

TOURIST THIRD CABIN



STEAMSHIP TRAVEL IN THE INTERWAR YEARS

LORRAINE COONS AND ALEXANDER VARIAS

CHAPTER THREE

"THE SOUL OF A SHIP"

EXPERIENCE AND LIFE OF "BELOW-DECK" PERSONNEL

Perhaps the sea water really does get into the soul. Whatever the reason, you just keep coming back for more and always threatening to leave the sea. Sometimes one does leave it and what a glorious feeling of achieving what others have only talked about. Yet there is a dull ache and one is lonely and something is lost. People ashore don't speak your language any more. . . . So you found yourself back again whilst the sea had a last laugh as it beckoned you with its soapy fingers and whirled you back with promises of distant shores.

—Dorothy Scobie, *A Stewardess Rings a Bell*

Many seafarers who have sailed on the great passenger liners share the love/hate relationship with the sea that Cunard White Star Line stewardess Dorothy Scobie describes in her memoir. They are drawn to the sea because of the adventure, glamour, and fantasy lifestyle it promises. Yet they resent the demands and rigors of shipboard employment, the loss of the sense of the individual, and the subordination to an officer hierarchy that seems more powerful and exacting than any authority ashore. They spend half their waking hours at sea planning their "escape" from what they

perceive to be a "floating jail" and yet once ashore feel as though they are alone in a foreign land unable to communicate with the people around them. The sea becomes their only refuge from this ambiguously perceived world, and they keep going back, contract after contract, year after year, to a paradise/jail-like existence, to be sure, but a place that, for them, is home.

Following World War I, all European nations sought to return to the "normalcy" of the prewar years. With postwar recovery came a renewed sense of promise and progress for the future. As we've seen, Cunard Line, White Star Line, and French Line eagerly adapted to the new age by converting their ships from coal- to oil-burning vessels, making the switch from steerage to tourist third cabin class, introducing the more democratic one-class and *classe unique* ships, and increasing the frequency of cruise itineraries for eager but cautious travelers.

Such developments meant new opportunities for the companies' seafarers. The stokers of the grand prewar liners became obsolete. To accommodate the changing nature of tourism, many new positions were introduced as more services were made available for passenger comfort. The number of medical staff, shop attendants, bath attendants, hairdressers, and cruise staff personnel all increased during the interwar years.¹

A French Line brochure described the men and women who worked aboard their vessels as "the soul of a ship," without whom "the most gigantic, most lavishly decorated and most costly steamer ever fashioned . . . would be but a lifeless, helpless, aimlessly drifting iron hulk." TRANSAT attributed its success in attracting and retaining "a large and high-class clientele" largely to "the men and women who, through a sense of duty and devotion to it, breathe life into its ships."²

New and bigger steamers were being built that promised employment for many a would-be seafarer from Liverpool, Southampton, Le Havre, Marseilles, and other port towns in England and France. The decision to leave one's family to spend a life

at sea, for most people, was purely a financial one. Although not bringing in great wages, a job at sea (especially one that opened up the possibilities for gratuities) proved far more lucrative than a similar position ashore. Earning potential was far greater on the high seas than in the port towns at home especially during the Depression years of the 1930s. On board these luxury liners, seafarers detached themselves from the grim poverty ashore and yet felt secure in knowing that their work was helping to improve their families' economic situation at home.

The average age of a young man who "signed on" with one of the shipping companies was between fourteen and twenty. (See figure # 9.) In many cases, he would remain at sea until he retired unless he was dismissed, injured, or died while in the company's service. Many crew members began their careers at sea as "mousses" (bellboys) or page boys and then progressed to positions including stewards, waiters, or assistant cooks. Even experienced crew joined as apprentices so as not to "destroy the esprit de corps of the service," as Cunard Chairman Thomas Royden explained to Lady Lettice Shepard, who in April 1923 wrote inquiring about a steward's position for her footman.³

On any given ship, an average of 96 percent of the seafarers were male, and many had signed on at a very early age. Most came from families having long maritime traditions—fathers, uncles, and brothers had sailed before them. Dave Marlowe recalls that "the smell of my father's sea-chest always fascinated me. It reeked of ship's tobacco, fruit, and that strange indefinable odour . . . always associated . . . with the sea and ships." After World War I, he got his opportunity to "sign on" and marveled at his good fortune: "Not for me were the homely jobs that my schoolmates had favoured. Errand-boys, shop assistants, milkmen, paper-boys. . . . I was going to sea!"⁴ Frank Severini, who joined White Star Line's flagship *Majestic* in 1924 as a page boy at the age of fourteen, on the other hand, was not enthusiastic about the prospect at first. All of his family worked on ships, and one uncle had been lost on the *Titanic*. His father, a chef on the *Olympic*, used his influence

to secure a position for his son. Only the money attracted him, and he recalls that "I cried my eyes out" when he first went to sea but soon "got used to it and loved it."⁵

Jack Dempsey (not to be confused with the famous boxer), joined Cunard Line's *Mauretania* in 1934 at the age of 14 as a bellboy. He had first been captivated by the idea of becoming a seafarer while serving an apprenticeship at a laundry in Southampton: "The monotony of several days removing stains, cleaning and pressing was relieved by a visit to the docks . . . to collect uniforms from the *Leviathan*." He describes his adventure on board in finding himself in crew quarters: "Before long I was surrounded by members of the American crew, and a few British, discarding their uniforms and tossing them in my direction! Turn the pockets out, I had been told and so I did. 10 cent pieces and larger coins cascaded to the deck. I tried to give them back, a gesture which was greeted with laughter and a dismissive chorus of "keep it, son." The day's lucrative takings had set me thinking. This is where I should be, not in a factory, but how?"⁶ Dempsey's persistence landed him a job on the *Mauretania*. Once on board, he was dazzled by its opulence: "Never before had my eyes observed such splendor. All that paneling, large ornate doors, tables wet with silver cutlery, flowers and waiters in wing collars with black bows and neat waistcoats bustling around—it was magnificent."⁷ Such wealth could easily be contrasted against the background of the Depression-ridden Southampton docks. Others, like Edwin Praine, a waiter on the maiden voyage of the *Queen Mary* in May 1936, expressed the same sense of wonder upon entering the almost make-believe world of the great floating palaces, finding it "strange to see the crew drinking champagne and smoking Havana cigars."⁸

The initial impression of another young man, who joined the *Queen Mary* in 1937 as a bellboy, was one of astonishment: "It was a different world from what you had been used to. . . . There was stuff that you never knew existed . . . there was stuff on the menus that you never knew . . . such as turkey . . . all sorts of magical

things.⁹ After awhile, crew members became accustomed to such luxuries and ate from the same menu as the passengers, although most were obliged to consume their food standing up in the galley while on duty. "It is quite astonishing how very quickly most of us can get used to expensive living, food and drink—even exotic living at second hand," commented stewardess Edith Sowerbutts. Many who were indulging in lobster, caviar, oysters, and the like "might have been brought up on bread and dripping and porridge." But she too had to acknowledge that "meals on the run did not taste so good."¹⁰

Once on board, life for the ordinary seafarer was less than idyllic. "Below the decks" in crew quarters, a world very different from the splendid life on the promenade was being played out simultaneously. Long hours (usually from 7 A.M. until 10 P.M.), hard work, and extreme discipline awaited the would-be seafarer. John O. Wann comments that in the early days, the *Queen Mary* "was not popular among seamen" because working on board such an enormous floating palace was intense, the accommodations were "mediocre," and the crew bar, the Pig & Whistle, "was nearly a quarter of a mile from our quarters."¹¹ Dave Marlowe had a similar experience and agreed that for crew, "the *Queen Mary* holds no illusions." Sightseers who "swarmed over the ship in hundreds" to admire its grace and beauty "never saw the glory hole," which he shared with twenty-four other "tired-eyed and weary" boys who put in long days scrubbing decks, polishing brass and furniture "until everything was immaculate" and the ship was ready to "hold court" with its admiring public.¹² Marlowe also writes about his participation in the chain gang on board. During eastbound sailings when the ship was only half full, crew members were kept busy painting cabins, checking over crockery, cleaning silver, and other odd jobs.¹³

Still, for the working poor of Liverpool, Southampton, and Le Havre, ship life, with all its drawbacks, was more tolerable than what they had known at home. One man, who joined Cunard White Star Line's *Homer* as an engineer's steward in 1934 at age

twenty, acknowledged that he was lucky to secure a job during a time when unemployment figures for seafarers was at an all-time high. His Roman Catholic connection worked for him when an Irish steward friend was able to get him the job. "Every man on Deal Street was a seafarer," he said. The children of seafarers were so poor that they had to wear clogs instead of shoes. One person on the street had a "bungalow bath" (portable) on which you could sit. When the husband was at sea, the bath was loaned around the street.¹⁴

Liverpudlians in search of work would gather at Dock Tavern, which was the hiring place for seafarers. Company representatives went to the tavern to get "hands" for the next trip. There was no contract for ordinary crew, and thus no job security. At the end of each voyage, one would have to "sign on" again for the next trip. Since the British shipping companies did not pay for crew uniforms, a great initial expense was made by the family with no guarantee of long-term employment. This situation contrasts to the practice of French Line, which did supply its crew with uniforms. Each member kept a *carte d'habillement* that recorded the date and type of clothing that had been replaced. Additional requests had to be approved by the *maître d'hôtel principal*. Joining Cunard Line's *Aquitania* in 1935 at age twenty as an assistant cook, Frank Mortimer had to provide his own knives. "Anything you had to use for the job, you had to supply yourself," he said. "Nobody could touch your knives . . . you were responsible to keep them sharp and in good condition."¹⁵

Cunard Magazine described each of its company's ships as "a floating town" and likened the captain to the chief magistrate and the chief officer to the chief constable. The chief engineer was compared to the borough surveyor, and the purser became the town clerk, a sort of "jack-of-all-trades."¹⁶ *Aquitania's* Captain E. G. Diggle referred to a ship's master as lord mayor of the city and his officers as city councillors.¹⁷ As "chief magistrate" of this "floating town," the captain was responsible for keeping every crew member "up to the high standard of discipline and ef-

ficiency usual in the service." A TRANSAT brochure described the captain as a "perfect host" to his passengers and "a stern but affectionate father" to his crew. He inspired both fear and respect among the crew, although some captains were more popular than others. A rigid, stern, inflexible master might run a tight ship, but it was unlikely to have been a happy one. The master of the vessel was set apart from the rest of the crew and even had his own personal servant, a special boy steward who was referred to as the "captain's tiger."¹⁸ The captain conducted a daily inspection of the public rooms to ensure that "cleanliness is at all times maintained on board." At the onset of each voyage, an inspection of crew uniforms was made to make sure that every button was in place. Cunard Line reminded its captains that "a man who does not take any pride in personal cleanliness, habits, and/or dress, seldom takes pride in his occupation or duties" and made clear that if they and other officers took "greater pains in demanding that their subordinates pay more attention to their personal appearance, the result will be reflected in a corresponding degree in the general bearing and smartness of the whole of the ship's company."¹⁹

Management periodically issued guides like "Useful Hints for Stewards," "Rule Book for Crew," and "Reglement des Etats-Majors" to ensure that the sterling reputation of the company remained untarnished. Crew members who committed infractions against company policy were severely punished by the master of the vessel. White Star Line told its stewards that "the travelling public tell us a well-trained English Steward is the best in the world. Please endeavor to maintain this good reputation." It also reminded them that a "courteous and interested service is profitable both to the Company and yourself." "Useful Hints for Stewards" further counseled stewards to take care in maintaining a neat appearance since "passengers will not be attracted by untidy servants" and that hands and fingernails should be cleaned before each meal with care to "remove cigarette stains, if any." Stewards were advised to refrain from idle conversation with passengers and

warned not to talk "about the passengers, the crew, the steamer, or the Company's business."²⁰

In such a competitive business, shipping companies took passengers' comments seriously. A memo to Cunard Line's general manager in June 1922 regarding transatlantic crossings of the *Berengaria* stated that passengers found the cuisine and service to be below the standard of quality desired. The memo referred to 80 percent of the saloon (first-class) waiters as "third rate" and suggested that the dining room staff be strengthened "in order to attain for *Berengaria* that high mark of proficiency necessary to the reputation she now deserves" and more important, not to lose out to any of Cunard Line's competitors.²¹ Many crew received on-the-job training once on board. Bridge officers gave sailors lessons on the handling and navigation of lifeboats. *Cours du Soir* were offered on board French Line ships daily between 4 and 5 P.M. at the "Ecole Hotelière" and provided intensive language classes to *mousses* (bellboys) whose English was not adequate to deal with the largely American audience. French Line also maintained a school for the education and training of young men about to enter its hotel and stewards departments in Le Havre at which they "are given a thorough grounding in the theory and practice of their future jobs."²² This rigorous course of instruction was supplemented by compulsory physical training with a gymnastics instructor who designed a daily physical fitness program to keep *mousses* and young commis-waiters (apprentices) fit and up to the demands of the job.

Shipping companies dealt harshly with those crew members whose behavior threatened to damage the reputation of the line. In May 1938, the French Line vessel *Lafayette* caught fire while in port in Le Havre. A *femme de chambre*, Mme. Pouré, came forward with evidence implicating a crew member, Claire Unterneh, and her boyfriend, M. Levieux, head cashier in the purser's office, with the theft of the cash box on board ship. On the morning of the fire, Mme. Unterneh gave Mme. Pouré a packet of love letters to safeguard for her. She claimed that the letters were from an ear-

lier lover and that her new friend now demanded that she destroy them. She refused, saying that he must marry her first. Mme. Pouré became suspicious of her friend's story and opened the packet, finding 52,800 francs (both in American and French banknotes), the exact amount of money "lost" in the fire on the *Lafayette*. Although Mme. Unterneh refused to implicate her lover, both she and M. Levieux were found guilty and imprisoned. A series of thefts of passenger belongings had taken place on board the *Lafayette* earlier in the year. The captain's report to the secretary general of TRANSAT warned that the bad publicity such incidents could cause the company would be used against them by their competitors. He suggested that great care be taken in the recruitment of new crew members and that French Line should be careful to avoid embarking "questionable elements" as members of their staff.²³ Other petty thefts involved items from the ship's kitchen or the ship's liquor storage room that were sold ashore (an especially lucrative business during Prohibition in the United States), all of which met with stringent penalties. One chief steward of Cunard Line was arrested and charged in court with smuggling diamonds into the United States. This publicity was not the kind Cunard appreciated. Equally embarrassing to the company was a case of an indiscreet bellboy who was caught peeping through a hole in the bulkhead of the bathroom that a second-class passenger on the *Samaria* was vacating. The aforementioned bell-boy's services were promptly dispensed with on his return to England.²⁴

Fraternization was expressly forbidden between passengers and ordinary seafarers. Aside from fulfilling their duties in the public rooms or on deck, crew members did not venture out into public space on the promenade. Passenger space, in fact, was completely off-limits to crew. Company rules also prohibited crew members from soliciting gratuities from passengers or smuggling liquor off the ship. Either offense, if caught, meant immediate dismissal. Smoking in staterooms or alleyways met with the same penalty.

Fernand Brossard, a French Line employee, had a close call, his services nearly being terminated. He escaped dismissal because of a unique talent he possessed and which French Line exploited. Sent to sea at the age of twelve, Brossard entertained the crew with the Guignol puppet show he had been performing since he was four years old. After World War I, he returned to sea with French Line. He began entertaining the passengers in third class incognito as "Charlot" (as the French affectionately called Charlie Chaplin), and was invited to the first-class lounge. When Brossard was called to the purser's office, he thought he was being discharged. Instead, the positive response from the passengers persuaded TRANSAT to give Fernand a full-time job producing a first-class Guignol theater on board. He joined the *Ile de France* when she was launched in 1927 and was promoted to the new *Normandie* in 1935. Brossard became something of a celebrity, being invited, between sea trips, to perform in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and even in Columbia University's Hall of Philosophy. Although he was not the inventor of the art, Brossard was responsible for bringing Guignol to American audiences.²⁵

Other crew members, without Brossard's special talents, learned early on to submit in silence to the powerful officer hierarchy. Dave Marlowe recalls an incident that caused his demotion from serving in the first-class dining room to waiting on tables in the stewardesses's mess. His misfortune was to tell a troubled passenger that the chief steward had found the half cufflink that he had lost at dinner the previous night. Little did he realize that the chief steward had no intention of returning it. As a consequence, he was chastised and punished for his honesty by his superior.²⁶ Marlowe later switched to an American ship on advice from a friend who painted a more positive picture of life on board for crew: "We eat in the room after the people are gone, we don't do stores, we scrub out with mops, not on our benders [knees], and we get better pay. What more can a guy ask?" Marlowe found American officers "to be more human, more laid-back, not hung up on rank like their British counterparts." Even the crew behaved differently "for they

all seemed so sure of themselves. . . . They spoke quite respectfully to the officers, but more as man to man, often omitting the 'sir,' a thing that would have brought sharp rebuke on a British ship." The work went on just the same, he said, with everyone doing their jobs, "and it certainly produced a far more harmonious feeling between officers and men."²⁷ He earned more money, did not have the additional expense of buying a uniform, and shared the glory hole with only five other men as compared to the twenty-four with whom he had to bunk on the *Queen Mary*.

Though Cunard White Star Line ship brochures boasted of the plentiful space and posh accommodations for first-class passengers, there was no mention of the glory holes Marlowe describes, those large rooms at the aft end of the ship which served as home for ten to twenty or more young men, who were stacked along the bulkhead in steel bunks and shared their accommodations with cockroaches and other equally undesirable roommates. Though the *Queen Mary* may have dazzled its passengers, crew were far more critical. While conceding that the tips were good on board the *Queen Mary*, they found the work grueling and although the food was great, Marlowe says, "at the time when, exhausted, I was standing up to eat, I did not notice the flavour."²⁸ Sowerbutts comments that such practices frequently led to digestive troubles, which were common among crew who routinely put in thirteen-hour days and that the "only difference between these men and horses was that horses would be left in peace in their stables while they munched, whereas stewards and stewardesses could be summoned by a bell or a light for passenger service."²⁹

French Line was the only company to publicize crew accommodations. In announcing the debut of its new flagship, *Normandie*, in 1935, the *Nautical Gazette* explained that the 1,300-member crew had not been neglected. "The crew quarters, the 'forecastle' of ancient days, strikes a new high in the wonder ship from France," the article stated. Crew bunks were "of steel frame construction, enameled and designed for genuine comfort. . . . All bunks are provided with comfortable mattresses,

blankets, and sheets. The same perfect ventilation that serves the passengers is carried out in the crew quarters." Crew accommodations were well lighted, had steam heat, and contained individual steel lockers.³⁰ In short, they were spartan but clean. French Line, quite predictably, paid a good deal of attention to the cuisine served to its crew on board. The maritime law of 20 July 1910 had greatly improved the quality of life for French crew. The ration of wine was augmented by 50 percent. Crew members were entitled to fresh fish at least once per week, and menus were to be varied. There was also much discussion relating to weekly allowances. Sample menus were submitted for approval of the unions. Crew members even complained about the quality of the *vin ordinaire* and requested a Tunisian wine that was *plus léger*.³¹ This was in stark contrast to the P&O (Peninsular and Oriental) Steamship Company, which issued memoranda to pursers that no "grog" allowance was to be issued to stewards, who would instead receive a sum of 5 shillings per month as compensation. So concerned was the company about drunkenness among its crew that barmen were instructed not to sell liquor to any crew member not on the authorized list.³²

Although hardly acknowledged, the work of the steward/stewardess was often the most grueling on board. From early morning until late at night these workers were kept busy cleaning public rooms, serving morning tea and coffee to passengers in their cabins, and preparing the dining room for meals and cleaning up afterward or tending to cabins. They scrubbed floors, polished brass, made sure all cutlery, plates, and linens were kept in good order, and were at their passengers' beck and call nearly twenty-four hours a day. They worked seven days each week, had little shore leave, and never received overtime. Male stewards were looked down upon by fellow crew members as not "proper seafarers." Jo Stanley's interviews with former crew members suggests that "they were not even seen as 'proper men'—especially as so many were homosexual" and performed what was considered "soft work."³³ In her memoirs, White Star Line stewardess Violet Jer-

sop writes of this denigration of male stewards in her first encounter with Ned Tracy, a junior fifth engineer: "I found he hated stewards unreasonably. There was something vital about him that rebelled against their passivity. He despised their cupidity, their lack of manliness, their submissiveness, and that they mostly subsisted on tips brought forth his bitterest scorn."³⁴ Jessop, however, saw the stewards' timidity in the face of authority as a response "to their restricted life since boyhood or to the cringing fear of sudden dismissal without opportunity for redress." They were "handicapped by the scantiest education" and received little training on board. She blamed the employers who compelled stewards to grovel to and ingratiate themselves with passengers in order to subsidize the "starvation wage" they earned "for intolerably long hours."

While their monthly wage of £8 (\$41) might be meager, that was little indication of what their yearly income with tips might average. Although Frank Severini was earning only 12 shillings a week as a page boy on the *Majestic* in 1924, he considered it a "top job" since he made good tips and was able to meet celebrities like Johnny Weismuller (*Tarzan*), who, having been paged at the pool, gave Frank a substantial tip. He recalls that the largest tip he received was from an elderly millionaire, a famous Hollywood film producer who gave him \$50 for returning his lost wallet.³⁵ One of the most coveted positions on board was that of chief smoking room steward, whose annual income might be as much as £3000 (\$15,000), chiefly from tips. A cabin steward or stewardess in the first-class section of a luxury liner could easily make £600 (\$3,000) including gratuities, or four times what they would earn ashore. Dining room stewards routinely tipped the kitchen staff for speedy service so as to keep them in good stead with the passengers.

In his book on sea travel, Roydon Freeman includes guidelines on appropriate tipping. Though the suggested gratuity for a five-day crossing for a cabin/dining room steward was \$2.50, a chief steward could hope to collect up to \$5 from rich passengers. No

wonder then, that "at the home port of a giant liner you are quite likely to see a chief steward met at the quay by his chauffeur and limousine, while the Captain walks off towards an omnibus for the Chief Steward's income is often twice the Captain's."³⁶ This may, in fact, explain Ned Tracy's resentment of stewards, who obviously were financially far better off than he himself. Crew members were generally a resourceful lot. Some augmented their incomes by turning their hobbies into lucrative sidelines. Barbers and members of the orchestra often moonlighted as amateur photographers, selling passengers mementos of their excursions ashore. Others made model ships and clocks, which passengers purchased as souvenirs of their cruise. The barber's shop on board doubled as a "general store" where all practical necessities, including remedies for seasickness, could be purchased. This enabled the barber to supplement the meager income he earned at his trade.

Like Ned Tracy, officers generally did not mingle socially with the crew and regarded them as a class apart. Commenting on the dining room staff, Sir James Bisset, commodore of Cunard White Star Line and wartime captain of both the *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*, admits that "we on the bridge had no special interest in them except that they kept us fed."³⁷

Violet Jessop observed that aboard ship, "there was too much regimentation and too little consideration for the dignity of the individual." Officers and engineers regarded stewards with undisguised contempt. Although stewards "seem like an agreeable fraternity, circumstances make them utterly indifferent to one another, unless they need something," Jessop comments on the breakdown of any camaraderie as soon as crew members were promoted to superior positions and "forget their less fortunate brethren, whose lives they often make hell in order to maintain their own precarious place." Stewards were generally a passive lot whose "individual initiative has been quashed" through long years of continued regimentation. "One rarely heard them complain that they found their work . . . monotonous and distasteful," she said. "They never realized that the very monotony had eaten like

a canker into their souls, killing ambition and leaving them content to get along without exerting their minds."³⁸

As Jessop astutely observed, a class system was clearly at work even within the crew ranks. First-class stewards regarded themselves as superior to their third-class counterparts. Not only were the gratuities higher but a boost in social status came with serving the rich and famous. This "upstairs, downstairs" mentality was very prevalent on board the "floating palaces" of the interwar years. Stewards working in first-class sections of the ship believed that their own worth had increased because of their close contact with celebrities and powerful businessmen—even if they only cleaned up after them. Interviews with former seafarers always include mention of the many "important" people they met while working on board, as the many scrapbooks of celebrity photos, which they have meticulously cared for over the years would indicate.

Edith Sowerbutts writes of meeting noted celebrities including Robert Taylor, Gary Cooper, Marlene Dietrich, Doris Duke, and Douglas Fairbanks Sr. Though she acknowledged that Erich Maria Remarque was an important writer, she described him as "a cynical type" and remembers him mostly for "the mucky state of his wash-bowl." One favorite passenger with the crew was another familiar face on board the *Queen Mary*, Paul Robeson, whom Sowerbutts describes as "every inch a gentleman." Robeson was one of the few celebrities who had more time for the crew than for many of his fellow passengers, frequently entertaining male crew members in the Pig & Whistle. He treated the crew as valued individuals and always remembered their names.³⁹ As a black actor and socialist, Robeson understood the realities of prejudice and discrimination and was especially sensitive to the plight of crew who, aboard ship, were treated like second-class citizens both by passengers and the officer elite (and by a few fellow crew members who had managed to rise to the rank of petty officers.)

Relations among officers were generally friendly, although when Captain William Eldin Warwick joined Cunard White Star

Line in 1936, he recalled friction between the officers of Cunard Line and former White Star Line as a result of cutbacks in staff caused by the 1934 merger which was referred to by some White Star people as the "submerger." Warwick, assigned to the *Seydlitz* as junior third officer at age twenty-four, found that the next youngest officer was forty-nine years old because of a hiring freeze. Commodore Geoffrey Mar likewise recalls that when he joined Cunard Line in 1936 as a junior officer, many of the other junior officers were twenty years older than him.

Officers on both French and British ships were held to a high standard of conduct. The captain and all chief officers were required to file voyage reports with the general manager of the company commenting on any personnel problems. "Character books," which were annual reports on officers' conduct, were also kept. Officers were rated on overall intelligence, sobriety, education, conduct, initiative, health, job suitability, and qualifications for promotion. Negative comments from a superior officer could result in the termination of an officer's contract or a denial of promotion. An officer referred to as "reliable and sober" or as "a total abstainer" was guaranteed a long career with the company. Anyone described as "a man of vile temper, not accustomed to discipline" or "a capable chief steward, but hot headed and tactless" would have a harder time convincing the company hierarchy that he deserved a promotion. Other negative comments, including characterization as a "very affected and conceited" individual or "a gambler" or as suffering "from nervous exhaustion and unfit for duty" could jeopardize a person's career altogether.

One captain reprimanded an officer "who does not realize the dignity of his position, inasmuch that he consorts with any member of the crew," something that was frowned upon on all ships. The officer was also accused of insobriety, which led to the rationing of his "wine bill" during the next voyage. Additional comments about his personal appearance led the captain to conclude that he was "unsuitable to wear his officer's uniform." Perhaps the most damning charge against this officer, however, was that he

"has a very disturbing influence among the Juniors. [He] is very radical in his views." Such an accusation could mean immediate dismissal, as was the case of an engineer aboard French Line's *Alaska* in 1925. Although he had been with the company for three years and had already received a promotion, he was dismissed on the grounds that he had a "clear tendency towards communism" and had insulted his superior officers, thereby being a bad influence on the crew.⁴⁰

Bridge officers and engineers working on British liners were expected to refrain from having much direct contact with the passengers and were discouraged from even frequenting the public rooms. While the British sought to maintain a polite but formal distance between passengers and staff, Americans expected a more friendly reception from the officer elite on board. The rules expressly forbade the captain, bridge officers, engineers, and all other officials (other than the purser and surgeon) from receiving passengers in their rooms. They were also instructed to refrain from participating in the amusements of passengers—games, concerts, deck sports, and so on—and "while courteously replying to any questions which may be put to them by passengers, [they] will not seek conversation with them."⁴¹ By contrast, French Line officers were not only encouraged to mix with passengers, but socializing with their guests was part of their job description. When not on duty on the bridge, officers were required to mingle with passengers in the public lounges and even take a few for a spin or two around the dance floor! As Raoul de Beaudéan, captain of the *Ile de France*, wrote: "This courtesy, rare on transatlantic liners, tacitly involved the obligation to dance with all the ladies and particularly with the plainest and clumsiest ones."⁴² French Line officers became most popular with the passengers, particularly Americans, who eagerly sought to hobnob with the ship's officer elite during their voyage and perhaps even find a little romance.

Fraternization between male and female crew was clearly not encouraged by the shipping companies. The Pig & Whistle was off-limits to women, who were largely confined to their tiny,

cramped quarters for socializing with friends. Men and women had separate crew messes. Companies purposefully did not hire young women as stewardesses so that male crew members could keep their minds on their work. Stewardesses, however, generally did not seek out fellow workers, for they had higher stakes. Like young female department store clerks ashore, stewardesses dreamed of bettering themselves socially and economically by marrying "the boss," in this case, one of their superiors in the officer class. Even when friendships did develop, it was difficult to sustain a normal relationship. Violet Jessop recalls that once on a cruise stopping in Jamaica, she and Ned went out for a drink at a famous hotel that was crowded with passengers. "They appeared somewhat surprised to see us," she said. "I learned from later experience that passengers generally are surprised if you use the same public buildings they do."⁴³ As a general rule, only an officer would even consider patronizing a restaurant frequented by passengers. Crew members found themselves equally confined both on board ship and on shore. Even if they married, a practice not encouraged by the steamship companies, spouses were rarely assigned to the same ship. While John Patrick Mullins sailed on the maiden voyage of the *Queen Mary*, his wife, Helen, was a nurse on another Cunard Line ship.⁴⁴ Delia Callaghan met her husband while working on the *Berengaria*. Though they were "allowed" to marry, she never saw him very much, only in port on occasion.⁴⁵

Captain William Eldin Warwick fondly recalls meeting his wife, who worked as a "barbareen" (a nickname for a female hairdresser), on the *Carinthia*. Their budding romance captured the attention of his crew, half of whom "would line up to see what she was wearing when we went out." Once married, she left her position altogether and thereafter sailed occasionally. When asked if she wanted to leave her job, Captain Warwick replied, "Being a man, I never asked her!"⁴⁶ At least he was honest!

In order to keep up crew morale, which frequently needed boosting, social and athletic associations were organized on all

Cunard and French Line ships. (See figure # 10.) Such accessibility to sports activities was a reflection of the opening up of "leisure" to members of the middle and working classes in the interwar years. In his memoirs, *Aquitania* purser Charles Spedding, writes that "shipowners themselves have never given much, if any, thought to this side of sea life."⁴⁷ A crew committee, headed by the captain, organized football, cricket, bowling, billiard, swimming, and boxing matches when two ships were in port. Before the war, most lower-, middle-, and working-class people had little exposure to most sports.⁴⁸ The steamship lines organized social events including dances, concerts, and cinema viewings for their crews on board as well as picnics and shore excursions in American ports of call. Cunard Line presented each of its passenger liners with a handsome challenge cup, for which different departments of the ship would compete in rowing matches. Cunard attributed the "high standard of efficiency which exists" among its crews in the manner of manning lifeboats to the "keen competition among departments to possess the cup." A silver medal was presented to each member of the winning team.⁴⁹ Company executives rightly calculated that a happy crew would result in positive ratings from passengers who would be likely to choose Cunard for a subsequent voyage.

The social and athletic association had its own crew publication, the *Commodore*, for each Cunard Line ship, and the July 1930 issue published for the *Aquitania* included various practical columns: "Repair Queries," advice on caring for one's garden at home, fashion tips, and suggestions for touring while in a foreign port. There were updates on various upcoming sports events and results of matches with other ships. Crew members contributed poetry and other literary articles. A notice from a department store, Austin Reed Ltd., solicited help from the crew to increase business in its on board shop. Awards of credit notes for £5, £3, and £1 were given as prizes for suggestions regarding the most popular items demanded by passengers. Advertisements for radios, gramophones, furniture, flowers, ladies' silk

hosiery and underwear, laundries, sports goods, steamship trunks, ship uniforms, engagement rings, furs, car hire service, and the YMCA also appeared on the pages of the *Commodore*.⁵⁰ Such ads reveal that the working classes were quickly becoming mass consumers in the interwar years and that various merchants were actively competing for their business.

Despite long hours and often tedious labor, seafarers had their own lives and money for some of the luxuries that would never have been within their reach if they worked ashore. Articles on spring and summer gardening and home decorating tips indicate that crew members sought to maintain two lives simultaneously. They wanted the security of having their own private space ashore to which they could retreat when ship life became too restrictive. At home, they were their own masters. But they maintained a separate identity on board that provided an added degree of comfort because they also saw themselves as part of the ship family. There was a strong camaraderie among the crew which revolved around a ship's social and athletic association, and the net effect of this social bonding was to create a more amiable work atmosphere and, therefore, a happy, more contented crew loyal to the company.

Sports were similarly used in the 1920s and 1930s to unite youth at home behind even the most unpopular governments in Europe. Léon Blum's Popular Front government in France was the first to create a Subsecretariat for Leisure and Sports, or Ministry of Idleness as it came to be known. Its director, Léo Lagrange, set as his goal "the improvement of the race," using methods promoted by the Nazi Strength through Joy leisure and sports organizations.⁵¹ Competition in sports had the effect of deflecting attention away from a nation's social problems and rallying the people around the flag of patriotism. In the same way, shipping companies encouraged sports competitions between crews of different shipping lines in order to neutralize discontent and engender a feeling of loyalty to one's company.

There was an intimate relationship between a ship's crew and its home port—generally where the families of crew members

lived. An article in *Cunard Magazine* spoke about the interest that the people of Southampton took in their crews when a ship was in port. It acknowledged the town's indebtedness to their sons and daughters who work on the ships which "mean so much to the life of the town." On one occasion, the crew of the *Agui-tania* was honored by the mayor, who arranged a gala for their benefit. A repeat performance was held for the crew of the *Mau-retania*. Not only did the ships bring business to the port of Southampton, but they also brought employment to its inhabitants, thereby contributing to the economic well-being of the port.⁵² The British Sailors' Society arranged to have seafarers entertained at Christmas at more than 110 homes and hostels affiliated with the society in 1932.⁵³

Life for families of seafarers was often difficult. Though the shipboard jobs made the families financially more secure, the absence of a seafaring husband, wife, sibling, or child had a negative effect on the family. Economic security came at a price, as Captain William Eldin Warwick found out. On one of Warwick's visits home, his youngest son, who had hardly seen his father, was puzzled when introduced to him and asked, "What's a dad?"⁵⁴ Flora Ackroyd recalls the changed atmosphere at home when her father, an engineer with Cunard Line, was in port. "The sky was the limit," she said, remembering his treating them to fish and chips and a concert.⁵⁵ Those were happy times but the periods in between were lonely and often anxiety-ridden. Her father was senior second engineer on the *Lusitania* when it was torpedoed. He was pulled out of the water hanging on to an overturned lifeboat. Many other families were not so fortunate.

To address the retirement needs of Cunard Line staff, a Superannuation Fund was established in 1925, which made "all permanent male employees of the Company over 21 years of age in the United Kingdom" members of the fund. Employees' contribution of 2.5 percent of their salaries would be matched by 7.5 percent from the company. The widow of a deceased Cunard employee would receive a yearly pension according to her age, ranging from

£36 to £100, and all children under the age of seventeen would receive a yearly allowance of £25. Although officers benefited from this fund, seamen and firemen were not eligible to join as they were not on the "regular salary list."⁵⁶ Cunard Line board minutes from 1911 mention the existence of a type of pension fund for long-term employees (including stewards, stewardesses, and firemen) with fifteen-plus years service that provided a weekly retirement allowance of 5 shillings.⁵⁷ The fund was discontinued in 1930 as the full effects of the Depression were felt in England.

Times had not changed that dramatically for crew since the days when Charles Logan sailed with Cunard. Having served the company faithfully for twenty years, he contracted lead poisoning on the job as a "lamp trimmer" and, when he developed paralysis, was subsequently discharged as "a total wreck" from the *Lusitania* in 1912. Since he did not qualify for workmen's compensation, the company gave him £25 and promised him a "light job," which he never received. He died seven and one half years later, in 1919, leaving behind a widow and child. Through the intercession of the mother, the son obtained a position aboard a Cunarder as a bell-boy but was made to work with "a drunken Chief Steward" and some "uncultivated boys who made his life intolerable." When he was let go, Annie Logan wrote to Cunard Chairman Sir Percy Bates, complaining that she had to live on a meager widow's pension. Bates reluctantly agreed to reinstate the son in 1935.⁵⁸

Cunard generosity had its limits. When a steward on board the *Carinthia* met with an accident in July 1928, he was examined by specialists who found that he was suffering from Bright's disease and diabetes and had a short time to live. Having worked for Cunard for thirty-two years, he put in an insurance claim for £450 for the support of his wife and two children. Although not related to his illness, the accident caused him the loss of his finger, which was amputated in October. Upon advice from the company's lawyers, Cunard admitted liability but was willing to consider only a £200 settlement, £100 short of what was suggested by the lawyers.⁵⁹

French Line provided a range of social services for the families of its crew. In 1913, a maternity fund, *La Layette Transatlantique*, was established with the goal of helping pregnant wives of men in French Line service for at least six months. This provision applied to both shore and seagoing staff. The fund provided medical attention and a layette for the baby and sought "to look after the general welfare and happiness of the mother, keeping up her courage and giving the newborn infant a fair start in life." It was personally administered by ladies' visiting committees in the four principal embarkation ports of the company—Le Havre, St. Nazaire, Bordeaux, and Marseilles. Auctions and special concert programs were held aboard TRANSAT ships, like the *Fête de Bienfaisance*, the proceeds of which went to several benevolent institutions, such as the French and American Seamen's Fund.⁶⁰

As a result of the severe economic consequences of the Depression, shipping companies adopted a policy of austerity in order to survive. On 1 May 1931, Cunard Line reduced all sea/shore staff salaries by £10, not restoring them until April 1937.⁶¹ Letters of dismissal were sent to crew members of shipping companies whose liners were sailing half empty and could no longer support a full staff. French Line terminated the services of many of its crew in 1932 with two weeks' notice and an indemnity of three months' salary.⁶²

Once economic recovery began, TRANSAT established a Service Social to work with the needy families of company employees in 1936. In June 1939, French shipowners grouped together to create a national association, the Union Sociale Maritime, which was headquartered in Paris. Its work included finding placement for orphans in foster homes and the sick in convalescent centers, aiding wives of enlisted men, and securing work for "company widows." TRANSAT organized a workshop for the fabrication of woolens for the Army Service Corps that provided work for 300 wives of mobilized seamen during the winter of 1940. The efforts of the Service Social and the larger Union Sociale Maritime were cut short by the bombardments of Le Havre in the spring of 1940.

An eleven-page report, dated 16 May 1941, addressed French Line workers' housing and living conditions. French Line managers examined company activities and proposed necessary measures to aid the maritime population of Le Havre. The Service Social researched the names and addresses of crew members who were prisoners of war and helped families to send them packages. The children of these prisoners under the age of fourteen received 100 francs.

Disaster relief was made available for mobilized seafarers' families who were victims of the English bombings of Le Havre. The Service Social provided clothing and temporary shelter for homeless families. It also worked to help relocate women and children to other regions in case of renewed bombardments, and sought to provide treatment in the proper sanatoriums to seafarers' family members inflicted with tuberculosis. In making aid available to its needy employees, French Line wanted to ensure that families would use it wisely. The company's paternalism was transparent in choosing to give relief in the form of goods rather than money to avoid the "bad practice of getting the unemployed used to receiving handouts."

Once shortages and rationing limited TRANSAT's ability to help families send parcels to POWs in Germany, the company appealed to its workers to aid their imprisoned colleagues. To augment the Service Social's efforts, French Line appointed a committee of liberated POWs to make suggestions regarding the particular needs of prisoners who remained in Germany.⁶³ The managers expressed concern that seafarers, like their counterparts ashore, might have a tendency to blame the employer for all their misfortunes. Thus, the company sought to be prudent in distributing aid according to what was deemed appropriate. Seafarers played no role in this decision. While showing its compassion for needy employees, TRANSAT also feared and distrusted its workers whom it often viewed as potential anarchists and troublemakers.

The fear of anarchism and communism and other forms of "trouble" predated the outbreak of the Second World War. The

paternalism of the shipping companies was most strongly felt in the discipline they exerted over those employees whom they considered disloyal or untrustworthy, particularly those who deserted their posts to join in strikes called by their unions. In such cases, the full wrath of the father toward his wayward children was demonstrated by the letters of dismissal sent to crew members who were considered "dangerous agitators." Shipping companies' general hostile attitude to labor organization among their crew is best revealed in the comments of pre-World War I writer R. A. Fletcher, who describes a labor organizer as a "sea lawyer" who is "not a solicitor whose taste for a nautical life has induced him to slip before the mast, but a sailor who combines a discontented disposition with a passion for grumbling, an uncanny knack of finding something to grumble at, the gift of gab, and an elementary knowledge of a few of the legal points which may arise under the articles."⁶⁴

After World War I, diplomats at the Paris Peace Conference called for an eight-hour day/forty-eight-hour workweek as an ideal to be achieved by all nations. At the 1919 Washington Conference, a convention was adopted that the forty-eight-hour week should be applied to seamen of all member states of the League of Nations. This question was discussed further at the Genoa Conference organized by the league's International Labor Office, which was held 15 June–10 July 1920 and attended by members of the International Shipping Federation and the International Seamen's Federation. In preparation for the conference, a memo to Cunard Line managers warned of the increase in crew (mainly in the catering department) that would be necessary if such a measure were adopted. The 833-person crew aboard the *Mauretania* would need to be increased to 1,239, and while the *Caronia's* 470-member crew would number 754.⁶⁵

Returning from the Genoa Conference, Cunard Line Chairman Sir Alfred Booth, stated that it was impossible to establish an international convention regarding hours of labor at sea and intimated that if "such a system were adopted . . . foreign nations,

having no surplus sea labor available, would find it physically impossible to carry it out. They would interpret it elastically, and fall back in the payment of overtime, thereby escaping the heavy burden which increased complements would impose on the British shipowner." Contrary to seamen's expectations that the forty-eight-hour workweek would eliminate unemployment, Booth was convinced that the unemployment rate would rise dramatically and that some ships "would not go to sea at all; some would be laid up undergoing expensive alterations; others would be sold. . . . [T]here would be a serious check to the building of new tonnage and shipbuilding would come almost to a standstill."⁶⁶

Fearing a dramatic increase in crew expenditures, the International Shipping Federation refused to ratify the draft convention proposed at Genoa regulating work hours at sea. Meanwhile the seamen believed that they had the right to apply the principles of the Washington Convention. Since the two sides had reached an impasse in negotiations, the establishment of international legislation was postponed to a later date. The International Seamen's Federation asked Albert Thomas, director of the League of Nations' International Labor Office, to organize another conference and act as arbiter in the dispute between shipowners and seafarers. If no arbitration was permitted, they indicated that they were prepared to call for a forty-eight-hour strike in all ports.⁶⁷

The purpose of the conference was to find an acceptable balance between the proposal of the seamen, which called for an eight-hour day and a forty-eight-hour week, and the more modest concession of the shipowners for a fifty-six-hour workweek for the engine and deck departments and a seventy-hour week for the catering department (excluding France and Holland, where the forty-eight-hour week was already law). After considerable delay, the conference was convened in Brussels in October 1921 and was followed by a second session of the Joint Advisory Commission to the International Labor Office in Paris on 7 March 1922. The commission consisted of five representatives for shipowners, five for seafarers, and four members of the governing body of the International Labor Office.

By 1922, the Genoa Conference's recommendation that all countries adopt systems of unemployment insurance for crew members was accepted by seven countries. The hotly contested issue concerned the recommendation for the forty-eight-hour workweek. The French government indicated that, to keep competitive, it would drop its own law providing for a forty-eight-hour workweek at sea if the proposal were not universally adopted. After much discussion, the manager of the International Shipping Federation, Cuthbert Laws, acting on behalf of the shipowners, stated that the forty-eight-hour week was a "lost cause." Though the International Labor Office could act as mediator in the dispute, the shipowners alone had the power "to adopt whatever attitude they considered right when such a proposition is brought forward."⁶⁸ At the end of the day, the seafarers went home empty-handed. French seamen lost the rights they had, and the British seafarers' representative, James Havelock-Wilson, was absent from the conference to avoid responsibility for the failure of the International Seamen's Federation to achieve its demands.

While negotiations for an international regulation of labor at sea were continuing, the Cooks and Stewards' Union, founded in 1909 by Joe Cotter, was engaging in strike activity against Cunard Line, opposing a wage cut of £2.10 per month agreed to by the National Maritime Board⁶⁹ that was to take effect on 6 May 1921. This reduction was £2 less than the cut requested by the shipowners for sailors and firemen and £3 less than that which was requested for catering personnel. The *Liverpool Echo* reported that, of the 598 stewards on the *Aquitania*, 590 of them went on strike, with stewards voting six to one against wage reductions. The paper noted that several strikers from the ship were survivors of the *Lusitania*. "Cotter's Union," as the Cooks and Stewards' Union was commonly called, saw no reason for wage cuts during a time when the company was making huge profits, and so it followed the example of Swedish and American seafarers who refused to accept similar cuts. Cunard Line's justification for the wage reduction was that the shipping industry was going through

a depression.⁷⁰ This is a curious comment from a company that was in the process of launching five new ships between 1920 and 1925 and that was benefiting from the postwar acquisition of Germany's *Imperator*, which would sail under the Cunard flag as the *Berengaria*. The more plausible explanation for the company's tight budget for staff salaries is that it sought to pass on to its seafarers the high costs of converting coal- to oil-burning vessels and of transforming steerage space into more comfortable "tourist third cabin" quarters.

Three hundred Cunard Line home office volunteers crossed the picket lines to take the place of the strikers, and the *Aquitania* sailed for New York from Southampton on 14 May according to schedule. This happened despite Joe Cotter's threat that sailors and firemen would refuse to take the ship out with "black leg" labor. All three thousand passengers were promptly embarked, and the general manager afterward awarded bonuses to the volunteers. Despite company fears, 1921 did not become a replay of the violent 1911 strike known as "Bloody Sunday," which had been led by "Explosive Joe" Cotter.⁷¹ "Cotter's Union" all but collapsed and eventually merged with the British Seafarers' Union to form the Amalgamated Marine Workers' Union (AMWU) in January 1922. The AMWU continued until it was gradually absorbed in 1927 into the newly constituted National Union of Seamen (NUS), which was led by J. Havelock-Wilson.⁷² Despite the wage cut temporarily imposed on seafarers during the most severe years of economic depression in the early 1930s, the NUS achieved important concessions from the shipowners in the years preceding the Second World War. Significant progress was made in the improvement of crew accommodations, and, in a stunning policy reversal, the shipowners agreed to revisit the issue of a limited workweek for the catering department. With the outbreak of the war, however, all such discussions were put on hold.

Strike activity in the maritime industry was especially visible in France in the decades preceding World War II. One of the most

important strikes of the French Merchant Marine occurred in the summer of 1912. Fearing a strike, which would paralyze its fleet in all French ports, French Line managers voted to increase crew salaries in response to the rise in the cost of living. The unions, believing the increase to be too little too late, ordered its members to go out on strike on 9 June. All major French ports were affected, and in Le Havre the *France*, *Touraine*, *Rochambeau*, *Savoie*, and *Provence* were laid up for fifty-five days. The strike was finally settled on 3 August, when the state intervened to force the company to grant a modest salary increase. The *Lorraine*, which was in dry dock undergoing refurbishment, was tied up for 182 days, which resulted in great financial expense to TRANSAT.⁷³

In the decade preceding World War I, French Line extended existing social laws to its seafarers by increasing salaries and pensions, establishing disability insurance, regulating hours of work and payment for overtime, and providing vacation pay. This came at a significant financial cost to the company. The resolution of the 1912 strike increased the company's expenditures by a half million francs, making it more difficult to keep up with its competitors, especially the British shipping companies, which provided far fewer benefits to their employees.⁷⁴ Many of the strikes in the interwar years were related to the application of the law of the eight-hour day in France. Strikes on individual ships were also caused by personnel problems, as in the case of crew members aboard the *France* who deserted their posts in 1925 to protest the reassignment of an unpopular maître d'hôtel to the *Paris* after they demanded his dismissal from the company. A twelve-day strike by the engine room crew over wages affected the *Ile de France*, *Paris*, and *Rochambeau* in the summer of 1928. Few concessions were made by TRANSAT. "Agitators" were dismissed, and legal proceedings were initiated against strikers for breaking their contracts, as was the case with strikers on the *Paris* and the *France* who abandoned ship in October 1922.

All strike activity was coordinated by union leaders and their representatives on board. The union representing the kitchen staff

in May 1936 demanded that crew cooks, butchers, and bakers receive a raise because their work had become more complex. Since TRANSAT had upgraded the quality of the cuisine for its seafarers, short-order cooks were no longer sufficient. Cooks in the crew mess needed more skill and experience and demanded adequate compensation.⁷⁵ A letter from the unions to the company managers, dated 7 August 1936, expressed crew members' outrage that a recent brochure advertising a cruise to Canada on the *Champlain* commemorating the three hundredth anniversary of Champlain's explorations mentioned that gratuities were included in the price of the ticket. This was a hotly contested issue for crew members as tips were their bread and butter, and this announcement threatened to result in a work stoppage. In addition to making standard demands for better wages and benefits, unions argued for upgraded menus and higher quality wines, both serious matters of the heart to the French.

The most publicized of the interwar year maritime strikes in France was a ten-day standoff in 1938 between the Fédération Nationale des Syndicats Maritimes and the Ministère de la Marine acting in concert with the French shipping companies. This struggle centered on the battle over the forty-hour week. France's first Socialist-led coalition government, the Popular Front, which grouped together Socialists, Communists, and Radical Republicans, took power on 4 June 1936 under the leadership of Léon Blum. What brought these divergent political groups together was the common fear of Fascism. In the first days of its existence, the Popular Front was threatened by a wave of strikes from the left. Through the Matignon Agreements, workers were granted substantial concessions, including the principle of collective bargaining, a two-week paid vacation, an average 12 percent salary increase, and a reduction of the official workweek from forty-eight to forty hours without loss of income. Bending to pressure, Blum's government acted imprudently, and his social program, however well intentioned, backfired. Although the average national wage increased by 47.5 percent, the effects of the implementation of the

forty-hour week undermined workers' gains as the cost of living rose 46 percent between May 1936 and May 1938. Blum's position was indeed precarious as he tried to steer a moderate course in extreme times when racism was on the rise, and segments of the French, lured by the many right-wing nationalist movements, began to subscribe to the belief "Better Hitler than Blum." The government was forced to turn its back on its campaign platform and devalued the franc three times between 1936 and 1938. When Edouard Daladier replaced Blum in April 1938, the Socialists had already left the government, and workers' suspicions were raised that it would now cooperate with employers to renege the implementation of the forty-hour week.⁷⁶

On 30 November, the local maritime unions, conforming to directives received by the leadership of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), ordered their members to cease work, thereby delaying the departure of the *Wisconsin*, *Ile de France*, *Paris*, and the *De Grasse*. The strike was called to protest the laws of 12 November "which forecasted a negative development concerning the forty hour week. . . . These laws also anticipated a two percent contribution of crew members' salaries" toward benefits provided by the company. TRANSAT had delayed the application of the law of forty hours, which was to have taken effect on 8 June 1937, and officers were asking for compensation for overtime work.⁷⁷ The November laws hinted at the suppression of the five-day workweek/eight-hour day in favor of organizing work on a daily basis of six hours and forty minutes.

Anticipating a work stoppage, the French government, through its minister of the Merchant Marine, M. de Chappedelaine, issued the law of 28 November 1938, which requisitioned the personnel of all French shipping companies subsidized by the state. Such an action brought a sharp exchange of letters between former Prime Minister Léon Blum and Edouard Daladier over the legality of invoking the law of 1877 to apply to the present situation. Daladier had claimed that the government was just following the example of Blum who used the law of 1877 (modified on 21 January

1935) requisitioning maritime personnel outside of mobilization for his own purposes on 6 June 1936. In both cases, Daladier insisted, France was in a state of crisis justifying extraordinary action by the government.⁷⁸

Crew members reported to their posts as scheduled but refused to work. On the afternoon of 30 November, the secretaries of the unions called a meeting at the Salle Franklin in Le Havre, and union members of the *Ile de France* left the ship to attend. They were quickly slapped with a penalty of 50 francs and had one day's pay withheld for deserting their posts. *Normandie* arrived on 1 December and was scheduled to depart on its transatlantic journey to New York on Saturday, 3 December. Among its passenger "celebrities" were Anthony Eden, Gary Cooper, and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. The union called a "general strike" for 3 December to protest the actions taken by the government against the strikers on 30 November. The crew of the *Normandie*, which had also been requisitioned by the government, joined in the strike. As a consequence, passengers, scheduled to sail on 3 December were rerouted to Cherbourg to board Cunard Line's *Aquitania*. One indignant French passenger commented, "[T]his ship which serves the prestige of France does not merit today such an unjust humiliation."⁷⁹ French Line filed complaints against those crew members who had technically broken their contracts. Union organizers and others identified as agitators promptly received letters of dismissal from the company, which was drafting blacklists for each ship of those seafarers who were to be fired for their role in the strike. Those placed on the "index" were mainly men from Le Havre, between the ages of fourteen and forty-nine with the average age of the strikers being between thirty and thirty-two. Those seafarers, thought to be of "questionable character"—that is, suspected of being "communist revolutionaries," "dangerous agitators," or "drunkards"—were dismissed.⁸⁰

On 5 December, Henri Cangardel, French Line general secretary, gave the order to man the *Paris* with TRANSAT loyal crew and newly recruited shore personnel along with merchant marines

for engine and bridge personnel. The government promised protection against reprisals from strikers to those crew members who wished to join their ships. The *Paris* departed from Le Havre at 11 P.M. on 7 December and arrived at Cherbourg at 3 A.M. the following day without incident and embarked 489 passengers. Among the third-class passengers who boarded the ship in Cherbourg were 150 members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade returning from the Spanish front where Franco's forces were virtually in control.⁸¹ On 9 December, 2,000 union members met in the Salle Franklin and voted nearly two to one to continue the strike (1,300 for to 700 against). The secretary-general of the Central Committee of French Shipowners appealed to M. De Chappedelaine to have station police readily available at the quais should they be needed by ships' captains if crew members became violent and provoked an insurrection. Captains were instructed to bar any union representative from coming on board and were given authority to "lock out" any crew member thought to be an agitator. Worker solidarity began to break down with news of crew defections. As early as 8 December, the crew of the *Cuba* secretly voted against the strike. Desperate appeals from the Fédération Nationale des Syndicats Maritimes to support its fight to uphold the law of the forty-hour week continued: "[E]ach time that the workers defend their right to maintain their livelihood, it is said that their struggles have a political character to them." The union blamed the press for biased coverage of the strike. It accused the press of having been "hired" and "bought off" by big business, and demanded the release of imprisoned union organizers. It unsuccessfully pleaded with its members to remain firm: "Unity in our ranks is essential, Comrade Marines, so that we may respect ourselves today and will conquer tomorrow."⁸²

On 10 December, 2,800 navigators presented themselves to the company for work while 900 strikers were meeting at the Salle Franklin. At the end of the day, the strike was over with seafarers having made no gains. By the spring of 1939, crew were protesting against what they saw as "revenge" on the part of the French

Line. Substantial cuts had been made in seagoing personnel, beer allowances were reduced, and discipline was more strictly enforced. A poster distributed on board the *Normandie* warned crew that the captain expressly prohibited the distribution of any kind of political journal. Apparently this was not viewed as a contradiction to Republican freedoms. This notice was posted after the captain had discovered that two members of the crew were circulating among the sailors copies of *Vérité*, the journal of the CGT, which contained articles criticizing the minister of the Merchant Marine Chappedelaine.⁸³ Once World War II began, the company discontinued all accessory wages (which made up 40 to 60 percent of their earnings), including cost-of-living supplements and allowances for laundry, tobacco, alcohol, and overtime pay, and for the duration of the war the forty-hour week dispute was put on the back burner. As a result, strike activity ceased.

In 1944, an international conference of seafarers was held in which representatives from the twelve maritime countries present adopted a series of demands that became the International Seafarers' Charter. Its main goal was to secure recognition of uniform minimum standards. The charter was the main agenda for a special maritime session of the International Labor Organization held in Seattle in 1946. The principal features of the charter were manifested in a series of conventions and recommendations which provided for an instrument that recognized the seafarers' right to an international minimum wage. Much of the credit for this success belonged to the new general secretary of Britain's National Union of Seamen, Charles Jarman.

Sixty years later, seafarers are voicing many of the same complaints of crew members of the 1930s. In an extensive exposé of the cruise industry, New York Times reporter Douglas Frantz examined working conditions for seafarers on the new megaships at the close of the twentieth century.⁸⁴ The "migrant workers of the oceans" (as Frantz calls the thousands of people from Third World countries who "sign on" as unskilled labor—dishwashers, assistant

cooks, cabin cleaners, and the like) were putting in eighteen-hour days, seven days a week, for little more than \$400-\$450 a month. Yet they remain at sea, just as their predecessors did, because wages, however meager, are much better than they could ever hope to earn at home.

Just as in the interwar years, legislation governing the industry is often ignored. Despite the call for a seventy-hour week from the International Labor Office (an affiliate of the United Nations), crew members routinely put in eighty- to ninety-hour weeks. Unions have thus come full circle. After all the discussions in the interwar years for a forty-eight-hour week, today's seafarers routinely put in the same number of hours as did crew in the 1880s. While in theory entitled to receive sick leave and disability payments, seafarers sometimes find their services with the shipping line terminated when they become ill or meet with an accident. Cruise staff are generally considered independent contractors and thus receive no vacation pay or pensions and little in the way of medical coverage, even those who make a career at sea. While outside advocates note that working and living conditions on board have dramatically improved in recent years, they acknowledge that "improvement" must be measured by the position a seafarer holds in the company.

Society on board ship (both for those on the promenade and "below the decks") is still highly stratified. Although technically one-class ships, the megaliners of today have a vast array of passenger accommodations ranging from tiny, cramped inside cabins to luxurious suites with balconies larger than the average condo or townhouse ashore. The same class/caste system prevails in crew quarters. The officer elite and skilled seamen continue to enjoy better living and working conditions than the "migrants" who clean the kitchens and cabins. Unlike its superiors who enjoy many passenger privileges, this invisible workforce cannot venture into the public space of passengers and is confined to crew quarters "below the decks." The International Labor Office has become more modest in its demands on the cruise companies than

it was sixty years ago. Rather than a forty-eight-hour workweek, the ideal now to be achieved is a ten-hour day and seven-day workweek that would bring a monthly minimum wage of \$435. One extra roadblock that seafarers of the 1930s did not have to confront when looking for a job on board ship was the need to go through an intermediary and to pay a hefty placement fee, as is the practice today. Recruiting agencies charge up to \$500 for ship placement. Workers have been reluctant to complain about this practice for fear of being blacklisted. Frantz notes that maritime laws to protect seamen have been on the books since the thirteenth century in recognition of the fact that seafarers form a social underclass easily exploited by both shipowners and officers.

In chapter 19 of John Maxtone-Graham's edited memoirs of Violet Jessop, the author suggests that the reader should regard Jessop's comments about the evils of shipboard employment and their long-term negative effect on the individual as "a rambling diatribe" of a jaded middle-aged woman. The chapter, he explains, was written in the 1930s "long after the earlier events and colored by a dour recapitulation of her career thus far at sea." Margaret Meehan, one of Jessop's nieces, concurs, describing this chapter as "one long moan" and completely uncharacteristic of her aunt, whom she characterized as "sweet natured." Neither, having worked at sea, can reconcile the two Violets presented here. Indeed, they cannot understand that the two Violets are, in fact, one and the same person. Jessop's words strike a chord with many a seafarer today. Violet's love/hate obsession with the sea is common to all seafarers, both past and present. While being seduced by the extraordinarily unique lifestyle shipboard employment promises, enabling one to live outside the norm of society, seafarers still experience a loss of the sense of the individual. The paternalism of the company and the officer caste, the restrictions placed on the individual, and the extreme regimentation of the work itself have the cumulative effect of making the seafarer submissive. As Jessop writes: "They had come to accept the limitations of their life, the struggle for existence, the everlasting uncertainty, the lack of ho-

manity and minimum of consideration most companies afforded them. Both employers and passengers exploited them, though the latter, having paid exorbitant fares, no doubt felt entitled to willing slaves, making demands they wouldn't dare on their own servants ashore.⁸⁵ The sea, which offers the individual freedom from the conformity of life ashore, demands another kind of conformity, altogether more stifling and exacting. It is perfectly understandable that Jessop, while maintaining a "great zest for life" and thoroughly enjoying her experience at sea, still felt the limitations and self-sacrifice that ship life entailed. These two feelings—exhilaration and confinement—seem at odds with each other but are essential to understanding the complex character of seafarers. They are a rare breed, often misunderstood. Perhaps because they do not fit comfortably into either world—at sea or on shore—their observations seem confused to us.

The lure of the sea is still a powerful force that influences some crew members to come back contract after contract. Like Violet Jessop, Dorothy Scobie, and others, young men and women today sign on as entertainers, disc jockeys, cruise staff, stewards/stewardesses, and waiters "to explore distant shores," but for many, the "traveling palace" becomes more a floating jail wherein the inmates impatiently serve their sentences, anxious for the day when they will be free to leave and resume their lives ashore with greater economic security.