

Down the River

By David Partridge (R531727)

The summer 1962 found me working as one of the Blue star 'rock dodgers', an intrepid band of seamen whose main purpose in life was never to lose sight of land. We would 'work by' on ships which were between voyages and do 'run jobs' between London, Liverpool, and Glasgow etc., and occasionally venture as far afield as Antwerp or Rotterdam although these little sojourns were seen to be fraught with danger due to the ever present 'shanghai' threat. As a consequence I spent a lot of time hanging around the east end of London and was inevitably drawn into a relationship with a local girl who didn't take too kindly to me vanishing at regular intervals, albeit only for a week at a time, and I was cajoled into looking for a shoreside job...and in these days of almost full employment this was not a hard task.

The local labour exchange dispatched me off to Ford's motor factory in Dagenham, a great sprawling place which was almost a small town in itself and which, at the time, employed about 20,000 people or more. After a quick medical I was put to work in the foundry, an absolutely awful place; smelly, dirty, unbearably hot, and about as foreign to any seafarer as it was possible to be. My job was to grind the rough edges from obscure motor parts, which would be delivered to me in great bins, and as soon as one bin was emptied so another would take its place; thus was my part in keeping the wheels of industry turning. I found it hard to believe that some men actually spent the whole of their working lives in that Hades and I even heard stories of workers who had been injured in the factory, and instead of taking compensation would be offered 'jobs for life'...no thanks!

As I suffered endless hours of that grinding my thoughts would often drift back to balmy nights on lookout, and even two hours on the wheel began to seem like heaven. At the end of my shift I would catch a bus home, and each day I would pass a huge billboard where Harold McMillan stared down at me, pointing his finger, declaring 'You've never had it so good'. Yeah, right, Harold and here's two fingers back at you!

One of the conditions of employment at the time was that any employee who had completed less than four weeks service could ask to be paid off at a minute's notice and it was on my 27th day that I was sitting in a huge canteen staring with little enthusiasm at the pie and chips in front of me. There was a picture window in the canteen which looked out over the River Thames and as I looked up there appeared, gliding silently by, a Houlder Brothers 'Grange' boat. 'In two weeks time', I thought to myself, 'those boys will be in B.A., or Santos drinking Brahma Chop and dancing the samba'. That was it for me and I approached the foreman of my section who was sitting close by and asked to be paid off immediately.

"Whassermarrer son, don't cha like it 'ere?'".

"You see that ship out there", I replied pointing to the disappearing 'Grange' boat, "Well in a couple of weeks those boys will drinking Rum 'n' coke in some sleazy little bar in Porto Alegre and I'm off to join them".

"Don't blame ya son, don't waste yer life in this place. Wish I could come wiv yer, but me missus would be none too pleased".

He then took me down to the pay office and within an hour I was paid and through the factory gates without a backward glance.

The relationship which had led me to that awful place was rapidly waning and a couple of days later I signed on the 'Pampas', of the Royal Mail Line, bound for the West Indies and Central America. As we steamed past the Ford factory at Dagenham, I paused for a not too nostalgic look. I'd like to think that the foreman was looking back, giving me the thumbs up.