

***ELINOR
MORDAUNT***



***THE VENTURE
BOOK***

Elinor Mordaunt

The Venture Book

EAN 8596547321675

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>p.. v INTRODUCTION</u>
<u>p. 3 CHAPTER. I</u>
<u>p. 9 CHAPTER. II</u>
<u>p.. 23 CHAPTER III</u>
<u>p.. 30 CHAPTER IV</u>
<u>p.. 42 CHAPTER V</u>
<u>p.. 59 CHAPTER VI</u>
<u>p.. 69 CHAPTER VII</u>
<u>p.. 83 CHAPTER VIII</u>
<u>p.. 95 CHAPTER IX</u>
<u>p.. 111 CHAPTER X</u>
<u>p.. 129 CHAPTER XI</u>
<u>p.. 138 CHAPTER XII</u>
<u>p.. 148 CHAPTER XIII</u>
<u>p.. 157 CHAPTER XIV</u>
<u>p.. 167 CHAPTER XV</u>
<u>p.. 191 CHAPTER XVI</u>
<u>p.. 230 CHAPTER XVII</u>
<u>p.. 249 CHAPTER XVIII</u>
<u>p.. 261 CHAPTER XIX</u>
<u>p.. 280 CHAPTER XX</u>
<u>p.. 298 CHAPTER XXI</u>
<u>p.. 316 CHAPTER XXII</u>

p. vINTRODUCTION

[Table of Contents](#)

People ask me whether I travel for pleasure or profit, but I am unable to say. I should make a great deal more money if I stayed at home, in Pimlico or Putney, writing books about the Pacific: about places I have never seen; about the people I should hate to meet. But I do not desire only to make money, though I desire that passionately enough at times, times when I feel like a poor relation. If I must work to live,—and thank God for the necessity!—a thousand thousand times more must I live to work. In addition to this I am terribly afraid of being hustled off to another world before I have had time to find the one perfect spot in this. And is there not always, always the something more! Perhaps this is why I find myself unable to rest. There are people who go to the same English seaside resort every summer of their lives, and they are—well, that sort of people. And very nice, truly sane people, too. Or is it only that their madness lies in some altogether different direction?

p. viFor myself, I am always thinking, "There is something better: other places, other people."

Boredom drives me; the dust and ashes of the easily obtainable drive me; strangeness draws me like a master hand on my heartstrings.

And yet I do not know why. I am happy in a house of my own, or a single room of my own. I love my books, my own household gods. But there is something else, another self—

and I would give much to know how many other people are charmed and tortured by this other self—which is like a bird deep within me; deep in some dark and tropical forest, among trees so high that no wind touches it; nesting quiet beneath the leaves until something or some one whistles it away out of its wood. I am drawn by some instinct akin to that which sets the swallow, while suns are yet warm in England, longing beyond all denial for Africa—that glare and glamour and heartbreak which is Africa. Drawn like a lark from its happy nest in the grass, aspiring to the skies.

One is not really happy traveling, one is most happy in remembering. It is, indeed, like hanging one's memory with a magic web in which one must have done all one's own weaving, with much hard work, with weariness and many denials. A web of gold and drab and black and opal tints; a p. viiweb like the canopy of the Milky Way, with dark patches toward which one never once looks back. For altogether safe and comfortable traveling, in which one is surrounded by everything to which one is accustomed—and how many people ask, "Was it comfortable?" and not "Was it wonderful?"—is nothing to be accounted of.

To live wonderfully, to live adventurously, to live by the skin of one's teeth. It would be an ill world if every one were like this, but I cannot help myself, that's how I am. And, though it is altogether as a shifting magic web that I look back upon my adventure, I feel it best to leave the greater part of it in this book just as I wrote it, sitting in boats or canoes, standing in crowded streets or market-places, in a native hut or at the door of my tent, as much in the moment

and upon the spot as though I were drawing actual portraits of places, of people, and of my own impression of them.

The real loss in writing about such a venture lies in the fact that the scenes, at first so strange, the people, the material of life itself, one's altogether changed method of meeting it, become in so short a time a commonplace, that one forgets that there are still many people to whom it is all glamour or altogether unknown.

p. viiiA ship so quickly becomes a home, with all the queer little ups and downs of home life, an endless succession of strange ports no more wonderful than a succession of strange streets less than a mile away from one's own doorstep, that, far from exaggerating, it is with difficulty that one can jerk one's memory back to the wonder of the first keen impression: the effect upon one of the first flight of flying-fish, like fine elfin silver scimitars of the sea, the first fringe of palms upon a white strand. It is hard to realize that there are many thousands who have never seen a Portuguese man-of-war, or nautilus, with all its tiny orchid-like sails set, indomitably sailing a momentary tranquil, perfectly blue, and yet to it—no larger in all its pride and panoply than half a thumb's length—unending ocean. Only by an effort does one remember that there are still, even in these days, many who have not so much as edged upon the unexplored desert of the Sargasso Sea; been in the company of a man who has dined upon his fellows, with relish and without self-consciousness; consorted with widows who regard it as no more than a commonplace decency of mourning to blacken themselves from head to foot, wear an assortment of their husbands'

bones slung about their necks, so that the fact of any one of them choosing to pose for p. ixher photograph with the dear departed's skull clasped in both hands upon her knee seems no whit more peculiar than that English beauties should be pictured showing every tooth—which is, after all, no more than a sort of bone, made to be decently covered by the lips—in an unending and unvarying smirk.

But, then, what an amazing thing is this affair of modes and morals. One's own quick readaptation. Upon the Trobriand Islands, for instance,—where for some happy and never-to-be-forgotten weeks I reigned as king,—it was regarded as in some ways a want of delicacy to allow worms to devour your dead relatives when you might so well, and with profit, perform that last office for yourself; whereas in Fiji, even in the fiercest days of cannibalism, it was looked upon as the worst sort of form to dish up your own relative, even an in-law. Again, to show the difficulty there is in preserving any kind of fixed standard, we have that curious custom of the people in the Marquesas Islands in which, far from virginity being counted as a virtue, the bride gains in value, in consideration, by the number of men of her own village with whom she has consorted upon the night before her marriage; while one can imagine no more vile crime in the eyes of any truly p. x moral Marquesan than the denial involved in taking the veil.

Is it strange, then, that among all these changes one finds oneself doing quite naturally things which one never could, at home in England, have imagined oneself as doing? Though there is still the liability of a sudden, sweeping wonder as to how you come to be where you are, or if it is,

indeed, you yourself; a longing for the little dog of the nursery rhyme to prove to you your own identity:

If this be I, as I should hope it be,
I've a little dog at home and he'll know me.

And it could but end in one way:

Home went the little woman all in the dark,
Up jumped the little dog and he began to bark.

I remember well at one odd little hotel where I was stranded, waiting for a boat—a place frequented by gold-diggers, searchers after osmium-iridium and oil, missionaries, pearl-buyers, and people who purchased ancient vessels for no other reason than to insure and wreck them—getting so tired of the sound of a violent and noisy quarrel, which went on late into the night in a neighboring room, sounds which at home in England would p. xi have scared and shocked me, that, rising in my wrath, slipping into a dressing-gown, I went off to find out what could be done to stop it.

I can see that scene now. It was a very small room, full of men in pajamas or trousers and singlets,—the latter so torn open that they did not count,—beer bottles and glasses; how the most enraged of them found space to fling up and down it, I don't know, but he did, while I myself was drawn by the eddy to a seat on the bed between two other men.

The dispute was upon an affair which really did touch the striding man's honor, but still there was no necessity to make such a bellow about it. When I pointed this out, said that if they would all stop talking at once I might get at

something of the truth, far from telling me to go back to my own room, mind my own business, they all turned to me, appealed to me, with a: “Look here, you’re a woman of the world, and you know . . . He said . . .” and “He said . . .” and “He said . . .”

In their eagerness the men beside me caught my arms and tugged until I got to my feet and, snatching the aggrieved one by the sleeve, entreated him to cease making an ass of himself.

It was all settled at last by my promise to go p. xiout at seven next morning, the moment the wireless office was open, and myself, at my own expense, send off a message with a prepaid answer which would clench the matter once for all. And I remember how it ended too—what I said:

“And now stop making a nuisance of yourself, and get off to bed, for the Lord’s sake!”

That was one of the occasions when, returning to my own room, I found myself wondering if this was, indeed, I.

And again, though a very different setting, this: The dense black-velvet mask of a moonless and starless tropical night; one of those nights when you hear the swish of the palms above your head, the sea at your feet, and see nothing, not so much as the ghost of a crested wave, the tremor of a pale-gray stem; when the very fireflies seem abashed into darkness by the immensity of unilluminated space. At such a time was I carried on shore upon a strange island, having put off in a dinghy from a cutter, wind-driven with a force which separated us as entirely from civilization as though the main and altogether sophisticated island of the group were the width of the Atlantic away; borne in the

arms of a gigantic native through the water to the shore and deposited there, with the sound, the gentle stir, of a multitude of p. xiiistrange, totally unseen people all around me. My pack, with a few personal belongings which might have helped me to prove my own identity to myself, with the help of Cash's woven names,—though Heaven knows that names which nobody can read or pronounce, giving no indication of tribe or "pigeon," mean little enough to anybody once you are off the beaten path and there is nobody to bolster up your dignity by taking it for granted that you are one of the so-and-so's of so-and-so,—was awash in a very insecurely anchored boat, the best part of a quarter of a mile out to sea.

But here I am forestalling myself, for this is a tale to be told in its proper place and at its proper time, more especially recorded because it was the only time when I ever felt really and truly frightened. Not that this is any boast or proof of courage, but rather that, sliding eastward by the West as I did, everything seemed in its own time and place to be so inevitable, and so altogether as it should be.

p. 3CHAPTER I

[Table of Contents](#)

People use Marseilles as a jumping-off place; but to me it is an enchantment, a hot-pot of strangeness and beauty and villainies. The door of the East; the East itself done out, not in the hot colors of oil paint, but in pastels of infinite softness, hinting and beckoning, smiling, leering, threatening, enchanting.

The little streets run like outstretched fingers from the palm of the main streets, clutching the world, with every nationality and every tongue dripping through them; narrow streets with high white and cream-colored buildings on each side and green and blue outside shutters; incredibly narrow alleys with bister-colored houses, and rags of washing fluttering across them; but at the end of each the beauty of the hills or the sea, the harbor with its crowded shipping, its forests of masts and funnels, its quays with men of every shade and color thick upon them, the romances and p. 4 horrors of a whole world written upon their faces.

Everywhere there are plane-trees; bare now, with a delicate lace-like web of twigs against a sky which has been an unclouded soft blue, that same pastel-like blue, throughout the three days which have passed since I came rushing down to the South, clear away without a break from the London fogs, to catch my boat, which is late in arriving from Bordeaux.

The fishermen's church, La Dame de la Garde, stands high upon its rocky jag of mountain. I can see it from my bedroom window at the Hotel Terminus, set like the

crowning point of a tiara, at the end of half the aspiring streets of Marseilles; most lovely in the evening when the sky is the color of the skies in very old Chinese prints.

At that time the streets are crowded with promenaders, as are the cafés which debouch upon them every few yards, crowded with, for the most part, staid revelers: little families; husbands and wives; young men with their sweethearts; groups of young men; groups of business men—all eating and drinking, moderately enough and yet with a relish, a delight, which is strange to us.

It seems to me, indeed, like a series of fête-days coming one on top of another, those days when one laughs at nothing in particular, drinks the p. 5health of every one, and no one in particular. But in reality it is nothing of the sort; it goes on just the same from day to day. It is the everyday life of the South, the sort of life which, whatever it may be, is most emphatically not English; infinitely far removed from the drinking of beer in frowzy bars, noisy men, furtive or bold-faced women in men's caps, babies in prams upon the pavement outside.

The whole of the front of one large draper's shop—displaying wax ladies of an almost incredible loveliness, standing tiptoe in wages-of-sin sort of undergarments—is aglow with an innumerable number of rose-pink electric lights. In front of this shop, and bathed in the pink lights, are flower-stalls piled high with narcissi, carnations, mimosa, hyacinths, and violets.

Fresh from the hands of the hairdresser at the Hotel Terminus, I sit on the open veranda of one of the cafés and sip my coffee. The dressing of my hair was in itself a prelude

to adventure, a sort of sloughing off of the skin of everyday life. My request was for a simple and inexpensive shampoo, and that was all I was charged for. But the artist, an artist with a soul, plump as a rather overgrown Cupid, with large ox eyes, a brosse of dark hair, deprecating and persuasive hands,—an p. 6artist with, evidently enough, an eye for antiques,—was totally unable to leave it at that.

After washing my hair he tied up my head tight in a white towel, so that I looked like a *religieuse*, and massaged me, first with cream that smelt of lavender, then with three different sorts of powder. He was very short and fat, and I am very tall and thin. When he had almost finished he made me stand up and tilted my face this way and that, as though it had been nothing human, to get the light upon it at every angle. Never in my life have I seen any one so completely absorbed. As I was obliged to stoop, the whole effect, repeated in the manifold mirrors around the room, was odd beyond words; but like all true artists, this one was completely lacking in the faintest sense of humor.

His last touch was the most wonderful of all; for with some scented liquid on the tip of his forefinger he swept up the eyelashes on the upper lid of each eye and left them curling. Heavens above! and to think that I am now a middle-aged woman and never before have I had curling eyelashes; never before have I realized that my eyelashes were capable of curling. So many, many things come to one altogether too late in life.

p. 7A man with a wooden leg is sitting under the trees beneath my window at the hotel. It makes no pretense of being anything but a wooden leg, for there is a stump at the

end of it, faintly Panlike—so easy to notch into a hoof! But this very dapper gentleman has not done that; instead, he has padded it where the ankle should be, and wears the upper part of a very neat—oh, but very neat!—patent-leather boot to match the one upon his other foot, the eyelets rimmed with white and laced with white silk ties.

To-night I dined with a man I met in London, who is also awaiting his boat, at Le Grand Restaurant Basso, famous for its bouillabaisse. I lived too dreadfully long and intimately at one time of my life with people who guzzled bouillabaisse as nothing else on earth can be sucked and gobbled, to go there for that; but there were many other things at Basso's. I went, indeed, for the company and the delight of dining in the upper room with its glazed veranda, so like the upper deck of a ship, giving straight on to the lights of the harbor. The dinner, minus bouillabaisse, was beyond criticism and very carefully thought out: *Soupe de Petit Marmite*; a mixture of shellfish cooked p. 8 with creamy white sauce in large flat shells and deliciously named *Coquille de Fruit de Mer*; pigeons; *petit pois*; *Pêche Melba* banked round with chopped ice, and coffee—such coffee, redolent of all the perfumes of Araby! A dinner which rounded off to perfection my three days in Marseilles.

p. 9CHAPTER II

[Table of Contents](#)

To-day, the day of my first embarkation, dawned gray and very chilly; all the magic for the time being gone from out Marseilles, bedraggled drab of a drunken sailor.

I gave myself an hour to get to my ship, ten minutes' drive at most. But I had forgotten: cargo-boats are things apart, "nothing accounted of" in Marseilles; and though the porter at the hotel and the taxi-driver assured me that they knew exactly where mine started from, they knew nothing whatever about it, while I myself had been perfectly casual.

Quays, quays, quays! Search for an inconsiderable French cargo-boat among the quays of Marseilles and the whole world seems to be overrun with them, thick as a spider's web. For what seemed like an eternity we rushed up and down quays in clouds of dust; threaded tangles of quays; lost them altogether; were caught in the hem of the town, tore ourselves loose and raced shrieking from it; got back to our quays and were p. 10no better off; drew up innumerable times to make innumerable inquiries of wildly excited and gesticulating men, who knew all about everything; were held back by innumerable open bridges while the ships of the entire world, or so it seemed, trailed their way with a calculated and malicious slowness between the draws. And all the time bells rang, whistles shrilled; steam-sirens pierced the air with screams, every one of which I took to be the signal for the departure of my own special ship, while I myself stood up in the taxi exhorting the driver, in execrable French, to pull himself together.

The ship, *El Kantara*, was to sail at ten o'clock and the representative of the Messageries Maritimes Company, to whom she belongs, was to be there at half-past nine to introduce me to the captain. It was, however, precisely three minutes to ten when we at last sighted her, and hurtling the length of the last quay, the taxi making such sounds as though it were the only taxi in the world, I scrambled out of it and on board, finding the agent, exquisitely polite—and still polite!—waiting for me with the captain by his side. A shortish, stoutly built man, this captain whom I was to find so good a comrade, with a short, bright-brown beard, merry bright-brown eyes, p. 11and a bright color; a man in whom every line and every tint, every movement spoke of a life at sea.

There are some twenty first-class passengers on board,—one Englishman and the remainder French,—with a few more in the second class. But they do not really count, so entirely is the ship built and fitted for cargo. The alleyways past the cabins and beneath the central deck are flush and open, with the crew passing to and fro unchecked; while all decks are free to me.

The lower decks are crowded with live stock: cocks and hens, loudly quacking ducks, and geese; sheep in pens, and large, mild dun-colored oxen. There are soldiers being carried out to New Caledonia, with no one apart from a petty officer over them. The crew are of all nationalities and colors; in the evening long trestle tables, decently laid, are set out on deck for their dinner, which begins with soup, goes on to other courses just as ours does, and ends with black coffee and cigarettes, while bottles of wine stand all

along its length. As I look over the rail of the upper deck on this first evening more than one man raises his glass to me, for they all seem entirely friendly. There is a continual flow of talk and laughter and loud argument, but they do not seem to grumble, and I do believe that other nations vent that spleen p. 12 which embitters ours by loud shouting and excited gestures leading to nothing whatever.

On going down to my cabin to wash my hands for dinner I find it lighted by two candles, for the electric light is out of gear. So steady is the boat, so smooth the sea, that they stand upright without so much as a dab of wax to fix them, reminding me of a Spanish hotel in Tetuan at which I was staying last year.

In this hotel, where there was rather fine imitation Jacobean furniture, I noticed that all the tables and flat arms of the chairs were covered with tallow, the reason for which was shown to me that evening when the electric light gave out and the incredibly shabby little waiter, wearing a dress suit which was an epic in descent, coming round with a handful of candles, poured yet more wax upon every convenient spot and dabbed a lighted candle down upon it. That was a hotel which—proudly advertising fitted basins and hot and cold water in every room, with bath-rooms—used the baths as dust-bins, while there was nothing beyond the mere basin in any room; no plumbing of any sort; a bucket beneath to catch the water when one pulled out the cork, and a battered enamel jug standing by its side.

The boat is thick with the grime of ports, her p. 13 decks foul with the trampling of many feet; while the aft decks are packed high with those iron rods which—sent aboard her at

the last moment at Bordeaux—necessitated the shifting of much cargo to balance her, the re-rating of the chronometers which so much iron threw out of gear, thus accounting for her late arrival at Marseilles. For a ship is like a woman in love: it takes very little to upset her when there is nothing serious in hand.

El Kantara is by far the steadiest boat I have ever been on, pursuing her somewhat slow way with such placidity that whenever I think of her I think of a motherly brown hen brooding over her young. To-day, however, the third day out, she took a sea—or rather the sea took her—most uncivilly, right across her starboard bows.

I was still in my bunk when a steward came running to tell me that I must not go on deck, while the saloon, very far forward, was so full of water that I couldn't go there, either. At this I remembered the bridge, which the captain had made free to me. Dressing hurriedly, I made my way up there, and stood, holding to the rail, torn by the wind, the rain running in torrents from off my oilskin; while then only, for the first time, the full delight of the sea got me, the weariness of land was sloughed away from me.

p. 14 We have already passed Gibraltar. The coast of Morocco is dim in the rain at one side of us, Spain less than two miles away upon the other. There are steamers upon each side, pitching too terribly, but all this while we are steady; at least quite steady enough.

The name of the colored steward who waits upon me is Chocolat; he has a very great deal of gold set round his white teeth, reminding me of Solomon's throne, all gold and ivory. I like that. I like the fact, also, that despite the

passengers whom I had not expected and who at first rather appalled me, this is, indeed, a cargo-boat where one need not spend one's time feverishly dragging out boxes from under one's bunk, dressing and undressing, sitting with one's hair in curlers, or clamoring at the hairdresser's door.

We pass Madeira at night. There must be some festival in progress at Funchal, for the town glitters with lights; the hillside is looped with them, but little less remote than the stars. More remote, indeed, when I come to think of it, for the stars are our friends, our guides, while the ephemeral lights of land are left behind us, forgotten for a month at least. The weather grows warmer each day, the sun gains in power, and with the salt and wind and sun comes that delicious languor of the sea, so that one can sleep in a moment and wake in a moment. For hours upon end the soldiers play at dominoes and draughts and cards, with other odd games which I have not yet mastered, upon the lower decks; while the members of the crew who are not on duty lounge about and watch them or take a hand.

The warmest place on board is on the long narrow slit of upper deck in front of the saloon, and here I love to lean over the flat woodwork of the rail and watch the life going on beneath me, feel the sun upon my back.

To-day, during the first half of the dog-watch, there was a thick ring of backers around two men who were boxing: a tall negro, thin, weak-looking, and hollow-cheeked, who reminded me of the nigger of the *Narcissus*, and a small, strongly built Frenchman, with bright black eyes, hard red cheeks, and a waxed mustache, quivering with life and energy. At the first go-off the negro seemed half asleep; his

chin appeared to loll forward on his breast; he moved his muffled hands vaguely, almost as though he were massaging his own person as certain insects do, swaying gently from side to side; while the Frenchman danced around him on the tips of his toes, nimble as a cat, with p. 16swift lightning punches up at his antagonist's face.

I had no idea how the negro defended himself. To my mind he just lolloped from side to side; but somehow or other he did it, while all the other man's clean and, as it seemed, beautifully timed blows slid aside from him.

Quite suddenly, so suddenly that I heard myself cry out, the negro woke to life. That sort of gray pallor which comes over colored people when they are wearied or bored passed away. It is certain that he grew blacker, black and shiny; with a fierce left-hander he got the Frenchman on the jaw just as he was stepping back, and over the little man went; but he was up in a moment and at it again like a spirited cock-sparrow, bent beneath a perfect hurricane of two-handed blows. His eyes, bright and scared, full of astonishment, ran to and fro, putting him completely at the mercy of the negro, whose somnolent gaze never for a single moment left the other's face, while, though drops of sweat sprayed out from him in the sunshine, he was still entirely unexhausted.

The fight was interesting, but more interesting still were the spectators. A lank blackguard in a red-and-white striped singlet, with but one tooth in his head and that in the very center of the top p. 17jaw, long and yellow, kept on throwing flirtatious glances up at the poop where I stood leaning over the rail, as if to say, "All this is done to please

you.” An apache with inordinately long hair plastered back from his forehead, who was painting stanchions with red lead, seemed to be hung upon a string between his interest in the match and his work, to which he was jerked back by the ferocious stare of the *maître d’équipage*, who was walking to and fro by me, jerking his chin in my direction, as if to say: “Did you ever see the like of that!” An efficient person with a commanding presence, large and heavily built, florid and bearded and fierce; so challenging that at first when I spoke to him I thought he intended to be insolent. I found later on that his manner, curt, independent, and fierce, was precisely the same with the captain as with me; that he was in reality full of kindness, though intolerant of idlers. He had been on the ship for nineteen years—ever since she was built, indeed, save for one short break.

Throughout the evenings the lower decks, both fore and aft, are like scenes in old Dutch pictures. Then one hears the thin, piercing note of mandolin and zither, while men of every shade of color, from the fair-haired Norman soldier to the full-blooded negro,—though there are more of the warm p. 18chocolate-brown of the Malagash than any other,—sprawl under the great lamps which hang beneath the awnings, casting all their light downward in an umber-tinted glow upon the sleepers, the loungers, the musicians, and the gamblers. These last are now, for the most part, possessed by a passion for a game of which I have not yet mastered the name, played with small, round counters upon little boards showing numbered squares; the man who holds the bank shaking a bag unceasingly, picking out numbered

counters at random, shouting out the numbers in a loud monotone which seems to go on throughout the entire night.

The negro who is now the acknowledged champion boxer of the *Kantara*, and is to fight another ship's champion in Martinique, sits motionless hour after hour, meditatively caressing his vast and shining biceps, while every little Jack Sparrow among the crew spars at him jocularly, in passing, and the stowaway—an elderly man with a rascally empurpled face and incredibly incongruous collection of garments—earns his tucker and tobacco, all the scraps thrown to him, by a perpetual and ornate stream of blasphemous humor. I myself am liable to fine and imprisonment when we reach Pointe-à-Pitre, for tossing him occasional packets p. 19 of rank French cigarettes which I purchase from the *maître d'équipage*, for, after all, he is a merry rascal and little more coarse, I suspect, than an aforetime king's jester.

When night has once really fallen, men strew the deck in every direction. An hour ago, pacing a narrow slip which edges the saloon, I as nearly as possible stepped upon a sleeper stretched out upon bare boards; I drew back my foot just in time, warned by nothing more than the sudden realization of two curving rows of white teeth in an invisible face immediately beneath it.

The moon is four days old. At six o'clock this evening it was half-way up the sky, lying upon its back in a perfect crescent, with the fiery sun dipping to the sea beneath it, and Venus, diamond clear, immediately above. The sea was a deep peacock blue, every small ripple tipped with gold. As the sun set, all was clear indigo, sea and sky alike, the moon

and that one lovely planet a shining gold, such as could scarcely be imagined in more temperate climes. The sight of it is well worth an eighteen-days' voyage, even if we were only to turn and go back the way we have come.

Every evening I go up to the fore peak and watch the sunset with all that magnificent panoply of purple, silver, and gold clouds which are part of the pageant of the trades.

The time is infinitely long and yet short. It seems as though I could never have been anywhere else than upon this ship; that Marseilles, indeed, is farther away than my childhood. And yet each individual day slides by like light, though I am up on deck at seven, having my coffee in my dressing-gown, while the captain walks the deck with quick, short steps. He paces thus for hour upon hour each day, wheeling back every now and then—for he never thinks of it until he is past me—to recount some ridiculous, amorous, or dangerous adventure; such adventures as would make a whole book in themselves.

I see very little of the other passengers. All the morning I work in the captain's own little saloon, high up on the bridge, and in the afternoon every one else is asleep. For the time being, however, there is nothing on earth that I desire so little as human companionship; while the voyage is so uneventful, so quiet, that the days stream out behind me like a long, indefinitely shaded, blue-and-gray scarf.

What is real is that I am writing short stories to finish a series, of which I left the first part at home; that the food is good, and there is good red wine served at every meal; that the captain is a good comrade when I want one,

brave and honest, the other officers pleasant and friendly, the bridge quiet and infinitely restful.

It is an occasion when we all get into white clothes,—the first epoch-making event, indeed,—and it means a lot. One feels cleaner, fresher, and saner with the sun and the air upon one's skin, stretching oneself in it, breathing it all in; lazier also, for more and more often the captain and his officers lounge at the open door talking to me, while more and more often I put down my pen and go out upon the open bridge, to look at—what?—the sea and the sky.

There are twenty cats on board, but only one has the run of the bridge; she sees to this for herself. Every morning, when the steward brings the captain a cup of coffee, the cat brings the captain a dead rat, fruit of a night's hunting, and lays it upon the deck beside his bunk.

Up to now she has spent the entire day sleeping in an arm-chair, save when, arching her back, stretching and yawning, she aroused herself sufficiently to come down and eat and drink what the obsequious steward had placed ready for her. p. 22 Now, however, she lies, like a tiger, stretched out upon her side upon the open deck in front of the chart-house, and when you stoop and stroke her you find that her fur is deliciously hot, every hair alive with electricity.

p. 23 CHAPTER III

[Table of Contents](#)

By the sea-gulls, if by nothing else, I should know that we were nearing land. For weeks the sea has been empty of them, but during the past two or three days there have been thousands upon thousands, flashing white against a flawless deep-blue sky, and early this morning we passed the island of Désirade,—which was among the many islands sighted by Columbus,—a long, flat wedge upon the very edge of the horizon. We make Guadeloupe soon after midnight.

Pointe-à-Pitre as I saw it this morning, backed with its panoply of mountains, is a poor place, a veritable black man's town, and it is necessary to drive a good twenty miles out into the country to get any real idea of the beauty of the island, when it comes upon one with a sense of something like enchantment after one has crossed the bridge at Salt River, which is in reality a narrow strip of sea dividing the kidney-shaped island toward the southern half.

Beyond this division the road begins to mount up and up in a series of sharp hair-pin bends p. 24 among innumerable sugar-cone mountains thick to the very top with vegetation, while the scenery unrolls itself behind one like a broad and brilliant ribbon, an endless shining pattern of bright-blue bays and scattered isles and deep gorges; of small villages, gold and brown like the wings of a moth, and scattered huts—the meanest, a single room roofed with palm-leaves, set in its own gem-like garden. Poinsettias; purple and rose-pink Bougainvillea; rose and scarlet crotons; hibiscus and

plumbago; orange-trees laden with fruit; bananas with their immense banners of shining enamel-like green leaves overhung by the glossy foliage of breadfruit, more like shining metal than anything else.

The Englishman from off the boat, with whom I maintain a curious sort of armed neutrality,—for quite plainly he dislikes me as much as I dislike him, and yet at times we are glad to talk to each other in our own language,—was with me; and for that day, at least, so great was the enchantment of the place, we were almost friends.

Some fifteen miles from town we passed the cleared open place, the pedestal and bust which mark the spot where Columbus landed; and soon after this we came to an immense archway of gray dressed stone, magnificent in its conception, p. 25giving on to a long drive bordered with the tallest cocoanut palms that I have ever seen, towering and perfectly upright, silver-gray stems. An avenue designed to lead to something very magnificent in the way of palace or city, but leading here, in this place,—with “all the glades’ colonnades,”—to nothing more than a rougher track, a deeper bush, a greater exuberance of nature. An arch erected during the proud days of Louis XIV, with Heaven only knows what visions of a semi-royal colonization.