

Port A Fine Place After Stormy Seas

LEDA TWICE ESCAPES PILING UP ON REEFS

(By W. A. WILSON)
(IV)

This, the fourth instalment of the story of the 54ft Tauranga yacht Leda's voyage across the Pacific to America, tells of her arrival at Suva, Fiji, from Tonga. She is now on her way to Tahiti, and may call en route at Apia, Samoa.

My small nieces, Jan and Ruth, declare that Leda has eyes. I think they are referring to the two anchor-chain fairleads on either side of the bow, but after eight days' sailing among the reefs of the Tonga and Fiji groups, during which we covered between 600 and 700 miles without mishap, I think we were all prepared to credit the yacht with some sort of supernatural optical powers.

Twice, in the stormy weather at the end of our trip, we were close to piling up on a reef. Pelting rain reduced visibility to a hundred yards or so but each time we received just sufficient warning of the lines of breakers ahead and Leda made no bones about coming about and clawing her way to windward into the safety of deep water.

Breakers Ahead

The first time was when we approached the outer barrier of the Fiji group after sailing nearly 250 miles on dead reckoning from Vava'u. We were making eight knots before a fresh breeze with the genoa jib boomed out on one side and the mainsail on the other, but Leda delayed her arrival at the Argo Reef until half an hour after sunrise, and although there was no sun we were able to spot the formidable line of white breakers when it was still half a mile ahead.

We pushed the tiller down and Leda held her own against the wind, steep seas constantly sweeping her decks, while we hurriedly doused the genoa and set the stay-sail. Then she raced to windward out of danger; we came about and headed north for the gap in the reef at Bacon Island.

Heavy rain set in early that afternoon and we had to estimate our course for the next 140-odd miles to dodge islands, reefs and what the charts encouragingly describe as "blind rollers". But before eight o'clock next morning, after a wild night of sailing, we sighted a dread line of white breakers ahead once more. We sailed along parallel for about 10 minutes, optimistically looking for the entrance to Suva Harbour.

Then, glancing to windward, we saw another line of white, less than 100 yards away and running out at right angles. Leda swung round, practically turning on a sixpence, and galloped out into safety.

Fierce Rain Squalls

For the next six hours the rain squalls came down on us ever more fiercely as we tacked and tacked again, looking for some headland of island we could identify.

Our peace of mind was not improved by the discovery that a tin under the compass had deflected it half a point all through the night. Visibility was often no more than 50 yards and the seas, though short, were remarkably steep and rolled heavily.

We were just resigning ourselves to a sleepless night careering wildly about in these dangerous waters when, at 3 o'clock, the rain stopped, the cloud lifted and we sighted islands, headlands and reefs down to leeward. Ten minutes' furious work with the hand-bearing compass and several trips up the mast to the lower cross-trees, and we had fixed our position. A lighthouse soon hove in sight to confirm it. We were 18 miles from Suva.

Two hours later the wind had dropped and the sea was dropping. We started the engine and finished

the voyage in the dark under power. Needless to say we were properly thankful to drop anchor in the calm water of Suva Harbour—no wind howling in the rigging, no violent motion; only the beacon lights winking at us from all sides through the misty rain.

This is where my brother's wife, Kit, and the three children, Jan, Ruth and six-months-old Nicholas, are to end their cruise. They will stay with friends here and then fly back to New Zealand.

The remaining four of us will carry on at least to America, but on that night we reached Suva it must be admitted that none of us was thinking so much of the rest of the trip as of a good rest, and a good time for the next fortnight. Port after stormy seas is a fine place indeed.

Suva has done its best to make it even finer and we have been having a marvellous time here. A cocktail party at the Defence Club and ball at the Royal Suva Yacht Club—we have been made honorary members of both—another ball at the Air Force station, and everywhere we go, hospitality and friendliness. We will spend the next week recovering from this by sailing to neighbouring islands in company with two former Auckland yachts, Tama-tea and Temptress.

Four for Tahiti

After that the four of us left aboard Leda will be Tahiti bound. We have had a message from the crew of the Auckland yacht Ghost telling us that we must be sure to get to Tahiti in time for the Bastille Day celebrations in mid-July.

No doubt we shall miss the three children when we leave Suva, if only because of the increased amount of elbow room on board the yacht. They are all three still most distressingly healthy and the fact that they generally get us up at an ungodly hour of the morning has no doubt prevented us from sinking too far into slothful South Sea island ways.

Nicholas was hardly in a position to know much about what was going on, but Jan and Ruth have always been intensely interested in the strange new sights they have seen, above and below the water. No doubt their youthful approach has sharpened our own interest and they certainly provided an open sesame for us to many a house and fale (or whare) throughout the Friendly Islands. There will be compensations, but we will miss them all the same.

(To Be Continued)