

AUDITION

EVER since I was a violinist and orchestra leader aboard French Line ships in the late twenties and the early thirties, people have asked me how I happened to become a ship's musician, as though the making of a seafaring fiddler were more mysterious than the making of, say, an embalmer or a B.-M. T. motorman. The simple fact is that in those days in Paris there was always an opening with the French Line for an experienced instrumentalist who could produce a *certificat de bonnes mœurs* from the *commissariat de police*, pass the medical examination by the steamship line's doctor, and, above all, come successfully through *l'audition*. Many a poised and self-confident musician was mortally terrified of the audition. Candidates for a job aboard a French Line vessel had to audition before Monsieur Arnould, the musical director of the company, at his apartment, 36 Avenue Parmentier.

I went there one afternoon with Maurice, a genial, whimsical Alsatian 'cellist with whom I had worked at the Folies-Bergère, the Gaumont-Palace, and the Bal Chez Laboule, at Nogent-sur-Marne, a rustic establishment mainly frequented by somewhat battered lovelorn ladies from the capital. Maurice, an old hand at ocean crossings, wanted me as second violinist for his newly formed orchestra aboard *La Bourdonnais*, a decrepit French Line steamer of so little importance that she didn't even have a boat train. Maurice told me not to worry about the audition, since he happened to be a great friend of Monsieur Arnould. They had worked together in the old days aboard the *Provence*, Monsieur Arnould as bass player and *chef d'orchestre*, Maurice as first 'cellist. After twenty years of faithful musical service to the passengers of the French Line, Monsieur Arnould had been retired from sea duty and made musical director in charge of personnel.

A narrow, winding *escalier en limacon* led up to Monsieur Arnould's apartment, on the fourth floor. The waxed wooden stairs were as slippery as ice, quite a problem for Maurice, who was carrying his 'cello and had had a number of *apéritifs* and *digestifs*, with some *demies*, *bocks*, and glasses of wine for good measure. Twice he stumbled over his instrument and almost broke his neck. The staircase smelled of onion soup, and between the second and third floor we met a tall, cool blonde coming down. She gave Maurice an encourag-

ing smile out of the corner of her almond-shaped eyes. He whirled around and would have followed her if I hadn't blocked his way. At last I got him up to the fourth floor. The bell beside the Arnould door didn't work, and Maurice raised his fist and hammered a melody from Massenet's "Manon" on the door. "Watch the rhythm," he said to me. "Arnould is crazy about 'Manon.'" A fat, smiling, perfunctorily made-up lady in a silk dressing gown opened the door and exclaimed with delight as she saw my friend. Maurice hugged her fondly, introduced her as Madame Arnould, and we went in. Madame said Monsieur Arnould would be in right away.

The music room was large and bright. There was an upright piano in one corner, next to a large window, and a harmonium in the opposite corner. Two of the four walls were covered with a peculiar collection of instruments—a violin with bow, a clarinet, a banjo, a tenor saxophone, a bombardon, a trumpet, an English horn, a viola d'amore, and an instrument identified by Maurice as a Japanese samisen. These instruments were traps for wise guys who didn't bring their instruments, hoping to get away without an audition—except, that is, for the viola d'amore and the samisen, which were purely ornamental.

The other two walls of the room had a distinctly nautical flavor. There were pictures of the great steamers aboard which Monsieur Arnould had worked in his earlier days: the *Leviathan*, *Majestic*, *Aquitania*, *Provence*, and the *France*, her four funnels proudly smoking, including the one that was a dummy. On the piano was a small model of the Capitol at Washington and

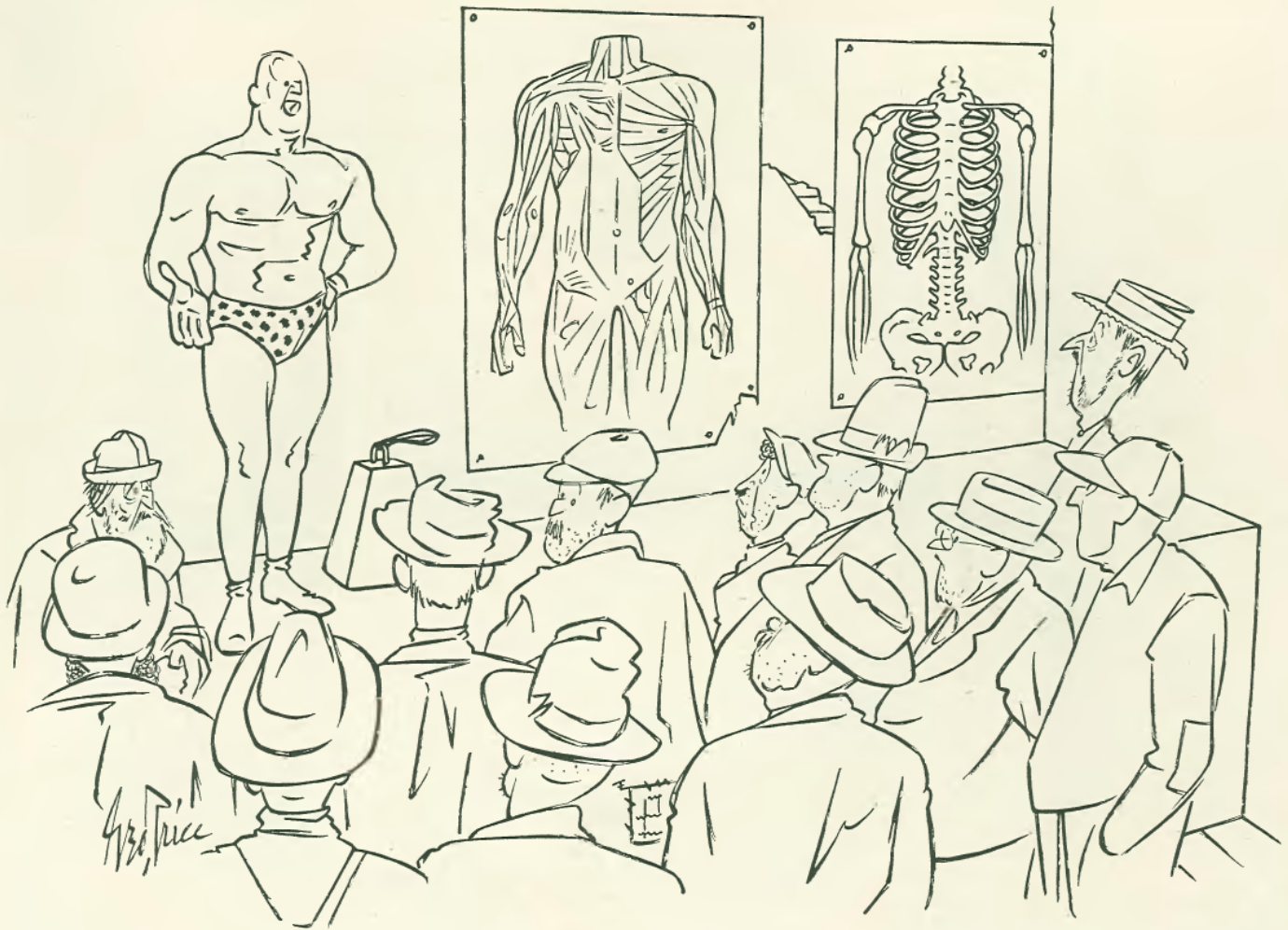
an ebony elephant of the sort that was cynically displayed and sold on Victoria Street in Colombo as "genuine Ceylonese" in spite of the imprint on the bottom—"Made in Czechoslovakia."

MONSIEUR ARNOULD made an impressive entrance through a side door. He was a formidable, huge, heavy man and as he moved through the room the instruments on the walls trembled softly. He had a carefully trimmed Vandyke beard and wore striped trousers, a cutaway, and a mariner's cap. A thick gold chain, from which was suspended an enormous black stone, dangled over his stomach. He looked as though he had walked out of a Rembrandt painting. Had he been dressed in dirty dungarees, unshaven, and carrying a half-emptied bottle of gin, it would have been easy to visualize him as the skipper of a pirate schooner running his sinister craft between Hong Kong and Macao for the benefit of the old Vitaphone company. He shook hands with us and gave me a broad grin. As musicians grow old, they often begin to resemble the instrument they play. Violinists look moody and wear their hair almost half as long as that of their bow; flautists are gaunt and nervous; bass-tuba players, full of beer, have shiny, pink, broad, tubalike faces. Monsieur Arnould had something of the jovial, placid dignity of the bull fiddle. There was a photograph on one wall, hanging next to the smoking France, which showed him amidst a crowd of early-century lovelies with wasplike waists and enormous hats covered with zoos and flower gardens, and I remembered Maurice's saying that Monsieur Arnould had been a great success with *les Américaines* on their way to Europe without their husbands.

Monsieur Arnould asked me if I had travelled aboard ships and I said, according to Maurice's instructions, "Through all the seven seas, Monsieur," a stock phrase which reportedly never missed its effect on the musical director in charge of personnel. The statement was not entirely true. My only ocean experience had been a half-hour trip between Marseilles and the Château d'If, where I had gone to look at the gloomy cell of Edmond Dantès.

Monsieur Arnould nodded and casually took up a few sheets of music from a large, disorderly pile on the floor beside the piano. He handed me a crumpled, much-used one. "*On commence avec la 'Manon' fantaisie*," he said. Monsieur Arnould always used the indefinite





"Before I begin, I must ask anyone engaged in an essential war industry to return to his job, as it is not my intention to interfere with the war effort."

pronoun when referring to himself. This habit he had acquired as a result of frequent conversations with American passengers, who, as he put it, "were driving you crazy talking all the time of themselves. Nothing but I's and I's. *On en a assez.*"

My audition was perfunctory, no doubt owing to Maurice's recommendation. Monsieur Arnould sat down at the piano, I unpacked my violin, and Maurice took out his 'cello. We played the first twenty bars from the "Manon" fantasy, and Monsieur Arnould remarked that I sounded "*assez bien, un violoniste classique.*" Apparently I confirmed this flattering judgment by my performance of Kreisler's "Caprice Viennois," for Monsieur Arnould nodded in satisfaction, saying, "*Bon, bon.*" He wrote my name in a small, red-leather book and thus I became a full-fledged ship's musician.

I made a few transatlantic crossings as second violinist with Maurice aboard

La Bourdonnais. Each time we got back to Paris, we would go to see Monsieur Arnould and report informally on our work. The world of the ship's musician is round and full of fun, and Monsieur Arnould was delighted with such bits of gossip as that the pianist aboard the Berengaria had been caught in a state-room with a red-headed woman from Minneapolis; that aboard the Hapag liner Hamburg there was an idiotic brass band of *Musik-Kellner*, who waited on tables and, between *Sauerbraten*, *Klöße*, and *Rote Grütze*, blew the "Hohenfriedberger Marsch" and excerpts from "Rheingold;" that a new purser aboard the Statendam made the musicians get up and rehearse at 9 A.M., an unheard-of brutality; and that the 'cellist aboard the Majestic was robbed in a Hoboken bar.

ONE day in Paris—I had just completed my fourth transatlantic round trip and been promoted to first

violinist aboard La Bourdonnais—I encountered at my hotel a dear friend, Franzl, from back home, in Prague. Franzl was in Paris on a three-week vacation, for which he had slaved and saved all year long. He was an underpaid clerk at the Prague Petschek bank, where he spent eight dull hours a day picking up the phone and supplying the customers of the bank with the latest New York Stock Exchange quotations. Bank clerks in Prague, as everywhere, have a lot of holidays. These Franzl spent at his piano. He was an excellent amateur pianist and the principal attraction at many musical parties which worried Prague matrons gave for their unmarried daughters. His specialty was a musical trick which fascinated his listeners. His audience would give him three widely different themes, such as the "Tannhäuser" Pilgerchor, "Vilia, Oh, Vilia," from "The Merry Widow," and "Yes! We Have No Bananas," and he would work them into a beau-



tiful improvisation, complete with counterpoint and a fugue at the end.

There was only one subject that fascinated Franzl more than music and that was Wall Street. Being on the receiving end of the New York quotations had filled him with an ardent desire to visit the sacred place where the market prices were being made. He searched the anterooms of all the dentists in Prague for old copies of American magazines and newspapers and clipped out all pictures of and references to Wall, Broad, Pine, and Nassau Streets. He had read so much about the financial district of Manhattan that he probably knew it better than many people who worked there. His room was full of photographs of the Stock Exchange, the Morgan bank, the Treasury, and the Irving Trust Building, and he owned, among other relics, a Manhattan telephone directory for spring, 1925, six inches of genuine New York ticker tape, envelopes of various New York brokerage firms, and two shares of United States Steel. He would have given his right hand to see Man-

hattan, and he told everyone of his desire to go there. His friends shrugged benevolently, and his boss, the *Herr Prokurist*, said rather pointedly that Prague bank clerks don't travel to America—that is, not unless they rob the vaults or defraud their clients.

The day before I met Franzl, Maurice and I had been to see Monsieur Arnould, who had told us that there was an opening for a pianist aboard the *De Grasse*, leaving the following night from Le Havre for New York. I talked to Maurice and we decided to take Franzl to Monsieur Arnould for an audition.

At Monsieur Arnould's apartment Franzl stammered dutifully that he had been through all the seven seas and Maurice recommended him as an old friend and a *pianiste classique*. Franzl was trembling with excitement—this was different from playing at the party of the *Herr Prokurist's* daughter; this was the great chance of his life to go to America and see Wall Street and even to get paid for it—and when Monsieur Arnould suggested that we all play the

beginning of the "Manon" fantasy, he turned pale and lost his head. We had taken him to see Monsieur Arnould in a feverish hurry and I had forgotten to ask him if he knew "Manon." Unfortunately, it was one of the few pieces he had never played at the Prague matrons' parties. In the "Manon" fantasy the pianist begins first, playing trioles and, naturally, setting the tempo. Franzl didn't know the tempo and he didn't take a good look at the score. His mind was in lower Manhattan, not in "Manon's" Paris. He hammered out the trioles twice as fast as prescribed. When Maurice and I joined him and tried to slow him down, he became completely lost and broke down. The rest was utter horror. Before long, Monsieur Arnould shook like a piece of jello and told us to stop, *nom de Dieu*.

"*C'est assez*," Monsieur Arnould said. "*On est dégouté. Dé-gou-té.*"

It was very quiet in the room. Franzl, his forehead covered with perspiration, looked out of the open window at one side of the piano. For a moment I had the silly notion that he might jump out.

There was a faraway, defeated look in his eyes. Goodbye, Wall Street, Pine, and Nassau. Gone the dream of a lifetime. Goodbye, America.

Monsieur Arnould cleared his throat, but Maurice spoke up first. "I was telling the boys about the old days when we both played at the Cirque," he said. "About how every time Madame Desdemona, *La Reine du Far-Ouest*, made her spectacular leap across the backs of three white horses, the orchestra would stop and there was only a fast beating of the drums. Until that night when she turned you down, *mon vieux*. We were all silent, with the drums beating furiously, when you made a horrible glissando on the D string of your contrabass. The third horse got wild and ran away and Madame Desdemona fell down flat in the sand."

I had heard this story again and again and it had always had its effect on Monsieur, but this time he remained silent and hostile. He shrugged. "*On est très pressé*," he said coolly. "*Il faut s'en aller. Il faut chercher un pianiste*." It was 3 P.M. and the De Grasse was sailing at midnight.

Franzl got up, a prematurely aged man, from his seat and wiped his forehead and Maurice and I packed our instruments. Nobody spoke a word. We went down the stairs with Monsieur Arnould, who had exchanged his mariner's cap for a black derby. He kept away from Franzl as though my friend were a leper. To Monsieur Arnould, not to know "Manon" was a crime worse than robbing the Banque de France. As we reached the street, hot and sleepy in the glaring afternoon sunlight, Maurice pointed at the Brasserie Parmentier, a shabby little establishment across from Arnould's house. "It's hot," Maurice said, putting a finger under his collar. "Let's go over there and have a *bock*."

"Why don't we go to the Renaissance instead?" I asked. The Café de la Renaissance, near the Porte St. Martin, was the musicians' favorite downtown café, where they met friends, found jobs, and had unlimited credit.

Maurice gave me a furious look. "Shut up," he said, without his customary restraint. "I'm thirsty." He led us straight into the back room, where the temperature was even higher than outside. "It's much cooler in here," he said, and gave me a wink. I was completely mystified, but I didn't say anything. There were no guests at that early-afternoon hour. An old waiter dozed at a table in the rear. Standing

a couple of feet out from the rear wall was an upright electric piano of a relatively modern type. Maurice shook the waiter and ordered beer for everybody, and then more beer. For a while we kept the old waiter busy running for more *bocks*. After the fifth or sixth glass, Monsieur Arnould reminded Maurice of the circus lion that couldn't stand the sound of a flageolet and how Maurice had produced a flageolet and played it at the end of the lion act while the orchestra was playing Sousa's "El Capitán." The lion had grown fractious and refused to jump through a burning hoop and the lion tamer, a phony from the Argentine, had got frightened and made a sudden exit, walking backward out of the cage.

Maurice said, "And what about *la petite femme* that we found in your double-bass case, *mon vieux*? She didn't wear four bass strings. She didn't even have on a single G string."

Monsieur Arnould drank his beer and nodded moodily. "She had a throaty voice," he said. "When she laughed, there were dimples in her cheeks." He sighed and Maurice said gravely, "Let's drink to her memory." We ordered another round of *bocks* and drank to the memory of *la petite femme* in the double-bass case. Monsieur Arnould opened his stiff collar, stretched out his long legs, and leaned back comfortably. The derby fell down over his eyes. He hummed "*Ah! Fuyez, douce image*" from "Manon" and, using his cane

as a baton, conducted an imaginary orchestra. Maurice beckoned to me, winked, and pointed to Franzl, who sat motionless at the other side of the table, pale and as unhappy as a seasick yogi. Maurice whistled softly through his teeth, a sure sign that he was up to something. I didn't care. I felt too unhappy about Franzl's bad luck. It was unbearably hot, and I was tired and wanted to get out of the place.

Maurice got up and tiptoed over to the electric piano. Beside the instrument was a small table with a heap of perforated rolls, the piano's repertoire. Maurice selected a roll and put it into the piano. I looked at Monsieur Arnould, whose head was tilted sideward. He was asleep. Maurice pulled on a lever at the back of the piano, then came over to Franzl. "Get over there and sit down at the piano," Maurice said, in a whisper. "I put in the 'Manon' roll. It's a lousy reproduction, but the tempo is correct. Exactly the way Arnould likes it."

Franzl raised his head and stared at Maurice with an empty, forlorn expression. Maurice became impatient. "Sit at the piano, you fool, and act as though you were playing. Just try to go through the motions. Haven't you ever played on a dumb piano?"

I said, "If Arnould finds out—"

"Don't worry," Maurice said. "He's had six *bocks*. He'll be half asleep, anyway."

Franzl staggered over to the piano



"That is the official message, sir, but wait—you don't know the half of it!"

and sat down, a study in bewilderment. Maurice tried to wake up Monsieur Arnould. "*Ecoute, mon vieux!*" he shouted. "We've got to get a man for the De Grasse. She can't sail without a pianist."

The French Line's musical director grunted and rubbed his eyes, very disgusted with the world and himself. Maurice bent down and spoke in a soft, suggestive voice, trying the child-and-drunk approach. "Why don't you give that man Franzl another chance? He got frightened up there. Let him try 'Manon' once more, will you?"

Monsieur Arnould yawned and said, "*Mince alors.* He didn't know the tempo, *l'espèce d'imbécile. On s'en fiche.*"

"There's a piano right behind you," Maurice said. "Keep your seat and listen. If I'm not right, I'll buy you ten *bocks*. You don't want to run around Paris on a hot afternoon looking for a pianist."

Monsieur Arnould grunted again and wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. Maurice walked over to the piano and pushed another lever. I kept my eye on Monsieur Arnould. There was a noise like an empty barrel rolling down the cellar steps and the trioles of the "Manon" fantasy came out, battered and metallic, but definitely in the correct tempo. Franzl was trying desperately to adjust the speed of his fingers to the sounds. It took him a while to get used to the rubati of the electric piano, but soon the illusion of his playing the instrument became convincing.

Monsieur Arnould tilted his derby to the back of his head and turned around heavily. He looked at Franzl with, it seemed, new interest. He shook his head and murmured, "*Pas mal, pas mal du tout.*" By now Franzl was doing a job of synchronization that might have fooled even Toscanini if he had drunk six *bocks* on a hot summer afternoon. Monsieur Arnould nodded happily and raised his hand. "*C'est assez,*" he said. "*Tiens—vous êtes un pianiste classique. Vous êtes engagé.*"

Franzl took his hands off the keyboard, but the piano went on playing, so he quickly put his hands on the keyboard again. Arnould repeated, "*C'est assez,*" waved his derby, and turned his back to the piano. Franzl, in despair, looked for the lever to stop it, his eyes

wild, while the damned piano kept on grinding out more "Manon." Maurice jumped behind the piano and fumbled with the lever that was supposed to stop the piano. It seemed to be stuck. We are through, I thought. Franzl will never get his job and Maurice and I will lose ours. Maurice lost patience with the lever and viciously kicked the piano with his right foot. There was a crash and then silence.



Monsieur Arnould started and said, "What's that?"

"The loose pedal always falls down," Maurice called out. He came over to Monsieur Arnould. "Didn't I tell you the man is good?" he asked.

Monsieur Arnould nodded. He twisted his head around and addressed Franzl. "How about Chopin?" he asked. "Do you play Chopin? The études? And more beer. Four *bocks!*" he roared toward the front room.

Franzl's face had a broad, relaxed grin. Chopin was his oyster. He knew by heart many of the études, nocturnes, waltzes, mazurkas, and preludes. He got set to launch himself into the sweeping passages of the Opus 10, No. 12 étude, but as soon as his fingers touched the keyboard, he turned pale. The ivories were stuck and no sound came out of the piano. Apparently Maurice had done a thorough job of destruction. Franzl hammered down desperately on the keyboard, his lips thin and grim, but there was no sound, Chopin or otherwise. This time the arrival of the old waiter, carrying four *bocks*, saved the situation. Monsieur Arnould drank his and my glass. There followed the usual noble argument as to who should pay for the beer and Chopin got lost in the shuffle.

FRANZL left for Le Havre on the 7 P.M. boat train. Monsieur Arnould, Maurice, and I saw him off at the Gare St. Lazare. I'll never forget Franzl's face as he looked down at us from the window of his car, flushed with happiness. "So long, *mon vieux*, give my regards to Wall Street!" Maurice cried as the train pulled out.

Monsieur Arnould decided to see Maurice and me off, so the three of us took a cab to the Gare d'Orléans, where the train for Bordeaux was to leave at nine. Roger, our new second violin,

and Dimitrij, our Russian piano player, were already waiting. Monsieur Arnould had completely recovered from the afternoon's party and was his old self again. We marched through the station, led by Monsieur Arnould, who carried his derby aloft on top of his cane, like a banner, walking erect and with a powerful stride. Roger and I held our violin cases shoulder-arms fashion, and Dimitrij carried the big drums and beat them as we marched out to the platform. Maurice, with his cello, formed the rear end of the column, singing a horrible Arabian ditty, which I hope nobody understood. People stopped talking and stared after us in amazement. We took noisy possession of our first-class compartment, and Maurice sent the second violinist for the dining-car waiter.

Monsieur Arnould sat down in a corner, breathing heavily. He took out a cigar and thoughtfully bit off its end. "*Votre ami, François*—he was very happy to go to America, was he?" he asked me.

I remained silent, nonplussed by the unexpected question.

Maurice came to my help. "Sure he was. Who wouldn't be glad to leave Paris for a couple of weeks in this damned heat?"

"One likes to see people happy," Monsieur Arnould said thoughtfully, and lighted his cigar. "But that was not a very good one you tried to pull on me this afternoon, Maurice. *Non.* The electric piano wasn't half as good as the one about the lion and the flageolet. You are slipping, *mon vieux.*" He showed his broad, double-basslike smile. "*Enfin, on s'en fiche pas mal,*" he said.

The second violinist appeared with the dining-room steward and Monsieur Arnould ordered *cinq bocks*.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

ANTICLIMAX DEPARTMENT

[From "Life Is Too Short,"
by G. Kay-Scott]

Who, after once being in the tropics, has not thought upon, and longed for in his secret heart, a clean beach, which never has mosquitoes, with ever cooling wind from the lazy ocean, music of the constant waves, and palms like slender girls with waving green hair (even palms so far away you cannot discern their stems remind you of emerald humming-birds), where life is perfect beneath the tropic sun and moon, and the southern cross like a diamond pendant set askew in the sky? I always grow lyrical on the subject of coconut palms. But to get back to the Singer Sewing Machine Company and its business, with which I was charged.