

Pearls, Arms and Hashish

Pages from the Life of a Red Sea
Navigator

Henri De Monfried

Collected and written down with a
forward by Ida Treat



PEARLS, ARMS AND HASHISH

Nobleman, writer, adventurer and inspiration for the swashbuckling gun runner in the *Adventures of Tintin*, Henri de Monfried lived by his own account 'a rich, restless, magnificent life' as one of the great travellers of his or any age. Infamous as well as famous, his name is inextricably linked to the Red Sea and the raffish ports between Suez and Aden in the early years of the twentieth century. This is a compelling account of how de Monfried sought his fortune by becoming a collector and merchant of the fabled Gulf pearls, and was then drawn into the shadowy world of arms trading, slavery, smuggling and drugs. Hashish was the drug of choice, and de Monfried writes of sailing to Suez with illegal cargoes, dodging blockades and pirates. This compelling book is a unique and detailed portrayal of a colourful and dangerous world that has now disappeared. It allows us to share in the exhilarating adventures of a legend whose love for the sea and zest for life run across every page.

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Abd el Hai navigating by sight, crossing the reefs

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HENRI DE MONFRIED

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Foreword

Abd el Hai is great:
he has conquered all men
from the White-Man's country—
English, Italians, French,
peoples like the sea
immense and menacing;
like butter he floats
ever on the surface
of the storm-tossed water.

(*Dankali song*)

Djibouti in August . . . "The capital of French Somaliland," according to the guidebooks. "Coaling station for eastern- and southern-bound liners. Twelve degrees above the Equator . . . and one of the hottest spots on the globe," adds the experienced colonial.

On that particular August morning, Djibouti gave every sign of living up to its reputation. The *Amboise*, ten days out from Marseilles, dropped anchor at dawn in the outer harbor. We had steamed down the Red Sea with the wind behind us—a constant fiery blast pelting us with sand and showers of locusts, piling up long, even swells that drove us forward in the airless heat, plunging with the dizzy regularity of a seesaw.

Djibouti came as a relief. For the majority of the passengers, government employees en route to Indo-China and the usual sprinkling of missionaries, it promised the air currents of the Indian Ocean, welcome in spite of the tricky monsoon. To the rest of us, it meant the high

plateau of Abyssinia and a European climate, a day's journey inland.

The abrupt silence of the engines, and the grinding clank of anchor chains, stirred even the limpest of the pajama-clad from their deck chairs. Damp and hollow-eyed, they hung above the rail, watching the land stream out to them in a bobbing procession propelled by steam, and motor, and paddle. Tugs towing coal barges, launches flying pennants of the *Messageries*, the Customs, and the Quarantine, manned by turbaned Somalis and bearing white-clad, helmeted Frenchmen. Rowboats, dugouts, and last of all a splashing school of swimmers, brown and black, as born to the water as a band of dolphins.

A scuffle on the swinging ladder. Confused cries and splashes. A voice shouting orders in a strange tongue. My neighbor at the rail, an officer of the French Colonial, translated. "No one allowed on board who hasn't a vaccination scar!" A chorus of protesting voices like an echo of the hubbub between decks rose in the passage behind us. Passengers besieged the maître d'hôtel, mustached and affable.

"I am sorry, sorry," he repeated amiably. "Quarantine allows nobody ashore but Djibouti passengers."

"You are going to keep us here all day in the heat and coal-dust?" panted a young Frenchwoman, impeccably rouged in spite of the early hour. "*Monsieur le maître d'hôtel*, you are not *gentil!*"

"*Tais-toi*, Amélie," her husband broke in shortly. "Do you want to catch the smallpox?"

"Smallpox, *O Seigneur!*" the young Frenchwoman lifted terrified plump hands to her powdered cheeks and collapsed heavily in her deck chair.

"When she has lived in the colonies, she will not be so

impressionable," my neighbor commented grimly. "Small-pox, and typhus, and cholera and the plague . . . you live next door to them most of the time. One of them may get you in the end; but chances are they won't." He shrugged his shoulders philosophically. "Quarantine is a necessity no doubt; but just the same, I would be glad for a cool drink on shore!"

The sun shot over the horizon like a pale balloon. A fan-shaped coating of molten brass spread over the surface of the harbor. Above the distant cubes and arches of the town, heat waves quivered, transparent and liquid. The *Amboise*, all portholes shut, rolled gently on its anchor chains, while on either flank a busy army of black men poured coal into the bunkers to the rhythm of an interminable chant. From the barges a column of dust rose like smoke to the promenade deck where it spread and settled in a gritty crust on all things horizontal—planks, rails, deck chairs, sun helmets, pajamas—while the thermometer climbed: 99, 100, 101. . . .

Limp along the rail, the passengers for Saïgon, Hanoi, and Abyssinia (the latter waiting for landing papers) envied the little Somali boys, naked and dripping, who wriggled lizard-like up the ship's side, brandishing straw fans, bracelets of elephant's hair, and bottles of eau de Cologne which they hawked noisily, scattering in a scramble when the burly shape of the maître d'hôtel showed in the passage, their bare feet leaving crescents of black mud in the dust of the deck.

Propped on their elbows, the pajama-clad stared through sun spectacles at the blazing harbor, the town, the tossing barges, hoping dully for a shark, a fight, an accident—anything to help them forget for an instant the vertical sun, the coal-dust, and general boredom.

Like a great tan bird, a sailboat slid in a supple curve about the stern of the liner. On the deck of the *Amboise* the row of sun helmets rotated clockwise towards the apparition. Forty pairs of eyes registered with mild interest the taut canvas, the untidy litter amidships, the bronze bodies of the Somali crew. Then abruptly came a change. A stir of curiosity rippled along the rail. Elbows nudged.

“*Dis, donc*, look at the two at the stern!”

A white man stood at the helm of the sailboat. That is to say, no one could have mistaken him for a Somali. But whether Arab or European it would have been difficult to decide. His body, lean and muscular, bare to the waist, had the color of tobacco or old leather. Under the equatorial sun he was hatless. Feet planted firmly on the deck, he stood braced against the heavy bar—a pose that in its arc-like tensity suggested the nicely adjusted mechanism—or the animal crouched to spring.

Beside the helmsman, on the broad steering bench with its arched rail, sat a slight figure wearing loose trousers and a sleeveless shirt, and crowned by a mass of pale bobbed hair that the *Kamsin* (the desert wind) whipped and tossed.

“*Cristi*, it’s a girl!”

Along the rail of the *Amboise*, the passengers jostled for a better view. A sun helmet dropped spinning into space, and was rescued in passing by a steward on the deck below. From the bridge of the liner a gold-braided sleeve waved a greeting, while far below the Somalis on the coal barges ceased for a moment their ant-like labors, hailing the bark in a long cry:

“Abd el Hai! . . . O-o-o-o Abd el Hai!”

At the shout, the helmsman turned. We caught a rapid glimpse of lean, bronzed features barred by the darker

line of a crisp mustache. He lifted a hand to his forehead in brief acknowledgment of the greetings. (It was not evident whether this was directed towards the gesticulating figures on the barges or the officer on the bridge.) The young girl at his elbow flashed a smile through her blowing hair and the boat swept on towards the distant wharf.

Leaving the rail, my fellow-passengers pressed the maître d'hôtel with questions. For once that gentleman's store of knowledge was inadequate. He could tell them nothing. Their curiosity was destined to remain unsatisfied: the bridge being too exalted and the coal barges too lowly for contact.

To me, chance brought greater luck.

After the sweltering harbor, the town. Djibouti by night, with the thermometer perched inert somewhere at the top of the nineties. The glare of a dozen electric lamps flooded the hotel terrace whose predominating white—the plaster wall, the tables, the frosted glasses, the linen clothes of the Europeans—tantalized with the illusion of coolness. Beyond the border of mimosas, drooping and gray, bare feet padded past in the dust, and mangy dogs, close cousins of the jackal, prowled and snarled.

On the terrace, nothing stirred but the Somali boys carrying trays with bottles and ice pails, and two tame gazelles with ears and tails twitching who pattered delicately over the cement. A group of men sat about a phonograph heavily digesting the *Clair de Lune* from *Werther*, Mistinguett's latest, and the visceral melancholy of American jazz. Others were deep in the columns of the *Petit Marseillais*, ten days old, brought that morning by the *Amboise*. A forlorn couple, government employees shunted from Indo-China to Madagascar, merely sat, heavy-eyed

and speechless, while their baby slept in a go-cart, like a dislocated doll of yellow wax.

Not a sound but the grinding metallic voice of the machine. One had the feeling that a spell lay on the terrace and its white-clad mannequins: the prank of some malicious heat-god, or the revenge of a local jinn, forgotten or ignored. As on the morning of that day, a single event sufficed to break the charm, to send a current vibrating over dead wires, setting the inert figures in motion.

Beyond the mimosas, the lights of an automobile swept the square. With a rush of tires and the flutter of a dying motor, the car drew up beside the terrace. A man in white, brown-skinned and slight, a Basque cap pushed back on his dark hair, sat at the wheel; a blond young girl beside him. This I saw in the flash before a group of dark shapes, sprung apparently from nowhere, closed in about the car. The phonograph ended its musical chatter in a squawk. The cloud of lethargy was lifting; the terrace listened. A chorus of light voices filled the silence, broken by a deeper one speaking rapid words in Arab. The group by the curb parted; the man in the Basque cap stepped out from the knot of Somalis, and strode across the terrace with a light step. A handshake with the hotel keeper, a nod towards the group about the phonograph, and he disappeared beneath an archway. The slight stoop of the shoulders, the vigorous gesture would have sufficed. . . . But already I had recognized the helmsman of the morning.

“That”—at my question, the hotel proprietor settled himself conversationally in the chair beside me,—“that is the most remarkable figure from Suez to Bombay.”

He had no opportunity to add more. The clock-work

dolls whom the stranger's passing had set nodding and gesturing, had found their voices.

"From all appearances, the great Abd el Hai keeps to himself as much as ever," remarked a long-nosed man by the wall, folding his newspaper in a neat rectangle.

"Possibly he finds the climate of Djibouti . . . a little too hot. . . ." That, with pompous satisfaction, from an official-looking personage at the next table.

"That last attempt of yours to . . . catch him in the act—not too successful from all I hear," a third speaker put in.

The stout official flushed. "How was I to know he had a band of government geologists on board that boutre of his?" he blustered. "You can be sure they were a blind. Chances are he landed a cargo of arms under the very noses of his scientists! But we watch him now. . . ."

"A little late in the day, don't you think?" a voice—the same one that had provoked the official gentleman's explosion—observed. "Along the docks they say Abd el Hai has given up smuggling for good."

"A new trick of his," snapped the official. "Rest assured, we mean to get him in the end."

"That is what your predecessors, *Monsieur le Commissaire*, have predicted for fifteen years or more," the same cool voice insisted. "And until now, no one . . ."

"The miracle to me . . ." Another *Petit Marseillais* was laid aside as a new speaker joined in the conversation. "I say, I never have understood why the English didn't finish him off properly when they had him in their hands. They're not ordinarily squeamish in matters of that sort."

The group about the phonograph drew closer.

"My dear Garnier, the English like him," drawled an

immaculate person with a pale mustache who might have passed for an Englishman himself. "Quite aside from their official attitude of course. You see he is what they call a good sport and a gentleman besides. . . ."

"You know the story of how he saved his life by playing the piano on a British gunboat," some one recalled.

"They say a lot of things. Personally I never saw a piano on any gunboat," the man by the wall contributed.

The official at the next table snorted his indignation. "I would be merciless if I could catch him red-handed."

"But my dear fellow, you never will. That is the poetry of the situation. When you think that for eighteen years our countryman, Abd el Hai, has cruised up and down the Red Sea, carrying arms, and drugs, and God knows what else besides . . ."

"Slaves," the stout official supplemented.

"Is . . . is it true that every time he met a coast-guard, he threw all the slaves overboard?" A timid young man at a table by the mimosas spoke for the first time.

"Worse than that," he was told gravely. I identified the speaker, the same one who had already taken pleasure in baiting the official. "Haven't you heard that when a British gunboat followed him, he kept them off all day by tossing overboard a slave in a barrel every time they came too near. The tender-hearted English stopped every time to rescue the drowning Soudanese, and that is how he got away."

"Horrible!"

"They believe all this," murmured the hotel proprietor in my ear. The tone quite as much as the words gave me to understand that the mysterious Abd el Hai counted one partisan. The gossip of the terrace rose and fell.

“That affair of the two British sailors . . . it might have cost him dear.”

“What affair was that?”

“One of the stories they tell along the coast. A sambuk loaded with hides, running the British blockade of Arabia back in '15 or '16. A gunboat captured it off the Farsan Islands, but the sea was running too high to take it in tow. The English put two marines on board their capture and steamed off with the sambuk following behind. At dusk when they were skirting a coast reef, the Arabs flung themselves on the two sailors, disarmed them, and threw them down a hatch. The sambuk shot through a passage in the reef and away through shallow water to the Arab coast. The British had to pay two thousand pounds ransom. . . .”

“But where does Abd el Hai come in?”

“He was the instigator of the trick. Certainly, left to themselves, no Arab would have dared. . . . But no one could get an Arab to swear that Abd el Hai was aboard the sambuk.”

“It has been my experience,” the stout official remarked pompously, “that you can always find a native to swear to anything!” He checked his speech abruptly as if he had said too much, or perhaps not precisely what he meant to say. Or it may be that I misunderstood. . . .

“Not to swearing against Abd el Hai. The natives think he has supernatural powers. One of your predecessors, *Monsieur le Chef de Service*, tried shutting up a black of Abd el Hai's, cutting down rations and water for a month or so. The beggar slept twenty-four hours in the day. When they woke him up, all he would say was: ‘Dig a hole and when I am dead put me in it.’”

“Sounds like Abdi, that black mate of his,” the long-

nosed man by the wall contributed. "He has shipped with our smuggler friend for fifteen years. I had him up before me once myself. He had the impudence to shake a finger in my face and warn me against touching that precious master of his. 'He will come out on top and you will be the one to pay,' he kept saying."

"Well, wasn't he right?"

"We held him in jail, at any rate, until the case collapsed. It is astonishing the way they always do. As if the entire population was in league. . . ."

"My dear fellow," the long bland pseudo-Englishman leaned forward impressively. "You forget that the smuggler is always a popular character. Nobody loves the gendarme. It is only human. Remember *Guignol*."

Some one in my immediate neighborhood whistled softly. The timid young man gave an audible sigh, flushed beet red, and spoke with no apparent apropos:

"And his daughter seems such a nice girl!"

Following his gaze, I discovered that "the nice girl" sat at the far end of the terrace, a fair-haired child of sixteen, perhaps, in a white organdy dress—a young girl such as you might meet at the house of a friend in France or England. She conversed in low tones with a black woman in Arab costume, who leaned forward, bracelets glinting on her bare arms, holding one of the white girl's hands affectionately in hers.

"Nigger-crazy," a superior voice sneered.

Almost without transition, the conversation veered off on a new topic, inexhaustible, which I had already heard discussed from the deck chairs of the *Amboise*, the colonial and the native. In substance and in point of view it never varied, whether the speakers evoked Indo-China, Mada-

gascar, Algeria, or Senegal. The mysterious Abd el Hai was forgotten.

The metallic voice of the phonograph, again audible, held a hypnotized handful of listeners; but the others, singly and in groups, clapping on their helmets by force of habit, filtered away beneath the moon that hung above the square like a great arc light.

"And now, I wish you would tell me," I addressed the hotel keeper who was adding up columns of figures in a notebook, "*who* is Abd el Hai?"

He laid down his fountain pen. "You have heard what they said," he began; "some of it true, a lot just legend. The Europeans are as bad as the natives. And the Somalis, the Issas and the Danakils, all have their legends about Abd el Hai. They will tell you how, single-handed, he put to flight a whole regiment of Italian askari; how he saved a fleet of Arab boutres from the English guns. They say he can stop a bullet with a look; that even the sea creatures obey him; that once, when he ran his boat on a reef in a storm, the porpoises gathered up every plank, every rope and spar, even the anchor, and carried them all to the beach before his door!"

"Who *is* Abd el Hai?" I persisted.

"A good many people have asked that question," he remarked, stopping to light a cigarette. "You have guessed, I imagine, that Abd el Hai is not the name I knew him by first. He was Henri de Monfreid before he became a Moslem and the natives began calling him Abd el Hai. Scarcely a conversion that. More a matter of expediency. It helped him with the black men. They do despise a Christian. You have no idea. . . . Though his influence goes deeper than that. You see what the natives respect—and with the Somali or the Arab it is quite the

same—is not money nor brute force. Naturally he accepts the money, and since he is no fool, he shows proper respect for men-of-war and machine guns. But in his heart he despises us just the same.

“Take the English,” he went on, lowering his tone a fraction as his gaze strayed towards the solitary drinker. “They have tried to get the Arabs with gold and machine guns. There are times when they seem to have succeeded; but nothing lasts. It is all unstable. They have to keep both elements working all the time—the money and the rest. And invent all kinds of tactics. I have heard of a fellow over in Yemen who spends his time fomenting revolts, so that he can go in with airplanes and bombs and put them down.

“But that is politics. I don’t think Abd el Hai has mixed greatly in politics. He is too much of an individualist; and if he has, I doubt whether he has met with much encouragement. Not from his own government, certainly. Between you and me, the French are pretty pusillanimous in this quarter of the world. They let the English keep the upper hand. . . . Though once you get away from the coast, the native does pretty much what he pleases.

“Boy! A *citron pressé* for Madame! Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, the native. What he respects, then, is not the gun nor the money bag. His admiration goes to the man who is not afraid to stake his life on a gamble. That is the secret of Abd el Hai. . . .”

At dawn the next morning, the bi-weekly train of the Franco-Ethiopian railway carried me westward to the Abyssinian plateau. Djibouti and Abd el Hai were alike forgotten. . . . That episode was no more than a fragment—a bit of mosaic I never hoped to see completed.

Our paths crossed again by a rare coincidence. Chance brought him a year later to a laboratory on the Seine, among the fossil bones and stones of a Paris museum. One winter afternoon, I came in and, however unexpected and incredible his presence there, I recognized him at first glance. Flanked by the stocky corpulence of the Chief, and a tall scientist in ecclesiastical black, he was seated at a table—my table—on which were heaped, in neat piles, bits of limestone and flint. His brown hands moved rapidly among the stone fragments, seizing a primitive tool of rock crystal, holding an obsidian chip to the light, and talking the while—as if quite the most natural thing in the world—the technical jargon of the prehistorian and the geologist. He looked more Arab than ever in his dark suit and formal collar, which he wore with a certain stiffness, like an officer in civilian clothes.

While I still stood rooted with surprise in the doorway, the Chief beckoned me into the circle. He spoke a name—it was not Abd el Hai; in its assonance it might have been either French or English. As an afterthought he added:

“This is almost a countryman of yours, Madame.” The stranger nodded.

“My father was born in Boston.”

“Boston!” Back Bay and the gossip of a hotel terrace on the Somali coast. Sea-adventure and fossil bones. The pattern of the “mosaic,” I began to suspect, might prove more intricate than I had first imagined.

The days that followed gave food to the hypothesis. They furnished other fragments, revealed still different aspects of the East African navigator. I was to see him seated at the piano of an Auteuil apartment, weaving together in a sort of semi-improvisation (while I remembered the story of the hypnotized British officers!) snatches of

Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, old patois folk songs, and measures of Plain Chant.

"The sort of thing that sticks in your head when you haven't seen a sheet of music for years," he explained. "That is my quarrel with the moderns. Their things are amusing, like cross-word puzzles, but they don't stay in a layman's memory overnight."

"Music," he told me later, "is essentially an accompaniment. I cannot conceive of it as an isolated 'performance.' The Somali associates music with every emotion, with every physical effort, however humble—hauling stones, grinding durra, lifting an anchor. It furnishes a rhythm to his interminable stories. To me, music represents a background—or a stimulant—for thought. It gives the fundamental tone. You may smile, but I have worked out many a problem, come to many a decision at the piano. On land I generally manage to have a piano," he went on. "There is a German make—excellent tone and very convenient. You can take it apart and load it on a camel."

He spoke from a rug of black and white monkey skins, on which he sat cross-legged. "The most restful posture I know of, once your legs get used to it," he explained. "Though they laugh at me on trains." His features, habitually stern, relaxed in a boyish smile. Now that I think of it, I rarely heard him laugh. Even in repose his whole figure kept its tenseness. There was nothing heavy or massive about him, not an atom of superfluous flesh; as if his body, wiry and slight, had been stripped to the essential muscles. Every gesture, every movement, bore the same alert intentness. Some one commented on him later: "Abd el Hai never *walks* towards you, *il fonce!* 'He springs.'" The man himself was a steel spring, perpetually coiled and set.

Above his head, as he sat Buddha-like on the low divan, a sketch in water colors hung against the wall, a desert landscape, sun-baked and bare, a succession of horizontal planes—sea, beach, and distant table-land. About the room hung others, more desert, rock, and sea; in the foreground, an occasional dark figure or the ragged outline of a palm. All done by the same hand, a technique vigorous and simple. Abd el Hai caught my unspoken query.

“That,” he indicated the sketch above the divan, “was one day in the anchorage of Ras al Ara; and that,” pointing to another, “when we were held up by bad weather at Assab. The three by the window, I painted from memory during a stay—involuntary—within four walls.”

“You?”

“Why not? Painting runs in the family, you know. Though I began rather late in life and could never hope to compete with my father, who was a painter by profession. Seriously, when a man spends his life in the lonely places of the globe he cannot afford to be a ‘specialist’ unless he expects to starve, physically and spiritually. He learns to try his hand at all kinds of jobs for which he received no training. Generally he ends by discovering possibilities within himself he never dreamed of—if nothing more than finding how to be his own mechanic, or doctor, or cook! What drove me to paint was no particular concern with art, but more nearly an attempt to give an illusion of permanence to my own relationship with landscapes and regions that had meant much to me in the past. A relationship which, as I grew older,” his face darkened, “I realized could not be prolonged indefinitely. . . . Much the same motive, I imagine, that pushes the traveler to collect photographs or souvenirs. That low rocky island, there by the door, was where I fancied I

saw the funnel of the fugitive *Caiman* and made ready for the attack; that inlet between two cliffs was my first anchorage when I started to try out my luck in the arms trade; that bare strip of beach is where we landed after the shipwreck of the *Ibn el Bahar*; and that gorge with the incense trees is where Sheik Mâki, the slaver, made camp with me."

Out of that row of water color sketches grew this book, pieced together fragment by fragment, arabesque by arabesque, until the mosaic pattern was complete. As my host talked on, the walls of the Paris apartment receded. I felt the hot breath of the *Kamsin* sweeping south over the Dankali desert, saw the Gulf of Tajura glitter in the sun, volcanic peaks and black beaches, the purple wall of Yemen, green water breaking on hidden reefs, the flare of midnight signals; and heard the thud of heavy cases landed on the sand and the rubbery tread of Bedouin camels.

"You must write," I said.

"No, no. I have not yet reached the age to find consolation in memoirs. I am interested in the present . . . and the future as well!" He drew my attention to a table littered with catalogues, blue prints of motors, and estimates.

"And if some one else held the pen?" I suggested. "If I . . ."

"But would I not offer difficulties to a biographer since I am not yet dead!" He looked very much alive as he sat there, crouched on the black-and-white fur, for all his fifty years as alert as a man in his twenties. "You would have to be polite." His eyes twinkled. "And in a certain measure, discreet. Not on my account; but there are other people to consider. In short, you could tell only part of the story—the first half."

That is how the story came to be set down. It is the narration of the "first half" of Abd el Hai's life in the East.

There was no lack of tangible documents to consult: hundreds of letters; the log-books of dozens of cruises in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, detailed as a traveler's notebook; sketches and photographs. But most of this story of his is just as Abd el Hai told it himself the following summer in an Abyssinian garden high-perched above the blue plain of Erer, and continued in the shade of the taut canvas as the sailboat—the same one I had first seen in the harbor of Djibouti—plunged through the long swell towards Arabia.

I have tried to write it down as he told it, changing here and there the name of a person or a locality: minor modifications, made out of consideration for others. . . . Aside from that, nothing has been changed, nothing altered. The story stands as I noted it down from the lips of this blue-eyed dark-skinned man of my own race who years ago set himself voluntarily outside frontiers, outside the law, through love of solitude and the sea, and risk—irrespective of failure or success—its own recompense.

PEARLS, ARMS AND
HASHISH

I

Boyhood on the Cape

The first thing I remember as a tow-headed little boy, is a window looking out on the Mediterranean and the bare flank of Cape Leucate, named by the Ionian colonists who settled centuries ago on the edge of the lagoon.

My grandfather's house turned its back on the salt marshes, the sandy vineyards, and the clustered cabins of the fishing village nestled in the shelter of the cape. It looked towards the open sea in a line of windows, one of which was mine. Of the room that lay behind the window, I have no recollection. It was as if I, too, like the old house, turned my back on the land.

I had no playmates or I have forgotten them. Even the familiar figures of the household in which I spent my first eight years have grown indistinct with time. But I recall to-day with startling precision the sound of the sea wind in the pines, the smell of the cape—its silvery tufts of thyme and lavender crushed underfoot or fragrant in the sun—and more vivid still the beach, and the excitement of each new morning when I hurried across the sand to discover what the sea had brought during the night: a wealth of shells and seaweed, bright-colored fish, and strange nameless creatures, thorny and tentacled, or boneless and opaque like mysterious sea flowers.

Like all children living by the sea, I heard tales of its malice: storm, torn nets, lost boats and men—things I failed to understand and in my secret heart refused to

credit. True, I remember one winter nightmare of shrieking mistral, rockets and gunshots, hurrying shapes with lanterns, and dripping strangers in the family kitchen. But in the morning—lavish compensation—the Mediterranean lay still and blue, and the beach for hundreds of yards was strewn with oranges!

To me, the friendly sea seemed far less destructive than man himself. Our neighbors with their boat-loads of gasping fish, stretching snares for the migrating birds, massacring the ducks that dotted the lagoon in November, trampling the ripe grapes with red-stained feet in the big wooden wine vats; and my own family who stood constantly in the way, uncomprehending, interfering in what concerned me intimately—my relationship to the sea. . . .

Like the Ionian rock which had given it its name, and from which—I learned as a schoolboy—criminals and political offenders had been cast into the sea, the cape of Leucate owned a legend. In the days of the Moors, three sons of the Seigneur of Leucate had leaped off the point of rock to escape death at the hands of the invaders. Fishermen still point to three boulders at the foot of the cliff to prove the story. It was difficult for me to believe that the three lads had sprung to their death in the blue water, and I preferred to imagine that the sea had borne them away to a rich and foreign destiny; that their leap had meant not suicide but an escape. I often wondered, as I lay on my face in the fragrant herbs of the cape, whether if I too leaped, strange fortune would not be mine.

My mother's family, with whom I spent the greater part of my childhood, came of peasant stock. Serious, hard-working land-folk, advocates of constant patient toil for hard-won, often insignificant rewards. Though their vineyards lay along the Mediterranean, there had never been

a single seaman among them. But I have heard my mother tell how my grandfather, in Paris for his daughter's wedding, astonished the barber who shaved him, by a lurid narration of imaginary adventures as a sea-captain in distant lands. But that may have been nothing more than meridional exuberance, not the smoldering passion for the sea which I was to inherit.

My father was an aristocrat and a painter. An American by birth, but of French Protestant stock exiled three centuries before. He had lived in France since a young man, one of the little group of painters, of which Gauguin and Van Gogh formed the luminous center. A jovial, easy-going individualist, my father, with Bohemian tastes acquired when to be "Bohemian" represented not so much a pose as a profession of faith. As foreign to the practical-minded folk of my mother's family (he had fallen in love with my mother for her beauty) as a cricket among ants. For all their mutual affection, radical differences in character and outlook created grave misunderstandings between my parents, struggles that marked my boyhood with their imprint, and harassed and pursued me for years to come. Outwardly, from affection, I stood with my mother during her brief lifetime; but secretly all my instincts and preferences inclined me to take my father's part.

My father loved the sea, but as amateur, not as a navigator. He owned a white-winged yacht, a two-masted schooner which from time to time dropped anchor in the lee of the Cape. It supplied the few outstanding events of my childhood: cruises in the Mediterranean, and to North Africa and Spain. I too resolved to have one day a boat of my own and cruise in distant seas, not as passenger but captain. At fifteen, I owned my first boat, an old fishing bark abandoned on the beach for years, after the death of

its proprietor. I appropriated the derelict, calked and tarred it, and fitted it with a sail. First, I tried out my prize on the lagoon. Later, I ventured into the open sea, choosing rough weather by preference to test my own skill. I sailed summers with the fishers of the Cape, proud to be treated as a member of the crew and receive my share of the catch. Glorious vacations of sun, and water, and flapping sails those were, with only one cloud in the August sky—the return to the city and to school.

At eight, I had been taken to Paris, to civilize me, as my mother said, Paris—gray, maladorous, and airless—my first great disappointment. We arrived at the capital, with me dressed in an ornate sailor suit I detested. (No seaman I had ever met wore anything that remotely resembled it!) And we came out of the station into a gloomy morning, dripping and raw. Processions of umbrellas lined the boulevard, its asphalt glistening with rain. A few street lamps still glowed yellow, though I knew that the sun must have risen hours before. Then the apartment, another disappointment, with closed windows overlooking a deary landscape of roofs and chimney-pots. I decided straightway that I loathed all cities.

At school, the young Parisians made fun of my southern accent; and because I was timid nicknamed me straightway the “Savage.” To avoid becoming a victim and a martyr, I had to adopt the pattern of my fellows, appear to like what they liked and hide my own preferences. I succeeded in maintaining a façade. But as I grew older I learned to distinguish two separate and distinct worlds: school and the city, the drab promiscuity of bodies and ideas made up the one—a world esteemed by my mother, my uncles, and my grandfather. The other, a free, lonely existence of sun and sea, belonged to my father and to me.

Of the two, the former only had intrinsic value in the eyes of most people. "Art," sneered the uncles. "Egotism," Grandfather supplemented; his tone implying that the two were synonymous. My mother shook her head sadly and remained silent.

Notwithstanding my mother's admiration for her brilliant, irresponsible mate (I am sure she admired him up to the very end), it was not he whom she held up to me as model, but Uncle Emile—Uncle Emile, the notary from Toulouse, always dressed in black, and carrying with him an oppressive atmosphere of sepulchral elegance. I had no love for Uncle Emile though I too was impressed by the weight of his watch-chain and the amount of consideration he aroused in others.

Aside from my father, the one man who stirred my admiration was a vagabond who came to my grandfather's door one July night to ask for food and shelter in exchange for work. As the man of the house was absent, my mother and grandmother admitted the stranger grudgingly, trembling for the family silver, but fearful to refuse lest he set fire to the straw-stacks and outbuildings. Such things had been known. . . . That night, while the two women barricaded themselves in their rooms behind barred shutters, I slipped out through the window, to keep the intruder company in the tool-shed.

He told me little of himself beyond the fact that he was a florist by trade. A florist! The word alone aroused pictures of exotic luxury in a district where no one thought of cultivating flowers, since they had no market value. . . . Something the matter with his lungs had brought him south, covering the distance from Paris on foot. He remained with us only a day, for he decided, incontinently, to settle on the Cape. He asked help of no one, and built

himself a cabin of stones and driftwood on the edge of the beach, where he lived alone, fishing in the lagoon and selling his catch for bread. And—amazing thing—he created a garden: roses, chrysanthemums, and carnations. In time, jasmine and *vigne vierge* covered the cabin.

My grandfather and several of the wealthier neighbors, inspired by his example, tried to get the man to plant gardens for them in the sandy soil among the pines. Stubbornly he refused. He told them he earned enough for his own needs by selling fish and he preferred to work for no one. He did not even sell his flowers, though he gave them away generously to the housewives of the village. The Cape grew to accept the newcomer with good-humored tolerance, while deploring his “lack of ambition.” “Once a tramp, always a tramp,” my grandmother liked to remark with acid emphasis when any one spoke of the stranger. What she and the other thrifty folk failed to grasp, I comprehended perfectly: the man was happy; living life as he understood it, asking no more than to be left in peace between his flowers and the sea. Secretly I promised myself some day I would follow his example. But not on land. . . .

Meanwhile the family began laying plans for my future. To those relatives of mine, my passion for salt water was identified with the “egotism” that had made my father a painter. As I neared the age of military service, I ventured to state my solemn intention of following the sea as a career. The statement produced an explosion. Pent-up resentment, unknown to me, had been accumulating for years. I was no match for such combined opposition, and my mother’s tears carried the day. I promised to remain on land.

I set my teeth doggedly, determined to show the world—their world—that the “artist’s son” as Uncle Emile

scornfully termed me, could be as solid a bourgeois as the rest of them. I threw myself into my studies, docile enough in appearance, but resolved that once I had demonstrated my capacity, and was as rich and respectable as Uncle Emile, I would do as I pleased.

When I had finished with the middle-class education which fitted me for nothing, I started out to earn my living. To my mother's disappointment, I resolutely refused to become a lawyer or a notary. An office-prison was unendurable. I announced that I was going to take up business.

"Business." I smile now. I became a coffee salesman for a firm that to-day still owns a network of branches covering the whole French countryside. Not a village but receives the visit several times a month of a man with a pushcart, or walking beside a dog or a donkey that draws a box on wheels. His coming is heralded afar by the sharp toot of a horn.

"Coffee, Madam, sugar, or spices? Or a box of *petits fours*?"

I had neither donkey nor cart, for my "district" was limited to several wards in the north of Paris. I merely collected orders. Daily I climbed hundreds of back stairs, rang hundreds of bells. I learned to overcome my panic of timidity before closed doors, and to assume the "salesman's face"—beaming and affable, whatever the reception. I stuck grimly to the task. It took three years to convince me that fortune, immediate or eventual, did not lie in that direction. In fact, all my earnings barely sufficed to provide food and shelter, and to keep me in shoe leather.

My next business venture carried me a step higher on the ladder. The milk trust engaged my services as "laboratory expert." My task consisted of buying up dairies and opening new milk stations. That experience furnished me

with a modest bank account, the conviction that there was money in the milk business, and a deep-seated dislike of working for a salary while the profits went to others.

After five years of the milk trust, I decided to go into dairying on my own. Cows . . . can any type of slavery be worse than that exacted by the milk-giving bovine? Even now, the mere sight of a cow gives me a shiver. I was the complete dairyman—stable boy, milker, bottler, and deliveryman; for I could ill afford to hire many helpers, given the loans and mortgages that had made the "*Vert Clos*" dairy possible. Stalls to clean, bottles to wash; milk, strain, skim, fill . . . harness the horses and start out at four in the morning on a route that kept me going until long past noon. And at three in the afternoon, begin all over again! I finished by detesting the placid beasts, but the tyrannic udders furnished me little leisure even for lamenting. I trudged through the daily round like a slave in the treadmill.

Then Fate took a hand. The blessed cows, or the goats (for I had imported a herd from the Pyrenees) gave me the Maltese fever. Eight months of semioblivion—delirium, recovery, and relapse. When I began to totter about again, debts and interest had eaten up cows and dairy. Nothing remained. I was ruined financially, but the fever had set me free.

The fever did me another good turn. During convalescence, I rediscovered my father. For years we had lived, not estranged precisely, but separated by barriers that no longer had any reason for existing. . . . Now we spent weeks together; a lazy, happy time among the red rocks and cork forests of the Eastern Pyrenees where the cone of the Canigou looks down on the distant Mediterranean. It was good to be irresponsible again, to think momen-

tarily of other things than cows and coffee, to wander purposeless as a boy through the rich vineyards and olive groves; to spend hours at the piano and fill notebooks with timid sketches.

There was even time for an idyll. In the village five miles down the slope, I made the acquaintance of a farmer's daughter, a black-eyed, black-haired witch of a girl whose Spanish blood gave her uncommon spice and color even in a region where handsome women are the rule. My daily walks became less purposeless. My attentions were gracefully accepted; indeed, the entire family adopted me with alacrity. Evenings I had my chair in the circle round the fire, while the old grandmother told hair-raising tales of witchcraft, and the whole circle sang songs of the countryside: the "*Pardal*" that dates from the Crusades, or the "*Dama de Paris*" whose blond tresses were tied with ribbons of nine different colors. . . . Sundays, with the young folk of the village, we danced the *Cerdane* beneath the plane trees of the square to the music of a "*cobla*."

My father puckered his fine brows and sounded a friendly note of warning on the subject of mismatches. But I shook off his advice. I had done with considerations of that order which recalled all too unpleasantly the counsels of Uncle Emile! Then, suddenly without warning, I found myself the center of a typical peasant drama. I discovered that my black-eyed sweetheart already had a lover, an accredited fiancé; and that together they had counted on my credulity to supply a comfortable *dot* to the prospective bride.

Sorry ending to a country idyll! In the humiliation of that discovery, the last shreds of my tardy adolescence fell from me. I realized that I was nearing my thirties and that the period of convalescence was over. Materially

speaking, I had little to show for the eight years' effort in the world in which I had promised myself to succeed so brilliantly. Failure everywhere. Not even a sentimental success to my credit. I would have to begin all over again.

But not in France. That I decided, filling my lungs with the fresh mountain air as I looked down the long slope of vineyards to the distant blue line of the Mediterranean. The drab city would see no more of me; the time had come for the leap towards the unknown. "Not a suicide but an escape. . . ."

Through a friend I got promise of employment in a French trading firm established for many years in Abyssinia. In July, 1910, I engaged passage on a liner leaving Marseilles for Djibouti.

A deck passage . . . East.

II

Rain

When it rains in the tropics, there is nothing much you can do except sit down and accept it. That is if you are lucky enough to find any shelter. There is precious little chance for philosophizing if you are caught between the walls of a cañon, following the bed of one of the dried-up streams that wriggle down from the Tcher Tcher mountains to the Abyssinian plateau and the desert. In dry weather, travel is bad over one of these primitive trails among the heaped boulders and water-worn stones. But when it rains—for all the world as if the bottom had fallen out of a lake suspended somewhere overhead—you know you are caught without any providential ark.

Gasping, pelted, half-drowned in the black downpour, you splash down a stream that in fifteen minutes has swollen to a torrent. By the half hour it will swirl nine feet deep between the rock walls, sweeping all before it: you and your caravan along with tree-trunks and stones, unless wit or luck show you a way out of the watery trap. The pack animals know the danger. Mules buck and scramble. Camels snort and groan, swaying and stumbling beneath their loads. In the blackness of the cañon bottom, the train stampedes—a panic of frantic beasts and shouting men. A mule slips; is borne away struggling in the current. To-morrow you may find it far below; though of his pack no trace. Lost or looted. Given a storm, and all that the storm can cover, chances are that few of the bales

of hides and coffee will ever reach the coast. And what finally gets there will be practically worthless from the soaking.

That, I reflected, was what was happening to my pack train, as I sat in the doorway of a hut on the Tcher Tcher mountainside one October afternoon watching the blue-black sheet of rain that darkened and shut off the world outside. Flashes and zigzags of lightning gave it brief instants of transparency, revealing pale green patches of coffee and *kat* and a tossing confusion of banana leaves, far below on the valley floor. A thick smell of soaked earth and sodden green things crept fog-like up the slope, mingling with the smells of the hut, magnified in the dampness: the tang of burning cow dung, of rancid butter, and sour milk; the stale odor of hides on the earthen floor. Behind me in the darkness of the hut came the faint flat tinkle of anklets, barely audible in the hiss of the downpour: the Somali girl, moving about the fire.

If I had gone with the pack train. . . . The thought tormented me. Something, perhaps all, might have been saved. A desperate struggle in water and darkness—with nine chances to lose out, but always one to win. Those Somali boys! What were my precious bales to them? Not values to risk a life for, though their capacity for faithfulness and devotion—profound primitive virtues—is always far above that of the white. Ask a white man to carry a letter to its destination, even to the nearest letter box. He will lose or forget it, and justify the oversight with the reflection that after all this was not his business; if important, you should have attended to it yourself. But the black man you meet in the desert—“Will you carry a message to X?” (It may be distant a day’s journey, or two, or a dozen.) If he accepts the errand, he will go through fire

and thirst, rain and darkness, and deliver the massage. That you can count on. Property is another matter. It is less sacred than the word, spoken or written; infinitely less important. To-morrow, if the slippery ledge where you cling shivering through the night has not let you drop spinning into the torrent, you will still be yourself, richer or poorer. *Inchallah*. . . .

In the shadow of the hut, the Somali girl, oblivious of the lashing fury of the storm, was preparing our evening meal. One must eat . . . though a thousand plans had gone crashing to destruction and all my Maria Theresa dollars—two years' patient combing of the Ethiopian brush—swept jingling down to the sea. The black girl crouched by the fire, the curved *gambia* with its razor blade upwards, gripped firmly between her two feet. Holding the strips of raw mutton stretched taut between both fists, she severed them on the blade, tossing the meat into the boiling kettle. The firelight glinted on her arms and breast that had the patina of old bronze. Her only garment, a few yards of striped cotton, strained tight about her hips. Through the cool mountain night it served her as a coverlet, while I shivered beneath two blankets.

Out of doors the rain stopped—suddenly, as if the celestial lake had emptied to the last drop. And as suddenly, all the familiar sounds that the rain had muted burst forth again, explosive in their abrupt release: green things stirring; insects; bird calls; cedars rustling, shaking off raindrops, and blurred far-away voices. I had seen other storms on the mountains; in the years to come I was to live through many another, sheltered and in the open, but none has stayed in my memory as vividly as that October rain on the Tcher Tcher. Even to-day I have only to close my eyes to see again the valley with its green