

Matey's Memoirs

By Robin (Matey) Martin

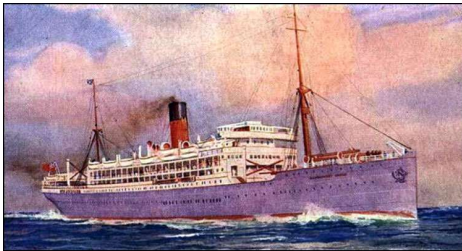
In his above titled book Robin Martin includes the time he spent in the Nyasaland Police in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Courtesy of his daughter, Anne Blackman, these chapters are available on the Nypol website. They are broken down into a number of parts and appear in serial form from month to month until fully available.

Chapter 3 ~ Part 1

Slow Boat to Beira

In late March 1949, I once more said my goodbyes to my mother and sisters and friends in Kent and made for Tilbury docks with my local Taxi owner. He took my baggage and me over the Thames, via the Gravesend Ferry, and dropped me at the ship's gangway. This was a much quicker, cheaper and more convenient way to travel, than to go by train to Tilbury, via London, and I was soon aboard the *SS Llandoverly Castle*. However, she was not to sail on time as work needed to be done on the boilers: consequently, we were moored in midstream for four days, downriver from the docks, while the repairs were completed. Passengers were given the option to stay ashore for a few more days, or remain on board. Of course there were complaints, but I was happy to stay onboard. I had said my "Good-byes" and did not want to repeat the process. I was travelling first class for the first time, so was made very comfortable and drinks were at sea-going prices. It was also a chance to get to meet some of my fellow passengers, amongst whom I noticed a very neat little lady, travelling alone, who also stayed onboard, and who I came to know as the journey progressed. My fellow cabin-mate was Frank Chivers, an-ex Palestine Policemen who I had not met before, also going to Nyasaland to join the police.

The ship was one of the mail steamships of the Union Castle Line, not very large, about 11,000 tons. She was a working passenger and cargo ship. There may have been capacity for about 120 first class and 40 second class passengers and in spite of the fact



that there had been a shortage of sea berths after the war, the passenger list was not full and there was plenty of room. The ship was comfortably fitted out with saloon, dining room and library etc, but a far cry from the enormous luxury liners of today – certainly not a cruise ship, but perhaps all the more agreeable for that. For those who liked a dip each day there was a small

wooden swimming pool on the deck, about 20 ft by 14, which you had to climb into by ladder.

Once the ship was ready to sail we made our way down the English Channel, and across the Bay of Biscay, a body of water which lived up to its wild, rough reputation, and only a few passengers spent the evening in the saloon. Once across the bay, however, the weather moderated considerably and we all enjoyed a very pleasant cruise to the Canary Islands, where we refuelled with oil at Las Palmas. This was the refuelling station for many liners, it being so much cheaper for the shipping companies to "bunker up" there than in the UK.

Ascension Island

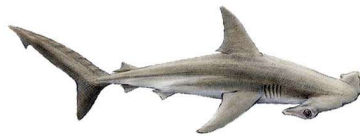
On the Equator King Neptune came aboard, robed and with his trident as sceptre. A rollicking "trial" followed and then dramatic if messy operations involving a lot of tomato sauce and custard; the extraction of sausage intestines; the ducking of a few "miscreants"

in the swimming pool; and finally celebratory drinks. Soon after we called at Ascension Island, to collect and deliver mail. Passengers were not allowed ashore but the island did not look all that inviting. However, there was one phenomenon at Ascension that made the



visit quite memorable. Thousands, possibly millions, of ugly black fish that surrounded the ship – from stem to stern – as soon as it moored in the bay, forming a writhing black band about 10 to 12 ft wide. These sinister creatures swam slowly around the hull, eating anything and everything that was thrown overboard. I noticed even something as unappetising as

orange peel caused some to leap over the backs of others and squirmed across them to get the peel. These fish were so tightly packed that when a steward dropped a bucket attached to a rope amongst them, he pulled up two immediately. When cut open the flesh was seen to be very dark and coarse. We were told they were absolutely unfit to eat. We were also told that these fish were so voracious that they had eaten all the other fish in the vicinity. There was another creature of interest, hammerhead sharks - several of which were lying close by a lighter. A lighter-man was trying to catch one with a hand-line, but he was not having much success.



St Helena

The next port of call was St Helena, about 1,000 miles off the coast of Angola, which I thought was a most delightful Island, and it was very interesting to see Longwood House

where Napoleon had lived during his exile on the island. I recognised it immediately from a picture that I had seen in a history book when I was a lad in school. Some people remarked that they found St Helena dull and boring, there not being a great deal to see and do there, but I did not find it so. I particularly recall the beautiful evening light in the valleys and enjoyed the



island just for that. Art was not generally taught when I was at school but I had attended drawing and painting evening classes once I had left, which I feel helped to develop an appreciation of such, apparently simple things as beautiful light and perhaps I noticed more than I would have done without the training of looking at things that art encourages. I have long held the view that it is very important that schools spend time teaching art, not primarily as preparation for a profession, but as a way of training observation and a greater appreciation of nature. It must surely help enrich pupils' lives after leaving school. From St Helena, being just south of the Equator, it was possible to see both the North Star and the Southern Cross in clear night skies as they spanned the ocean. This was a new experience for me, not having been this far south before. I knew nothing of the southern constellations though I had learnt a good deal about the stars above Palestine from my old Bedouin friend, Hassan Riatti.

Fellow Passengers

There was a complete mix of people travelling on the ship and each day I got to know a little more of my fellow passengers, a few of whom I can recall with some clarity. Some were government servants with jobs to go to or missionaries with a calling; others were travelling to Rhodesia, and other places, to see what work they could find; some were on holiday; others were out for adventure. One chap, a short fat man with several chins, was

a prison officer in some African territory, returning from home leave. He was a perfect example of a glutton and would go through the complete menu at each meal and then be seen eating snacks between meals. The game of "20 Questions" had been arranged as entertainment for the passengers and the prison officer was to be on the panel of questioners. When I heard this I remarked to some of my travelling companions, "There's one question he is bound to ask, 'Can you eat it?'" Sure enough, when it was his turn to enquire about the mystery object, what did he ask but, "Can you eat it?" The company I had been speaking to all burst out laughing – to the panel member's evident discomfort who was quite bemused as to the reason for the merriment. Another extraordinary passenger was a heavy-drinking catholic priest, who became somewhat amorous when drunk. One night I found him trying to force his way into a lady's cabin and had to use some effort to restrain him. In the morning he apologised and explained that it was "the old Adam" that had got into him.

Another, rather colourful character, Dudley Simms, was what we might now call an entrepreneur, who had made himself a small fortune in the dealing of real estate. He was generous to a fault and was usually to be seen surrounded by a crowd of hangers-on, waiting for him to buy the drinks. One night, after he had bought his whole table several rounds, and the levels in the glasses were getting low, he called out loudly to the steward, so that the whole saloon could hear, "Smithy, you'd better bring another round: if I don't buy them no one else will on this table." To my amazement the whole crowd of scroungers treated this as a huge joke and only laughed. Shortly after this incident he got up, left them and walked over to ask if he could join our table. He then went on to tell a remarkable story of how he had recently, and miraculously, escaped death. He had driven his car into the Thames at Maidenhead, one dark night when the river was in flood, and he was drunk. He only realised that he was in the river when the water started coming up from the floor. Soon the car had sunk and settled on the riverbed, under the water. He was able to get out by smashing the window glass, which allowed water to flow into the car and so enable him to open the door and swim out and up to the surface. It was bitterly cold and he was washed half a mile downstream before he managed to grab an overhanging tree and haul himself out. He concluded, with a laugh, that by which time he was stone cold sober. And then he produced a newspaper cutting of the event to corroborate his story.

I also got to know the sweet young woman I had first noticed, when I boarded the ship, Elsie Waters. I fell in love and for 41 years, until she died a few years ago, she was my wife. Elsie had been to England because her mother had died and was now returning to Durban. She sat on a table of women who were travelling alone, including Dr Lucy Mair, an anthropologist, and Iris Davis, who was married to a District Commissioner in Nyasaland and she was on her way to join him. I learnt that since before the war Elsie had been travelling round the world as companion to an Uncle, Col. Swift, who had retired from the Indian Army. They had arrived in South Africa when the war began and spent some time in Durban, staying at the Rydal Mount Hotel. They had also travelled in Central Africa, journeying by bus from Umtali in Rhodesia, where a fellow Indian Army Colonel had retired to, up as far as Lake Kivu, a beautiful resort for Belgian Congo officials. They had then travelled up the Lualaba River for five days, as far as Stanley Falls – the boat tying up at night. They had also travelled to the country I was going to, and so Elsie was able to tell me a little about it. She assured me, "Oh you will like Nyasaland. It is a very happy place. Quite a few people who have worked in the country have bought a place and settled in retirement there." However I am getting ahead of the story.

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