

VOYAGE ON A CONVICT SHIP
BY CHA LIE

On the 23RD March, 1855, the good ship Adelaide, Captain Longman, left the East India Docks, and dropped down to Woolwich to receive her cargo of convicts. These poor fellows were marched on board between soldiers, they were chained together, and looked very dejected, as they were leaving the home of their birth, perhaps never to return, in some cases surely so, as they were sentenced for life. As they came on board they showed no sign of bravado, but all looked sad, some probably thinking of their dear old fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, or wives and sweethearts, broken hearts they were leaving behind, happy homes they once had. These were thoughts that occurred to me as I watched the sad faces and heard the awful sound of the clinking chains that held them together. There was no one to bid them goodbye, no cheering and waving of handkerchiefs, nothing but the cold steel bayonets of the soldiers hurrying them on and ordering them down below to their prison.

Let me here describe the interior of the ship. Which was made as secure as possible (at least everyone thought so, but I will afterwards show that there was at least one weak place about her fastenings). On the main deck there was a barricade from one side of the ship to the other by the mainmast with a door on each side sufficiently large to let one person through at a time. None of the convicts were allowed abaft this barricade, and at each door a sentry was placed with loaded gun and fixed bayonet. The fore and main hatches were made secure by thick iron bars being fastened on the deck to the 'tween deck, so that the lower hatch was clear; in other words the hatch was barred all round; in each hatchway a sentry was stationed, and had a view of the prisoners all round him. Wherever there was wood, the cutting away of which would enable prisoners to get out, large headed nails were driven in, so that it would be impossible for them to cut their way out of the prison.

All the crew of the ship lived aft, as also did the soldiers; the convicts had the whole of the fore part of the ship, and nearly the whole of the 'tween decks, while that part which they did not have was barricaded with thick wood studded with large-headed nails, as were the other parts of which I have spoken. The soldiers lived on the other side of the barricade, so there was no fear of any intrusions there, Guns and cutlasses were arranged in places convenient for both sailors and soldiers ready for any emergency. There were thirty soldiers and their officers; a surgeon superintendent had charge of both soldiers and convicts; and we had also a religious instructor whose duty it was to hold divine service and also to go down among the convicts every night at 8 o'clock to say prayers. I do not know that this did any good, but judging from the songs which the jokers used to sing after the worthy came up I should think it was time wasted; however, it may not have been so, as we had some very repentant fellows among the crowd.

After taking some of our complement on board at Woolwich "Smokey Jack," the tugboat, took us in tow and brought us to Portsmouth, where we embarked some more, and thence to Plymouth, where we received the last batch, making a total of 300. From Plymouth we made a start for Swan River, Western Australia.

When we were well clear of the land all the convicts were let on deck, and had the free run of all the fore part of the ship-that is forward of the barricades. They did what ever they liked; no irons now, they knocked about like free men until nightfall, when they all had to march down below and be locked up till the next morning. No matter

what happened [to] the ship, where they were all caged in without any possible chance of escape, even through fire, storm, or shipwreck should happen, and I am quite sure this used to trouble some of them very much, for I remember the first storm we got into hearing the poor fellows crying for help, and as a sailor never thinks that anything is going to happen to his ship until it does happen the chances are that not a door would be open for them to escape until it was too late, so if anything did occur they would all have gone down in their cage. I must admit that this was the most unfortunate position of these poor fellows during the whole passage out. However, as fate would have it, nothing happened beyond the occasional fights they received when a gale or squall occurred, or anything unusual happened on deck.

Of course we came around the Cape of Good Hope, as the Suez Canal was not made in those days, so you can be sure we had a bit of rough weather, which added considerably to the discomfort of our 'tween deck passengers (the convicts). Things went on first-rate as we proceeded on our voyage, and everything seemed to settle down in order. The ship could be likened to a floating town; all sorts and conditions of people were represented. I do not think there was any crime that could be mentioned but had a representative on board the ship, nor any trade, profession, calling, or station in life that could not be found among our passengers. All sorts of games, cards, draughts, dominoes, &c., music, dancing, prayer meetings, prize fights, and comic, secular, religious, political, and scientific arguments and discourses (for we had some very clever fellows among them) were held in different parts of the ship as at all times of the day, as the convicts were allowed to do anything they thought proper so long as they behaved themselves and gave the soldiers no trouble. Prize fighting was a great sport, as there were some professional bruisers on board, and when they had a proper "go in" for a stick of tobacco there were no such things as gloves used, but the bare fists. Each slogger would strip to the waist, and at it they would go; no "show" business about it, but a clean knock out; no gate money, all seats free, and if the owner of an "athletic hall" had seen the audience he would have died of envy, for the bulwarks, longboat, and barricade, and rigging were packed with onlookers. If the loser was very badly handled he would be put in the hospital for repairs, and after a few days come up smiling. The captain of the ship spoke to the super about the disgraceful way that these fellows used to amuse themselves, but all the satisfaction he got was that he had better not interfere, but let them amuse themselves in their own little way. In some parts of the ship you could find some very clever hands at carving wood, bone, &c., and others again would be making rings out of copper, or if you gave them a shilling they would make a nice ring out of it with your name or the name of the ship on it. As we had a few sailors among the convicts the sailors of the ship had a comparatively easy time of it, with regard to the fore part of the ship, as the convict would help them stow sails, pull ropes, repair rigging, and make themselves generally useful; in fact they all seemed to make themselves as happy and comfortable as they could. There was no such thing as punishment required; the superintendent had a happy way of settling any trouble or disputes, but when he had occasion to speak there appeared to be no mistaking what he said – a look sometimes would be enough. He must have been a clever fellow, for they all appeared to like him and gave him very little trouble. I have no doubt that they knew he would stand no nonsense, and that if any of them had shown any act of disobedience or behaved himself in anything but a becoming manner he would have simply transferred to him the contents of one of the soldiers muskets.

Every morning the soldiers who had been on watch, in fact half the number we had on board, or more correctly speaking, the half who were relieved from duty, had to fire

off their muskets to see that they were in good working order, and probably to let the convicts see that they were always loaded with ball, and many a poor unfortunate Cape pigeon and albatross found a watery grave through this performance. The other half of the soldiers were on duty and all the sentries at their posts while the shooting was going on in case of a break out.

Everything was going along first rate when one morning the sentries who were stationed down the hatchways were astonished to see that none of the convicts were about when day broke, a rather unusual thing as many of them were early risers and were always waiting to the doors to open that they could get up on deck for a bath and fresh air. The fact was they were all drunk, with the exception of one old fellow, who made his appearance at the iron bars and explained matters to the best of his ability. Then there were signs of trouble, for every one knew that something was wrong, but little did we know the danger we had passed through that night, and how it was that the ship and all hands were not burnt to the water's edge is and has always been a mystery. There we were sleeping quietly in our hammocks and bunks. The watches were at their posts, all the sentries at their stations, and everything apparently secure, while the convicts were actually crawling along the hold of the ship on top of the cargo with lights of their way to the storeroom, which was in the after part of the hold. They had by some means removed the iron bars from the cabin locker (that is where the anchor chains are stowed away). This is the weak part of our fastenings to which I referred to at the beginning of this story. Then some of them must have got down into the hold and crawled along on the top of the cargo and reached the storeroom, which they broke into, passing bottles of wine, spirits and beer along to the 'tween decks where they would be distributed among the whole convicts without any noise or disturbances, as a sentry was stationed down each hatchway, and to be sure that all the sentries were awake they had to sing out every time the bell rang, which was every half-hour, No 1 "All's well" No 2 "all's well" and so on until every sentry had done so. The sergeant of the watch would listen, and if any one neglected to call out the sergeant would be at the post of that sentry in a second. However the prisoners managed it, it was done, and most of them were so drunk that the sailors had to hoist them on deck and lay them down; and of all the sights that I ever saw this was one of the most comical. I never saw so many drunken men at one time, and what with the ship rolling about and the positions they got into as they lay about the deck rolling this way and then over each other, and so on, the scene was indescribably funny. When the third mate, who had charge of the stores, saw what had happened he immediately made for the storeroom, where a deplorable sight awaited him. Before going down he called out "If any man is down there let him come forward now; if not, and I meet any when I get down, I will shoot him." And so he would have done if appearances went for anything as he had two loaded revolvers, and if he should miss there were plenty of soldiers with loaded muskets waiting on top of the hatch. He went down with some others and lanterns were lowered to enable them to see, but no one was there. Such confusion was never seen before; there were cases of wine, spirits, beer &c., opened and some bottles taken out of each, while the straw was all lying about the storeroom; casks of rum and wine had ... holes in them, and the contents running all over the place, as the convicts did not take the trouble to put into the casks after they had bored them. If a lighted match had fallen on the straw or on the spirit the ship and all on board would have been burnt, but as luck would have it we were spared any catastrophe of that kind. As the drunken men began to get sober it was amusing to watch them, for they could not think what would happen to them for annexing the grog. The captain asked the superintendent what he was going to do to them for

stealing his liquor, and the super asked the captain what would he do with them seeing they were all convicts already, and probably would be all their lives, as most of them were "lifers"; in fact the only satisfaction the captain got was that he ought to have seen that his ship was secure, knowing as he did the class of men he was going to have as passengers. The super promised to report the matter on arrival at Swan River. And that ended the whole business so far as the convicts were concerned unless the super did report it, and if he did I do not think any notice was taken of it. The super of course gave them a lecture, and told them what he would do if anything of the kind happened again. After this little spree all went well and every one appeared to enjoy the trip. The convicts were all well fed and cared for, and were always civil and obliging, being treated much better than I have seen soldiers treated when on passage to India in the days of the Mutiny.

After a good passage we arrived at Swan River where the convicts were mustered and landed all safe and sound, not one having been lost during the voyage. How they were treated when they got ashore I cannot say but I think they had the run of the place, for we saw many of them walking about like free men when we went ashore. We stayed at Swan River until our cargo was discharged and received a visit from the Governor and his lady, upon which occasion the captain of the ship asked them if they had heard the then new patriotic song "The Red, White & Blue." They said they had not whereupon the captain told them that he had a boy on board who would sing it for them. So I was called up on the poop and sang to the party who were so pleased with it that they asked me to sing again, which I did, and they made me a present. I think the Governor's name was Captain Fitzgerald. We had the pleasure of taking him and suite to Ceylon, where he met the P&O steamer for home. From Ceylon we went to Madras, then to Rangoon, and then home, doing the voyage in fourteen months. I was on a trial voyage with a view to being apprenticed, being too young to be bound apprentice on that voyage.

On Wednesday January 10, 1894 an article appeared in the Brisbane Courier recording the experiences of a boy who had sailed in 1855 on His Majesty's Convict Ship *Adelaide* from London to what was then termed the Swan River. The by-line for the article was a Cha Lie who said he made the trial voyage prior to being apprenticed to a life at sea. It is of interest to us as we have very little information on this particular voyage and it gives some interesting insights into the daily life on the voyage.

The ship sailed on March 23, 1855 picking up 300 convicts at Woolwich, Portsmouth and Plymouth. As the lad watched he was struck by the pathos and solemnity of the occasion and the dejected appearance of the convicts as soldiers with 'cold steel bayonets' marched them aboard to the accompaniment of the clanking of their chains. He describes how the ship was made secure and in doing so gives us some idea of the way the pensioner guard was employed. A barricade was erected on the main deck from one side of the ship to the other near the main mast thus confining the convicts to one particular area. A small door, guarded by a sentry with a loaded gun and fixed bayonet, was located each side of the mainmast allowing the admittance of one person at a time. He said 'The fore and main hatches were secured by thick iron bars being fastened on the deck to the 'tween deck, so that the lower hatch was clear, in other words the hatch was barred all round; in each hatchway a sentry was stationed, and had a view of the prisoners all round him'. Every piece of wood was reinforced by large headed nails so that it could not be sawn through. The ships crew and the soldiers and their family lived aft of the barricade while the convicts had full rein of the fore part of the ship and most of the 'tween decks. Needless to say there was a plentiful supply of guns and cutlasses for both the soldiers and crew at convenient stations.

Once at sea the convicts had their irons knocked off and they were given free range of their part of the deck until nightfall when they were marched below and locked in for the night. The convicts were a pretty diverse lot and he stated that they came from all classes, trades and professions and their crimes covered all areas of infamy. The Surgeon Superintendent had a pretty relaxed outlook on the convicts although at the changing on the watch in the morning he had all the members going off duty line up and shoot off their muskets so that the convicts had no doubt they were loaded with ball and ready for business at any time, many innocent Cape pigeons and albatrosses gave up their lives to prove the point.

The picture he paints of ship board life is in direct conflict with what we are led to believe was generally experienced on convict ships. During the day the convicts entertained themselves with games such as 'cards, draughts, dominoes, &c there was music, dancing, prayer meetings, prize fights [bare knuckle], and comic, secular, religious, political and scientific arguments and discourses (for we had some pretty clever fellows among them)'. Some of the prisoners who had been sailors helped the crew in the forepart of the ship to stow sails, pull ropes, repair rigging and generally being useful. Other set to carving curios and souvenirs from wood, bone or copper. The relatively idyllic life-style continued until one morning the guard was surprised to find no one was waiting for the hatches to be opened at day break, usually the early risers were ready and waiting to come on deck, but this particular day all was quiet. Eventually one old man came out and said that they were lying below drunk. It was with some trepidation they made their way down the hatch to find the entire complement paralytic, they were hoisted on deck and lay there rolling with the ship this way and that until they sobered up. During the night the convicts had removed the iron bars from the cabin [chain] locker and got down into the hold, crawled along

the top of the cargo and reached the storeroom. They passed the bottles of wine, spirits, and beer along to the 'tween decks and distributed them among the convicts. In doing so they broached some of the casks of rum and wine and it was sloshing around the storeroom floor amongst the packing straw. Presumably they lit their way by candlelight although how they achieved this without igniting the spirits and burning the ship and all in her to the water level no one ever knew. The whole operation was carried out in complete silence the only sound was the sentries stationed at the hatchways crying "alls well" every half hour. Needless to say the Captain was not impressed and when he asked the Surgeon Superintendent what he was going to do about punishing the convicts he considered there was not any thing he could do as they had all been convicted and were under punishment as it was. He felt the precautions the captain had undertaken to protect his ship from felons had been found wanting. Fearing the worst, the convicts must have been very surprised to be given a lecture and the voyage continued as it had before. Eventually the ship reached Swan River and the convicts were mustered and landed, there was no loss of life and doubtless it was a voyage related to the grandchildren. The *Adelaide* then sailed to Ceylon taking with it Governor Fitzgerald and his family and then on to Madras and Rangoon and so home to England.