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PIER 99

I FIRST saw New York early one morning in July, 1928, from the sun deck of a small, decrepit French Line steamer, La Bourdonnais. I was making my first transatlantic crossing, as second violinist with the ship's orchestra. All night long, while we were still far out at sea, there had been a reddish glow in the dark sky, like the reflection of a big forest fire.

"It took the *types* on the bridge eleven days to find Broadway," Maurice, my orchestra leader, said. "Hello, Broadway."

I had been too excited to go to bed, afraid of missing the great moment. Now, as I stared through the morning haze, what had looked like the contours of a giant chain of mountains took on the shape of buildings, towers, roofs, and windows.

"*C'est ça*," Maurice said, his flat hand outstretched like an innkeeper showing his best room to a prospective guest. "The Skyline. *Eau chaude et froide. Bains. Confort moderne.* This is my hundred-and-eighty-ninth crossing, and it's nice seeing it again. *Ecoute, mon petit*, did you store the cognac bottles under my berth?"

I said yes, I had, and the six bottles of Veuve Clicquot were in the 'cello. In addition to being the *chef d'orchestre*, Maurice also played the 'cello. He played very well when he was sober. He had two instruments, one for playing, the other, with a detachable back, for storing laundry, certain photographs, and liquor bottles. Maurice was a short, rotund fellow with the healthy, pink complexion of many Frenchmen who have been brought up on *pinard* instead of mother's milk. He was forty-five and looked half his age. His rich, uncombed hair was always hidden under a Basque beret which he didn't bother to take off while playing or even in bed. He seldom undressed himself. It was the duty of the first and second violinists to get him out of his clothes and the wine bottle out of his hands, and all the time he would be sound asleep. He was an Alsatian, his wife lived in Atlantic City, and his mother in Paris, 18^e *Arrondissement*. He'd worked on many great liners of the day—the Berengaria, Paris, Leviathan, Mauretania, France, Aquitania, and Ile de France.

I often wondered what had made Maurice take a job aboard La Bour-

donnais, which had but one funnel, no glass-covered deck, no swimming pool, no valuable oils in the music saloon, and carried no celebrities in de-luxe suites, because there were no suites. It took her eleven days, twice as long as the big liners, to cross the ocean. On that trip she had sailed from a dilapidated, open-air pier in Bordeaux, picking up more passengers at the Spanish ports of Vigo and Santander, going north-north-west to Halifax and then on to New York. The passengers, mostly Spaniards and Canadians, were kept apart in the dining room. This clever bit of protocol eliminated many frictions. On the starboard side, where the Spanish group ate, there was much noise and animation. On the port side, home of the Anglo-Saxons, prolonged periods of silence were not unusual. There were only about sixty passengers, and the *quête*, the collection for the musicians, which is always made by a popular lady passenger on the last day of the trip, was poor compared to the princely tips which our colleagues aboard the Ile de France and Paris were getting from prosperous Americans.

We didn't dock at Pier 57, berth of the great Compagnie Générale Transatlantique liners, at the foot of West Fourteenth Street. Our ship's officers said there was no room, the Ile de France and Paris being there. The fact was that the company officials, afraid of damaging the French Line's excellent reputation by disclosing such poor relations as La Bourdonnais, were eager to keep her out of the public eye.

We went way up to Pier 99, at Fifty-ninth Street. They couldn't hide us farther away because Pier 99 was the last one. We docked without any cheers, reporters, or photographers. Ten people, the police and customs men, and three bored dogs were waiting. It was quite a letdown after what a first

violinist from the Ile de France had once told me, "You arrive on Forty-fourth Street, almost in the heart of the big city. You walk over to Times Square. It's a great experience."

I stared gloomily at the rows of walls, broken windows, factories, and a game of ball going on in the middle of the street, and then went down to our two connecting staterooms. Maurice and my colleagues were in the middle of great preparations, storing away wine bottles. As a rule we had our meals in the



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first-class dining room, just before the regular service, together with the small children and their nurses. We were served two bottles of wine apiece with each meal, one white, one red. No one except Maurice ever finished the bottles, and he kept urging us to take them down to our staterooms. Two days before we got to New York, he had borrowed six hundred francs from the tourist-class barman and ordered all the rest of us to get more money. Dimitrij, our piano player, a pale man from Vladivostok, got five hundred francs from a sinister-looking *matelot*, at fourteen-per-cent interest. Lucien, the first violinist, who had a way with the ladies, borrowed eight hundred francs from Madame Marguerite, age forty-eight, the *femme de chambre* and only female member of the crew, also at fourteen per cent. I secured five hundred from the chief steward, at eleven per cent.

All the money was carefully counted and written down, then Maurice went to the first-class and tourist-class bars and bought bottles of cognac, Byrrh, Scotch whiskey, Dubonnet, gin, Benedictine, champagne, Pernod, beer, rum—all at the fifty-per-cent discount which we musicians were allowed at the ship's bars. By the time La Bourdonnais entered the territorial waters of the United States and the bars were closed, our two staterooms were beautifully stocked with large quantities of liquor and beer and over eighty bottles of red and white wine. To get more space we knocked out closets, threw out life belts, and thoroughly rearranged our staterooms.

WE got our debarkation cards after the ship docked and were free to leave. Maurice gave me a list of telephone numbers and told me to go to the nearest drugstore and call them up. "You say, 'Hello, La Bourdonnais is in port,' and that's all."

I pointed out that I was Czechoslovakian, had never been in America before, spoke only somewhat limited English, and had never talked on the phone to an American. I was afraid they might not understand me.

Maurice chuckled, in a half-amused, half-pitying way. "They will understand no matter how you say it. Get going, *mon petit*."

I called the numbers from a drugstore near Columbus Circle. Maurice was right. Nobody seemed to have any trouble in getting my message. The simple words appeared to cause unanimous delight to all the people on the

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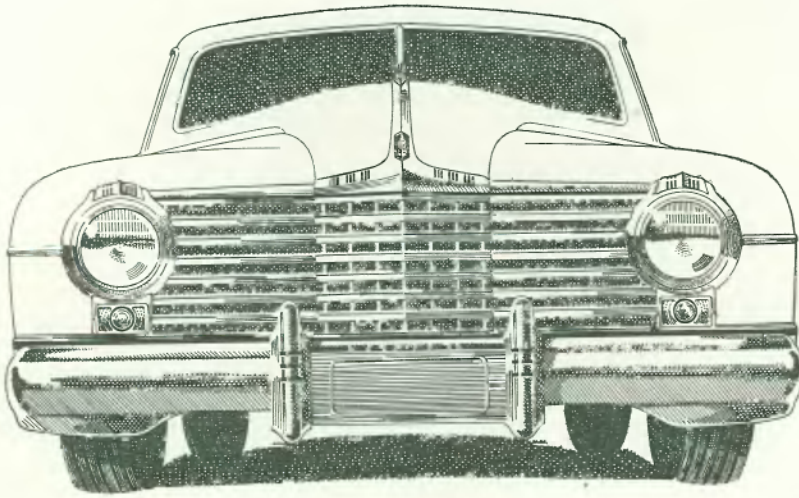


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other end of the wire. Most of them uttered cries of joy and said they were coming right over and assured me of their everlasting friendship.

I went over to Broadway and down to Times Square and had a chocolate soda and a shoe shine. When I came back to Pier 99, early in the afternoon, Lucien was going aboard with two dignified-looking citizens. It was very hot and he wiped his forehead.

"Those gentlemen are friends," Lucien said to the customs men near the gangway. "They've come to visit with us."

Dimitrij was standing in the corridor leading to our staterooms. He looked tense and businesslike. "Where have you been?" he said to me. "Maurice is waiting for you. There is work to do."

There were fifteen strangers in our staterooms. Most of them were bald and all had the look of prosperous, busy men, happy to get away from the office for an afternoon. It was very hot down in the cabins and they were sitting in their shirtsleeves, fanning themselves with their straw hats. Because it was so hot, they were thirsty, and each one was holding a glass in his hand. They were sitting on the berths, on the floor, on the 'cello case, on piles of sheet music, on chairs, drinking highballs and wine and beer and gin and Dubonnet and cognac and everything mixed. Two men were squatted in the bathtub, their legs crossed in Brahmin fashion, but their faces were red and happy and they seemed quite comfortable.

Maurice was standing before the washbasin, which had been turned into a bar, mixing drinks, opening bottles, and stuffing money in his trouser pockets. He told me to raid the adjoining staterooms and bring all the mouthwash glasses. Dimitrij came in and helped us wash glasses. The gentlemen shook hands with me and said I must come and have lunch with them tomorrow.

At dinnertime, Maurice went to the dining room above and took four guests along. We were allowed to have dinner guests while the ship was in port, provided we paid for their meals, but the regulation about payment was seldom enforced, since so much food was wasted aboard ship anyway. Maurice and his friends came back from the dining room, each happily carrying two bottles of wine. Next, I was dispatched to the dining room with another party of four. Two of them were, they explained to me, a railroad executive and a corporation lawyer. The others preferred vaguely to mention their "downtown

offices." All were in high spirits and very amiable, and the corporation lawyer offered me a job.

"What kind of job?" I asked.

"Oh, any kind of job," he said. "What kind of job do you want?"

The food aboard *La Bourdonnais* was excellent, but my four guests ate very little. The chief steward came to say hello and the railroad executive shook hands with him as though he were an old friend. The railroad man was enormously fat, with a heavy, bulging neck and a face that one sometimes finds painted on children's balloons, a friendly, Buddha-like face. He said he had happened to see a little picture in town that the chief steward might like to see, ha, ha, ha, and he gave him a picture of Lincoln with the number "5" in every corner. The chief steward said that Lincoln was his favorite *subject d'art*. He collected all the pictures of Lincoln he could get. There were two incidents—one when the corporation lawyer started singing "Hail, Columbia" just as the second *capitaine* was going through the dining room, the other when we were trying to get the railroad magnate down the narrow iron steps that led to C Deck, where our state-rooms were. He almost broke his fat neck, and it took all four of us, the three other guests and me, to get him down successfully.

After dinner the first violinist from the *Ile de France* came over to say hello and goodbye. She was sailing at midnight. He looked at the happy citizens all over the place, many of them now singing, and at Maurice, carrying all that money in his bulging pockets.

"I wish I were here with you," he said. "Over there we can't do this sort of thing. Too many customs men and coppers hanging around Fourteenth Street. *Mince alors*, how I hate those big boats!"

I said, "Well, at least you're near Times Square and in the heart of the big city. That's what you told me in Paris, remember?" He gave me a disgusted look and left.

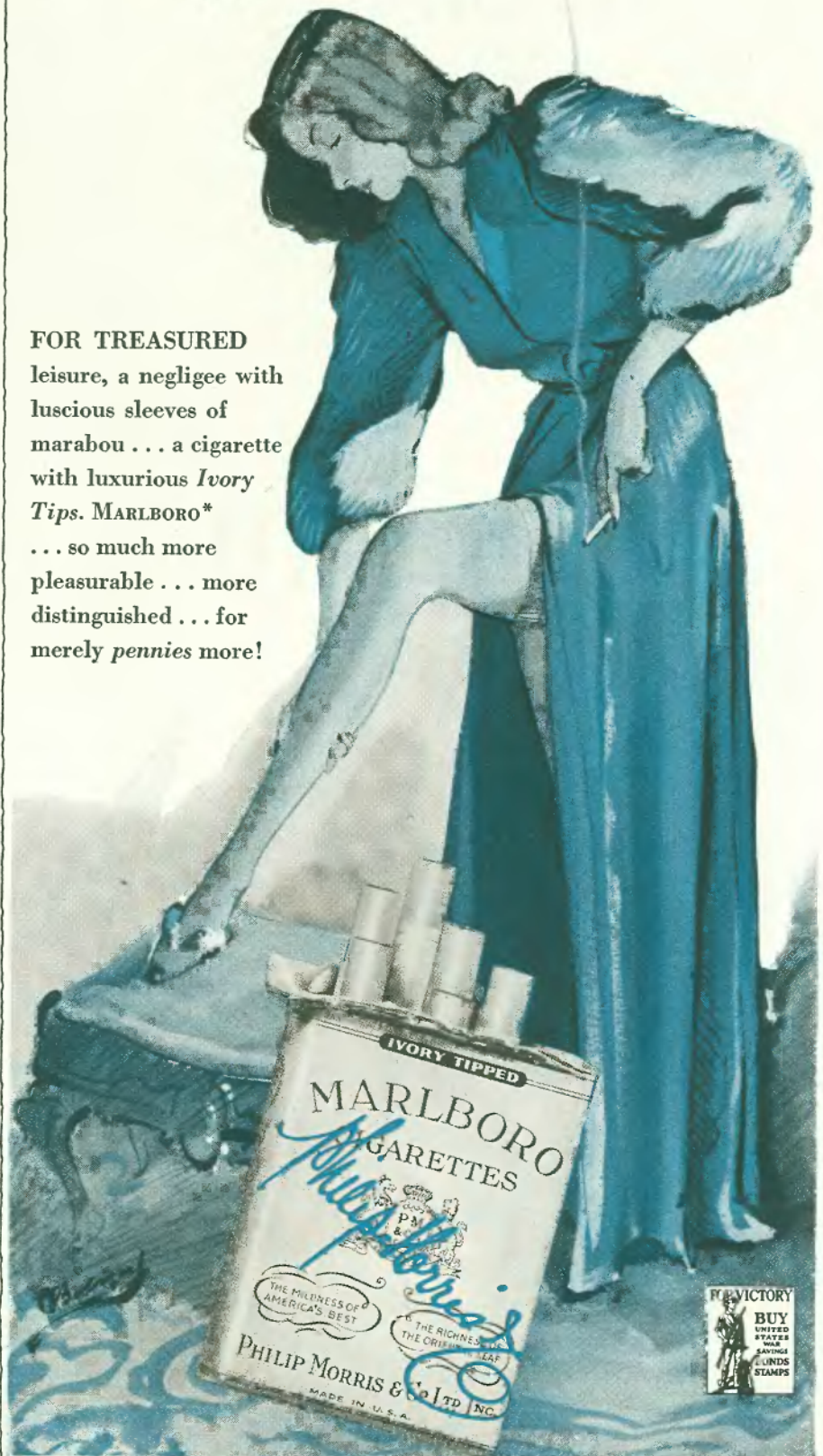
One after another, the citizens drift-



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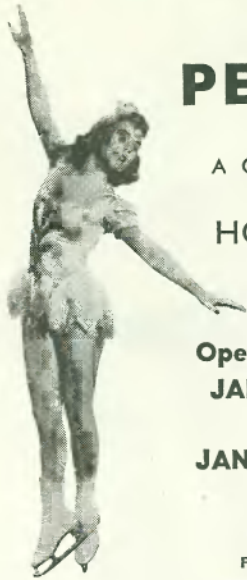
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ed out. Before leaving, each had to
rinse his mouth with a special mouth-
wash which Maurice prepared himself.
Then Maurice sniffed at the breath of
each one, and if there was a trace of
liquor left he made the man eat a piece
of apple and drink some milk. "Milk
always helps," he said. "Can't take a
chance with the *types* standing outside
the pier."

The railroad magnate was fast asleep
on Dimitrij's berth. We worked on him
for ten minutes, but he kept sleeping.

"Those railroad men are the worst,"
Maurice said. "He's the *directeur* of a
big railroad. It's an unbelievably big
railroad and he's making more money
while he sleeps than the four of us play-
ing a whole month. I wonder if a
directeur of the Paris-Lyon-Méditer-
ranée railroad would go to sleep in
somebody else's stateroom."

We carried the railroad magnate out
and dragged him over into a cabin
which was used as a storage room for
old mattresses. We put him down on a
pile of mattresses, closed the door, and
went back to our staterooms to clean
the glasses and the bathtub. Maurice
counted the money, carefully writing
down the total. All our business debts
were to be paid tomorrow so that too
much interest wouldn't accumulate.
The rest was equally divided among the
four of us, eighty-three dollars apiece.
It was almost three times as much as
a musician's monthly salary aboard the
Ile de France.

We went up to the dark sun deck.
The night was stifling hot and we sat
down, watching the reddish glow over
what we decided was Broadway. Fifty-
ninth Street was deserted and two cats
were fighting on the roof of Pier 99.
Maurice took a drink from the wine bot-
tle he had brought along and Dimitrij
lay down flat on his back and stared up
at the stars.

"There's some stuff left for tomor-
row," Maurice said, "and the day after
tomorrow, too, unless they come for
breakfast and lunch. Sometimes they
can't even wait until afternoon. Each
of you will have more money than those
types make aboard the Ile de France,
and the hell with Louis Quinze stuff
and Impressionist paintings in the grand
saloon. I think I'm going to buy my
wife a fur coat. She wants a new one
and I guess they're cheaper now in sum-
mer."

From downstream came the long,
deep sound of a siren. It was midnight,
and the Ile de France was sailing from
her crowded, noisy pier. There were
undoubtedly men in dinner coats and

One man
tells Another



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ladies in evening gowns seeing her off, and "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the "Marseillaise" were being played. There were also sure to be customs men and coppers and a lot of fun all around. I wanted to talk to Maurice, but he was already snoring.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

LAST AFTERNOON OF A FURLOUGH

The afternoon is full of noise; the girls in slacks and sweaters laugh and turn their heads like geese at boys, and you sit there and watch and curse

the sunny Sunday, since you have, between now and the long ride back, five hours, six pockets (empty, save for crumpled butts, a card they gave

you for a dance two nights ago, two nickels, and a baggage check, and the ticket to return you to wherever it is you have to go).

And so you sit here in the park waiting for your cashed-in leave to end so you can undertake the trip back, rushing through the dark

soft intervening countryside, sprawling all night in the train empty and spent till you arrive at an ultimate stop and the end of your ride.

The sun upon your neck is warm. You read the stale headlines again, and on the bench the uniform cloaks the cipher heart within.

And the bright ribbons on your chest, the tapes you wear upon your sleeve, the discs of brass, and all the rest suffice to label you for most

who see this park bench as your throne, the rolled newspaper as your staff, your outstretched legs as all your own and on your head a khaki crown.

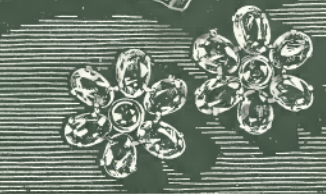
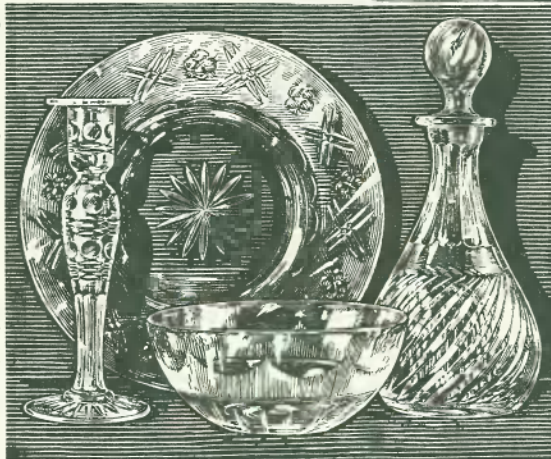
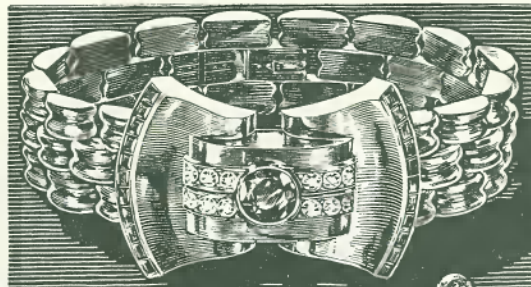
And watching the civilian feet, the girls with high heels, and the crowd, the Sunday city walking out, coming to watch the sea lions eat,

your uniform, dark, slightly creased, divides you from them all . . .

and now you sit there like a royal ghost, viewing the kingdom you have lost.

—EDWARD FENTON

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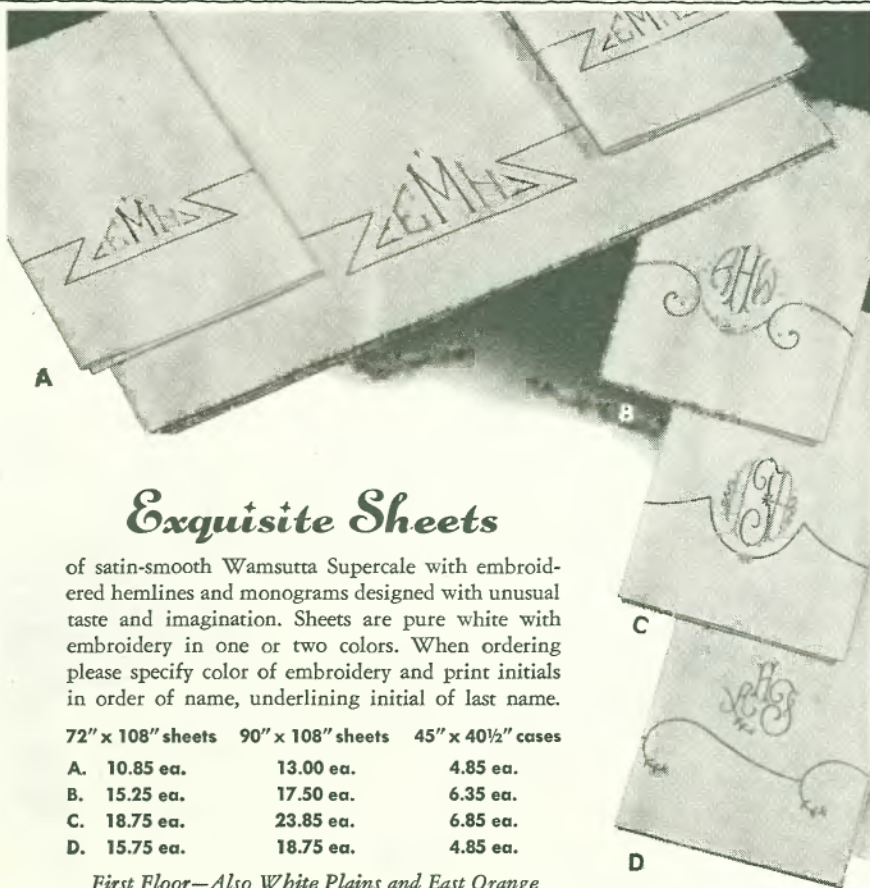


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