

THE HUNDRED DAYS

An account of the voyage from Georgetown to England from
29th October 1944 to 6th February 1945 on the S. S. Arabian Prince,

by

Elsie D. Smellie.

This account has been transcribed and edited by Timothy,
younger son of Elsie

He has also appended at the end of this account, a postscript covering the result of his
research into this particular voyage of the Arabian Prince.

FOREWORD

In the early 1940s, both of Elsie and Geofs' children, David and Timothy, were at school at Queen's College, Georgetown. But it was felt that the education there at the time left much to be desired, due to the war situation and the lack of good teaching staff.

David was sent to The Lodge School in Barbados where the standard of education had always been known to be high, while Geof negotiated for places at boarding schools in England, his intention always to have his children educated there.

Possibly the availability of passages by boat came earlier than expected, as hostilities were far from over and England was suffering the inevitable privations of the war.

Thus it was that Elsie and the two children set sail for England in October 1944.



The Arabian Prince in better days after the war



A typical Atlantic convoy

THE HUNDRED DAYS

How deeply are those last hours at The Casuarinas engraved on my memory. The rush of final packing, the filling-in of forms (in triplicate) for acquiring permits; permits to take away a few pieces of jewellery, permits to take 50 lb. of food, permits for the boys' stamp collections, a permit for my bicycle; visits to the Censor's Office with letters, to the Police Station with a photo album; the goodbyes with the necessary vague "sometime soon" in answer to the repeated question "When are you off?"; false alarms over times of sailing. All these were over. The heavy luggage had gone down ahead, and in the hall the carefully labelled hand baggage and last minute packages were lying ready by the door with the utter forlornness that luggage can assume when it spells finality.

The day had dragged unmercifully. Everything was done and it was only left to wait. We had tea on the lawn and watched the long shadows creep across the boys' cricket-pitch, which would no longer know the careful tending, and pride of perfection. The Sutherlands arrived with Donald who was to be in my charge on board. So hearty they were, and jarring to our pensive mood, but probably a heaven-sent antidote to our gloom. We sat and tried to make bright conversation; no longer possible to have that last stroll round the garden, to hunt out the pets to say goodbye. Just as well, perhaps. We joked; we had some drinks, and smoked, as the shadows darkened with the swift suddenness of tropical night. And then in awed silence we watched the splendour of the full moon as she rose behind the lacy tracery of that tree with the long Latin name which I never could remember.

Six-thirty and time to go. We were to be on the wharf by seven. Hasty goodbyes to the Sutherlands, to the servants - a sobbing quartette - a pat for Patch sniffing suspiciously at the luggage. One last look back.

Geof was not allowed on the wharf, and our parting under the shaded arc light and the curious eyes of black dock labourers and loiterers, had the appearance of a casual farewell. It was not easy for him when Tim, weighed down with many small packages, turned to him for help which he could not give, and I could only guess his feelings. We walked in choked silence carrying our hand baggage down the ill-lit wharf to where the

little Arabian Prince was moored. How grubby and infinitely small she looked! Too small surely to cross the Atlantic? We found our luggage and sat disconsolately on it amid the melancholy squalor of the almost deserted wharf, waiting for customs and censors officials, the childrens' excitement waning with the drabness of the scene and the realisation of final departure. Other passengers were arriving. Only Ray I knew and fourteen year-old Elizabeth. I had heard there was a missionary, and there he was, fat and red-faced; rather jolly I thought, but how little I knew. Behind him were his wife, a thin delicate, down-trodden-looking little woman, and a small white-faced boy of about three. At the last minute Mrs Fitzgibbon arrived, extravagantly made-up and exotically and quite unsuitably dressed for this sort of travel. Trailing at her brief skirt were two small children, themselves trailing parcels, a doll and an enormous toy panda. Mrs Fitzgibbon was *not* my cup of tea, I decided!

We filed up the gangway, into an alleyway where stewards showed us into our cabins. These were small but two-berthed, which was better than one expected in wartime. Opposite was a little dining saloon and on the boat deck was a tiny room with the grandiloquent name of 'Social Room' over the door. It contained a settee, nine chairs, a radio (which didn't work), a book-cupboard called a library, and two bridge tables. One supposed that as the ship took twelve passengers, twelve people could get in. But it looked doubtful. Off one end was a small bar, which was to be a very present help in time of trouble and despondency. It was horribly hot alongside the wharf. We were all getting hungry, and seldom had I had such a thirst. Apparently there was no food to be had on board at that hour, but Ray had wisely come equipped with sandwiches, and these we shared, quenching our thirst with beer and sweet drinks for the children.

Ray and I wondered whether we could get ashore to phone our husbands. There was an unguarded gangway, and all wharves have phones, we argued. There was no one about. Why not chance it? The tide had risen and the gangway seemed almost perpendicular, as we climbed stealthily down to the darkened wharf, little knowing what a serious breach of wartime regulations we were committing. Suddenly out of the darkness a voice challenged us, and with becoming meekness and a certain degree of fright, we explained our mission. No, we could not use the phone under any conditions,

but a message might possibly be sent. Would we return with expediency to the ship, and not mention the fact that we had ventured ashore?

In the early hours of next morning I awoke to find the moonlight flooding the cabin, and a soft breeze blowing through the open porthole. Looking out I saw that we were in mid-stream and turning, and some hundred yards away I could see the Market clock at half past two. We were stealing away in the dead of night and would awake next morning, 30 October, in a boundless sea.

The boys were up early, all agog to explore the ship by daylight. She was pitifully small (under 2000 tons), and the decks looked deplorably dirty. With the four lifeboats swung in, there wasn't even room to walk two abreast along the entire length of the boat-deck. How well were we to know that deck before many weeks had passed! And how many times did Ray and I walk those thirty paces up and down in our thrice-daily exercises? Later, at Trinidad, and until we ran into bad weather or danger areas, we were allowed to use the open foredeck. Here we played deck tennis until all the quoits had been lost overboard, and the children and many of the crew fished over the side for catfish while we were in Port-of-Spain harbour. These are ugly, vicious-looking fish with long whiskers and spikes, and are dangerous to handle. They have dorsal bones that are shaped like a crucifix with the figure of Christ, and the crew would paint them in silver and gold and take them home as souvenirs. Otherwise they are useless as they are not good eating, but are themselves such gross feeders and scavengers that they would swarm round the ship and fight for garbage. They are easy to catch as they swallow anything, so they have not even the merits of sporting game. But fishing, for the children, helped to pass away the drowsy hours anchored out in Port-of-Spain harbour; hours that grew into days, and then to weeks, as engineers worked in their vain attempts to put things right below decks. News filtered through that trouble had started towards the end of the outward voyage, that inadequate repairs had been done in Georgetown, and that the ship was overworked and in need of extensive overhaul. It was thought that we would get to New York all right, and there, of course it would only be a matter of days with all the expert advice and facilities at hand. It didn't help matters that the chief engineer was left behind in Trinidad with a mysterious illness, which apparently led to the false rumour,

current in Georgetown, that we were delayed in Port-of-Spain on account of quarantine. Censorship was such that we were never able to write or cable any news of our plight or the reason for delay. Probably this lessened the anxiety at either end, but it was none the less a worrying time for our families. We learned that it was not possible to get a new chief down from New York as was hoped, and so a young, highly-strung Second Engineer, already weighed down to an unnatural degree with the anxieties of expected father-hood, was promoted and an extra Third was taken on to fill the gap. Much later when our troubles were over, and the ship's engines were running smoothly at long last, I saw Mr L. smartly dressed in uniform, a tall handsome young man and it was difficult to realise that this was the same shaggy-haired, grimy, unshaven man that we had seen in greasy overalls, with sunken eyes and the cares of the world on his shoulders. He had had no experience in handling tough, unruly firemen, and he had no confidence in himself or in his ship. More than once he had asked to be relieved because he did not think that the ship could cross the ocean without mishap, (this cheerful piece of information was given to us by the captain himself!) and time and again he was reduced to tears and his nerves to breaking-point. Little of all this escaped us. The ship was too small and the living space too confined, with the engine-room and engineers' quarters just the other end of our alleyway. Moreover there was the galley boy who would devise rumours designed for the especial delectation of us passengers. With his red beaming face and strong Liverpool accent, he would tell us with malicious impulse, that we were now in U-boat alley; or that if the ship were torpedoed she could not keep afloat for more than ten minutes; and later when we were hit by a gale, that all the ammunition had broken loose, and nothing could be done about it until the gale abated (if we were still there, his expression seemed to imply!). A bright lad, and a scourge to cooks, stewards, officers and passengers alike. I saw him swimming off the ship's side in Port-of-Spain harbour in impudent defiance of orders, and in contempt of sharks and barracudas; and at another time being helped back from shore leave, too drunk to care in his fifteen years of worldly wisdom.

But apart from these more serious happenings, we passengers had our small burdens and inconveniences about which there seemed little redress. There was the electric iron which failed to function during the first fortnight and necessitated our wearing rough-dried clothes until it was mended in New York some six weeks later; the

lavatory plug in the ladies' toilet which had periodical strikes for unhealthily long periods and caused us much concern, and then in sudden pique would work non-stop and flood the whole floor; the leaking radiator which soaked the boys' trunks and their contents; the lights that often failed and left us in darkness, save for a few dim oil-lamps, for anything up to two hours on end. There was the electric fan in David's and Donald's cabin which went up in smoke one night, filling the cabin with suffocating fumes (fortunately just before they went off to sleep); the condensation on cabin walls and ceilings when a following wind blew the steam from the engine-room, down towards our alleyway, which meant moving mattresses from the upper bunks and sleeping on the floor; the frozen outlet pipes in the intense cold of Halifax, when we could not use our cabin basins. Our baths became less attractive as it became colder for the salt-water system never did work, and our hot water allowance was only enough to use with a calabash to wash the soap off. And lastly there was the dirt, the everlasting dirt of uncleaned upholstered chairs and carpets, of decks made grimy from continual bunkerings, and the lick and a promise habits of wartime. We felt that everything we wore, everything we touched, was dirty, and laundering took up an important part of each day. David and Donald learned to do their own washing to a great extent, and were becoming adept at ironing until the iron broke down - perhaps because of their ardour!

But all these were small unimportant matters, to be expected in wartime travel, and who were we to complain? We were so thankful to have been given passages, and after all, few travellers in wartime had the good fortune of uncrowded two-berth cabins. Only one person grumbled continuously, the missionary, whom I no longer looked upon as fat and cheery. He was obese, self-satisfied and pompous, and only once, I think, in the whole voyage, did he display the attributes of his calling. One felt sorry for his little mouse-like wife who was so often put to shame in our presence by his angry outbursts and continual selfish complaints. It seemed to us that he more than anyone had cause for thanksgiving, for he had his entire family with him, and was going to indulge in a whole year's holiday, while our husbands had stayed behind because they believed that there was a job to be done, and until the war was over, there was no time for holidays in England. He was also entirely devoid of a sense of humour, and on one occasion, when our lavatory plug was in its most extravagant mood, he offered us women, with a

magnanimous gesture, the privileged use of the 'gents' (which we were graciously pleased to accept), and was quite incapable of seeing the humour of the situation.

But I must go back to the breathless heat of Port-of-Spain harbour, where we are once more moored alongside the wharf, taking coal for the second time. The decks are thick with black dust, which finds its way into every crack and crevice, and is ground into the carpet by careless feet. We can't go up on deck where the coal is being poured into the bunkers; the iron surface of the foredeck burns our feet and the reflected heat strikes up at our faces. By evening they have finished the coaling, and we feel like plants reviving with rain after a long drought as the ship quietly moves out into the harbour to the precise spot allotted to her by the Port Authorities. Little cool breezes are springing up, and dusk is floating down, as one by one the lights of Port-of-Spain twinkle across the harbour and reflect in the darkened water. We sit on deck with the captain and some of the officers late into the night, drinking in the cool air and quaffing beer under a sky whose stars outshine those thousands of lights on shore. Tomorrow we leave.

When tomorrow dawns, we are all awake before the sun has topped the hills where mist lies pocketed in the valleys and hollows. We climb up on the fo'c'sle-head and watch the colours creep into the day and edge the little waves with silver and gold of the reflected sunrise. We steam out of the safekeeping of the harbour boom, past the distant outline of a cruiser and a submarine in the naval base, and there, with ensigns flattened in the wind, with spray flying away from their bows, come three corvettes. They rush past and their crews wave back at us. They are our escort. We wonder about our convoy. All these ships in harbour, which we thought might be accompanying us, are left behind. All, that is, save one old tramp. We understand now. That one old tramp and ourselves, we are the convoy.

It is a grand sight leaving or entering Port-of-Spain by the Bocas. We had come in by the less used and less interesting approach known as the Serpent's Mouth. It was the way that Columbus had come nearly 400 years before. We were now going west, to cut between the string of islands that link Trinidad with the mainland of Venezuela. The islands are wild and rugged, fringed by sheer cliffs and jagged rocks, against which, on

one side, the Atlantic beats relentlessly. There are many dark, eerie caves, some that a child might play in, others large enough to hold a house. The current is strong, and the sea swirls round boulders forming whirlpools, and gurgles and bellows deep into the caves. Here and there are sheltered bays and inviting sandy beaches, and on the leeward side one can see holiday bungalows and a cluster of small houses. Behind towering upwards over the hillside, is a dense forest-growth in varying shades of green. Soon we have left land behind and we are heading north-west towards Cuba and Haiti.

There was little variety in the circumscribed life on board ship, and for us with none of the attractions, which peacetime passenger ships offer to tourists, the days were monotonous. Yet I don't think we were often really bored. Ray, Phyll Fitzbibbon and I got on well together. Phyll gave the lie to my first impression of her and proved a good-hearted, amusing, and most likeable fellow traveller. It was surprising how much the children found to do. David and Tim made friends with Chippy, the carpenter, and had the run of his tiny workshop, where they made little models from odd pieces of wood. Chippy took a great liking to Tim and would do anything for him, and when the cold nipped Tim's ears and turned them into cockscombs, he bought him a red and blue woolly cap which Tim wore faithfully until we landed in England, and would not have parted with even if we had not insisted that it too un-English looking! At Christmas he presented Chippy with a simple unadorned tobacco pouch which we had bought in New York.

The Bosun was another favourite. Except for one taciturn old salt, he could give many years to any member of the crew. He had been shipwrecked three times and now had a prudent regard for the dangers of war and always wore his life jacket when working on deck, advising us to do the same. Lean, wrinkled and hard as nails, yet kindly and gentle, he was a most efficient and valued seaman. Ray and I talked to him often, listening to his experiences. He would tell us of his family and his hopes of retiring from the sea as soon as the war was over. He had tried to leave it before, but the call of the sea was in his blood, and he had to go back. Now he felt that his age and hard experience of the war years had sobered the urge to wander, and his thoughts were turned to his home in Manchester, and to domestic pursuits.

In the blue-green waters of the Caribbean, we saw shoals of flying-fish which scattered to right and left, skipping the surface of the sea like stones thrown as in 'ducks-and-drakes'. We sometimes saw porpoises or dolphins, (there was always an argument as to which they were), and from the vantage point of the fo'c'sle-head we could look down on them as they rubbed their tough sides against the bows of the ship, and leapt away and cavorted in swirls and leaps and dives, one after another. They were fascinating to watch in their graceful antics and childlike games, flashing under the clear, translucent waters.

There is something fascinating about the fo'c'sle-head of a ship. The Arabian Prince, whatever her failings, she had good lines, and her bows were like those of a destroyer, so that at this most forward part of the ship, one had the sea beneath one, that one could look down on, as well as before one and on either side. It gave a strange detached feeling of being somewhere between sea and air, or of flying low over an endless ocean. Here one felt the full force of the wind as the ship ploughed through the sea. In the tropics it was refreshing to stand there, but when the bitter wind blew from the north, and the spray froze on the iron hawsers, or when the fog enveloped and cut it off from the rest of the ship, it was an unenviable place for the men whose business it was on occasions, to weigh or drop anchor, or to peer through the thick blanket of fog for danger ahead.

It was on a halcyon day of tropical sunshine, and blue-green sea and flying spray, that we first broke down. That is, the engines actually stopped at sea; and it was not long after leaving Trinidad. It was, we were told, some trifling matter concerning a boiler tube, and we would not be long delayed. We noticed, with gratitude, that the other half of the convoy had also stopped, which we thought very considerate of her, and the three escorts were circling round like agitated hens. Signal lights were flashing between the chief escort ship and the old tramp and ourselves, and we could well imagine the acrimonious remarks that were being directed at us.

The repairs were soon finished and off we started once more, but in less than twenty-four hours the whole performance was repeated, and we began to wonder whether we were to do this all the way to New York. However on the morrow it was the turn of

the old tramp to break down. Signals flashed busily back and forth, yet on we sped, in evident indifference to our sister's plight. The fact of the matter was, it was considered unwise to stop in case we couldn't start again, and whatever the issue we had to proceed. A few hours later we were a happy united family once more, imbued with a satisfactory sense of well being induced by the thought that our troubles were easily put right. Had we known that we were to endure eight more weeks of successive breakdowns and repairs, we would have felt far less happy and carefree.

Our course was a more westerly one than was usually taken between Trinidad and New York, as the Admiralty felt that in our uncertain state we should not venture far from land. Or so we were told. At any rate our route took us south of Santo Domingo and then round the west of Haiti, through the Windward Passage dividing the island from Cuba. But before going through the Passage we had sudden orders to proceed to Guantanamo Bay on the south coast of Cuba. The name was unknown to most of us and not even the captain had ever been there, but it was, we learned, an American submarine and air base of considerable importance, because of its position, and although its harbour was prohibited in wartime to merchant ships, we were to proceed there for water. The inner basin provides a perfect, almost land-locked harbour, with deep water, but the surrounding country is bare, arid and inhospitable, although not far inland there are fertile valleys. We spent all day with the water-ship alongside. Even water-ships, if they are American, have their comforts, and this one had a kitchen of which any housewife would be proud. We watched the cook make a magnificent chocolate soufflé. We also watched three members of the crew doing the washing and hanging out the clothes across the after-deck, to the accompaniment of some amusing repartee. By and large, the American navy was quite entertaining.

November, and a northerly course. It was becoming colder now as each day brought us nearer to North America. Our thoughts were turning to the prospect of going ashore in New York, an opportunity which would have been denied us had we arrived in time for an out-going convoy to England, and had we been in a fit state to accompany one. But with faulty engines, repairs were inevitable, and we gambled on the chance of a long enough stay for the American authorities to grant us landing permits. There were no

more actual stoppages, but the speed of the boat was slowly decreasing and sometimes the log seemed barely to move. We could only do five knots, then four, then three. It was a nice question whether we would make harbour before the engines died on us. Then the gale hit us. As Atlantic gales go, it was not a bad one, only sixty miles per hour, but to such a small ship in such bad plight, it was like the wrath of God. The seas mounted in ever-increasing walls of shiny, green-black water. Higher and higher they came, each one seeming to swallow us as we dived into its depths, and then emerged miraculously, with a shudder to a sky of driving rain and spray. Above us the wind shrieked in the rigging, and it seemed that every lifeboat must be torn from its stance. As we stood for a few minutes near the deck, we could hear neither our own voices nor the sound of the engines; only the tearing, shrieking wind, and the boom of the sea as it hit the ship, and like a terrier with a rat, seemed to shake the very life out of her. Down below there was broken crockery and general disorder, and excitement amongst the children. Fortunately the full extent of the danger was not realised, and later, when we limped into the Hudson River we learned that we had only been able to make one knot against the storm, which had it blown against the shore might well have been disastrous. Land was a glad sight, but safe anchorage was not yet ours, for as we steamed up the Hudson River the pilot found difficulty in manoeuvring the ship against the swift current. The engines, almost at their last gasp, were not powerful enough for the quick response required of them, and we were driven aground on to some rocks. Not five minutes earlier, the captain who was standing with us on deck, had thanked Providence for a merciful deliverance and a safe arrival at long last. Now we were in trouble again. For the Americans it meant salvage fees; for the captain searching enquiries and blame, even though the ship at the time was in the hands of the American pilot. Busy little tugs hooted around us, and captains shrieked orders and counter-orders, but to no avail. We were stuck until the rising tide could move us. Fortunately no damage was done, and next day, 1st December, we were able to sail on up river.

I shall not easily forget my first sight of New York on that December morning. The tall skyscrapers of Manhattan were like fairy castles and spires rising out of a pearly mist pierced by the wintry sun. They seemed ethereal and more like a mirage than the steel and concrete of a vast city. Those three and a half weeks in New York were a

wonderful experience in spite of the background of anxiety regarding the ship; an anxiety which, at times, amounted to real fear when one breakdown followed another with relentless persistency. We felt so utterly helpless. Worst of all was having no one with whom to discuss our worries, or to turn to for advice. Phyll was a bit nervous, so with her we avoided serious discussion; the missionary seemed to have quite lost his head, and was rushing about in all directions trying to tell the Ministry of Shipping and the British Consul, as well as his own brothers of the church, what should be done with himself and his wife and child, and, possibly, the nine other passengers as well. The officers preserved an attitude of cautious understatement. The captain was more often drunk than sober. Ray and I had only each other to turn to, and we always came to the same decision. We were entirely in the hands of the Ministry of War Transport, and whatever the issue, we must go when and where we were told, and trust to God. A transfer to another ship was just wishful thinking and best not entertained. But it was with heavy hearts that we watched the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth and the Aquitania come and go at regular intervals, and wished that room might be found for us on one of them.

But apart from this, the days of sightseeing and shopping in New York were fun, and if, with our limited funds we were restricted in our choice of entertainment, we had friends who took us driving, to see our first ice hockey at Madison Square Gardens, to a variety show at Radio City, and (Ray, Elizabeth and me) drinking and dining at the better restaurants and the Waldorf Astoria. And of course we all went to the top of the Empire State Building. The ship was our home, but we could go ashore whenever we chose, a liberty which was much abused by the crew, who would roll home in the early hours of the morning and wake everyone with their drunken laughter, and arguments which often ended in fights. One night I awoke to hear a torrent of abuse from Phyll in the next cabin. Jumping up from bed, I put my head out of the door to see the cause of the disturbance, and was narrowly missed by a couple of oranges which whizzed past my ear in the wake of a retreating and very sozzled fireman. He had evidently mistaken Phyll's bunk for his own. There was no discipline on board and no one bore the captain any respect. With melancholy repetition he would be put to bed by his steward (who was also bar-steward and my cabin steward) to wake perhaps by noon next day. This imprudent regard for the bottle we expected would be put aside with heroic resolve when the ship, in some distant

future, would be ready to take her place in convoy. Our hopes were confounded. He became imbued with a singleness of purpose, which no sense of responsibility could shake. In fact, he let it be known, as if to excuse himself, that this very sense of responsibility towards us women and children had been his undoing, and the anxiety had driven him to drink. It cut no ice with us. His reputation had preceded him.

During all this time gangs of workmen were trying to patch up the engines, and every now and then (three or four times, I think) it was announced that all shore leave was cancelled. Paradoxically this was welcome news, for it meant that we would leave by the next convoy, within forty-eight hours. The captain and chief wireless operator would slip away secretly to attend convoy conferences, and once, (and heaven alone knows why, although we suspected it was entirely on the merits of our foghorn, which, in volume, was out of all proportion to the size of the ship, and never failed to function), our captain was appointed Vice-Commodore of the convoy and a naval signalman was duly added to the crew. But nothing came of them, and each time, on the eve of departure, another boiler tube would burst rudely, or propeller curl up and die on us, in sickening familiarity. At one time it seemed as if the disease was spreading to the crew, for the night before one of these false starts, the third officer was whisked off to hospital with acute appendicitis. How fortunate it was that we were not at sea where he would have had to be transferred to the rescue ship which accompanies each convoy.

The time that our faith entirely left us was the occasion when we actually *did* make a start and *did* leave in convoy. At least that was really the trouble. We left all right, but not in convoy, for by the time the engineers had managed to get up steam, we had watched some thirty to forty ships slip quietly past us to take up their station at the river mouth, and when we did reach the appointed place, the convoy was out of sight. All the miserable speed that she could raise was put into a supreme effort to catch up, and all day long the horizon was scanned for a sight of that elusive convoy. At dawn next day we were still alone, and with heavy hearts we turned westward once more. That day was 6th December and with it went our final hopes of Christmas in England. It was small comfort to learn that the reverse gear (or its maritime equivalent) had broken, and that we were

incapable of going backwards. After all, who wanted to go backwards? And wasn't that, in a sense, just what we were doing?

Back came the gangs of workmen, and once more we were subjected to the noise of repair work all day and all night. Off we passengers went to change another pound or two into American dollars, so that at least we could wander about New York a little longer, and in the evenings we settled down once more to the old routine of bridge and cribbage.

Then came a day with news that we were to sail *up* the Hudson on an eight hour trial run, the result of which would determine whether we should sail with the next convoy, or go to Halifax to join a slow one which might take us cruising around Iceland. Of course *we* knew the answer right away, but it was none the less an added experience (especially as the Hudson was in the grip of winter, and in places, sheet-ice covered the whole width of the river); and it was something thrown in free gratis and for nothing. Quite surprisingly there were no fresh breakdowns, but the speed acquired was not sufficient for a ten-knot convoy, and we were duly dispatched northward.

Christmas Eve was memorable. We were due to sail that night, and I suppose because we were not joining an ocean convoy, shore leave was extended. In the afternoon Phyll and I had collected all the dregs from our several spendings, and had gone off to the Fifth Avenue Woolworths to buy small gifts for the Christmas tree which the chief steward had got for the children. We returned tired by the crowded shops and streets, and cold from battling against fierce flurries of snow, but pleased with our purchases. Phyll, Ray and I met in secret to tie up our gifts for the tree, while the children, under the direction of Elizabeth, undertook to decorate the social room.

Earlier in the day, Tim had arranged a little entertainment, and posted the ship inviting all and sundry to aquatic sports to be held in my cabin. A rather startling announcement! The contestants were, let me hasten to add, two very small turtles named Japhet and Oswald which David and Tim had bought for 45 cents apiece in Broadway. The 'baths' were my washbasin, and minute wooden shoots, diving boards and floats were

the furnishings. The turtles did their stuff with surprising willingness, and the entertainment, if brief, was at least, unusual.

That night the children retired to bed, according to their ages, in excited anticipation of a white Christmas, and of a fresh start on our travels. Ray, always an early bird, went next. The captain had preceded everyone. I stayed up with Phyll, the chief wireless officer and the chief steward. Suddenly two faces were thrust through the bower of holly and paper decorations round the doorway; two very red, very bleary, and obviously inebriated faces. We recognised the cook and one of the seamen. They hiccuped a greeting, and Phyll, who was in a state of well being which saw no limits to good natured camaraderie, invited them in. It was a mistake, of course, and the men lost no time in demonstrating their aggressive mood. I have forgotten the cause of their discontent, but their truculent invective was levelled at the captain, and it was the captain they intended to see. "Sparks" with quiet tact, tried to persuade them to wait on the morrow, but their mood, dictated rather by the effects of rum than by any real grievance, was importunate, as they tried to force their way towards the captain's cabin. To make matters worse, Phyll made some silly remark and drew their attention to her. One of them used the foulest language directed at her. There was a skirmish, and soon 'Sparks' had got him down on the floor and was firmly sitting on him. The chief steward had rushed out to call the dockside police; the cook, with better judgement, retreated to the deck to watch the fray from the porthole, and Phyll fell weeping on my neck in a flood of injured dignity. When calm was restored and we were able to steer a clear course across the room, I shepherded Phyll to her cabin, for it seemed time to call it a day. I was glad to leave the squalid scene of overturned chairs and broken glasses, torn decorations and an ugly collection of empty bottles standing in odd juxtaposition at the foot of the childrens' Christmas tree.

During the night we heard the engines start up and the ship move away from the pier. But when Dick, the steward, brought tea next morning we sensed that something was wrong. We were no longer moving, and above and around us echoed the varying hoots of half-a-dozen foghorns. 'A happy Christmas' said Dick grinning. 'We are fog-bound. A better chance of enjoying your Christmas dinner anyway. We shall be stuck

here all day.' And so it was. Christmas Day in the New England Sound, snugly wrapped in a blanket of fog!

So used were we by now to a voyage devoid of progress, this further delay seemed no matter for comment. We just went ahead and made the best of Christmas Day. The cook, in spite of late indiscretions, produced an excellent midday dinner, and the chief steward had gone to considerable trouble to obtain all the accessories of Christmas fare. The captain, coming down to a meal for the first time, and later in the social room, was a good host. He gave presents to the children, told anecdotes to the adults, and played bears with the under-tens. We had music and games and the day passed happily.

Next morning we were on our way to Boston. Here we were to pick up a northbound convoy, but we had run into more trouble, and further repairs were necessary. We spent nine days in Boston before the ship was fit to leave for Halifax. We saw the New Year in with an 80 mile-an-hour gale and were thankful that we were not at sea. The temperature was up to 51°F at 9 p.m. and next day it dropped to 5°F. These sudden drops were more than strange to us who were used to a climate where the thermometer never exceeds a range of some 15°F. My diary records that we arrived in Halifax in a temperature of 11°F and next day with a thick blanket of snow, the thermometer had risen to 40°F. Three days later it was 6° below zero F (which is -21°C) when we woke to a frost and a fog-bound world with a visibility of about fifty yards. The small deck with its dirty paint and rusty ironwork had overnight turned to fairyland. Greasy ropes were garlands of feathery whiteness, every little fibre standing out in a coat of frost. Long slender icicles hung wherever water or steam had escaped, and the decks were like glass and the scuppers were frozen hard. Even the aerated drinks in the bar were solid. By midday the thaw had set in, and in the afternoon we were walking in slush in the streets of Halifax, and dodging the dripping roof gutters above the crowded pavements. How crowded the town was! And ninety percent of the people seemed to be in uniform, mostly navy and merchant service, for Halifax was a busy port, and at that time crews were being sent across in large numbers to man ships in British harbours. The Germans knew this and several ships were sunk, some just outside the harbour boom, during those early weeks of 1945.

Anchored with some thirty other ships in the inner basin above the town, we were isolated in a strange world. The low snow-covered hills around us looked very desolate, except for here and there where spirals of smoke curled up from little doll's-house-like-homes. The water was the deepest blue I have ever seen, changing from ultramarine to a kind of midnight blue. On it and riding the dancing ripples sat fat brown gulls, replete with an excess of well being. The edge of the basin was encrusted in ice in a deep band, and an inlet had turned into a frozen lake, with steely-blue colouring, and a background of bare trees. Nearby was a tiny island, for all the world like an ornament for a Christmas cake. Its snow-covered mound was encircled by firtrees of such deep green as to seem almost unnatural, and whose lower branches were powdered as with icing-sugar. One half expected it to break into a gay tinkle of a musical box, and small dwarfs to pop out from the dark shadows.

The children enjoyed the snow fights in which nearly everyone joined. The night before we sailed was a gala performance with a theatrical setting. The ship had moved down alongside one of the wharves where arc lights gave a brilliance to the snow-covered decks, and caught and illuminated each feathery flake as it came swirling down from the black night above. A mighty battle raged across the hatches on the open foredeck, and staggering were the blows, which one often suffered when unprepared in the act of replenishing one's store of ammunition. Now and then one retired to peel off some superfluous garment in this heartening exercise, for one soon became uncomfortably warm. 'Porky Boy', the chief steward, was the childrens' target number one, but he gave as good as he got, which they found to their cost.

At last came the day for departure, and great was our excitement as we slipped quietly through the submarine nets to the cold, grey water of the Atlantic. Here we took station in the first line of a convoy of thirty-six ships, and so ended, on 16th January, our winter sojourn in the United States and Canada. We had no reason for confidence that we would get across without further mishap, and the submarine menace added to an undercurrent of uneasiness, which we were careful not to share with the children. They were schooled to the necessity of keeping life jackets and rescue-suits always at hand, and even wearing the jackets while on deck. In fact we all were fully prepared and kept

together for the first two or three hours out at sea, and all slept fully clothed for the first few nights. But except for an occasional depth charge, we saw and heard nothing and the voyage was uneventful. None of us passengers had sailed in convoy before. It was wonderful to wake each morning and find the other ships around us. Only bad weather at night broke up our close formation, in spite of the fact that every ship in the convoy was said to be a lame dog. There were five of us in the front line, and all kept perfect station, even to the tiny vessel on our starboard side whom we looked upon as the baby of the party. Plucky little thing, we thought. Almost losing herself in the big seas, but always bobbing up again, and always in line. It was considerably disconcerting to learn, near the end of the crossing, that she was appreciably bigger than we were!

There was a heavy swell the first four days, which was unpleasant and left me prostrate for most of a day. But it was warm when we had expected it to be bitterly cold, and in mid Atlantic the weather was perfect, and unbelievably mild. Off Southern Ireland we ran into a gale which was a big brother to the one off New York. It seemed incredible that we could roll so much and not turn over. I wedged Tim into his bunk, but in the upper berth, which I took over, it was impossible to sleep, and one's muscles ached with the resistance that one was forced to exert with each roll of the ship. Poor little Japhet and Oswald had a rough deal. Their bath-pan broke loose from the radiator moorings, and shot across the cabin just as a large box of soap-flakes landed on top of them. They had a faintly reproachful look as I rescued them from their foamy bath. Next morning the steward slung them hammock-fashion from the ceiling, where they rode out the gale in comfortable equilibrium.

Breakfast next day was a farce. Nothing would remain on the table and as one held on grimly with one hand, the other was mostly used to fend off the boiled eggs (under-done that particular morning), the sugar, bread and cutlery which rolled from side to side of the table. Only the brave attempted a cup of tea, and most of that went over, rather than down them. The children thought it the funniest thing that had ever happened! I really wonder that there weren't accidents of a more serious nature. We all suffered from

bruises, and Tim had a nasty fall,¹ but of grave damage there was none, and surprisingly little above decks, although other ships lost lifeboats and rafts. In the middle of all this, I discovered the loss of the centre diamond of my engagement ring. We searched everywhere, even to emptying the bag of the Hoover, and cleaning the bend of the waste pipe of my cabin basin, but to no avail. I gave up the search with a heavy heart, and five days later, when packing, I found the diamond in a drawer, stuck to an empty envelope by a segment of lipstick.

We had been led to believe that Liverpool would be our home port, so great was our consternation when, as part of the convoy broke away and steamed east, we still proceeded south. It seemed nothing but cruel to prolong the journey at this stage; but there it was, and orders could not be disputed. We steamed south, and then round Pembroke Point, to anchor on the 1st February in Swansea Bay, where we stayed nearly two days and nights before the Admiralty saw fit to speed us on our way. On leaving, the anchor fouled in some rusty chains on the harbour bed, and it was some little time before it was freed.

Land seemed so close and so tantalising. First the Welsh coast, and then the wild, rocky cliffs of North Cornwall, and next day the soft, red sandstone of South Devon. We expected the Channel to be rough, but on the contrary, it was like the proverbial millpond. There were, however, stretches of fog, and two or three times we had, perforce, to drop anchor for an hour or so.

On 4th February, we turned into the Solent and anchored off St. Helens in the Isle of Wight. Here we felt that we had come into our first contact with Britain at war. Planes flew overhead, and there was the constant coming and going of warships, hospital ships and leave boats. A large ship passed quite close to us; so close that with binoculars, we could see the faces of the men who thronged the decks, and stood close-packed looking out across the ship's rails. They were homecoming, and it was up to us, we thought, to give them a welcome. Handkerchiefs and towels were waved wildly, but there was no

¹ Actually, he was knocked out by a 'flying' armchair in the social room, which literally took to the air when the chain securing it to the floor, broke.

response. I, who had the binoculars, was asked what they were doing. Why didn't they wave? Their faces, I saw, were wooden-looking and expressionless, yet they could not fail to see the waving, even looking into the sun, as they were. Later we learned they were German prisoners. Hopes of landing were still denied us, and we were told that London was to be our final port. On we sped, at a fine spanking pace. With a following wind, and the home-scent growing hourly stronger, the old tub was making a last glorious dash, as if to retrieve her lost reputation. What happened to the rest of the convoy, I do not know, for we had dwindled to a mere handful. Perhaps the small coastal vessels, which had joined us on the way, were unable to stand the pace, or perhaps it was considered that a smaller convoy was less vulnerable. For stragglers we had no care; our blood was heated in the chase. Beachy Head, so close to home, we were to pass in the night, which was disappointing. I had so hoped to see the Seven Sisters and the Downs, the lovely, rolling Downs of Sussex. When Dick brought my morning tea, he also brought a message from the bridge to say that we were in near view of the white cliffs of Dover. Throwing on dressing gowns, coats and slippers, we rushed up on deck to see the early light of a winter dawn breaking over the cliffs and a glassy sea with here and there the grim reminder of sunken ships. Our emotions were quickened with the certainty that journey's end was now only a matter of hours, and our excitement was intense as we sailed up the Thames. The green fields and bare trees, the little grey and redbrick houses, the wheeling gulls and the sedate swans, the busy tugs with their cheerful bustle of coming and going, the dingy wharves and the typical London smell; all was just as we expected it, just as we remembered it. Everything but the grim ghost of war that stared at one from the stark shells of warehouses, and the bare spaces where buildings had once stood. It was an impressive ending to a long journey, and the final destination made a fit setting for the last act of that which we had come to call our world tour. The little ship had suddenly acquired a certain dignity. With pennants and flag-signals fluttering, we sailed proudly up the Thames. There before us, and opening to receive us, was Tower Bridge, and a cheerful London bobby smiling back at our frenzied waving. There too, was the Tower of London, like a crayon drawing, soft-edged in the winter evening light. With a surge of emotion, the relief in one's heart seemed almost too exquisite to be borne. So ended our journey.

By the following day we were safely home in Pevensey Bay. That night I looked back as in a dream. Outside, I could hear the sea breaking on the beach, and it was hard to realise that we had spent a hundred nights afloat on her. Indoors, with the windows closed against the wintry cold and thick blackout curtains to heighten the effect of restful quiet, it was unbelievably still. Never, in that long journey, had we been free of noise. Always there had been the engines, or the waves, or the fog-horn; sometimes all in chorus. But here there were only our voices and the crackling fire to break a stillness, which could be, felt more than sensed. We were home at last.

Postscript to THE HUNDRED DAYS, and the voyage of the Arabian Prince
by
Timothy Smellie, younger son of Elsie.

I have always been fascinated by my mother's account and my own recollections of the voyage, and 55 years later, I have found out more about the convoy in which we sailed across the Atlantic.

Initial enquires elicited the information that no convoy had left Halifax on 16 January 1945.

However the Voyage Record Card and Lloyd's List held in Lloyd's Maritime Collection at the Guildhall Library, London, stated the Arabian Prince did indeed leave Halifax on 16 January in a 36 ship convoy, arriving Swansea Bay on 1 February (confirming what we originally thought.)

I obtained a copy of the official logbook of the ship during this time (from 2 September 1944 to 6 February 1945), from the Maritime & Coastguard Agency in Cardiff. This was mainly concerned with crew matters and ship movements. Of interest here was the fact that a new crewmember was signed on on 16 January in Halifax. This infers that the ship was still in port, at least on the morning of that day (confirming what we originally thought).

Finally from another source, the following was established:

1. The convoy in which the Arabian Prince sailed was SC165.
2. The convoy left Halifax on 16 January 1945.
3. The Arabian Prince arrived in London on 6 February 1945.

SC convoys were classed slow, 7½ - 8 knots, and sailed from Halifax. Convoy SC165 comprised 32 merchant vessels, which together with a rescue ship and two

merchant aircraft carriers made a total of 35 sailing in the convoy. Two ships were destined for Loch Ewe, 5 for the Clyde, 7 for the Mersey, 1 for Derry and 20 ships for Barry Roads (Bristol Channel).

The escorts for the first half of the crossing were Canadian and consisted of:

Sault St. Marie J334 (CO): Algerine class minesweeper, 850 tons.

Agassiz K129: Flower class corvette 925 tons.

Wetaskiwin K175: Flower class corvette 925 tons.

Dauphin K157: Flower class corvette 925 tons.

making up Escort Group W7.

Escort Group C6, also Canadian, relieved W7 and took the convoy on to UK. It consisted of:

Eastview K665 (CO): River class frigate 1370 tons.

Lauzon K671: River class frigate 1370 tons

Tillsonburg K496: Castle class frigate 1010 tons

St. Lambert K343: Modified Flower class corvette 980 tons

Peterborough K342: Modified Flower class corvette 980 tons

Cobourg K333: Modified Flower class corvette 980 tons.

The rescue vessel, sailing at the rear of the convoy, was the St. Clair (ex RN Baldur) 1637 tons, and the two merchant aircraft carriers (MACs) were the Miralda and Adula. Both were of about 8000 tons, modified into carriers from oil tankers and doubled as escort oilers. They had no hangers and flew Swordfish aircraft.

The log of Convoy SC165 is as follows:

15 January. Weather in Halifax poor, cold and snowing. The MAC arrester gear remained frozen and could not be freed.

16 January. Convoy sailed at 0845 under Commodore Sir E.O.Cochrane KBE, RNR in Pacific Shipper. Escort Group W7 joined at 1000, and all ships on station by 1640 when speed was increased to 7 knots. Both Pilar de Larrinaga and Odysseus could not maintain speed due to poor coal supplied in Halifax, so put back to that port. Odysseus' master refused to enter port in the dark, and his vessel ran aground the next day, becoming a total loss.

17 January. Arabian Prince led the eighth column with Willow Park to starboard and Tiradentes to port. (I remember my brother saying that Arabian Prince was made to lead a column on account of her having an extremely loud and effective ex-destroyer siren, and this must have been most useful and comforting in the foggy conditions at the start of the crossing).

Shore based air cover. Wind 6 (strong wind)

18 January. Weather unsuitable for flying. No U-boat contact.

Wind 4.

19 January. Escort Group C6 sailed from St. John's, Newfoundland, to relieve W7, but told that the convoy would be 18 hours late at rendezvous, as speed was down to 7.5 knots, several vessels complaining of bad coal.

Weather unfit for flying. Wind 4 (moderate breeze)

20 January. Escort Group C6 took over from W7 at 0930.

Unfit for flying, carrier arrester gear frozen up.

Wind 5.

21 January. Route altered to southward. Rocket exploded by accident on British Commadore. Chart house caught fire, but quickly extinguished.

Unfit for flying. Wind 6-7 (strong wind)

22 January. Unfit for flying. Wind 6-7.

23 January. Swordfish took off on patrol at 0915.

U-boat out of range port bow.

Altered course to northward. MAC ships engaged refuelling escorts.

Wind 2.

24 January. Four aircraft patrols

U-boats acting as weather reporters ahead but out of range.

Escorts refuelled. Wind 3-4.

25 January. Three U-boats out of range, one weather reporter port bow, one starboard bow, and one starboard beam.

Wind 3.

26 January. At 0930, one of Miralda's patrolling Swordfish sighted a possible periscope. He 'baited' it and on return saw a possible schnorkel. On both occasions the object was not visible for long enough to permit an attack but what appeared to be fresh oil was spotted on the surface. Baiting means that the aircraft would continue on its course after sighting the periscope in the hope that the U-boat would think that it had not been spotted and might surface. The aircraft would return at low level to the expected position of the U-boat, hopefully on the surface.

Wind 3.

Eastview and Lauzon detached to last position of U-boat. Escorts found very fresh small oil patches. Twenty depth charges dropped without success before returning to the convoy.

27 January. Weather deteriorated, wind 7-8 (strong to gale)

Empire Kingsley disappeared from sight due to gales.

Weather unfit for flying.

28 January. Weather unfit for flying. Wind 8-10 (gale to storm)

Samdonald hove to during the night to secure boats.

29 January. Weather unfit for flying. Wind 8.

Escort CO advised to look out for a Liberator and told to form convoy into no less than 4 columns for passage through the North Channel and Irish Sea.

Heavy weather and low visibility improving but Samdonald with damaged boats and Empire Kingsley straggling and would be 5 hours late.

30 January. 1136 Lauzon with CAT drag stream experienced unexplained explosion astern. Suspect GNAT (acoustic torpedo). 15th Escort Group sent to investigate.

Convoy average speed 7 knots off Oversay at 1640. All arrived.

Note 1. There is no record of a U-boat attack north of Ireland on 30 January but one could have been made by a U-boat that did not return its base. U1014 was sunk off Northern Ireland on 4 February suggesting that this could have been the convoy's assailant.

Note 2. The previous convoy, HX332, from Halifax, arrived safely on 28 January except for two vessels, Rueben Dario and Solor, which were torpedoed on the 27th in St. George's Channel. The 5th Escort Group was quickly on the scene and sank U1051.

Note 3. My brother remembers well the storm off Northern Ireland and being told that the ship was rolling 35 degrees from the vertical. Also the dropping of depth charges by our escort in the Bristol Channel, followed by the total confusion as a liberty ship leading another convoy, cut through our own.

The Arabian Prince captain's log gives these final dates:

Mumbles: 1 - 2 February

Lizard: 3 February

St. Helen's Roads: 5 February

Downs: 6 February

The Arabian Prince entered London Docks p.m. on 6 February 1945 and tied up just past Tower Bridge and opposite the Tower of London.

Details of the Arabian Prince.

Launched 1936 at Greenock, one of three similar vessels of the Prince Line for the Mediterranean trade, her sisters being Palestinian Prince, Syrian Prince and Cyprian Prince. She carried 12 passengers, a crew of 32 and was registered in London.

She was of 1959 gross tons, 1063 net tons, was 296 feet in length and cost £69,265. She was broken up in Rotterdam in 1959.

From the few sheets relating to the ship's movements and completed by the captain that I have, it appears that the Arabian Prince made the regular run to Georgetown a number of times during the war. Her cargo back to UK on this occasion consisted of:

945 tons sugar
750 tons rum
100 tons H.P. spirit
90 tons balata
2 tons rosewood oil
164 bags of mail.

It appears that the ship sailed for Holland on 16 February under a new captain and continued its Demerara run on 17 May, this time direct via Trinidad. There was one more trip to Georgetown in October taking just 4 weeks before the ship returned to trading in the Mediterranean.

Finally the 'Official Log Book' and 'Agreement and List of Crew' for the Arabian Prince for this round trip to Georgetown (Liverpool Sept 13 1944 /London Feb 6 1945) give some interesting items of information.

Certainly the captain had numerous trials and tribulations regarding his crew, all meticulously documented by him. No wonder he took to the bottle!

On the outward voyage, an assistant steward had suspected appendicitis and had to be transferred to the convoy rescue ship in mid-Atlantic.

In Georgetown, about a week before we sailed, a deck hand lost part of his lower leg in an accident with a loose derrick wire.

On the same day, a trainee fireman from the engine room was attacked by another with a carving knife and had his wrist slashed. The chief officer overpowered the assailant in the officer's alleyway, handcuffs were applied and the police called. In court the next day, the assailant was fined \$15.00/£3.2.6 or 30 day's imprisonment. The fine was paid.

According to the Regulations for Maintaining Discipline on Merchant Ships at that time, fines of 10 shillings were imposed for:

Striking or assaulting another person onboard (if not otherwise prosecuted).

Bringing liquor onboard.

Drunkenness.

Keeping possession of firearms, knuckle-dusters, knives or offensive weapons.

Insolent or contemptuous language.

Absent without leave and 20 shillings for subsequent offences.

Fines of 40 shillings were imposed for:

Exposing a light between sunset and sunrise including lighting of matches on the upper deck.

The ship sailed from Georgetown on 29 October and in Trinidad, the chief engineer left (nervous breakdown?) so that those below him were promoted.

On reaching New York, the chief officer left the ship, and one man deserted.

Interestingly, there is no record of the fracas on Christmas Eve as described by my mother, in which one of the seamen had to be forcibly restrained and the dockside police called. The captain, at the time, was probably the worse for wear to make an entry in the log.

On Christmas Day in New York, two crewmembers deserted but later rejoined when the ship failed to sail on that day.

In Boston, 3 including the aforementioned knife-wielder, were absent without leave and on being fined 10 shillings and one day's pay, stated 'We were in jail!'

One man refused duty and was duly fined. His reply 'I was drunk the previous night!'

Then 3 days later, 3 more crew went absent without leave, the knife-wielder yet again; this time his fine was 20 shillings.

In Halifax 3 crew were absent without leave and were duly fined while an assistant steward was removed to hospital for observation.

A replacement steward was signed on at £13 a month.

Salaries were entered in the 'Agreement and List of Crew'. The pantry boy received £6 a month while general crewmembers got £13 to 14. Officers were paid from about £18 to 35. Although crewmembers would be getting board and lodging, their pay was only for the time actually on the ship and stopped the moment the ship was sunk or paid off. It is uncertain whether crew received danger money in time of war.

In today's prices, £6 would have the same purchasing power as £166, £14 as £385 and £35 as £962.