

JUNKET ON THE HARBOUR

ONE day in June when I was sitting on the Eastbourne ferry wharf having lunch, the Poolta thrashed away from the Railway Wharf with her screw half out of the water, and flogged awkwardly round the Pipitea Wharf in the general direction of Petone. I sat listening to the flailing thump of her screw, wondering where she was going. Next morning on the way to work I saw she'd joined the Karetu and the Kaimai, which have both been waiting quietly at anchor for somebody to buy them since the summer of 1948-49.

They lie offshore between Kaiwarra and Ngahauranga, and after some research I've found that they're stripped of stores and equipment, parts likely to rust are greased, automatic switches and storage batteries look after the riding lights. They're so empty that life is hard for rats and cockroaches. Constant supervision also makes it tough for anyone who wants to swim out and flog a funnel or a garboard strake. Space in that part of Wellington Harbour is free, whereas at the wharves, ships pay a fairly high rent. The Kaimai and Poolta were both colliers in the West Coast trade, and will have company soon when two other colliers, the Gabriella and the Omana are laid up. Over at Shelly Bay, an idyllic spot where there are trees, good shelter and few people, the Wingatui and the old Wellington-Nelson ferry Arahura lie. So did the Arahura's sister ship the Matangi, until she was hauled into the stream recently by the tug Tapuhi; a trip on which I was supercargo, or superfluous deadweight.

It was a crisp afternoon with a light southerly as the Tapuhi tramped and mumbled over to Shelly Bay against the ripple. The crew squatted in nooks

out of the breeze. They smoked, and squinted into the sun with that timeless contemplation sailors can wrap round themselves whenever they have a minute to spare. I wandered about, looking at the gear: lengths of steam-piping, spikes and three axes, the massive iron swivel for the mooring chains, and finally came to rest against the engine room scuttle, where the hot draught warmed my back and the sun my chest.

AT Shelly Bay wharf we came alongside the Matangi, port bow to starboard beam, with scarcely a kiss. The men who had been working on her looked down at us with cold eyes.

"What do you want?" they asked. "There's nothing left to flog . . . we've stripped her." Undeterred, we scrambled over the rail with our axes and spikes and made our way forward. Two tons thirteen hundredweight of mushroom anchor hung on the starboard bow near water level, while an ordinary two-clawed model of about one ton decorated the port bow. Lengths of looped chain were suspended from the rail by light lines. It was all a little depressing; so much weight to Jiang round an old lady's neck.

The Matangi was cunningly warped away from the wharf, the Tapuhi lashed to the starboard quarter, heaving and hauling, and a couple of lines out to port over wharf bollards to pull the stern round. The bos'n, a Scandinavian who liked to see things done right, stayed on the wharf until the last minute, hitched his pants and walked aboard as casually as a man stepping over the gutter.

RUNNING with the breeze across the harbour was blissful. I hung over the dodger of the Matangi's stripped bridge like a praying mantis on a sunny

log. We had to pick up a marker buoy and dropped by the pilot launch. It was up sun and about the size of a pin head. The skipper hailed the pilot launch and asked it to stand by the buoy. We swung a little to port and ran straight up the sun track, four lookouts in echelon at the bow rail silhouetted against the shivering patch of dazzle, while the skipper peered from the bridge.

"Can you see that buoy?" he called. "Yust right amedships on the pilot launch," the bos'n said, flourishing a Scandinavian J over his shoulder at the bridge. "Too much vay. Stop her."

"How close now?"
"100 feet . . . 50 feet . . . 15 feet."
"Right. Cut her!"

The axeman swung at the lines holding the port anchor. There was a splash, a rumble, a flurry of rust from the chain, and down it went.

The Tapuhi hauled us off astern, and the chain paid out. "There should be 120 fathoms on the chain," the skipper said. "We'll run out 90."

We ran out 90. The Tapuhi cast off, came up to our starboard bow, stern on, and two men bent a heavy line round the massive mushroom anchor. "They'll tow it out 90 fathoms on the other side and drop it," the skipper said. "Then we'll be moored fast."

The Tapuhi went ahead strongly, the bos'n let go the brake on the anchor winch, and the chain dived into the water like a striking snake, link following link in a vicious, eager rush. Flakes of rust flew up in the bos'n's face. He narrowed his eyes, leaned on the brake, and counted aloud as the shackles ran out. There were fifteen fathoms of chain between each shackle. The skipper clutched the rail and hissed between his teeth. He waved his hand when 90 fathoms had run out. Nobody on the Tapuhi moved. The skipper leaped in the air. "Chop her!" he yelled, in a voice that filled the air like a rock fall in a fiord. "Chop her! Chop her!" "Ya, ya," the bos'n said very softly. "Chop her."

An axe swung once on the Tapuhi. It jammed in the block with the line only half cut. There was a struggle and a rushing about. Somebody finished the job with another axe and the mushroom anchor disappeared in an upsurge of froth and bubbles.

THE sun set as we made back towards the wharves. At Aotea Quay we nosed in to the other tug, the Taioma, lying alongside the Dorset. Directed by a tired, catarrhal loudspeaker we shoved the big ship astern and sideways to her berth, ready to land the New Zealand Army's new tank, which she had brought from England.

We backed out and picked up speed again. The breeze freshened. I slunk aft turning up my coat collar and found a nook with two men in it. They borrowed a match and told me about a fish and chip shop in Glasgow. "Nothing like it here," they said. "Three pieces of fish and a hatful of chips for sixpence." The Somes Island light started to wink. We pounded round Fryatt Quay. "Half-past five," they said, collecting their gear. "Home to the wife and kids. Glasgow can keep its fish and chip shop."

—G. leF. Y.



Turnbull Library photograph

"Running with the breeze across the harbour was blissful"

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 25, 1950.

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