SIMPLE SEAMAN

CHAPTER II THE NAUTICAL COLLEGE, PANGBOURNE

In 1918, after a splendid long summer holiday at Salcombe, where my parents had rented a little cottage by the water at Batson, I set out on my seafaring career, or preparation for it, at Pangbourne. My mother had very efficiently arranged matters so that we merely changed trains at Reading, where she said goodbye and saw me into the little branch line train for Pangbourne. I cannot remember my feelings at the time but I do not suppose I was very perturbed at the prospect ahead of me. I had already learned one of the fundamental rules of life, namely, that you climbed slowly and painfully up the social scale in one community or organisation only to start right at the bottom again when you were 'promoted' to a higher sphere. Life was a series of slow ups and quick downs and that was life. This hardly seems to be the popular opinion today, when the student wants a written guarantee that he will pass his exams whether he works or not - and having been given a pass expects the world to accept him at his own valuation and start him at the top. Unfortunately, this, or something else like it frequently happens with the result that the poor chap is dissatisfied for the rest of his life. Never having earned anything he can never enjoy anything.

So, from leading choirboy and headboy of the school, I plummeted straight down to become a first term 'tick' at Pangbourne.

The new term arrived at the college a day before the rest of the cadets so we were able to settle in and look around unharassed. The college stood on top of a hill with marvellous views to the south over the Berkshire countryside. Before being taken over by Devitt and Moore it had been the home of Claysmore, an expensive public school which had moved to Dorset. The main building stood in some ninety acres of attractive woodland and pasture and there were a number of other buildings, including a classroom block of a semi-permanent construction.

Harbinger, my term, was the fourth to join since the college started in September 1917 and we, therefore, commenced the second year of its existence. The first three terms were called Illawarra, Macquarie and Hesperus, after Devitt and Moore ships, and they joined in that order. There were about 30 cadets in each term but Harbinger produced some 45 and was later reputed to be the least attractive collection of young males to arrive at Pangbourne.

The Captain Superintendent was W.H.D. Montenaro, a naval officer of considerable fame and character and it was a great blow to the college and the cadets when he died in the great influenza epidemic of 1918. I still recall vividly my first night at the college. In the dining room, after prayers, Captain Montenaro told us quietly and truthfully what lay ahead of us, what was expected of us and what would happen

if we did not measure up to the minimum requirements. As a choirboy I was used to discipline. It is essential in church. At Pangbourne there was a different kind of discipline but essential for the proper running of the college and to condition us for the life we had chosen. It is not the people who learn to obey implicitly who are fools but those who never learn discipline. For until you have known and understood or understood discipline you can never enjoy freedom completely. Again, this is a fundamental rule of life.

We slept in dormitories, each of which held about 16 cadets. Massive wooden frames carried hooks for the hammocks and our big wooden seachests were stowed in neat rows underneath. The hammocks were all stowed in small hammock rooms in daytime so a dormitory had a somewhat stark, unfurnished look. The windows were almost invariably wide open and the rooms had no doors. With 16 pairs of healthy lungs competing for oxygen this was a necessity. On each corridor there were shower rooms containing six or eight showers apiece and a cold shower every morning, summer and winter, was obligatory. There was no rule as to how long one had to stay underneath though.

Each term had its own instructor - an ex-naval petty officer - attached to it as guide and mentor. All these men were great characters and all very different in their methods. Little Mr. Molyneux had a squeaky voice but stood no nonsense.

Harry Binstead looked just like one of the crew of H.M.S. Pinafore and could sail a naval cutter on the narrow river with ease and precision. He had a habit of unshipping the tiller, running forward along the thwarts and cracking the fore-sheetman across the shoulders if he was slow when coming about. His favourite expression was "My name's Binstead - and don't you forget it!" Tubby Hall was probably the most popular instructor as he did not overwork his classes and was fond of spinning improbable - and sometimes questionable - yarns. He had an odd habit of sticking his chin up in the air and stretching his throat muscles, particularly when at a loss for suitable words.

A new instructor (Mr. Futcher?) joined with Harbinger term but his name will not come to mind and he probably did not remain at the college for long.

When the other cadets arrived next day the pattern of a first termer's existence was rapidly made clear. Following naval tradition seniority was all important. The second termers took every opportunity of showing their superiority over the humble first term cadets and so on up the scale. The original first term, now fourth term, were rather inclined to behave as if they were gods and we were just out of the primeval slime. It never occurred to me that in about a years time some of these autocratic supermen would be the butts and drudges of a cargo ship half-deck

with older and tougher overlords in the guise of second, third or fourth trip apprentices. But that's life! Having finished ones apprenticeship and gained the coveted 2nd Mates ticket, back you go to the bottom again as a lowly Fourth Mate, hardly to be trusted with taking an azimuth or a simple cross bearing.

All this experience and the accompanying philosophy was way out in the future and to begin with life at Pangbourne for a fair haired, undersized shrimp was pretty grim. Then, one wet Saturday when playing fields were under water the lordly fourth termers demanded the attendance of the first term in the changing room. This had an ominous sound as this venue was a favourite one for beating rebellious juniors. A number of my fellow molluscs disappeared silently into the woods but I was caught up in the net and found myself awaiting trial. This consisted of being stood up on a bench in front of the fourth term, now having something of the appearance of a bloodthirsty crowd at a Roman circus, and told to 'sing, dance or tell a story'. If the first termers performance was not approved he was booted off the stage and cuffed, in not unkindly fashion, all the way to the back of the room. Then came my turn. Standing up in front of an audience was, of course, nothing new to me and I had a good, if somewhat unsophisticated repertoire. 'What shall I sing, gentlemen?' I said briskly, doing my own compering. 'Gilbert and Sullivan?' 'Sing something funny' came the flat reply.

So I sang 'The Duke of Plaza Toro'.
'Oh, he can sing!' said one of the knowledgeable ones.
'Put on a voice'. So I sang 'Take a pair of sparkling eyes'.
I must say my opinion of the fourth term went up considerably for they kept me singing a long time! From then on life was very much easier. I was 'the little chap with a voice' and I sang at every concert and show produced during my two years at Pangbourne. I sang solos in church and on one occasion was kept up late to sing 'Abide with me' for a visiting Bishop.

A recently retired Elder Brother of Trinity House, Captain Dick Galpin, was one of my audience in the changing room and at intervals when we meet he reminds me of the occasion. Apparently what impressed him was that I sang as if I liked it.

A new English and History master joined the college at the same time as 1st Harbinger, one Robert Massey Rayner, a keen and proficient musician who had once played the oboe in the orchestra of the old Gaiety theatre. He was a tremendous acquisition to Pangbourne, especially in those early, formative days. He was a rowing blue and had been a keen rugger player (I do not know whether he was capped) so brought a wealth of useful experience with him. He had been blown up at Gallipoli and as a result suffered from a spasmodic stammer, which soon earned him the nickname of 'Popoff' from the odd 'pop-pop-pop'

hiatus in his speech when excited. He read poetry extremely well and apparently had no idea of the stammer which must have come in a moment of complete amnesia. Imagine the Pied Piper of Hamlyn,when all the rats come tumbling,with 'pop-pop-pop' inserted into the marvellous rhythm. Yet nobody ever laughed or for that matter thought it spoilt the poem. I have never heard anyone put it over better.

R.M. Rayner soon had the musical life of the college organised and amongst other things composed a college anthemn— 'Those that go down to the sea in ships'. A great friend of mine, also in Harbinger term, Dick Daniel, had never done any singing but obviously had an exceptionally good voice. Mr. Rayner would get me to sing a passage and then tell Dick to sing it after me and in this way he soon became very proficient, even to the extent of reading music. He really had a beautiful voice and Paul Brunet, first violin of the Queen's Hall orchestra of those days was so impressed when he heard Dick sing at a college concert that he arranged for him to sing at the Queen's Hall. It was certainly the best boy's voice I ever heard and had he been caught earlier he would have probably been as famous as Ernest Lough. It seems strange one so rarely hears a treble solo in a B.B.C. programme today.

My first term at Pangbourne coincided with momentous days in history. In November the armistice was declared, followed

shortly by the great influenza epidemic. Cadets and staff went down like ninepins. The sick bay was overcrowded and many of the invalids had to stay in their hammocks.

Captain Montenaro owned a T-model Ford car and another friend of mine, Roland Spaull, was appointed coxswain of this vehicle. His duties really consisted of cleaning it as required but he often drove it on the private roads of the college. When Captain Montenaro became desperately ill with influenza and pneumonia followed, it became necessary to give him oxygen and this was in very short supply. Eventually the Reading War Hospital agreed to release a cylinder and Spaull, a senior cadet named Scott and myself set off in the Ford to get it. We careered hectically through the streets of Reading but eventually got the cylinder and set off for Pangbourne. Coming up the hill at Tilehurst there was a traction engine parked on one side of the road and a two-wheeled butcher's cart on the other. Spaull made a dash at it and cannoned off the traction engine on to the butcher's cart. We described a complete circle and stopped some fifty yards down the road to find several spokes of the wooden artillery wheels broken and a considerable length of the running board and the battery box removed. However, the engine started again on the magneto and away we went at a somewhat limping gait. In Pangbourne village I got out and got a taxi to follow the Ford up Pangbourne hill in case she did not make it but when we got to the college the Ford was abandoned beside the drive.

Captain Montenaro had died.

A cadet also died and for some time there was hardly any domestic staff for either cleaning or cooking. Eventually it was decided to close the college early for the Christmas holidays and those of us still on our feet went home to find armistice celebrations still going on.

When we returned in January 1919 for the spring term we found a new Captain Superintendent had been appointed. This was Captain W.H.F. Margesson, another distinguished naval officer who had probably retired when war broke out as he was then living in British Columbia. He was a very different type of man from his predecessor. Very quiet and shy. Some time after Captain Margesson assumed command of the college, Commander A.F.G. Tracy was appointed Executive Officer. Commander Tracy had come from the Royal Naval College Dartmouth so, not surprisingly, Pangbourne was run on similar lines, at least as far as discipline was concerned.

So terms went by calmly and, I suppose, pleasantly on the whole. A wet bob and dry bob system prevailed on the choice of games. In other words, in summer you could play cricket or spend your games periods on the river. I chose the river as being a step towards seafaring and have rather regretted it ever since as I was always fond of cricket. In fact, I can only remember playing one game of cricket at Pangbourne

and that was in my last term. There was an inter-term competition and as Cadet Captain of the first term I played for them. Apparently this impressed the 'new ticks' considerably as I scored 35 and carried my bat! The opposition bowling must have been very poor.

Teaching staff changed frequently - whether by design or accident was not apparent but it did not make for efficient education. In ~~Like~~ most immediate post-war periods change is endemic and people take some time to settle down. R.M.Rayner became a housemaster. A young ex-soldier named Harry Sykes joined and taught physics, and an impressive Director of Studies, Major Dann, also enlivened the scene.

Major Dann ~~also~~ sang and Mrs. Margesson played the violin so our concerts began to show a wider scope. One one occasion R.M. Rayner gave a lecture and demonstration on orchestration in the course of which he played at least six instruments, which I thought a most entertaining and remarkable feat. He was a remarkable man.

The woods provided endless scope for hut building both in trees and on the ground and some troglodytes made caves. Wonderful fry-ups were produced and some enterprising cadets ran restaurants. Rabbits were caught using ferrets or snares and some of the more knowledgable poachers managed to get an occasional pheasant.

It was noted that cadets from families high up the social scale almost invariably were experienced poachers. One bright winter day I was walking with a cadet named George Paulet when we realised a shoot was in progress in an adjoining spinney. A wounded pheasant came down about 20 yards away and George Paulet was over the hedge, had retrieved the bird and we were both flat on our faces in a ditch in a matter of seconds. I seem to remember one dog came over and smelt round us but George discouraged further advances and when all was clear we returned to the college via one of the 'caves' where the pheasant was hung.

Motor cycles were of course much in the minds of cadets and our engineering master, Mr. B.L. Hawes, was a great enthusiast. He had a Martin racer and a B.R.S. Norton on one of which he rode to the college from his home in Tilehurst every day. He had one bad eye and when riding pillion behind him he would frighten the life out of you by turning his head suddenly to protect the eye. It usually happened at about fifty miles an hour - a high speed in those days. He also owned a New Imperial J.A.P. 2½ h.p. machine, which he taught me to ride and which I came off at speed on one of the college loose gravel drives. Later on I acquired an auto-wheel, an auxiliary driving wheel complete with small two stroke engine which clamped on to the rear forks of a bicycle.

Coming up the hill to the college one day the Bowden wire controls fell off the handle-bars and dangled in the road behind the bicycle completely out of reach. All motorcycles were now forbidden at the college and disaster loomed ahead as I approached the parade ground unable to stop the engine which was driving me, if not to destruction, at least to some unpleasant punishment. Just in time I drove into a soft looking ditch but neither the bicycle nor the auto-wheel were quite the same again.

A senior cadet named Blois formed a company to operate an aerial railway. This consisted of some hundreds of feet of fencing wire - obtained, it is said, from the neighbouring estate of a Major Tate - and fixed from the top of a tall tree across a large hollow and on to the bottom of another tree. On the wire a scratch block from the seamanship room was attached with a bos'un's chair underneath. A certain amount of padding on the lower tree minimised the shock of decelleration but at 3d a go it was more of a test of nerves than a pleasure. One cadet lost his nerve and fell from half way down the wire into the hollow and had to be taken to sick bay. This lead to the enterprising Blois and his firm being put into liquidation.

The college standing high on a hill was in those days out of reach of local services except gas. It had its own generating amd pumping station run by a typically dour and taciturn Scot

named Livingstone. He had a somewhat puckish sense of humour and one of its manifestations was to get an unsuspecting cadet to bring him a full bucket of water from the far end of the power house. The powerful magnets in the generator swung the bucket up at right angles tipping the water all over the cadet's legs. One evening when I was recovering from some minor complaint in sick bay and had got to the walking convalescent stage, Livingstone came by with a fearsome old single barrelled shot gun over his shoulder. He said he was off to try and 'knock a bird down' and I asked if I could come and watch. It was pretty well dusk and we found it almost dark in the woods. Livingstone padded on without saying anything but suddenly he stopped. 'Up there' he said, loading his musket with the one cartridge he carried. It looked to me like a large bird asleep on a bough. The fact that all game birds were out of season did not appear to worry the Scot, who clearly had no intention of wasting ammunition on birds in flight. He loosed off and when the reverberations had died and the pattering of shot had stilled, a noise like a circular saw in full swing rent the quiet air. I took to my heels and ran like a stag, gaining the open fields a hundred yards ahead of the less agile Livingstone, who came galloping along swearing odd Scottish oaths. His 'bird' was a wasps nest and one at least had managed to register disapproval of what can only be described as thoroughly unsportsmanlike behaviour. Livingstone's main

regret appeared to be that he had wasted a cartridge.

After a tragic first term my years at Pangbourne subsequently were devoid of any major incident. The course was one of two years. The Board of Trade allowed it to count as one year of the four years at sea it was necessary to serve before sitting for a 2nd Mates Certificate of Competency. Devitt and Moore bought a topsail schooner, the St. George, and put Captain Hamilton Blair in command. Her usual voyage was to the Canary islands and after passing out from the College cadets spent a year getting sail training. The steamship companies, however, were not enthusiastic about this part of the training and indeed the Union-Castle company put their foot down firmly and said the rest of my training must be done in their ships.

In the autumn term of 1919 we did H.M.S.Pinafore and as 'the College Clara Butt' as R.M.Rayner used to announce me, I naturally got the part of Buttercup. My friend, Dick Daniel, was Josephine, and sang 'Sorry her lot' superbly. Everybody enjoyed themselves immensely and R.M.Rayner who was orchestra and accompanist in one broke three keys of the grand piano in the overture so some of us could not be given a note for the recitatives. Rupert D'Oyley Carte came to the dress rehearsal and was very complimentary but for some reason parents were not invited.

Learning I always found easy, thanks to a particularly retentive memory and I enjoyed the practical side of seamanship. Navigation gave me a certain amount of trouble as maths was one of my weaker subjects but the mass of trigonometrical formulae stuck firmly in my mind and my main failures were in simple arithmatic.

In my second year we had some interesting outings. The Bursar at that time was a famous old Etonian, P.J.de Paravicini and thanks to his good offices the Pangbourne College choir had a day at Eton and Windsor with a conducted tour of the college and the castle, finally attending evensong in St. George's Chapel. We also had a day at Henley, the highlight of which was the cheapjack vendors with their quick-fire patter and complicated 'bargains'. In those days Pangbourne only rowed cutters and whalers and nobody even mentioned eights.

So we came to the end of 1st Harbinger's two years at Pangbourne. On prize day I was dispatched to the village to meet Lady Owen Phillips (subsequently Lady Kilsant) who was to present the prizes. Unfortunately her car came by another route and eventually I gave it up and tore up the hill on a hot summer day to arrive dusty and thirsty but just in time to take part in the ceremonial parade. I passed out 2nd in my term with five prizes, the real 'brain' of Harbinger

being H.R.A. King, who was way out in front of everybody. Some time afterwards I remember saying to my mother that I thought I had done pretty well at Pangbourne to which she replied quite sharply that it was no better than was expected of me.

One of the traditions after passing out was that all leaving cadets must be shaved, if they had not done so already and I was duly scraped with a rather rusty safety razor. Unfortunately my lip was nicked and became infected so that I arrived home with a very lop sided smile. I was soon in bed with a temperature and a terribly swollen face which our doctor lanced. For some days my mother applied almost continuous hot fomentations which I suspect probably saved my life, for eventually the wound started to drain and my face returned to something like the normal size. Having recovered, we went to Jersey for a holiday before I joined my first ship.