

SHORESIDE & INDIA

A series of short stories about his life at sea

by Tommy Mitchell

MV 'EUCADIA'
12th Jun. 1956 until 23 Aug. 1957
and
MV 'ELYSIA'
28th Feb 1958 until 17th Jun. 1958

Time ashore

I had made up my mind that I would attend college to study, in preparation to take the exams for my 2nd class Engineering Certificate. Everything went well for the first couple of weeks and I was pretty careful with my money because I knew that it would have to last me several months. Much of my free time I spent with other students from the college and we would study together at lunchtime in one of the local bars over a pint of beer. As the weeks passed some of us started to partake of more than one pint, till eventually we were missing out the afternoon lectures completely. The tutors reminded us that if we did not meet attendance requirements, we would not be allowed to sit the exams. I personally tried to catch up on the lectures in a bid to try and see it through, but it was no use, my liking for beer and a good time was getting the better of me. I did continue to attend for the next few weeks but knowing that I had no chance of ever passing any exams, I decided to quit. My money was now getting low enough to restrict my enjoyment to evenings only and even then I had to drastically reduce the amount of drink that I could have. On top of that I was getting bored with being at home. I knew that I could not leave the Merchant Navy, otherwise I would be required to do my National Service and so far as I knew the pay would still have been a pittance compared to my current earnings. I had now been ashore for about eight weeks and I was beginning to itch for another voyage, regardless of where it was going. I contacted the Anchor Line in Glasgow and was offered a position as 5th engineer. Not much of a position, considering that when I left the 'Inverbank' I was sailing as junior 3rd engineer. However the pay was good and since the Anchor Line sailed mainly out of Glasgow I decided to accept.

The Anchor line was quite a large shipping company and all of their ships were categorised into groups. They had a group of 'E' boats, which only meant that the ships names began with the letter 'E'. For instance 'Eucadia', 'Egidia' and 'Elysia'. Then there was a 'T' group with the ships names 'Tyria' and 'Tyrantia'. I believe that at one time they had other groups beginning with a specific letter, but I am mentioning only the groups on which I sailed or worked on. The 'C' boats were the passenger ships of the company and so far as I know (at least when I was with the company), there was only the two, namely 'Caledonia' and 'Circassia'. I have never sailed on these vessels, but I did stand in as relieving engineer on the 'Circassia' while she was in the UK.

I did three voyages on the 'Eucadia' commencing 12th June 1956 until 23rd August 1957 and one voyage on her sister ship, the 'Elysia' from 28th February 1958 until 17th June 1958. The gap between leaving the 'Eucadia' and joining the 'Elysia' was some six months and was due to a serious attempt by me to try to give up the sea, now that National Service in the armed forces was no longer a requirement. Having served an apprenticeship as a steam locomotive engineer I thought that I could perhaps return to my trade. But steam locomotives were gradually being replaced by Diesel and although I had sailed on Diesel engined ships for the past four years it was not the kind of Diesel experience that British Rail wanted so I had to look elsewhere. Trying to find a job of interest, challenge, and responsibility was impossible. I was forced to take whatever work I could get and the jobs that I did get were generally only seasonal or of very short duration. For instance I worked as a fitter for a company that made elevators for a while, even took to delivering parcels with the G.P.O. over the seasonal period. I was finding it increasingly more difficult to settle and I was missing the sea-going life with its duty free booze and cigarettes. Shall I say that the money I

was earning ashore was not enough to pay for the drinking and smoking habits that I had acquired in the Merchant Navy? Besides I now also had to pay for my keep. I eventually had to give in to the call of the sea and returned to the Anchor Line on the 'Elysia' but that was not to be my last trip for the company.

MV 'EUCADIA'/'ELYSIA'

I joined the 'Eucadia' in Glasgow on 12th June 1956. The trading routes for Anchor Line were varied but the ships that I sailed on generally plied between UK and India. The 'Eucadia' was a ship of some 7000 gross tonnes and although primarily a cargo ship, she did have accommodation for, I think 9 or 12 passengers. Unlike the Bank line, this company employed all white crew and this would be my first experience of sailing with them. I would not want to give an impression of being racist but in the long term I preferred to sail with white crew. Lascar crewmen would certainly carry out their duties to the letter when told to do so. Whereas seasoned white crewmen not only carried out their duties, but would also think for themselves and knew what to do next. In fact those employed in the engine room would sometimes notice potential problems that the watch engineer might miss and help by drawing his attention to it.

I can't remember how many passenger cabins there were, or how many there were to a cabin, but I know that they were well enough catered for, considering that it was not a luxury liner and they were only doing a one way voyage. I have no doubt also that the fare was just a fraction of what it would have been if travelling on a conventional passenger ship. This ship was not equivalent to today's modern cargo vessels, where the living spaces are all air-conditioned and fitted with refrigerators. No! The only people who had refrigerators were the Captain, Chief Engineer, the Pantry and of course the Galley. None of us ever used these refrigerators to chill our beer, as too often it would go missing. We developed our own method of at least cooling it down a bit. The idea was to wrap a wet cloth around a few cans and tie them onto a stanchion on deck, where the sea breeze and natural effect of evaporation would cool it down a bit. Even this idea wasn't foolproof, as sometimes they too would mysteriously disappear. There was no passenger lounge as such but the dining saloon could double for that outwith meal times. Refreshments such as Beer, Wines and Spirits had to be purchased from the Chief Steward and kept in your cabin as usual. The same thing applied to the passengers.

Each of us officers of course had our own cabin, which generally measured about eight feet square. The bunk bed was always over a set of drawers, usually on the outer bulkhead with a porthole above. There was also a settee, or rather a fitted couch. There was a wardrobe, a desk which again was over a set of drawers and a quite comfortable padded chair with padded arm rests. The cabin also had a wash hand basin with hot and cold running water (not drinking water I might add). Drinking water was supplied either from the Pantry or galley usually in a 2-pint thermos jug together with a half-pint tumbler, which was kept above the washbasin. The shower and toilet facilities were as usual at the end of the alleyway. The passengers on occasion I am afraid, sometimes had to use our facilities if their own were already engaged. This could be awkward at times, especially if any of them were female. The reason being that the shower cubicle was simply a curtained off area beside the toilets and while the toilets each had a door, the shower as I have just said, did not. So if a female was using the shower, it meant that the toilets too were out of bounds to us. Fortunately this was a rare occurrence.

Now, if you have had the patience to read these pages this far, you will by now have assumed that the other ships I sailed on had a similar accommodation layout. My previous ship the 'Inverbank' had even less facilities, having been built in 1924. I guess I just never got round to mentioning it before now. While we were expected to help entertain the passengers, the Captain would frown upon us doing it in our cabin or theirs for that matter, but never actually forbade it. We each obviously tried to make the voyage as pleasant as possible for them. We were required to change into the dress of the day every time we came off watch, while they wandered about in loose clothing and Flip Flops, (a kind of flat sandal held on only by your toes). The evening meal (or dinner if you like) was about the only time they would be expected to appear respectably dressed.

On the other ships that I had sailed on, all of the engine-room auxiliary machinery such as pumps compressors etc. were steam operated, as were the winches, windlass and steering gear etc. However this ship's auxiliaries were all electric and we therefore carried two electricians. One of them would be the senior but they were generally just referred to as 1st and 2nd 'Lecky', not

'Sparks' as I am sure I have said earlier in these pages. The 'Sparks' is the Radio Operator. The 2nd Lecky and I became very good mates and we had some good times together, both as shipmates and later as friends ashore, long after we both had left the Merchant Navy. Our homes were only about fifteen miles or so apart and we shared the same interests, Wine, Women and song. Well! Ballroom dancing, anyway. Somewhere later in these pages I might relate a couple of humorous incidents we shared together. Bear in mind that I did three voyages on this ship, so events that I recall are not in any way continuous but cover a broad space of time and again I emphasise, are not in chronological order. I think I use that word quite a lot 'Chronological'. Well, I like it and let's face it; it does help to explain why these pages seem so mixed up. I am quite sure that I have put the cart before the horse on many occasions, but that word seems to make everything okay. Again! I am not going to write about every port that the ship visited, mainly because I am unable to remember them, but I will as usual try to recall some of my main recollections from these voyages.

One such recollection immediately springs to mind. We had on board I remember, six passengers. Four of the passengers were men. They were it seems, reasonably well off professionals of Asian origin who were presumably going home. The other two were a woman perhaps in her late fifties and a young woman of about 21. The younger one told us that she was a ballet dancer. Apparently she was going out to India to study some Asian dances. The older one was her ballet teacher (or whatever you call them) and I suppose a kind of chaperone to the young girl. I don't remember what the girl's name was but she was tall, quite good-looking and slim. In fact I would say very slim almost to the point of being skinny. But then! I must admit that any time I have seen a female ballet dancer (or ballerina if you prefer), they have been mostly very slim. The pair of them could usually be seen together walking the deck. Often we would see the girl doing her exercises at the ship's handrail. Of course we would sometimes spend time chatting to them. On occasion we would even have a few refreshments together. My friend, the Lecky was quite a handsome guy and it soon became obvious that the girl was beginning to pay more attention to him than to anyone else. He of course, being a red blooded male, accepted her advances but could do little about it; her chaperone was always keeping an eye on them.

I don't remember how it came about, but there was one time when Lecky and I found ourselves entertaining the pair in the girl's cabin. Something we were not supposed to do! But as I have said, the captain usually didn't bother, or perhaps 'turned a blind eye' would be a better phrase. We'd had a few drinks certainly, though none of us were in the least way drunk. Suddenly for some obscure reason, the woman asked me if I would show her round the engine-room. Of course I agreed and looked at my mate for some sign that he had set it up. If he and the girl had connived something, it must have been pretty convincing to the chaperone. The woman and I went off and I did show her round the place. I took my time of course. All the time we were in the engine-room, she kept asking me to show her the propeller shaft tunnel. Soon we made our way down there and all the while she seemed a bit apprehensive, as though she were afraid or something. I sensed this and assured her that we were safe and there was nothing to worry about. Eventually she stopped and blurted out "I have been told that every ship when launched contains a 'Golden Rivet' in the propeller shaft tunnel". I was so taken aback that I didn't know what to say. She then said "Could you show it to me please". Now! If I had been the one to initiate this subject, I would have been more prepared to cope with the situation. As it was, she just looked innocently at me expecting an answer. I had to think fast and told her that no one knew exactly where it was and so far no one had ever found one. She obviously didn't believe me and seemed very disappointed but showed no sign that she really understood the meaning of the 'Golden Rivet'. Just to satisfy the reader's curiosity, I can tell you that the 'Golden Rivet' is part of old naval mythology that every ship has a golden rivet concealed in the lower part of the hull. In most cases this is usually the propeller shaft tunnel. I guess that at one time it formed a bit of kidding for young recruits, similar to looking for the 'key for the starboard watch' or an engineering apprentice being sent for a 'long stand'. I could have explained all of this to her but I kept thinking of the meaning as I knew it. The saying that every ship has one is still used by seamen but has sexual connotations, an excuse if you like for a guy to try and take advantage of a girl, who would obviously be required to bend over to be able to see this mythical 'golden rivet'. I must say that I have never met anyone who can truthfully say that they used the ruse successfully.

It must have been about a half-hour later that we returned back to the cabin. There was no sign of Lecky or the girl and I could feel that this woman was beginning to get suspicious. I had a good

idea where they might be, but I suggested that we look for them up on the bridge. She hesitated and said, "maybe they've gone to look for the golden rivet too". "I doubt it" I said knowingly "we would have passed them on the way". Anyway she agreed to go with me to the bridge. As we passed my mates cabin, I gave the door a discreet knock, in the hope that if he was in there he would realise that we were back, ready or not. By the time we got back to the accommodation, we met Lecky and the girl coming in from the after-deck, where they said they had been taking the night air. I think the woman believed them because the night ended with all of us having a night-cap, again in the girl's cabin. My mate and the girl certainly seemed to hit it off. Well! It is probably more truthful to say that the girl seemed to be the one who was doing all the pushing. That was not the end of the relationship, but more perhaps on that later. Incidentally, I never did find out if my mate had originally broached the subject of 'The Golden Rivet'

Bombay:-India

The ships main ports of call were Calcutta and Bombay with occasional visits to Karachi and Chittagong. I have said that I am finding it increasingly difficult to remember which event happened in which port, but there are obvious exceptions. For instance, where my recollections might perhaps contain phrases like 'Cages of Bombay' or 'Bombay Canaries' it will be obvious that I am referring to the port of Bombay. Similarly where else could you see 'The Black Hole', but in Calcutta.

As usual I made no effort to try to understand this country's culture or politics. However I did learn that the country in fact had now become two. It had now been partitioned into two neighbouring but different states i.e. India and Pakistan. There are plenty of historians and the like who are better able to expand on the politics and reasons for this, but basically it boils down to the fact that India became a predominately 'Hindu' state, while Pakistan became 'Moslem'. Not that it made any difference to me, I wrongly saw them as being the same, after all unless you make a study of these people it is difficult to tell one religion from the other.

Our main concern was to try to enjoy our time ashore. There were no bars as such, but it was usually possible to get a drink at some cafés or restaurants. Often we would just opt to spend our evenings aboard ship. Whenever we did venture ashore it was usually in the daytime and would be for shopping or to visit one of the European establishments, such as private clubs. Of course, there was always the Seaman's Mission, which is never far from the dock area in any port. There, you could get a couple of bottles of beer and perhaps see a film. I remember however that the Mission always rationed you to no more than three bottles of beer. Not surprising really, since it is a Christian Institution for seamen of all nationalities. I say Christian, but it actually catered for all seamen regardless of creed, colour or religion. The beer was a local brew and it was not to my taste at all, but it was all right as a chaser when ever you were having a sip from your own flask of spirits. Anyway, the last thing that the mission would want was to encourage a crowd of drunken seamen hanging around the place.

There was one British club that we would sometimes go to in Bombay. I think it was called 'Beach Candi' though that might not be the correct spelling. This club predominately catered for the requirements of British people in Bombay, but I am sure was also frequented by other white nationalities. I don't know if it existed in the days of the 'British Raj', but it was a very popular meeting place and had an air of the early Empire Builders about it. I believe that there were several private rooms, a common smoking room and of course a billiard room. The dining room area was very open, with large overhead fans and uniformed Indian waiters hovering about. The room also boasted a long bar, but the popular drinking area seemed to be on the veranda outside, overlooking the swimming pool. Off to the side of this pool and across a well-kept lawn, was a changing area. This was just a narrow building containing a row of cubicles, similar to what we had at home in the local swimming baths. In spite of its name, this club stood at the top of a hill overlooking the sea, so the pool water was fresh, not salt and it felt great to swim in. One morning, a couple of shipmates and myself, went to this place for a snack, a few drinks and a swim. We sat drinking at the bar for a while before ordering some sandwiches to be brought to the swimming pool. Meanwhile we went to the cubicles to get changed. At this time of day we had the place to ourselves, because as Kipling said "Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun". Well! We did have the pool to ourselves, but overhead a flock of birds were hovering. They were called 'Kite Hawks', probably about 15 or 20 of them and every so often some of them would swoop

down to pick something from the ground. They were reasonably big birds so we guessed that they were not picking up insects. Whatever it was, it would have to be large enough to make it worth their while, but no matter how closely we watched them we still saw nothing. Another thing that made it difficult to observe was that they used their feet to pick things up, so whatever it was, it was wrapped up tightly in their feet. These birds were not picking up anything from the terracing round the pool, but from the area of the main building, the changing block and a couple of outhouses nearby. Of course they were continuously circling overhead like vultures, before dropping to the ground. It was while they were circling that they were causing us problems, as every now and then we would get a Splatter in the Water. It is little wonder then that the common name for these birds is S**** Hawks. After a while I felt that I'd had enough swimming and was beginning to burn in the heat of the sun. I had one last dip and made my way down to the changing block. Anyway the sandwiches were about due to arrive. As I made my way across the lawn I was able to see what the birds were picking up.

They were insects, but not the small insignificant things you get at home. These were a kind of cockroach about two and a half inches long and almost an inch across, at its shoulders. I couldn't see many of them, but I'm sure there must have been. Every so often one would emerge and scurry across the open ground only to be picked off by a Hawk. I stood watching for a few minutes then went in to get changed. I stripped off my costume and reached for my towel, but stopped with my hand hovering above my clothes, shaking and unable to move. There! Crawling over them was a 'Scorpion'; I felt the hairs on my body stand on end with fear. The creature was about two inches long and white in colour (as I am sure I must have been), with a little black tip on its curled up tail, which I guess was its sting. I have no idea whether it was dangerous or not but I wasn't hanging around to find out. I reached for the costume I had discarded to put it back on, as I was naked and wanted to get out of the place. Have you ever tried to put on a wet bathing costume standing on one leg with nothing to sit on or lean against? My towel and clothes were on the seat, a 'Scorpion' was on my clothes and I didn't know what to do. Keeping an eye on the insect and getting nowhere with the costume! I decided instead to swipe the thing off with it. Now, whether it was the booze affecting my eyesight or just a bad aim, I missed the thing entirely. So, the next time I just tried to nudge it off. Its tail shot up over its back and it grabbed hold of the costume and started to climb. How fast can a scorpion go? I can tell you, not nearly as fast as me. I dropped everything and ran out of the place naked on to the lawn, shouting, probably screaming at the top of my voice. My mates turned and looked at me, but not knowing what was wrong, just laughed at me standing there naked. Eventually one of the staff from the club came running over with a towel to cover me. I told him what had happened and he came out with my clothes and my wet costume. He assured me that he could find nothing anywhere on my clothes, or anywhere else for that matter. In fact I wonder if he believed me in the first place. There was no way I was wearing any of these clothes until he went through them with the proverbial fine toothed comb. Once satisfied that it was safe, I returned to the cubicle got dressed, then made my way back to my mates. I tipped the guy for his help. Of course my mates didn't believe I'd seen anything either. However, I could relax in the knowledge that I had changed out of my costume, while they were still in theirs and their clothes were still back in the changing rooms. Maybe they would get lucky too.

During all of the excitement, (which was really only about 15 or 20 minutes), the waiter had brought the food to the poolside table and my mates were about to tuck in. I remember there were two silver style platters, covered of course to keep the flies off. The idea was to just slip your hand under the lid and take out whatever you wanted. Now that was fine for a while, eating, drinking and just chatting, everyone just slipping their hand under the lid when they felt like it. Eventually someone said "For god's sake, I feel like I am stealing these bloody things! Let's take the F***** lid off and eat them". All agreed, so we did and within a few seconds we were fending off the Kite Hawks which we had forgotten about. As we flailed our arms about, I knocked over the hitherto untouched platter sending everything onto the ground. We could do nothing because the sandwiches were now covered in dirt and strictly for the birds, pardon the pun. Later as we made our way back to the ship we vowed not to go there again in the daytime, but to pay heed to Rudyard Kipling. I never did find out whether that scorpion was deadly or not and I have never had any reason since then to check it out. The cockroaches like creatures were indeed just larger relatives of the common cockroach. The local name for them, I understand, sounded like canary, so naturally they got to be called 'Bombay Canaries'. I'm sure though that they were common enough to be found almost anywhere in India or Pakistan.

'Sit -Com'
Bombay :- India

Often when the ship arrives in port a telephone line is installed and I remember that this was the case in Bombay. It is mainly for the use of the deck officers and freight agents in connection with the cargo. Of course we also could use it if we were ordering a taxi. Sometimes we used it when contacting the tailors and shoemakers ashore. Perhaps I should qualify that statement! You see these people are well known for their skill and ability to make well fitting clothes and shoes quickly and cheaply, so every time we went there, we would order some new shirts, shorts or a pair of sandals. I in fact bought all of my uniform and equipment in this city. The reason I particularly recall the telephone is because therein lies a tale.

The telephone on this occasion was in the alleyway just outside my cabin door. Naturally if I happened to be in my cabin, I would hear it. If it rang for a long time, then I would of course answer it. All calls in connection with the cargo would come through the dock offices and it was therefore always the same operator on the line. I knew she was Indian but her voice had a very affected English accent and sounded very pleasant. One day I answered the phone and called the deck officer. When I told her that he was on his way, she asked me if she could speak to me afterwards. I was a bit taken aback at first, but my ego was flattered so I agreed. When I got back on the line she told me that she wanted to expand her English (whatever that meant!). Now! I hadn't spoken to many women in India except perhaps when we visited some of the British Clubs. Most of the women in these places either considered that you were not in their class, or they were old wrinkled Gin Bins quite happy to talk to anyone who would buy them a drink, if you know what I mean. Anyway, I suggested to her that she should come down to the ship in the evening when we could talk all night if she wished. (No ulterior motive Mate?). She declined my offer but instead asked if I would like to meet her outside the offices when she finished work. She asked me to bring a friend for her friend and she would prepare a meal for us at her flat. Now things were looking promising, I was being asked for a date! No! A double date! The only problem was that it was a blind date and maybe she had an ulterior motive. Anyway, I told my mate, and he was all for it. His philosophy being, 'You won't know if you don't go' and anyway there was to be a free home cooked meal in it.

That evening as we stood at the front door of the dock offices I could see that almost all of the staff coming out were men, all of whom were dressed in smart western style. Obviously they were of a very high Caste. I turned to my mate and told him that I had forgotten to ask how we would recognise our dates and that I didn't even know her name. By now there was quite a few women coming out and like the men, they too were obviously high Caste`, almost white I would say. Some were dressed in a traditional 'Sari' (I think that is how you spell it) and some in Western dress. But where were our dates? My mate decided to go in and ask a very attractive young girl in a 'Sari' to direct him to where the switchboard was. Within minutes he learned that the girl he was talking to was the friend of the operator and was waiting for her. His date in fact. We introduced ourselves and chatted while we waited for her mate to arrive. Well, that was him fixed up and he seemed to have done all right, so far as looks and shape were concerned. I wondered if I would be as lucky! No sooner into my head than along came my date, she too was dressed in a Sari and while also a very attractive girl, she was shall we say, a bit on the plump side. Not fat! But definitely on the plump side. This was no time to criticise her shape or looks, after all she hadn't known what I would look like, I could have looked like Frankenstein or been built like a 'Sumo' wrestler. No! I learned a long time ago that looks can be deceiving and that there is much more to a person than their looks. If I ever knew what their names were, then I have long since forgotten and from now on I will just refer to them as the girls. The time was probably about 6pm when we hailed a taxi. I wondered where we were going as I took a swig from the half bottle that I always carried in my back pocket. I offered it over to the girl and to my surprise, she took a drink. Well, now I knew that her religion, whatever it was, at least didn't forbid alcohol. The girls first wanted to visit the market to pick up some ingredients for the meal before going to the flat. We left the taxi and strolled around the market place.

Having obtained what was needed, (which we of course paid for) we again hailed a taxi and carried on to what looked like a row of two storey flats. They looked quite nice and I guess was the equivalent to their middle class houses. They were obviously not cheap and run down, so we knew that we were not going to a hovel. We went up to the first floor and into the flat. We were right; the flat was very bright and tidy though sparsely furnished, just like a bed-sit at home. A set of French doors led on to a small balcony. The table was quite low, like a coffee table and with very

ornate carvings. We all sat on cushions on the floor, eating the meal from a couple of large dishes in the middle. Why not? Again I use the saying, When in Rome, do as the Romans do. The meal I will tell you was first class, but then by this time I was hungry enough to eat a horse. Mind you, I have no idea what I was eating. The girls produced bottles of some kind of beer to wash it all down and we reciprocated with drinks from our trusty flasks, which were now almost empty. The time by now must have been going on 10.00pm and it was quite dark. Inevitably we paired off to give each couple some privacy. The girl and I went out onto the balcony and I was hoping that she wasn't going to ask for lessons in English. I don't know how long we were there, but suddenly a voice called from the balcony above. Whoever it was, obviously couldn't see us, but knew that we were there.

The girl put her hand over my mouth and looked anxiously up. At the same time answering the person above. Now I was beginning to get the picture! They might have their own flat, but they obviously had a landlady or nosey neighbour in the flat above. She put her finger to her lips to silence me and made to get up. This was no time to run out on me, but she got up and went inside. A few minutes later she came back in a panic whispering "Your pal has already left, but I can't get you to the door, so you will have to go that way". She ushered me to the balcony rail and pointed down. I hesitated for a moment, trying to pull myself together. She must be kidding! The balcony was about 10 or 12 feet above the ground. She looked behind her into the flat and then in one pleading look at me, said "Please". I quickly climbed over the edge and lowered myself as far as I could so that I wouldn't have so far to drop. The drop in any case must have been well over 6 feet and as soon as I hit the ground I rolled, rather than ran into the shadows. By this time the situation seemed so ridiculous that it got the better of me and I started to laugh aloud, only to have someone put their hand over my mouth again. This time it was my mate whom I hadn't seen in the darkness. He whispered as he pointed up to the balcony. A big woman in western dress seemed to be arguing with the girls or scolding them, while they appeared to be protesting their innocence. After a time, everything calmed down and they all went inside. We checked that we hadn't left anything behind before making our way to a main road to get a taxi back to the ship. I learned later that the girls were actually residents in a kind of company owned house and one of the house rules was. 'No male guests after 8 PM' and they had well and truly broken the rules. Apparently they got away with it but I couldn't help thinking that it was all like a scene from some kind of sit-com.

The Cages: -Bombay

Some places have certain attractions that a guy should attempt to visit if given the opportunity. For instance, one would not go to Paris and not visit the 'Moulin Rouge' or to London and not visit 'Soho'. You will notice that I am not referring to museums or architecture, but it is nevertheless sightseeing to some extent. The main red light district of Bombay is a street of shop windows where prostitutes of all kinds ply their trade. They don't stand out in the street touting for customers. That is done by dozens of pimps arguing and jostling each other. Before you judge me, I must tell you that we saw these things from the safety of a taxi while the driver gave us a running commentary. He drove slowly along this street pointing out the different attractions. I said earlier that it was a street of shop windows and it was, but the windows were large and almost at ground level. Because of the intense heat during the day, the windows are not covered in glass, but instead are covered by stout iron bars and look for the entire world like a row of cages. These allowed you to see the various saleable goods sitting or lying about in scanty underwear and I might add, looking very disinterested and miserable. I can tell you that there was absolutely nothing sexy looking about them and although I was seeing them from afar shall we say, I can tell you that the attractions were certainly varied though I would hardly call them attractive. Some of the cages I understand, contained men dressed in women's clothing, but in spite of that they still looked like men. (No thank you! I had been fooled before by these pretenses). Some of the other cages even contained children, some looking as young as seven or eight, and they appeared to be mostly all boys. In fact, some of the pimps were openly shouting "Small boys, very cheap!" Almost all of the pimps were also offering to supply English schoolteachers. Now! Who would want to learn English in a red light district?

The women and girls (all of whom I might say, looked exactly what they were and as I have said, miserable into the bargain) were black. I am not being racist when I say that, I simply mean that they were obviously of quite a low 'caste' and had probably been sold into the business as young girls. Perhaps this was just another way of staying alive in this poverty-ridden City. The taxi driver

told us that they were not really visited by white customers, but mainly by the locals. That is not to say that white people didn't frequent the places, but they would have to be very, very drunk or desperate, maybe both! All of these sights in any case, we found to be absolutely disgusting. Even more disgusting was the smell, a mixture of incense, spices and what could best be described as raw sewage. We'd had enough so we urged the driver to move away. I'd heard about the 'Cages of Bombay'. Now I had seen them.

At the far end of this street and separated by an open space, was a white painted two-storey building. This building, although having similar low windows, did not have bars on them but rather resembled a proper shop front with glass windows and fine net curtains at the back. The windows were decorated with exotic houseplants and a couple of fish tanks containing tropical fish. The driver told us that this was a house owned by a British woman and it was where he often brought visitors, from seamen to civic officials. There were four of us and we voted to go in (just out of curiosity, you understand!). I had never been in a recognised, shall we say establishment before. Bars? Clubs? Yes! But not a real brothel. I only wanted to check out the place so that I could add to my experiences. For the benefit of anyone reading this and unlikely to have the opportunity of a similar experience, I will try and describe the place.

As soon as we stepped inside, I had the distinct impression that it resembled a kind of up-market Indian Restaurant. I remember that the carpet was a bright red in colour, while the walls appeared to be painted in dark lilac, with several large expensive looking tapestries hanging. The ceiling was dark blue and covered in stars and crescent moons, some of which I think were illuminated. There was also quite a large illuminated fish tank in the centre of the room, again, filled with tropical species. I think the décor at first, seemed a little intimidating, but once my eyes became accustomed to the dim light, I actually found it to be quite relaxing. The room itself was probably about twenty feet square. Against the walls were several bamboo or wickerwork sofas covered in brightly embroidered cushions and each sofa had a long low table in front of it.

You must be wondering how I could remember all these details after such a long time. All I can say in defence is that I was 24 years old and although having seen many interesting things on other voyages, this was something entirely different and I couldn't help but be impressed. All of this of course I observed in a matter of minutes, but it is still imprinted in my memory. We were at a loss what to do for a few moments, then, an attractive white woman came into the room and asked us if we wanted to order a drink. She was quite matter of fact about it as though she were a waitress. I guessed she was probably in her mid thirties, very good-looking and respectably dressed, not at all what one would expect to see in a place like this. For a brief few moments I began to wonder where we were. I suppose I expected to see girls scantily dressed in revealing tops, frilly knickers and stockings held up with garters, but then that's what comes from watching too many cowboy movies. We ordered some beer and settled ourselves on the sofas to wait apprehensively on whatever was to follow. The woman brought us the drinks, sat down beside us and proceeded to ask what our requirements were. I had never heard it put that way before and certainly never expected to be asked what I required. After all, you wouldn't go in to a fish shop and ask for a cake. One of my mates, who obviously seemed to have been around, jokingly asked her if she had a list of 'Tariffs'. A contemptuous look and a stony silence met this remark. She then went on to explain that she wanted to know whether we were going to stay for a lengthy period or just for a short time. Again, my mate spoke up, saying, "I don't spend any money on time, its goods we're after and I don't spend money on goods until I've seen them". We all fell silent for a moment then my mate continued again saying, "If you are the only one here, I would rather not wait in a queue". Someone else asked her to explain before we got fed up guessing and decided to leave. She half apologised saying that she had assumed that we knew how her house functioned. That's a good way of describing her business. Apparently most of her girls were graded according to what we were prepared to spend and she would have to know in advance. The whole thing was beginning to seem like an auction of sorts, where the one who pays the most, gets the best. We agreed that we would each spend the same amount. I forget how much, but it must have been an acceptable amount because she seemed quite pleased. This way none of us would have an advantage over the other and at least it would get us a stage further in the proceedings. We also agreed that none of us would pay anything up-front until we saw what was on offer. The woman was a bit agitated at this and realised that she was going to have to explain herself further.

She told us that only a few girls lived on the premises. They apparently were mainly for those men who are, shall we say, in a hurry. I guess that would put these girls at the lower end of the earners though probably often the hardest worked. Unfortunately that would also make them the most frequented. The woman assured us however that even these girls were White, European or Eurasian. She went on to explain that the cream of her girls were mainly recruited from respected occupations and would have to be contacted depending on what we were prepared to pay. Now the picture was becoming much clearer. Apparently some of her girls were ordinary housewives, nurses or schoolteachers and would only appear if it were going to be worth while for them. All of this I should point out had taken place over a period of about thirty minutes or so and I at least was fast losing interest. Let's face it, we were expected to tell her that we were prepared to pay £10, £20 or whatever, so that she could arrange an appointment. We were then to come back when the goods were ready, so to speak! Well we were just seamen and there was no way that we were going to hang about or call back on the off chance that we would like what we got. No! This time we decided to give it a miss. Maybe next time? You'll never know. A pity mind you, I would like to have seen just what some of these girls looked like. My wisecracking mate's parting remark was "Maybe next time we'll send you a post card first".

One thing had crossed my mind though! When the taxi driver told us that he often took civic officials to the place. I wondered! Did any of them ever accidentally meet their next door neighbour? Their mate's wife? Or maybe worse! Also! Why did these women do it? Surely it wasn't for the money. Perhaps it was a bit of excitement in place of boredom. Or is it just the heat that gets them?

As we drove back down the street (yes the taxi had waited for us, he knew he would make more from us than he would locally) past the cages, it must have looked to the pimps that we were coming back for the cheap stuff. Again we had to go quite slowly through the crowds and because of the heat the car windows were wide open. No such thing as air conditioning in these days. Many of these pimps and what seemed like the entire city of child beggars were poking their heads in and shouting at us. The pimps were only trying to get custom, while the kids were looking as usual for 'Backshees' (hand outs). I guess the heat was beginning to get to me too and I was getting pissed off with them. I actually swore at one of the pimps as he moved with the car. That was my big mistake! As he angrily shouted back at me, he put his arm through the window and reached for me with his hand. I shrank back in case he had a knife but nevertheless felt his hand on my face and breathed a sigh of relief when I felt no pain. I did feel something wet on my cheek however. I wiped it away with my hand expecting to see blood and discovered to my disgust that somehow or other he had smeared me with what smelled like 'shit'. Hell he must have been carrying it around with him! I was all for getting out and having a go, but the driver told me to stay inside and that he would not stop his car. As soon as we got clear of the crowd, the driver explained that the cages was notorious for lawlessness and that I would definitely have come off worse in any fight. When we got back to the ship, I must have spent hours cleaning my face with disinfectant and a scrubber. I know it took a long time to erase it from my memory. Well! Until now that is.

Bird Brain:- Bombay

On another occasion, a few of us went into the city, mainly, for a look around the place and to perhaps buy some souvenirs. I can remember we were in a kind of market area, of which there seemed to be many. Street entertainers like 'Gilly Gilly' men (Fakirs) or 'Mongoose' and 'Snake' performers always had an appreciative audience and were worth giving a few 'Rupees'. These markets sold just about anything you can imagine. In addition to the usual fruit and vegetables, there were stalls selling ivory and woodcarvings, while others sold silks, linens and carpets. Still more sold live insects, snakes and other reptiles, monkeys and other animals including birds. It was all very interesting and we were constantly being pestered to buy something. As usual, we'd had a few drinks before going ashore and we're generally having fun trying to bargain with the stallholders. Somehow, during our bargaining, one of my mates was persuaded to buy a Minah bird. He had no idea whether he would be allowed to keep it aboard ship, but he was quite pleased with his purchase of this very plain looking black bird. He knew, as we all did of course, that these birds are well known for their ability to mimic sounds realistically, especially speech and he was assured that his bird was an excellent speaker. It certainly made a lot of noise and seemed to be repeating itself loudly as he carried it round the market in its tiny bamboo basket. The trouble was that no

one could understand what it was saying as it was speaking in Hindi or Urdu. As we continued our way round the market looking for a larger cage for his new purchase, we were followed by lots of children. This in itself was not unusual, as the children are always begging. "Backsheesh Sahib", but these children were just following and laughing at us, while pointing at the bird. Eventually we got hold of a group of them and after giving them some money, we asked them what they were all laughing at. From what they told us, the bird was yelling, "Help" and "Thief" together with swearing all sorts of curses, apparently just for the fun of it.

Our mate thought carefully for a while about the bird. After all, if he were allowed to take it home, no one would know that it was swearing, although some of the sounds were not dissimilar to swear words. With some difficulty we managed to talk him out of keeping it, by convincing him that if it was saying the same thing over and over, it might take years to get it to stop and learn a new language. We had no idea whether this was true or not. The bird might easily have been trainable. Anyway, he reluctantly decided to take it back. Now! I have no idea what he originally paid for it, but the guy told him that a sale was a sale and he didn't want the bird back. However, if he really didn't want to keep it, he would buy it back at half its original price. "No way" said my mate, "I want what I paid for it, or I will wring its neck". The guy looked at him and shrugging his shoulders said, "It is your bird so you can kill it if you want". Our mate really had no intention of killing it and probably wouldn't have known how in any case. Again we persuaded him to cut his losses and accept the offer. The trader seemed very pleased to have his bird back, which, by the way, was now sitting very quietly in its original cage at the back of the stall. After all, he had just conned my mate out of quite a few Rupees

This little story is just another example of the incredibly stupid escapades that half pissed seamen get up to. Of course our mate wasn't really upset about being out of pocket, he realised that he would probably have spent considerably more in booze, if he had been in a bar or club somewhere. The trader, on the other hand, had made a nice little profit at no real risk to his original investment. He probably got the bird for nothing as an egg. No doubt he would be able to feed his family for months on that one aborted sale, but I often wondered if the whole thing was a put up job and how many other unsuspecting people had been conned. I know that these birds are clever, but surely not that clever! Nevertheless, I bet it got extra special treats from time to time. When we got back to the ship that night we learned that our mate would have been allowed to keep the bird. There is a ban on the import of hooked-billed birds into UK, but apparently some other kinds are okay. That's a bit of a pity, because parrots have been associated with seamen for a very long time. Let's face it! Where would Long John Silver be without his parrot?

Calcutta:- India

Memories of this city are vague now and to tell the truth, I doubt if I could separate it in my mind from any other city in India. Certainly, I do the country an injustice as I know that each city and town has its own history, character and attractions. However these things held little interest for me at that time. To tell the truth, I was interested only in what pleasures I could gain. One could argue that I was foolish not to recognise and exploit the wonderful opportunities I had. Opportunities, to educate myself to a world of knowledge. Opportunities, to record on paper the many things I had seen done, however insignificant at the time. Having missed these opportunities I now have only my memory to help me with these pages.

There were of course some things about Calcutta that one could not fail to notice and which gave it a certain similarity to many other cities in India. The streets were always full of beggars and noisy cars, large over laden ornately painted lorries and lots of taxis. They are always impatient and constantly blasting away on their horns, even when it is obvious that the vehicle they are blasting at is unable to move because of a vehicle in front of it and so on along the traffic. Not unlike a traffic jam in New York! To add to this, there is a constant to-ing and fro-ing of precariously loaded handcarts and bicycles. Cows wander about at will and sometimes will be found lying unconcerned in the middle of street. Everything therefore has to stop or go around them causing even more traffic mayhem. No one dares to touch or move them as they are considered to be sacred animals, to the Hindu religion.

All of India shares one thing in common! What we sarcastically called, 'The call of the East'. This was a habit of most of the male population (and some women) of clearing their throat and spitting indiscriminately onto the street and walls. The spitting is bad enough but it covers everything in a

blood red dye. This is apparently caused by their habit of chewing, what I recall was called 'Betel Nut'. This is a substance made from the fore mentioned nut, which is ground up and wrapped in a special kind of leaf, which is then chewed. I never tried the stuff, but was told that it is similar to chewing tobacco. It causes one to produce liberal amounts of saliva, which is bright red in colour and has to be spat out. Apparently without regard to where it lands, even people. The clearing of the throat is presumably to clear that substance which must inevitably lodge there. Certainly there is much evidence on their tongue, lips and beard. Which would indicate that the habit is more prevalent among the older men, though having said that? Many of the young men also have beards.

I have said earlier that I seldom interested myself in local culture or history. Calcutta is probably one of the exceptions to this, in as much that some of us felt that we should visit the historical 'Black Hole'. We took a taxi to a place called 'Fort William' in what we were told was the 'Maidan' area of the city. Better known perhaps as the Great Park. In a place called Fort William there is a narrow dungeon, measuring only 6m by 6m (about 20 feet square). The guide told us that the name 'Black Hole' was given to it after an event in the mid-eighteenth century, 1756 to be exact. When, on the 20th June, 156 British prisoners were detained there overnight without food or water. On the following morning it was discovered that only 23 men had survived. By the way, I took the time to research and confirm the above facts.

Another interesting thing about Calcutta is their very high kerbs. The space between the pavement and road is at least a foot high and at intervals, have long spaces below them between the road and the kerb of about 6 inches. The high kerbs are apparently designed to be above the flood level during the monsoon season. The large gaps under the kerbs are to allow a faster run off of water from the roads. We were told however that the system is so antiquated, that it seldom functions properly. I have been caught in these monsoon downbursts a few times and believe me it is no joke. Mind you, the monsoon rains must at least wash some of that dreadful mess off the pavements. When next you see a film of India and the many people carrying umbrellas on what appears to be a brilliant sunny day. You will know why. Monsoon rains come down vertically almost without warning. In fact the sky hardly even gets overcast.

Catching Up:- Calcutta

I had mentioned earlier about the ballet dancer and my mate. She and her teacher had disembarked some days earlier in Bombay. So far as we were concerned that was the last we would see of them. Not so! Here we now were in Calcutta and my mate had received a letter from the girl. He confided in me that she intended to travel to Calcutta to meet him and that he was to phone her to confirm arrange when she should arrive. Now! There was no way that he wanted her to follow him around India and anyway the ship would never be in one port long enough for her to catch up. Since he had received the letter via the shipping agent, he guessed that she would already know the movements of the ship. It would be no use trying to put her off by telling her that the ship would have sailed by the time she arrived. She would always have a good idea of the ship's movements several ports ahead and could be on the quayside when it arrived. Of course as I have said, he had only surmised all of this. Perhaps after all, she would be totally unaware of the ship's movements. He could of course just ignore the letter and hope that she would just forget about him. No! He wasn't a man like that and knew that something had to be done; he was not at all a happy man.

He asked me if I would help by doing a big favour. Of course I would! That's what mates are for. It was decided that I should try to find out the lay of the land (so to speak) by phoning on his behalf. The idea was to try and convince her that it was his duty night aboard so he couldn't contact her. In addition the ship would be sailing early next morning. Not true of course, but it would at least give us the opportunity to find out what she knew. For her to arrive quickly in any port in India she would obviously have to travel by plane so she must be able to afford it. That evening we both went ashore and I phoned the number she had given us from the dock offices. The phone rang out for some time, but there was no reply. Well that settles it I said, "You've phoned and got no reply, so you can forget about it now". He wasn't at all convinced so we decided to wait for an hour or so before trying again. This time we did get through and a woman answered it. I half choked with nerves as I enquired after the girl. There was a bit of a silence, then, the woman returned. "I'm so sorry" she said "but she left for Australia a couple of days ago". I thanked her and told her

that there was no message (just in case she wanted to know who was phoning). My mate had overheard our conversation and to be truthful, I'd never seen him with a bigger smile. I'm sure he made some comment that he hoped the ship didn't have to make an unscheduled visit to Australia.

That night we both got pissed out of our minds.