

PROMENADE DECK.

by Ishbel Ross

SYNOPSIS . . . A luxurious five-month cruise around the world aboard the "Marenia" brings together a group of passengers for adventures, romantic, entertaining . . . and tragic. . . Like in "Grand Hotel" these passengers offer a study in human actions and reactions which unconsciously bare their souls . . . These characters are aboard the ship Macduff, dour Scotchman, single, of middle age; Miss Mudge, school teacher, spending the savings of 20 years; Angela, faithful wife of Lovat, gigolo; Dick Charlton, first officer; Clare, a person of experience; Joan, a dissipated flapper; Jenny, runaway wife, and Peter; Captain Baring, master of the ship . . . and his soul . . . NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

SIXTH INSTALMENT

"Well, I'm doing it. I'm painting a little, because I like to pass the time that way."

Macduff was charmed with Angela's way of tossing off her words. Here was a woman who might be worth her salt. She chatted about the Ganges, and gave him a lively picture of her own impressions that morning. Yes, she was an artist. He could tell that from her choice of words.

When Macduff was writing, he bothered little with externals, going in for sombre, philosophical stuff that some people seemed to like. It surprised him to see India through the sapient eyes of an intelligent woman. Soon he was talking himself, and marveling at his own fluency. For half an hour his companion sat back, entranced and amused, while he unbent. She lit a cigarette and watched him from under the brim of her hat. It must be the cocktails. He was off like an orator. There was nothing to do but listen, now that the floodgates were open. But would he ever come to the end of his soliloquy? Was he talking sense or nonsense? Angela realized that the man was simply unused to voicing his thoughts, although verbose, no doubt, on paper. She had heard vaguely of his books, but had never read anything that he had written. After this, she would

try to get hold of them and see what they were like.

The other people in the room who knew them were watching their table with surprise.

"Ye gods!" said Johnny to Clare. "Watch Macduff talking to Mrs. Wynant."

"It's a miracle. I'd like to know what he's saying. It would be Mrs. Wynant who would get him to talk."

"Won't you come with me to the river, Mr. Macduff?" Angela was saying, at the first break in their conversation. "I can't keep away. It's the most animated canvas I've ever seen in my life and I'm rather keen about masses of people."

"That's just where you're different from me," said Macduff, weighing his decision on whether to go with Angela or stay for a liqueur.

"No, I won't. There's nothing I dislike so much as human beings, and I find it depressing to look at such thousands mucking about together."

They went out to the veranda and he ordered liquors. Angela watched him, wondering if perfect frankness were not the cue in handling Macduff. She leaned towards him. "You're rather a myth on the boat," she laughed, "the man who must not be spoken to."

A deep roll of laughter shot surprisingly from his throat. "It's not on the boat alone—it's the way I live. I find that human contacts interfere with one's work and one's life."

"Then I can't understand why you travel around the world on a cruising boat. To escape from people on the Marenia is like trying to dodge bees in a hive."

"I came on a cruising boat because it takes me to out-of-the-way ports I'd never have been able to get to by any other means. Moreover, I've found all the isolation that I would get at home—at the least possible expense," Macduff finished, cannily.

Angela sighed and swung her parasol. "Sometimes I think one would be happier alone, in a world of one's own. The constant give and take of social relations wear one down."

Macduff's face was loosening in amiable lines, and she thought she detected a twinkle through his rimless spectacles. Or was it just the sun on the lens?

"I'm thinking that you're not very happy," he told her, surprisingly. "Happy enough, Mr. Macduff, but wandering in my thoughts. To tell you the truth, they're in England with my husband and my home."

"Tell me about your home."

"I've never been able to conjure it up for anyone else, although it's so

vivid in my own mind. It's a rambling house with gables, frightfully ancient, with bits that have been added on from time to time. The ceilings are low and beamed, and the dormer windows are tucked in odd places under the eaves. It's filled with pictures, ancient and modern, and my dog Jock patters all over it like a presiding Turk."

Angela stopped abruptly, thinking that she had been lacking in tact and reserve.

"Do you live in New York, Mr. Macduff?"

"Yes, have you ever been there?" "Five years ago I visited it for a few weeks. I love it, the excitement, the tearing hurry, the air—such air! But to live in it—how does one manage that?"

"My life is as quiet and slow as if I lived on the tip end of Cornwall." "I don't see how you can dwell among such glorious skyscrapers and feel that life is quiet and slow. Life can't be slow in a soaring city. I think I should live on wings if New York were my home."

"It's all tosh, the things people think of New York. It's the best possible city for work, because it's one of the few places in the world where you are let alone if you want to be. I can work better there than anywhere under the sun."

"Perhaps that's why American women accomplish so much. I admire them greatly."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Don't you?" Her voice expressed surprise.

"No. They're scatterbrains—reckless creatures. They're also shockingly vain—spending, spending, everything for clothes and appearances."

"But how stunning they look!" "Like so many dolls in a window. The same eyes, the same lift to their chins, the same way of wearing their clothes, and the same ankles."

"But I can't imagine a race of women with better ankles! American women always surprise me afresh with the buoyancy of their spirit. They have such grace—perhaps because they're free and have economic independence. They're the only women who walk with hope and assurance."

"I don't approve of them at all." "Oh dear! What a pity! If I were a man and lived in America, I should admire them very much and fall in love with any number of them. They're intelligent, too. But I see it's a hopeless argument."

Macduff had lost the thread of the conversation, and seemed to be

stumbling towards an important conclusion of his own. He was standing, looking down at her with an air of gloom, Angela gazed at him softly and he shifted his weight. The sun was in his eyes, the garden was fragrant with blooms, the Union Jacks were still pleasantly warm in his stomach. He rubbed the back of his head meditatively and couldn't imagine why his feet were moving towards the river. What was the sense of going to the Ganges with a chance traveling acquaintance?

"How delightful of you to come with me to the river, Mr. Macduff," Angela's voice was gay with pleasure as she saw him falling into step. Her companion grunted and pulled on his pipe.

"We'll ride to Tiger Hill together to see the dawn over Mount Everest when we reach Darjeeling," he announced, amazed at his own desire to establish a deeper contact with the woman at his side.

"That will be splendid," she told him.

The afternoon sun fell in slanting rays over the Indian Ocean, shedding a flutter of gold on water that heaved in a darkening swell. The aquatic sports were about to begin in the swimming pool. Patty, brimful of energy, was diving repeatedly from the highest springboard.

"She was born to live in a swimming-suit," Jenny said, admiringly.

"A genuine water-nymph!" Peter remarked, always appreciative of the manifestations of physical perfection.

Jenny saw that Clare and Patty were both in the race. It would be interesting to watch the two of them together, for they were evenly matched, in spite of the difference in their ages.

Clare was a gifted swimmer, and her speed and form were equal to the best that girls half her age could do. No woman on the boat could compete with her except Patty. Joan Foster was good, but she slept all day and took most of her swims late at night.

Clare was in tangerine, a brilliant flash in the clear water of the tank. It suited her dusky skin. Patty was in a striking green suit.

The whistle blew and the contestants were off, with orange and green in the lead. Clare tore through the water like a goldfish, using the long Australian crawl. Patty made better time with the American crawl.

Johnny was pierced in a corner close to Angela. His face was set in anxious frowns, for he felt that the race had something to do with him. Patty won the first heat, Clare the second; they seemed to be marvelously paired. Angela sat silent, thinking of Johnny and wondering whom he wanted to win.

Clare was leading now, but Patty was creeping up. Every stroke brought her nearer to the fleet orange figure. Patty was breathing easily and turning in the water with each long stroke.

Johnny's heart was pounding. Clare was losing. Did he want her to lose? He did not know. Patty was magnificent. He liked the clean sweep of her strokes. He remembered his college days, and his heart went out to Patty. He knew that she would root for him, but Clare bewitched him.

But this was Patty's race. She must win! Johnny's throat was soapy, as it used to be when he tackled at football.

Patty won, and, as she touched the end of the swimming pool, he bit his lips on a shout of jubilation. Angela felt his suppressed excitement and was suddenly sure of something that had puzzled her for weeks.

But it was Clare he went over to speak to. Clare he helped out of the water. "Good stuff, Patty!" whispered Johnny as she passed him on her way to the dressing-room. "You and I'll have a race pretty soon."

Patty laughed in her throat, tossed her cap and strode on. She felt robust and happy, as if a dark shadow that had been creeping up on her for weeks had taken to its heels.

Clare was also in gay spirits, a step from Peter's side. She had not cared whether she won or lost; stress did nothing but give one crow's feet. "Well, that's over," she said. "Patty's like the wind. I admire her form in the water."

"You were quite worth watching, too." Peter's voice was warm, and his glance passed over her like a searching flame.

"Why didn't you compete, Mrs. Rumford?"

"Oh, I'm a drone," laughed Jenny. "She's a lorelai who looks for rocks to sit on in the sun while she combs her hair," said Peter.

Was Jenny dreaming, or did she catch a look of understanding, the sudden raising of a curtain, between those two? Her heart missed a beat. No, that was absurd. Day-dreams! Clare and Peter had scarcely spoken to each other since they'd come on the boat, except for their chat in the lounge at Bombay. They all moved out to the deck to dry themselves.

"Isn't the sea strange today?" Jenny murmured, after a long silence. "This is the first time since we left the Mediterranean that I've seen the water crumpled, or foam breaking on the waves."

No one was paying any attention to what she said.

"This is no place to dry," said Clare, shivering with cold. "It's too late. The sun's gone down."

Jenny was lost in her thoughts, watching the dying sun in a semi-france. She would not go below while the sunset lasted. The others had already gone; she had not noticed them leaving her.

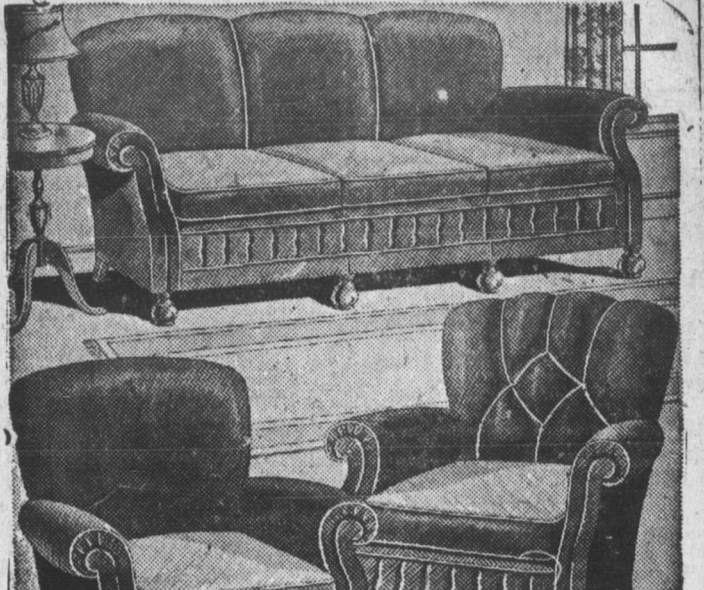
She went down to B deck and along the corridor. Her glance swept by chance towards an alleyway, and her hand went up to her mouth to stop the exclamation that sprang from her lips.

Continued Next Week

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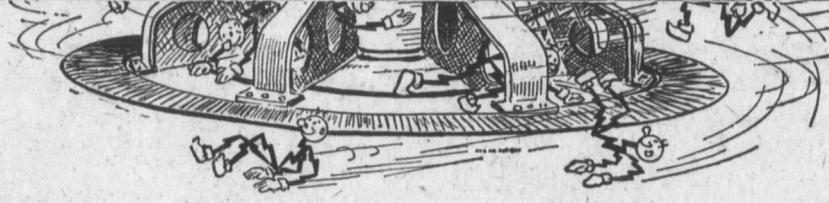
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