

CHAPTER VIIICRUISING IN 'RANCHI'

I joined 'Ranchi' as supernumary 4th Officer in July 1925. She had just completed her acceptance trials and her first voyage was to Cowes for Cowes week. This was something quite new and Lord Inchcape, Chairman of the P & O Company, had conceived the idea of using the new ship as a sort of super yacht for Cowes week and inviting half the peerage, government and opposition to come as his guests. His own yacht 'Rover' was also at Cowes. I suppose it could be considered an advertising stunt.

It would be interesting to be able to detail all the famous and important people who were on board but, so long after the event, only a few names come to mind. The senior guests were Prince and Princess Arthur of Connaught and I remember them as particularly charming, friendly people. I danced with the Princess and thoroughly enjoyed it as she was an extremely accomplished partner.

Lord Birkenhead and his sparring partner, J.H. Thomas, were both guests and so was Philip Snowden. Of the nobility I also remember the Earl of Masserene and Ferrard and Lord Waring, although there were certainly many other well-known titles on the list of guests.

There were four supernumary 4th Mates on board, our job being to run the ship's boats which, of course, would be used extensively when cruising. Presumably it was considered that apprentices (the P & O always used the word rather than cadet) would not be reliable or experienced enough or, more likely, we would be more careful as we had jobs to lose. Three additional motor-driven life-boats had been placed on board and the one assigned to me was housed on chocks on No. I hatch and placed in the water by one of the hydraulic cranes used for cargo work.

This meant the boat was hoisted and lowered by a single hook and wire span as opposed to the normal falls at each end. Soon after I left the ship the span parted when the boat was being lowered and all the crew were flung into the water. Fortunately no one was seriously hurt.

'Ranchi' sailed for Cowes with most of her distinguished company on board and the food and drink provided was of the highest possible standard. More, it had been decided that as all passengers were guests and no accounts were being kept, the ship's officers should have all their drinks and smokes free, also. To the best of my belief no one took advantage of this, except one of the pilots who could not resist the attraction of unlimited champagne on the table and had to be relieved by a harder-headed colleague.

All our motor boats had been provided with Royal Yacht Squadron badges and when they were put in the water at Cowes flew white ensigns as tenders to 'Rover', Lord Inchcape's yacht. This brought an immediate reaction from the Squadron - some said from His Majesty, who was there in the royal yacht - and before the end of the day the R.Y.S. badges had been removed from our boats and we all reverted to red ensigns. Apparently the rules said that to wear the Squadron badge and fly a white ensign a tender must be capable of being hoisted by her parent yacht and 'Rover' was clearly incapable of dealing with our large craft.

'Ranchi' lay in Cowes roads and sported lower booms for the boats, like a man-of-war. We joined the boats over the booms in naval style and it was just like being a midshipman again. Everybody was in holiday mood and although the boats were kept busy from early morning until very late at night we all enjoyed the unusual life we were leading.

On the Sunday - there was no racing on the Sabbath in those days - 'Ranchi' steamed round the island for the amusement of the passengers.

One day I was assigned to Elsie McKay, Lord Inchcape's daughter, to go ship visiting. We went to many beautiful yachts but I could not leave the boat so I soon realised what it is like to be a chauffeur waiting for his boss. Going alongside a yacht was quite a performance. As the boat approached the spotless, shining gangway half the yacht's crew appeared, every man armed with a boathook, and pushed the boat away. The idea being, I assumed, to make sure no scratch or mark should sully their vessel; but it made going alongside very difficult.

Lord Birkenhead sailed his six-metre every day and on one occasion he was leading the fleet coming up to the finishing line off the castle. He bore up close under 'Ranchi's' stern and then found he had sailed into a trap. One of our motorboats lying at the lower boom had sheered right out into the tide and he was embayed between her and the ship. Lord Birkenhead let his yacht come up into the wind and backed his jib to take the way off her. Then in precise but scarcely legal language he proceeded to explain what he thought of Lord Inchcape, the P & O company and 'Ranchi' in particular.

On another occasion I was on gangway watch and Lord Birkenhead and J.N. Thomas were leaning on the rail nearby, discussing all sorts of things, merely, I believe, because they enjoyed talking. Had tape recorders been invented the wit and wisdom of that conversation might have been preserved for posterity. As it is, I regret that I cannot remember a word of it but it made it a very short gangway watch for me.

One of my passengers from the ship to the Squadron steps was Lord Jellicoe. When we got alongside he turned to me and said 'It is a rather high step' and from the bottom of the boat on to the side thwarts was indeed a long way. The Little Admiral obviously did not want to be assisted in front of the large crowd of onlookers so we quickly made a couple of steps by piling up petrol cans and with a smile of appreciation his Lordship went tang, clang, bang up the improvised stairway.

Either on this or some other occasion we were having engine trouble alongside the Squadron steps and my engineer was going through his usual routine of swinging the starting handle in time to a singsong "Sometimes she will and sometimes she won't", which seemed to help. Suddenly the engine went off with a roar and I gave the order 'full astern'. As I did so I noticed a look of horror on the jetty attendants' faces and then saw this reflected, but more so, on my engineer's face as he looked aft. I turned and froze also. Barely a boat's length away the Royal barge with their Majesties in the stern sheets was steaming smoothly by. Saluting smartly as we stopped engines and swept stern first into the stream I caught a glance from the barge's coxswain. I swear it was one of wonder and admiration. My engineer insisted that His Majesty's look was not so kind.

In general I do not think Ranchi's boats were very popular in spite of their distinguished passengers. It became rather a nightmare to see the forest of boathooks which greeted you every time you went alongside. And with its strong tides, Cowes harbour is not a very easy place to manoeuvre rather clumsy ships' life-boats alongside the various steps.

'Ranchi' gave a party one night and there was a strong naval contingent from the guard ship which was one of the 'R' class battle-ships, I believe. With every known drink available for the asking and as much as one wanted, together with delicious food, it was not surprising that the evening was a success.



One of the last boats to leave the ship at about 1.30 a.m. was a naval picket boat and there was some delay when it was found that a sub-lieutenant was missing. Eventually this young officer came rushing up to the gangway accompanied by a very pretty, somewhat dishevelled girl and apologised to the officer of the watch saying, "I'm terribly sorry, we were looking for a box of matches". This rather un-Nelson like excuse was received in the silence it deserved.

Having returned all our noble and distinguished guests to London, 'Ranchi' prepared for the first of her cruises. This was to the northern capitals and took us to Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm. These were all new places to me and as the ship lay alongside in Copenhagen and Oslo there was not much boatwork and the four boat officers were free to see something of the shore.

There are few places where a cruising liner can lay in such a pleasant, convenient spot as the Langelinie at Copenhagen. A short walk from the town with pleasant gardens at hand it is very different from any berth in this country that I can think of. Anyone arriving at Tilbury and journeying up to town from there must surely be deeply depressed by the dull, sordid surroundings. In Southampton you are in the docks and there are no concessions to beauty. Possibly Liverpool's Princes stage is as good as anywhere although few people would consider Merseyside particularly salubrious.

Oslo was pleasant and very clean but in those days there was a considerable language difficulty. There is no doubt that the 1939-45 war improved the English of many of our continental neighbours, although it probably did little to overcome our own insular dislike of foreign languages.

Stockholm I thought superb. The approach from the south through the thousands of islands of the Skärgård on a sunny summer day was entrancing. Some of the islands were only a few yards in diameter, others some miles across but all attractively green and

timbered, with charming little beaches. It was a paradise for water sports.

Stockholm itself I thought a splendid town and I remember going over the magnificent town-hall, which I described enthusiastically in some detail to my parents when I got home. The ship was anchored in the harbour, close to the royal palace, and running boats was a pleasant and interesting job. I got a rather severe reprimand for taking my boat up a small creek or canal, exploring, and was reported by the police as being in a dangerous position. I may say I got a bit worried when I found the stream getting faster and rocks appearing in the shallows but I managed to get the boat round and back to the harbour safely.

On this, or possibly a later cruise, we also went to Helsingfors as it was then and this particular capital struck me as consisting principally of lagoons and lots of water and not much else. The old buildings and the fishing quay were attractive and I daresay a good deal more which I was unable to get ashore and see.

'Ranchi' also went to Gdynia for Danzig. This involved proceeding up a very narrow river with very muddy banks and turning her at a bend in the river with few feet to spare. Captain Brookes strongly advised against P & O ships calling there again. No doubt conditions have been improved since. We also got into some trouble for flying the Polish flag instead of the flag of the free city of Danzig, as it was then. Each time we cruised in the Baltic one of our listed ports of call was Visby on the island of Gotland. In fact we never did get there as the anchorage is exposed and our time of arrival always coincided with an onshore gale.

The Norwegian fjords were ideal for cruising, provided the weather was good. Although on the one occasion we did get bad weather and visibility was down to a minimum so all the magnificent scenery was lost, we had the cheeriest and most enthusiastic crowd

of passengers of the lot. They really enjoyed themselves in spite of the adverse conditions. Life is so often a matter of contradictions.

On another occasion at Trondheim the weather suddenly worsened and we had a lot of passengers ashore. 'Ranchi' had to move from her anchorage near the harbour to another more sheltered berth a mile or two further away. Two of the motor launches were hoisted, but mine and one other ~~were~~ left inshore to bring off the passengers. I made one trip with a full load and then returned for the remainder, only to find considerably more than my proper complement waiting to come off, wet, cold and hungry. I had to make a quick decision and although I knew it was going to be a rough and by no means easy trip, I accepted the overload, told the passengers they must get right down in the bottom of the boat and prepare to get very wet and off we went. By this time it was blowing really hard and the spray flew in sheets over the whole boat. I fervently hoped the engines would continue to function, for in those days the internal combustion engine was not as reliable as it is today. In addition I expected a severe reprimand from the Chief Officer for exceeding the permitted load. Going alongside 'Ranchi' was as difficult a piece of boatwork as I have ever experienced but all my passengers got aboard safely and many thanked me warmly. The Chief Mate said "Well done, Middleton. The ship was under way as you came alongside. We should have had to leave the passengers behind if you had not got them off". Of course, had I failed to get them off or lost one I should have been signing on as A.B. in some tramp steamer as my next job. If I could get one!

Starting so late in the year, 'Ranchi' only got in a few cruises in what was left of the season and then reverted to her Indian mail run to Bombay in October. I was told I would be required for cruising again next year and given more or less a free hand as to how I filled in the winter months. I was due to do my three months training as a sub-lieutenant R.N.R. so I applied for

this and was posted to H.M.S. 'Vivid' at Devonport for a six weeks gunnery course. This was really hard work, the day commencing with divisions followed by drill on the parade ground. On Mondays we paraded with swords and were given a platoon apiece, which we led in the march past the Commodore of the barracks who occupied the saluting base. If your platoon was considered below standard when marching past you were sent round again - and again, as necessary. I once collected a platoon of Royal Fleet Reserve men doing their annual training and they took the whole thing as a big joke, or an insult, I am not sure which. Anyway the result was that we spent most of the forenoon marching round and round the parade ground doing 'eyes right' and me a snappy sword salute to a very bored gunner's mate who had taken the Commodore's place.

Under the eagle eye of a hardened gunner's mate we formed gun's crews for loader drill in the batteries. The projectiles and charges were all made of wood and were quite heavy enough to handle as the spare numbers had to double round and pick them up as they fell out of the muzzle and return them to the loaders. After every two or three 'salvoes' the order came "Gun's crew, change round" and every one changed places so that each gun position became familiar and everyone got their share of loading, ramming and doubling round to the muzzle for fresh supplies. In the batteries a number of guns crews would be exercising and with the clang of the firing gongs, the orders to the sightsetters and an occasional "Still. Missfire. Carry on", all given by the gunners mates and the thumps and bumps of the wooden 'ammunition' there was a fairly chaotic crescendo of noise giving a good simulation of guns in action.. Without, of course, the actual sound of guns going off, thank goodness.

Towards the end of the course we all went to sea in a destroyer and in turn took over the duties of spotting officer with the guns firing 1" aiming rifles. This was quite good fun and gave us a pretty good idea of the difficulties of accurate spotting and control of range and deflection.



The days work finished at 3.30 p.m. when tea was served in the wardroom and, if inclined and funds permitted, we were free to go ashore. After a hard day on the parade ground and at loader drill I frequently felt the need to rest my legs for a while and on one occasion lay down on my bed and went off into a deep sleep. I awoke to find it quite dark and a glance at my watch showed the time to be 1.30 a.m. I had missed dinner, had about nine hours sleep and did not know what on earth to do for the rest of the night. I put on civilian clothes and walked into the town in the hope of finding an all-night cafe where I could at least get a pie and a cup of coffee but found nothing. Eventually I returned to the barracks, turned in again and got about another five hours sleep.

Our favourite haunts were the Wine Lodge in Devonport, Nicholson's in Plymouth, known as the 'Sawdust Club', and Lockyer's Hotel, where we got a very good steak and chips for 2s.6d. For cultural entertainment we went to the Devonport Hippodrome, where the jokes left little to the imagination but everyone joined in the fun. There were usually a few exciting evictions of over-enthusiastic members of the audience, which also enlivened the proceedings.

So the six weeks at 'Vivid' passed fairly quickly and after some rather searching examinations I found myself with a 1st class certificate in gunnery and appointed to H.M.S. 'Truro' at Portland for a minesweeping course.

Once again I was extremely fortunate as 'Truro' was a very happy ship and her captain, Lieutenant-Commander E.F. Wharton, an extremely able and pleasant commanding officer.

'Truro' was a coal-burning ship from the '14-'18 war and the minesweeping flotilla consisted of eight ships fitted with 'Oropesa' sweeps.

We also swept in pairs with a sweep wire from one ship to the other. This produced a very large sweep area but led to some awkward situations if the sweep was allowed to become too taut,

as once this happened neither ship could steer and they would end up facing in opposite directions. This inelegant posture was known as 'doggo' for a reason that can no doubt be deduced!

There was a lot to be learned about minesweeping and this involved some new techniques in ship-handling which were to come in useful. I got to know Portland race pretty well during this time as we normally worked in West Bay and went through the race at least twice a day.

While I was in 'Truro' some Royal Indian Marine officers joined for a short spell of training and as a mere sub-lieutenant R.N.R. I had to give up my cabin and sling a hammock in the after cabin flat. I came off watch at midnight and turned in happily enough and remembered no more until I found myself on the wardroom settee with a lot of anxious faces round me. Apparently the rating who slung the hammock had chosen the steam pipe leading to the sweeping winch as a handy thing to make the lanyards fast to. When steam was turned on for sweeping in the early hours of the morning the temperature in my hammock, which was almost touching the big lagged steampipe, rose to some phenomenal height. Had it not been for one of the R.I.M. officers failing to get any reply to his "Going to hog it all day, sub.?", I might well have been pressure-cooked entirely.

H.M.S. 'Harebell', the Fishery Protection cruiser for the channel left Portland to carry out gunnery practice with her one 12 pounder but was seen to be returning flying a signal for medical assistance. <sup>:- Hark</sup> We soon learned that she had had an accident in which the breech of the gun was blown off, killing a rating and severely wounding the first lieutenant, whose name was Despard. As a result of this accident 'Truro' was detached to carry out Fishery Protection duties, which was something I had not come in contact with before.

We moved up channel to Dover and spent most of our time cruising the fishing grounds from the Sandettie bank to the Bassurelle shoal. Our duties mainly consisted in seeing fair play between the various nationalities and discouraging poaching inside the three mile limit.

On several occasions I went away in our whaler to visit trawlers and usually managed to return with some fine fresh fish and occasionally a bottle of wine or brandy, eagerly swapped for English cigarettes or tobacco.

We put into Boulogne on occasions and were able to improve the wardroom wine cellar in consequence. I remember one evening ashore drinking vermouth and soda, which struck me as a harmless concoction, only to find it had a latent effect which was quite astonishing. It also had remarkable headache-making properties and obviously needed to be treated with caution.

Immediately prior to my joining 'Truro' she had been attending the Royal yacht 'Britannia' at the various regattas and King George V had spent a good deal of time on board. 'Truro's' job was to tow 'Britannia' from place to place as necessary and provide some shelter for His Majesty when required. The King spent quite a lot of time in 'Truro', played bridge on board and his name appeared frequently in the card and wine books. Lieutenant-Commander Wharton was not her captain then but the officer who was, was said to have flouted protocol by asking the King for his autograph. Apparently the King said 'Certainly' and asked for a pot of paint and a brush. When it was brought to him he scrawled 'George R I' on the wardroom bulkshead and left in evident displeasure. The captain, however, was not dismayed and asked Admiralty permission to have the whole steel plate removed and replaced at his own expense. This was granted and so an almost priceless souvenir of the royal visit to the ship became his personal property. Somehow I do not think His Majesty would have approved.

In December 1925 I regretfully left 'Truro' on completion of my training, very pleased that Lieutenant-Commander Wharton had recorded my ability as 'Exceptional' and noted in my training book that I was 'Trained in minesweeping'. I reported back to the P & O and was placed on Dock Staff, which meant that I relieved officers who were going on leave and became a sort of general dogsbody. I did not enjoy it.

One weekend I was sent at short notice to relieve on board the 'Morea', just arrived from China. All her hydraulic cranes were frozen solid and gangs of engineers were working frantically to free them so that the ship could start discharging her cargo, a great deal of which consisted of bales of silk. The company's rules for working silk and bullion were naturally very strict. An officer had to be on duty at each hold and as I was the only officer on board it meant that I could only work one hold at a time. As each crane was freed from ice and made to work I placed a lascar seaman at the controls with instructions to keep the crane working, heaving the hook up and down and swinging the jib right and left continuously. As all this went on through the night, I did not get much sleep and next day, of course, started to discharge silk.

As if this were not enough, some time during the week-end the ship took a sudden list to starboard of about  $7\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  and looked as if she was going to lean against the dock cranes. The engineers said they had not moved any ballast and we had not worked enough cargo to cause a list, even if it had all come out of one side of the ship, which it had not. Under the company's regulations, as a junior officer, I was not allowed to order transfer of ballast and as the list was increasing I hastily went ashore and tried to get the Marine Superintendent on the telephone. He was not at home and after some difficulty I managed to get the assistant superintendent, who said he would come down immediately. When he arrived and saw the angle the ship was at he nearly exploded but had to admit it could hardly be my fault.



Ballast was transferred and when the ballast log was produced it was clear that someone had pumped out a tank on the port side giving the ship her list to starboard. No doubt there was an inquest later after I had left the ship as I was only there a few days. I have never been so glad to leave a ship in my life as I was when I departed from 'Morea' to take over as Third Mate in another ship for a coastal voyage. This was the "Benalla", one of the company's 'Australia via the Cape' ships and commanded for the voyage by Captain Short, who had a most opprobrious nick-name. It was in February 1926, <sup>and</sup> the weather was poor and very unpleasant on the continent. It was not an enjoyable trip, although the other mates were a cheerful and congenial lot.

After this trip followed another month of dock staff moving from ship to ship and not knowing from one day to the next where I was going to sleep. One week-end I joined the 'Dongola' in Tilbury docks to relieve the 3rd mate who was the only deck officer on board. Hardly had he left the ship before there was a great commotion in the course of which the serang explained to me that the 3rd engineer had been hit over the head with a large spanner by one of the Ag-wallahs (engine-room native ratings). So once more I started my week-end with a fist full of trouble. First we had to get the engineer up from below, which was no easy job. He looked pretty far gone to me, with two enormous black eyes and a trickle of blood from his nose. His assailant was also flaked out but whether from injury or fear of the consequences we could not tell. An ambulance and police guard got both of them away and by tea time things were fairly normal for a Saturday afternoon in the docks.

I walked across to the Tilbury hotel for a drink during the evening and soon after I arrived a police sergeant came in, looked round officiously and then graciously accepted a pint from the barmaid. I noticed with some surprise that he carefully positioned himself so that his shadow, and that of the pint glass, was silhouetted clearly on one of the window blinds.

Down went the pint and out he went, to be followed a few minutes later by another policeman who did exactly the same thing - to be followed by yet another policeman. I then realised that the shadow on the blind was the signal for the next man to take his turn. A very convenient arrangement.

There is a strange eerie atmosphere about docks at night and at the week-end, even when some ships are working cargo. The long lines of gaunt sheds, with the huge skeletons of the idle cranes, loom grimly over the deserted quays. If a ship is working at night the clusters of lights seem to emphasise the gloom of the surroundings as the slings of cargo rise and fall through the air, accurately guided by the unseen hand in the lofty control house of the crane.

The dock police seemed to have an uncanny instinct for recognising seamen and others who might legitimately move about the docks at night. On one occasion I took a friend down to the 'King George' dock to visit an old ship of mine and at the gate just said 'Rawalpindi' to the policeman, who waved us on without comment. On our return my friend said "I had no idea it was so easy to get into the docks - no pass required - just say the name of a ship". As we walked past another entrance to the docks I said "Try it" and after one look to see if I were joking, he marched boldly up to the gate.

"Rawalpindi", he said briskly.

"Out", said the policeman and his meaning was abundantly clear as he pointed to the way my friend had come.

"See what I mean", I said and I think my friend dined out on this story for a long while.

After some time moving from ship to ship relieving officers who had gone sick or on leave, I joined 'Karmala', one of the company's Calcutta ships, for the continental trip. The 4th Mate of this ship was L.H. Howard, who was a term senior to me at Pangbourne. He had also been an apprentice in 'Balranald' and

on one occasion stepped in as Russian interpreter when we had difficulty with some of the emigrants. I believe he had spent some years in Russia, where his parents lived before the revolution. He was a very quiet, unassuming chap but eventually reached command in the company. I liked him very much and we got on well all the time we were shipmates. 'Karmala's' captain was one Cornwall-Jones, whose little idiosyncracies have already been mentioned. This voyage came at a rather inconvenient time for me as I was about to become engaged and my fiancée's 21st birthday party was to be the occasion of the announcement. As far as I could see the ship would be in Middlesbrough and all I could say was that I would try and get leave to come to London just for the evening of the party. During the trip I sounded the Chief Mate, who said he would ask the old man and, rather to my surprise, permission was at once granted. After the usual Hamburg, Rotterdam, Antwerp calls we eventually arrived at Middlesbrough and I shot off on the appointed day by train to London. Incidentally, I sold my motor-cycle in order to pay for an engagement ring.

The party went off splendidly, my engagement to Vera Ferris was announced and I dashed off to catch the night train to Grimsby, as during my absence the ship was moving to Immingham. It was a most uncomfortable journey as I was turfed out onto a deserted platform at Peterborough in the early hours of the morning. A friendly porter informed me that I must wait for the milk train at 5.0 a.m., which was in about four hours time. When I said the platform looked a bit bleak for a night's rest he very kindly led me to a sleeping car in a siding, saw me safely installed in a bunk and said he would call me with a cup of tea at ten to five, which he did. There really are a surprising number of kindly individuals about if you approach them in the right way. Even in Australia!

When I eventually arrived at Immingham I found the ship had not arrived and was not expected until next day so I promptly returned to Grimsby where my Aunt Florence and her husband, Dr. Byron Turner, lived. Aunt Flo was one of the most delightful of hostesses and to stay in her house was a most rewarding experience. In the whole of my life I can remember no other house in which I felt so much at home, so comfortable or so welcome, other than my own home. I remember little of Dr. Turner, except one story he told against himself. He said that on one occasion, when visiting a very ill patient, outside whose home straw had been laid in the street to reduce the traffic noise, as was quite common in those days, there were several urchins grouped round the gate. As he entered he heard one of the boys say,

"There'll be a deader here today, lads - the doctor's got his drums with him".

'The drums' referred to the metal drums in which dressings were sterilised and carried to the patient. Dr. Turner went on to say,

"It wasn't very flattering and I regret to say he was right".

When 'Karmala' arrived at Immingham I went on board to be greeted by the Chief Mate, who said, "We've been trying to get hold of you. You need not have come back as they want you in London right away to rejoin 'Ranchi' for cruising. So I turned round and went back to London again and signed on 'Ranchi' the next day. She sailed almost immediately on her first cruise of the year which took her to the Dalmatian coast and Venice. This again was new ground for me and the cruise one of the most interesting of them all. The Dalmatian coast has some of the most attractive scenery imaginable and Rugusa (now Dubrovnik) and Spalato (now Split) quite unlike any other ports I had visited. Running the motor boats from ship to shore was a very pleasant occupation and of course there were plenty of pretty girls to astonish with our skill in handling them.



'Ranchi' also visited the little port of Tran (whose new name I have never heard), which was one of the crusade towns and near Diocletian's palace. Just where Tran is I am no longer able to say precisely as it does not appear on any map I have examined. But it certainly exists and is well worth a visit, if you can find it!

'Ranchi' also called at Trieste and here I had a very expensive night ashore. The ship's 3rd Officer (incidentally I had now been promoted and was supernumary 3rd Officer of 'Ranchi'), C.S. Cooke, another old Pangbournian, was friendly with one of our passengers, a Mrs Hoyle, and her two daughters, Margaret and Nancy. Mrs Hoyle asked Cooke if we would take the girls ashore as she did not wish to go, and she provided a handsome sum of money to pay for the entertainment. Of course we said 'yes' and it so happened that Cooke was keen on Margaret, who was a blonde. Nancy had raven hair and was, I thought, the more attractive of the two, so the arrangement was ideal.

In great style we arrived at the Savoy-Palace-Excelsior hotel for dinner but had to wait for a table. During this time we sat in the vestibule and drank cocktails. Presently the Head Waiter came to tell us our table was ready and we all trooped in to the restaurant. Almost immediately Nancy said "Oh, we have left our wraps in the vestibule" and I shot out to collect them. There was the table at which we had been sitting and there were the empty chairs but no wraps. I returned and told the girls, who expressed horror and came running out to see for themselves; but there were no wraps. We got hold of the manager who harangued the staff, without any success and eventually we gave it up and went in to dinner. We had a very pleasant evening but the incident naturally cast a bit of gloom over the otherwise delightful occasion. The shock came when we got back and reported to Mrs Hoyle, who was obviously very put out indeed. A little later when the girls

were not there she told us what the wraps - they were, I remember fur capes or big stoles - cost. It was several hundred pounds. Cooke and I felt very guilty and agreed we were never likely to have such an expensive night out again.

We also called at Venice and on arrival lay at anchor for some time off the mouth of the lagoon. Nobody, no doubt with the exception of Captain Brookes, seemed to know why. Now Captain Brookes, besides being a most efficient commander, was also a bit of a dandy and always wore beautifully clean chamois leather gloves when on deck. A wit among the passengers got hold of the vestibule notice board and very neatly arranged the little metal letters to read:-

S.S. 'Ranchi'

'The delay is regretted and the ship will proceed as soon as the Captain finds his other glove'.

Cecil Brookes was not amused.

Many passengers returned for cruise after cruise and of these I particularly remember Lady Milne, wife of Field Marshal Sir George Milne, and her daughter, Joan. Also Sir Richard Gregory and the Astronomer Royal, Sir Frank Dyson. There were many others. All these 'regulars' were very kind and friendly and in Venice put on a splendid party for the ship's officers. This was a great success and so the ship's officers reciprocated by putting on a party for the passengers at the same hotel, which was equally successful. So much so that someone, or possibly more, ended up in the canal as a result of trying to be a part time gondolier. We drank a great deal of champagne and I seem to remember the party cost us something like £20 a head - a great deal of money in those days and well over a month's pay for me. Well worth it, though.

Another Mediterranean cruise brought us to Istamboul and I remember vividly the sight of the spires and domes and minarets of the city rising golden in the early morning sunshine as we approached across the sea of Marmora. It had an uncanny Arabian Nights effect for mist lay thickly on the water and swirled eerily upwards.

Again I was able to go ashore on one of the ships' 'Cook's tours' and visit the bazaars and the splendid mosques of San Sophia and Sultan Achmet. Here the wide area under the domes was completely covered with what must have been hundreds of priceless carpets. I still have photos taken inside the mosques - a practice which is strictly forbidden and might well have got the photographer into very serious trouble.

'Ranchi' anchored off Khelia bay in the Dardanelles and we visited the battlefields, which at that time still had a comparatively fresh look about them with trenches and strong points still intact. Away across on the southern shore the batteries at Chanak were visible. It was not difficult to imagine the fierce and bloody fighting which had taken place those few years previously.

Another interesting call, particularly for the boat officers, was Crete, where we anchored off Candia (now Heraklion). It was blowing quite hard from the north and there was quite a nasty sea running, although it was brilliantly sunny without a cloud in the sky. As my boat plunged up and down alongside the accommodation ladder passengers streamed down, eager to get ashore and seemed in no way perturbed by the conditions. One old lady hesitated on the lower platform as the boat rose and fell and sheered about, in spite of the efforts of my very able lascar crew. "I really don't think I can jump quickly enough", she said sadly. My engineer, who was the ship's winchman and a real character, said "If you don't mind being manhandled lady, we can get you aboard easy". Having received what

appeared to be a rather joyful assent he said to the quarter-master on the gangway,

"Pick her up and throw her to me".

This was done in a flash and very neatly indeed, much to everybody's amusement. There was even more hilarity when a very smart girl following said,

"May I go that way, too, please?",  
and I got my full complement in record time!

The run in from the ship was very rough indeed and there was a steep breaking sea in the shallows. To make matters worse, 'Ranchi' began to drag and had to shift berth a good deal further off shore under the lee of an island. Most of the day we were covered in spray as we ploughed almost incessantly from ship to shore and back again. The strong wind and the sun dried the salt on our faces and when at last my boat was hoisted, my face was so sore I went down to the sick bay to consult Dr. Roberts, the ship's very popular surgeon. He took one look at me and said,

"You've got very bad burns there, Middleton, I shall have to put you in a mask",  
and in a very short time I looked like something out of a horror film. It was a long time before all the scabs came off and I could shave again. It was a lesson I was not likely to forget.

Throughout the cruising we all had to work very hard. There was no such thing as overtime at sea in those days, at least, certainly not for officers. Boats would often be in the water by 7.0 a.m. or before and we might well make our last trip very late at night. In bad weather it was often impossible to leave the boats, even at the lower booms and we would have a picnic meal sent down in a carton. There was always a bottle of beer for the European members of the crew. The lascars could not be given picnic meals so we always had to put them on board for food. All I ever had dealings with were good seamen, smart and obedient and usually very friendly.



I would always be happy to sail with a lascar crew. However, this does not mean I would wish to see them displace British seamen or come and settle in this country in large numbers. I believe with people as with things "There is a place for everything and everything in its place". To me it is extraordinary that so many otherwise sensible people take it as axiomatic that our way of life is the best and we should do all we can to see everybody else lives the same way. From what I have seen of life this is far from the truth and many people living simple, unsophisticated, even primitive lives are far happier than they would be with a car, television, washing-machine and one-armed bandit ridden existences. In fact it may one day come as a great discovery that the only hope for mankind is to cease worshipping wealth and begin to enjoy nature as it was intended.

'Ranchi's' officers got on very well together but unfortunately Sammy Dickson took a sudden dislike to me after an incident at Cowes and we were on very distant terms, if we ever spoke at all. Of the boat officers the other three were R.S. Kerridge, <sup>many years later</sup> who was killed defusing a parachute mine in the blitz; E.R. Chaffin, who married a daughter of Roger Sing of the Union Cold Storage Company, and Eric Morley. We got on well together and as far as I can remember never had any real rows. There was only one tragedy during our two years cruising. This occurred in Rotterdam during a Northern Capitals cruise.

'Ranchi' had just left her berth and had been swung into the river Maas by two tugs forward and two aft. The ship had just steadied up in the river and was increasing speed when one of the two tugs aft obviously had some trouble and quickly became 'girt'. That is, she got beam-on to the tow rope. This is not unusual and the tug skipper quickly gave the order to slip to the man standing by the towing hook. Unfortunately the man lost his head

and instead of knocking the slip off, was obviously knocking it on. I was aft with Sammy Dickson and on his orders rang the bridge and asked them to come full astern as otherwise the tug would be towed under or capsize. The reply came shortly from the bridge that we were passing another big ship in the narrow river and a highly dangerous collision would occur unless we kept steerage way.

The towing wire, a  $3\frac{1}{2}$ " steel hawser, was turned up on the bitts with eight turns and a chain stopper, so there was no hope of letting go quickly. Almost at once the full weight of the tug came on the wire and ~~it~~ <sup>the little vessel</sup> heeled rapidly as the weight of water piled up on her deck. A man came running up from below and dived over the side. The skipper tried frantically and unsuccessfully to get out of the wheelhouse. Within a minute the tug had disappeared under the murky waters of the Maas.

On board the wire was rendering round the bitts in spite of the stopper and eight turns. The lascars paid the wire off the reel until reel and all came flying on to the small working deck aft and the end of the wire parted from the stops and flew overboard in a shower of sparks. The bitts were cut nearly through. We rang 'All clear aft' on the telegraph. All the crew of the tug except one were drowned.

There was very little time between cruises and the most we ever got was one night at home. If the ship was delayed we might have a turn-round of a few hours so in fact we were hard at it from May to October. Our total annual leave was three weeks, in addition to which we were entitled to five days local leave, which included a week-end, when we were in a terminal port and could be spared. Things are very different in the merchant service today. Yet oddly enough you hear far more complaints about conditions. There must be a moral in this somewhere.

At the end of the cruising season, Cooke, Ranchi's 3rd Mate, went on leave and I was appointed in his place for the normal Bombay mail run to which the ship reverted. Without my three boat-running companions and with Sammy Dickson maintaining a very distant attitude, life was a bit dull, if not depressing. I had a word with Lyndon, the Chief Mate, who was a very pleasant, friendly man and said I felt that as Dickson and I were obviously not hitting it off it might be better if I had a change and did he think it would be a good thing if I applied for leave to do my twelve months naval training. He said he would speak to Captain Brookes and as a result I duly applied for leave and wrote to the Admiralty offering myself for twelve months training.

The Company granted me leave and the Admiralty accepted my application for 12 months naval training. My relief arrived on board 'Ranchi' and I prepared to leave the ship. Then occurred one of the most touching incidents of my life.

The Serang came to me and said he had heard I was leaving the ship. Would I permit the lascar crew to accompany me to the railway station. Very surprised I naturally said 'yes' and told the Serang what train I proposed to catch. Some twenty minutes before this time the Serang arrived outside my cabin and said the crew would like to carry my gear. Every lascar from the Tindals\* to the Chokras\* took some article or other and led by the Serang who walked majestically at ~~the~~ my side, we all proceeded along the quay and across the railway lines to the station. I suppose the lascar crew consisted of some forty or fifty men and it made a most impressive procession. No doubt it had happened before and since but I have never heard it recorded. To me it was a great honour. I have no idea why it was accorded to me.

As my train steamed out of Tilbury Station with the whole of

Ranchi's Lascar crew giving me a 'Bote salaam', I felt I was leaving some splendid shipmates and real friends.

- \* Tindal = Equivalent of bosun's mate.
- \* Chokra = Boy