

16/09/48 to 29/10/48

### PRETORIA CASTLE

When I joined the Pretoria Castle on 16/09/48 in Southampton I didn't realize that I would go on several other castle boats in the next few years.

I had been sent to the Union Castle offices in London by the "Pool", (Shipping Federation) for the job of Cabin Boy the day before and had been told to travel down from London on the Boat Train laid on for the passengers.

My first sight of her was of amazement. The hull was lavender or French blue coloured, the upper works were white and her funnel was red with a black top. Quite the prettiest ship I had seen, and after the "Stratheden", very modern and tidy looking; which is as it should be for this was only her second voyage.

I found out that although the service and food were excellent, and my accommodation was a lot better than the P & O, there was not so much bull, and provided you did your Job to the best of your ability, you didn't have to look round every corner for the Chief or Second Stewards.

Luckily the uniform was white coat and black trousers, so I didn't have to lay out money for those, but it was strange to wear tidy clothes all the time, after being on a tanker wearing casual dress, which consisted of shirt and jeans or else shorts.

One of my jobs was to take radio telegrams from the radio room to the passengers cabins, or to find them wherever they might be, and I did quite well for tips in the first class, as most of the passengers wanted to reply, which kept me busy at times especially when nearing a port or at the end of the voyage.

I also found out that some of the titled women passengers didn't even bother to cover themselves when you knocked at the cabin door, and would quite often be nearly naked as if you didn't count as a human being.

My main job was as a saloon boy or commis waiter, helping the stewards to get the passengers meals, and serving at the table if the steward was very busy.

I also helped out at the children's meal-times which was hard work, and the noise was terrible, until I noticed that two mothers were so busy talking that one had actually put food in her babies ear. I then realized that most of the noise was coming from the parents, so I politely threw all the parents out and took over feeding a baby, and got one of the older girls to help feed the other one, then organized the other older children to dish out the cereals and put the sugar and milk on, It was easy.

It ended up with having them collect empty plates and cups, wash the cutlery, clear the table and lay it for the next sitting; In the end I had to be firm with them when they tried to help at main meals. I did make sure that they had plenty of ice cream and fruit, but not until they had eaten their meals, and they were not allowed to collect or wash glasses.

Another of my jobs was on the lift in the afternoons from two to four pm, after which I began to prepare for the children's tea.

Our first port of call was Madeira where the wine comes from, and I was told it is called the Royal Bastard Isle, because the illegitimate babies of England's early kings were taken there.

The roads are very steep and tourists sit on stone sledges and are pulled up and down by donkeys.

The local boys will dive from the ships bridge, which was over 50ft high, into the sea for coins which they carry back to the surface in their mouths or in between their toes.

There are always lots of locals either in boats or setting up shop on board to sell goods made from cane, these included small wine barrels and bird cages and lots of different furniture items like card or veranda tables and all types of cane chairs.

They also sold canaries, but you had to be careful, as I was told that sometimes they dyed sparrows yellow, and split their tongues, then put pepper in their water to make them sing.

We sailed from Madeira the same day with our next stop Capetown.

During the two hour period on the lift,(2 to 4pm) which was the standard time on all passenger ships for a siesta, when they either rested in their cabins or dozed in deck chairs, I once again got friendly with a passenger. This time she was a seventeen year old white South African girl who was very bored with the other passengers of her age group and wanted to know more about travelling round the world.

At that time it was very daring to be able to go anywhere without your parents and she told me that the only time she was allowed out of her mothers sight on board, was during the afternoon siesta when her parents were asleep.

Incidentally she was the person who got me over my nervousness of serving passengers at table. I used to hold the veg dish out to the passengers, to help themselves, but she said it was too awkward and insisted that I serve her myself. After that it was easy to serve everyone and a lot quicker.

### **September 30th.**

We have just arrived at Cape town, (What a beautiful sight!) where the majority of the passengers disembarked for up country, all the passengers who had children in my tender care tipped me very well and thanked me for not only looking after their children, but actually getting them to do as they were told and enjoying it; little did they know that the two eldest boys, who were brothers, had threatened the others if they didn't behave, and used to share out jobs to stop arguments. The view from Table Bay is breathtaking and although I was to see it many more times it never failed to impress me with the grandeur of Table mountain or of The Lions head on the one side and I believe spoin kop on the other with the City of Cape town laid out in the middle, running from Table Mountain to the Bay.

Most of the passengers disembarked here for upcountry places like Pretoria and Johannesburg, while new ones embarked for the trip round to other ports on our route.

I managed to get ashore in the evening with some of the other boys, but as usual they only went to the nearest bar leaving me to explore alone. I wasn't a prude but I didn't see the point of travelling the world showing people how stupid I acted when drunk.

I walked up Adderley Street and enjoyed looking in the shops, and then ambled along a couple of other streets, finally ending up on the balcony of the Castle Hotel with a nice cold beer, watching the people and traffic with a nice view of the bay and necklaces of lights going into the distance.

About ten pm I started walking back to the ship and when I arrived on board sneaked down to the pantry for a sandwich which I took back to the cabin. A couple of the lads were there who didn't drink and like me had just been looking around, and about ten minutes later the other three turned up much the worse for wear and singing out of tune, luckily they soon flaked out and we could all get some rest.

We sailed the next day Oct 1st, after cargo had been unloaded and other cargo loaded, and all the passengers were on board, bound for our next Port of call Port Elizabeth, which we reached on Oct 2nd.

Once again we were only staying one night, and as soon as we could; Stan, who was also in my cabin and I went ashore to look around.

We found a cafe that also had a bar and went in for a coffee and while we were there this cab driver asked us if we were interested in a couple of girls. When we said we were he took us in his cab to a black area and told us to knock on the door of a shack, he wanted us to pay him first but we said not until we were fixed up.

When the door opened a black woman said jig a jig five shilling, nice girl, I said one and six she said three and we agreed on half a crown; then after we had paid the cab driver, she took us into this room with two small boys and two girls about thirteen or fourteen, and took the two boys out, pointing to the two girls and repeating jig a jig.

The girls were obviously not virgins, and after we had finished we gave the woman five shillings and asked where the nearest telephone was. She said it was about half a mile away and warned us to keep in the shadows as whites were usually beaten up if they were spotted. When we got to the phone and contacted the cab driver, he told us to keep walking towards the city and he would pick us up.

When he finally pulled up beside us we were both a bundle of nerves, as we had several times seen blacks go past on the other side of the road, and had hidden as best we could, luckily not being spotted.

We sailed again next day, arriving at East London early the following morning. I managed to get ashore for a couple of hours in the afternoon, only going to the beach, as we were sailing about five and I didn't relish being left behind.

Early next morning we arrived in Durban, where we stayed for a couple of days before sailing again. This was the turnaround port of our trip, all Passengers disembarked, cargo was unloaded, and we started reloading for the homeward voyage.

Stan and I went ashore as soon as we could, and we both managed to fiddle the whole afternoon and evening off, so we went to the beach in the afternoon where I had my first experience of surfing, hiring a board and paddling it out to catch the waves.

It wasn't until I took my board back that I was told that they had caught fifteen sharks in the nets designed to stop sharks from getting near the swimmers, I hate to think how many were outside the nets.

Going back on board about five we had something to eat, then changed our clothes and caught a bus into town as we didn't have enough money to waste it on cabs.

We decided to go to the pictures first, and then have a quiet drink after. We paid for our tickets and were shown to our seats by a nice looking usherette, who when we tried to chat her up said something in Afrikaans and walked away.

We had been watching the film for some time when Stan said that it had got dark early; when I asked what he meant he pointed up and I saw that the stars were out and clouds were going across the sky, then I realized that it was the ceiling of the theatre.

When we finally left the theatre and walked into the foyer we discovered that it was also a restaurant and bar so we found a table and had a couple of drinks, before making our way back to the ship.

The next evening as we didn't have a lot of money left, we contented ourselves with going out of the dock gate into Crown Point road and into a cafe opposite, owned I think, by Eagle Taxis whose office was next door, and who employed some woman drivers. It was one of the only places I knew that you could mix and talk to black Africans, and we even danced with a couple of the black girls.

You could also get a terrific meal of steak with two eggs on top surrounded by mushrooms, onions, tomatoes and French fries, for about three shillings.

The other thing I found out while in the cafe was that one of the records on the juke box was blank so you could pay for three minutes quiet.

The next day we sailed for East London where we stayed just long enough to pick up a few passengers, and for quite a few of the crew, myself included, to rush ashore and buy pound packets of tea in large red packets, butter, sugar and trays of eggs, some of them buying as many as ten trays, but there was still a shortage of butter and sugar in South Africa and we were limited to a pound of butter and four of sugar I managed to acquire some at each South African port, and ended up with five pounds of tea, six pounds of butter and ten of sugar, plus four trays of eggs. This was because Britain was still rationed and Together with some of the ships stores that you could buy from the store men, made your homecoming seem like Christmas to your family.

We left port late afternoon and docked at Port Elizabeth early next morning, picking up more cargo and passengers, before leaving again the next day. One of the crew had got drunk that evening and had tried to run into the docks; when the dock police shouted to him to stop he carried on running and they threw a truncheon at him breaking his ankle. They refused to hand him over to the company and I believe he got a prison sentence for being drunk.

Quite a few of the police were nasty to British seamen and we had to watch what we were doing, although I found some that liked us.

We docked in Capetown two days later and had three days in port before leaving for Madeira and home.

While we were in Capetown, Stan and I decided to go swimming in the afternoon as we had again arranged to cover with two of the other cabin boys, they having the next afternoon off. We went to the beach and had a good time, the water being nice and warm, there were quite a few white people on the beach with black girls looking after the children, but the blacks were not allowed to swim there, they had to go to another part of the beach.

As before, we returned to the ship to change, then decided to catch a train to Wynberg where there was a roller skating rink. Luckily I had bought my skates with me, and made sure I carried them with me every trip, as I had found that you could usually pick up a girl at a skating rink, even if you couldn't speak the language.

While we were waiting for the train we saw John, another member of the crew, who had made his first trip to sea on the previous, maiden voyage of the Pretoria Castle. He was with a local girl whom he had met on his previous trip, and as they were also going skating, we all got in the same carriage.

We were glad that someone knew the way as we had only been told to get off at Wynberg and hadn't a clue where it was.

When we arrived at the rink, I was soon on the floor as I had my own skates as did Vinnie the local girl and by the time the other two had hired their skates and got them on, Vinnie and I were already on good terms.

I told John to take her round in the dancing where you both hold each others hand in front and put your other arm round your partners waist but every time he tried they both fell over, then Vinnie asked me to take her round and she was a good skater so it must have been his fault. Stan also took her around a couple of times and they were alright, so I tried to teach John to relax and hold her while I skated backwards in front but he was gripping her too tight and using her to try and keep his balance,

so they kept going over, then she suddenly started to lose her balance again and pushed him away, he bounced off of the pillar in the middle, then rolled backwards across the rink hitting the outside bar then doing a somersault before laying flat on his back in the viewing area

I had stopped Vinnie from falling, and we were laughing at John, who got up and started yelling that it was my fault; he then rushed onto the rink and tried to hit me, but I ducked and he spun round and landed on his back again, so I told him not to be stupid, whereupon he stormed off into the changing room, and we didn't see him until the next day. When Stan, Vinnie and I left the rink, we ended up going to a fairground which I found out later was on the edge of district six a notorious area where whites were not welcome. We were having a go on the rifles and the white man who owned the booth told us to go quick as a crowd of blacks were slowly gathering around the rifle range; just then a police car drove up and we were ordered in. they dropped us back at the rail station and told us never to go there again, as it was for blacks only.

When the train pulled into Capetown, Stan said goodnight as I had arranged to see Vinnie home, and we caught a bus which dropped us near an ex military airfield where she told me her father was the caretaker and where they lived in a large converted Nissan hut.

This had been nicely altered so that it was just like a real house on the inside and Vinnie told me to sit down while she made us a drink. I thought she meant a tea or coffee but she came back with two large glasses of cape brandy.

I asked her where her parents were and she said they had probably been in bed since ten pm, then she sat on the settee next to me and we started kissing. One thing led to another and by the time we had drunk a second glass of brandy we had progressed to her bedroom and were ready to make love. I was awakened at five thirty in the morning by Vinnie, who luckily always got up at that time, and I just had time for a quick kiss and make a date for that evening, before rushing off to catch a bus back to the ship. I was one of those people who could wake up without a hangover although I did sometimes have a bad head if I mixed drinks.

The remaining two nights were spent in Vinnie's company until the ship sailed for Madeira and home.

During one of the Three trips I made on the Pretoria, one of the first class passengers who was also a Lord, turned up in the crews "Pig & Whistle" and after buying drinks all round, sat down at the piano and played the best Boogie Woogie and Jazz I had ever heard, and after that he was at the piano most nights.

The other thing I remember was the gay crew members putting on a concert for the passengers, although most of us didn't know they were crew or gay until after the show.

One girl came on stage dressed in a royal blue evening gown, matching shoes and elbow length gloves, her hair in long black ringlets, and matching diamond earrings, necklace and bracelet.

When she started to sing an aria from an opera, I thought she must be a real opera singer as her voice was so perfect, but it turned out that it was the fruit "king" or in this instance "Queen", as the person who dished out the fruit to the stewards was called.

Another of the acts was a man in evening dress with his back to the audience, with a girls arms round his neck rubbing his hair and neck, then one of her arms going round his back before starting to slide down past his waist, suddenly his hand grabbing hers and pulling it back up to his shoulder, then a spotlight shining on him revealing that it was just a man with one arm in a suit jacket, and his other arm with a girls glove and bracelet on it. This same idea was later used in a Bond Movie.

When I finally docked in Southampton I had also acquired a three pound piece of bacon, a whole box of apples, and one case each of tinned pineapple, tinned pears, and tinned peaches, courtesy of the ships store keepers.

Some one had found out that if you rubbed the black numbers on the tins with cigarette ash you could erase them, so the police on the gate couldn't tell they were ships stores.

My next two trips on the Pretoria Castle went very much like the first except that I now had a girl in Capetown and also one outside Johannesburg, whom I had first met in the dining saloon and afterwards in the lift. I often wrote letters to her and sent her napkin rings from different ships, with the ships crest on, which she collected, and on two occasions I sent her recordings on records, from fairground booths, unfortunately I never saw her again although I believe she did get a position as a singer with a radio station.

My romance with Vinnie went on for about a year during which time we explored museums and parks, gardens and beaches.

Then one day she didn't turn up for a date and didn't answer the phone, end of romance.

While on my third trip with Union Castle, I wrote to head office requesting promotion to assistant steward, as by the time I returned to England and had had my leave I would be Eighteen.

When the ship docked at Southampton a letter was waiting for me requesting me to report to the Edinburgh Castle on the 28th march as an assistant steward.  
Once again I had a new ship to report to, this time on her third voyage sailing on the 31st March.