

## The Enigmatic Sea

I had been looking forward to this cruise with the same passion that a drowning man grabs the proffered lifebelt.

The past year had been a long litany of one bothersome relationship after another and I had a great yearning to spend some time in a place where I would be free from my social circle. This cruise seemed to hold the promise of fulfilling all these hopes.

The Obsidian lay heaving gently against the quay-side in the afternoon sun. Small wisps of smoke twirled vertically upwards from her twin funnels, indicating the total absence of any breeze. She was literally brand-new having just completed her maiden voyage.

The Obsidian and the Carnarvon Castle were two of the first passenger motor ships, that is, they were powered by diesel engines instead of the old coal, or oil fired, boilers of the steamships, such as the ill-fated Titanic.

A porter lifted my bags from the Bentley's boot and trundled up the gangway with them.

I bid George a hurried farewell and swept up the walkway in as regal a manner as I could muster. Once on deck I stopped just long enough to give George a peremptory wave and then scampered off to find my home for the next four weeks.

A cruise liner offers not only the sanctity of the sea but it promises that most private of pleasures, travel. I was relieved and delighted to be accompanying myself as all too often a pleasurable experience shared is a pleasure halved. A shared cabin at this stage would have been unendurable.

Ah, pleasure. The one emotion that really enhances pleasure is anticipation. Take a letter, for instance. The sheer pleasure of anticipating its arrival allows the imagination to conjure up the most exciting expectations, for the imagination is both creative and fulfilling. The imagined pleasures of eagerly drinking in its contents are heightened by the anticipation of its arrival. Alas, too frequently the pleasures of anticipation are dulled by the colder flood of fulfilment and to counteract this state a further letter must immediately be anticipated.

My cabin raised no such feelings of fulfilment, rather of anticipation. It would be both my springboard and my sanctuary during the coming weeks.

I left my bags unpacked and hurried back on deck knowing that George would have left, as was my requirement. I hate farewells. All I ever ask is that you put me on a train or a boat and go away as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. I can then sidle into my new space without the encumbrance of considering another's feelings.

I walked over to the sea side of the boat and found, to my delight, that the Sir John Hunt and the Sir Reginald Baxter were already attached to the Obsidian, ready to pull her away from the dock.

Tugs are such honest vessels. They earn their keep every moment of the day by being of use and service to both the great liners and the raggedy tramps that venture into the world's harbours to disgorge their cargoes of merchandise, coal and people.

The band on the quayside struck up a tuneful note but I remained fixed to the spot. Soon the water behind the tugs would start churning and the smoke would billow from their funnels as they strained to pull the boat away from the quayside.

Suddenly, two quick blasts rang forth from both tugs and slowly they began pulling the Obsidian into the harbour.

An electric shock of delight ran through me knowing that we were no longer attached to the bollards.

Once in the middle of the harbour I felt a slight rumble as the big ship's propellers began biting into the water. Slowly, regally, she moved towards the roadstead and the open sea.

Once in the roadstead a peremptory blast of her whistle was met by the tugs as they turned to find their next charge.

I could feel her engines and her movement as she gently porpoised in the open sea. My hair was now blowing in the breeze caused by her motion, and I stood transfixed by the beauty and anticipation of it all.

The sky began to darken and the full moon, just above the horizon, was beginning to glow serenely.

“Ahem.”

I turned to find a handsome steward standing behind me.

“Pardon me m’lady, I did not mean to disturb your reverie but I am duty bound to offer you a pre-dinner drink.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I could use a strong whiskey.”

“Over here?”

“Yes thank you. It and the sun will go down well together.”

He smiled, and was gone.

The whiskey turned my mood mellow and I was easily persuaded to present myself at the dinner table.

Should I ask for a single table? I thought not. Perhaps it would be interesting to observe what mix of fellow travellers I might be allied with.

The fare, as always, was scrumptious. But I must come back to my fellow diners.

Edith Samuels. Here was your classic spinster. She had been saving for forty years for this trip. I strongly suspected that any man that might show an interest in her would be clung to as a limpet does to a rock. She was a legal secretary and spoke in those same guarded terms that lawyers do when they are about to tell you that, though they may not solve your problem, they can, and will, considerably lighten your purse.

Mr and Mrs Anthony and Edith Harris. She was your classic, “Yes Dear,” Victorian wife who appeared at a cursory glance to be the ideal puppy dog in the marriage, pandering to her husband’s every whim. However, on closer inspection I sensed a seething, boiling something or other just waiting to get out — or perhaps, even!

Anthony Harris was the answer to the world’s every prayer. He knew how to solve every problem from war to water pollution. And he made darn sure that you knew it.

“Good God,” I thought, “I would have throttled the man years ago if I had to see him every day, or even every week, for that matter.”

Captain James Koch was a striking man! Eight years ago he was severely wounded during one of the last battles of the Great War. This had left him with a painful limp but with an unchecked spirit. We were later to learn that his wounds were obtained in such an heroic manner that they had earned him the Victoria Cross.

Eileen Pillington was a slip of a girl, barely out of her teens. Daddy had not approved of her latest suitor’s attentions and had whisked her on to this cruise to douse the flames of that romance. She looked as though she needed no more dousing — her fire was certainly not apparent.

The last two making up the eight at our table were a young couple who had left their children with Mum and Dad and embarked on this trip to try and save, or rekindle, their dying romance.

“Good God, yes,” I found myself blurting out, “Children really do place a great strain on any marriage, The fact that so many marriages survive children, without serious wounds to either party, is a miracle.”

Frowns met this little outburst of mine. I smiled inwardly. I felt in a frame of mind to shock my co-diners for I had not been outspoken enough during the past year.

“Sex appears to be inordinately important in most marriages,” I said.

This was greeted with lowered eyes, cleared throats and uncomfortable movements in chairs.

“This being the case, the fact that the frequency of sex drops dramatically after the arrival of children must really strain most marriages to the limit.”

I looked gleefully around the table, silent except for one or two choking on their tea.

With that I excused myself and wandered back up onto the deck.

It was a magnificent moonlight night and some stars valiantly tried to put in an appearance besides the radiant moon. Certainly Jupiter and Saturn were the pride of the planets and there was no dousing the light of the dog star.

“Hello Sally.”

I looked up. “Duncan, whatever are you doing here?” I blurted out.

“Well, I did not think that you would feel that strongly about my presence. If I knew, I wouldn’t have bothered you.”

“Sorry,” I said smiling and touching his arm. “It’s just that I want to get away from all the people I know after the hectic, harrowing year I’ve had.”

“I understand,” he said.

We agreed to keep our distance.

The next evening I looked forward to dinner as I had not seen my seven companions since the previous night. I always breakfast in my cabin and have a lunchtime snack on deck.

There they were — no doubt wary of me!

“What outlandish, imprudent statements would she come out with tonight?” all but the Captain’s face seemed to say.

I was more at peace with myself and spoke little — but observed my fellow diners.

As the days passed, I noticed little changes in some behavioural patterns.

Every evening Anthony Harris would prop himself up against the bar and regale all and sundry within earshot as to how the world should be run and how foolish those were who actually tried, unsuccessfully, to run it.

Edith Harris began the voyage by sitting in the lounge on her own, obviously thankful for a brief respite from Anthony.

Soon I noticed that James Koch began joining her and that her demeanour changed markedly — her face became alive. “She really is a striking woman when she lets her dislike of Anthony go,” I thought to myself.

These two became inseparable in the evenings when Anthony was spouting forth and too drunk to notice anything at all.

One night, as I slipped into bed I thought that Edith and James had seemed rather subdued. “Perhaps they both had an off day,” I thought.

That evening I awoke from a dream that I was bouncing on a trampoline. The ship had, in fact, turned into a trampoline. We were experiencing an almighty windstorm and I lay there in the dark relishing the experience and watching the stars flashing to and fro through my cabin’s widely gyrating porthole.

The next morning I found the ship to be like a morgue. Apparently, during the night, two passengers were washed overboard during the strong winds and heavy seas.

I caught Edith sitting on a deck chair staring out to sea.

“Oh Edith,” I said, “What can I say?” for apparently both Anthony and James had been washed overboard.

She looked straight in front of her and started talking. "After thirty years with that rascal I had just begun to realise that I am a woman again — James made me feel alive. Then yesterday I discovered he was gay."

"Oh no!" I groaned.

"Well, this led to a slanging match and I demanded to know why he had not told me from the outset. As luck would have it, in the middle of this rumpus drunk Anthony appeared on the scene. By this time the wind had reached gale force and had whipped up huge waves on the sea. There we were, just the three of us, alone on the wildly pitching deck."

"For reasons known only to the male species, James and Anthony got into a huge argument and an almighty scuffle ensued, right against the railings. Before I knew it the ship lurched heavily and they both pitched overboard."

"I deliberately called no-one and just sat there watching the sea."

Gently I took her hands and looked her straight in the eye, "So you got rid of two burdens in one fell swoop," I smiled.

Her face crinkled into a grin. "Why, yes," she smiled!

"Sweet, lucky Edith, your secret is quite safe with me — shall we go and have some tea?"

"Oh yes," she sparkled and off we set, arm in arm — both deliciously free of our burdens — to find the tea trolley.