

ABOARD THE JERVIS BAY

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)

THE last voyages of the Jervis Bay were, I suppose, her most exciting. And the last of all her greatest. But these "Bay" boats always were more interesting than most. They touched all the Australian State centres (going down to Hobart in the apple season) and then Colombo, Port Said, Malta, and Southampton. And they were One Class, which gave a great variety of company. Opinions about the desirability of this differed, of course. "Life like a blank double blank barracks," grunted Ross, referring to the regular hours and few "extras." But then he had spent most of his life serving the Shell millions in the Far East, which gives men ever after an unconscious expectation not only of the domestic comfort of *ayahs* and *amahs* and *syces* and "boys" galore, but also of being the no-matter-how-eccentric hub round which these minions and domestic arrangements for ever circle. "When there was no Aberdeen in her Aberdeen and Commonwealth Line title—when she was State owned, that is—the crew used to occupy the best quarters in the ship," snarled Tonks. But then he paid so many taxes to governments that he thought nothing too bad of them and their undertakings as well as of anyone low enough to be employed by them.

A Varied Company

These thoughts that poisoned the wood and brasswork for them didn't worry me. I was off to see the world; and indeed was seeing it already in the varied ship's company. In my own cabin was a Lancashire—speaking Dunedin youth going missioning in Syria, a young Greek from Darwin, Northern Territory, and a son of the Isle of Dogs painfully turning his East End and rolling-stone experiences into short stories. (I wish I knew under what name he writes now. For those first attempts of his were the real thing). Then at midnight as we were leaving Adelaide's desolate uninhabited Outer Harbour a head poked in—"Spare berth, here?"

But he never slept in that berth, only on it. And always when I returned after meals he was already at "home."

"Sick, or slick?" I asked him the second day.

"Neither," said he, "I'm not eating at all on this voyage."

"What?"

"I can't. You see, I'm a stowaway."

Jerry the Stowaway

His plan was simple but daring. Success with it depended on his finding a berth vacant in a cabin whose occupants were prepared to give him a run for his lack of money, living on their scraps, and not being recognised by any officer as "unofficial" while he moved among the pukka passengers during the day. "Why! The gink I got the idea from travelled right to Southampton. Only then, instead of walking down the gangway, the fool ups and asks the purser for a passenger's pass on the boat train to London. So they spotted him and sent



him back to Aussie and gaol, when all he needed to do was to fall off the deck to be free."

Jerry did not get past the clink at Fremantle. To get marooned like that in Western Australia had been his fear. "W.A.'s nothing but a blasted island for a joker without hoot," he had told us. "You can't swag it across the desert any more than you can across the sea. And them Transcontinental trucks is fair built to murder the man that tried to jump them—even if the driver sees you and slows down."

Studying the Animal Life

We had been the only barque in the Great Australian Bight, and the inky Indian Ocean was just ten days of increasing sameness. So there were great points in having a varied fauna to observe. There were students going to Europe to extend their studies, immigrants of a few years ago returning to extend the reputation of Australia, businessmen going to extend (they hoped) their businesses, and their wives to distend the bank accounts of railway directors and hotel waiters. Every possible way of mispronouncing the English language was heard aboard, every sort of libel on the British features was to be seen, and most forms of conduct (and misconduct) to be winked at. Josephs, if not the worst, had the worst cheek. He used to sit all day on the upper

sun deck with someone else's wife whom he had snaffled almost before she had dried her eyes and dropped her broken streamer at Sydney wharf. And then he berated me for having sunbathed (with all due concessions to modesty) on the far corner of that deck where "the lady might have seen you!"

"Among Those Present"

Among those present were the "Professor" (in implacable ignorance and self-conceit); the "Prince of Wales" (in a George V. beard and certainly out of his mind); the Misses B— (in a different garment—and sometimes mostly out of one—every meal); Signor Doctor Antonio Diagachomo (in love); "Pansy" (in red, green, and purple shirts, kimono and basket sandals); il Capitane Fichi (in goodwill, popularity and unintelligibility); Mr. F— (in a book-semi-pornographic), and several Colombo tea-planters (in drink). The "Prof.", though his qualifications consisted of his having "gone deep into Psychology one time," and having slushed in a Tasmanian hospital, and though his Chair was in the University of His Own Esteem, fooled all of the people some of the time and some of the people all the time. The Misses B— were alleged to have two cabins—one to sleep in and one to keep their clothes in. The man with the flat, bald head sunburned all over was an Owstrian engineer (or a Swiss, some said: His speech was a mixture of European pronunciations of English: But he really came from Lichtenstein, well known to stamp collectors, unknown to the rest of mankind). That tanned top came from his "living native" and hatless in the Indies, and he was off to His Promised Land of Russia to make roads. Mr. F— was the greatest living expert on the Australian blowfly. They needed him in Bradford. "Pansy" (real name Tom) had been a valet, had stolen an umbrella when unemployed after his "job" died, and had done fourteen days. He knitted and crocheted all day in the lounge,

danced divinely, and wore a Turner-esque succession of semi-feminine ensembles. I saw him last chopping meat at Smithfield Markets.

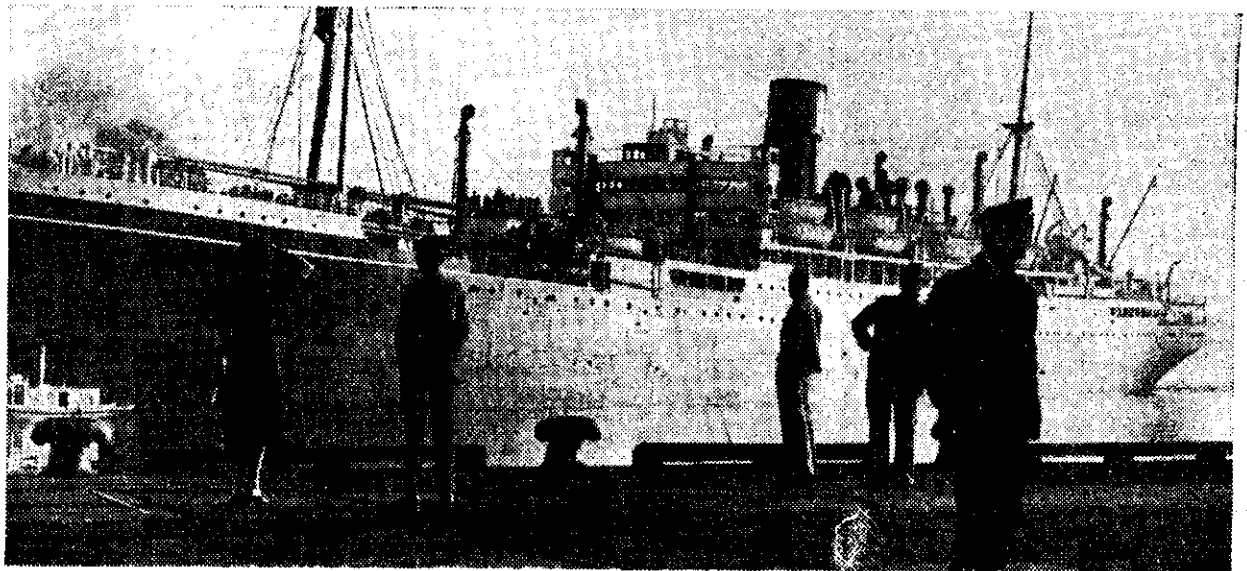
The young Parsee, whose passport name was Mr. Thomas, showed me things the First Class don't see when we got to Colombo. (Though I burgled the Maltese Parliament House right off my own bat, and got into a drovers' and Abos' Two-up Ring in the Fremantle sandhills entirely by accident. The amenities of the Jervis Bay didn't extend to helping me do these things, I mean).

At Port Said a man got on who walked the deck reading books written in the Hebrew Script — on the pruning and dunging of orange trees at Tel Aviv. His home was Swansea. There were also some New Zealanders and Australians aboard. One, I heard, used in Britain to startle the natives into servility and amazement with references to his "hundreds of acres under tea-tree."

Seeing Red!

But we had ultra-respectable passengers too: Those, that is, with money enough to occupy deck cabins and make beasts of themselves at the bar (some of them). One of these rushed out of a talk I was giving on "Russia" in the dining room for the Entertainments' Committee. In stamped the Purser in a moment or two and bawled at the back of the hall, "I order this meeting to disband: This is a British ship!" And I had chosen the topic as being less controversial than the others which had been suggested to me — "The Bible" and "How Not To Bring Up Children!" (I had had a lifetime's experience of not bringing up children in those days). In revenge, the proletariat—including an Australian University Lecturer and a gigantic Irishman who always wore a bleeding heart, and some very decent but very villainous-looking Maltese—staged a "Bonehead's Nightmare" at the Captain's Fancy Dress Ball—complete with red bunting, bombs, and boiled babies in bags in the Red Sea. And the Captain apologised.

That was in 1932—a far cry from a Dean of Canterbury's eulogies of Russia and the Churchill Government's wooing of a possible ally. But the Jervis Bay has indeed shown that she was a British ship.



THE former Australian liner, Jervis Bay, which, as an armed merchant cruiser on convoy protection duty, went down in flames in the North Atlantic after engaging a heavily-armed German surface raider.