

CHAPTER XI"RAWALPINDI"

After three weeks at the navigation school, I decided I was ready to take the examination and proceeded to Dock Street to put my papers in. Captain Saul was at the desk and after examining my record of sea time he looked at me in astonishment.

"Do you really think I am going to count your time in an aircraft carrier as sea time for ~~mate~~?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir. The regulations say that time served in naval vessels counts as full sea time for Board of Trade certificates".

"They may do, but I am going to examine you to test your ability as a seaman, not an airman".

I explained that although I had done some flying, my normal duties were watch keeping and navigating ones and I had been given my capital ship watchkeeping certificate in consequence. The old man was not convinced and went off to discuss the matter and I had visions of having to put in a lot more sea time before I could sit. But eventually he returned and with rather bad grace gave me my chit to sit on the following Monday. It occurred to me that he had a very easy way round the problem and I hoped I would not get him for seamanship, as if he failed me it was back to sea for six months without the option. And take me for seamanship he did! I am pleased to say he showed no ill-will and duly gave me a pass, although he did say he thought I was weak on single-screw ship handling. As I had run drifter "Cloud" - a difficult single-screw assignment if ever there were one - successfully, for some months in all sorts of weather, I felt he must have been hard put to find something to grumble at. Anyway, I was too pleased with my pass to care and certainly too diplomatic to say anything about it.

I got my 1st Mate's ticket on the 24th April, 1928, and joined the P & O S.S. 'Rawalpindi' on the 14th May as Third Mate. In those days the rules for sea time were far more stringent than today and in three years I did not get a single day in towards the 18 months required for Mate. Yet all my naval training counted in spite of the fact that three months were spent on shore.

Having been away from the company for a year, the Chief Officer of 'Rawalpindi', whose name was Beck, suggested that I should study carefully all the Dock orders and standing orders. These were in a large file and there must have been over a hundred quarto sheets in all. Most of it was straightforward and routine but suddenly I came on one which affected me considerably as mail officer. It said, in effect, that in future the East African mails would not be stowed and landed with the mails for Aden as previously but would be stowed with the Bombay mails and landed there. This may seem a very odd thing to the uninitiated but the explanation was given and it made sense.

There was at that time no regular sea mail service to East Africa and what happened was that the outward bound P & O mail ship landed the mails at Aden from whence they were taken on to Mombasa by the first available ship. This was all right when there was a ship sailing from Aden within a day or two but sometimes it would be as much as a week. The dock circular I was reading went on to say that it had been decided to delay the sailing of the Bombay-Mombasa B.I. ship one day so as to connect with the outward bound P & O ship and the East African mails would be transferred to her. This would ensure a regular mail service which, although possibly a day or two slower than was sometimes possible via Aden, would be better over a period. It seemed to make sense.

I returned the orders to the Chief Mate and showed him the circular. He glanced at it casually and said no doubt the East African mail would be specially labelled and there would be nothing to worry about. He little knew!

When we got to Marseilles I asked Morris, the mail foreman, if he knew about the change. He said 'no, but I'll ask the postmaster'. Bianchetti, the postmaster, a rather fiery Corsican, sent off a shower of sparks but was otherwise unhelpful. I reported again to the Chief Mate, who said 'wait for the mail to arrive'.

When it did, all the East African mail had the usual Aden pink labels. They are bound to know at Aden said everybody and I stowed the mail so that it could be discharged either at Aden or Bombay and, except for turning it all over with the rest of the mails between Marseilles and Port Said, forgot all about it. This turning over mails to ensure no bags had been mis-stowed was a long, hot, dusty job and no mail officers enjoyed it. There was some compensation in that a bottle of rum was issued to the mail officer according to some ancient regulation.

At Aden my first action was to ask the mail authorities whether they had special orders for the East Africa bags. They said 'no', so I went straight to the Chief Officer and asked for instructions. He saw the captain who put the question to the company agent, Captain Messenger. He sent a cable to London: But by the time we were due to sail no reply had been received so it was decided to abide by the dock orders and take the mail on to Bombay. An hour or two after we had sailed the reply came 'Mail is to be landed at Aden'. It was too late and we took it to Bombay.

This was not a very encouraging start to a voyage and from the rumblings which began to emanate from Head Office it was clear that someone was to be cast in the role of scapegoat. What made the situation further inflamed was the fact that the Prince of Wales was touring East Africa and all his mail, official and private, was in those bags with Aden pink labels down below. Resignedly, I accepted the fact that there was very little doubt *about* who was in line for the role of 'First Scapegoat'. It was me.

Whenever we were in port with another P & O ship I was the recipient of sympathetic and sometimes even envious remarks. "What sort of shore job are you going to look for?" was a fairly common query and when, later, questions were asked in Parliament about the miscarriage of mails it was even suggested that I might end up with a long term of imprisonment.

However, the voyage proceeded and after Bombay we called at Colombo, Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong. I was able to get ashore in Hong Kong and had a car trip over Green Mountain and a bathe in a delightful bay on the other side. At this time the pirates on the China coast were very active and all the coasting steamers had their bridges protected with spikes and barbed wire. Even so, at intervals one would be taken over, the pirates having boarded as seemingly innocent passengers. The ships would be taken in to one of the pirates' lairs and eventually ransomed. I always thought it would be ridiculously easy for them to have taken over a P & O ship as, as far as I know, no precautions were taken against attack at sea.

From Hong Kong we proceeded north to Shanghai and I was very impressed with the skill of the Shanghai pilots as they moved the ship through a mass of junks at the narrow entrance at Woosung and berthed off Shanghai in the fast running river.

Some passenger friends asked me to dine ashore and I had a very cheerful evening at their home and at the Shanghai Club. The real reason for the invitation, I surmised, was that the daughter of the house had cast a speculative eye upon me, as father asked if I would be interested in taking up a job in Shanghai. I pointed out that I was engaged to a girl in England and he suggested that I think it over and let him know my answer when we called at Shanghai homeward bound.

Our next port was Tsing- Tao. Here I went ashore with Micheltore, the Second Mate, and we were followed all the way from the quay to the town by rickshaw boys who got steadily more incensed when we showed no signs of becoming customers.

From Tsing-Tao the ship went on to Wei-hai-wei, where we lay some distance from the shore and saw nothing of the country. From there we sailed to Japan.

'Rawalpindi' passed through the straits of Shimonoseki and obtained pratique off Moji before proceeding through the inland sea to Kobe. While on watch in the inland sea the Japanese pilot told me a number of interesting stories. One was that a Japanese destroyer had gone ashore in a typhoon on the east coast of Japan recently but the rocks on which she ran were such that on the shore side it was possible to step ashore almost dry shod. Having lost his ship, the Japanese captain stepped straight off the bridge into the boiling surf on the seaward side and was instantly lost. As one man, the whole of the crew followed him.

A lighter tale was about an island we passed on which, he said, there was a Buddhist 'nunnery'. The entirely female inhabitants were reputed to have lived there for 300 years without contact with the outside world. When I suggested that this was physically impossible, he said with what must be the nearest thing a Japanese can get to a twinkle in his eye:-

"Well, it is said, they were friendly with the local fishermen".

At one point in the inland sea there is a very narrow passage between an island and the mainland and as we approached this we met another vessel coming the other way. We passed one another very closely indeed and when we were clear I said to the pilot that it needed good nerves to pass in such narrow waters. He agreed and said almost casually:-

"There was a bad collision there once. Both pilots committed hari-kiri on the bridge of the ships they were in".

I went shopping in the Motomachi in Kobe and bought a number of attractive things to take home, including a delightful tea set in eggshell china. This was packed beautifully in a wooden box and I was warned not to unpack or attempt to re-pack it but leave it as it was until I got it home. Alas, I had to show it to somebody and when I did get it home at least half the set was broken. I was very upset. The remaining pieces I still have and they are quite delightful.

As much as anything else in the Motomachi, which is the main shopping centre of Kobe, I liked the bills in Japanese characters, made out with a brush and Indian ink. Each one was a miniature work of art.

Either at Kobe or Yokohama, I cannot remember which, I went ashore one night with our assistant Purser or 'Dip' as this rank was known in the P & O. We had a fairly riotous evening as the Dip was nothing if not lively and eventually ended up rather a long way from anywhere sometime after midnight. Down the road came a Japanese with an odd sort of barrow hung with lanterns and on seeing us he invited us to join him. The top of the barrow was in fact a shallow tank in which swam hundreds of goldfish. The owner indicated by signs that if we gave him a small sum he would give us what appeared to be a rice paper fan like a ping-pong bat and a small glass bowl. The idea was to scoop a goldfish into the bowl. It looked easy when he did it. The catch was that after a very brief period in the water the paper of the 'fan' melted. If you still wanted a fish you paid for another one.

After half a dozen fruitless attempts the Dip got angry and scooped away with such vigour that although he did get one fish in the bowl he also scooped quite a number of fish and several gallons of water on to the road. The little Jap was very angry and started calling out the Japanese equivalent for 'Fire', 'Police', 'Murder' at the top of his voice. People began to appear in all directions and not for the first time in my sea-faring career I took to my legs followed by an angry shouting mob. Followed, if not preceded, of course, by the Dip. All the roads were dark and we had no idea at all where we were going but at last some bright lights appeared and there was what was obviously a high-class Yoshiwara*.

The chase was gaining so without hesitation we belted in, past the brilliantly lit windows in which a number of the available girls were sitting quietly, and much to my surprise, were not promptly thrown out again, although the means was readily available.

* Brothel

The lady of the house greeted us civilly, sat us down and provided a drink indicating that all the facilities of the house were at our disposal. The angry mob appeared to have great respect for the premises for they made no attempt to follow and comparatively soon dispersed into the night. Having allowed reasonable time for tempers to cool, we asked for a rickshaw, which was promptly provided and off we went to bows and smiles, the Dip still clutching his one goldfish in its bowl. Alas, arriving at the dockside, as the rickshaw man lowered the shafts, the Dip shot forward and dropped the bowl on the railway lines, where it smashed to pieces. It was quite an evening.

In Yokohama, our terminal port, the last of our passengers left and some of them invited us to their homes. One family lived at Kamakura, an old capital of Japan and a most interesting place. There was a large Buddhist monastery with lovely gardens and a Dai-Butsu or Great Buddha. This effigy was gigantic and I remember we went up inside and walked about in the head. There was a lake with enormous goldfish, which you could feed with the bread available, hung from thread on a board, for a small coin. From the great swirl of water and the gaping mouths as the fish took the bread I would judge them to have been at least four feet long. An attendant indicated that they were 'man-eaters'.

One Sunday while we were in Yokohama, members of our crew took a life-boat away sailing for the day. I was on duty so could not go and at about 11 a.m. a weather report giving a typhoon warning was brought on board. I went at once to the Chief Mate and said I thought our boat's crew would be in some danger; could I ask the harbour authorities to send a launch to tow them back? He agreed so I went at once to the harbour office and asked to see the Port Captain. After some delay I was told that he was taking coffee but would see me. I was taken to his office, which was unoccupied

and then through a little door into an ante-room. This proved to be almost completely bare with matting walls and in traditional Japanese style - in complete contrast to the Port Captain's ultra-modern office. On the floor sat several Japanese officials in native dress, drinking coffee. The scene might have been taken from a Japanese print of a hundred years earlier, except for the coffee. One of the men said:-

"I am the Port Captain. I hear that you need assistance".

I explained the position to him and said we were very worried about the safety of our people in the boat in view of the typhoon warning. He shrugged his shoulders and said:-

"If they are to be drowned in a typhoon it will happen. It is not for us to interfere".

I said this was hardly the way we looked at it and I could not return to my captain with such a message. If the harbour authorities would do nothing we should undoubtedly have to ask our agents to obtain a suitable vessel and send it to their assistance. But this would take time and it might well be too late. After some further discussion the Port Captain gave in gracefully and issued some instructions.

"You may tell your captain he has a good representative", he said in a friendly way. "We will do all we can". It was an interesting experience and in the event the boat was towed back but the typhoon failed to materialise. Perhaps the Port Captain was a good forecaster.

The Japanese outlook on life was quite different from that of western nations and based on a rigid code of behaviour which few could or would ignore. I heard many stories of the Japanese attitude, some amusing some grim. I formed the opinion that they would be tough opponents in war, if only because of their rigid discipline and complete fatalism.

One story concerned a Japanese toy manufacturer who was approached by a big London store for samples of a particular novelty. To the stores surprise they received a carton containing a gross of the toys which were offered at a very low figure. They bought a large quantity but when they went on sale they found that there were as many as three broken or faulty toys in every dozen. They wrote and complained to the manufacturer, who replied that they obviously had not examined the samples very well as if they had they would have found the proportion of duds exactly the same.

At the house of our friends at Kamakura everything was done Japanese fashion. We sat cross-legged on the matting floor for meals and drank out of delicate china cups without handles. A rather elderly Japanese 'nannie', obviously an old retainer, sat with us at meals and carried on what we were told was a rather frank commentary on the family habits and affairs. One day our hostess was complaining that she hardly slept a wink the night before because of a persistent mosquito. The Japanese 'nannie' snapped out a few words with a wicked look on her face and the rest of the guests went off into peals of laughter. Our hostess blushed - I think - and certainly looked furious. Her father, who sat next to me, translated:-

"The old demon said she knows which mosquito it was. It was the one that makes all the babies!"

All the signs of the great earthquake of 1924 had disappeared but people who were in Yokohama at the time gave vivid descriptions of the havoc. The lighthouse on one of the breakwaters sank almost out of sight and a great wave or series of waves swept the harbour and waterfront. Great chasms opened in the streets and for some time the trams operated between chasms, the passengers getting out and crossing the gap by temporary footbridges. The fire which followed the 'quakes did an enormous amount of damage and the final death roll ran into thousands.

Leaving Japan homeward bound we went straight to Shanghai but were only there for a few hours. I told my friend that I did not think China was for me and thanked him for his offer of a job. In fact, I think the girl had already forgotten all about me.

At Hong Kong we went alongside the wharf at Kowloon and as we approached the berth I could see an altercation going on between two Sikh policemen and a large gang of coolies. It looked as if the coolies, who all carried stout bamboo poles on which they slung baggage and merchandise across their shoulders, wanted to get to the ship's berth and the Sikhs did not want them to. Suddenly the coolies started to push their way on to the quay and the Sikhs promptly retaliated by going for them bald-headed with their canes. In a moment a first-class battle erupted, the two proud Sikhs endeavouring to beat back the fifty or more coolies who were now laying about them with their six foot long stout bamboo poles. Gradually the policemen were forced back along the wharf, blood streaming from their heads until a rush brought one down and he disappeared under the flailing poles and the trampling feet. There was nothing whatever that we on board could do as the ship was not yet alongside. The remaining Sikh showed no sign of crying quarter and stubbornly battled on as he was forced inch by inch along the quay until he disappeared without a sound over the end into the water. He did not appear to come to the surface again and on the quay his comrade in arms lay dead. Whether the coolies were charged with the deaths I do not know as we sailed the same day.

Again we had a short stay at Singapore and in the straits of Malacca experienced the most violent thunderstorm I have ever met. Lightning ran along the water, up and down the masts and across the bridge in the most vivid flashes which made the dark night even blacker. The rain hissed down and at times the visibility was practically nil.

In any case the brilliant flashes completely ruined one's night vision. It was as if one was in the middle of a thunder cloud itself and I suppose it is possible that that is just what happened.

The 4th Mate in "Rawalpindi" for the China voyage was G.D. Copeland, an old Pangbournian. I cannot remember whether we had ever met before but we got on very well together and he put up with a good deal of practical joking that went on amongst the younger officers. While in Japan I remember we lit a great mass of 'smudge sticks' - a slow burning anti-mosquito device - in his cabin when he was asleep and very nearly suffocated him. Playing pranks was one of the ways of enlivening a sometimes humdrum existence and in one ship we introduced a great mass of mashed shallots into the air-conditioning system so that the 2nd Mate got the full benefit from the blower over his bunk. Another time we carefully took a nautical almanac to pieces and sewed in a page from the year before, which gave the 2nd Mate a good deal of difficulty with his sights.

R.G. Wood, who had been a midshipman in H.M.S. 'King George V' with me, relieved Copeland later on. He lived in Acton as did my parents and we came in contact quite a lot over the years. One day when we were on the bridge together going down the Red Sea we were watching flocks of migrating birds. Many of these appeared to be exhausted and after circling the ship a few times they would alight and rest. Few if any ever seemed to take off again and many pathetic little bodies dropped quietly into the sea or fell to the deck. Bob Wood recalled a previous voyage and his story of a similar occasion was, I am sure, absolutely true. He said that he and the Chief Officer were pacing up and down the bridge in complete silence, as was usual as the Chief Officer was an extremely taciturn individual. Migrating birds

were everywhere, some circling the bridge getting closer and closer. Mainly because he was bored with the silence, Bob said,

"If I held out my hand I believe I could catch one of those birds".

They continued pacing to and fro and for some time the Chief said nothing, then, "Try", he said.

Bob, who was nearest to the fore side of the bridge, promptly put out his arm and there, as if by magic, was a warm, fluttering bird in his hand. Incidentally he held it in front of the dour Chief Mate who again said nothing but continued pacing as Bob released the bird. Eventually he spoke. "Not a very big one", he said.

Off the southern end of Ceylon in the morning watch just after daylight we sighted a fleet of small catamarans fishing. As "Rawalpindi" approached at 16 knots she must have looked menacing to the men in these frail craft but they merely altered course a fraction to leave a narrow lane down the middle of the fleet, through which we passed. Our wash set the whole lot bobbing up and down violently with the crews unconcernedly going about their business. Frail as they were, these craft were well out of sight of land.

As we got nearer home the African mail question began to loom larger and I suppose I really did feel it might be the end of my career in the P & O. At Marseilles, where we met the outward bound ship, all sorts of lurid stories were current and it was clear that none of the officers on board her thought much of my chances.

? Sweeney? /
So at last we arrived in London and no sooner was the gangway down than Captain Swiney, the Marine Superintendent, came storming on board.

I was at the head of the gangway and saluted hopefully but he swept by with the barest acknowledgement. Rumour had it that Captain Redhead had locked himself in his bathroom and Captain Swiney threatened to knock the door down but this seems unlikely! Some twenty minutes later Captain Swiney swept ashore and, rather as I expected, my summons came in the form of the dock messenger who sympathetically explained that the Marine Superintendent wished to see me in his office.

I knocked at the door, received a gruff 'come in' and found the great man sitting at his desk with his back to me. After what seemed a very long time he suddenly swivelled round in his chair, scratching his beard in characteristic fashion.

"Middleton", he said, "I have long known that many officers in this company would be delighted if I got the sack. No one has come nearer accomplishing that object than you". He went on to say that the dock order in question was 18 months old and should have been cancelled but, as nobody but myself appeared to have read it, the necessity had not arisen before.

"So go", he said, "and put your talent for over-zealousness to better use in future", and I still insist that he smiled. Nobody would believe me, the general opinion being that he never had and never would smile.

"Rawalpindi" then reverted to the Indian Mail run to Bombay and did two more trips which, as far as I can remember, were without incident.

One voyage turned out to be something more than a normal Bombay run as we found ourselves relieving the "Razmak", which ran a service between Aden and Bombay in between the Indian mail ships. She picked up the Indian mail in Aden from the outward bound Australian or China mail ship and returned again from Bombay

with mail which was transferred at Aden to the homeward bound ship. As we took over in October we missed the unpleasant S.W. monsoon season and spent three months in the Indian Ocean in ideal weather conditions. Our schedule gave us four days in Aden and about twenty-four hours in Bombay. Most of the time in Bombay was ^{spent} working mails so I did not get ashore much but in Aden we got very friendly with the R.A.F. squadron and had a great deal of fun.

We used to alternate between having the R.A.F. to dine on board with us and going ashore to dine with them. All sorts of silly games were played, the current craze being 'free kicks'. This simply consisted of bending over and letting someone take a free kick at your behind and then having a similar free kick at his. I do not remember that anyone was seriously crippled in the process.

On one occasion when we were dining at the R.A.F. mess we had been overhauling the ship's fireworks and distress rockets, maroons, coloured flares and the like. It was suggested that we should put on a 'Brock's benefit' for our friends and so we took a large selection of obsolete fireworks with us. We were travelling in an open taxi driven by a bare-footed Arab and when about a mile from the camp we told him to turn off the road and approach over the sandhills. Here, as we rolled and pitched easily over the dunes we loosed off an impressive display of blue and red lights, rockets and other scintillating pyrotechnics. We really thought it was rather good. But when we arrived at the mess the patio was deserted. Drinks stood on the tables, lights were on in the building and in the kitchen dinner appeared to be well advanced but quite un-tended. We poured drinks for ourselves and wondered what mischief our hosts had planned. Surely they must have been gratified by our really professional display.

It must have looked quite eerie coming from our vehicle rising and falling in the sand hills. Where on earth could they be?

Some ten minutes later we learned the answer. A very dishevelled officer in mess kit slightly soiled by copious perspiration came panting up from the surrounding dark sandy waste.

"You're a brilliant lot of so-and-sos", he gasped. "When the first rocket went up from that magic chariot of yours the whole native staff cried, "Djinns" and took to their heels and ran. They are still running so you'll get no dinner tonight". I suppose one could say that our rockets mis-fired.

While on the 'ferry run' as it was called, the Dip, whose name was Barfoot, and I ran a ship's newspaper. We had a number of clever contributions, one of the most versatile being the ship's carpenter who really produced some splendidly imaginative pieces. Captain Furlong, who had relieved our Captain for this voyage, got quite upset if his copy of the paper was not on his breakfast table.

Seeing the mail on to the homeward bound ship was usually a rather alcoholic occasion as everybody sympathised with us for being stuck in Aden. As we had four days in port and I was virtually off duty next day I could afford to indulge a little more freely than usual. As gin cost us 3/- a bottle and whisky 5/10, entertaining was not expensive. It was just as well, as my pay as Third Mate was £17 a month.

In London we heard that on our next voyage the ship was going to lay up in Bombay until the season opened again in the spring. Mr. Acton, who ran the officers department at the offices in Leadenhall Street, asked me if I would like to come home from Bombay, take some leave and then return to join "Rawlpindi" when she sailed. I said 'yes please' and he arranged for me to be paid off on arrival.

A little calculation showed that if I left the homeward bound ship in Marseilles and went home overland I could get there in time for Christmas. I knew that the homeward bound ship in which I expected to take passage would be met by a mail courier who would take charge of the special bags (diplomatic and service secret documents) and travel with them in the mail train in his own compartment. There would be no other passengers. So I asked Morris, the mail foreman at Marseilles, if he would tackle the courier when he arrived with the mail for the outward bound ship and ask him if I could travel home with him. It seemed a reasonable request and apparently Morris thought so too as he said he would do his best.

"Rawalpindi" proceeded on to Bombay and after landing her passengers and discharging her cargo she moved out into the harbour and was moored up for her long wait until spring. I paid off and joined the homeward bound China mail ship "Malwa" as supernumary Third Mate. I could, of course, have been made to keep a watch on board but I was not and having become friendly with two high-spirited tea planters from Assam, I had a hectic but very enjoyable voyage. My two friends were, to use a favourite expression of theirs, 'balls of fire' and it would be true to say they ignited nearly everything with which they came in contact.

We arrived at Marseilles where a number of friendly passengers were leaving the ship and we were in the middle of a very hilarious farewell luncheon party when Morris arrived at the table looking rather put out.

"You asked me to fix a trip in the mail train", he said, "This is the courier and he says he will take you".

Full of apologies I jumped to my feet and invited them to have a drink. Both refused but the courier told me to be ready

to join the train at four o'clock. "But don't get in my coupe' alongside the ship", he said. "Wait until we pull out. The train will stop for some time before leaving the docks". I asked whether there was anything I could bring with me and he suggested a bottle of whisky and some Perrier water.

This did not seem to be an occasion for dressing up or heavy baggage so I went as I was, in a sports coat and grey trousers and carrying my regulation blue raincoat with the whisky and three large Perrier in the pockets. Much to my surprise the Captain of 'Malwa' gave me permission to go without question and, ^{seemed} in a fact ~~which~~ highly amused with the whole idea which he thought quite enterprising.

I left in such a hurry and with so little concern that I quite forgot to make any provision for travelling expenses. I have no doubt I meant to see the Purser and get a sub but missed out in the rush. The result was that I joined the mail train with tenpence in my pocket to take me the six hundred miles or so to my home. Of course, I was getting a free trip in the mail train but I did not know how far that would take me. I was fairly soon to find out.

In conspiratorial fashion I dodged round trucks and joined the courier in his coupe'. He seemed somewhat agitated and asked me to disappear into the lavatory compartment if any officials came to the compartment. Fairly soon someone did, enquiring as to whether there were two couriers travelling in the train. My friend said 'no', which I thought unwise, as at some stage someone was bound to find out that it was untrue.

When we got moving he thawed a bit and told me that he was not a post office official but in fact a senior civil servant in one of the ministries. Apparently the courier jobs were much sought after as they carried the advantage of five days holiday on the Riviera between the outward and homeward mail ships and this, of course, was at the Post Offices or tax payers' expense. He also went on to say that he now regretted his decision to take me as it might be considered as jeopardising the safety of the special bags and, therefore, could have an adverse effect on his career. Naturally, this made me feel uncomfortable.

We had no food at all, which was really very foolish as I could have got a good hamper packed on board. At Avignon the mail train happened to stop in the station and the courier nipped out and got two lunch bags at the buffet. These consisted of some ^{cold} ~~old~~ meat, cheese, a French loaf and a half bottle of red wine, in a carrier bag. I confessed I was unable to pay for mine.

While having our meal the courier told me that on a previous occasion he had done the same thing on the outward journey but in that case had to cross the rails to get to the platform, which had the buffet. Having got his lunch bag he was just about to cross the lines to get back when a fast train came through. While it was passing the mail train also started up and my friend visualised the special bags arriving at Marseilles in an empty coupe with disastrous consequences for him. He ran along the platform in the hope that the last coach of the fast train would pass him before the mail train had gathered any significant speed. In fact, it did, and my friend was able to get aboard somehow. It must have been quite a feat as it is not easy to board even a stationary train from track level.

It was extremely cold crossing France and we did not get much sleep. Once or twice when we stopped there were enquiries as to the number of couriers on board, which did not improve the atmosphere in the coupe!

In the early hours of the morning the courier announced that we were approaching Calais and that we had better have a wash and shave. It then became clear that all the water was frozen solid and although he had a small methyated spirit stove, there was not a drop for it to heat. So I suggested we should use Perrier water, of which we still had two large bottles left and this proved highly satisfactory.

Soon after daylight we started jolting through the approaches to the docks at Calais and stopped in a net-work of lines inside the gates. Here the courier showed rather more signs of agitation than before and said:-

"I really dare not take you any further. You must leave the train and make your own way from here".

This was a shattering blow. I had no passport and only tenpence in English money. If I were picked up inside the docks with no papers I would be likely to spend Christmas in a French jail rather than at home. I started to point all this out but the train began to move and urged by my erstwhile friend I jumped down beside the line.

I had seen the Southern railway steamer away in the distance and assumed this was the one taking the mail. Dodging behind trucks and dashing along railway lines in authentic thriller fashion, though somewhat hampered by ^{the} two-thirds of a bottle of whisky still remaining, I eventually arrived at the steamer's gangway without hindrance.

~~He~~
The Second Mate was on the gangway and I quickly told him who I was and my plight. He grinned cheerfully and said:-

"Come and see the old man. He's a decent sort and I think he'll help you".

The Captain listened to my story and seemed to think the whole thing a rather good joke.

"Yes, I'll give you a passage", he said. "We shall have to think about how we can get you through Customs and Immigration at Dover but I've no doubt we shall manage".

I cannot remember now whether the courier travelled in the same ship but I have an idea that he and his special bags went in the ordinary passenger steamer whereas the bulk of the mail, and I, made the trip in a cargo ship.

Just before we reached Dover the Captain sent for me and said:-

"The Third Mate will lend you his badge cap and you've got a regulation raincoat. Put them both on and when we dock the Second Mate will walk ashore with you to the station. He can collect the Third Mate's cap and bring it back. Good luck".

I could not bring myself to say I had no money for my fare to London but the Second Mate and I walked out through Customs and Immigration, carrying on some highly technical argument in which I was being taken to task for some lapse of duty. The shore officials grinned cheerfully and encouraged the Second Mate to "teach him to do things Bristol fashion".

In the station I thanked the Second Mate for his kindness and was promptly told I could always have a passage if I wanted one. He then took the cap and left with the self-satisfied look of someone who has got away with something.

It was easy to find the mail train and, of course, the courier,

and I now had no option but to point out that I had no means of paying a fare to London. Whether he paid it or whether I travelled as an extra in the mail train again I cannot remember but I arrived in London with my tenpence intact. It was more than enough for my fare home to Acton in those days.

About a week later I went down to the docks to get my gear from "Malwa" and pay off. This was virtually the end of my service with the P & O company.