

# Mollie's Journal

## Part One

### *The Dream*



Mollie Veale in 1950

*September 1949 – on board SS Esperance Bay, at sea*

My eyes are closed, but I know the sun is out there. I am bathing in such a wonderful blend of light and warmth as I have never felt before. I can hear the sea too, and taste the salt painted on my lips by the strong breeze. This really is living the dream. In a moment I expect to wake up to a dull, rain-soaked day in Manchester with a list of household chores to work through. Or perhaps by some miracle I have already been transported to a tropical island, ready to be waited on hand and foot by dusky natives.

In reality I am seated on a deck chair among a small group of passengers belonging to the *Esperance Bay*, currently steaming her way at about fifteen knots around the coast of Spain. I can allow myself the luxury of day-dreaming, letting my senses pick out the noise of the sea and the strengthening warmth of the morning sun, while my ears have grown accustomed to the steady throb of engines powering the ship south and east on its six week journey. Eric has taken Susan off to play in the children's room, and I am indulging in a spot of relaxation that feels strangely addictive. If this is an indication of how our lives are about to change, then it is more than welcome. Despite the occasional speck of smutty smoke from the funnel landing in my hair, and the familiar childish shrieks in the background, I feel more relaxed than I can remember since our honeymoon. My thoughts start to drift to another set of pleasant memories, but then I have a rude awakening as I feel an object slam against my right shoulder.

'Wake up Mummy!' My little girl has run as fast as her legs will carry her across twenty feet of deck, so it seems she has collided with the wooden framework.

'Oh, Susan! Please be careful!'

Startled by this interruption to my fantasies, I must look

rather peculiar to her, as my reaction produces a fit of giggles from the beaming three year old. I put my arm out to steady her as she jiggles up and down with unrestrained excitement. Then I arch my neck round as another voice interrupts her juvenile chatter.

‘Hey, she beat me!’ Eric strolls into view. ‘I tell you, Mollie, that little thing can certainly run. Calm down, Suey! She’s pretty good on the swing too. How did you get on?’

But Susan’s needs are urgent: ‘I want a chair too, Mummy!’

I pull her onto my lap. ‘Oh it was heavenly! If I closed my eyes I could have been on a desert island. Apart from the noisy neighbours, that is.’

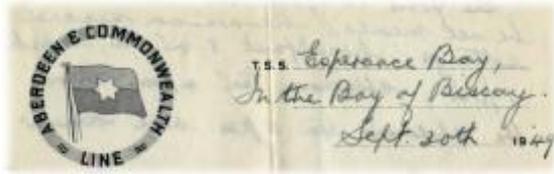
‘Yes, there are a few others competing for kiddie’s facilities, and I suppose they hadn’t appreciated Mrs Veale was trying for a nap. Come on then. Let’s swap now you’re awake. You’ve got that letter to finish off, haven’t you?’

‘Can I do my colouring?’ A perennial question from my art-obsessed daughter.

‘In a minute, Susan!’

Time to give in. My idyll is at an end, and it is clear I will get no sympathy from either of them until I relinquish my throne. ‘Eric, you’re a cruel man, but a fair one. Yes, I’ve still got a page and a half to fill, so I’ll give Elsie and Alan an update. Yes, Little Imp! You can sit with me and do some more colouring while mummy writes her letter. Don’t let this deck chair go, Eric! I might want to try a little more sunbathing when we get back. A girl can get used to this.’

I can sense his eager anticipation while I take hold of Susan and a raffia basket containing handbag, writing paper and pen, drawing materials and a bag of sweets. Eric has a grin on his face as broad as the proverbial Cheshire Cat as we walk off in the direction of the writing room. I can’t help smiling at the loud sigh behind me as he finally takes possession of the much-coveted deck chair.



*My dear Elsie & Alan,*

*It is difficult to believe we are in the middle of the ocean. This is a lovely writing room and except for a little vibration and slight roll, we might be sat in a hotel. We had a weary journey to Southampton as we had no breakfast, and had to do some queuing up to give up ration books, customs etc before going on the ship. The journey to London was very good, right on time. We went in a Corner House with Joan and had a good meal. Susan was fascinated with the orchestra and included bands in her prayers that night. We were fixed up alright in Sussex Gardens but had to come away too early for breakfast.*

*The ship sailed about 12.30pm, and we didn't know until it was well out from the dock. We were having lunch and suddenly noticed the land slipping past the portholes! Of course, I didn't bother about pudding and dashed up on deck, but I was glad I had missed the first break as I dreaded it very much. The land soon disappeared as it was misty and has been ever since. It's just sea and mist all round us now. I hope it will clear soon.*

*We are separated. Eric is in another cabin, while Susan and I share with another mother and her little girl aged 5. Last night we couldn't get the kiddies to settle, they both wanted to climb the ladder to the top*

*bunks. We left them finally and took the ladder away, and going back later on the steward said Susan had swung herself down and come out in the corridor saying she wanted to 'wee wee'. However we did eventually get them off and I slept quite well. The bunks are very nice.*

*The food is good too. It seems to be all meals. We are on second sittings, breakfast 8.45am, lunch 1pm, afternoon tea 4pm. Then the children have their tea at 5pm and dinner 7 o'clock.*

*We cannot send any letters until the ship reaches Malta, so have sent you a radio air letter today. We shall reach Adelaide on Nov 5<sup>th</sup>, all being well of course, so it would be best to write direct to Keith.*

*We shall try and get deck chairs as soon as possible. I've only seen about half a dozen belonging to the ship up to now, and there are 515 people on board.*

I finish reading over the partly completed letter, and feel it is an accurate enough summary of our journey so far. I trained as a shorthand typist after leaving school, and then spent several years working in a busy office in the city before I married Eric, so it has become a habit of mine to check everything I write. Susan is on my lap, happily making patterns with crayons on her own piece of paper, so I adjust my position at the desk and continue writing to my brother and sister-in-law.

*Saturday*

*Beautiful morning. Weather getting warmer. Still a bit misty or we should be able to see the coast of Spain. We played Housey Housey last night, and Eric won*

*12/2d. What with gambling and cheap drinks (we've had a couple of gin & limes), I'll be a depraved woman by the time we reach Australia.*

*So far I haven't had much time on my hands. We had to queue up a long time for a reserved table on Thursday night, and up to now the kiddies are very restless and unsettled.*

*There is a shop on board which seems to sell practically everything (including nylons, but they haven't released those yet).*

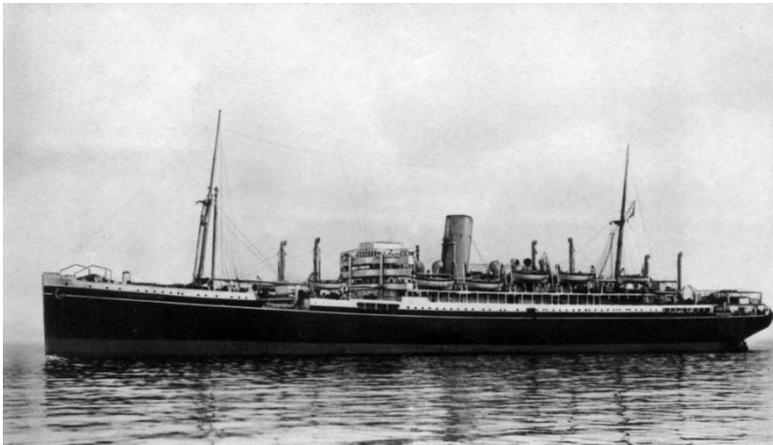
*Susan is sat on my knee drawing weird diagrams, she sends you lots of love and kisses, sticky ones of course. Plenty of chocolate and toffee on board, also Players cigarettes – 2/6 for 50!*

*Will write again soon, Eric has sent you a postcard of the ship.*

*Much love always*

*Mollie*

*A P.S. Monday morning.  
The posting box is open. We are past  
Gibraltar now. Lovely weather.*



## SS Esperance Bay

My first letter home. Now “home” is wherever I can lay my head. In a few short weeks I will be an Australian Citizen, and settling in to a new home and a new life. Eric and I are joining so many of our kin and pinning our hopes for the future on promises of a better life in another country. A few years ago I could never have imagined taking such a huge gamble, so what has happened to bring me to this?

Curiously it began with another letter. The War had been over barely a year when it arrived. It had travelled twelve thousand miles, and the excitement was obvious on Eric’s face as he slit open the envelope.

‘News from Hurtle in Australia.’

‘Where’s that?’ I said as I placed our month old baby back in her cot. ‘I’m sorry I don’t know much about Australia.’



Eric with Hurtle

‘It’s not a *place*,’ he said. ‘It’s a bloke I knew in Palestine.’

His name is Hurtle! He was a sapper with ANZAC and we got quite close...'

His voice trailed off while he studied the contents of his letter. Idly I wondered if this Australian soldier had some sort of skin condition. I had no idea then about overseas army divisions. We had just come home from a short walk with our daughter in her pram, and I was thankful that she seemed to be fast asleep. Last night Susan had woken me three times, so now I was more interested in my bed than in Eric's news from abroad. I started to unlace my shoes.

'Listen to this, Mollie!' He was standing in the doorway, reading from his letter. *'Eric, this is a wonderful country if anyone is prepared to work. We had one of my pals and his English bride out here the other week and she could not get over all the fresh butter, cream, eggs, fruit and vegetables we have over here...'*

I listened, but somehow the words weren't making much sense. Where was this wonderful shop?

Then Eric spoke again. 'What do you think?' he asked. 'Be a great place for Susan to grow up.'

I looked at him, realising I was expected to respond with enthusiasm. Hazel eyes sparkled above a broad smile that usually melted my heart. But today was different. Today I lived in a world where a woman needed to be more than a romantic heroine. Today I had to snatch what sleep I could, then put food on our plates, make up a coal fire and soak two soiled nappies.

I took the letter from Eric and chewed my lip in an effort to concentrate as I studied the page. Blue spidery writing on thin blue paper, but some of the words were easy to read: *butter, cream, eggs...* It was a shopping list too far – all of it desirable, but sadly out of reach of my ration book. Then I glanced at the cot by my side in the cramped little bedroom. Only last night we had talked of our concerns for the child's future. Our entire world was here in this one room at the back

of my mother's house. Could we dare to dream of something better? I tried to picture us in a different world: our own house, sunshine and three smiling children. But there was a problem with that sort of vision.

'It's a long way away.'

'That's the point!' Eric was not to be dismissed easily. 'Australia hasn't been touched by the war in the way we have. Think about it, Mollie. No rationing! Hundreds of opportunities for work! Hurtle's a good mate. He could help us get settled there.'

I did think about it. I stared back at my husband and tried to remember what I could about Australia. Red portions on a map, or was it pink? I thought back to my schooldays with Miss Travis and a huge globe dominating a corner of the classroom. I remembered her turning it slowly to show us the pink-coloured extent of the British Empire. Canada was the largest single expanse, and then she spun the globe to show us the next in size at the bottom of the world – Australia. We asked lots of questions then: Why didn't they fall off if they lived upside down? What was it like to live in a pink country? *What was it like?* Miss Travis told us it was hot there, and they had natives who threw strange sticks in the air that flew in a circle. The tomboy inside me was desperate to own one of those sticks.

The memory brought the beginnings of a smile to my face which I immediately quashed, not wanting to give Eric any encouragement for an idea which, at first mention, seemed too fantastic to contemplate. Then Susan began to splutter in her sleep, little bubbles of saliva decorating her tiny lips as a growing squeal emerged demanding my milk. It was a welcome distraction for once, and I threw a smile of apology over my shoulder as I started to unbutton my blouse.

'Not now, Eric. We'll talk about it later, shall we?'

It was a topic of conversation that would be raised many more times. While I knew Eric was right to look at

alternative prospects to those in Britain after the war, all I could think about was the wrench such a parting would cause. Emotions had been running high enough following my father's death less than a year before. He had been sixty three, and we all felt his loss deeply. Father and Mother had been the same age, and her own poor health was a growing cause for concern. Brothers Alan and Bert were both recently married and living nearby. But my younger sister Joan had moved away to London, and that at first seemed a huge distance to cope with – so the prospect of relocating to a foreign country on the other side of the world was totally unreasonable.

Or was it?



Mollie with Susan 1947

Eric's idea of moving to Australia became an obsession. Each letter we received from Hurtle painted a clear picture of brighter prospects in a new country. The former soldier was now a farmer, but he was looking to change from growing crops to rearing sheep. It seemed the meat market in Australia was booming, and if Hurtle could also buy a

butcher's shop he reckoned he would need help with the business side. I was sure it was this that had been the real reason behind Eric's decision to work with his brother-in-law, who ran a butcher's in Chorlton.

At the shop he gained first-hand knowledge of the meagre allowance a housewife had to manage on, struggling to put protein on a plate in an economy that had been restricted for years. I laughed as he finally started to appreciate what life was like from my point of view. Not one to do anything by halves, Eric next announced he was starting a night school course in bookkeeping. He had been a regular soldier since 1935, signing up at the age of twenty one in preference to doing factory work. The army had sheltered him from the real world until a few months before Susan was born, so I couldn't blame him for looking at alternative lifestyles in another country. But convincing me this impossible dream could work for *us* was never going to be easy when I felt so strongly about my immediate family.

One Sunday we boarded a tram on our way home from church in Hulme. Eric carried Susan in his arms as I could not offer her the same degree of protection. A childhood accident had left me with a hip problem and a severe dose of tuberculosis. The result was my left leg grew shorter than my right, leaving me with a pronounced limp. Once I was seated on board Eric was able to hand Susan back to me, before drawing my attention to a poster opposite that had been left up too long after the event: *Let us Face the Future* – the rallying call from Attlee's Labour Party manifesto.

'See that?' said Eric. 'The promises we were made? We voted them in to change this country for the better. Promised us a major new health service and goodness knows what else. What have we actually got?'

There was no need for me to reply. The answer was all around us: broken fittings and peeling varnish on the wood trims inside the tram, cracked and stained leather on our

bench seat. But the real evidence was etched into the faces of the other passengers – pale and drawn, eyes cast down, Sunday-best clothes patched and worn thin as their owners tried to maintain an illusion of prosperity.

Our tram lurched from one side to the other as it rounded the corner into Chorlton Road, a long metallic screech assaulting my ears as the wheels scraped the side of the rails. I clutched Susan tighter to my chest in case her little head should come into contact with the window next to me. She gave a squeal and reached a tiny hand up to try and touch the grimy surface of the glass, streaked with rusty condensation. An older woman in a matching maroon coat and hat sat opposite us, and gave me a disapproving stare as Susan made a further protest. I smiled in apology but got a blank response in return.

The war was supposed to have united us all in fighting for a common cause, but now each of us seemed preoccupied with our own private battles. All of us were struggling to get by day-to-day. Britain no longer seemed so “Great” now that the war was won.

Eric was in conversation with another passenger. The man had been with us that morning at the church service, and I remembered him saying he had recently moved to the area from somewhere near London.

‘This country has been pulling together so long it’s exhausted,’ said the man. ‘My cousin and his wife are selling up and moving to Canada. Can’t say I blame them. Surely there ought to be a better life for us here after all we’ve been through? What price Victory, eh?’

I didn’t look up, but I could sense Eric glance in my direction at the mention of Canada, and I desperately tried to think of something more positive to contribute. I used my glove to wipe a clearer patch of glass for Susan to look out at the grey city landscape. In my heart I knew the stranger had a point. Eric and I had been offered a plausible solution

and it deserved serious consideration. Perhaps I was behaving like the proverbial kangaroo with my head stuck in the sand. Or was that some other animal?



*October 1949 –  
on board SS Esperance Bay, past Suez*

It is the first week of October, and Australia is still nearly four weeks away. But this voyage has been like nothing I have ever experienced. Eric reminds me over ten years before he had sailed with five hundred men on a ship very similar to this, but then the home port had been Liverpool. They had taken a similar course through the Med to Port Said, and then taken a shorter journey by train to Palestine for the necessary demands of army service. Now he is able to point out some familiar landmarks to us as we enter an engineering marvel called the Suez Canal. We are almost a quarter of the way to Australia!

The deep rich colours of the sea enthral us all, passing through turquoise and emerald green to every shade of blue, all governed by the depth of the water below. We are steering a course across the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and then on to Ceylon, before crossing the equator via the Indian Ocean

to reach the western coast of Australia at Fremantle.

Eric has decided to write to his younger sister, Pat – but never considers a letter to his father. My own parents had both been so dear to me, and yet Eric’s accounts of childhood are very different to mine. He had been close to his mother, who died suddenly while he was serving overseas, and Pat had only been ten when he left. But he has two brothers and another sister, all now married and with their own children. That doesn’t seem so very different to my own background, but then Eric explains it to me in a simple way: ‘Your family hugs a lot. Mine just shake hands’.

Now we have a little family of our own, all of us clinging to the ship’s rail, and delighting in the experience of warm wind peppered with sea spray. I squeal with delight as I catch sight of a porpoise leaping out of the water just yards from the ship. I haven’t felt so happy since our wedding day.

It is very much like a holiday, but one we have never known before. There are so many goods available to us on board – without limit and at cheaper prices – that it immediately puts a brighter gloss on the whole adventure. The gloom of ration-infested Britain is becoming a distant memory. Not only do we not have to pay for, plan or prepare our meals – we have them put in front of us! We can also eat together as a family, and Eric can have a smoke afterwards if he wants, joining other male passengers in the lee of the dining saloon while I and the other mothers take our children off to bed.

The further we travel the higher rises the temperature. After two weeks, as *Esperance Bay* reaches Aden on the Arabian Coast, peaches in jelly and ice cream with wafers are more than welcome in the stifling heat. Despite it all, I still have thoughts of “home”, and keep my promise to write to Elsie and Alan:

*In the Arabian Sea,  
Sat Oct 15<sup>th</sup> /49*

*My dear Elsie & Alan,*

*I don't know just where we are at the moment, nor the exact date and am only just beginning to care! The Red Sea seems to have taken all the use out of me. It is cooler now but below decks all the heat seems to be stored up and then of course we are still in the tropics. We went ashore at Aden on Thursday – it was fairly cool in the shade and we enjoyed a wander down the main street looking in the shops. Some of the shops were quite nice and had some lovely things for sale. Eric bought a white silk shirt for 10/- and pyjamas, also white silk, for £1. They seemed to cater for men mostly, as apart from women off the ships, I didn't see any others. There were a lot of beggars, and cheeky little Arab boys. We went in a cafe for iced drinks and suddenly found two little lads cleaning the men's shoes under the table. Eric pushed one off and then we found him attacking Susan's – she wasn't protesting either! She was very good and came all round with us holding tight to my hand, not saying much except when she saw one or two camels and goats. Aden is very hot, dusty with barren looking hills. They haven't had any rain since 1941.*

*The ship took in drinking water. It's terrible stuff because it's treated with chlorine. We are all hoping there will be fresh supplies at Colombo, which we should reach on the 19th. I seem to have been on this ship two months instead of just over two weeks and still three weeks to go. Susan doesn't eat any better. She has had two or three stewards round each threatening, and then when they've gone she says "He's a nice man*

isn't he mummy?" *There is a fancy dress party for the kiddies on Tuesday. We are racking our brains what we can do for the imp. At tea time today the steward rashly told the kiddies there would be large balloons for them at the party. So Susan instantly said "I want a wellow one" and demanded it forthwith. I asked her tonight "I wonder what Auntie Elsie and Uncle Alan are doing?" and she said "I think they're crying". So I said "Why?" and she answered "I think they want to see Suey". So I said "We'll have to go and see them one day" and she said "Yes, we'll go on the bus!!" Oh dear, I only wish we could.*

*If you leave Knutsford Avenue I wonder if you would put that plant which grew from my wedding bouquet on mother and father's grave. I should like to think of it there. Susan loves the swimming pool. It is lowered for the children for an hour, and Eric takes her in. She doesn't mind the water coming right up to her shoulders now. All three of us slept out under the stars on Tuesday. In the morning we were covered in smuts from the funnel. We are about three hours ahead of your time now so each time I think of you, I have to remember that. I do hope you are both well and that we didn't leave you too much clearing up. It looked dreadful to me. Please give my love to all at Zion, and very much love to both of you.*

*Mollie*



On board *Esperance Bay* (Mollie on RHS)

Eric finishes reading and passes the single sheet of paper back to me on the other side of the table. ‘Very good. You write a lovely letter. It’s a shame about the ink.’

I glance up from looking in my bag for the envelope I prepared earlier. ‘It kept drying up with the heat, I think. What time is it?’

‘Nearly ten past nine.’

‘Phew!’ I fan myself with the envelope and grin at him. ‘Gone nine o’ clock at night and still so hot out here! I hope the kiddies can sleep.’

Eric smiles. ‘She’s a nice lady, Mrs Solomons. And Rachel. She and Sue get on very well. They’ll probably talk themselves to sleep.’

‘Or Mrs Solomons! It’s good of her to give us some peace though. I’ll miss her once we get to Fremantle.’ I look up as a steward approaches our table. ‘Eric? Could I have another gin and lime?’

We are sat in the corner of the writing room I had claimed for my own. Eric orders the drinks and gives the steward a ten shilling note, then turns back to me with a wink.

‘Depraved woman!’

‘Hey! Be careful Eric – I could get used to this. There’s still time... Was I right about it being nearly two weeks?’

‘Well, it’s the fifteenth of October now, and we sailed on the twenty-ninth, so yes – we’ve had just over sixteen days, and...’ he does some mental arithmetic. ‘...If we keep to schedule we have another three weeks before Adelaide.’

‘Gosh! Not even halfway yet.’

We sit quietly for a moment, and then a thought crosses my mind that I just can’t shift. I am about to voice my concerns when Eric distracts me with an observation of his own.

‘Have you noticed something?’

‘What?’

‘My asthma. It’s gone!’

I stare at him for a moment, trying to recall when I last saw my husband doubled over with the effort of coughing while gasping for breath. He reminds me it had been while carrying our luggage into the cabins on that first day. Over two weeks have passed without incident, and that is the longest asthma-free period either of us can remember since before he was demobbed.

The steward arrives with our drinks before I can reply. ‘Oh, thank you. Eric, that’s marvellous! What do you think caused it?’

Eric takes the proffered change and places a sixpence tip on the steward’s tray. ‘Thanks, Sam.’ He smiles as he puts the remaining coins back in his wallet. ‘The sea air, I should think. We’ve had plenty of it, after all, and I don’t think it matters whether it’s humid or not. It’s just so much purer than we have at... than we had back in England.’

‘But what happens when we get to Australia? What if you

get ill again?’

‘I won’t. We’re going to be arriving at the start of their summer, and that has to mean lots of dry, hot periods. I got plenty of those in Palestine and Persia, and I reckon that sort of atmosphere suits me. So – I think my body will respond to that, and the asthma should get less and less.’

I nod in agreement, although privately I am not convinced. My thoughts drift back to an occasion not much more than a year ago, when I was still struggling to cope with the suggestion I leave my family behind me.

Eric was late. It was nearly seven o’clock and he still wasn’t back from work. I knew he should have finished by half past five, and would have no problem catching a tram from Piccadilly. The service was regular, and should have taken no more than thirty minutes, so by now I was getting worried. A loud knock at the door gave me such a fright, and I expected to see a grim-faced policeman stood outside. Instead there was Eric, his hair dishevelled and shirt soaked through, clearly in some distress and supported under the shoulders by two genial gentlemen, both older than him.

‘Would you be the lady looking for this young fellow?’ asked the shorter of the two.

I must have looked so shocked, but the man seemed oblivious.

*Sorry, but that is the end of this Preview of  
**A Kangaroo In My Sideboard** by Alan Veale.*

If you would like to read the rest, then please visit  
the author’s website for details on how to  
purchase a copy:

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