

LAST WALTZ

THE Azay-le-Rideau was one of four Messageries Maritimes liners making the Indo-China run—thirty-five dreary, hot days—from Marseille to Haiphong by way of Suez, Djibouti, Colombo, Pondichéry, Madras, Singapore, and Saïgon. The photographs in the company's folders were not completely revealing about the Azay-le-Rideau. There was one which, by means of ingenious perspective, made the ship's really lamentable lines look actually rakish. Another, a closeup, showed a corner of the dining saloon—three tables, full of crystal, china, silver, and flowers—and the caption read, "Delicious meals, cooked by the *Compagnie's* famous chefs, served in an atmosphere of simple dignity." There was also a picture of the promenade deck which featured two shapely blondes in shorts. But there was no intimation in the folders that the Azay-le-Rideau was the company's combination prison and lunatic asylum.

Our little orchestra came aboard her one day in 1930. I was violinist and *chef d'orchestre*. My companions were Artie, an undernourished-looking pianist from Yonkers, and Pedro, a lethargic cello player from Barcelona, who was forever complaining of the ship's *bêtes noires*. Every ship has its bugs, but the old, filthy Azay-le-Rideau had them in

extraordinary variety. There were common cockroaches behind the washbasins, grayish ones near the portholes, and a domesticated, Wagnerian species which hid in the piano and came out only during the "Lohengrin" or "Tannhäuser" fantasies.

The liner's *commandant* was a heavy-set, gray-haired, frequently unshaved misanthrope of the Ivan the Terrible type, who had once run one of the company's luxury liners aground near Port Said. The *second capitaine* was known around Singapore as a junior-grade amuck-runner. The ship's doctor had had to give up a flourishing practice in Marseille when the local police checked up on him. Our immediate superior, the *commissaire*, was a chronic alcoholic who considered musicians an especially nauseating, noisy species of beetle.

The Azay-le-Rideau had been a Hapag ship before she was handed over to the French as a measly payment on reparations. It was no doubt a beautiful day for the Hapag people when they got rid of the ship. There was always trouble. On this voyage nothing much, except daily fights among the crew, happened in the Mediterranean, but two days out of Suez the engines broke down. The Azay-le-Rideau stopped, listed to port, and for two days

we lay motionless in the middle of the Red Sea. The heat was unbearable. The only piano aboard stood on the stern of the promenade deck, under a roof formed by the overhang of the sun deck above. There were some basketwork chairs and tables and two decrepit palm trees in pots there, and a bar.

Playing music in this hothouse was plain hell. I had to use four metal strings and the hairs of my bow wouldn't hold the resin. Our instruments were always covered with moisture and the keyboard of the piano was slippery. Frequently we had to play by heart, because the sweat ran down into our eyes and made it impossible for us to read the music. The passengers would lie in their chairs, sipping iced drinks and wishing they were dead or in Alaska. Nobody wanted to listen to music, anyway, so Artie and Pedro and I would have long intermissions between pieces. On the second evening of the breakdown, we were standing near the railing during one of the intermissions. Far across the sea we saw Mount Sinai, its craggy silhouette outlined in the pale moonlight. Pedro made the fitting observation that the Azay-le-Rideau should be chartered by the management of hell for the transportation of lost souls. The ensuing gloomy silence was interrupted by the barking voice of the *commandant*, who had sneaked up on us out of the darkness. He wanted to know why we weren't performing our musical duties. Artie pointed out that music was the last thing the passengers wanted.

"What do you think they want?" the *commandant* asked sharply.

"Free drinks with plenty of ice," Artie said.

"*Ces Américains*," the *commandant* said with contempt. "All they think of is drinks and more drinks." At that, Artie hotly defended the honor of his country. In no time the two men were engrossed in a bitter argument which ended, arbitrarily, with the *commandant's* shouting at Artie to shut up and go back to work. From that night on there was war between the *commandant* and the orchestra.

AT Colombo the Five Ferraris came aboard. They were a dynasty of Italian circus acrobats, prominent mainly on the Bombay circuit, where the customers were not as blasé as at the Cirque Médrano in Paris. The Five Ferraris consisted of Father Ferrari, his three sons, Giuseppe, Gino, Giacomo, and his daughter, Lucia. Father Ferrari was six feet three inches tall. His sons



"No, but you're getting warmer."

were smaller. They always walked abreast, descending in height from left to right, like organ pipes, which was funny and no doubt partly accounted for the Ferraris' popularity with the Orientals. Mamma Ferrari, who was not a member of the show, combined a gross weight of three hundred pounds with the dignity of the late Dowager Empress of China. She did crochet work and watched over Lucia, who was seventeen, blond, and beautiful.

The Five Ferraris soon turned the tourist-class deck into a circus arena. They practiced every morning, wearing black *tricots*, and executed magnificent *caprioles*, leaps, and somersaults. The finale of their act was a living pyramid, with Father Ferrari as base and Lucia as top. By the time the Ferraris got to this, most of the male passengers and many of the officers and crew members would have arrived to have a look at Lucia, who was quite a sight in her close-fitting black costume. On the third morning out of Colombo, Lieutenant Lavallère, a mild-mannered, shy, handsome officer who was in charge of the ship's wireless, came down from the radio room. He saw Lucia and fell in love with her at first sight. The fact would never have become known, Lavallère not being the loquacious type, if it hadn't been for Artie, who was a radio fan and spent much of his time in the wireless room. Artie brought the news that Lavallère had been severely reprimanded by the *commandant* for signing three messages "Lucia." "He's transfigured," Artie said. "Sits there and his fingers unconsciously tap out 'L-u-c-i-a.' I think we ought to help that guy. He's too shy to talk to her."

Every night Lavallère came down to the dance. He would sit all by himself in a remote corner and watch Lucia as she danced with various male passengers. Lavallère never asked her for a dance. He knew none of the modern dances, only *la valse*, he explained to Artie. Lucia had been quoted by several persons as being a *valse* hater.

"It breaks my heart looking at that guy," Artie said. "He's growing thinner by the hour. And I'm sure Lucia likes him. The other night she smiled at him as she danced by."

ON the evening before we arrived at Saigon, where most of the passengers were going to debark, there was a concert, after which Lucia, as the most popular girl aboard, made *la quête*, the customary collection for the musicians. We saw her make the round of the passengers and cram a



"Now where do we go for the allotment?"

heap of bills into her handbag. After the *quête* we played dance music. Lavallère was at a table in the background, alone as usual. Suddenly Artie got up. "Messieurs-dames," he announced, "we are going to play 'Tales from the Vienna Woods.' This is especially for Mademoiselle Ferrari and Monsieur Lavallère."

The people applauded and Artie and I began to play the waltz. Lavallère looked flustered. Pedro stepped onto the dance floor, took Lucia's arm, and gently led her across the floor to Lavallère's table. I thought the Lieutenant would drop dead with happiness. He took her into his arms cautiously, as though she were made of soap bubbles. He danced very well. They looked into each other's eyes and smiled. Artie had a Santa Claus look in his eyes and, at his signals, we played the refrain over and over

again. Of a sudden the deck steward walked across the dance floor, tapped Lavallère on the shoulder, and whispered in his ear. The young officer blushed deeply. He led Lucia back to her table, gently kissed her hand, and left. We finished the waltz. Then I stepped down from the platform and walked over to the rail. Some distance away on the dimly lit deck I saw the *commandant* talking to Lavallère. After a few moments the young man saluted and went upstairs.

During the intermission after the next dance, Artie went up to the wireless room. He came back in great indignation. "Lavallère's been ordered to his quarters," he told us. "The *commandant* says that junior officers are not permitted to dance with the passengers. What's this ship anyway—a galley?"

After the dance, Artie and Pedro and

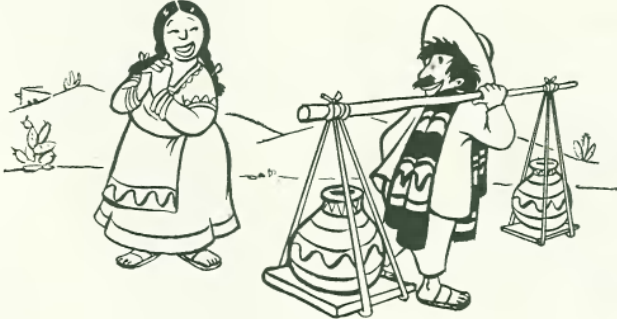
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I went up to the wireless room, on the sun deck. Lavallère was sitting outside, staring at the Southern Cross and sighing deeply. He said he had made a date with Lucia. He was to have met her beside the funnel. Now he was restricted to his quarters.

We stared across the sun deck. Near the funnel a shadow seemed to be moving. The deep silence was broken by Lavallère, sighing again. Artie couldn't stand the heartbreak. "You go over there," he said to the officer. "We'll wait here. If somebody comes, I'll say you went down for a minute or got the scarlet fever or something. Come on. Hurry up."

Lavallère hesitated. There are certain things a junior officer of *la marine marchande* doesn't do, even when he is desperately in love, he said. By way of reply, Artie pointed across the deck. The shadow was still there, near the funnel. Lavallère shrugged and left, giving us a last, desperate glance. Artie walked into Lavallère's room and saw the Lieutenant's cap. He put it on, gave it a rakish tilt, and looked at himself in the mirror with obvious satisfaction. "Not bad," he said. "Someday I ought to get myself a job with this outfit."

"What outfit?" a horrifying voice shouted. We turned around and almost fainted. The *commandant* was standing in the doorway and he looked wild. "Where is Lieutenant Lavallère?" he asked grimly. There was a mad sparkle

in his eyes. We were silent. This was no time for fast repartee. There is no telling what a madman may do when he gets into a rage. We were sure the *commandant* had a razor on him. Perhaps one in each pocket.

"I'll put you in irons! All of you!" he shouted. He now was a perfect facsimile of Ivan the Terrible. "No shore leave in Saïgon! From now on you'll work ten hours a day instead of five! Get out of here and go to your quarters!"

WE started for our quarters. On the main deck we ran into Mr. Hartford, an asthmatic, partly deaf retired tycoon from Delaware. He adjusted his hearing aid, embraced Artie, and boomed that we were just in time to celebrate. This was, he said, the seventeenth anniversary of his divorce, a happy day that called for champagne. We all went to the bar and had a bottle of champagne and then another. After that we forgot all about the *commandant* and being restricted to our quarters. Artie told Mr. Hartford about our war against the Azay-le-Rideau's captain.

The ex-tycoon solemnly put his hand on Artie's shoulder. "There's only one thing to do," he said. "Strike. Don't play any more."

I pointed out that you don't strike aboard ship.

"All right, then," Mr. Hartford said. "Why don't you throw your violin

overboard? You can't play without a violin, can you?"

Artie said, "It's no use. Two seamen have violins and the damned pharmacist carries a cello along and—" He stopped in the middle of his sentence and jumped up from his chair. "There is only one piano aboard," he said in a soft, alien-sounding voice. "Without this piano there couldn't be ten hours of music, as the madman said. In fact, there couldn't be any music at all."

A solemn silence followed these words. The suggestion was overwhelming. It was a hot night. Mr. Hartford waved to the barman and we were served a third bottle of champagne.

"If we throw the piano overboard, we'll be fired in Saïgon," I said. "What are we going to do there?"

Artie shrugged. "We can open an opium den. Everybody smokes opium in Saïgon. And if we fold up, we can always join the Foreign Legion in Tonkin."

Mr. Hartford fussed with his hearing aid and said would somebody *please* speak up and tell him what it was all about. When we explained our project, he nodded gravely. He got up and picked up one of the chairs, carried it to the rail, and threw it overboard. We all got very excited. Pedro threw a table and another chair after Mr. Hartford's chair, "for a mermaid who wants to furnish her room," and I came in with all the glasses, match hold-

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de la Torre

ers, ashtrays, and bottles within reach.

Mr. Hartford started to tug at the piano. At this critical point, we musicians had some misgivings and expressed them. In fact, I think we would have given up the whole idea right then, but Mr. Hartford said the cost of such a bad, old piano didn't amount to anything in American money and that he would gladly pay for it if necessary. We had another glass of champagne. Then we pushed the piano toward the rail. The barman and the deck steward looked on, in a paralysis of consternation. Mr. Hartford breathed hard and almost lost his hearing aid. Artie suggested that we should cover the instrument with a flag, a piano being worth as much as any human being and considerably more than some of them, but no one seconded the motion. We lifted the piano. It was only an upright Pleyel, but after all the drinks it seemed as heavy as a big Steinway. A final effort and the instrument toppled over the rail. There was a big splash and the strings gave what sounded like an almost human cry. Pedro, a devout Catholic, took off his Basque beret and moved his lips. No doubt he said a prayer. We musicians went to our rooms and lay down.

WHEN the Azay-le-Rideau arrived at Saigon the following day, we were called into the *commandant's* of-

fice. The skipper said we had one hour, and no longer, to get twelve hundred and fifty francs for the drowned piano. We went down and looked for Mr. Hartford, but he had already gone ashore. He had, his cabin steward told us, been met by friends who had arranged a house-party in his honor. Artie smiled confidently.

"Let's find Lucia," he said. "There must be enough money in the *quête*. Lucia collected lots of money last night."

We found Lucia and Lavallère on the foremost part of the main deck, high above the bow. Lavallère had his arm around her waist. They were looking down into the water, far below, and didn't see or hear us as we came up behind them.

"Chérie," Lavallère was saying, "don't worry about me. I'll get transferred to another vessel. I'll be back in eight weeks. I'll be with you."

"Darling," Lucia whispered.

Artie cleared his throat. The couple turned around and smiled. Lucia touched Artie's cheek. "Artie, you were wonderful last night," she said. She opened her handbag and thrust an envelope filled with coins into Artie's hand. "Here are the coins—about two

hundred francs. Did you find the paper money? I counted almost eleven hundred francs. I put it down inside the piano so nobody would steal it overnight."

I felt suddenly cold. Artie's mouth sagged open and I guess mine did, too. Pedro looked pale and stricken.

"Chérie," Lavallère said, and sighed.

"Darling," Lucia said. They looked into each other's eyes, oblivious of the big, bad world.

Artie and Pedro and I tiptoed away.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

FORT WORTH—(AP)—The civil aeronautics board has applications on file for extension of airline service to 723 cities, many of them in Texas.—McAllen (Tex.) Valley Evening Monitor.

Great state, Texas.