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TWOPENCE

OPEN LETTER TO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE P. & O. Co. (Owners of the s.s. "Egypt")

By J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD

MY dear Inchcape,—
The lamentable disaster which befell the mail steamship "Egypt" some ten days ago, when she was rammed and sunk by a French steamer in the fog, has had attendant upon it several unfortunate and, as yet, unexplained circumstances.

It would appear very doubtful as to whether these circumstances are capable of any explanation that will be satisfactory to others than the parties interested in the parsimonious operation of what, by all the showing of capitalist authorities has, for long, been a most profitable property.

The crew consisted, we are assured by the press, of Lascars. When the ship was struck, these Lascars are reported to have completely lost their heads and to have been panic-stricken in their conduct. It is due to them, we are told, that the number of lives lost was as great as it was, and we are given to understand that, had the number of passengers been greater, the disaster would have been, from the number of lives lost, terrible.

Now, we have no particular complaint to make against you and your colleagues for your employment of coloured seamen. We are internationalists. We welcome the sight of seamen of all colours—except green—in our ports. (Pardon me, *your* ports. Nowhere, so far as my memory serves me, do you let the workers get any appreciable measure of control of ports, however else owned or controlled.)

What we object to about your employment of Lascars is your reasons for so doing. We object to the conditions under which they can be induced to work and the wages for which they can be hired.

When there are thousands of British seamen out of work, we have serious cause for complaint that your extremely prosperous combine should man its passenger ships with coloured crews. These coloured crews, even according to Government figures, work for £5 a month for skilled, and £1 12s. 6d. for unskilled men. We know that these wages are a considerable improvement on those paid prior to 1917 (for carpenters), and 1919 for others. We know, why. The former were getting higher wages in Mesopotamia. The latter had to get more because of the considerable increase in the cost of living in India.

Your plea for not employing Britishers, will be, of course, that wages had increased "enormously" after November, 1917. You will contend that you could not afford to pay them "when the vessels came to be discharged from Government service and

things got back to economic conditions, and when world freights had to bear the disbursements" (to quote your own speech last November.)

You had "a wretched year" in 1921. Of course you had. You were only able to pay a dividend of 12 per cent. That was terrible, was it not! "Most distasteful"—as you remarked!

In 1916-1917, and 1918, you paid 18 per cent. (free of tax) every year; in 1919, 12 per cent. (free of tax) plus a bonus of 6 per cent.; and in 1920, 15 per cent. (free of tax) plus the same bonus of 6 per cent. You have only paid 105 per cent. in six years, have you, my parsimonious and poverty-stricken peer?

You are, I suppose I am correct in saying, the most influential of our British shipowners. You are at the head of the largest shipping fleet in the world. You are a man whose influence here and in Calcutta is almost incalculably great. You are the senior partner in McKinnon, McKenzie and Co., a concern whose *status* in India grows every year more elevated.

You are accompanied on the board of your P and O., and its associated companies, by the most influential merchants in the East. You are a figure in banking circles, at home and in Asia, of outstanding eminence. You are a big man in oil. You represent H.M. Government on the board of the Anglo-Persian Oil Co., Ltd.

You sit with Irvine Campbell Geddes on the board of Anderson, Green and Co., who manage the Orient Line. You sat with his brother, Eric Campbell Geddes, on the Geddes' Economy Committee. Your daughter is married to the Hon. Alexander Shaw (since elected to the P. and O. board), whose father, Lord Shaw, of Dunfermline, was the chairman of the Dockers' Inquiry. . . . So impartial don't you know! One Geddes managed the Orient Line—what was it that *John Bull* had to say about steerage accommodation in its ships on, at least, two occasions? and the other Geddes managed the Ministry of Transport and, before that, the Admiralty.

You are "well in," aren't you, my lord?

I should not be at all surprised if the affair of the "Egypt" is forgotten before so very long. The P. and O. is, after all, a great company, has a great record, and, to my certain and private knowledge, has a very warm corner in the hearts of many Indian Civil Servants, who have retired, and who have yet got to retire.

You talk about competition with other lines, my lord, when you are on the theme

of wages. What other lines have you in view?

Your relations with Ellerman are of shareholding intimacy. Your relations with the Nippon Yukea Kaisha have been, I know, the most cordial.

Most respectfully I suggest to you, my lord, that much of your talk about competition and inability to pay high wages, is so much "fudge." You know, as I know, that you have nothing to fear from "the old man of the sea," Havelock Wilson. You know that you can treat his union members with good-humoured toleration. You know that you can hire Lascars in every port from Karachi to Canton, at wages grading down from £4 to £1 10s. a month. You know that, as at Hong-Kong, you have only got to ask, and the whole machinery of imperial repression is at your service.

You have economic power, both East and West, and it conveys with it all other power besides . . . as yet.

The Amsterdam International will not tie you up, my lord. The Second International has no means to bring you to book. You have the official trade unionists all ends up. "Yes, your lordship" . . . as Bob Williams would say, arguing before a Court of Arbitration.

But the Red International of Labour Unions has got your measure. The Third International has you taped from Tokio to Teheran and from Singapore to Suez.

You got a shake-up in Hong-Kong. That was a nice little "bust-up" your oil-men had at Barra a few weeks back. Calcutta is not so cosy as it used to be for capitalism, eh, my lord?

Well, well! There is "plenty much" coming to you yet, your lordship!

Meanwhile, no doubt, you will continue to develop the Steel Corporation of Asia, with its gangs of coolie labour; to enlist more Lascars for your syndicated shipping combine; to preach to the Government the same economy in housing that your Anglo-Persian board practises in the shale oil villages of West Lothian, and to confirm it in the admirable resolve to replace unreliable Moslem troops on guard at your oil wells by aeroplane-police drawn from your own social caste.

You will go on, you and your colleagues, a little while longer. You will still continue to risk lives by sea in ships, and lives by land in phthisis-breeding slums. You will still stand for £4 a month to deck hands and 105 per cent. (free of tax) every six years, to shareholders.

Just a little while longer, my lord!