

# *Schöffling & Co.*

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## DAIQUIRIS AND LICE

She had read about Atlantic crossings in Henry James's books and in *Tatler* and seen pictures of life on board the *Olympic*, the *France* and the *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*, imagining them as cities beating a path across the seas, and she remembered having dreamt on one of her last nights in Newport of a great white tower lying in the water and gliding across the surface, though she didn't know how. In that dream the floating tower was filled with laughter and music; it was brightly illuminated, visible from afar on a dark sea lit only by the glow of the stars.

She had pictured herself drinking champagne, and if there was no champers, cocktails at the very least, highballs and daiquiris. The narrow, long-stemmed glasses were tossed overboard by giggling women wearing fluttering silk scarves and cream-coloured bonnets over pageboy hairstyles, squawking 'Five klick it!' instead of Veuve Clicquot, with no inkling that it was not a corpulent, middle-aged man with a fob chain and spats who had made Clicquot champagne into a household name, but the young widow of the company's heir, who would take orders from no one

In magazines she had seen tail-coated and pomaded young men leaning against the railing and smoking Pall Malls. Their faces were like those of the *Echo*'s photos of officer candidates killed in the war and when, in her mind's eye, a tipsy lady melded herself to her dance partner's shoulder, the sea breeze billowed chintz curtains from a cabin's balcony doors out over the sea like a flag, which signified nothing but was beautiful purely because it moved in harmony with the world and its decay.

The *Orion* was no luxury liner and nor was it a gigantic ship or a floating tower but an ageing medium-sized steamer, black and rusting in places where the paint had flaked off, with two yellow funnels that poisoned the air and were emblazoned, as if to add insult to injury, with a green cross on either side. It was about 200 metres long and had two masts, 20 metres from the bow and stern respectively, which were at least faintly reminiscent of the lost age of rigged steamships and the grand old sail-powered passenger ships of yore. The *Orion* was an old dame from the previous century, an old German maid launched in Kiel way back in 1876.

There was a First Class for the wealthy, but glimpses of this high society were rare because the promenade deck, the lounges and the smoking balconies were guarded by sailors who could not take a joke and were implacable and impervious to charm. By her calculations, the lifeboats were intended only for these largely invisible and well-heeled members of London and New York society circles. Fourteen capacious sloops, some of them in a perilous state. Far too few even for the people in the Second Class berths on two cabin decks above the waterline, let alone for all those with whom she shared Third Class like teeming mice in a sewer and had despised from the moment they put out to sea because, almost without exception, they stank – of floor rags, sour and grey, or soggy old bread – and because they scared her, all of them, the women and children as much as the men with their lecherous, bloodshot eyes.

She didn't know how many people were making this voyage with her. The *Orion* left Portsmouth three hours late in the early afternoon of 25 February and even then it had been impossible to move anywhere on one of the two rodent-class decks without jostling someone who would yell and go for your throat. The dormitories – deep underwater in the ship's belly, continuously rattled by the throbbing of the furnaces in the engine room below – rang with babies' screams and scuffling children. Clusters of young card players perched on bunks beside an even younger mother who had bared her breast to feed a slurping, wailing infant. Cursing on all sides. A tempest of coughs and snores. There was drinking, nagging, laughing, jeering and brawling. She watched two men get into an argument by the railing and, in the blink of an eye, start pummelling each other with their fists before reeling onto the deck in a flurry of vicious kicks. A boot flew in a long arc into the sea, and it took the yells of a few heavily tattooed members of the otherwise tight-lipped crew with *Orion* stitched in white and gold on their dark-blue caps – as if the constellation had fallen to Earth – to stop one man from tossing his much older adversary overboard after the boot. Which would at least have meant one insufferable idiot less.

And so they chugged east along the Channel to avoid a storm off the Irish coast. The master of the *Orion*, Cap'n Archibald, only ever spotted, like a guru or a maharajah, amid a throng of disciple officers, initially set course for the North Sea. Rain poured down from the grey sky like a constant reminder of Newport to the passenger with boarding card 1213. Having overheard several conversations between Welsh women below decks, she knew that severe storms over Ireland and now Scotland – reportedly a wintry hurricane coming in off the North Atlantic – and empty berths had forced the steamer to make first for Rotterdam, where more passengers were waiting, before heading on to Hamburg. Only once the ship had taken on board several hundred Dutch and Germans and,

bursting at its seams, sailed the six hours back down the Elbe would the actual seven- or eight-day transatlantic voyage begin, up the east coast of England and through the now-navigable waters around the Orkney Islands off northern Scotland.

When the Dutch coast hove into view, an elderly woman standing beside her at the railing burst into tears. Ennid saw the woman's eyes: they looked disconcertingly happy. She realised how little she grasped of what went on on deck and what moved people, and how ill prepared she was for the absurdity that confronted her everywhere. All that was visible on the horizon was a thin green-grey strip which might equally have been land or fog.

When she had plugged her ears and tied her money pouch tightly to her wrist, she would creep into her bunk and sleep, albeit fitfully and for a few hours only. She had nightmares about spiders and penises. Men opened their fists and out crawled lice. Not the smallest ray of light entered the dormitory; it was never-ending night down there. If she lay awake, she would read poems by John Keats, something she had promised herself to do, and tried to learn the odes by heart:

'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter . . .'

The verses filled her with confidence, and she was so touched by Keats's sensuality that she believed his voice – which she imagined to be young, youthful and yet sombre – would lull and guide her into deep slumbers.

When she woke again, her whole body was sticky with cold sweat. Everything was fine – the money was there, the book for Mick, her cardigan, the hat. For a long time she just lay there on her bunk, stretching and listening to the murmuring whose volume increased with every minute.

Was Orion the great constellation that appeared over Newport in late autumn and hung in the sky until April, sometimes May – the three bright stars of the hunter's belt – or was Orion itself a star? Why had they named this ship after it?

She had a shower, surrounded by screeching little girls and their elder sisters, who merely smiled and allowed the wild bunch to let off steam, and then went back up on deck.

Through the drizzle she saw smoking chimneys, cranes and countless ships of every shape and size – steamers, freighters, sailing boats, cutters, tugs, launches and lighters; the bedlam of the huge port and its grey city. The buildings, squares and streets looked to her as if they had been washed up on the banks of a nameless river, and the countryside to the north and south of Rotterdam must be wide and

totally flat. Land folded seamlessly into sea and, as around the small lagoon at Trelech-a'r-Ryddws that suddenly popped into her mind, there appeared to be no boundaries between the lines and shapes, nothing but fluid transitions.

She stood a while longer at the railing because she had spotted the girl from the waiting room in Portsmouth close by and was striving to remember the youngster's name. Brittney . . . Betsy . . . The girl, a picture of drabness, was clinging to her mother, a woman who looked terribly tired and was barely older than Ennid herself.

'No, sweetheart, no, no,' she was telling her daughter. 'Where we're going, it looks completely different. There are enormous cities full of people living in houses as high as the clouds, as high as the stars. And aeroplanes fly around between the houses, and anyone who wants to can fly one of those aeroplanes or build those houses or do something completely different.'

'How about Daddy?' the girl asked. 'What does Daddy want to do?'

'Let's get there first, Biggs,' the young woman said. 'It's a long way still, quite a way. But we're all here together, you know.'

## A BELT OF THREE STARS

Hamburg, 3rd March '21

Dear friends,

My steamer will probably leave Europe sometime tonight. I'll only be able to write again from N.Y., so hopefully in 6 days' time when I am channelled through Ellis Island with the ratfaces.

Which is why I'm enclosing 2 letters at once in this envelope! Don't be worried about my crossing to Rotterdam in the 1st. It was absolutely horrid. I genuinely wondered whether I shouldn't get off in Hamburg + call it all off + come home.

But things turned out differently + you won't believe all the experiences I'm having. The ship is presently sailing through Germany, down the Elbe towards the North Sea. I'm lying on my bunk. It's cosy here because beyond the curtains is total chaos. Of course, the Germans are now on board + I can tell you – they're monsters! Nonsense. Many of them are just as sad.

Everywhere people are sitting + lying around + writing because the pilot will disembark at the mouth of the Elbe + take the last mail with him – including the letter to you all. I won't have time to copy it out. Please pass it around! I love all three of you. Don't ever forget that! You are three bright stars in a belt that gives me strength.

You have to engage with people here. Of course, that's hard when we're so jammed together. Still, no one is better or worse than anyone else. Everyone is worthy of love. I believe Tolstoy.

I went out on deck somewhere between Rotterdam + Hamburg. I was gazing at the starlit sky to the south + saw the old man with the giraffe soft toy in his coat pocket again, a few yards away. He was standing on his own by the railing, smoking. It wasn't snowing as much as now – crazy. So I went over to him + we introduced ourselves: Mr Vanbronck + Miss Muldoon.

It warmed my heart to hear his old-fashioned English. He knows Swansea + Cardiff, but not Newp. His wife came out to see us briefly, a small pale lady. She greeted me in Dutch + said goodnight to her husband. They have been married for well over 50 years + are glass dealers in a town whose name I've

forgotten. Their business went under during the war + so they started saving up for America where their son and his family live in a suburb of Boston – glass dealers like them.

Mr Vanbronck asked me where I'm travelling to + I told him N.Y. first, maybe somewhere else from there, depends.

Why I'm alone – whether I have enough money – why I drag my leg + what it depends on: he didn't ask about any of those things. We just chatted + gazed at the sky + watched the few people passing by. The deck is a lot quieter at night. There's nowhere on the ship I love more than underneath the rusty lifeboats. + all the snow. Like in my dreams when I was small.

He told me: Please watch out for yourself. You are young + on your own. There are some crazy people with lots of money on board + and they take pleasure in organising a sort of masked ball.

So I've heard, I said (not true) + so what. I've nothing to lose.

He said: Really? One always has something to lose. At the very least one's dignity – the soul of life. One often loses what is most important in one's moments of greatest success + finest prospects.

+ then he told me about Orion.

Look at that constellation. Up above is Orion, which gave our ship its name. Do you know its story? He showed me the shoulders + feet + belt + sword. Many people count the Horsehead Nebula too, apparently.

I really had no idea that Orion was so big + made up of so many stars!

Mr Vanbronck said: It's the most beautiful constellation. The giant Orion was a hunter, the greatest hunter far and wide. There was no animal he had not slain. He boasted about his skills + for his arrogance the gods blinded him. He would only regain his eyesight, they said, if turned his face to the sun god as he rose from the ocean. Orion abducted a young blacksmith from the island of the Cyclops. He raised him onto his shoulders and carried him off. The blacksmith guided Orion to a distant shore where the sun goddess fell in love with him + begged her brother to restore his sight.

Me: What happened to the apprentice?

Him: Now there's a question! He laughed at me. He said he had never asked himself that. Do you see the belt of three stars? I nodded. Alnitak. Alnilam. Mintaka. The stars of the feet are Saiph + Rigel. The shoulders: Betelgeuse + Bellatrix. The head is seldom visible because it is in the middle of a nebula.

(By the way, I immediately noted down all the star names so I could send them to you.)

I said: Maybe Bellatrix or Betelgeuse actually represents the young blacksmith on Orion's shoulder.

Mr Vanbronck was astonished. + because he hadn't heard of it, I also told him about Oscar Wilde's short story *The Star-Child*.

Do you understand (do the three of you understand) why that makes me happy + why since then I believe everything will turn out well? It's good that I left, even if it has distressed you all + surely some other people.

We went inside because the snow was thickening + went down to the main corridor. Lots of German men women + children were still waiting for a berth.

I asked Mr Vanbronck: Those people with lots of money – what do they do exactly? Masked balls? Why?

He said: They dress up in costumes. They send out sailors. They promise them money + alcohol. Gin.

I laughed: I love gin!

The seamen buy clothes + old suits in 3rd Class + the rich go around the ship dressed up in that stuff + have some fun.

Naturally I said: That is horrible and mean. I hope they catch those people. You have to watch yourself around people like them. But in fact I thought what the old gentleman was saying sounded absolutely fabulous.

I have more to write about falling in love. I may not be the sun goddess (I don't think) but the boy from Brittany (Corentin, Coco) has taken a shine to me anyway.

His *maman* (Danielle) had trouble stopping him from jumping ship in Hamburg. He wanted to take a look at St. Pauli + all because I'd put the idea into his head. A woman from our row of cabins cracked a joke about it: Coco + Miss Ennid want to go out smooching on the Reeperbahn. Dolt that I am, I said: And why not.

I know what being in love can do to you + I told his mother I would have a word with him.

To Coco I said: You're going to Montreal. I'm not. Do I look as if I can speak French? I'm going to look for a husband in N.Y. or Oklahoma City. Or are you rich?

Yes.

I beg your pardon?

Because now I know you. Otherwise, sadly not.

Exactly. No one from 3rd Class is allowed off the ship – not you + not me. That we have in common. *Tu comprends?*



Everyone was out on deck when we docked in Hamburg + some 2,000 passengers were watching the excitement in the harbour. The Germans came on board. Customs officers + the fur-coats + then emigrants – far fewer than feared, thank God. They look like the rest of us. The whole city was out on the quayside. Bells were ringing. They were all cheering + waving to an airship that looked like a flying silver gherkin. The boy + I stood next to the Vanbroncks + made sure no one trampled on the old couple.

I have to stop now. The mail! They're walking along the rows of beds shouting: Anyone still writing a letter, finish up now. Shed one last tear on your message + wrap it up!

Because the pilot is leaving the ship in 10 mins. And then we head out into the North Sea.

What can I wish you?

White clouds! I've never seen so much snow.

Maybe one last thing I've never told you but have always wished for you with all my heart: Be happy. Find the one you love + don't lose yourselves in the process. Have a family (as Reg does already) back home there in a better Wales. Out at sea I will look up in the night at Orion's belt + see the three of you there, twinkling:

Alnitak

Alnilam

Mintaka

Farewell!

Ever yours

Ennid