

## THE CORSICAN EXPRESS

**N**ORMALLY the Ajaccio Express makes a daily run from Ajaccio to Ghisonaccia, in the south of Corsica. "Run" isn't exactly the word. The Ajaccio Express is no streamliner with Pullmans and observation car. It was nicknamed by Ajaccio's more sardonic wits. A locomotive, early-Waterloo vintage, of which any museum would be proud, tugs two shabby wooden carriages, one for the mail and one for the passengers. After the train has left Ajaccio, no one knows if and when it will arrive at Ghisonaccia. The passengers hope and, literally, pray. The express made a speed of fourteen miles an hour, which wasn't bad, the native passengers assured me. Hens, dogs, cats, and goats wandered between the mail and passenger cars. I was kept busy trying to keep the dirt off my suit and the coal dust out of my eyes. In vain I had tried to close the window just after we started. The entire side wall of the car trembled, but the window remained fiercely open.

That I happened to be on the Ajaccio Express was all my own fault. I had come to Corsica from the Riviera in July, 1940, when the armistice made life fairly difficult, even in southern France. Corsica, I thought, would be another world, carefree and untroubled, untouched by the Nazi conquest. My friends on the Continent had warned me that there were still bandits on the island and the vendetta was as much in style as ever. But for the first part of the trip, at least, there seemed nothing to worry about.

There were frequent stops when a lone passenger wanted to board the train. Now and then some people would wave, and the train would stop, the engineer get out, and they would all sit down beside the rails. After a few minutes' conversation, the engineer would shake hands with everybody and get back on board the locomotive. I asked the passenger next to me who those people were.

He shrugged. "*Des parents et des amis, je suppose.*" The engineer seemed to have quite a family.

To make up lost time, the engineer did not stop at the stations where no passengers were waiting. The conductor threw out the mailbag to the attendant, usually a middle-aged woman in a black

silk dress clutching a saucepan with one hand and a baby with the other. The passenger next to me explained that she was the stationmaster's wife and did all the dispatching.

The train left the plains of Ajaccio and started climbing, coughing its way past small forest fires and the ruins of a deserted Roman town miraculously built into the rocks centuries ago. The stops became more frequent, and the shepherds and peasants in our car prayed with increasing fervor. They said, in explaining one of these stops, that the engineer had to "oil" the locomotive. Later, even that didn't help, and we had to wait until "the pressure in the boiler calmed down."

Sunset came, then darkness—solid, hostile darkness. There was no light in the car. We were scheduled to arrive at Ghisonaccia at 7:12 P.M. and it was now past eleven. We entered a tunnel. The locomotive became more and more erratic, producing strange, clanking noises, which echoed against the walls of the tunnel. Suddenly there was a minor explosion—a sort of hissing and thundering sound—and the train stopped dead.

This was serious. We were on a single-track line and my neighbors told me a train from the opposite direction was expected to arrive any moment. I thought of the stationmaster's wife. Suppose the baby was crying and she went into her kitchen, forgetting about trains and signals.

Our engineer was said to be the best on the line. We could hear him swear as he worked on the engine. But the train didn't budge, and the passengers were praying in French, Italian, and Corsican.

Suddenly the coach was illuminated by the dim light of a candle with a giant shadow behind. Looking up, I saw an old

man, perhaps seventy but still erect, with a magnificent profile and deep-set, clever eyes. He commented on the "unusual situation," adding, "I see you are a stranger, Monsieur. I'll be glad to lead you out of the tunnel. There won't be any collision; the other train's locomotive is also out of commission. We are close to Propriano and my little place is only a mile from here. Won't you come and have a glass of wine with me? I



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haven't spoken to a stranger for a long time. Perhaps you have been in France recently. You must tell me what life is like there now."

"Well," I said, "but the train—"

"You will have to wait until the second locomotive arrives and the train can be moved."

His voice had the gentle timbre of a viola d'amore. I was silent. "Some of the most dangerous Corsican bandits look like operatic baritones," a friend in Cannes had told me.

Everybody seemed to know the old man, and at his age he couldn't be a very active bandit any more. Besides, anything would be better than spending the rest of the night on a wooden bench in the dirty carriage amidst the hens and goats. I accepted his invitation.

He stared at me for a moment and bowed with old-fashioned *grandezza*. He said, "I am Philippe Fernande Colombo."

"Enchanté," I said, and introduced myself.

He seemed disappointed, like an actor who expected applause at his first appearance and found his audience as quiet as the grave.

I followed him through the tunnel, stumbling along the rails in the flickering of the candle. A dog was barking. Hens were running between my feet, cackling and merry. Once I stumbled and would have fallen if the old man hadn't caught me.

I sighed with relief as we left the tunnel. Outside, the moon was pale, but after the blackness in there the light seemed bright and cheerful. The old man led the way along a narrow path through the low, thick, tangled underwood of the Corsican *macchie*—cork trees, honeysuckle, wild Madonna lilies. The hot air smelled of earth and burned leaves.

The old man stopped so suddenly I almost bumped into him. In the dimness I saw the outlines of a small wooden hut. A lamp was dangling from above the door, and he turned it on. Beneath was a dusty shield with a crude sign in English: "BAR."

Of all the bars I had seen on French soil, in Paris, Algiers, Saïgon, and Dakar, this was the oddest one. It didn't even look like a bar. There were no bottles or glasses on the shelves behind the counter, only ancient books, placed there carelessly and covered with dust. There were three leather-bound volumes on the counter. The walls were covered with framed newspaper clippings, drawings, and medieval maps. I wondered if my host had been a celebrity in his time,

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perhaps an actor or a singer. Those clippings looked like the pathetic souvenirs of past fame; some showed his picture. But why the maps and the two antique prints on the wall beside the framed bar license, showing "The Ocean Wave, the Ship of Columbus" and "The Oldest Known Portrait of Our Very Magnificent Lord Don Cristóbal Colón"?

I sat down at a table. The old man went behind the counter. He opened a drawer and came over to the table with a bottle, a loaf of white bread, and a plate of cheese. He poured the wine. "Try it. You won't find a better one in all Corsica. The shepherds brought it down from Sartène. They always bring me presents. Good people—a bit funny, though, and very superstitious. They look at the shoulder blades of a goat and tell you the future. Good people, though they don't understand."

"Understand what?"

Again the disappointed look. "I am the only direct descendant of Christopher Columbus," he said.

So it was the old story, all over again. Scores of people along the Italian shore of the Mediterranean still boast of their relationship to Columbus. There are Colombos in Genoa, Savona, Oneglia, Cogoleto, Nervi, Piacenza, Finale, and Pradello, all of them claiming a direct family tie with the discoverer. Even in the old Corsican town of Calvi, one is shown a dreary, dilapidated house where the late Admiral of the Indies allegedly first saw the light. The Calvais don't believe it themselves, but they like to heckle the big-mouthed people from Ajaccio who make so much fuss about Napoleon Bonaparte's birthplace, *nom de Dieu*, or those idiots from Caprera with their tomb of Garibaldi.

It was warm, and the wine was strong and good, and the old man kept pouring it out, talking softly, excitedly. As he moved around, his muscular hands accentuated his words. Foreign-sounding names of men and places, scattered bits of history, torn-off pieces of a phrase brought from far away by the wind. Cristóbal Colón, the Portuguese weaver in Genoa; Colombo from Calvi, the direct ancestor; the notary's archives. There were parchments on the table in front of us, heaps of them, and more wine.

I was dozing when there was a knocking at the door and the engineer of the express came in. The second locomotive had arrived and the train was about to leave.

"There's no hurry, Pierre-Jerôme," the old man said.

The engineer agreed. There was no



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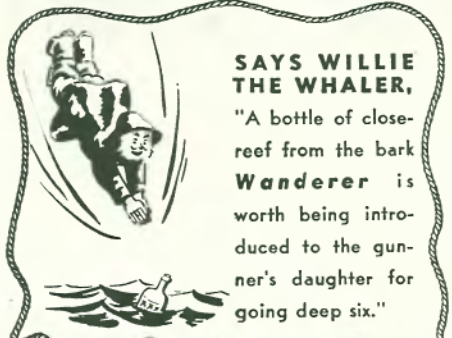




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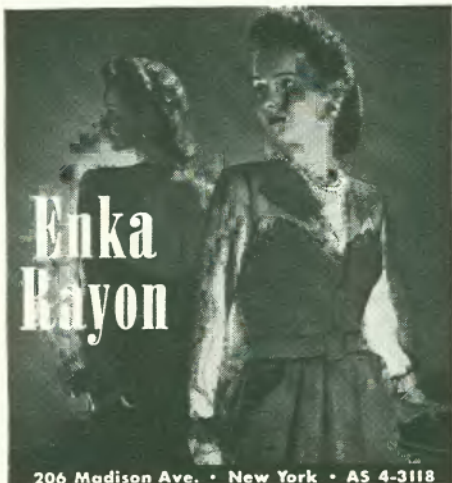


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hurry at all and he'd be delighted to have a glass of M. Colombo's excellent wine. The passengers could wait.

At last the engineer and I said good-bye, and I wanted to pay for the wine. The old man raised his hands in a gesture of noble refusal.

"*Vous m'avez fait heureux. Au revoir, Monsieur.*"

The engineer put his hand on my shoulder in a friendly gesture and we left. I turned back. The old man was standing in front of the hut, a tall silhouette against the dim sky.

The engineer was whistling a Genoese melody. "Do you know him?" I asked.

"M. Colombo? Certainly. Everybody knows him. We all like him, too. Even Romanetti liked him."

"Romanetti?"

"You haven't heard of Romanetti? Why, he was the famous bandit who hid in the *macchie* for years. The gendarmes couldn't get him and he refused to give himself up. But then M. Colombo went into the *macchie* and talked to Romanetti, and they made a deal and Romanetti came out. A fine man, M. Colombo, a fine man. When Morito's wife, my cousin's sister-in-law, was sick, he went up there and brought her food and medicine. He knows more about sickness and medicine than the doctor down in Ajaccio."

He led me back to the tunnel and the train. The second locomotive made encouraging noises. The passengers were sitting on the steps, which ran the length of the carriage. The other train was nowhere in sight. A cock was crowing. I was tired. I yawned.

"*En voiture, messieurs, dames,*" the engineer said. "*On y va.*"

"He is a descendant of Christopher Columbus," I said. "At least he claims to be."

The engineer closed the door to the carriage and turned toward the locomotives. "I don't know," he said, his voice clearly audible through the open window. "Frankly, I don't care. I wonder where he gets his wine. His wine is excellent." —JOSEPH WECHSBERG

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[A.P. wire report received by the Hackensack (N.J.) Bergen Evening Record] A138WX

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