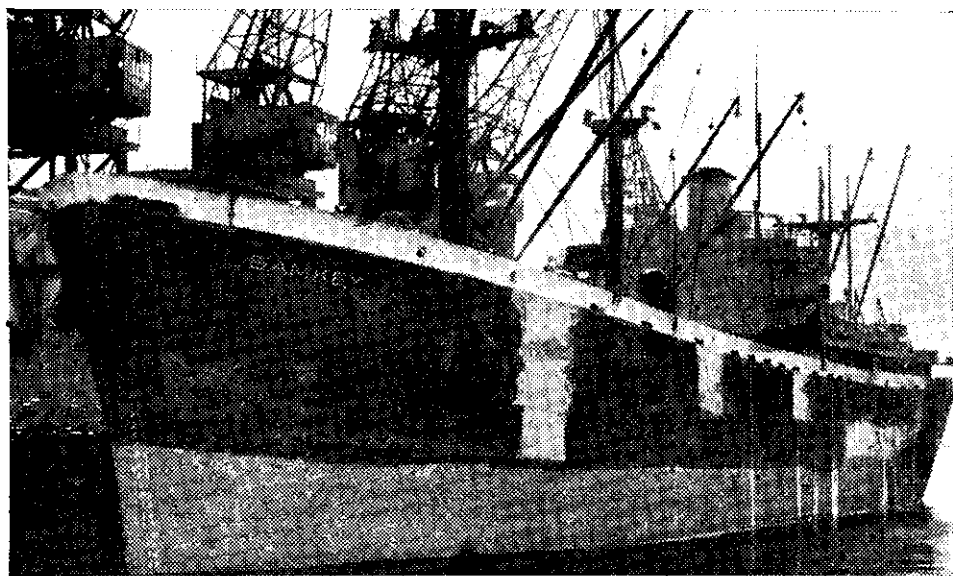
Not a word came from the ship which was due at Santiago on or about February 14, not a single flash of distress from her radio: no report of her being sighted or spoken by a passing ship. She had passed completely from human ken, vanished in the vast silence of the ocean. Then, all hope for her ultimate

safety abandoned, the Samkey was listed under the final declaration of "missing."

Steamship Samkey of London, 7219 tons gross; official No. 169788, Cremin master; sailed from London for Santiago de Cuba in ballast on the 24th January, 1948; was in wireless communication with Azores Radio on the 31st January, 1948, and has not since been heard of.

Such is the terse phrasing of the official "posting" at Lloyd's. It was the epitaph of many a fine ship in the days of sail, but, happily, is seldom recorded nowadays. It is the first time that such a fate has befallen a vessel under the New Zealand Shipping Company's house-flag—though the Samkey was not owned by them. The Nottingham, five days out from the Clyde on her maiden voyage, was lost with all hands on November 7, 1941, when she was torpedoed without warning in the North Atlantic. However, she was able to signal what was happening.

The Samkey, a steamer of the Liberty ship type, built at Baltimore barely five years ago, was well-found and well-manned. Her ship's company numbered



THE SAMKEY, photographed at an Auckland wharf not long before her unexplained disappearance

43. Her master, officers and engineers and most of her hands were tried and experienced men whose service with the New Zealand Shipping Company covered six grim years of seagoing during the war. Captain Lawson was to have sailed in the Samkey on his first voyage in command, but owing to sudden sickness, he was replaced at the eleventh hour by Captain C. A. Cremin, who had commanded a number of the company's ships.

Two Years' War Service

The Samkey had seen two years of war service and had voyaged to many out of the way places. She carried two full cargoes of war supplies from the United States to the Mediterranean and took part in the "build-up" of the American troops during the invasion of Southern France. She was at Eniwetok, in the Marshall Islands, on her way to Okinawa when the end of the war came and was diverted to Leyte, in the Philippines, and thence to Hong Kong to discharge her last war cargo. Next, the Samkey went to Chinwangtao, at the seaward end of the Great Wall of China, and loaded coal for Shanghai. Thence she sailed in ballast to Vancouver where she loaded for the United Kingdom. Last year she carried several cargoes of phosphates from Makatea Island to Auckland.

Seldom in these days of wireless does a full-powered ocean-going ship disappear without trace, leaving no clue to her fate. Yet I can recall three other cases of missing ships during the last 20 years. There was the

five-masted auxiliary-screw barque Kobenhavn, 3965 tons, the "pride of Denmark." She sailed from Buenos Aires in ballast for Melbourne on December 14, 1928, and was not heard of again. Whether she capsized under too great a press of canvas or foundered after collision with an iceberg in the South Ocean will never be known.

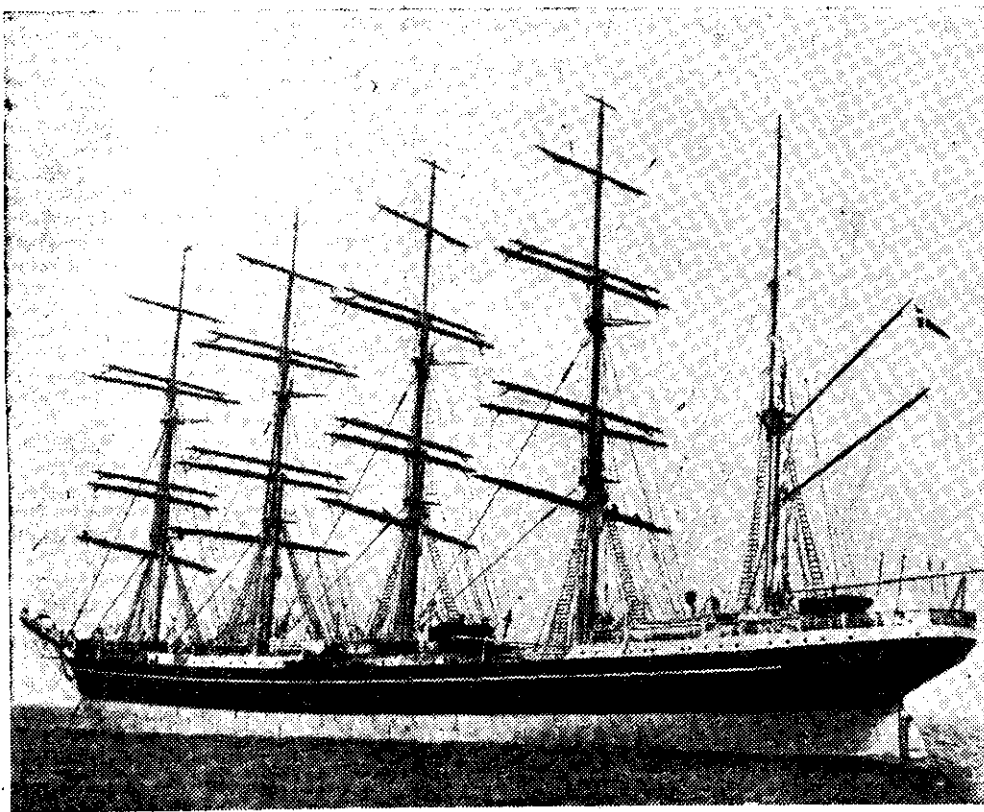
Lost Near the Horn

Little more than nine years later, on February 8, 1938, the German four-masted barque Admiral Karpfanger, 2853 tons, training-ship of the Hamburg-Amerika Line, sailed from Port Germein, South Australia, with a cargo of 3450 tons of wheat for Queenstown for orders. She reported by wireless to her owners on March 12 that she was approaching Cape Horn. That was the last heard of her and, following a vain search for traces of her by one of the company's steamers, she was posted as missing.

The third case was that of the British steamer Anglo-Australian, 5456 tons, which disappeared 10 years ago in circumstances very similar to those surrounding the mystery of the Samkey. Commanded by Captain F. Parslow, D.S.C., the Anglo-Australian, after a complete refit, sailed from Cardiff for British Colombia via the Panama Canal on March 8, 1938, and reported "all well" by wireless to the Azores six days later. She was not heard of again and was posted as missing on May 11, 1938.

What Joseph Conrad has called the "unholy fascination of dread" dwells in the thought of the last moments of a ship posted at Lloyd's as "missing." Nothing from her may ever be found—"no grating, no lifebuoy, no piece of boat or branded oar—to give a hint of the place and date of her sudden end." Lloyd's does not even report her "lost with all hands." She is "missing." She has "disappeared enigmatically into a mystery of fate as big as the world, where your imagination of a brother-sailor, of a fellow-servant and lover of ships, may range unchecked."

"You don't know what the sea can do to a ship."



THE BARQUE KOBENHAVN, which disappeared mysteriously in the South Atlantic just on 20 years ago