

## SIMPLE SEAMAN

1.

### CHAPTER I.      "SINGING FOR MY SUPPER"

*Corrected*

At the age of seven, or thereabouts, I found myself a choir boy at St. Martin's Church, West Acton. I cannot remember my initiation but I have little doubt that my mother took me firmly by the hand, led me to the choirmaster and said "Sing!" Although by no means formidable in appearance she had a strong personality and could be very persuasive. A year or two later my mother saw an advertisement offering bursaries for choirboys for the Chapel Royal, Savoy, and promptly took me for an audition. Unfortunately, she omitted to study the address given and merely asked the way to the Chapel Royal. This brought us to St. James' Palace where the Master of the King's Music<sup>al</sup> looked at me kindly but said he did not want me. He also suggested that what my mother was looking for was the Savoy Chapel, close to the Savoy hotel. Naturally, we were somewhat late in arriving and Colin Campbell, the choirmaster, was about to go home. Nevertheless, my mother did a little more persuading and he sat down and played a few scales for me to sing. After I had performed for some ten minutes or so he said, "All right, I'll take him but he has an unusual voice - more alto than treble and rather like a pocket contralto!"

My years as a chorister at the Chapel Royal, Savoy, and a member of the Royal Savoy School were interesting and

varied. When I joined as a probationer in 1913 the school consisted of some 20 boys and was housed in the Savoy Chantry on Savoy Hill. Some years later Savoy Hill became famous as the home of the B.B.C. In September, 1914, the school moved to Colyton Road, Honor Oak, and became a boarding and day school and I became one of the boarders.

Colin Campbell was choirmaster and headmaster of the school and Dr. H. Bromley Derry organist of the Chapel Royal. The Reverend Hugh B. Chapman, brother of <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ well known magistrate, was chaplain, and the congregation varied from pillars of respectability like <sup>the Hon. W.H.</sup> ~~Sir William~~ Goschen and the Countess of Caledon through members of the stage and screen to flower-sellers and ladies of less respectable occupations from the Strand. Unlike so many of today's churchmen, the Reverend H.B. Chapman preferred sinners in his congregation as being more in need of conversion and care. He was the last one to say "You are not a regular member of the congregation so you cannot be baptised, married or buried in my church". He remembered no doubt that there was 'more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth - ". He was loved and admired by all who came in contact with him. In spite of this his somewhat unorthodox methods were said to be unpopular with the Duchy of Lancaster, who owned the benefice and to be the reason for the Chapel losing the title 'Royal' to become simply <sup>the Chapel of the Savoy</sup> ~~highly~~ respectable as the <sup>Queen's and Chapel</sup> Chapel of the Royal Victorian Order. It is now, of course, again highly

As one of the 'singing boys of the Savoy' life was pretty full and activities ranged from singing carols at children's parties at the Savoy hotel, national anthems at a war time function at the Ritz, society weddings at the Savoy Chapel and mid-week services at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, whose choir only sang there on Sundays. One of the services at St. Martin's was the memorial for the heroes of Kut-el-Amara with a full congregation of politicians, service chiefs and diplomatic corps. Highland pipers played a lament and in one of the front pews Mr. Asquith, then Prime Minister, stood with tears streaming down his cheeks. There were few dry eyes. We frequently sang at St. Martin's, whose vicar in those days was the popular Dick Sheppard. He was not quite so popular with the choir boys as we thought he was far less benign than our own Hugh B. Chapman. When a full choir was necessary the men usually came from St. Paul's Cathedral so we got some valuable experience, singing in a church many times the size of the Savoy Chapel, instructed by a different organist and choirmaster and with different men's voices.

Cricket was the great game at the Savoy school. The Honor Oak Cricket Club ground adjoined the school ground and Colin Campbell was a regular member of the first team. The club was pretty well up to minor County standard and many of the matches were very exciting. Other members of the team, which I recall were Dr. Kirton, the school doctor, and the



the O'Gorman brothers of music-hall fame. I remember one splendid occasion when Dr. Kirton and one of the O'Gorman brothers made a famous last wicket stand of thirty or more runs and won the match against all odds. The brothers, who were clever duo-dancers, would sometimes produce a bit of 'duo-cricket' if they were batting together! Jack Hobbs played against Honor Oak on more than one occasion - playing, I believe, for the Royal Naval Division, then at Crystal Palace. Occasionally one of us would get a game when sides were a man short and this, of course, was an honour indeed.

Sometimes the choir would travel four or five times a week in a No. 56 L.C.C. tram from Peckham Rye to the Embankment at the foot of Savoy Street. Just here some of the trams disappeared into a cavern which took them underground along Kingsway, an exciting journey which, unfortunately, rarely came our way. We were allowed a shilling for lunch and this almost invariably consisted of a poached egg on toast. Eggs were dear in war time and the dish cost ten pence, so the second course was probably a bun and a bar of chocolate.

Some great friends of the family, a Mr and Mrs Wilson, had a son, Harry, who was an artificer in the navy. As a very small boy I had been taken on board H.M.S. Fisguard, where Boy Artificers were trained, and had been suitably impressed with all I saw. This included hungry hordes of youngsters tucking in to thick slices of bread and butter spread lavishly with



the brown sugar provided for sweetening the tea. The consumption of brown sugar in H.M.S. Fisguard must have been phenomenal! As he and I grew up, Harry would always come and see me when he came home on leave and entertain me with stories of life at sea. He was very generous and amongst other things bought me a fine model boat with an efficient steam engine. I well remember the exciting smell of methylated spirits and steam as the little craft got under way and streaked through the water. Alas, Harry Wilson was killed in the battle-cruiser "Queen Mary" when she was blown up at the battle of Jutland with few survivors. It would be fair to say that he left with me an enthusiasm for the sea, if not <sup>for</sup> ~~of~~ engine rooms, for he always said there would be no chance of escape for him if the "Queen Mary" ~~was~~ <sup>were</sup> sunk in action.

Close behind the school at Honor Oak was an anti-aircraft battery and in the zeppelin raids this made enough noise to convince us that we were well in the firing line. The school had a big basement and everyone retired there when the shooting started and held a sing song which sometimes went on for hours, to the detriment of some of the more delicate voices. Colin Campbell had a wonderful repertoire and his songs were always in great demand. 'Fairshon swore a feud', 'The burglar's song' (Sleep on, gently sleep on, while I softly creep on) and lots of Gilbert and Sullivan, including the Nightmare song from 'Iolanthe'

We sang carols on Christmas eve at Charing Cross Hospital ending up on the top floor and then proceeding down all the stairs singing 'O come all ye faithful', with the wards joining in as we passed. We then had a magnificent supper with the nurses and staff, a senior surgeon <sup>whose job on this occasion was merely to pass the plates</sup> carrying the turkey, assisted by his anaesthetist. We also sang carols at St. Peter's Hospital, <sup>netta</sup> Henoceller Street, on the Sunday after Christmas. The Matron <sup>m</sup>/those days was the aunt of one of my school fellows, Pat Keefe. On this occasion we were always entertained at Pinoli's Restaurant in Wardour Street by Mr. Pinoli. I remember on one occasion Mr. Pinoli arranged for us all to see a film about a great Italian soldier named Macesti who performed superhuman feats in the alpine snows. Pinoli's was always a favourite restaurant of my father and mother, who said the <sup>(or was it 1/9p?)</sup> 2/9 table d'hôte lunch was excellent value - you could easily get a month's calories from the hors d'oeuvres.

When the air raid warnings came through on the telephone to the schoolhouse, one of my duties was to belt down Colyton Road to the New house where the older boys slept and warn the housemaster to get everyone downstairs. One occasion, just as I rang the front door bell, there was a loud swishing noise and as Mr. Basket, the housemaster, opened the door a bomb exploded in Peckham Rye park just across the road, not fifty yards away. Mr. Basket swore he was blown from one end of the hall to the other but I only remembered the vivid

flash lighting up his astonished face. Next morning I was in the park at daylight examining the crater, which was only about five feet across, for souvenirs. This enterprise was terminated abruptly by the arrival of a disgruntled park-keeper who enquired 'who made that 'ole?' but I did get a bomb fragment.

Then, one day, Colin Campbell's brother Archie arrived. He had just returned from the south Pacific in the armed merchant cruiser 'Otranto', of which he was Fleet Paymaster. This rank must have disappeared shortly afterwards to be replaced by the more prosaic 'Paymaster Lieutenant-Commander'. A.B. Campbell had been a purser in the Orient Company and his stock of stories and songs was phenomenal. He was a superb raconteur and incidents in places we had never seen or heard of came vividly alive. I still recall the word pictures he painted of places like the Galapagos islands, Easter island and Pitcairn. One of the songs he taught us was 'Spanish Ladies' - still my favourite. As a member of the B.B.C. Brains Trust he became known to millions. I have seen him eat marmalade but I do not remember steam coming out of his head, as I believe he once suggested happened!

Very little work in school was done for a day or two after A.B.C., as we called him, came on leave. Colin and Archie sat well into the small hours yarning and, no doubt, celebrating



the event as good Scots do. It was all very exciting and educational, too. Our geography improved enormously as we followed 'Otranto' across the world and until she was sunk - I believe in collision in the ~~Bay of Biscay~~. *Western Approaches*.

While all this was going on one of my school friends, G.W. (Dick) Wood and I would discuss plans for going to sea. The engineering side was examined and discarded, paymastering was not exciting enough and so we came to some executive branch. Should it be navy or merchant service? Osborne and Dartmouth seemed out of the question so it really looked as if it would have to be the merchant service. Of course, we would join the naval reserve like A.B.C., so we should get the best of both worlds.

Oddly enough, one of our principal amusements consisted of running our own concerts and, one year, a pantomime. The author and composer of the pantomime 'Aladdin and A lad out' was a non-singing member of the school, Ray Noble. Ray was an exceptional pianist and it may well be that at times Colin Campbell envied him his talent. Ray's pantomime had some excellent tunes, one of which, 'Oh, for a pound of margarine', had a subtle likeness to his much later success 'Love is the sweetest thing'.

Ray brought a small band to play at my 21st birthday party, free of charge, although by that time he was already playing at the Mayfair Hotel.

A year later he came on his own to my future wife's 21st birthday party and played almost without a stop for the whole evening. I do not believe we ever met again.

Some time in 1917 my friend Dick Wood left the Savoy. His brother, Hugh <sup>ainson</sup> ~~Lawson~~ Wood, later the tennis correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, had already left. Hugh had a good voice and once sang in a turn at the Chiswick Empire, which I saw. One Sunday from my place in the choir I saw a naval cap with white cover and brilliant gold badge on top of the music cabinet in the organ loft. After service Dick arrived at the vestry resplendent in the uniform of a cadet R.N.R. and announced that he was at Pangbourne Nautical College. From that moment nothing would do for me but that I must follow suit. As my elder sister, Doris, was an enterprising and persuasive girl she saw to it that I did, but it was not easy. She wrote to Pangbourne and got a prospectus. When my father saw the fees (they were in fact £80 a year at that time) he just said quietly 'impossible', so my sister then wrote to firms which were listed as donors of scholarships, extolling the virtues and abilities of her small brother. To everyones astonishment the Union-Castle Company said they would like to see me and to further general astonishment awarded me a scholarship (really a bursary) for half fees.

The next hurdle was to convince the Pangbourne authorities that I would make a suitable member of their

establishment and in due course I was dispatched to Fenchurch Street, to the offices of Devitt and Moore, the college managers, to be interviewed by Sir Thomas Devitt himself.

Unfortunately, as in the case of my initial visit to the Savoy Chapel, the instructions were somewhat sketchy. In fact, I had been told to 'Go to Fenchurch Street and enquire' but nobody seemed to know exactly where the Devitt and Moore office was. So eventually I found a telephone kiosk and looked up the <sup>address of the</sup> firm in that, arriving <sup>in front of</sup> ~~before~~ Sir Thomas some five minutes late.

It was not a good start. The redoubtable old gentleman, who had run the famous sail training ships, Harbinger, Hesperus, Port Jackson, Macquarie and others for many years, looked terrifying to me and his displeasure at my late arrival was evident. When I explained that my parents obviously expected the Devitt and Moore office to occupy most of one side of Fenchurch Street he softened slightly and asked how I had managed to find them. I explained about the telephone kiosk (there were not so many about in those days) and he seemed quite impressed with this enterprise. At all events I was accepted and was soon in Greaves establishment in Old Bond Street, being kitted out by Mr. Kingston, friend and mentor of thousands of cadets and naval officers. How my father found the money for this I shall never know but it must have meant putting the whole family on short commons. Even so, I think they were all rather proud of the achievement.