

SATIN SKIRTS OF COMMERCE

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by

ELSIE NOBLE CALDWELL

*"Returning he proclaims by many a grace,
By shrugs and strange contortions of his face,
How much a dunce that has been sent to roam,
Excels a dunce that has been kept at home."*

COWPER.



RICHARD R. SMITH

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原书缺页

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*DEDICATED TO
MY FRIENDS IN MANY LANDS*

SATIN SKIRTS OF COMMERCE

EVER SINCE the rustle of elegance in the satin-skirted coats of Oriental merchants lured Marco Polo from Europe, trade and travel to the Far East have swished over every route of sea and land to wrest riches from the earth, and power from turbaned potentates. And ever since the warring Arabs closed the Mediterranean to the Portuguese, cutting off the source of their supply of spices for cooking their meats, and forcing them to find new routes to the Orient, the western world has battled with blood and intrigue to gain supremacy in eastern commerce.

There is no greater stimulus for the imagination than a dark-hulled freighter, hawsered unwilling and restless to the dock's weather-blackened bitts, with its yawning hatches open to receive cargo. There is story-decoy in every bale and crate of merchandise stowed in its dim-lit maw, whether loading is accompanied by the coarse clatter of chains and winches, or the droning minor chants of foul-spoken, thin-legged Lascars. It is the supreme in drama—this steady shuttling of normal shipping.

SOUTH AFRICA

Using Brazil's rich heritage of Portuguese history as a background or mental springboard, I turned eastward from the port of Santos for a happy year of vagabonding over the old Portuguese trade trails to the Orient—trails blazed by the wealthy spice merchant, Covilhão. I wanted to see the commerce that shuttles between the Indian Ocean and the Malayan ports, and sail into the South Pacific where grass-skirted Polynesian girls presumably demoralized the Bligh crew.

So I crossed to South Africa on a freighter loaded to the Plimsoll mark with 50,000 bags of coffee. The old ship had been condemned and was on her last voyage. Officers' quarters on either side of a

very small dining room had been given over to ten passengers. The eleventh, poor man, had to be quartered below in a six-by-eight maternity ward designed for steerage emergencies.

The plumbing was obsolete. There were no electric fans, no radio, no provision for heat. No running water in cabins that were too small for any except the most essential luggage. Eleven long faces assembled that first evening for dinner. With declarations of war between England and Germany momentarily expected, we substituted wild conjectures for news. We thought that a fortnight of harrowing oblivion would drive us distracted.

The next morning we compared in awesome whispers the sizes of cockroaches that had frisked across our faces during the night. Then, almost hourly, the things we had and the things we had not seemed to diminish in importance. The gradual calm of isolation was settling upon us. For two whole weeks we were lost in peace on the gray South Atlantic. The only life we saw—besides the cockroaches—was a ship of the same line, and as we passed north of Tristan da Cunha Islands two gulls circled out to look us over.

The expression "Cape swells" always had intrigued my sea-seasoned mind, and when we curved southward, after passing Tristan da Cunha, to edge out of the fury of a storm, we got the full sweep of this Antarctic phenomenon. Great undersea waves roll up from the south, yet do not dissipate the sharper pitch of the top seas. The ship lurches forward on a list; you brace yourself for this; it rights itself and slithers sidewise as it takes another forward pitch; you slide with it. Head foremost, the reverse, or sidewise, you slither and pitch with it, hour upon weary hour.

At Cape Town we added 36 dragging hours to our voyage by standing outside the harbor in a pea-soup fog. Another freighter, not so patient, piled up on the rocks, a mile off her course. For the Portuguese—Table Bay never was a *bahia delegada*, a designated bay where outgoing mariners would cache wine and food and letters for home-coming sailors who had been at sea for two or three years. There is an ugly island of black rock blocking the entrance in mid-