SAMPLE:
NOT FOR RESALE OR QUOTATION

The Fishing Fleet

Husband-Hunting in the Raj

Anne de Courcy

WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN (hardback): 978 0 297 86382 3

ISBN (trade paperback): 978 0 297 86847 7

Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Orion Publishing Group Ltd

Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane, London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

www.orionbooks.co.uk

Chapter 1

*‘Champagne has been known to allay seasickness
when all else failed’*

The voyage out

‘The smell of the earth soaking up the first rain of the monsoon, of watered Lucerne [alfafa], of roasting gram [chickpea from the servants’ godowns], of tobacco smoked on the roadside in a communal pipe and the tremendous, heady bitter smell of something in the Simla bazaar – you never forgot and you longed to smell it again.’ Veronica Bamfield, child of a family that had spent three generations in India, was returning as one of the Fishing Fleet.

Some of these young women had been born in India, sent home anywhere between five and ten years of age to be educated, and were now sailing out to rejoin their families. ‘Got up very early and went to St Pancras for boat train. Met Lady Steele. Arrived at Tilbury. Got on to boat for India, SS *Mongolia*, cabin 244,’ wrote the sixteen-year-old Claudine Gratton on 4 September 1936. ‘Said goodbye to Lady Steele.’

Claudine was one of many single girls for whom travelling out to India was a rite of passage as important as the debutante curtsey many of them had already made. In any autumn during the years of the Raj these groups of young women and girls could be found undertaking the voyage, its route marked by distant and exotic ports. ‘Gully gully men at Port Said, naked brown boys diving for pennies thrown over the side of a ship, islands gold, turquoise and amethyst in the misty early sunlight of the harbour of Bombay,’ reminisced Veronica Bamfield in the 1930s.

Claudine, like other young girls of her age and class, was chaperoned every inch of the way, first by her mother’s friend Lady Steele to Tilbury (it was unthinkable that she should travel alone on the boat train from St Pancras for Tilbury) until she boarded the SS *Mongolia* for Bombay, on which her mother was also sailing.

‘Three awful old hags in my cabin,’ she noted – her mother was in smarter accommodation – but within twenty-four hours was otherwise preoccupied. ‘The boat rolled. Felt very seasick. Slept on deck all day, very cold. Went to bed. Was sick once. Mummy fainted in the bathroom. Had fever, went back to bed. Had to look after her.’ Mercifully, her mother improved the next day.

Departures were always an event, heightened in many cases by the knowledge that this was the last time one might see a beloved face. ‘Steamed down Southampton Water under the guidance of a pilot. After three hours the pilot and several others left us,’ wrote William Adamson in the 1850s. ‘We

gave them a parting cheer which they lustily returned – the last of which many then on board would ever give to England'

None of this deterred the eager and determined young women bound for Bombay, as a poem written by Thomas Hood (in 1842) makes plain:

By Pa and Ma I'm daily told
To marry now's my time,
For though I'm very far from old,
I'm rather in my prime.
They say while we have any sun
We ought to make our hay—
And India has so hot an one,
I'm going to Bombay!

My heart is full – my trunks as well;
My mind and caps made up,
My corsets, shap'd by Mrs Bell,
Are promised ere I sup;
With boots and shoes, Rivarta's best,
And dresses by Ducé,
And a special licence in my chest—
I'm going to Bombay!

But to judge by the letters sent home by Minnie Blane, the bride of Archie Wood, a handsome captain in the army of the soon-to-be-disbanded East India Company, it could be a nightmare journey.

Minnie travelled on the newly built sailing ship *Southampton* in one of its eighteen passenger cabins. In these early journeys round the Cape all the cabins had to be furnished by the passengers themselves – what they bought was simply an empty space, to be filled at their expense and according to their means. This involved, at the least, a bed or sofa on which to sleep; sheets, looking glass, washstand, chair, candles and a chest for clothes.

The *Southampton* was cramped: there was a dining room but nowhere else to sit except parts of the deck. The ship also carried hens, pigs, a cow, several horses and a pack of foxhounds (which gave tongue just as everyone was falling asleep) that the captain intended to sell when they reached India. The shortage of water meant cleanliness was a problem and during the four months the voyage took much of the food went bad – perhaps the reason Minnie's husband got dysentery.

Sometimes the ship bounced along under a brisk wind with half the passengers prostrate with seasickness; when there was no breeze she inched her way forward under a hot sun. With the insanitary conditions, the endless bouts of seasickness, the effluvia from animals and passengers, one can only imagine

the stench, let alone the discomfort. 'Tell Cissy [her sister] never to undertake such a thing,' wrote Minnie. '*It is horrible*!'

Three months into the voyage she reported that 'all the lump sugar is gone and the eggs all went bad and had to be thrown overboard weeks ago, and though there is dessert on the table every day I cannot touch a thing, as biscuits, figs and ratafia are alive. I cannot tell you how sick it made me on cutting open a fig to see three or four large white maggots lying comfortably inside!' After intense heat ('I am *melting*') they rounded the Cape through a terrible storm, waves like mountains and snow falling.

It was so cold when she wrote this that Minnie, normally a bright, cheerful, lively girl, never left the cabin, while her husband wore three or four overcoats at once. A few days later she had retched and vomited so much that one of her eyes was entirely red from burst blood vessels and the doctor had kindly popped in to warn them against the mutton. 'It has all gone bad.' When they finally arrived, the voyage had lasted sixteen weeks and three days. Nor did Minnie know if they would ever return to England.

In 1830 the East India Company pioneered the Red Sea route with a small steamer, built in India, called the *Hugh Lindsay*. As sail gave way to steam - though the early steamships were often sail-assisted in suitable conditions – and with it the end of the perilous journey round the Cape of Good Hope, journey time shortened dramatically.

By the 1830s small steamers began to run across the Indian Ocean between Suez and Bombay. Passengers would leave their ship at Alexandria and, after changing to a Nile boat – even smaller – travel to Cairo via a canal forty-eight miles long that had been built a few years earlier by the Pasha of Egypt, using 200,000 slaves. At Suez they would catch the steamer that would take them on the last leg of their journey, to Bombay. The coal for this had to come out from England; and was humped across the desert by a herd of 3,000 camels kept for the purpose. By now ships' cabins were furnished, although the minimum wardrobe recommended seems enormous. 'Take with you only six dozen shirts…two dozen pairs of white pantaloons, three dozen pairs of long drawers, a forage cap, a straw hat.' Women were advised to take no less than six dozen chemises, four dozen night chemises, four dozen each of drawers, thin cotton stockings, towels and three pairs of stays.

By the early 1900s travel was more comfortable but for some severely regimented. Florence Evans, travelling out to India a few years before the 1914 war, described arriving at Southampton dock and boarding the SS *Nubia,* 'a splendid-looking steamer of great capacity'. In fact, the 5914-ton *Nubia*, built in 1894, was a mere 430 feet long – yet according to Florence, carried 'well over a thousand troops beside women and children, crew, officers etc. [She was] like a small town – one easily lost one's way in her.'

As Florence was not one of the ninety first- or sixty-two second-class passengers the *Nubia* was entitled to carry, routine started early. So rapidly could disease sweep round a crowded ship that she and her companions had to be medically examined and passed as fit before being allowed on board, where they were allotted their beds in the Women's Quarters.

'These Quarters,' she recorded, 'are like a large dormitory with rows of comfortable beds and under each bed is room for the deck box containing clothing for the journey. At the end are the bath rooms (hot and cold water always on) wash house and lavatories also two small hospitals for the sick. 'We steamed out of dock on the Friday morning with our band playing "Auld Lang Syne" and "Where is now the merry party?" These rather saddened us and many both men and women wiped away a few tears as they wished Goodbye to their native land for a few years: then we were cheered by "Soldiers of the Queen" a most lively and inspiring tune which put us all in good humour again.'

She forbore from describing the seasickness that raged after the first day ('I will draw a veil over our sufferings any one who has gone through it understands the horrors of sea sickness'), concentrating instead on the daily timetable: 'We rise at 5.30, breakfast 7.30, doctor's inspection 9, dinner at 12, tea at 4, bed at 8.0' - and sleepy or not, to their dormitory they had to go at eight sharp.

Despite the daily medical inspection, a few days before they arrived at Port Said a rumour swept round that scarlatina had broken out among the children. 'Certainly one child was taken seriously ill, an infant a few months old,' wrote Florence, adding sadly that the child had died before the day was out. 'Poor woman,' she wrote of the mother, 'she had buried three before and this was the last. The little one was buried in the evening, all engines were stopped and the service was read the parents standing by when the corpse was lowered into the deep, it is a most solemn ceremony done that I hope never to see again. Poor mother she was insensible for hours after, she attempted to follow the child at the burial and was held back by force.'

The Bay of Biscay was still so dreaded in the twentieth century that those who could afford it often travelled overland to join their ship at Marseilles in order to avoid it.

One such traveller was Lilah Wingfield, daughter of Lord Powerscourt, invited out to India to see the 1911 'Coronation' Durbar, held to recognise King George V and Queen Mary as Emperor and Empress of India. Lilah's fellow passengers were an exceptionally smart crowd, travelling out on the *Malaya* for the durbar as special guests, the married couples all accompanied by their respective lady's maids and valets (travelling second class, naturally). 'As well as the boy Maharaja of Jodhpur with his English army officer companion, Lord and Lady Bute sit at the next table to ours and the Duke and Duchess of

Hamilton, he is quite lame,' noted Lilah. 'Lord Leigh and his sister, both elderly, are our next neighbours.'

At first all was excitement and pleasure. Even during the lengthy process of coaling, Lilah could enjoy the warmth and beauty of the night, with its black-velvet sky studded with brilliant stars, listening to Scottish tunes floating upwards. 'Lord Bute's piper played the pipes on the second class passenger deck after dinner and all the maids and valets danced Scotch reels!'

Although Lilah was travelling on the newly launched *Maloja*, one of P&O's larger ships at nearly 12,500 tons, all too soon the disadvantages of a late-autumn sailing became apparent; and on 17 November 1911 she too was writing: 'A horrid rough night succeeded by a horrid rough choppy sea today and it is no longer warm and sunny either and it rains half the time. I lay in my chair on deck all day feeling very miserable and wretched and too giddy to go downstairs to meals or to do anything…..we had dinner on deck and afterwards there was a dance – a queer night to choose for this entertainment as the ship was rolling and pitching like anything.'

But Lilah's natural high spirits and readiness to enjoy herself soon surfaced. 'Lord Bute's piper played reels, Lord and Lady Bute, Lord Mar and Kellie, Lord and Lady Cassilis and the Duchess of Hamilton all took part, and it was a very funny sight as they were all lurching against the side of the ship and slipping about in the most comic way.'

'At Marseilles the posh people came aboard,' wrote Maisie Wright. 'There were five maharajas with their wives, children and retinues, and British Provincial Governors returning from home leave, and a bishop.'

By the beginning of the twentieth century nothing halted the relentless gaiety on these voyages. Corseted ladies in long flowing Edwardian skirts, holding long-handled spoons in front of them, ran as fast as they were able along heaving decks in the egg and spoon race and, as the *Marmora Gazette* reported (in February 1912): 'in the tie and cigarette race [seeing which lady could tie a tie or light a cigarette fastest, both things which no 'lady' would normally do] the mere men were much impressed by the countless opportunities of displaying genius, even in tying bows, while several ladies were clearly practised hands in lighting cigarettes. After the tea interval with its lively auction most of the time was devoted to spar fighting. How graceful one looks balanced on a thin pole! That amusing event cock-fighting brought the proceedings to a close.'

Invariably, there was a fancy dress ball; Lilah went as an Irish peasant, with a skirt of crimson muslin instead of red flannel because of the heat, her red hair in two long plaits and a scarlet handkerchief round her head. Another girl, rather than be overwhelmed by the elaborate fancy dresses some of the passengers had brought out from England, borrowed one of the young stewards' uniforms and accompanied him serving drinks to guests. She acted the part so well that no one spotted her – and she won a prize.

‘After Aden, we had the fancy dress dance, which I enjoyed very much,’ wrote Maisie Wright. ‘My table companions came in kilts made from bath towels with sporrans of sponge bags and two dangling shaving brushes. But they were drunk by dinner time so I kept out of their way. There was a full programme of social events, with competitions for deck games, camp-fire concerts round an electric fire on deck at night, and a gymkhana.’

Nor did injury deter: on Lilah’s voyage a man had four teeth knocked out by a bat during a cricket match on board, although the occasional ladies’ cricket match was gentler, if only because the men all had to play left-handed. By the late 1920s and 1930s romping games like sack and potato races had all but disappeared, their places taken by deck tennis (quoits), housey-housey (bingo), sunbathing and swimming, in canvas pools that slopped about in rough weather; not until 1929 did a P&O liner – *The Viceroy of India* – have a built-in-swimming pool surrounded by Pompeian reliefs (it also had a smoking room designed like the great hall of a castle, complete with hammer beams, baronial arms, a large fireplace and crossed swords on the walls).

Lilah shared her cabin with a friend: in the early 1900s there were very few single-berth cabins. By today’s standards it was Spartan: there was no heating or ventilation (if a cabin had a porthole and this was left open, water might sluice in dangerously on sleeping passengers). There were no bedside lights and the switch for the cabin light was by the door. The only furniture was a coffin-like upright stand that concealed a primitive basin and tap.

As there were no private bathrooms on P&O liners, passengers would scurry along corridors to ‘bath cubicles’ in their dressing gowns and, for women – as it was the age of long hair – boudoir caps to conceal their undressed coiffures. These caps were trimmed with lace or frills and the more frivolous ones had bunches of curls or ringlets – often made of real hair – at either side to frame the face. In the cubicles, Indian bath attendants filled the tub with hot sea water, for which a special soap was needed. Across each bath was a tray on which the attendant placed a large wooden container of fresh water with which the bather rinsed off the salt.

Passengers kept the clothes they needed in their flat-topped wooden cabin trunks, marked ‘Cabin’ and stowed beneath berths. Fresh water for washing clothes was in such short supply that many women who knew they were going to travel saved their most worn underwear and then discarded it overboard on the voyage leaving, one imagines, a trail of dirty, threadbare nightdresses and knickers across the Indian Ocean.

Ruby Madden, daughter of Sir John Madden, Chief Justice and Lieutenant Governor of Victoria, was one who took advantage of this custom, dropping her soiled nightdresses out of the porthole. Ruby, who had been invited to stay with her friend Jeanie, married to Lieutenant-Colonel Claude Hamilton, for the Coronation Durbar of 1902/3, wrote cheerfully that she had

very little laundry to do when she arrived as she had ‘worn most of the rags and thrown them overboard’.

As evening dress was compulsory at dinner, for a long voyage women had to pack quite an assortment of gowns, some for gala evenings. One little girl, put to bed earlier, watched her seventeen-year-old stepsister dressing in one of these, a confection of white pure silk satin, its skirt caught up with bunches of artificial violets, kept uncrushed in her cabin trunk by layers of tissue paper.

Among garments not needed on the voyage were the special lightweight tropical stays women were advised to take, with shorter ones for riding – much of life could be spent on a horse in India – as in those pre-1914 war years no respectable woman could go without corsets, whatever the weather. Two other essentials in the trunk were a pile of knitted woollen ‘cholera belts’ and a supply of the long white kid gloves, with tiny pearl buttons at the wrists so that the hands could be turned back at dinner parties, that were worn on all formal occasions.

It was a time when most women drank little. For men returning to India, there was the custom of the ‘chota peg’ – the ‘sundowner’ of whisky and soda or whisky and water, said to be medicinal in that climate, especially against malaria. (Until 1874 all drinks on board a P&O ship had been free – wine, beer, spirits, mineral water and champagne on celebration days like Sundays or landfalls – and the line was still famous for its claret. Many seasoned passengers took advantage of this from breakfast on.)

When a liner reached Port Said it was all change. ‘At about 7 pm we got into Port Said’ wrote Lilah in her journal on 18 November. ‘The most extraordinary thing seemed to me how marked a difference there suddenly was between west and east.’ Here the ship’s officers changed into white and double awnings were erected over the decks. Everyone went ashore, chiefly to the famous store Simon Artz (which prided itself on opening for the stay of every passenger liner, at whatever time of day or night) to buy topis – never white ones, which were considered bad form, but the oblong khaki-brown ones, sometimes known as Bombay bowlers – and any other tropical clothing needed. Here, too, was ‘Baggage Day’, when all the luggage marked ‘Wanted on Voyage’ and containing hot-weather clothes was brought up from the hold and exchanged for that marked ‘Cabin’.

In later years, Port Said was often seen as a behavioural Mason-Dixon line, with husbands or wives temporarily on the loose casting off the inhibitions that had shackled them on the earlier, cooler part of the trip. As one demure young woman remarked: ‘The fun started when they hit Port Said. And then the Red Sea became very hot in more ways than one.’

After Marseilles, Aden was the next port for coaling, a long process during which passengers were sent ashore, to amuse themselves in various ways. Some drove the few miles to the botanical gardens; Fishing Fleet girl

Marian Atkins and her mother drove up to a well, known for one extraordinary property. Those who looked into it, even at midday, could see the stars reflected, even though they were invisible in the clear blue sky overhead. On board, all doors and portholes were sealed and the coal carried up the ship's gangways by porters bent under the weight of sacks or baskets. Twenty-one-year-old Violet Hanson, travelling to India with her Aunt Mabs in 1920, recalled the scene – when they got back to the ship it was dark and the ship was lit by flares.

'Up the various gangways came almost naked black figures, walking in a constant progression intoning a long loud and monotonous chant, carrying on their heads baskets of coal which they then threw into the hold, only to return for more, chanting unceasingly. They looked like creatures from hell, covered with coal dust, illuminated by the orange glow of flares.'

The mid-Victorian habit of keeping a small farmyard on board and slaughtering pigs, cows, sheep and hens as needed (then, there was no refrigeration) to serve the copious meals demanded had long passed but seven courses were still the norm, with beef tea or ice cream at 11 a.m. Service, too, had become more stylish and elaborate: after the soup had been served the head waiter would walk round and, when he thought everyone had finished, beat a gong. In would rush the stewards, pounce on the empty plates and then, as one man, serve the fish. The same procedure would persist through the rest of the courses. In rough weather, 'fiddles' were placed on the tables. These were mahogany frames with walls about two inches high, divided into little squares in each of which was room for a plate, tumbler and wine glass. Dishes and bottles were placed in the gap between two rows of fiddles.

Precedence reigned supreme, with the most distinguished people – generals, aristocrats, Indian Civil Service commissioners – sitting at the captain's table, and the rest grouped as nearly as possible with their social equals (meals for the passengers' children, accompanied by their nannies or ayahs, were served in a separate dining room). Most ships were full of British officers returning to India after eight months' leave, business men in tussore silk suits and, invariably travelling first class on the top deck, the 'heaven-borns' – governors, commissioners, Residents, judges, often with their wives and chaperoned daughters.

Even with the shorter travelling times after the opening of the Suez Canal, partings could still be for a matter of years rather than months. Maisie Wright left England in November 1928 on the RMS *Rawalpindi*. 'When we arrived, rather late, we found the *Rawalpindi* towering above the P&O dock, with black smoke already billowing from its funnels. After a tearful farewell with my family, knowing that we should not meet again for four and a half years, I found my Second Class cabin. My cabin-mates were a middle-aged

Scotswoman, returning from leave to her husband, and a Bright Young Thing travelling to visit relatives.'

In the 1930s, though, partings became more like parties, with cocktails in friends' cabins until the last minute, families lining the quayside and waving, a band playing and long coloured streamers floating from ship to land as the liner edged away in stately fashion. By now, deck quoits, sunbathing and swimming had become favourite deck pursuits – barred to those who had left the necessary smallpox vaccinations until the last minute.

'My vaccination, red and swollen and at its worst, prevents me from swimming in the pool and from taking any exercise apart from the daily promenades round the deck,' wrote Margaret Martyn. 'I soothe my arm with boracic powder several times a day and wear a protective wire frame.' These vaccinations were quite painful: instead of the usual needle and syringe, the smallpox vaccine was given with a two-pronged needle, dipped into the vaccine solution, then the skin was pricked with this several times. It usually left a scar, so thoughtful doctors would do it on the legs of women rather the upper arm, where it would be seen in evening dress.

Even as late as 1934, sailing across the Bay of Biscay could still be terrifying. Bethea Field, aboard SS *Mantua* (a P&O ship of just under 11,000 tons) and fortunately immune to seasickness, ran into a storm so bad that she was one out of only twelve – the ship's full complement of passengers was 600 – who made it to the dining saloon; but when she returned to her cabin she found it impossible to climb into her bunk, the top one. 'I changed into nightclothes and dressing gown and rested for a time on the floor. The ship was being battered from every side and there was a wild shrieking from the rigging and crashes.

'Next morning it was wilder than ever. Sofas and armchairs were sliding about the saloon in every direction. Even the grand piano joined in the dance. The dining saloon was deserted and I heard that an order had come down from the bridge that all elderly passengers were advised to stay in their cabins - in their bunks. We found refuge in the divan room, a narrow saloon that ran from port to starboard of the ship. There were wall seats on three sides on which some people were lying – others were sitting on the deck holding onto anything that seemed stable.

'The deck steward came in and enquired for breakfast orders. As so few passengers were about the dining saloon was closed. I think I said "buttered toast and an apple". A few other orders were taken but most kept their eyes shut and shook their heads.' The ship was rolling so alarmingly that the returning steward crashed with his loaded tray, watched by passengers clinging to upright supports. Those who wanted a drink had to haul themselves to it hand over hand along 'storm ropes' lashed in place by the crew. 'I ordered a "horse's neck" [brandy and ginger ale, A drink supposed to settle the stomach] – and

that, with apples and sandwiches, became my main sustenance for the next three days as the cooking galley was closed,' wrote Bethea.

Until stabilisers finally came in finding one's sea legs was always a problem. One early authority, pointing out that 'chloroform taken in water is one remedy', added, 'I think no one should ever embark without a few bottles of the very best wine that can be procured; champagne has been known to allay seasickness when all else failed, and in the weakness and depression which invariably follow, good port wine is quite invaluable.'

Chapter 3

'Kisses on the boat deck'

Love at sea

'This evening Judy told me that the Comte de Madre had informed Lady Strefford that he had come simply and solely on this voyage for the purpose of finding an English wife!' wrote Lilah Wingfield, travelling to India for the Coronation Durbar of January 1912.

'She said that he was very anxious to marry and that he considered there were more opportunities on board ship for getting to know a girl well than in any other place, and he particularly wished for an English wife and did not want a very young girl – no Miss of eighteen – so he had set his selection on me! But I would ten times rather marry the black boy who prepares my bath!'

For Lilah and her friends, 'spooning' couples or those engaged in a purely shipboard romance were a common sight – and a bit of a joke. 'We all stalked around the deck to watch a ship flirtation which was going on at the far end of the bows, a very affectionate couple who held hands and gazed into each other's eyes, oblivious of all of us who walked by.' Sometimes their little group did more than stalk. 'We all nag Colonel Mitford over his infatuation for a pretty little Miss Gauntlett, it is a regular ship-flirtation. We composed a letter and had it given him by the deck steward, supposedly to be from "Mamma" Gauntlett, asking him his intentions! But he found out we had done it, so the joke fell flat.'

Lilah travelled out at a time when a strict and rather ridiculous apartheid existed between the P&O's officers and its passengers. 'There is a rather fascinating ship's doctor aboard but unluckily none of the ship's company is allowed to dance, which seems an absurd rule' she wrote sadly. 'They looked longingly on at the rest of us.' As one Commodore of the line, Captain Baillie, recalled: 'We were never allowed to appear on passenger decks in the day time before half past four in the afternoon, and we had to be off them by half-past nine. Drinking with passengers, either in one of the public rooms or a cabin, was rigidly forbidden and officially we were not permitted to dance.'

The reason was that earlier the P&O ship *China* had run aground on the island of Socotra at the southern entrance of the Red Sea – no one was hurt but it was considered a disgrace to the line. When it was found that some of the officers had been dancing with passengers during a dance on board, the Company concluded that this was a contributory cause of the error in navigation and decided to ban all officers from on-board gaieties. This, said Commodore Bailey, fomented a real grievance, especially in the Australian

mail ships, 'where rows of pretty and partnerless young girls would be sitting or standing round the edge of the dance space'.

Even more verboten was any hint of romance. But determination often found a way. As Captain Gordon Steele pointed out, although Company regulations forbade him from speaking to passengers, happily there was no rule against passengers addressing him – when, of course, politeness demanded an answer.

Apart from the attraction of a uniform, the officers of a liner in the P & O fleet had an aura of importance and dignity. When Steele – then younger and more junior – performed the simple operation of marking the ship's noon position on the track chart by means of a small circle, it was quite a small ceremony. He had a quartermaster to assist him. 'He opened the frame and held the dividers for me, and walked discreetly behind me as we wended our way to the First and Second Saloons.'

One day, said Steele, he found a pretty woman waiting by the First Saloon track chart. The following day she was there again. The third day she murmured to herself, sufficiently loud for Steele to hear: 'How beautifully he does it!' The embarrassed Steele not only dropped the dividers but also wrote down the latitude a whole degree out. The next day she asked if he would correct her wrist watch for longitude. He lingered so long over this operation that two elderly ladies thought they were holding hands, one whispering to the other, 'A boy and girl attachment – how sweet!'

Every day Steele corrected the young woman's watch. By now he had altered the routine so that the quartermaster went straight to the Second Saloon while he, alone, attended to the First – and to Jean, as the girl was called.

But they could not hope to escape notice for ever and Steele, while longing to see more of Jean, could not afford to jeopardise his chances with a reprimand – or worse. He happened to be the officer supervising the lifeboats on the ship's port side, so had Jean transferred from the starboard lifeboat list to the number 2 port lifeboat, of which he was directly in charge – while leaving her mother on the starboard list. He then ordered extra lifeboat drill for his port passengers……which meant helping Jean to put her lifebelt on, tying it round her, and assisting her to climb into the boat. But he was too steeped in the Company's traditions to make any further move.

Finally came the moment when the passenger tender arrived alongside the ship in Bombay and the passengers prepared to disembark. The queue was filing past the hatch where Steele was making up accounts; Jean, noticing this, left her mother at the head of the queue and herself rejoined at the very end. With everyone else ahead of them, Steele managed to give Jean a long and tender farewell kiss – their first.

For the next week, he recalled 'I was miserable.'

For others, these late-autumn sailings held a storehouse of possibilities.

As most men took their leave during the English summer, largely to avoid the heat of the plains and also often to take advantage of the London Season, ships going out in the autumn usually carried not only Fishing Fleet girls but also returning soldiers and administrators, most of whom would be single.

Some might have taken their furlough with the specific aim of finding a wife, but failed ('If she doesn't respond within a week, I move on,' said one ICS man) and were happy to meet a willing girl on the ship. Others made a mental note of a 'possible' girl, keeping her in mind for future encounters in India – or found that a meeting on board ship led to love in the future.

One of the latter was Jim Acheson, going out in 1913 to join the Indian Civil Service (known as the ICS, this was the body of civil servants who administered British rule in India), Curiously, it was also an ocean liner that nearly destroyed his chance of happiness – by sinking with his proposal of marriage on board. Jim was a young Ulsterman from County Armagh, who had done outstandingly well as both scholar and sportsman at Trinity College, Dublin, before passing into the ICS as a 'griffin' (as newly joined members of the Service were called).

In the tender taking passengers from the Tilbury quayside to their ship, the P&O *Arcadia*, Jim had noticed a Mrs Field 'whom I mentally described as a typical memsahib and her daughter Violet, then aged almost twenty, who at the time made little impression on him. He also saw a number of girls going out to join their parents in India – called, as he knew, the Fishing Fleet. 'It was perhaps ill-natured of the old hands in the services to refer to the P&O and other liners sailing east [in the late autumn] as the "Fishing Fleet". We had our full quota of these maidens on the *Arcadia*.' For them, as he also knew, he would be considered a desirable target. But at twenty-four and only at the start of his career Jim was well aware that any thoughts of marriage were out of the question.

By the end of the voyage Jim had had enough conversations with Mrs Field and Violet – 'whom I admired at a distance' – for Mrs Field to give him their Indian address and for him to promise to send them his when he knew where he would be posted. The Fields were bound for Meerut, a big cantonment in the United Provinces where Violet's father Colonel Charles Field was stationed as Cantonment Magistrate.

That first Christmas Jim exchanged Christmas cards with some of his shipboard friends, including Violet. The following summer, on 4 August 1914, war was declared between Great Britain and Germany. Jim, like most young men, wanted to fight for his country and applied for permission to join the Indian Army Reserve of Officers (IARO). He was flatly turned down by the Lieutenant-Governor of the United Provinces (to which he had been assigned) on the grounds that he could not be spared, although he did receive a promise that, should circumstances change, the position would be reconsidered.

The next time he sent a Christmas card to the Fields Jim, now stationed at Lucknow, happened to mention he was recovering from a cold. He was immediately invited to stay with them for Christmas and recuperate (in Indian terms Lucknow, less than 300 miles away, was quite close to Meerut). Feeling very run down and delighted at the idea, he accepted gladly.

He was met at the station by Violet, a memory he always cherished. 'I was greeted by a pretty, strange young woman, with what I can only describe as a gallant bearing, neatly gloved and neatly shod and with the brightest eyes I had ever seen and one of the sweetest voices I have ever heard.' Later he noticed that she had thick, glossy hair, with a reddish-gold glint. 'I have a crow to pluck with you, Mr Acheson,' she began, going on to point out that he had got the day of his arrival wrong. She led him out of the station to a smart English trap, with her mare Bunty between the shafts (there were only one or two cars to be seen), handling the reins efficiently through the crowds outside the station and in the bazaar.

It was a happy week. Jim rode, played tennis at the famous Wheler Club, met an old friend from on board ship, took part in his first large-scale snipe shoot and attended a New Year's Eve ball. The time slipped past all too quickly in those crisp sunny days of perfect weather – but not too quickly for Jim to become increasingly close to Violet.

They remained in touch and, by the time Violet was sent home early in 1915, along with other wives and daughters of Army officers ordered to Britain or elsewhere on active service, they were exchanging weekly letters, albeit on a firmly comradely basis. Jim, however, who had now been promoted to the two important positions of City Magistrate of Agra and Superintendent of the two Agra prisons (Agra Central Prison and the District Jail), had already decided that he was going to ask Violet to marry him.

What caused him to hesitate about proposing to her was not only the fact that Violet was doing war work but – much more of a consideration – ships were being sunk daily by German U-boats in the Mediterranean, which was inevitably traversed by any passenger to India. And if Violet agreed to marry him, she would in all likelihood feel bound to come out to join him in India – with the possibility of terrible danger en route, for which he would feel himself responsible.

The impasse was resolved when Violet wrote to him to say that she had decided to accept an invitation from a friend, the wife of a Hussar officer stationed in Meerut, to come out and stay with her. Jim resolved to act: if she was coming out anyway, why should she not come out as his fiancée – that is, if she accepted his proposal.

He wrote a letter asking her to marry him and it was duly despatched. Showing the forethought and intelligence that would later enable him to become one of the most distinguished members of the ICS, he then set himself to discover on which P&O mail boat the precious missive, so laboriously

worked over, would travel. This turned out to be the SS *Arabia*, a single-screw liner built in 1898.

The bad news he had been fearing came about. Three hundred miles off the coast of Malta the Arabia, a passenger liner, was torpedoed without warning on 6 November 1916 by the German submarine UB-43. Jim read the news in the Civil and Military Gazette, the Lahore newspaper that included the daily list of sinkings. Providentially, few lives were lost but all the home-bound mail went down – including, of course, Jim's proposal of marriage.

Swift action was needed. Jim rushed to the Agra Central Telegraph Office, where he composed a cablegram that was in effect a shortened version of his letter. He sent it off and waited anxiously for Violet's answer, hardly able to concentrate on the cases appearing before him in the stuffy, crowded Lucknow court room.

When her cable came the answer was 'Yes' followed by a letter saying she would be sailing a fortnight later in P&O's *Khyber*. This time, his anxiety during the three or four days the Khyber was in the Mediterranean was of a different order of intensity - with consequent relief when Violet's ship reached the safety of Port Said.

Then, just before Violet was due to arrive in Bombay, Jim received a telegram from the Lieutenant-Governor's secretariat. 'Be prepared to leave at shortest notice for Mesopotamia, Persian Gulf or NWF [North West Frontier],' it read. The telegram was followed by a letter saying that although the Lieutenant-Governor still adamantly forbade Jim from joining the IARO – which meant, effectively, from any kind of the active service he had wanted - all Indian provinces had been asked to send in the names of those officers who could be spared on loan to fill a single temporary gap in the Foreign and Political Department cadre. Jim's was one of the names put forward. 'At least,' ended the letter drily, 'You will be closer to the firing line.'

With his bride-to-be nearer every minute, Jim was at a loss. The only thing to do was to appeal to a higher authority. He went to see the Viceroy's Private Secretary – the Viceroy was on tour at Agra at the time – laid his dilemma before him and was advised to put it to the Deputy Foreign Secretary in Simla. It was back to the Telegraph Office again, this time to send a cable including the words: 'Am just about to get married stop please allow decent interval and post to Quetta stop Acheson.'

Jim's request was granted and he and Violet were married on 1 March 1917 at Meerut. Shortly afterwards, they were posted to Quetta.

For those in love the sea in peacetime – when calm – was a perfect setting. 'There was the excitement of sleeping on deck which we did if the nights were excessively hot as the tiny cabins were like ovens after the day's heat,' wrote Violet Hanson, who sailed to India in 1920. 'It was a lovely experience to lie under those brilliant stars and watch the tall mast gently swaying against the

marvellously clear dark sky. The pleasure of the little wafts of air after the heat was wonderful.'

Romances that had been tentative bloomed in the perfect temperature and tranquillity of the Indian Ocean. 'Here, the water looked like brilliant sapphire blue jelly,' wrote Violet, 'and the flying fish skimmed in flocks over the scarcely moving sea. At night phosphorescence glowed over the ocean, it was cool again and there was the excitement of nearing the end of the voyage. Shipboard romances were coming to an end with a great exchange of names and addresses and promises to meet.' These, she wrote with a touch of cynicism, were seldom to be fulfilled.

But for the sophisticated Edwina Ashley, one of the Fishing Fleet of late 1921, the dances and fancy dress balls were just so many humdrum episodes in a boring three weeks. In love with Lord Louis Mountbatten, who was accompanying his cousin David, the Prince of Wales, on a royal tour of India and Japan in 1921, she had decided to cut short their separation by securing an invitation to visit the Viceroy.

As a young unmarried girl, socially prominent, Edwina could not travel alone without giving rise to scandal: a chaperone was essential. She found one by the simple method of going to Thomas Cook's office and asking to look at the passenger list. The name she landed on was Olwen Carey Evans, Lloyd George's daughter, eight years older than Edwina and, as was essential, married. Edwina scarcely knew Olwen but Olwen's husband, Thomas Carey Evans, of the Indian Medical Service, was personal physician to the Viceroy, Lord Reading, with whom Edwina was going to stay.

Whatever her feelings, Mrs Carey Evans was not likely to refuse a girl who was going out to stay with the Viceroy during the visit of the Prince of Wales; in practice, she found Edwina difficult and self-willed, and was constantly worried that there would be some troubling episode on board the ship that would cause scandal.

For most, though – in the words of Joan Henry, an eighteen-year-old Fishing Fleet girl returning to India after years of boarding school – 'kisses on the boat deck with the moon making a silver path over a smooth sea was as far as it went – or was even expected [to go].'

When Kathleen Wilkes travelled out in 1922 to take up a post as a governess, warm weather and romance arrived together. 'In a few days under a full moon on the Red Sea we became engaged, much to the delight and interest of many people on board ship.' Her fiancé was a returning ICS man; as the older, rather snobbish woman with whom Kathleen was sharing a cabin remarked: 'You've done well for yourself, haven't you? He's one of the heaven-born.'

The 'shipboard effect' was well summed up by the youthful Cecile Stanley Clarke, travelling with her mother in 1928 to stay with her sister and brother-in-law Hubert Gough, tutor to the son of the Nizam of Hyderabad. 'One

old man, who must have been quite forty, had kissed me on the boat deck, but I had dismissed this lightly, having been told that the boat deck and the phosphorus on the water had funny effects on the most sober of men, especially as the aforesaid man had gone to great lengths to tell me how much he loved his wife. This was my first insight into the curious make up of the masculine sex; they can love one Woman with their Whole heart and at the same time get quite a lot of enjoyment from kissing another, and it is no good getting on one's high horse about it, it is just something to do with masculine hormones.'

For Ruth Barton, writing in the spring of 1931, a voyage was a magic time. 'The Mediterranean was calm and balmy and from the Red Sea onwards the nights were very hot, the stars brilliant and there was a waxing moon. At night we danced on deck and then went down to the Promenade Deck - invariably deserted at that hour – and leant on the rails, looking over the stern of the ship. The ceaseless silken swish of the double wave below us, creaming away across the moonlit sea and leaving an endless green track in the wake of the speeding ship, soothed and fascinated us. It needed an effort to break away and go down to a scruffy cabin – no air conditioning then.'

So dazzling was the romantic potential of sea travel that it could spill over into ordinary life – in one case, it even acted as a subliminal advertising medium. In the 1939 film *Love Affair* – the story of two strangers who meet aboard an ocean liner and fall deeply in love despite the fact that they are engaged to marry other people – there is a scene where Charles Boyer and Irene Dunne gaze into each other's eyes while sipping pink champagne. Immediately, sales of the then little-known drink rocketed.

Unsurprisingly, many of the Fishing Fleet found husbands even before arriving at Bombay, Calcutta, Colombo or Rangoon. There was a pretty good chance on the ship itself, filled as it was with a number of bachelors, some of whom had tried unsuccessfully to find a bride during their months of leave and were delighted to be offered another chance. Thus many romances started on the voyage out, as warm starlit nights succeeded the fogs of a British November, waltzes from the ship's band echoing faintly in the air as the couple gazed dreamily at the glimmering phosphorescence in the ship's wake.

Sometimes the engagement lasted only a matter of days, with a wedding the moment they arrived. Bombay, Calcutta and Rangoon were full of churches to facilitate this: the authorities very much disliked the idea of unattached European women in India – they had to be there as someone's wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt or niece and the man to whom they were related or who was their host was responsible for them (women teachers, governesses, missionaries or doctors were the responsibility of their employers). But for a member of the Fishing Fleet and the bachelor who had struck lucky on his return voyage this plethora of churches was often an answer to prayer – if only because both sides were anxious that the other should not change his or her mind.