

TRUE ADVENTURE THRILLS

Episode 1

The Stowaway

The mind of youth is always alerted to adventure, and mine was not an exception. My childhood days were lonely; I was the only child at home and sought, in books, the companionship so often found in a brother or a sister as in a house of children.

But my companions were the Swiss Family Robinson, the Three Musketeers, Ned Kelly - the Bushranger, Captain Cook, Sir James Franklin, Charles Darwin, Tom Paine and, not the least, Benjamin Franklin. So, it was not surprising that early on I sought adventures of my own. When a boy, I decided to be Captain Cook, Franklin, Darwin, Tom Paine and, perhaps, Robert Louis Stevenson, all in one.

Franklin was represented in my mind by the little engineering knowledge I had picked up as an apprentice. Darwin was suggested by the love of animals and interest in their behaviour, in which interest I indulged at my country home. Tom Paine, because my religious training had not been neglected, and after all, hadn't Robert Louis Stevenson travelled the seven seas and written fascinating stories about strange places. My mind was made up; I would travel, but how? Stowing away on board a tramp steamer was the answer.

Brought up in more or less the centre of Australia I had never seen the sea, never seen a ship and had never even used a small boat, for, in the vicinity of our ranch, there were no lakes, no large rivers; and creeks which carried roaring torrents during the infrequent thunderstorms were watered by trickling streams, or dry, throughout the greater part of the year. Our country was watered by artesian wells. Nevertheless, I thought I could manage to do something on board a ship if I could stow away and get to sea.

So, after persuading my parents that I wanted a holiday, and that I had arranged to with a friend on a short sea voyage, I travelled by train to the port of Adelaide, South Australia. There for the first time in my life I saw steamers and sailing vessels. I hardly knew one end from the other. All I knew was that big steamers had engines, and stokeholds with dark corners which might serve as a hide away. What I would find or do on board must be left to fate.

I know, also, that seamen did not wear white colours, stiff straw hats and polished boots, so the first thing I did at the railway station was to discard my suitcase, throw away my hat and colour, scuff my boots and smear my face. Then, with a spare suit of underwear, a couple of soft shirts and a sweater (all tied in a red bandana handkerchief, carried over my shoulder on a stick - Nick Whittington fashion) and with my money in a belt tied around my waist, I wandered down to the dock gates. There a policeman stopped me with "Hey, you. Where d'ya think you're going?"

Well, I put up a tale that I was a runaway sailor trying to re-join my ship. I had met several such who had jumped ship or having been left behind at a port high in the gulf, had wandered past my father's ranch as 'sundowners' or tramps, and I tried to imitate their manner of speaking.

The policeman was not to be deceived, but he too was an adventurer at heart; he let me pass and advised me to carry my parcel less conspicuously.

I wandered from dock to dock, looking over the steamers and listening to conversations. At one steamer there was an exceptional hustle; a stern faced mate was harassing the dock workers, As

sling after sling of cargo was slung into the hold, I ventured to ask "Where is this ship going?" only to hear "What's that to you, cocky? Get out of my way and pick the hayseeds out of your ears." That made me sad as I had thought I was pretty well disguised; no one should have known that I was from the country. I'd show that mate.

So, I hung around in the distance, and when he went aboard, I came close again and asked another man "when's she sailing?" "She'll be out of here by morning, if these wharfers hang around till dusk." Loading went on and there was always someone going up or down the gang plank – no chance to get on board unnoticed. Late evening the loading was finished; the dock slides clear and hatches closed. Things on the wharf quietened down, but a watch man stood at the head of the gang plank.

Then along came a couple of drunken sailors, beers bottles in each hand and a newspaper wrapped bundle from which crayfish claws and tails protruded under each arm. They staggered up the gang plank; there was a lot of talk and badinage which I couldn't hear clearly and then the watchman went off with the two men to some place on the ship. This was my chance; up the gang plank I nipped and into the first open door. The place was floored with an iron grating and a spiral gangway led down below. All was dimly lit, and I stepped gingerly down and down, to one deck, then another. Then, in a nervous sweat and trembling I sunk along a narrow passageway. Suddenly, a strong hand grasped my arm; I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Haha! A stowaway, eh? Just wait till the old man catches you. He'll beat the daylight out of you, any of them deck swabs would." "But", I said, "I'll work. I'll do anything. I must get away from here, get somewhere, anywhere." And I tried to tell a tale of being homeless, out of work, the call of the sea. "Ah," the man said, "come in and we'll talk about it." He took me into a cabin, closed the door and in a thick Scotch accent said, "Well now, what do you think you could do onboard a ship." I tried to tell him of my idea - just work on the ship until you got to port, then roam about and see things and write about them.

"But that don't make sense," he said "sailors especially engineers are always busy in a port, they get no time to run around. What work have you done before?" "Well," I said, "I have never really worked. I can ride horses; I know a bit about animals and insects, and I have been studying engineering, electrical engineering, as a sort of apprentice with a large engineering firm. "Ah," he said, "electrical engineering. Do you know anything about dynamos?" "Yes," I said, "how to wind them and how to work them, motors too." I gabbled on, my words tumbling out as I strove to convince him.

Eventually he said "well, if I help you to stow away, will you promise to help me wind a dynamo, no matters what the old man tell you to do? I have got one to wind and I don't know too much about it. But don't tell the old man you have spoken to me." I promised and he led me into a dark and dusty alcove through the grated floor of which I could see the stokers at work down below. They were firing the boilers and at each shovel of coal the dust rose and almost choked me. The heat above the boilers was such that the sweat ran and swilled the soot into my eyes until I was almost blinded.

Suddenly some bells nearby started to clang, clang, clang, I was in a fever of fright. Bells to me suggested fire... the ship was on fire and there I was stuck in the middle of it and not knowing which way to turn to reach the deck. I stepped out of the alcove, prepared to run anywhere to find an exit, but I noticed that the firemen below were not alarmed; they kept on shovelling. So, I sneaked back into the heat that was almost as stifling as it would be if the ship was on fire.

Then came the thump of engines turning, slow at first, then faster, more bells clanging – the engines stop; they start; then they race. More clanging and jangles followed by a steady beat of the engines. The vibration of the ship almost imperceptible draft let me know that the ship was moving. I was exultant, I had stowed away, and no one had found me....at least not yet. But soon after a figure, appearing as if from nowhere, poked me sharply in the ribs. “Come on, out of it, up on the deck afore the ole man. You’ll be getting it proper, you will.” “No, no,” I said, “you can’t take me. The engineer put me here; he’s going to give me work to do.” “Oh, the ole man’ll ‘ave some ‘at to say about that. ‘Op it an’ look lively.” But I refused to move and with some money I finally managed to persuade him to let me stay – for a few hours at least - until we got away from the shores.

Suddenly, bells clanged again; the thundering of the engines slackened, then stopped. I was terrified. But it was only to let the pilot off. Soon the engines wheezed, then took up their steady clank, clickety clank once more.

But I was not to be left alone very long. Another sailor, rougher than the first one and with a flair for drama, shoved me out and booted me up the gangway to the deck. Dawn had broken, raw and raining; the damp wind struck through my sweat drenched clothes and chilled me by the marrow. My breath came in gasps; my skin grew tight and prickly; my tendons and muscles taughened and relaxed; I shivered violently – so violently that I could scarcely answer when the Mate, looking down from the bridge above, yelled – “Hey, Clancey, what you got there? A blooming stowaway? How the blankety blazes did YOU get on board?”

I babbled the story of the two drunks, the crayfish and the beer, and the faithless watchman. Then hearing a throaty snarl behind me, turned and saw that the man who had flushed me out was the very same watchman. “I will kill you for this,” he snarled.

Then the captain looked over the bridge “What’s this mister, a stowaway? Wasn’t the ship searched before the pilot went ashore?” “Erre, yes sir, I had the ship searched, don’t know how this-un could have been missed. Never happened before, sir.” “Well son, what are you doing aboard my ship? Do you know that you will go to jail for this” “Yes sir, no sir,” I stuttered, almost speechless with cold and fright.

“Well speak up when you answer me. What do you think you can do on board?” “I can wind armatures and fix dynamos, Sir,” I chattered. “Oh, wind armatures, eh? Have you been talking to the third engineer?” By this time, I had recovered a little composure. “Why, no sir. Not that I know of sir.” “Well, it’s too late to put you ashore now; you will have to take what’s coming to you when we reach Africa. Bosun, take him below, clean him up, and then send him to my quarters.” My capturer shoved me roughly. I hardly noticed the shove. Africa! The ship is going to Africa! Gold; slaves; lions; Arabs; Zulus. Adventure – at last I was heading for real adventure.

The episode might end there, but what actually happened was that the Bosun, muttering threats as he drove me to the foo’stle and as soon as he was out of sight of the bridge, slugged me down the gangway. I turned angrily and slugged back. The next thing I knew I was coming to with a binged eye, a split lip and a roaring headache. I was no match for the experienced Bosun.

Later I took the job of winding armatures for the third engineer and kept out of sight of the Bosun for the rest of the voyage to Algiers.