

CHAPTER VIIFINDING A JOB*Corrected*

When I got home there was only about a month to Christmas and I decided that I must try and get my 2nd mate's certificate before the holiday as I might find it difficult to settle down to work again afterwards. Some other Union-Castle cadets were already at the navigation school so I signed on and commenced work immediately. The instructors knew their business and at the end of a fortnight I decided to put my papers in and take the examination the week before Christmas. The school thought this very ambitious and suggested that I needed at least another three weeks tuition. The idea of Christmas with the examination still in front of me did not appeal at all so I decided to take a chance.

Putting one's papers in involved going to the Board of Trade examination rooms in Dock Street near the Tower of London and producing proof that one had completed the necessary four years at sea. I believe you were allowed a margin of one fifth for time in port, leave, etc., and the examiners were very strict in this matter, counting up sea time to the very day. Having convinced them of my right to sit the examination, I paid my fee and prepared to do battle on the following Monday.

The Chief examiner was Captain Saul, revered and feared by all prospective mates and masters and his right-hand man was Captain Baker, who was, if anything, more feared but possibly less revered. In such apprehension were these two sea hawks held that many young men went to Bombay or Sydney to sit for their certificates, rather than face the ordeal in London. In fact I found them both kindly and helpful in a brusque sort of way and if they did not suffer fools gladly they obviously suffered them more than they need have done.

Monday's stint consisted entirely of paper work and at the luncheon break instructors from our school were waiting outside and eagerly asked what questions we had had. From these they endeavoured to deduce what we were likely to get in the afternoon and were, it is said, often very successful. But I felt I was likely to get into a muddle if I attacked a paper with what might or might not be pre-knowledge of the answers so I went my own way. In any case, the examiners were not content with correct answers; the working had to fit.

This last point was brought home to me in the trigonometry paper when the examiner sent for me and asked how I had managed to get the correct answer as I appeared to have taken a short cut. He seemed very suspicious. The problem involved two triangles and I pointed out that half the problem could be solved by Euclid leaving only the final portion to be solved by trigonometry. "Well", he said reluctantly "I can see you are right. I set that problem and did not notice that possibility". I felt sure I was safe as far as trigonometry was concerned!

During the chartwork paper, I found myself stuck at one of the questions as the answer I got seemed absurd. I was scratching my head over this when Captain Baker entered the room and walked over to me. He asked what was the matter and I explained that the answer I had got was absurd. He looked at the question and then at my working on the chart and said,

"Don't let it worry you - a lot stranger things than that happen in examinations. Anyway I set that paper". This sort of thing seemed to happen to me.

An examiner from Liverpool, Captain Doughty I think, took me for seamanship, which was of course oral and practical. He was extremely keen on cargo handling and stowage and my experience in 'Bampton Castle' stood me in good stead and he gave me an easy passage.

In those days, and possibly now, one had to know the Rule of the Road by heart; all thirty-one articles together with the preliminary and definitions. Article 7, which dealt with lights and shapes for fishing vessels was by far the longest and was dreaded by most candidates. I was lucky in that memorising never gave me any trouble and I could run through the Rules from start to finish without much effort. Most of them are still in my head today. My Scottish brother-in-law, David Beaton, used to hear me recite the rules when I was swotting and he would parody them in a real Scots accent and send me into fits of laughter. I was afraid that I might find myself giving his version to an indignant examiner.

By the Thursday of exam. week all I had left to do was signals, which 2nd Mates, Mates and Masters all did together. On my way along Tower Hill on Thursday morning I got a large piece of grit in my eye and was quite unable to use it during the examination. However, I passed and shortly afterwards left Dock Street with the coveted piece of paper confirming my right to a 2nd Mate's ticket. My eye gave me a good deal of trouble and when I got home I went to see my brother, who was an optician, who cleverly removed a large piece of brick. We celebrated that evening by going to the Shepherd's Bush Empire.

I did not waste any time in proudly presenting myself at the Union-Castle offices in Fenchurch Street and here a shock awaited me. There were no jobs. The head of the officer's department sympathised but pointed out that ships were being laid up and mates were two a penny. He suggested that I should join a smaller company, get my master's ticket and then come back to them. My thoughts were simple. If the Union-Castle, who paid for me to go to Pangbourne, won't have me, why should anyone else?

Fortunately, my good friend the Reverend Hugh B. Chapman, chaplain of the Royal Savoy Chapel, came to my rescue and

persuaded an influential friend to give me a job in the P & O company. This was a great stroke of luck as jobs were very scarce and the P & O normally recruited from the 'Worcester'.

So early in 1924 I joined the 'Caledonia' in the Royal Albert dock as 4th mate and found the 3rd mate was R.E.Cowell who eventually became marine superintendent of the company.

I did not stay in 'Caledonia' long and I am not sure that she ever did another voyage as she was very old. I got short notice to join the 'Barrabool', whose 4th mate had gone sick, and literally did a pierhead jump; but when we anchored off Tilbury the sick mate returned and I went ashore with the pilot. Definitely my shortest voyage.

I then joined the 'Balranald', Captain B.J. Ohlson, D.S.O. R.D., R.N.R. with 'Alphabetical' Carter as Chief Mate. The 'Alphabetical' referred to a long string of initials but I cannot remember what they were. These were two exceptionally fine officers and I was more than fortunate to sail under them. Carter in particular took a real fatherly interest in his cadets and young officers and saw that they met nice families abroad and did not get into the sort of trouble young seamen can so easily find if given half a chance.

The 'Balranald' belonged to what was known as the P & O Branch line and was one of six ships running a monthly service to Australia via the Cape. The company had been known as Lunn's Blue Anchor line before being taken over by the P & O and the ill-fated 'Waratah' which disappeared and was lost with all hands between Durban and Capetown was one of their ships. The six 'Bs' - Balranald, Barrabool, Bendigo, Beltana, Berrima and Borda - carried general cargo and emigrants outward bound and one class passengers, meat, butter and fruit homeward.

Balranald was 9,000 tons gross, fully refrigerated in all holds and carried some 1200 emigrants, of which a considerable number were known as 'open berth' passengers. In other words they slept in bunks rigged temporarily in the 'tween decks. There were usually some pretty tough customers amongst them and on occasions it was necessary to rig hoses to cool their fighting ardour or stop them getting at the many unattached females berthed aft.

We called at either Las Palmas or Tenerife outward and homeward but with only about $11\frac{1}{2}$ knots it was a long slow haul to the Cape. From there to Melbourne it was even longer, the ship going way down south on the great circle course. In fact, we could never do the complete great circle course as it took us too far south into the ice and more than once the fearful weather in the 'roaring forties' made us head up north for the comfort of the passengers.

Capetown and the Canaries of course I knew well but Melbourne was new to me and I found the entrance through Port Phillip heads exciting with the strong tidal overfalls. We only stayed about 36 hours in Melbourne so we did not have much time for exploring. But I remember the big fairground at Luna Park and the tramway cable cars.

At Sydney we berthed at Brown's Wharf on the south shore, *now* just underneath the harbour bridge which, however, was not built at that time. The ship would move to another berth at Piermont to load meat and used to dry dock at Ball's Point on the north shore. If we were not going up to Brisbane we got a month in Sydney, which was very pleasant indeed.

On the day of my first arrival the Chief Mate introduced me to some friends of his who invited me to stay the week-end at Fairfield, some twenty miles outside Sydney. I accepted gratefully but explained that I could not go then as I was on duty until 7.0 p.m.

They said there was a train at 8.0 p.m. and if I caught that they would meet me at Fairfield station. Their name was Carter. At 8.0 p.m. I boarded the train for Fairfield at Sydney's main station but an hour later it was still there. It appeared that a new signalling system was being put into operation during the slack period over Saturday night and Sunday and the train drivers were having some difficulty - or making some difficulty - in interpreting the new signals.

Eventually we started, but stopped at intervals so that what should have been less than an hour's journey took over four. When we arrived at Fairfield a solitary railwayman was extinguishing the lights and obviously anxious to get home to bed. I explained about the Carters; he knew about the train delay.

"They waited for two hours and then gave it up as a bad job" he said.

"But how do I get to their house?" I enquired. "Its pitch dark, I have no idea of the way and haven't even a torch with me".

"Well its only about a mile and a half" came the reply. "You go along this road about half a mile and then in through a gate and across a paddock on your left. The other side of the paddock there's another gate and a path leading through some trees to the river. Their house is close to the river. You can't miss it".

Can't miss it in the dark in a totally strange country? I hoped he was right and with the optimism of youth set out to try.

Sure enough I found the gate, or a gate, on the left of the road and as far as I was able to judge it led into what might well be a paddock. But could I find a gate at the other side? No. All I found was a big barbed wire fence along which I felt my way gingerly. Suddenly a dog barked noisily close at hand and shortly afterwards there was the noise of a window or door being opened.

"Clear out of there, you," said a rough unfriendly Australian voice, "I'll give you two minutes then let the dogs go".

"Could you please tell me - " I started in conciliatory tones but was interrupted, "On your way, pommie, I'm letting the dogs go". And let them go he did for within a few moments a couple of large hounds came bounding up barking ferociously. I froze, not moving a muscle and they sniffed around suspiciously, obviously puzzled. Their owner seemed to expect more of them for he called out angrily to them, whereupon they turned and went back to him. I quickly threw my raincoat over the barbed wire and scrambled over, preferring the risks involved to a second encounter with the hounds of the Baskervilles, Australian version. It did not do my raincoat much good.

Beyond the fence things went from bad to worse. I kept coming to more fences and simply had no idea where I was going. Suddenly, after climbing yet another fence, I realised I was on different ground and appeared to be in some sort of low scrub. I thought, too, that I could hear the sound of a river and after battling through the undergrowth for some distance arrived at what was clearly a river bank. Instinctively I turned left and made my way along the bank for a hundred yards or so. Then, for no reason I could place, I stopped dead and called out "Is there anyone here?" To my astonishment a girl's voice answered "Yes, is that Eric Middleton?" I thought I must be dreaming. I moved in the direction of the voice and found myself at the gate of a bungalow and on arriving at the porch was met by a young girl carrying a torch. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning.

I was dead beat and kept explanations brief. I found I had arrived at the home of Mrs. Carter's sister and it was her daughter who had replied to my call. They all knew I had got lost on the way and assumed I had gone back to the ship. My new friend offered me a couch in the sitting room and within a very few minutes I was fast asleep.

When I was awakened with a cup of tea in the morning Dorothy and her mother were obviously in a state of some excitement.

"Mother says you are lucky to be alive" said Dorothy.

"Oh, no! It wasn't as bad as that" I protested, feeling rather tough about the whole thing now it was daylight.

"When you have had your tea, come and look" was the non-committal reply and so, wondering what it was all about, I did so.

Outside in the morning sunlight I was shown a large tract of undergrowth, running along the high bank of a fast flowing river.

"There is your track right through the middle" I was told. "That scrub is full of snakes, venomous almost certainly. We would not walk there for worlds!" Having a healthy dislike for snakes, I shuddered.

"But then you see you walked along the bank to this spot where we have been excavating to make a boathouse".

It had rained early the previous night and the soil on the river bank was still damp. It showed my footmarks clearly - out of the scrub and along the bank with a toe print right on the edge of a ten foot drop where the earth had been removed to form a sunken boathouse, at river level. Another step and I should have pitched head first into the pit and possibly broken my neck. My first night in Australia might well have been my last.

However, I eventually ended up at the Carter's house and spent a very enjoyable Sunday with a lot of young people. From then on I spent many pleasant days at Fairfield.

The last train in to Sydney on a Sunday was about nine o'clock and at a smart trot it took about fifteen minutes from the Carter's house to the station. The train always used to whistle some distance down the line and this normally gave us just about time

to get to the station to catch it, if we left at once at full speed. I can remember some exciting gallops in the dark with a breathless scramble on board the moving train at the end of them. It all added to the fun.

But on one occasion when I was at Fairfield on my own I managed to miss the last train. 'Balranald' was at Ball's Point on the other side of the harbour in dry dock and due to un-dock at five in the morning. Two of the mates were away on leave so it was essential that I got back on board. My friends did not possess a car but I knew there was a hire car by the station. The thing was, would the owner take me in to Sydney at that time of night. I went to his house. It was in complete darkness.

Well, I had nothing to lose so I rang or knocked on the door. There was no reply. After several more attempts a window opened upstairs and a very irate voice demanded to know what I thought I was doing. I explained my plight. The only result was an equally irate demand that I sugar off with various suggestions as to where I should go. The window closed.

I now felt I was in a commanding position for I knew where the owner slept. Or would be trying to sleep. A handful of gravel brought him almost, but not quite, speechless with rage and, so he said, armed with a shotgun.

Once more I explained the absolute necessity for me to get to Sydney that night and endeavoured to awake his finer feelings by suggesting that he would not wish a promising career to end abruptly. This only produced a reply to the effect that it could not end too abruptly for the speaker's convenience. There were no shots and the window slammed shut. After a suitable interval I tried another handful of gravel.

The effect was magical. There was an explosive sound from inside the room followed by bumps and bangs and a train of ejaculations.

Then the sound of heavy footsteps thumping downstairs and the front door flew open with a crash. In desperation I stood my ground, wondering how much it hurt to be peppered by small shot. With a great sense of relief I realised the car hire man was not carrying a shotgun. He marched up to me aggressively but did not lay hands on me. He said:

"Well, pommie, since you won't let me sleep I may as well drive you in to Sydney" and with that he proceeded to get the car out.

Once on the way the atmosphere became a lot more friendly and we discussed Australia, the old country and a life at sea. In fact, so friendly did my driver become that I felt it would be caddish not to confess, so eventually I said:

"It is difficult for me to say this but I shan't be able to pay you until I get back to the ship". The ship, of course, was on the other side of Sydney harbour which meant he would just have to trust me to send the money.

There was a silence.

"I guessed it", he said at length. That was all he did say on the subject but we renewed our conversation.

At Sydney's circular quay I was able to get an all night ferry to the north shore and then a taxi to the ship. This driver merely had to wait while I went on board and got some money from my cabin. It was something of an anti-climax when the ship did not un-dock until after mid-day!

I sent the thirty shillings my Fairfield friend had asked for his fare and, almost by return of post, received a most charming well written letter thanking me for paying up promptly and inviting me to visit next time I was in Sydney. There was also a postscript, "And the next trip in to Sydney will be on me - whatever the time of night". This incident re-affirmed my faith in human nature and

showed what a lot of nice people disguise their true character under a rather rough exterior.

There were, and probably still are, some pretty tough characters about the Sydney water front. We had some in our engine-room crew on 'Balranald', so much so that the police had to be sent for on more than one occasion. The courts always seemed to be on the side of the malefactor as only minimal sentences were passed. The Chief Mate was discussing this problem with the Mate of another ship one day and it was suggested that better results were obtained if the signal was flown for the water police, rather than asking the shore side variety. Next time we had trouble this was done and the effect was astonishing. When the drunken, brawling engine-room hands saw the water police come over the side their truculence disappeared like magic. The burly policemen literally tumbled them down the gangway into the police boat and I rather fancy none of them ever got as far as the court. Two ended up in hospital and we had no more trouble after that.

The way from Brown's Wharf into the town went through a sunken road called the Argyll Cut, at the top of which there was a bridge. At night a favourite amusement for the local drunks was to stand on this bridge and drop empty bottles on people walking below. One soon learned to keep close to the walls of the Cut when passing under the bridge.

The Domain, a large park adjoining Circular Quay, was also reputed to be dangerous at night and Piermont bridge had a most unsavoury reputation.

'Balranald' loaded meat at Piermont and the speed and efficiency with which this was done was quite remarkable. Government inspectors kept a watchful eye on the whole process and would take the temperature of carcasses at intervals, rejecting

any which were above the permitted limit.

In the fruit season 'Balranald' went from Sydney to Hobart, Tasmania, to load apples. Again the speed at which the cases were hoisted in and stored in the refrigerated holds was quite astonishing. With fruit, of course, it is essential that the temperature of the hold is kept constant with^m a degree or two which places considerable responsibility on the refrigeration engineers. One mistake and a valuable cargo can be ruined.

In the fruit season we also called at Albany, Western Australia, for apples. This is a magnificent harbour and it seems strange that there is so little heard of it. It seems certain that sometime in the future this must be a highly developed and thriving part of Australia.

We also called at Freemantle homeward bound and for me the place was chiefly remarkable for the frequency of its dock strikes. On more than one occasion we had to let go our own lines on leaving and I believe more than one ship had to cut warps as the dockers would not allow anyone ashore to let them go.

Adelaide struck me as one of the most attractive of the Australian capitals but other than at Sydney we had little time to explore ashore and I personally had no friends in any of our other ports of call.

From Freemantle to Durban the course is practically ~~due~~ west and the ship sails along a parallel of latitude. A strong current sweeps down the African coast and approaching Durban it was vital to get good sights to determine one's latitude. As has been mentioned before, the coast line is practically featureless and if the Durban bluff was not sighted it would be difficult to decide whether to turn north or south to find the harbour. Today no such difficulty exists as radar and radio bearings would solve the problem no doubt.

I did three Australian voyages in 'Balnarald', each of four and a half months. Our Chief Mate introduced me to another family named Shelley, which consisted of mother and three daughters, one of whom was married. The other two, Elsie and Adele, were charming and full of fun so our days in Sydney passed very pleasantly. I was very taken with Adele, the younger girl, and we spent a lot of time together dancing, swimming and playing tennis.

The Shelleys had a country cottage at Newport, some twenty miles north of Sydney, and I was invited there one weekend. Mrs. Shelley met me on arrival and said "We are a bit crowded this week-end, Eric. I've had to put you in the garage with Elsie". This sounded like real Australian hospitality but somehow I got the impression that she had been shrewd enough not to put me in with Adele.

I was also given an introduction to a Dr. and Mrs. Chisholm by a friend of my mother's. They lived in what was probably the most exclusive part of Sydney and made me very welcome. I discovered that they were high in the Sydney social scale and I shone in reflected glory when I mentioned "my friends, the Chisholm's".

Another good friend was Jimmy Mullen, a very talented pianist, who was at one time Dame Melba's accompanist. He was also a Gilbert and Sullivan fan and we would play and sing for hours on occasion.

Life in 'Balnarald' went very smoothly. With a first class Captain and Chief Mate and indeed pleasant shipmates entirely, it would have been odd had it been otherwise. Carter left us and was relieved by a Mr. Hulton who had been with Lunn's Blue Anchor line but he was also easy to get on with and had, I remember, an extremely pretty young wife.

Only two untoward incidents occurred during my time in 'Balranald'. One was a collision coming stern first out of the dock at Piermont, when a Union-~~Steamship~~ of New Zealand vessel poked a large hole in our counter. This was roughly patched and we sailed on schedule. Unfortunately it put one of the main ladies' lavatories out of action, which may have caused some inconvenience.

The other incident occurred in mid-South Atlantic, when in the middle of the night a piece of wreckage or driftwood hit our port propellor, which immediately began to vibrate alarmingly. The revolutions had to be reduced to practically nothing and we came the rest of the way virtually on one engine. Even so, we maintained a speed of over nine knots, compared to our normal eleven and a half. When the ship went into dry dock in London it was found that one blade of the propellor was missing and two others were damaged.

At the end of my third voyage our dapper little second mate, Sammy Dickson, was transferred to a new ship, just launched, and asked if I would like to go, too. This ship, the 'Ranchi', was going cruising and as this sounded good fun and meant visiting new places, I accepted happily. Sammy knew the Captain of 'Ranchi', Cecil Brookes, and no doubt suggested he should apply for me. With some regret I said 'good-bye' to 'Balranald' - and, incidentally, to Adele!