

What a Bloke will do to get a Dance

by Brian Hunt

The story of my first trip to sea actually started when I ran away from home at fourteen to become an apprentice jockey at a stable in Winchester. Hampshire. On £7/10/6 per week it took a while but I eventually saved enough to purchase a pair of brothel creepers, a Harris Tweed hacking jacket and cord trousers and ventured on the Saturday bus to dance at Southampton.

This proved to be the turning point of my life, looking like the proverbial country bumpkin. I couldn't even entice the ugliest girl in the hall to dance with me. The reason being all the Merchant Navy boys with their Tony Curtis hair cuts, finger length drape jackets, stove pipe trousers and highly polished shoes. Observing this and speaking to a few of them, resolved there and then that joining the Merchant Navy was the only way to get a dance.

Now I had a problem, how do I get out of my apprenticeship? but this was solved about a year later when the owner I had indentured to croaked. Still too young to join the MN I stayed with horse racing until the trainer I was working for decided to train horses for the Grand National and the Cheltenham Cup. This involved building new jump fences alongside the old ones, only trouble was they were taller and wider. To my dismay it meant I was sitting on a horse 6 feet high off the ground with my knees under my chin, galloping at 25 mph towards an immovable object also 6 feet high and 3 feet wide. At the zenith of the jump I was looking down to the landing area from 15 - 18 feet depending on by how much the horse had cleared the obstacle, this being twice the height of a standard room. It was then I found that I didn't have the intestinal fortitude required for jump racing, because when I shut my eyes the horse would naturally jump the smaller of the obstacle in front of him, this was not the trainers intention.

Having by now learnt to dance by means of chalk marks in the earth of a barn floor, whistling "Night and Day" with other diminutive boys, plus having reached sixteen, started to shave and desirous of that finger length drape jacket applied to join the MN. Imagine my horror when the next suit I saw was a navy blue serge bomber jacket and cap.

Having completed my training (1951) at Sharpness, which I unfortunately or fortunately have only a few recollections of margarining bread with a paint brush, sports day, eating cake sent by my mother, getting some extra leave for proficiency badges and getting knocked out by a bloody good boxer from Dagenham. But because the girls at Sharpness had been told to be kind to those poor Vindi boys, at last got a dance, what bliss.

Donning my uniform and cap with pride, I boarded the train for London and Dock Street, upon finding the Office was greeted by the usual sniggers and glances from the experienced seamen. `Yes we do need a catering boy, on a "Palm Boat" I'm told, so kit bag in hand again headed on a bus to East India Dock. I was directed to a cargo boat with the big palm tree on its funnel, on being directed to the Chief Steward and handing over my discharge book was shown my cabin, shared with horror upon horror, no not a wooly woofter but a full grown black man. Now being of conservative stock and not yet liberalised this was the closest I'd been to a coloured man. The look in his bloodshot eyes reminded me of the pictures I'd seen in the geography books at school and visions of me being tied up in his big black cooking pot. Rising to my full stature of 5 foot 8 inches asked for another cabin before I would sign on, this resulted in some appalling language which cast doubt on my parentage and with kit bag hoisted shown the gangplank.

Fate took another hand, the clerk who I told my story to at arriving back at Dock Street was quite understanding and sympathetic and told me to go home and await a call or telegram for me to join another ship once they got my discharge book back.

To my recollection this took quite a few days but eventually a telegram arrived asking me to report to Dock Street the next day fully kited. On arrival saw the same clerk and was handed back my discharge book, luckily enough not having signed on bore no record of my mutiny. "Go to the West India Dock" I was told and report to the Beaconsfield a recently converted coal burner belonging to Watts Watts of London.

Upon settling in and meeting for the first time my all white crew members I asked the obvious question "where are we bound", the Scouse cook was the first to reply with "BLOODY WEST AFRICA" how soon was I going to learn how to live with black people but that's another story.