

Following short story received from Phil Kelly February 20 2013

**“RACV City Club – all things to all members.”**

I shall be deliberately vague with regard to names (with the exception of two) and dates in order to preserve the reputations of those who played a part in a job-threatening drama, set in the pre-container ship era of the 1950s, when our trade routes were plied by and our port crammed with stately 12-passenger-carrying cargo ships.

One of the Port Line ships to the agency of my employers, Gibbs, Bright & Co, was loading a huge cargo of butter, cheese, meat, canned and dried fruit, sheepskins and wool at Princes Pier Port Melbourne. My target was to honour the advertised sailing date which was to be a Saturday some 12 days hence, direct for Europe via Aden.

Unable to locate the Captain, I casually asked the Chief Officer of the Master's whereabouts and he derisively remarked that he is probably ashore on one of his binges!" "Don't worry old chap, he'll turn up", he added to allay my concern.

A week went by and still there was no sign of life, even inside the Master's accommodation which I had pressed the Mate to unlock in a moment of panic when it occurred to me that he might have been there all along; perhaps by then, in **rigour mortis'**

Panic set in as I assessed the situation. The ship would be sailing within three days.

If the ship's Master was away from his ship on departure day, he would be sacked, the Mate would be reprimanded and demoted and I would be selling newspapers 'under the Flinders St Station clocks' for a livelihood!

It was the ship's owners prerogative to replace the Captain for the homeward voyage to UK; not an easy task at short notice! I had not informed the owner's representative in Sydney (the Marine Superintendent), of the missing Captain; even worse, I had not even informed my Manager (Laurie Ogilvie's father) whom I admired but feared like most young men did of their Manager in that era.

On the brink of knocking on the managerial door of fate in order to confess all, I answered a call from Bourke St West Police station and was informed that a man resembling Steptoe had been apprehended for vagrancy, having slept on park benches for 8 or so nights! He had no money but claimed to be the Captain of a ship in port and had given the Police my name.

Where does the Royal Auto Club belong in this story?

The Police officers had already warmed to my 'lost' Captain and no charges were laid. The only ultimatum was "get him out of here – he smells!"

The problem: How to smuggle the Captain aboard without humiliating a very soft, gentle seafarer in the presence of his officers and crew?

Enlightenment: Of course, my friend John the Barber at the RAC where a hair shampoo and shave would do wonders! John had better advice to offer: "Cobber, book a room in the Club, attend yourself, to his ablutions, bring him back here and I'll finish the job! He will smell like roses when I've finished with him!"

Having 'phoned the Mate, he brought a suit and complete change of clothing to the Club and together, we re-clad the now sober, but exhausted Captain.

After a splendid evening meal with the prodigal Captain and the Mate, I slept in the same room to ensure park benches did not beckon the Captain and the saga ended the next morning with hearty breakfasts at the Club, followed by resumption of command of a ship which had not officially lost its Captain! One of his first actions was to empty bottles of gin and whisky into the toilet. He drank nothing but Coca Cola throughout the remainder of his life at sea. We both enjoyed 10 more years of deep friendship and respect.

I returned to the office and confessed all to my Boss who rewarded me firstly with some stern advice about the chain of command in the Gibbs Bright office and secondly with a very, very long lunch; mostly liquid! I retired early that night, vaguely recalling Fran's countenance which displayed some pride but overarching disapproval of my alcoholic state! To this day, I seem to recall her observation before closing my eyes that "The Captain is now sober and you are **NOT!**"

### **The morals:**

**All sensible Shipping Agents should ensure they are a Club member of the RACV. It means more than simply cars and travel. They do care and they really help!**

**Never under-estimate your Boss!**

**Never, ever under-estimate your Wife!**