

PART I

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The dates refer to the record and not to the events.

JOURNAL

February 26, 1938.

Now we are at sea. The boat, for all its small size, moves without a tremor of the engines nor is there yet any movement from the sea, though the wind and rain are beating against my portholes. From along the passage comes the sound of dinner preparing, and this is welcome enough because, in my usual foolish way (and against a specific promise to Dinah) I have had practically nothing to eat since dinner last night.

John, Alan and Kathleen came to see me off at Waterloo. They were a comforting trio: John acting as if I were going to Bath for a week, save for the handshake which he ventured to allow himself; Alan and Kathleen full of good cheer and good wishes. So, without letting me dwell on the miseries of parting, they waved me farewell and I watched Big Ben disappear from Vauxhall and the Battersea Power Station follow it for all the world as if I were leaving England for six years.

The channel crossing was calm and peaceful, especially on a boat which counted more crew than passengers. I slept unbrokenly and went through a more or less formal customs at Havre, then took a taxi to the C.G.T. dock. The day was only beginning to dawn, and I peered out for the first sight of the ship which was to contain me for a month. At first I set my hopes absurdly high - on the Paris and the Ile de France - next my more moderate expectations were disappointed and finally my gaze dwindled down until it fell on the San Antonio^(a) itself. It looked little larger than a channel steamer, though it stood more out of the water than most cargo steamers, and I prepared to help the taxi driver carry my luggage up the steep ramp. But this was not to be. An ancient sailor came up and told me that no one was allowed on board until 8 o'clock, an hour and a half hence; I had to go

These numbers refer to photographs.

through another douane, and my luggage must remain on shore till then. Even my French sufficed to extract a time-table of the day from the old man, but when it came to general conversation things grew more difficult. From time to time I had to stride away into the gloom in what I hoped was a Napoleonic manner, while I racked my brain for a missing word or even consulted a pocket dictionary. But as I was so obviously caught in the net of French officialdom, there was nothing to do but put my suit-cases in charge of the old sailor and take a walk round the docks. The dock belonging to the C.G. T. was of really remarkable length and size, but was built in an uninspired concrete style and was devoid of architectural interest. The two great ships I have mentioned towered beside the San Antonio and made it seem quite unfitted for transatlantic travel.

When I returned it was to find that the douane had proved a myth, and that my luggage had already been taken to my cabin. It was not that of L'Inspecteur, as had been promised, but was marked Élève - and, as befits the habitation of a midshipman, it is exceedingly compact and neat. The measurements are about eight feet in all directions. As you stand at the door you find first a wash-basin and then a desk along the left hand side; across the opposite end is the bunk, leaving a narrow well for luggage at its foot; next to the bunk on the right hand side is a fixed seat, and finally comes a hanging cupboard which is adjacent to the door. All these pieces of furniture touch one another, and all (except the wash-basin) are solidly built of mahogany. There is ample drawer space beneath the bunk and the fixed seat, and there is a small book-shelf above the foot of the bunk. As you look in from the door there is a porthole facing you and one on your left, these being respectively on the port side and astern.

Having unpacked my books and clothes I took a taxi to the town where I

had breakfast and changed some money; then I walked back to the boat, wrote a letter and returned with it to the town. It was the last opportunity for a long time to walk any distance in a straight line. During the afternoon the passengers assembled in the dining-room to give up their tickets and passports; they were then subjected to a short medical examination. I tried to evade mine by presenting Kathleen's certificate, but it did not work. At 4 o'clock, two hours after the scheduled time, the moorings were cast off and the ship put to sea. Just before this I was handed first a letter and then a telegram from Dinah, which formed a last delicious link with home.

March 1, 1938.

This is the third day at sea. I must give you some description of the San Antonio. Its displacement is 6,000 tons, which is about twice that of a modern cross-channel steamer. Its length is 450' and its breadth 57', being thus long and narrow. It was built in 1931 by Harland and Wolff of Belfast, and seems to be of excellent construction. In describing the disposition of the parts I am hampered by a complete ignorance of shipping - and you must forgive me if I use incorrect or absurd terms. The ship is easiest to imagine as consisting of one deck running the entire length, but interrupted by various substructures and superstructures. In the former class are five large hatches, giving access to the holds, which are now filled with such a quantity of cargo that the steep ascent to the deck on the morning of our departure was converted into a considerable fall by the late afternoon. Near the stern is a small steel hut, into which the lesser members of the crew disappear; on top of it is a minute deck. Amidships is a much larger erection surrounding the funnel; it contains the cabins of the mechanics

and the subordinate officers, and below it is the engine room. It is one storey high, except behind the ~~stair~~^{funnel} where is the wireless operator's room. Elsewhere is a deck. Lastly, in the forward part of the ship is a huge erection which must greatly impair the speed. It is four storeys high. At deck level are the chief officers' cabins (and also mine), besides the dining-room which is the only room the passengers have in common. Above this are the passengers' cabins, surrounded by a small deck; above again are a few more cabins and a deck; once more above, the wheel house; while to crown all is still another deck, on which I have once seen a sailor. There are two masts, round the bases of which are congregations of derricks. These lie flat while the ship is in motion. Round them in turn are a number of steam winches which clutter up the deck. The ship is propelled by a single screw which causes surprisingly little vibration except in the stern.

I will now give you some idea of the passengers, and then try to describe the feel of the ship. There are eleven passengers, including myself, and of these eight are German-speaking. The family of Caro is of Honduran nationality, though it seems to have spent most of its life in Germany. M. Caro (as we call him) is a man of about 45. In face and build he resembles the ex-Crown Prince, and I have no reason to suppose that his character is more agreeable. His wife, who looks about five years younger, has some charm and great animation. Then there is a son, Bernard, who is about 15; he has a receding forehead and a projecting chin, and abounds in animal spirits. He dresses in the height of French schoolboy fashion, but would I am afraid in England be called a bounder. These three speak English in descending, and French in ascending order of excellence. There is also Mme. Caro's aged mother, who is perpetually ill.

Next comes a young German couple who bear the charming name of Wohlgemuth. For the last two years they have lived at Tel Aviv, where he practised as a chiropodist in the concern of Dr. Schelk. I gather that the curtailment of immigration to Palestine has lowered the general prosperity of this new community. At any rate, the Wohlgemuths have decided to start business in Los Angeles. The husband has a sad and rather lonely face, with sensitive Jewish features. His wife, on the other hand, is boisterous and conceited beyond description. She prances into lunch oscillating her extremely fat bottom which is neatly encased in a pair of grey flannel trousers; above these she wears a close-fitting jersey of some dazzling colour, intended to display what she would call her curves and I her bulges. She has what used to be called an "Eton crop", and her hair is an auburn-red which is none the less startling for being so obviously unreal. Only by very low standards could her features be called pretty - still, she has a certain vivaciousness. The remaining German passengers are an unmarried woman of about 35 and an older married woman who has some ~~of~~ deformity; I can say nothing about them, for they have been ill ever since we left port.

Lastly there are two aged Irish-American brothers named Auld. They wear a kind of old-fashioned cardigan instead of coats, and always a tweed cap. In fact they are a veritable Tweedledum and Tweedledee, except that one has a moustache. The first evening at sea I hailed the clean-shaven one cheerily. "Can't hear a word!", he replied, "Stone deaf. Have been all my life." While thus happily deprived of the necessity of listening to me, he was eager to launch forth on his own account, which he did in an expressionless sing-song voice, stumbling over most of the words like old Sir George Egerton. He and his brother know no French and never speak a word at meals, either to one another or to anyone else.

These are the people I must bear with during the next month, and they with me. For the first two days I saw most of M. Caro, since the others were usually ill, especially Herr Wohlgeomuth who slept continuously until this morning. But the following scrap of conversation will show that M. Caro and I have little affinity. He asked if I had been to Paris. "No", I said, "I have never stayed there. But I have passed through many times, and last year went to the Exposition." A faint light came into M. Caro's eyes. "Then perhaps", he said, "you have experienced ze French lov." Noticing some expression of distaste, ^{on my face} he added kindly, "Ah, you were afraid, nicht war? You did not dare?" "No", I replied firmly, "I was with a girl of my own." "Ach", he replied in tones of the utmost disparagement, "An English girl. That is no gut, no gut at all. Besides, ze French lov is moch sheeper and - how you say? - more expairt. I remember --" But at this point the coldness of my manner proved sufficient to strike a chill even into M. Caro's ecstatic reminiscences, and the conversation ended.

You will have guessed by now that the sea must have been pretty rough. That, I think, would be an exaggeration. The passengers are an exceptionally unsteady lot. Nevertheless in so small a boat there has been a good deal of movement of a combined pitching and rolling kind. Though I did not feel sick at all, I had a perpetual slight headache and I don't pretend that that isn't akin to sea-sickness. So on Sunday morning I determined to get the better of this. The sky was cloudless, the breeze gentle and warm. I sat on a metal casing on that part of the deck where the amplitude of motion was least. Then (you will smile) I gazed upwards at various uncomfortable angles until the slight feeling of nausea which accompanied them had disappeared. Then I repeated these exercises in the bow and the stern where the movement of thē ship was vastly greater. Next I walked up and down the

deck allowing myself a decreasing departure from the straight line. By continuing like this for no more than an hour I effected an astonishing improvement in my stability and feeling of comfort. I found that I could walk fairly easily with my eyes fixed on the top of the mast, which formerly had proved quite impossible.

There is little to do outside but walk on the deck, wearisome as such exercise is. It is a poor kind of deck, made of naked steel plates such as are confined to the sides of more commodious vessels. Moreover, it is littered with pipes, winches, bollards and other such tackle which is liable to trip you up if you aren't thinking and prevents you making a complete circuit. Again, the deck is frequently (and seemingly superfluously) drenched with water, which not only gushes out from the sides but pours down from above. Here there are perpetual puddles; elsewhere little piles of sludge and pools of oil.

Among other defects of the ship are to be reckoned these. (1) The smells. They are of three kinds: culinary, mechanical and insanitary. Outside my cabin door hangs a smell of oily food combined with overheated water pipes and tarry ropes. Further aft is a smell of sewage blended with stagnant oil and seaweed. And so on, in endless permutation. So far I have repelled all these smells from my cabin - but it depends on the wind. (2) The insects. Soon after I came on board I observed an insect lurking on a wall. Though it had the presence of mind to dash behind a plan of the ship, I could see that it was of a venomous and obscure kind. A little later I saw another which had no opportunity to run away from me; it was a kind of beetle with long whiskers and of a curious colour. Yesterday I saw one in my cabin. (3) The sanitation. This is malodorous and inefficient, which seems to me unpardonable in view of the circumambience of the sea.

(4) The noises. On the second night at sea a fearful banging began outside my cabin at each roll of the ship. It sounded like one iron plate being dropped from a height upon another. Transmitted through the steel walls, it jarred on the nerves like a physical blow. I heard voices outside and discovered the Caros. Mme. Caro and I, in our dressing-gowns, climbed up the three ladders onto the bridge against the force of a violent gale. There she explained the situation to an officer in excellent French, while I interjected a few adjectives which I hoped would emphasize the enormity of the din. We returned, and after half-an-hour a ferocious looking sailor told us that a pipe had broken under the deck. In another hour the noise had ceased, but it broke out again before morning. Every night somebody leaves open the door in the passage outside my cabin, and it clangs against the steel sides.

¶ (5) Lastly and above all the slowness. We creep across the enormous sea, barely advancing from one wave to another. A bicycle^{le}~~fix~~ could easily outpace us. No birds, no land in sight, no variation in the endless pitch and roll, no break in the uniform greyness of the sky. And as if the gods delighted in prolonging this infinite tedium, twenty minutes have to be added to each day. There is a chart of the Atlantic outside the dining-room, and a series of little French flags juts out a tiny distance into the ocean.

The chief thing to be set against these disadvantages is the food. The Germans revel in it. During the rough weather, indeed, they have had to retire frequently from their meals. But these absences I suspect of being strategical, combining a classical convenience with a very present necessity - for I notice that they always return without missing a course and with a reawakened appetite. Breakfast is at 8 and consists of tea or coff-

ee and rolls with jam and butter. The Germans deplore the French breakfast, although in quantity there is an abundance. Lunch is at midday and dinner at seven; these meals consist as a rule of 5 and 6 courses respectively, beside cheese and fruit, and each takes $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours. I won't try to describe the food. There have been many dishes I have never tasted or even heard of before, all of what I should call a violent character - that is to say, the taste strikes you so forcibly that you cannot take your mind from it. All this is provided in indigestible profusion: at one single meal we had mushrooms, oysters and roast beef. Tea, consisting of jam, biscuits and tea, is given us at 4; and to fill up the remaining odd gaps the Germans are always ready with delicatessen. To-day M. Caro gave me some ~~XXXX~~ Pumpernickel, which I have never had before. I thought it tasted merely like very rich currant bread. On the tin was an exquisitely Teutonic sentiment: "This Stimulates the Appetite and Enriches the Blood." M. Caro is seldom without it.

MARCH 3, 1938.

So it goes on. My absurd powers of sleeping are employed to the full, and sometimes I sleep 16 hours out of the 24 $\frac{1}{2}$. Even so I have read with great care that gigantic masterpiece, La Chartreuse de Parme, though I could only manage it in translation, together with Balzac's study of Stendhal; and I am now well on with Anatole France's Thais in the original. The day begins at 7.30 when my hot water is brought. Cleansing presents great difficulties even to such a moderate washer as myself - moderate, at any rate, under difficulties. There is only cold water, even in the bath, and this is of a strange colour and smell which may be due to disinfectants or else to the presence of defunct fish. At any rate I had to clamour for hot water, which

seemed to the steward a most unreasonable requirement; at first it was given me in a cream-jug, then in a tea-pot, and only this morning - now that he sees I am a confirmed washer - in a small jug. Breakfast takes ten minutes, and my room is done at the same time in five; then I take a walk on the deck and sometimes am requested by Herr Wohlgemuth to play with him a curious game called "shuffleboard". It is played with wooden discs which have to be propelled from a distance by a stick onto numbered squares. I am not very good at it, but not disgracefully bad. The after part of the deck sometimes presents the agreeable appearance of a French village. At one point you will come upon a man bending an old iron rod in a primitive forge. A little farther on others are stitching mats and hanging up their washing on a line. Another will be repairing a puncture in the inevitable bicycle which stands behind the little hut I have mentioned in the stern.

Then I go in to read or write, and after lunch I read or write again. Often I sleep during the afternoon, and as soon as dinner is over I go to bed and am asleep before 9. The Captain, the Second Officer and the Chief Engineer come to lunch and dinner. They are all men of a grace and culture such as I am sure you would never find in an English boat of equal unimportance. They have perfect charm and ease of manner and their conversation ranges exceedingly widely. I wish I could join in it more, but though I understand most of it, I find the greatest impediment to speaking. This, however, is gradually breaking down under the stress of necessity. The Germans are of course most anxious to speak English for they will need it in America - so I give one or other of them English lessons every day. Conversation at meals is tedious but instructive, almost everything that is said being translated into German, French and English so that everyone can have