

MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS

SURGEON REAR ADMIRAL

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First published 1938 by Blackie and Son
This edition published 2016 by
Lodestar Books
71 Boveney Road, London, SE23 3NL, United Kingdom

www.lodestarbooks.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-907206-38-2

Typeset by Lodestar Books in Equity

Printed in Spain by Graphy Cems, Navarra

All papers used by Lodestar Books
are sourced responsibly

XI

The Bristol Channel

IT WAS THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY when I turned over my duties in Chatham to my relief and went up to the Admiralty to find out what was to become of me. There I learned that I was to be appointed to a Hospital ship, but the ship was refitting at Malta and was not expected in England for six weeks. In the meantime I would be placed on half pay. On protesting against this period of penury being forced upon me, I was lent to the Barracks as supernumerary and ordered to report myself in accordance. When I turned up, the senior medical officer was not at all gratified by this distinguished addition to his staff. He very tactfully suggested that I was a nuisance as my seniority made it difficult for him to employ me without interfering with his normal arrangements, and he did not feel inclined to upset his routine in order to keep me out of mischief for so short a period as six weeks. His solution of the problem was that the less he saw of me the better he would like me, and that the best thing I could do was to go on leave and keep him informed of my address in case my services might be required, a contingency of which he saw little prospect. For the first time in my life I had six weeks' leave in my pocket and no programme to fill up every minute of it.

For some years I had been deeply interested in Bristol Channel pilot boats and the possibility of their adaptation for yachting purposes. By all accounts they were wonderful seaboats, cheap to build and maintain, and a bigger ship than anything I had been accustomed to could be handled with only one man as crew. The last was an important consideration for me as my pay could not run to the wages of any more men. After donning my oldest yachting suit and stuffing plenty of warm underclothing and sea boots into a seaman's canvas bag, I looked the complete ruffian when I purchased a third-class ticket for a

little village on the Avon not far from Bristol. The consensus of opinion was that this was the best place to see these boats, and in the back of my mind was the hope that I might have the chance of getting inside information usually denied to the lordly yachtsman before I decided to spend several hundred pounds, which I hadn't got but hoped I might be able to raise, in buying one of them. Above everything I wanted to make sure that they were really within the power of two men and, as I was an average yachtsman, experience would enable me to judge this point quite fairly. I could not afford to make a mistake and bite off something a great deal bigger than I was able to chew.

In due time and in pitch darkness I was deposited as the sole passenger at the village station. This place was the headquarters of a large fleet of pilot boats and there were two famous building yards nearby. When I tumbled out of my compartment and went to the luggage van to collect my bundle I was the only occupant of the platform excepting the porter, who came along and watched with polite interest the struggles of the guard and myself, but did not make any attempt at help. He still stood watching me after the train had gone, asked for my ticket, and after its delivery was strolling off when I called him back. To state the truth I was annoyed at his casual treatment and intended to rate him soundly, tell him to pick up my dunnage, and look for a cab. Luckily, before I made a fool of myself, I recognized that his treatment was an acknowledgment that my disguise was perfect. To him I was an ordinary seaman probably looking for a job and of no interest. So when he turned round all I said was:

'I'm a stranger in these parts. Could you tell me if there is any place where I can find decent lodgings?'

He thought for a bit, pushed back his uniform cap and scratched the exposed area while he eyed me doubtfully.

'Well, my missus sometimes takes in lodgers and I know she has an empty room just now, but whether she's willing to take any more on her hands we'll have to leave to her.'

There was no doubt left that his missus might be anything but grateful for his production of such a scallywag. I said we had better get along and find out what she thought about it, and he promised to take me to the house as soon as

he had locked up the station as there were no more trains that night. I threw my bag across my shoulder in true sailor fashion and followed him out of the station when he was ready. The bag was heavy, and I was glad to think that railway employees were not likely to live far from their work as my proposed host had not the faintest intention of lending a hand. The walk was longer than I expected and, when I finally dropped the bag on his doorstep, the man of much experience remarked sympathetically:

‘Very heavy them bags is and yours is bigger than most. Better leave it on the step until we hears what the missus has to say.’ He pushed open the door and I followed him into the kitchen.

Our entry disturbed a pleasant little supper party seated at a table close to a roaring fire, which was a welcome sight on that bitter February night. At the end of the table nearest to us sat a buxom pleasant-faced woman, while on her right was a man about my own age opposite a girl of thirteen or so. The far end of the table was laid for the lord and master, and keeping hot on top of the range was something that smelt uncommonly good. With a ‘Here’s a sailor that wants to know if you will let him have a room, mother’, the porter threw his cap on the dresser, and apparently washed his hands of the rest of the proceedings at the sink.

The lady addressed as ‘mother’ pushed her chair back, turned round and took stock of me with both hands on her knees. Evidently the scrutiny was not entirely satisfactory.

‘How long were you thinking of staying?’

‘I’m not quite sure. It depends on whether I can get a job.’

‘What was your last job?’

‘I had a Government job at Chatham but that’s finished.’

‘Do you expect me to keep you until you get a job, or can you keep yourself?’

‘I can keep myself for a bit if it isn’t too long.’ ‘Where have you come from to-day?’ ‘I’ve come straight from Chatham.’

‘My! That’s a long way! Sit down and have a cup of tea and I’ll talk it over with my old man.’

They went into the lobby and I heard them talk it over. She said 'I'll take him', and he said 'All right, mother'. Then they came back and the lady resumed the cross-examination.

'Do you want a room to yourself or will you share? That'll be sixteen shillings a week by yourself or twelve shillings sharing.'

I expressed a preference for having a room to myself, and she suggested that I had better have a look at it, to which I agreed. She lit a candle and I followed her upstairs. I was shown into a bedroom beautifully clean and fresh although overloaded with furniture and crockery knick-knacks.

'This is a very nice room,' I said. 'I hope you will find me a good lodger.'

The lady was a little embarrassed. 'You won't mind me asking you, but we always keep ourselves clean. You know what I mean. Seafaring folks can't always help it.'

I knew what she was so delicately hinting at and reassured her. 'There's nothing like that about me, you're not allowed to go about like that in Government jobs.' I thought of my marine servant's face if he knew that I had been suspected of being verminous, and had difficulty in keeping from smiling. There was still a last point to discuss, and I had the wit to guess what it was before she had said two words.

'You're quite right, as you know nothing about me. I'll pay you a week in advance.' I handed her a golden sovereign and she carefully lifted up her skirt and from an enormous leather pouch slung round her waist produced the four shillings change. That was the end of the bargaining, and the next act was that I was seated at supper beside 'miss' and tucking into some of the best eggs and bacon I have ever tasted. Later, when we had become good friends, the porter confessed that his wife must have taken a sudden fancy to me as he had never expected she would have let me have the best bedroom, especially as he had been none too sure of me himself. 'Coming down in the dark like that and not offering me threepence to carry your bag! I thought there must be something queer about you, begging your pardon in a manner of speaking!' The last was a favourite phrase of his when he thought the compliments were getting a bit mixed.

Supper over, mother and daughter proceeded to the sink while we three men clustered round the fire and smoked. The young man was taking stock of me all the time and pumping me, with what object I could not determine, as to my experience at sea. He was visibly impressed when I admitted that I had been 'foreign'. 'That was in steamboats, I expect,' he said rather contemptuously. When I explained that I had been foreign in both steam and sail he dropped his suspicious manner, and told me that he was an apprentice pilot and first hand in a pilot cutter, but could not become qualified as a pilot until he had served a year in a foreign-going vessel. Just before we went to bed he said that the second hand in their cutter was sick and they were unable to go to sea. If I cared to put in for the job temporarily, he was sure the pilot would be glad to have me, as he was losing money by this delay. I asked what the pay would be, and was offered twenty-six shillings a week and my grub when at sea. There would be also my share in the pilotage which might amount to fifteen shillings a week or might be nothing. I said that I would think it over and should like to have a look at the ship before deciding but that I thought it would suit me. It was understood that, if I took the job, I would follow the custom of the pilot boatmen and pay the landlady six shillings a week as retainer for the room while I was at sea. That sounded reasonable enough, and—lest anyone should think that this was easy money for her—I was told to leave all my mending with her, and that she would do all the washing and mending necessary.

I went to bed well satisfied with myself. It was not much more than twelve hours since I had shed the conventional shackles of a naval officer, and here I was as good as engaged and earning enough to make me a self-respecting member of a seafaring community. I wondered how long it would be before I was discovered to be the fraud I really was and got the boot. Bill had told me that no seaman's discharges were required by the pilots so one source of exposure was removed.

Early the next morning after a jolly good breakfast my new friend and I went down to the creek, where about a score of pilot cutters were lying in mud berths at low water. It had been snowing during the night and there was

a sharp frost. The deck of the cutter was covered with ice, and the first thing Bill did, after telling me to stay where I was, was to dive down the fo'c'sle hatch and reappear with a shovelful of ashes which he sprinkled over the deck. This made our footing safe enough but, accustomed as I was to the sacred purity of scrubbed teak, horrified me and drew a protest, much to Bill's amusement. 'These navy ways aren't much use here. The decks are painted with a mixture of tar and paraffin and won't take any harm.'

I had never been on board one of these vessels before, and this one which we were in was said to belong to the biggest and best class. She was fifty-three feet over all, forty-eight on the waterline, thirteen feet six inches beam, drew nine feet aft and three feet six inches forward. She was very heavily built and all the gear seemed to promise heavy working. I did not like the outline of her deck since it had the appearance of having been pinched between a gigantic finger and thumb just abaft the rigging, an ugly feature I have noticed in many working craft which have not been built to well designed lines. The deck arrangements were simple, and had been purposely reduced to the minimum so that there were no skylights and only two hatches. The after hatch led from the small deep cockpit into the saloon, the forrard entered the fo'c'sle on the port side of the midship line, so as to be clear of the bowsprit when it was run in. A few scattered deck lights allowed you to avoid collision below, but did not supply anything that could be called light. There was no ventilation except through the hatches and the fo'c'sle chimney, which pierced the deck abaft the bitts. As all these openings were bound to be closed in bad weather I could have forecasted with certainty the solid atmosphere I was destined to meet—and enjoy—on many future occasions. The bowsprit bitts were three enormous blocks of timber rising high above the stemhead and much stronger than was needed in order to support the crab windlass and bowsprit. Later when we were towed at fourteen knots astern of an ocean-going steamer I was to learn that they were barely enough for their job.

The deck was protected by bulwarks about sixteen inches high with opening doors amidships to allow the dinghy to be dragged on board. The rigging had been reduced to the minimum possible. There were no bowsprit shrouds,

bobstay, or foretopmast stay, no runners, the triple shrouds being widely spread apart in lieu, no topmast shrouds or backstays. The main and peak halliards were led through leading blocks, in the covering board on each side, to bollards fitted on either side of the cockpit and within easy reach of the helmsman. The fore-sheet was a single part as far as the leading bulls eye, and thence was controlled by a powerful gun-tackle purchase, the standing block of which was made fast to the forrard of the two bollards at the side of the cockpit. There were no cross-trees at the hounds but an iron spur was fitted in their place for the all-round white light which was the only navigation light these ships carried. The mainsail, made of very heavy canvas and about 900 square feet in area, was laced along the foot to a wooden jackstay on the solid pitchpine boom which weighed just short of three hundredweight. The gaff, also very heavy, was almost the same length as the boom and the head of the sail squarer than is usual in yachts. Reefing was effected by the Appledore reefing gear with which I was unfamiliar although I had heard it warmly commended.

The mainsheet interested me most of all. This sheet was double-ended, the ends being made fast to the after bollards on each side of the well, and the purchase being made by means of two double blocks. Between the lower block and the main horse was an enormous spring buffer, and there was a similar buffer between the upper block and the boom. The pilots were in the habit of jibing their vessels all standing, under almost any conditions of wind and sea, and these buffers allowed this to be done without injury to the boom. The most common accident to which they were liable was the breaking of the boom when the sail was reefed, as the mere weight of wind would break the spar where the leach joined it, in the same way as a stick is snapped across the knee. The deck was free from encumbrances of any kind, and there were no rails or stanchions along the bulwarks. It struck me that this unprotected stretch of deck might well seem the loneliest place on God's earth when I left the security of the cockpit to do a job up forrard.

Going down a short steep ladder from the cockpit the compass was seen on a shelf under the sliding hatch in such a position that it was badly lit dur-

ing the day and almost invisible at night, while it was in the worst possible position for taking bearings. Bill's remark that they didn't bother with the compass much was borne out by the marlinspike and spare shackle stowed in a handy shelf close beside it. At the bottom of the ladder was a passageway about eight feet long between storerooms, sailracks, and a small compartment furnished with a seat and a bucket. This was never used at sea, direct contact being then made with the sewage system in a primitive fashion. A double door with glass panels admitted to the saloon, a large room about ten feet long and with six feet width of floor space. On either side were box bunks entered by a small oval hole, the edges of the hole decorated with mahogany moulding. The bunk was very narrow and once inside you were as securely fixed as if you had been screwed down in a coffin, to which the bunk bore a strong resemblance. In front of the bunks were narrow settees, and between the bunks and the settees the ship's legs were stowed when not in use. Fixed against the after bulkhead and on either side of the door were two mahogany chests of drawers, and against the forrard bulkhead on the port side of the fo'c'sle doorway was the table, which was a fixed one and covered the water tank holding sixty gallons or more.

The fo'c'sle was similarly fitted, the table against the after bulkhead forming the cable locker, and having the same type of bunks and settees but without the mahogany trimmings. The main addition to the furniture was the cooking range, a small Hostess, secured to the bitts where they passed through the floor to be embedded in the keel. The ship was open right up to the stem but there was an unholy row if anyone ventured to hang as much as an oilskin forrard of the bitts. The pilots believed that the dryness of the ship at sea depended on keeping the ends light and the weights amidships. I am sure they were right.

I have described the ship at some length because since the war many of them have been 'converted' into yachts, and in the process all their best features have been altered until, except in hull appearance, they no more resemble pilot boats than any other old 'tore-out'. I speak feelingly because I, who ought to have known better, was fool enough to 'convert' two of them after

the war as there was a shortage of yachts within the purchasing power of my gratuity. One of them was inspected by a pilot cutter hand in Brixham, and when I asked him what he thought about it his answer accorded with my own experience. 'Poor old *Freda*! You've spoiled a good seaboat but you've got a very fine houseboat.'

It was rather disappointing to find that the headroom below was only sufficient to let me stand up between the beams in the saloon, although it was a little better in the fo'c'sle. That was due to the bulky nature of her ballast which was all inside and consisted of scrap iron and steel punchings. The pilots disliked headroom as it meant heavy ballast concentrated low down and an uneasy ship in consequence. When considering these vessels it has to be remembered that the livelihood of their owners depended on their ability to keep the sea in any weather. They simply had to be on the spot when wanted, and it was only possible to do so if the ships were so easy at sea that even the wildest weather could not drive them in for shelter. That they fulfilled their functions admirably may be guessed when I say that I could find no record of one of those ships being lost through stress of weather. Losses, of course, there had been in plenty, but all of them had been due to collision, fire, or stranding. The power of the wind and sea alone had never overwhelmed one of them. Remember that we are speaking of the Bristol Channel in winter. One yachtsman I knew used to take off his hat and keep a moment's silence if anyone mentioned cruising in this area in his presence. The gesture was not meant as a joke.

Whilst I was nosing round and finding my way about, Bill was sweeping up the floor and tidying the cabins. He lit the stove—there was no method of heating the saloon—and after we had finished our respective occupations we sat down to talk things over. The questions I had asked and that I thought would betray my greenness had seemed to him just the intelligent desire for information that any man ought to show before taking on a new billet. When he had answered a whole string of queries he asked me whether I would join up at once, as the pilot was anxious to get away the next day to meet a big ship which was shortly due and would be worth a lot of money to all of us. If he

could report that he had got a second hand he would be able to provision ship at once. There was only one pilot in this ship instead of the usual two, and I suggested that she would prove heavy working for only three hands. At this Bill threw back his head and roared with laughter. 'The pilots don't help in the work of them ships. They're real gents. You and I will have to do all the work by ourselves, but we can manage it easy. I could do it by myself, only a man must get some sleep sometime when he may be a week at sea.'

I looked at his big powerful frame and could well believe him, but I was a much smaller man though tough enough and in good fettle. The next thing to do was to interview the pilot and get his approval. He was a big burly man with a secret sorrow which I was able to do something to assuage. He had been chosen as the pilot of the Royal Yacht when she came to Avonmouth to open the new docks, and when entering the lock she had rubbed her gangway ladder against the side of the lock and damaged it, so that it could not be used for the disembarkation of the royal party. He told me this when he learned that I had been in a government job, and added that he had never felt so ashamed in his life, and imagined all sorts of contempt had been showered on him by the naval officers who had been witnesses of the mishap. I thought of the times I had seen a ladder smashed by picket boats coming alongside, and said: 'I don't suppose they ever thought anything about it except to curse somebody for not having a fender handy.' This was a new idea to the old man and, coming as it did from one who claimed to know the service attitude, eased a load which he admitted he had been carrying for years. Incidentally, it also convinced him that I was the very man he wanted as temporary second hand, and allowed us to start on good terms. I wondered how long it would be before he found the very moderate value of my opinion on nautical affairs. It was arranged that Bill and I were to take the ship to Portishead the next day and lie in a mud berth. He was to join us in the evening, and we would get to sea on the early morning tide.

We filled in the afternoon and evening after the fashion of young men all over the world, that is to say we talked a little, smoked a good deal, ate more than was necessary, and spent most of the dark hours in a little local insti-

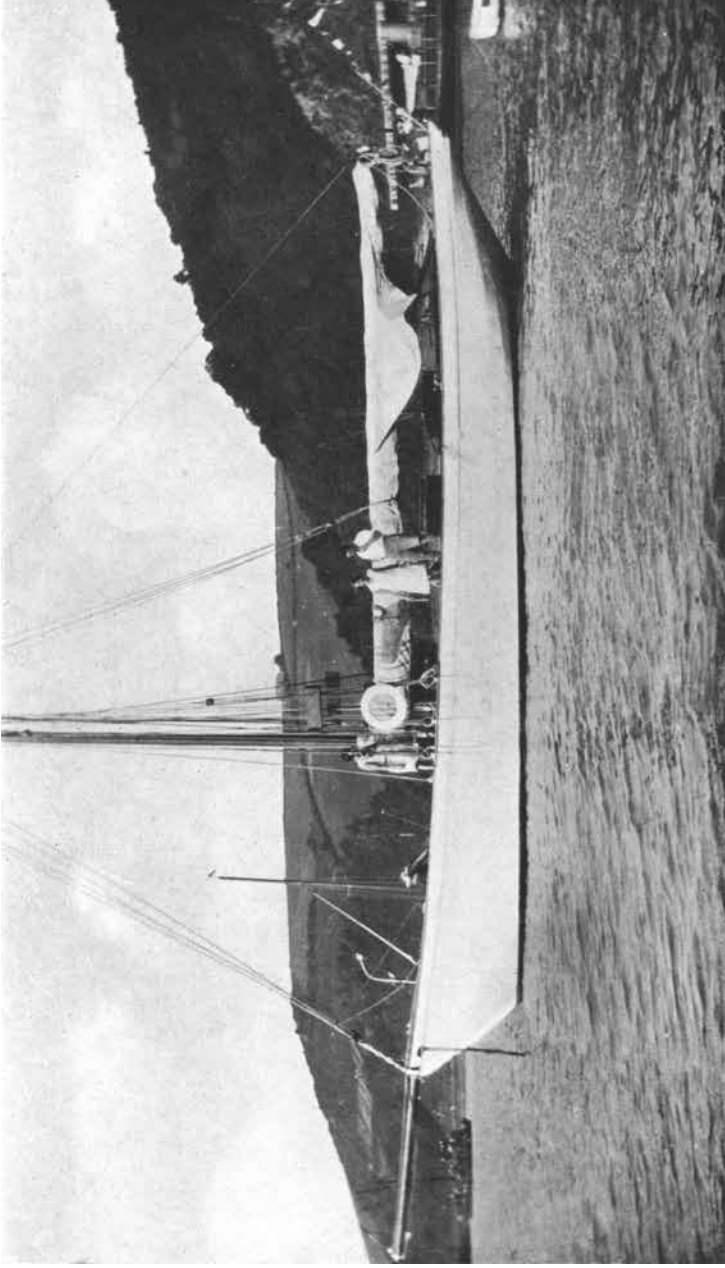
tute where there was a reading room and a very good billiard table. Although a fairly good billiard player, judged by mess room standards, I preferred to yarn with the seamen who were constantly coming and going. Almost without exception they were pilot-boat men or had some connexion with the calling and were the finest, clean-living types of men I have ever met. There was a comradeship and good feeling extended to the stranger which could only have been equalled in a wardroom mess. Their talk was all of the sea and ships, and in no way defaced by the bad language and doubtful stories that too often pass for wit in some nautical circles. I am always proud to remember that they welcomed me as one of themselves, and if ever I should be in mortal peril from the sea I could ask and hope for no better shipmates than these pilot-boat men from the Bristol Channel.

Late that night after being delightfully fussed over and stuffed by our landlady we went on board as it was necessary to be under way before dawn. It must have been desperately cold during the dark hours but, tucked away in the fo'c'sle bunks, and with the stove going full blast, we were as snug as the proverbial bugs, of which pest I was relieved to find no trace. There were snow and ice on the deck when we turned out under a dark blue frosty sky, and dawn was still in the future as we slipped our moorings and reached the fairway of the Avon. There was hardly a breath of wind, and we got the canvas on her easily enough although the halliards and sails were frozen stiff. There was nothing to do until we got to Portishead so Bill went to stir the fire and get breakfast ready while I did my best to obey his injunction to keep her in the middle of the river. The breakfast was cooked, eaten and cleared up before we edged out of the tide and picked up our berth on top of a mudbank opposite the village. The pilot joined in the evening and told us he had arranged with a friendly steamer to be towed as far as Lundy. I thought this was good news as the wind was too light to get us anywhere, but for some reason Bill did not seem quite so pleased. When I asked him why, he told me I'd very soon find out.

Dawn found us at the mouth of the river waiting for the steamer from Bristol, and soon she hove in sight and took our line. Before we had been astern

of her for five minutes I knew exactly what Bill meant. I was steering and the steamer worked up to fourteen knots in next to no time. Luckily it was a flat calm, but the speed at which we were towed brought a constant shower of spray over the fo'c'sle head and slap into my face where I stood in the cockpit. The bite of the icy spray was painful misery. I dodged it as best I could by ducking behind the companion, but with little success as the ship was very hard to steer, and I was afraid of pulling the bitts out of her if she were allowed to sheer about. In that trip to Lundy I learned to appreciate and be grateful for those enormous bitts. Bill and I found that an hour at the tiller was as much as either of us could stand, and we spent our watch below in front of the stove warming up for the next effort. That five-hour tow for long stood out as my most miserable experience at sea.

All things come to an end, and it was with unfeigned thankfulness we coiled in the tow-rope and hoisted the canvas midway between Lundy and Ilfracombe. There was a light westerly wind, and for the next twenty-four hours the ebb carried us towards Hartland and the flood towards the Bull. There were literally dozens of pilot boats all round from Barry, Cardiff, Pill, Swansea, and Newport, and there was a constant interchange of greetings as we passed one another or a ship slowed down to pick up or discharge her pilot. There did not seem to be any method in the allocation of jobs. The incoming steamer bore down on the pilot cutter whose lettering on her mainsail indicated that she belonged to the desired port, and hailed for a pilot. If one were available he went on board, if not the steamer went on to the next cutter. Occasionally the captain of the steamer asked for a special pilot, and if the cutter were anywhere handy the captain was allowed his choice, but the steamer could not afford to wait, and if he could not easily get the pilot he wanted the captain would take any one who offered. At night time the steamer could not see the markings on the sail, and then the pilot cutter burned the appropriate flares or the steamer hailed for information as she passed. The arrangement seems rather primitive but it worked all right and, although there was plenty of rivalry, there was no trace of ill-feeling and no jealousy was shown when a captain asked for his favourite pilot. Probably the reason for this comradeship



Britannia

The final stage in the development of the Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter

Note the overhang forward

was to be found in the fact that there was no economic drive as all the men were earning good money.

The pilot in our boat was exceptional, but he confessed to earning over a thousand a year, and many of the other men were not far behind him. Of course it can be readily understood that the fees for a large ship of deep draught were much higher than those for a smaller ship. We were waiting for a very large ship whose captain had warned the pilot that he expected to be off Lundy at a certain time, and it was well worth his while to let the small fry go past. Most of the cutters carried two pilots and either picked up or dropped their pilots as required. When both pilots had been placed on homeward bound ships the cutter went back to her home port to pick them up, and provision and water. If the pilots were expected to come back in an outward bounder the cutter went into Ilfracombe to provision and water there. The stay in port rarely exceeded four days unless the cutter were due for a refit, and the time on station might be anything but was usually ten days to a fortnight. The new steamer pilot service in which the pilot carries out his duties according to a roster may be more efficient, but it is responsible for an enormous amount of unemployment and the virtual extinction of the finest body of seamen in the world whose services can ill be spared.

I soon tumbled to the routine on board. Bill and I kept watch and watch, the hand turning out getting a meal ready and consuming it before relieving the deck. After my first effort at cooking the dinner Bill decided that it had better be prepared by himself if we were to remain friends. We saw very little of the pilot, who took no part in the deck work except to take the tiller, but who grumbled like a wardroom mess at the meals we placed in front of him with unfailing regularity. He insisted on drinking huge quantities of camomile tea, which we prepared for him, and it was not long before I was certain that he was suffering from a gastric ulcer, of which he was fond of telling me the symptoms without guessing that his second hand was making a medical diagnosis. Like many people of his class he would not seek medical advice although relief, if not complete cure, of his symptoms would have been easy.