

Characters

Crew changes are always interesting. The old crew happy to be going home, massing on deck with huge cases and boxes containing their belongings and presents bought during their 12 month voyage. The new crew arriving, somewhat apprehensive as to what sort of ship they will be joining. There is talk and laughter welling up as sometimes old friends meet again. One new arrival stood out against the others. He was huge. Around 6 feet tall, and built like a star wrestler, with a clean shaven head, polished to brilliance. He had no boxes, no cases, and looked somewhat unhappy. On the flight from Manila we were told, his baggage had gone missing. He was advanced some money so he could buy himself some gear, but it was not easy for someone of his size. His own never did turn up, thus he was christened "Suitcase" because he did not have one, and was known by that name by everyone on board. Although he was a giant, he turned out to be a gentle one, and was well liked. Any heavy lifting or strong man stuff was given to him. He took it all in good part. Having one such companion when going ashore had its good points. Any fights or bar brawls never seemed to be in our vicinity. The Philippine crew looked after their officers! The one time something did happen, almost the whole crew went back to that bar the next day and took it - and the culprits apart!

The Suez Canal is perhaps the bane of all seamen's lives. The transit itself is usually uneventful, perhaps even boring, but the ship is inundated with visitors. On stopping to await a transit, the ship anchors with others in its allocated convoy. Promptly it is the goal of hundreds of "bum boats", jockeying for position, people swarming up ropes and stalls being set up anywhere and everywhere a few square feet of space are available. On deck, in alleyways, anywhere. Crews of strangers manhandle a huge twin beam searchlight on to the bow of the ship and remain there with it the entire transit, as do the bum boats and souvenir sellers. The searchlight is needed at night to illuminate the Canal banks on either side. We are not allowed, however, to operate it ourselves. The fact that we had two perfectly good searchlights belonging to the ship just didn't enter into it. Strangers walk the alleyways, knocking on doors and peering inside if they are not locked, purporting to sell anything from postcards to potency potions. All doors all over the ship must be locked to prevent theft, (something that is never done at sea, where cabins are always left open). The crew are badgered to buy something - anything, to change money, or sometimes to give to a worthy charity (with very impressive - false - certificates of authenticity and personal identification). We could usually tell they are false because of the glaring spelling mistakes contained in them! The language skills of these traders are truly impressive. From one man, one can hear Cockney, Geordie, Scots fluent Egyptian, and a fairly good knowledge of German and French. This, added to their truly magnificent command of vulgar language when angry must be admired. This whole industry is encouraged by the Suez Canal Authority, and is in fact mandatory. A ship is not allowed to stop the bum boats from visiting, otherwise it will more than likely not transit the Canal - or at least a lot later than planned due to many unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances.

One day, our bosun, driven beyond endurance by the pestering of the hawkers, the virtual impossibility of escaping from them, and the all pervading sound and smells, lost his temper. One bum-boatman, refusing to acknowledge that his prospective customer had no money, no time, no interest, no space and no more patience, was bodily picked up and thrown overboard. This was greeted by joyous shouts of support from our crew, and screams and shouts of anger from the assembled bum-boatmen. The wet, bedraggled and very angry Egyptian was picked up from the water by one of his contemporaries, and brought back on board. After a long and very noisy meeting in the Captain's cabin with Canal officials, an apology was demanded (and received) from the bosun. We would otherwise have been delayed or maybe prevented from transiting completely until suitable "baksheesh" had been paid. The Captain, of course, sympathised with the bosun, but was unable to do very much to help. The ship came first.