CHAPTER IV LEARNING THE ROPES

Having had Christmas at home I soon received orders to join the "Goorkha", another small 'intermediate' liner which had belonged to the Union line before the merger with the Castle line. She was just over 5,000 tons gross and was about to sail for the continent to load for Capetown, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Lorenco Marques and Beira. It was January, 1921.

Once again I joined in the East India Dock, only this time without that awkward status symbol, my massive sea chest. This remained at home and in my possession for many years to come. When I did eventually part with it, it was only because it could not be made to fit in comfortably with modern 'housing units'. It would really have been better to have left it to be broken up with 'Dunvegan Castle', with which ship it had an obvious affinity.

One of my fellow cadets from 'Dunvegan Castle', Maltby, also joined the 'Goorkha' and there were two cadets from the previous voyage, Gelson and Wedderburn-Ogilvy. All very different in temperament, we got along very well together without any effort, which went a long way towards making life pleasant. The Captain was John Barry Whitton, known throughout the fleet as 'Cocky Whitton', a rather fierce little man who was a golf addict and who sported a parrot which spoke

very well. Of course, members of the crew were always trying to teach the parrot to say things which would infuriate the old man and on one occasion Cocky Whitton came out on deck from his cabin and found the ship's lamptrimmer on his knees by the cage imploring the parrot to say 'Cocky you bastard!'

The Chief Officer had the highly suitable name of Marriner and his outstanding trait was an ability to knit perfectly, so he spent most of his leisure hours with needles clicking. It was a charming sight to see him sitting in his chair knitting away and giving the bo'sun orders for the following day. The bosun was a great hulking man with round shoulders who used to pad round the ship like a grizzly bear. Whenever he met one of the crew going or coming he would growl 'Where yer working?' Another favourite expression of his was 'Got a knife, got a wristwatch?'. This was said all in one breath and presumably implied that modern young seamen were more likely to have a wristwatch than a knife.

Our ports of call were Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg but I cannot recall in what order we visited them. January is an uninviting month for navigating the North Sea and the Scheldt, Maas and Elbe rivers. Approaching Antwerp all hands were turned out on deck in the middle of the night for inspection by the port health authority and there would hardly be time to get warm again before hands would be called to 'stations' for going alongside. Sometimes the berth would

not be clear and the ship would be stemming the tide for an hour or more in a biting east wind. It was certainly a very different life from the average shore job.

Antwerp was an efficient, energetic port with a bawdy, bustling waterfront. Many of the berths were in the river itself and did not involve locking into the docks. The Castle ships normally berthed in the river so that it was easy to step ashore and see the sights. In the waterfront cafes, clashes between seamen of different nations were not infrequent but the place had nothing like the bad reputation held by the dock area of Marseilles in those days. Two cadets were stabbed on their way back to their ship in the early hours on one occasion when we were in Marseilles. In Antwerp bottles and glasses would fly but the streets seemed reasonably safe at night.

As in most of the continental ports, the standard of stevedoring was high and disputes and strikes seemed to be rare. Loading general cargo the ship seemed to fill at an incredible speed but one could stow sling after sling of steel plates and have little to show for it at the end of a day except an increase in the ship's draught.

Between Antwerp and Rotterdam there is an inner channel ~~called the Galgeput~~, which runs from the mouth of the Scheldt to the mouth of the Maas. Having changed pilots at Flushing inside the sand banks.

we were altering course to enter the inner channel when the ship took a violent sheer and in spite of immediate full helm and full astern on the port engine she ran straight up on the beach and brought up with her stem barely fifty yards from the houses. People came rushing out and there was soon a large crowd of, I think, hilarious people shouting encouragement or abuse. Full astern on both engines had the necessary effect and we slid off with the Captain telling the poor pilot just what he thought of him. We subsequently picked up another pilot and proceeded safely. Some years later I was in a P & O ship, 'Karmala' coming in the other end of the channel from Rotterdam to Antwerp. The Captain, Cornwall-Jones, had just asked me whether I had ever been through the channel before and I had just related my 'Goorkha' experience when the ship started to sheer and next minute we had one engine full astern. The pilot regained control and Cornwall-Jones said quietly without any trace of emotion, "Quite a coincidence, eh, Third Mate?".

This same captain had two idiosyncrasies well known in the company. One was that he always carried a large number of canaries to sea with him - at least a dozen cages; and the other was a habit of singing his orders to the tune of a nursery rhyme. He used to come on the bridge singing 'I think we'll have an azimuth, an azimuth, an azimuth' to the tune of 'Here we go gathering nuts in May', for instance.

Later on I found that his brother was our local vicar but I cannot remember whether there was any similarity between them.

The two incidents related, amongst others, remained firmly fixed in my mind and I always watched very carefully when a ship was swinging under helm, particularly in confined waters. A mistake on the part of the man at the wheel at a critical moment can easily produce what, to the pilot, may be an unaccountable sheer. He takes drastic steps to counteract it just as the helmsman realises his mistake and the nett result is an even bigger sheer in the opposite direction. Although the pilot normally watches the helmsmen to see his orders are obeyed correctly it is not always possible to do this satisfactorily, particularly at night.

The Rotterdam pilots always impressed me enormously. Manoeuvring ships in the narrow Maas with its tremendous amount of barge traffic and the precision needed to turn into and out of the various haven entrances called for the coolest of heads and technique of the highest quality. This is not to say they surpassed the London river pilots but somehow the Maas always seemed to present more problems. Recently, from the top of the Euromast I surveyed the astonishing port of Rotterdam in its entirety. Busy is a poor word to describe the waterborne activity of the great European port which is still expanding at an incredible rate. Possibly our own Port authorities could learn from our Dutch friends.

The Seamen's Mission at Rotterdam was known throughout the world as a real down to earth club for sailors. The padre in charge had a reputation for plain speaking and straight hitting and he would put the gloves on with anyone who cared to try and 'knock his block off'. I believe he subsequently went to Buenos Aires or perhaps the padre there had a similar reputation. Certainly Seamen's Missions throughout the world served a useful purpose and went about their work in a thoroughly practical way. Possibly they did not convert many seafarers to a holy way of life but they undoubtedly kept many out of mischief and gave a pleasant night ashore to all who cared to come to them, which usually included those with no money to spend on booze or women.

Rotterdam in 1921 was not, it appeared to me, a pro-British port. Many of the people I spoke to, usually to ask my way, either could not or would not speak English and many would speak German in a rather agressive way as if to say "Well I don't suppose you can speak German, either!" This feeling continued in all my other visits to Rotterdam between the wars and the different treatment received by the Dutch in the second world war as compared with the first undoubtedly accounts for their change of heart. No doubt, too, my opinions were affected by the fact that everything in Holland at that time was fiendishly dear by our standards and the guilder appeared to be worth 5/- in English money, rather

than its official value of 2/- or thereabouts.

Hamburg in January 1921 was very different from the Hamburg after the end of the 1939-1945 war. If it had been bombed there were no signs of it and ship-building and other activities were in full swing. The only unstable element seemed to be the mark which was losing value faster than currency could be printed. I believe at that time the rate was 4,000 marks to the pound but it may have been 40,000. It eventually reached millions and some of the notes, which were beautifully printed, must have had an intrinsic value greater than their purchasing power. So rapid was the devaluation that the stevedores were paid at the end of each four hour shift and all promptly ran to the nearest shops to turn their wages into something less likely to disappear before the end of the next shift. It was a terrible object lesson on the evils of inflation - if that is a correct description of what was happening-and one which was not easily forgotten.

During this stay in Hamburg the ship's agents arranged for some of the ship's officers and the cadets to visit the big Blohm and Voss shipyards. We had been on board a merchant ship building and were descending a ramp when there was a warning shout and a shower of red hot rivets thudded into the timber slope all round us. No one was hit but the height from which they fell would have made a direct hit on

the head almost certainly fatal. As there was no rivetting in progress immediately above us it could hardly have been an accident.

'Goorkha' was berthed on the dolphins in the sailing ship haven and we had to go ashore in the 'jolly boat', a ferry which made a round of the ships not berthed alongside. Gelson, as an old hand, offered to show me the sights and we went ashore and explored Altona and St.Pauli. This included a visit to a circus-cabaret affair where the guests could mount the circus ponies and jog around the ring to music. There were several portly business men in city clothes enjoying themselves. In this way, assisted to some extent by the circus girls, it was a most amusing entertainment.

On our way back we got thoroughly lost and eventually Gelson descended into a basement cafe to ask the way to the 'jolly ferry'. A somewhat unprepossessing large individual, with a fearsome German-American accent said 'Wait until I've finished my drink and I will come with you'. A number of nearby customers on hearing English appeared restive and gave us anything but friendly looks so we said we would wait outside. Immediately we opened the door there was a rush and next moment Gelson and I were belting down the dark street as a stream of angry Germans came flooding out of the cafe like hornets. We had no idea which way we were

going and it did not seem to matter much as long as we kept ahead. Unfortunately, we soon found ourselves approaching a bridge. At that time every bridge was guarded by armed policemen and it was necessary to stop and show your pass before proceeding. We had a feeling that the police might side with our pursuers so, as the guard was not in sight, we tore on over the bridge. Of course, there came a cry to halt but looking back we saw the chase was almost at the bridge so we ducked and ran. A shot rang out but how near or far from us the bullet went I cannot remember. By that time the pursuers were on the bridge and sheer weight of numbers made further shooting impossible. On the other side of the bridge we found ourselves in a more respectable quarter and as two opulent looking gentlemen approached we again asked our way. They were no more friendly than our other adviser and rather drunk. The result was that our pursuers arrived and we were in the middle of a gesticulating, shouting, hostile crowd. On the theory that Gelson was much bigger than I was and must look after himself I took advantage of the heated discussion - presumably on what to do with us - and ducked down, wriggling my way through and round the many pairs of legs. There was pandemonium and in the confusion Gelson got away, too. By a piece of sailor's luck we were close to the 'jolly ferry' stage and we tumbled aboard just as it was about to leave on its last trip of the day. As far as I can recall, our fellow

cadets were not impressed by our adventure but the Chief Officer heard about it and tightened up rules for shore leave in Hamburg.

By this time I was beginning to know my way about and conversations with people of many different nations were broadening my outlook. In Hamburg we had a German night-watchman on board and I had many talks with him. He had been Captain of a merchant ship and was now grateful to have any sort of job as the German merchant navy was reduced to a handful of vessels. He seemed to be very friendly towards the British and said, typically perhaps, "If only we Germans had had you British for allies we should have beaten the world". He also insisted that next time we should be on the same side. He was not a very good prophet.

Hamburg could be very cold indeed and on one occasion the river was frozen so hard that on leaving the docks with a tug towing ahead the ice was too thick for the tug to break and we almost ran her down. By contrast the Elbe below Hamburg in summer had some attractive looking resorts with many people boating and bathing. One Sunday afternoon we were coming up river and off Blankenese there were crowds of people disporting themselves. Suddenly members of our crew realised that some of the girls in canoes close to the ship were completely naked and as our lugubrious bosum put it, "We should have lost half of them over the side if the silly

sods had been able to swim".

After the continental trip which lasted anything from ten days to three weeks the ship was in London for about a fortnight to complete loading. The "Goorkha's" trip was to Beira and back calling at the Canaries and possibly at Ascension and St. Helena. Only a brief stay of a few hours was made at the islands but they made welcome breaks in the 21 day passage from London to Capetown. Once clear of the Bay of Biscay, the weather was generally good but on one occasion we struck a violent storm in the South Atlantic about 1,000 miles north of Capetown. It lasted for some days and the little "Goorkha" needed careful handling. On one occasion I was doing a trick at the wheel when a series of really heavy seas knocked her bow off and for a time it looked as if we should be broadside on, which would have been extremely unpleasant. We were eased down to about four knots and taking heavy water forward and over the promenade deck. A ring on the telegraph for more revolutions on the port engine gradually brought her nearly head to wind and sea again where she was virtually hove to. In some years of the Cape run I saw remarkably little really bad weather and it is undoubtedly a fine weather trip.

Ascension island is a mere pinpoint in the South Atlantic and had little of todays glamour then, as obviously tracking stations for moon shots were not even mentioned in science fiction. It

was as now, a cable station and there was a small Royal Marine garrison on the island. Ships called with stores and these normally included live sheep. These animals were slung over the side in nets and were reputed to graze on the slopes of Green Mountain. From the ship the whole place looked rather like a mound of cinders and anything but inviting. A heavy swell ran in to the anchorage every time I visited the island and boat work was difficult. On one occasion we took home some marines, one of whom had spent many years on the island. This grizzled stalwart asked if we would pay for a bottle of whisky if he could drink it without touching it. We accepted the bet and he proceeded to consume the contents through a straw without, as he said, touching the bottle. He recovered surprisingly quickly but I believe he was landed into hospital in England, probably as a result of winning too many similar wagers.

St. Helena was lush and luxuriant after the barren Ascension and from the anchorage off Georgetown, the capital of the island, one got the impression of a rather sad, seedy little colony. This may well have been completely false as I was never able to get shore leave during our brief stays. I would like to have visited Longwood and seen the relics of Napoleon.

The natives are coloured and presumably of African origin. Bumboats offer a variety of local products but little of particular

attraction. With the Cape route to the east now apparently firmly established once more there must be possibilities of more traffic and an increase in importance for St. Helena. It is of course also a cable station.

Our stay at Capetown was rarely more than 48 hours so there was little time for exploring ashore. I always hoped to be able to make the trip to the top of Table Mountain but never managed to do so. There were some friends of the family living at Wynberg and I used to visit them. It was here I was first introduced to corn on the cob, which promptly became one of my favourite dishes. My host usually invited a pretty girl to keep me company but I am afraid they must have found me pretty dull as a companion as I was very shy, and quite unpractised in small talk or dalliance. At the same time these pleasant little interludes added to my education and got me out of the rut of life on board ship. I thought Wynberg and Constantia were delightful.

One incident on shore in Capetown was on a rather different plane from tea parties with pretty girls. I went ashore with two other cadets and a tall, flat-footed quartermaster named Keech. After making a round of more or less respectable pubs, we ended up in the Opera House bar. By this time Keech was considered to have drunk 27 bottles of export Guiness. In the bar was a Cape Dutchman with a number of bulldog pups which he

had taught to do tricks, such as smoking a pipe, walking about on their hind legs and so on. When we were requested to leave at closing time this character suggested that we should repair to his house where he had some whisky. Taking this as a genuine invitation we agreed and soon found ourselves in a somewhat sordid part of the town. Our host led the way in through some sort of food shop and took us to a room at the top of the stairs where there were lots more dogs. He then produced a rather suspicious looking bottle labelled 'Whiskie' and some glasses. One sip was enough to tell us that the bottle was full of headaches, if nothing worse, so we told our benefactor we would pay up and go. He then demanded £1 for the drinks and when we proceeded to dispute the charge he called down the stairs and a number of aggressive looking toughs made their appearance. Realising that we were hardly in a position to argue against such convincing evidence, we paid up and the deputation from downstairs withdrew. But Keech decided that having paid over a hard earned pound (his wages would be about £8 or £9 a month at that time) the bottle, hooch or no, belonged to him and he was going to have it so he tucked it into his coat Unfortunately, going down the steep stairs the bottle fell out and smashed with a crash on the floor below. Immediately there was a violent hubbub and the noises made it clear that the toughs were about to fall on us in earnest. We all

retreated at speed to the room we had been in and jammed the door with a chair. Then out on to the verandah and down the iron pillars supporting it, into the street below. The shop was empty and we could hear all sorts of angry noises upstairs. On the counter of the shop was a large bowl of penguins eggs, almost exactly round, like small tennis balls. On Keech's advice we seized a number of these "as ammunition" and set off at high speed towards the docks. Within seconds the chase was on and at intervals we stopped, let loose a salvo of penguins eggs and then galloped off again. We reached the dock gates twenty yards ahead of our pursuers and were then in sanctuary. We left the angry deputation arguing with the dock policeman, obviously demanding instant retribution. As in fact they had a pound of our - or rather Keech's money, we had paid amply for a good nights entertainment and returned on board happily.

During my time at sea there were a surprising number of incidents in which I found myself being pursued by an angry crowd. The worst occasion was undoubtedly that in Hamburg already described but similar chases occurred in Japan and elsewhere. I think I know exactly how a fox feels.

Capetown to Durban always seemed a long dull passage. There was no relief from watchkeeping as we anchored off shore at Port Elizabeth and East London. Occasionally we would call at Mossel Bay, where we also lay at anchor.

The coast line, except in the vicinity of these ports, was almost featureless so one could not pass the time by taking bearings. The mates in charge of watches would often tell us to get a fix and laugh in superior fashion when the result was a 'cocked-hat' taking up half the chart. The one clearly marked feature was the 'Glendower beacon' but I cannot remember its origin.

It was somewhere along this coast that the ill-fated 'Waratah' of Lunn's Blue Anchor Line was lost with all hands Her fate still remains a mystery. One saw very little shipping, which contributed to the general feeling of being in a detached, dull world of our own. When the weather was bad matters were even worse and the coasting trip could be very unpleasant indeed. On one occasion we arrived at Durban in a full gale and for some time we cruised on and off, waiting to see if the pilot would come out. Eventually the pilot cutter appeared, climbing over the big swells and washing down in the breakers. Alongside, the pilot leapt for the jumping ladder and our old man gave a sigh of relief as he climbed aboard safely.

The sea was breaking over the harbour arms with a thunderous roar, the spray flinging high in the air before it disappeared like smoke to leeward. The entrance between the long breakwaters looked very narrow indeed and every now and then a big sea would break across it in a welter of foam.

No one on the bridge of 'Goorkha' looked very happy. The pilot kept the ship well up to windward and watched his chance to catch a "smooth" at the entrance, which he managed very skilfully. But halfway along the narrow channel 'Goorkha' felt a sea on her quarter and took a sudden and determined sheer to starboard. In fact, she was almost on the verge of broaching to. For a few tense minutes it seemed inevitable that the ship must go on the breakwater and with the sea that was running not only the ship but many lives as well would almost certainly have been lost. The pilot and the old man kept cool and refrained from giving the order for 'full astern', which under the circumstances would probably have been fatal. As it was 'Goorkha' reluctantly started to swing back towards the channel, the massive boulders of the breakwater only half a ship's length away. We all breathed a sigh of relief and some, perhaps, a little prayer of thanks.

Although food on board was excellent, it was always a pleasant change to eat ashore and in Durban there was an excellent restaurant on the front called 'The Model Dairy'. It was in fact rather more than a tea shop and the various ice cream dishes obtainable were simply delicious, banana splits being one of the favourites, of course.

There was a sea bathing enclosure also on the front, carefully netted to prevent the incursion of sharks. The story goes that on one occasion a swimmer found himself outside in the Indian Ocean having dived in and came out through a large hole in the netting!

Life at sea in those days, probably more than today, called for a great deal of understanding and tolerance. In the half deck, as the cadets' or apprentices' quarters are traditionally called, you would find four or possibly more adolescents living in the closest possible proximity for months on end. There would be little real mixing with other members of the crew, except as required by the work of the ship. So, with four cadets you had a community of four, closely bound by ties of similar circumstances. There would be no privacy and irritating habits would have every opportunity to do their worst. Mutual antipathies under these conditions could lead to explosive or impossible situations and life for everyone in the half deck would be hell. Fortunately, this rarely happened. There might be a good scrap and the contestants might go through the approved motions of shaking hands afterwards while still reserving an opinion about the other chap. But most seamen, young or old, instinctively realised that if you have got to live and work with a chap you dislike the only thing to do is make the best of it and avoid an open quarrel.

This usually worked well enough unless one or other, or both, got tight and lost control. The world would undoubtedly be a better place if more people had had similar training. As it is, the world is full of people who have no idea of putting their own house in order; they feel called upon to tell other people, indeed, other nations, how they should behave. My lifetime of considerably varied experience has taught me that in general these people are well-intentioned but misguided and would do well to do a little soul searching on their own account before undertaking wholesale conversion of other people.

Long ago I formed the opinion that seamen acquire a sense of the proper order of things which is quite lacking in the average landsman. "They that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters - these men see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep". Perhaps this is the reason but it is also true that seamen of different nations frequently have more in common than seamen and landsmen of the same nation. Oh well, as the shoemaker said, "There's nothing like leather!"

Captain 'Cocky' Whitton left 'Goorkha' and our new Captain was Stanley Owen, an entirely different type of individual; kinder perhaps and probably more eccentric. Ships captains are frequently eccentric and at times one was inclined to think a better description would be 'mad as a hatter'.

Cornwall-Jones with his birds and nursery rhymes has been mentioned and he, of course, could only be considered mildly eccentric. But I have heard of one captain who did penance for some past misdeed by sleeping with a halter round his neck and getting his officers to truss him up like a turkey. Another played hymn tunes on handbells while one that I sailed under insisted that the only treatment for falling hair was to use sheep dip. Stanley Owen had a mild monomania which consisted of an aggressive faith in the curative and preservative properties of Stockholm tar (always known at sea as 'Stockhollum'). He always had the soles of his shoes liberally coated with this strong smelling liquid and, no doubt, used it instead of Florida water in his bath. One day he insisted on having the patent log line soaked in the mixture and hung over the engine-room fiddley to dry. The poor quartermaster, to whose lot it fell to stream this particular log line, got well and truly stuck to it and eventually had to be cut adrift ~~from it~~, so the experiment was not a success. The captain always called his steward Hezikiah, regardless of his real name and I can still hear the stentorian shout of 'Hezikiah! Where the blazes is the Stockhollum?' To keep the record straight it must be admitted that any eccentricity apparent had no noticeable effect on the captain's ability to command his ship.

One voyage homeward bound in 'Goorkha', we arrived at Las Palmas with a fire in the cross bunker, apparently due to spontaneous combustion in Durban coal. Lloyds' surveyor came off and inspected the bunker and as a result a good deal of the coal was unloaded into a lighter and we were allowed to proceed. But, 36 hours later a passenger complained that the deck of her cabin was hot and the pitch was beginning to melt in the deck seams. A further inspection revealed the fact that the two or three hundred tons of coal in the bunker were obviously burning and after consultation with the Chief Engineer Stanley Owen decided that we must try and get at the burning coal and dump it over the side.

At first all available members of the crew - engine-room staff, deck staff and stewards were set to work shovelling coal into wet ash bags which were hoisted on deck and dumped over the side. After some hours work it was clear that the job was more than the men available could manage. The acrid fumes and smoke from the burning coal made more than a short spell of shovelling impossible and men were frequently staggering up the ladder on to the deck to get a lung full of fresh air. At one stage the captain came down to see what the situation was like and was obviously astonished to find that the coal was too hot to stand on in some places and workers were using wooden hatches as a platform. The old man was standing on one of these when

it burst into flames. Nearby was a large can of drinking water and a cup. Stanley Owen solemnly filled the cup with water and poured it gently on the flames, remarking as he did so, "I wonder if hell is any hotter?" This incident cheered everybody up immensely and there were more grinning faces than grim ones.

Nevertheless, the captain decided that the situation was sufficiently serious to call on all the younger male passengers to turn to and help save the ship, which most of them did without questions. One, however, had to be read the appropriate section of the Merchant Shipping Act, which authorises a captain to take this step, before he would go down the bunker and even then he did not stay long in what he described as 'perfectly ghastly conditions'.

Eventually most of the coal had gone over the side leaving a large heap of possibly fifty or sixty tons, which the Chief Engineer thought was probably safe. After some deliberation with the captain a fireman was sent to get a long 'slice' (a sort of gigantic poker about ten feet long) This he was instructed to work into the heap of coal to see if it was hotter in the middle. With great skill the rather small fireman worked away at the heavy slice until all but a couple of feet was embedded in the coal. After waiting about twenty minutes the captain walked over and put his hand on the slice,

leaping back instantly and waving his hand in the air. "Good God", he exclaimed, "It must be red hot inside. I can't bear my hand on the slice". The Chief Engineer felt the slice, too, and instructed the fireman to remove it so that we could proceed to dump the remaining coal, which did not please us at all. The fireman seized the slice and commenced to work it to and fro to get it out. Stanley Owen watched him curiously for a minute or two and then said, "Your hands must be tough to be able to grip that hot metal like that!" The fireman grinned and went on working. "It's nothing like as hot as it was when I put it in", he said casually, "it had come straight out of a furnace".

Collapse, as Punch would say, of stout party. The coal was allowed to remain. As stated elsewhere, this incident earned the cadets the princely sum of £2 as a gift from the underwriters. In fact, I believe all members of the crew got a month's pay so I suppose it was not bad.