

MURDER ON THE DURBAN CASTLE

During the postwar period, while the mailships were being refitted and others were employed as immigrant liners, the Durban Castle made several voyages on the mail schedule. Among her passengers on a voyage from Cape Town to Southampton in October 1947 was the young British actress Gay Gibson, who had come to South Africa to visit her father and had subsequently appeared in a play in Johannesburg.

When the vessel was eight days out of Cape Town, the night watchmen responded to an alarm bell from her cabin. There they found a steward, James Camb, who assured them that all was in order. They reported the incident to the officer of the watch who shrugged it off. Only when the stewardess arrived with the morning tea and found Miss Gibson missing was the alarm raised. Captain A. G. V Patey, later commodore of the line, turned the vessel to search for the actress, but to no avail. A shipboard search also revealed no trace of her.

The night watchmen's report was followed up and Camb was interviewed by the master who ordered the ship's surgeon to examine him. Although fresh scratches, consistent with a clawing action, were found on his face, Camb vehemently denied involvement in the mysterious disappearance of the actress. He was kept in custody until British police removed him from the vessel off the Isle of Wight and formally charged him with the murder of Gay Gibson. Camb made a statement to the police that he had gone to the cabin to have a drink with her, that she had succumbed to a fit and had apparently died. In a panic, he had pushed the body through the porthole.

The trial caused a sensation and was front page news for weeks. A murder charge without the body having been recovered made for a most unusual – and difficult case, but despite Camb's insistence on the truthfulness of his statement, the jury returned a verdict of guilty. Camb's sentence of death was upheld by the Court of Appeal but it was later commuted to life imprisonment. Released on parole in 1959, he was later found guilty on four different counts of indecent assault and returned to prison for an indefinite period.