

CHAPTER XII

MALTA, JANUARY 1936

*AJAX* arrived in Malta on 6th January and went straight into dock. By Sunday, 12th, we had to be provisioned, stored and ready to sail. On that day we learnt our sailing had been postponed. But on Monday we only sailed for a gunnery test and that evening found ourselves once again back in Dockyard Creek. We managed to tear ourselves away finally on Tuesday night, when we had on board the Civil Lord of the Admiralty bound for Alexandria on a tour of inspection.

Malta had certainly changed since we had worked-up there last June. Changed both inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly we found Malta in a state of war routine; Vice-Admiral, Malta, with his full covey of Lady Cypherers, had installed himself in the Castille, while the Distributing Authority, with all his hush-hush books, was now to be found out at Verdala. In the secret rooms of Castille, it was rumoured, high army officials planned the defence of Malta and at sundown might be seen slinking out disguised as Maltese dghaisamen to do a little secret spying. Someone had certainly made the coast of Malta pretty unhealthy to land on by draping barbed-wire fences round it. This also made bathing difficult.

Outwardly Malta wore a leaner, hungrier look. It had been a bad winter for the dghaisamen with the Fleet away—indeed everyone who customarily made money out of the Navy found his turnover decimated. Scenes of unusual activity, however, might be observed in the dockyard—which, in many departments worked the clock round in day and night shifts.

Meanwhile no one discussed the thought that caused all this

activity—namely, that sixty odd miles away was a concentration of Italian planes which, to say the least, would have made life in Malta a hot and unpleasant affair. With the growth of air power Malta becomes increasingly vulnerable. Indeed so current were the rumours later in 1936 that Malta was being forsaken for Cyprus as a base for the Fleet, that it was found necessary to make a statement in Parliament denying it.

One great change had taken place in the outlook of the Maltese. The British, instead of being reviled and cursed, were now respected and obeyed. The Maltese, suddenly realizing what a different life they would lead under Mussolini and becoming vividly aware of the prosperity, justice and freedom that England had given them, dropped all clamour for self-government like a red-hot poker. Bearing Mussolini's guns and aeroplanes in mind, they decided to a man that it was nice—very nice—to have a strong British garrison to deal with any dirty fighting that might have to be done, and if only the Fleet could be persuaded to return and spend in Valetta all those golden guineas that were now pouring into Arab hands—if only, please, the brave British sailors could come back to Malta . . . life would be something like a Maltese paradise.

As for our activities, these were mainly individual and personal. We had little over a week away from the Fleet and there was plenty of work to be done on board. Our leisure and the way we used it produced no incidents worthy of record.

#### MALTA—HISTORICAL

Malta has an interesting history, and this brief summary of it may be of value to those who have visited the island. Neanderthal and Neolithic bones have been found and there are many ruins of Stone and Bronze Age temples. About a thousand years B.C. the Phœnicians colonized the island until they were turned out by the Greeks, who in their turn were evicted by the Romans.

While under the Roman Eagle one of the most famous events in Maltese history took place: Saint Paul was cast ashore.

There are many legends still of his stay in the island: the earth from the cave he occupied is supposed to have power of healing, and although shiploads of it have been removed through the ages the cave is said to have got no bigger.

The old capital of the island, Citta Vecchia, was founded in 700 B.C., and although it has been known as Melita, Medina, and nowadays Notabile, it has endured through the ages. Beneath the city are extensive catacombs, partly a burial-place and partly the home of some prehistoric people who must have been of very small stature from the size of the living spaces.

Malta went the way of the rest of the Eastern Roman Empire and was taken by the Vandals and the Goths, but was eventually recovered for the Western Byzantine Empire. The Arabs took it in A.D. 870 and fortified the harbour; they were turned out by Count Roger of Sicily, and from then until 1530 it passed from one Mediterranean country to another until in that year Charles V of Aragon gave Malta, Gozo and Tripoli in perpetual sovereignty to the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.

The really interesting position of Maltese history now starts as the influence of the Knights of Malta is still very present in the island. They spent a lot of money in raising stupendous fortifications and beautifying the island. The fortifications were put to the test in 1565 when the famous siege of Malta by the Turks took place. La Valette, the Grand Master at the time, had 700 Knights and 8,000 men, and with these he managed to keep at bay a Turkish fleet of 159 ships with 30,000 men. The siege lasted for four months and the defenders were at their last gasp when a Neapolitan fleet appeared on the scene and the Turks raised the siege.

After this the city of Valetta was founded and impregably fortified; with the lessons learnt in the siege vast granaries were built underground, and these can still be seen in Floriana and are actually in use to the present day. An aqueduct was built across the island to supply water to the city and many farm buildings were put up. The palace of the Grand Masters is a magnificent edifice and is now used as the Governor's Palace. The armoury has a collection of armour and weapons

of the Knights, including the gold inlaid suit of La Valette himself.

The next event was in 1798, when the island was surrendered to the French and visited by Napoleon. They left very little trace of their occupation, as the natives rose in disgust against the ill-treatment meted out to them, and after a siege of two years, helped by the Neapolitans and the British, they forced the French to surrender to an English general. The Treaty of Amiens stipulated that Malta should be returned to the Knights, but this the Maltese would not have, and so the British did not give up the island. Napoleon used this fact as one of the reasons for opening up hostilities again after his return from Elba, but in 1814 the British right to the island was finally established by the Congress of Vienna.

Since we had lost Tangier there was no British naval base in the Mediterranean, and so this little island was rapidly developed as such, and has proved absolutely invaluable to us. The fortifications by the Knights, aided by modern weapons of war, maintained the impregnability of the island until the advent of aircraft, and its geographical position makes it the keystone of all Mediterranean trade.

Up to a couple of years ago Malta had been governed by a legislative council under the Governor, but now it has been made a Crown Colony and is administered direct from the Colonial Office. The administration of the island has always been difficult, as there are three constant sources of irritation. First, the language question: English, Italian and Maltese are all used and frequently debates even in the legislative were carried on in all three. Secondly, the religious question: the Roman Catholic priests of Malta have always exercised a very strong influence over the minds of the people, usually in a rather anti-government, pro-Italian direction, and it is only by allowing them every indulgence in the way of "fiestas," with which everyone visiting Malta is familiar, that peace can be maintained. The third question is purely social: the nobility of Malta take precedence after the Irish peerage, and this is liable to lead to jealousy with some of the British upper classes in the island.

That such a small place could have such a varied history is amazing. The total area of the island is only  $91\frac{1}{2}$  square miles, but in this there are crowded nearly a quarter of a million people.

In Valetta, indeed, the houses seem to be built on top of each other in the struggle for existence. With the coming of new weapons which science is giving to the world Malta is becoming more and more vulnerable. Steps are being taken to ensure that the defences are as far advanced as possible, but let us hope the horrors of modern warfare may never be let loose on this human beehive.

#### THE DEATH OF KING GEORGE V

The shock of King George's death seemed the greater through being so sudden and unexpected. To many in the ship the King was as permanent a part of England as the Houses of Parliament, for he had been ruling before their birth. To others the Jubilee seemed only yesterday—with all its amazing display of loyalty and affection.

The first news that the King was sinking came on 18th January, when we learnt that he had had oxygen and that the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York had been summoned.

We were at sea when that short, fateful and dignified bulletin was received—"The King's life is drawing peacefully to its close . . ." Two hours later he died.

Exercises and the silly little war games we were playing became suddenly unimportant. The throne was in everyone's thoughts. A thousand miles from England we were living through the end of an era and the beginning of another.

King George had seen his people change out of recognition. He had seen old beliefs crumble and new ones take their place, he had led us through the most disastrous war in history and had watched a great change of heart sweep through his Empire. He had ruled while women won their right to freedom. He had watched our modern world grow like a phoenix out of the ashes and the wreckage of the Great War. In his reign

the cinema came of age and wireless established itself . . . and his Christmas messages moved an entire Empire with their quiet simplicity.

Through the maelstrom of change he and Queen Mary had stood firm and certain. They had led and they had been idolized. Well might the world envy our monarchy, well might the ordinary people, the people who do as they are told, who go to war for reasons they do not understand and who achieve honour even in death—well might they be proud of their freedom and their leadership.

On 28th January the British Navy, scattered in its different units all over the world, stood to attention while 70 minute-guns honoured the burial of a king.

#### 25TH JANUARY—A WEDDING

On 25th January 1936 the wedding of Lieutenant Commander (T) E. R. Collins to Miss Valda Forster took place. This has been the only wedding in the commission, and the first time most of us had ever gone to a marriage ceremony in mourning.

The officers were to have gone in uniform, but as the King's funeral was to take place only three days later, we put on our plain clothes and black ties instead. Some of us affected bowlers and managed to look extraordinarily self-conscious, while others cracked jokes at our expense.

The service at St. Mark's Church, Alexandria, was simple and dignified; none of the traditional hitches in connection with mislaying the ring, etc., occurred, and we all went along afterwards to 11 Rue Hussein to drink the health of the newly married couple and to view the presents.

Bride and bridegroom subsequently left under a deluge of rice and confetti (a large part of which, it is possible to record, made its mark) for a short honeymoon. That it could not be longer is another score which Mussolini will one day have to settle.



H. A.

## CHAPTER XIII

### EXERCISES

**D**URING the months of February and March we had the most trying and strenuous months of the Mediterranean interlude. The early preparations of a great fleet for all contingencies had been completed. Organization was complete and the Commander-in-Chief was left with the task of tuning up his great fighting machine. It had been realized that aircraft would play a very much greater part in any war now-days than had been met before. Accordingly the Gunnery Co-operation Flight, or "Queen Bee" party, was sent out to Alexandria early in February. This form of wireless-controlled aerial target had of course been in use in the Navy for some time, but it was brought out particularly to give the fleet at Alexandria a chance to get their anti-aircraft armament up to absolutely first-rate efficiency.

These "Queen Bee" aircraft were kept on shore and whenever required for a practice the *Australia* would hoist one on to her catapult and put to sea. The principal controlling officer was on her bridge, and it was he who directed the aircraft's movements. As a stand-by in case his set lost control, another ship was required to act as secondary control ready to take over at a moment's notice. This lot fell to *Ajax*, so that for the following seven weeks we found ourselves going to sea whenever a practice was being carried out. The somewhat negative duty of being prepared was supplemented by making us flank-mark, and keep records of the shoots for analysis afterwards.

The first shoot was carried out by the 1st Cruiser Squadron on 15th February. One plane was shot down in the forenoon by close-range fire of the 1st C.S., and in the afternoon we were



very glad to see *Ajax* alone bring one down at long range. We therefore could afford to criticize the efforts of other ships, so many of which we were forced to witness. Many and various were the weird squadrons that would sail down between *Australia* and *Ajax*. Battleships, aircraft-carriers, cruisers, repair ships, depot ships, destroyers and net-layers all had their fling. Some of the shoots made good watching, especially some of the more ambitious barrages, but we were one and all sick of the sight of Queen Bees by the time the last one was killed. According to the official report on the matter, the Fleet learnt a great deal in those two months. We are glad that our labours were not in vain.

In the midst of this anti-aircraft programme we had to take our place in the routine gunnery and torpedo practices of the squadron, so we did not get much time in harbour. On the 20th March Admiral Sir W. W. Fisher handed over the Fleet to Admiral Sir A. D. P. R. Pound and sailed for England in the *Queen Elizabeth*. All ships manned and cheered ship as he went out. He had done the nation a great service during his additional six months of command, and though we perhaps did not occupy the highest place of favour in his eye, we must all recognize the great work that he did during those critical months.

The new C.-in-C. spent the next three days visiting every ship in the Fleet. He came on board *Ajax* on the Monday and later that week we heard that we were to fly his flag at sea for exercises. At first little was known as to what was required of us, but on Tuesday, 31st, he came attended by nine staff officers. Ship's staffs were augmented in the communication and cypher departments, and for 24 hours we were the flag-ship. We are happy to be able to record that as far as we know the ship gave every satisfaction in its unexpected rôle, and though we are thankful that the war for which we were preparing never occurred, it is a pity that we could not show our full ability.

Those, then, were the incidents which were occupying us during those two months. The monotony was soul-destroying. Even the eternal buzz that we were returning to our

station next Friday week began to flag and fail. Rear-Admiral A. E. Evans, erstwhile Commodore of the South American Division, came on board and walked round divisions one Sunday, and said a few words of encouragement, wishing us luck on return to Patagonia. And yet the weeks dragged on. Ships came and went. The 1st Cruiser Squadron had swollen to 11 on arrival of the *Sydney*, the new Australian cruiser. At the end of March certain leave restrictions were removed, and it was made possible to go to Cairo for a couple of days. Many took advantage of this concession. Sports were the refuge of many, and the ship did very well in the Squadron football league, being beaten in the final by the *London*. This was an especially good show, when one realizes that the ships against which we were competing had much larger ships' companies.

#### CAIRO

Busy streets, taxicabs, buses, tramways, large hotels, modern shops and carefully laid out gardens—that was my first impression of Cairo. But for the characteristic smock-like dress of the natives, and the fez, which are seen on every hand, I might almost have imagined myself to be in a European city. Not until I visited the Citadel, an ancient fortress built by Saladin in 1163 on a hill almost in the centre of Cairo, did I realize the capital of Egypt is termed the "City of Mosques."

Part of the Citadel is still used to house a garrison, but the rest of it is open to visitors and from its windows some wonderful views are to be seen. In one direction I looked out towards the Great Pyramids standing on the edge of the desert in the suburb of Giza; in another direction I looked over the Moslem part of the town, and it is there that the flat monotony of city roofs is relieved by the domes and minarets of scores of mosques. A mosque is always built with a tall minaret from the balcony of which a *muezzin* or priest calls the faithful to worship "Allah" at appointed hours.

The interior of a mosque is well worth seeing, and the one I chose to visit was El Rifai Mosque, in which the late King Fuad had recently been buried. His tomb, an elaborate affair

of alabaster and marble, was in a screened-off corner—a private chapel, as it were—through which there was a constant stream of people, the natives in bare feet and the foreign visitors wearing canvas overshoes which they are compelled to put on before entering the mosque. In this chapel were half a dozen venerable old men sitting cross-legged on the floor and poring over the Koran, a copy of which lay open on a stool in front of each one. The Moslems believe it to be good for the soul of the departed that these men should sit there reading the Koran, though in truth it seemed to me that they were either chatting with one another or dozing over their books. Certainly not more than one of the six was reading.

In the main hall of the mosque a score or more of natives were standing in one long line for prayer. The priest who stood in front of the line led the prayer, and as he bowed towards Mecca, the remainder also knelt and bowed low, touching the ground with their foreheads. This ritual, incidentally, accounts for the use of the fez amongst Moham-medans. They consider it wrong to uncover the head in the mosque and the fez is the only type of hat which allows them to put the forehead on the ground whilst wearing it.

No visit to Cairo would be complete without seeing the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx at Giza. Many years ago, the journey to these had to be made by camel or mule across the sands of the desert, but now, thanks to a splendid modern road, I was able to reach them speedily and in comfort by motor-car. On reaching Mena House Hotel at the foot of the plateau on which these stand, I found that to get a "close-up" view it was necessary either to walk over the deep sand or ride on a donkey or camel; I chose to ride one of the latter and found this an experience in itself. The camel seemed to rise and fall and develop a rolling motion, so I soon realized why these beasts are called "ships of the desert," and would myself much prefer ships of the sea.

Though lacking beauty of design, the pyramids are certainly majestic and fitting tombs for the ancient Kings of Egypt. Perhaps they presented a much more impressive spectacle when they were completely covered with alabaster, all of

which has been removed at various times for use in constructing mosques and other buildings within the city. The largest, the Pyramid of Cheops, was built about 3733 B.C., and it is said to be built from 2,300,000 huge stone blocks and to have taken 100,000 men, working three months each year, twenty years to erect it. It is 450 feet high, each side at the base being 764 feet in length, and it covers roughly thirteen acres. For a small fee, guides will climb to the top and come down again in about seven minutes—no mean feat. Visitors may ascend with a guide if they wish, but I felt this would prove rather too strenuous in the boiling midday heat.

The inside of the pyramid is open to the public, access being gained through an opening only a few feet from the ground. I was thus able to investigate the huge central chamber, high up in the pyramid, which was once the tomb of kings. Now it is merely a large chamber, lined with granite and completely devoid of any decoration. The ascent along a steep narrow tunnel was very tiring, as in many places it was quite impossible to walk in an upright position. Perhaps the most remarkable feature inside the pyramid is the ventilation which is effected by means of shafts about a foot square which run straight to the outside. In spite of this, the air, though reasonably fresh, is cold and damp, and it was indeed a pleasant relief to be once more out in the sunshine.

Behind the pyramids stands the Sphinx, the mysterious-looking creature with the body of a lion—the symbol of strength, and the head of a man—the symbol of wisdom. Near by is a temple containing tombs built from blocks of alabaster and granite, which were brought down the Nile from Aswan, 600 miles away. As some of these are six feet thick and fourteen feet long, they must have presented quite a problem, even to the famous Egyptians.

Once again back in Cairo, I decided to visit the world-renowned Egyptian Museum and learn more of the tombs of the ancient Pharaohs. It was impossible during a short visit to see more than a small portion of the vast number of exhibits this treasure-house contains, and though there are many things of more historic interest, no exhibits have the same magnifi-

cence as those excavated from the tomb of Tutankhamen by Lord Carnarvon and Mr. Carter. Their value must be fabulous, and after seeing this marvellous collection of treasures, I realized the great task they had set themselves and the pleasure and satisfaction they must have felt on seeing the fruits of their labour. The collection, though excavated from tombs, portrays vividly the life of the ancient Egyptians, their homes, industries, artistic attainments and wealth. The Egyptian Government has recently passed a law prohibiting the removal of these relics from the country, and not without reason, for there is no more fitting place in which they could be seen than in the land in which they were originally made and used.

Shops have a curious fascination for most of us and the bazaars of Cairo are no exception. They are situated in narrow lanes and streets, and it is here that the natives of the city sell wares from all parts of the East. In many ways the Egyptian has become Westernized, but not so in selling, for he still loves to bargain over the price of his goods. At first he asks an exorbitant price for them, but can easily be brought down if you adopt an air of indifference, and a sale is frequently transacted over a cup of "moka," that inky coffee in which he seems to delight, and a highly perfumed oriental cigarette.

## CHAPTER XIV

## MALTA HOLIDAY

ON 11th April *Ajax* sailed for her second "emergency period," docking at Malta. This time we were allowed a fortnight away from the Fleet, and 48 hours' general leave was given to each watch. On 21st April the ship's sports were held, and on 24th April the Ship's Company dance took place at Queen's Hall and proved to be an unqualified success.

It seemed we were never to get away from Malta "in one." We had no sooner left on 28th April than we were recalled. At 2000 the next day we were sent at 20 knots to Marseilles for the purpose of escorting the new King of Egypt across the Mediterranean to his own land. The following report of proceedings has been supplied us by a special correspondent on the ship's cypher staff:

"At about half-past six on the same evening of the day of leaving Malta, after one of our 'periodical dockings' arrived the shortest cypher message yet seen. It said 'Return to Malta' and nothing more. Obediently we turned and within half an hour of our newly left destination, we received another cryptic order—'Proceed in execution of previous orders'; round we went again, beginning to feel giddy as we didn't know why we were cavorting anyway.

"I awoke at 7 o'clock the next morning with the feeling that something more had occurred—it had as soon as I realized we were not doing the regulation 20 knots at which speed we invariably made the passage between Malta and Alexandria. On deck I passed a Midshipman and asked the latest news. 'Going back to Malta—arriving 8 o'clock and berthing in Dockyard Creek.' 'How many times during the night have



we been told to return and then carry on?' I enquired. 'This is only the second time,' he answered proudly.

"With our future still in the dark, and very restricted leave, we went ashore to play squash, and returning to the ship passed the motor-boat hurrying into Corradino to collect some athletes. 'Sailing at eight,' shouted the Mid of the boat. 'Where?' I yelled. For answer he wagged his thumb over his shoulder and made a wry face. The direction given by his thumb was approximately north-west, but his expression decided me—it must be Alexandria again. In disgruntled silence we climbed back on board. 'May as well see what the latest message says,' I remarked, and sought out the Duty Cypher Officer. 'Oh, yes,' said Schoolie, 'we've to go to Marseilles to escort the *Viceroy of India* with King Farouk on board. Arrive daylight Friday and leave that evening 20 knots.' The Mid's thumb was right after all.

"We passed Maddalena the following afternoon, sighting some Italian cruisers lying snugly inside, and arrived off Marseilles in a grey dawn of a grey day. Here the married and engaged officers who had bidden farewell to their womenfolk at Malta had another chance of hails and farewells as the P. & O. *Ranchi* arrived from Malta three hours after us with the contingent from Malta on board on their way home. For the remainder of the ship Marseilles had little attraction, as it happened to be May Day and the usual communist demonstrations, to which this town is particularly prone, made it advisable for those not in possession of tin helmets to keep to their houses or ships.

"*Viceroy of India* arrived at 10 o'clock and H.M. King Farouk embarked from the P. & O. Overland Express shortly afterwards. I believe there was no little apprehension in local circles lest the local element should attempt to add another king to their already notorious bag of celebrities, but perhaps insufficient notice was given as everything passed off very quietly. Two French destroyers arrived later from Toulon—the *Vauquelin* and *Kersaint*. They were to escort the King out of French waters and, in conference with our Captain, were persuaded that their best position would be on each quarter

of the *Viceroy*. At the unpleasant hour of 4.30 a.m. next morning the procession moved away from Marseilles; *Ajax* five cables from the *Viceroy* and a destroyer on each quarter. *Ajax* had to keep station on the liner—an almost unprecedented state of affairs for a ship ahead to have to keep station on one astern of her. At 8.30 the Frenchman parted company, firing a salute before turning away and making for Toulon. We felt envious of the navies whose activities rarely take them outside their own territorial waters.

"The passage was made in ideal weather and after a brief stop at Malta we arrived off Alexandria early in the morning, on the fifth day out of Marseilles. A flotilla of destroyers from Alexandria met the convoy on reaching Egyptian waters; it approached on an opposite course at 25 knots and then broke formation, the two divisions taking station one on each side abreast the Royal Transport, and the Flotilla leader astern of *Ajax*. Apart from the fact that the second destroyer of the division to starboard narrowly avoided ramming her leader, the manœuvre seemed very impressive.

"In the message sent to the *Viceroy* for the information of King Farouk, it was hinted that 'the manœuvring of the destroyers when taking station on *Viceroy of India* might possibly be of interest to His Majesty'—interest was apparently somewhat lacking, however, as the only persons observed to be on deck in that ship at this early hour were three Lascars getting dressing lines rigged for entering harbour (it was still only 6.30 a.m., so perhaps lack of interest was excusable). At 7.30 the whole escort parted company from its protégé who completed her entry into Alexandria under the care of the appropriately named Egyptian gunboat *Farouk*.

"In recognition of their services the whole convoy were then ordered to remain under weigh outside the harbour until *Viceroy of India* had left again—which she did at 11.30, when we were free to enter and receive the glad tidings that we should be required to embark the C.-in-C. at 8.30 the following morning for a Fleet exercise."

The day after arrival back in Alexandria (7th May) we duly hoisted the Commander-in-Chief on board and shot out to sea

for two days' joyful exercises. How we loved it!! Not till 8th June did we get another break—and then we sailed for Haifa.

Only two things during May are worthy of record. One was the Fleet sports on 11–12th May, and the other was the three days' run of the revue "Carry On London" by the ship's concert party, which is separately reported on.

In other respects May was as uneventful as February, March and April had been, and it was with relief that we sailed for Haifa.

## CHAPTER XV

### TROUBLE IN PALESTINE

**I**N the manner to which we had by this time become accustomed we left Alexandria for Haifa within 48 hours of first receiving any intimation of such a movement and with no particular instructions as to our conduct on arrival. We could hardly be blamed, therefore, for arriving in an area where rioting was a daily pastime without an adequate supply of tin helmets, which consequently had to be borrowed from the *Delhi* just before she sailed for Malta.

In contrast to the daily reports of blood and strife in Palestine, our arrival at her premier port was disappointingly lacking in such manifestations of welcome as bombs and machine-guns. The trains still ran (under armed guards), but the harbour works were idle and motor traffic seemed sparse; most of the lorries seen were fitted with wire netting round the driver's cabin to shield him from stones, bombs and other impediments.

The day after our arrival, 11th June, was the anniversary of our departure from England. Whether or no the Arabs realized the significance of the date is a matter for conjecture, but they certainly celebrated the occasion by bombing the Sailors' Club ashore, no more damage being done, however, than usually occurred with the infernal machines of oriental design. A game of ping-pong amongst our stokers had temporarily to be suspended until the table could be cleared of pieces of ceiling with which it was strewn.

The next day was apparently devoted to trains. A train propelled by a naval driver and fireman was the subject of a bomb explosion at Lydda, just as the train was drawing out of the station. The fireman (a Marine) could not resist the

temptation of dropping his shovel for a handy rifle and speeding the departure of a fleeing Arab with three snap shots. Subsequent enquiry did not establish whether the bomb was actually thrown or whether it was a time-bomb attached to the carriage at a previous halt, so perhaps it was as well the Marine completely missed his target. As all the casualties caused in the train were Arabs, the incident can be said to have ended happily for all concerned.

During our stay an old entente between the Loyal Regiment and *Ajax* (of pre-war origin) was most enthusiastically renewed and those officers of the regiment not actually engaged in rounding up the faithful were often to be seen on board. Amongst these visitors was an officer who, the previous night, had been engaged in surprising a small encampment of Arabs ensconced in a hill-side cave. Coming down over the hill-top well ahead of his platoon, he was almost on top of the Arab sentry when the latter realized his false position and drew a bead on our hero, who only owed his life to the fact that the cartridge misfired. In retaliation he felt justified in discharging his pistol at his adversary, but although the weapon did go off, honours remained even as he clean missed his man at point-blank range. So feeling that it was time for a decisive step, he advanced a pace and smote his enemy shrewdly on the jaw. The Arab was subsequently removed to hospital, as our hero, in his spare time, was a champion boxer.

Trains were being derailed during most days of our stay and at Jenin (some 50 miles distant) a pitched battle was fought. It commenced one Sunday morning with 3 Seaforth Highlanders convoying buses versus some 60 or so Arabs; it terminated at nightfall by some 300 soldiers and police, assisted by aerial machine-gunning, dislodging the hosts of Midian from the hill-side where, as usual, they had taken shelter in caves. Casualties: one Seaforth sergeant killed, 10 or so Arabs despatched.

We left on 27th June. Most people in the ship never saw a shot fired or a bomb exploded, but all the same it was not pleasant to walk the streets with the possibilities of a firework display ever present in mind, and local police stations did not

appear improved by large placards where a tempting offer of £500 reward for the discovery of murderers headed an ominously long list of names and descriptions.

#### THE HISTORY OF THE ARAB TROUBLE

The disorders which took place in Palestine during 1936 began with a hold-up of Jews by Arabs on the Nablus road on 15th April, although unrest and dissatisfaction had been shown by the Arabs for some considerable time before this date. In November 1935 the combined Arab parties presented a memorandum to the Administration calling for the establishment of democratic government, the complete cessation of Jewish immigration and the prohibition of the sale of land to the Jews. The reply of the Colonial Office in February 1936, through the High Commissioner, referred to its offer of a new constitution made in December 1935 which represented a practical step towards democratic government. For various reasons this alarmed the Jews and the more extreme Arab elements demanded drastic alterations to the plan. It had been arranged that a delegation should come to London to discuss the question when the Nablus road incident precipitated the crisis. The Arab parties declared a strike pending the granting of their demands and Jews fled from the paralysed areas into the bigger Jewish settlements. Hold-ups, sniping, and general lawlessness then prevailed and many lives were lost among all parties. By 10th June 10 battalions of British troops had been drafted in from Egypt in an attempt to restore order.

The Press at this period published statements to the effect that the trouble was being fostered and financed by certain foreign powers, but it is not proposed to weigh up all the evidence for and against these statements in this short article; the recent clash between white and coloured races in Abyssinia did undoubtedly cause unrest in Near Eastern countries.

The fundamental cause of the trouble, however, is not new: small Jewish settlements prospered in Palestine before 1914, and relations with the Arabs were generally amicable.

During the war the Allies held out to the Arabs the hope of becoming an independent nation as part of their effort to obtain the services of the Arabs and to harass the Turks; but confusion arose later as to whether Palestine was to be included in this "independent nation." According to the British Government the area to the west of the Jordan Valley was definitely not included. Later, in November 1917, came the "Balfour Declaration," which stated that the British Government "viewed with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people," but contained clauses to the effect that the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities would not be prejudiced. In 1920 the Mandate for Palestine was awarded to Great Britain; this was confirmed by the League Council in 1922; and came into force in 1923; Great Britain was made responsible for giving effect to the "Balfour Declaration."

The Arabs immediately became alarmed lest their land should be expropriated for purposes of Jewish colonization, and the Colonial Office in 1922 published the "Churchill Memorandum," which stressed that H.M. Government did not contemplate the creation of a Jewish Palestine and the disappearance or subordination of the Arabic population, but merely that a Jewish home should be founded there, and that Jewish immigration should be limited according to the economic capacity of the country.

Since that period unrest has continued; many efforts have been made to settle the Palestine question, but the "Wailing Wall Incident" led to the serious disorders in 1929 when several hundreds of lives were lost. This naturally led to a setback in any initial developments towards self-government. Many men may remember the part played by the Royal Navy in the suppression of these disorders.

As a result of the official enquiry into the disorders the Palestine Police came into being, a scientific enquiry was made into land cultivation and settlement possibilities, and arrangements were made to check the irregular entry of Jews into Palestine. The tension which marked 1929-30 steadily relaxed, and Palestine, between the years 1931-3, enjoyed a

wave of prosperity unequalled anywhere in the world. The High Commissioner did all in his power to "bring the two peoples of Palestine and the Administration into closer touch," but plentiful evidence of constrained high feeling was still forthcoming.

During 1932-3 Jewish immigration was increased (partly by Jews from Germany), owing to the prosperous trade conditions then prevailing in Palestine, the building boom, the satisfactory development of new companies, and the opening of the new oil pipe line and harbour works at Haifa.

In October 1933 the latent unrest again became manifest; riots, shooting and strikes took place. Emergency measures were proclaimed, however, and disorders did not assume the same proportions as in 1929 owing to the efficiency of the Palestine Police and the increased garrison available.

During 1934 and 1935 various improvements were carried out to increase the economic value of the country, and Jewish immigration was accordingly increased—causing protest from the Arab parties. In December 1935 it was judged that the municipal councils (formed in 1930) were working sufficiently well to warrant a further step towards self-government, and proposals for a Legislative Council were published. Jewish dislike of this was strong, as on a population basis they were bound to be in a minority. On 18th May 1936 it was announced in the House of Commons that a Royal Commission was to be set up to look into the whole Palestine question, but by 9th June 1936 grave disorders had again broken out, and a further announcement was made to the effect that no Royal Commission would be appointed until British Administration was once more master of the country.

The action taken by the British Government on this occasion is too well known to warrant repetition; many naval units were sent to Palestine and provided sea patrols, and landing parties. Army Reservists were called up on orders being received for one Division to embark for Palestine from England.

It was during these last disorders that H.M.S. *Ajax* was on duty in Palestine from 9th June 1936 until 27th June 1936.

Once again disorders "set the clock back" in Palestine, and what the future holds depends on British Policy and Administration. If Jew and Arab can work together for the good of Palestine the country has a prosperous future to look forward to, but this brief article has endeavoured to point out the differences which at present exist between them. It would appear that many years must elapse before these differences can be forgotten, during which time Great Britain must govern with a firm hand, develop the country, and at the same time instil into both parties the principles of how to govern. Great Britain has also to remember that the two communities concerned are not isolated entities but form part of racial groups all over the world, particularly in other parts of the Empire.

## CHAPTER XVI

PORT SAID, SECOND VISIT—REGATTA—  
DISPERSAL

WE were at Port Said from 27th June to 4th July. In comparison with our previous visit we found life very quiet, almost dull. That feverish flow of traffic through the Canal had died down. The slow trickle of normal commerce went on, while more Italian ships were returning than were going to East Africa. No longer did thousands yell the name of their leader from the over-crowded troopships. Instead those same ships were bearing back the sick and wounded to their homes, and not a sound was heard as they slipped unobtrusively out to sea. Our work as S.N.O. (A) was easier in consequence, and we found plenty of time to keep up our regatta training.

The conditions for pulling between the two long breakwaters were good—and good times were recorded. This was perhaps a disadvantage, as it gave us a sense of false confidence which was to be very badly shaken when we tried to emulate them in the choppy waters of Alexandria harbour. Just before we left the Commander had the misfortune to go sick. However, the organization of the regatta was taken on by others and he was soon back to duty.

By this time "buzzes" were beginning to filter across from Alexandria. Jim Irish had ingenious cruise programmes mapped out for the ships when they left Alexandria. The favourite one gave us six months in Pompey to recuperate. Talk of the lifting of sanctions was filling the air in Geneva, and prospects were distinctly bright. It was with high hopes that we steamed into Alexandria on 5th July.



## REGATTA

When we steamed into our old berth at "F" buoy we noticed that the harbour was fuller than we had ever seen it. Every available ship seemed to be there. That evening we heard more substantial rumours as to impending changes, but nothing definite. On Monday, 6th, Regatta Week opened with the destroyers' races. The harbour was very rough with a cross-wind blowing, and the wash of a thousand picket boats adding to the confusion. Slow times were recorded, and in the spare moments our crews went away to try and get used to the changed conditions.

The Cruiser Regatta took place on Wednesday and Thursday. Fate (or perhaps the C.-in-C.) arranged a special treat for us on the first morning. On turning out we found the signal:

"The Mediterranean Fleet will be returning to Malta in about ten days' time, and those ships temporarily detached from other stations will return to their respective stations at about the same time."

This was the best bit of news we had heard for ten months. It put great heart into the crews that day, and undoubtedly the times would not have been so good without it. The account of the regatta has been written by a more knowledgeable pen, and the details of a unique regatta are given here.

## MEDITERRANEAN FLEET CRUISER REGATTA—1936

We started the regatta under a moral and physical handicap. To begin with, we had been "standing by to stand by" at Haifa and Alexandria so long that we had great trouble in settling down. The "We may be here for the regatta" complex was at the back of most of our minds. Then our opponents were for the most part 10,000-ton cruisers with a bigger complement and with at least one year's regatta experience to their credit. However, being "Nec quisquam," we did our best.

No description of the regatta is complete without a mention

of the encouraging anecdotes on the top of the Commander's Daily Orders during the training period.

All ships were given special berths on or near the course, which was dog-legged in shape, with a straight mile and a half-mile reach. This was the best that could be done in the harbour, so that all cutter races were limited to one and a half miles instead of two, as is usual. We had an excellent billet just at the corner of the first mile, so we could see everything.

## THE FIRST DAY—WEDNESDAY, 8th JULY 1936

The day's racing began with the seamen's cutters, a race in which we had not much hope as the crew had suffered too many changes during its short career. However, it did surprisingly well, coming in sixth out of the eleven ships present. A credit to its coxswain, who had taken over such a short time before. In the second race everyone in the ship was very interested financially and otherwise because our seamen's gig, which was representing us as the open gig, had a great reputation enhanced against the *Arethusa* at Haifa. So we were very disappointed when it came in only sixth. But we decided to blame the gig and not its crew. A moment's divergence on the subject of our gig. This fine relic was endowed to the ship on commissioning. Built by Alfred in A.D. 878 in his big Navy expansion days preparatory to fighting the Danes, it suffered several reconstructions, only the original keel and garboard strakes remaining. Several new bottom planks were fitted after it ran aground in the Wash in 1100 and a new stem piece was deliberately fitted in the twentieth century, ruining its historical value. Enough said. . . .

As for the other races, the wardroom crew managed to pull better than six other wardrooms, which was a good effort, and we finished the forenoon with the boys' cutter getting second. A fine performance and our first place.

In the afternoon the daymen's crew got our next place by coming in second, only being beaten by a very fine crew from the *Australia* that won the open whalers' race as well.