

CHAPTER SIX -- CHANGE OF SCENE

I was now a student again, albeit a slightly more mature one. As part of the company's agreement with a cadet, the company was bound to pay you for up to three months to study for your Second Mate's Certificate, or "ticket," as it was usually referred to. Studying at the "Tech" was a lot more structured than it had been at Captain Boyd's Nautical School -- but not necessarily any better.

I have not mentioned anything about girlfriends. That's for a very good reason. There wasn't one -- or certainly not a steady one. I had gone out with girls occasionally, both at home in Belfast, and in other parts of the UK, but I don't recall dating any girls when I was in the States or Canada -- mainly because it was too expensive in those countries at that time. For some months I had been seeing a girl called Iris Cregan, who worked in the Head Line office. She was probably the first girl that I considered as a steady girlfriend. Being at home for a couple of months now was a good chance for us to see how compatible we were.

It's not that I was an extremely bright student, because as I have stated earlier, at school I was just average -- but I didn't find anything we did during my studies there as being difficult in any way. So after nearly three months I sat for my "ticket." There were three parts to it -- written exams, orals and signals. You could sit one at a time if you wished, or you could do them all at the same time. However, if you did them one at a time you paid each time you did one. Being cheap, I chose to do the lot -- and passed!

Obtaining this qualification was the first step on a three rung ladder to the top qualification of a Master's Certificate of Competency, Foreign Going, which was now my goal. One down -- two to go. I now had to get another eighteen months seatime in before I could sit for my Mate's Certificate -- the next rung. This was not calender time -- this was time spent at sea, signed on the ship's articles, which could sometimes take over two years.

With the ink hardly dry on my new "ticket" I was sent to the ss.Rathlin Head for a short trip. This was the newest ship in the company, and was very comfortable. Unfortunately it went downhill from there.

In December 1953 I was posted to the ss.Torr Head as Third Mate, the oldest ship in the fleet. This ship was built in 1936 -- and looked every bit of it!

I spent five months in that ship. The only redeeming feature

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about my time in the Torr Head, was that instead of going to Saint John for the winter months we went to Savannah, and then Norfolk and Baltimore, which meant that we avoided the terrible cold up north.

Luckily for me I was home on leave when my cousin Thelma was to be married to a young lieutenant in the army, called Ernie Thompson. I had never met him before, so it was a real pleasure when my mother, sister, Iris and I flew over to London for the wedding. I remember that Iris was less than impressed when I was ushered away by Ernie, his best man, my brother and other male invitees, to go on a pub crawl. Ernie and Thelma were married on the twenty-seventh of February 1954.

It was during my time in the Torr Head when I asked myself whether I really wanted to spend the next forty years, making ten voyages a year, across one of the most inhospitable oceans in the world -- or should I be looking elsewhere, where I might enjoy more temperate conditions. I decided to look for better weather.

I left the Head Line in April 1954. I had no complaint with the company. They had some archaic ideas, but so did many other companies. They had always treated me fairly and I had made some good friends.

The next five months I spent at home, without doing much. I'm not sure why I took this amount of time off, because it was not like me to do that. I was living at home with my mother and sister, and while I was supporting my mother, by supplementing the allowance she was getting from my father, I still seemed to have money in my pocket. I couldn't decide which shipping company I should write to. All I knew was -- I wanted sun!

One day, in the local newspaper there was an article about a man who had bought a fishing trawler somewhere in Ireland, and that he was looking for a navigator to get him to New Zealand. The idea attracted me, so I wrote to him, care of the newspaper, offering my services. Much to my surprise, a few days later, at about eight o'clock one morning, my mother woke me to say that there was a man at the front door looking for me. It was the Captain of the fishing boat, wanting to know if I wanted the job.

Over a cup of tea he gave me the details. In effect, it was a case of working my passage. I was to get fed etc., and in return, I would navigate the boat to New Zealand. If I had been guaranteed my passage home I would have gone like a shot, but I didn't fancy the idea of being left on the beach in New Zealand, with possibly very little money. Reluctantly, I turned down his offer. It would have been interesting -- but if I had accepted his offer, I probably would not have been writing this now -- at least, not with the same story to tell.

I finally decided to write to a Captain Stocks, who had been an old friend of my father's, and was now the Senior Marine Superintendent of T and J Harrison Ltd. They had taken over Rankin and Gilmore, the company that my father had been with, about twenty-five years earlier. They were known as, "Two of fat and one of lean," because of the two white stripes on either side of a red stripe on their funnel markings. They were also known as, "Hungry Harrison's." Nick names for shipping companies were common, so those derogatory terms did not deter me. Before I wrote to Captain Stocks I checked out which parts of the world their ships visited. Their normal voyages were of about three to four months duration, mainly to East and South Africa, the West Indies and Gulf of Mexico. That sounded sunny enough for me!

Unfortunately, it didn't have quite the same ring to it as far as Iris was concerned. Some time in the past year we had become engaged, which in retrospect was a stupid thing for both of us to do. I think we got engaged because it sounded like a good idea, and some of our friends were doing it. Exactly the type of reason why one should become engaged! Anyway, the idea of long voyages did not go down too well with half our team so we terminated our engagement amicably.

I went over to Liverpool for an interview with Captain Stocks at the company's office in Mersey Chambers -- occasionally called Misery Chambers, as I was to find out later. The Harrison Line ships were named after trades and professions, and I subsequently joined the ss. Speaker in Glasgow on 9th September 1954, as Third Mate.

The Speaker was a Liberty ship -- one of the many that had been built during the war. They were very basic in design, but very functional. They were floating warehouses. There was no pretence at fine lines and good looks. They had been built in the United States for one purpose, and one purpose only -- to get supplies across the Atlantic to Europe. If they managed to make one trip across the Atlantic before being torpedoed, they were seen as cost effective.

The ships were very slow, with a maximum speed of ten knots. Because of their bluff bow, they seemed to push the ocean in front of them.

The Speaker was undergoing a refit when I joined her on Clydebank. Steve Richardson, the Master, was a very affable man.

The Chief Officer, "Canadian" Johnston, was also a pleasant man, but I didn't think he was very bright. His wife was living on board while we were in refit. He told me she had been a painter, which I assumed, meant that she was an artist. Wrong! She painted ships hulls!

My first trip with the Speaker was to South Africa. Although I had been at sea for over four years now, this was all new to me. Our first stop was in Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands, to take

on fuel. We then had a long passage to Durban -- in fact it took twenty-eight days from Liverpool to Durban. That was more time than it took to make a round trip in the Head Line.

When we crossed the equator into the South Atlantic I saw my first albatross. What a marvellous bird. With its twelve-foot wing span it seemed to soar forever, skimming above the waves by inches, with barely a movement of its wings. They were so graceful. Another thing that was different. While I had seen quite a few dolphins before, I had never seen them keep station on the ship by diving in and out of the ship's bow wave for long periods. I loved it all.

There is a world of difference from being at sea in the tropics to ploughing across the Western Ocean. I enjoyed being on watch at night when I could continue my star gazing in the southern hemisphere. The tropics certainly agreed with me.

Just to make sure that I didn't get a sense of false security about the weather always being idyllic in the South Atlantic, things changed when we neared the Cape of Good Hope. Because there is no land between the Antarctic and South Africa, the weather around the Cape can be just as bad as any North Atlantic storm. When there has been a storm in the Southern Ocean, the swell comes rolling in over those miles of unbroken ocean. Over the next few years I was to experience that weather frequently.

Between the Cape and Durban we hugged the coast. This was to take advantage of a close-in-shore counter-current, to the normally south-flowing Agulhas Current. With our maximum speed of ten knots we needed all the help we could get.

I remember the exhilaration I felt when we first sighted the Bluff at the approaches to Durban. As we passed around the Bluff it was full of whale-catchers, as they used Durban as their base for their forays into the Southern Ocean. The smell was terrible.

I was very lucky that my first trip was to Durban, because I had a contact there. My brother's current girlfriend came from there, so she asked me to contact her father, which I did. He, in turn, introduced me to his nephew, Peter Kettle, who was about my age. That was the start of a long friendship. Although I haven't seen him for 35 years we still correspond at Christmas time.

I thoroughly enjoyed Durban. It was a lovely clean city, with absolutely fabulous beaches. Peter had a car, so therefore I managed to see much of the surrounding countryside as well. In my subsequent travels all over the world, Durban still ranks as one of my favourite places. It was also the first place where I ran into apartheid.

One afternoon walking along South Beach I stopped to talk to a beach photographer about cameras. He was very interested in my

new Voightlander which I had just bought. During our discussion, one of his previous customers came up to him to enquire if his photos were ready. He asked him to go over to his booth with his "boy," who would check for him. His comment was, "You don't expect me to walk along with this black bastard, do you?"

After discharging our cargo, we headed south down the coast again, loading in East London, Port Elizabeth and Capetown. While I enjoyed Durban, I think nothing in that part of the world can compare to the scenery on the approaches to Capetown. If you arrive in the late afternoon, a long thin layer of white cloud, called the "table cloth," sits just above Table Mountain. With the Lion's Head and Table Mountain as a back drop, the city of Capetown rises gently up their lower slopes.

Our next stop was to be Liverpool. We had been away about three months -- longer than I had ever been away before -- and I was smitten with what I had seen of Africa.