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Tropic Temper

JAMES KIRKUP

A MEMOIR OF MALAYA



TROPIC TEMPER

By the Same Author

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Only Child
Sorrows, Passions and Alarms

NOVEL

The Love of Others

POETRY

The Drowned Sailor
The Submerged Village
A Correct Compassion
A Spring Journey
The Descent Into the Cave
The Prodigal Son
Refusal to Conform

PLAYS

Upon this Rock
The True Mystery of the Nativity
The True Mystery of the Passion
The Physicists (after Dürrenmatt)

TRAVEL

These Horned Islands

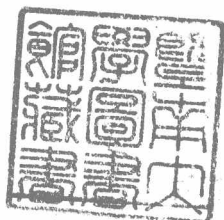
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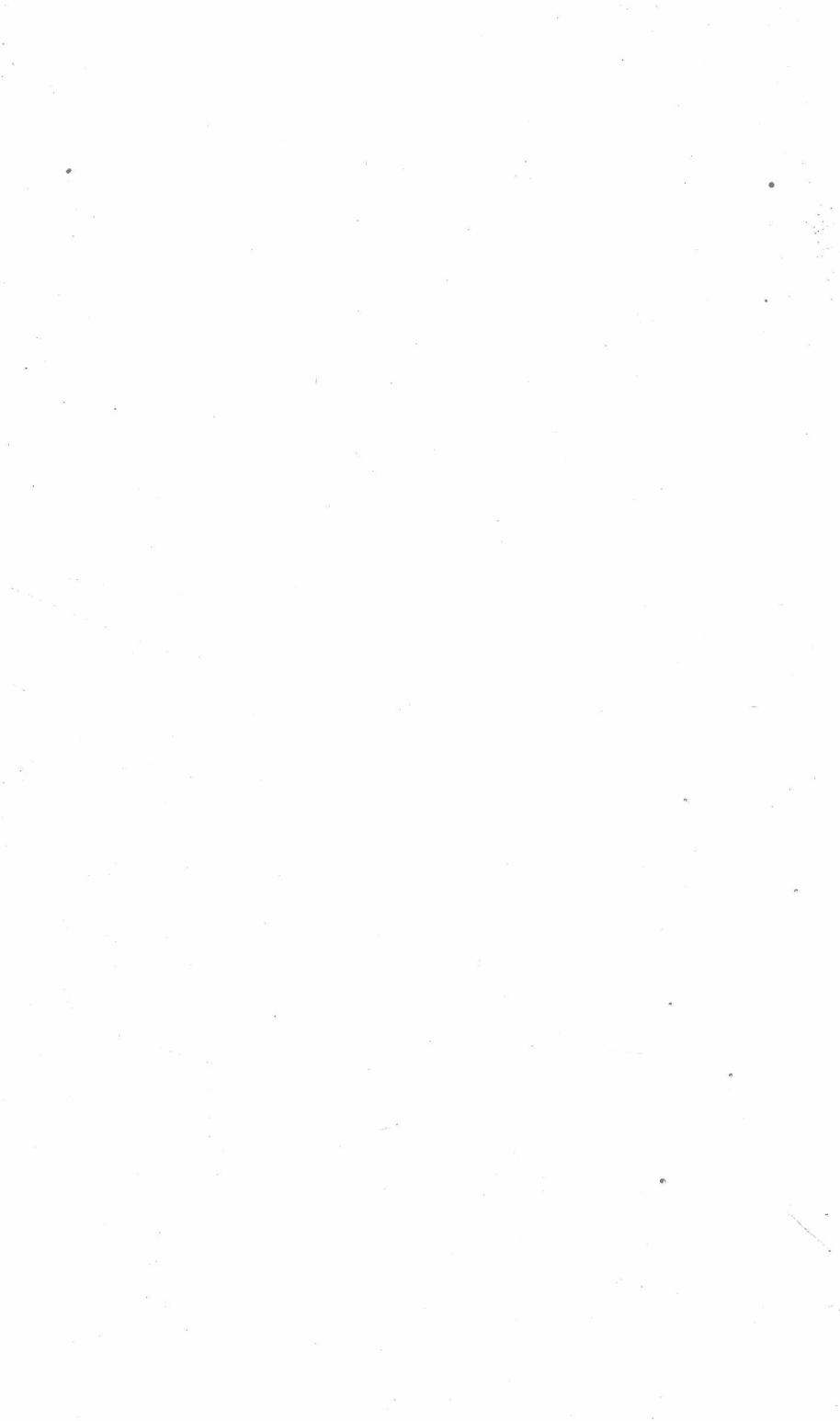
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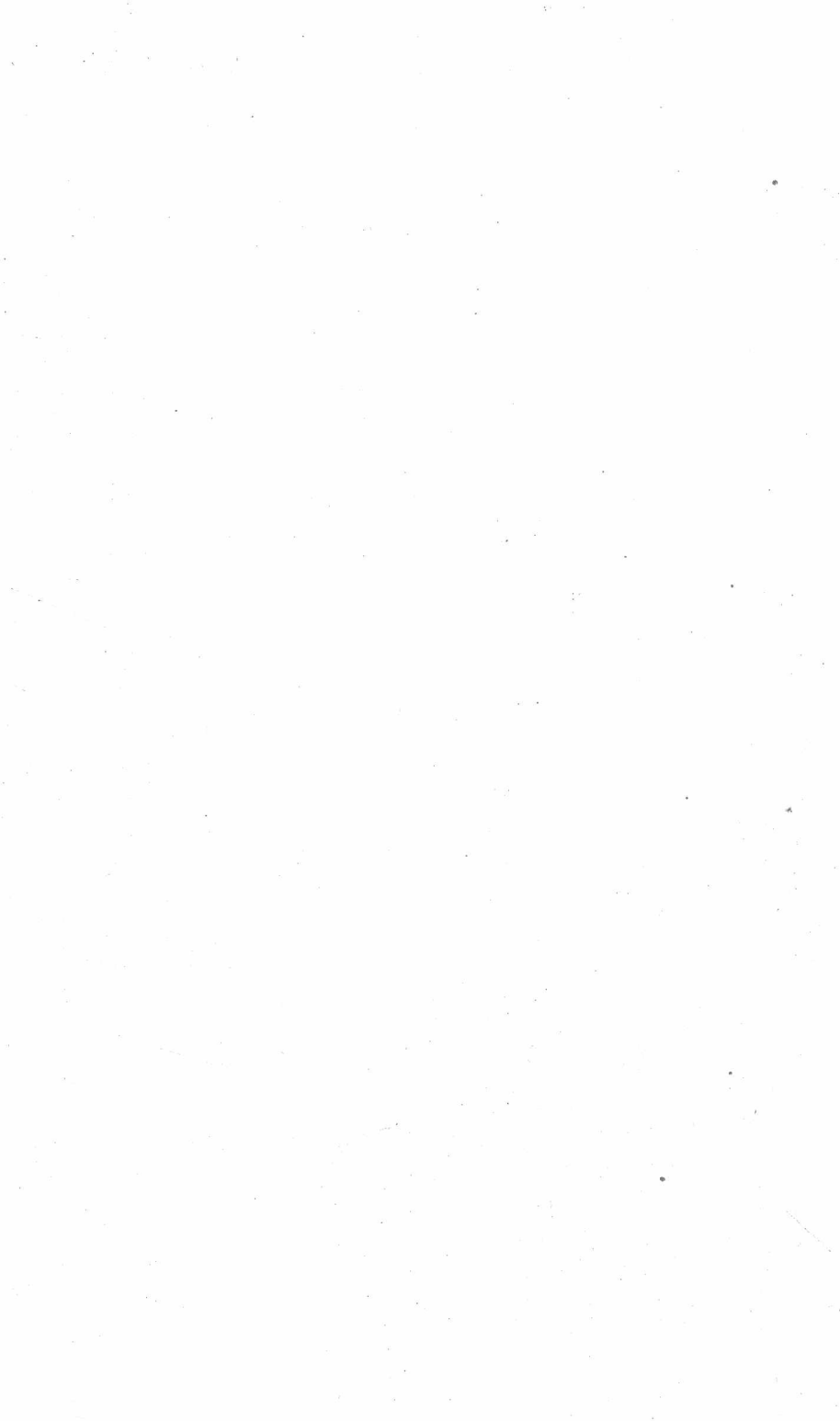
"An' I'm learnin' 'ere in London what the ten-year
soldier tells :

If you've 'eard the East a-callin', you won't never 'eed
naught else . . ."

KIPLING : *Mandalay*

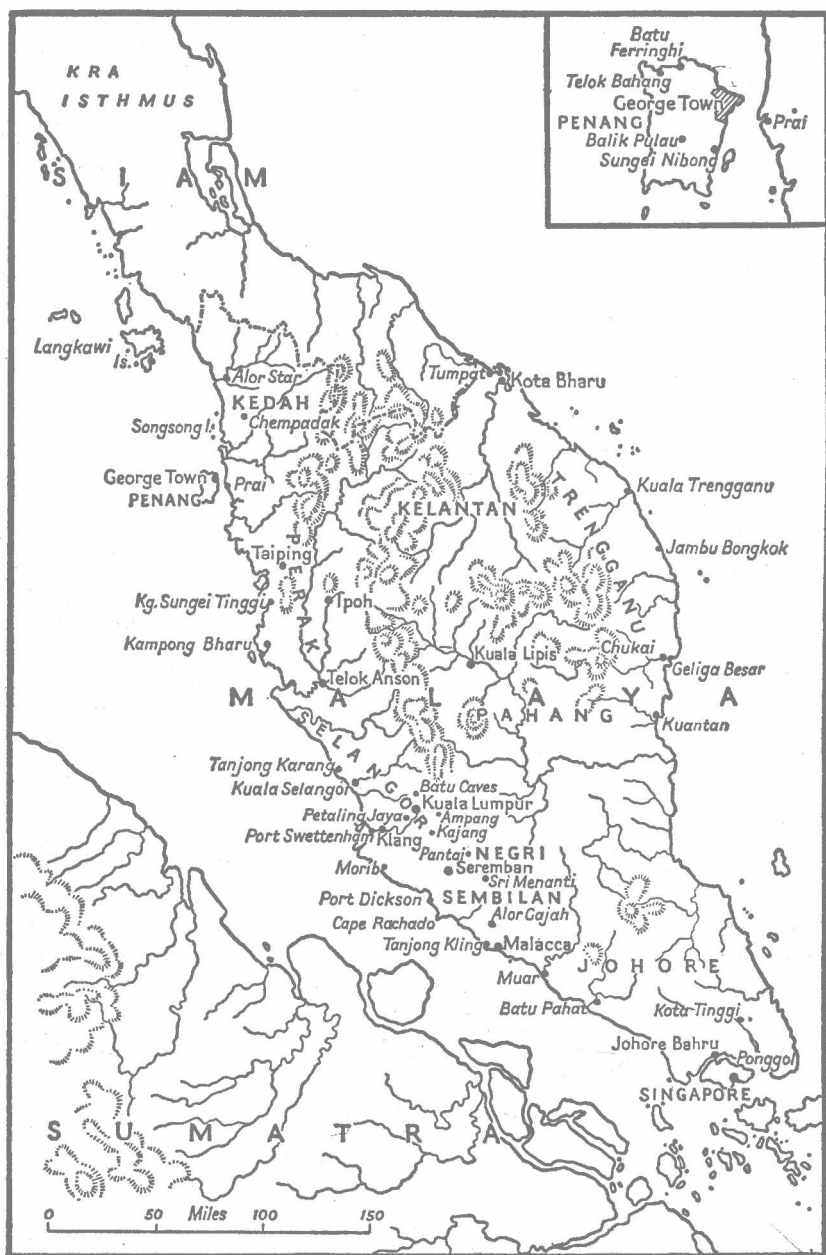
"I agree with those who have said that travel is the chief
end of life."

ROSE MACAULAY : *The Towers of Trebizond*



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I. *The Voyage*

September in the pale-golden, tranquil, ever-beautiful city of Bath, where the avenues of lime in Lansdown are heavy with leaf.

Over the trim-gravelled drives of Georgian houses lean the expiring rockets of purple or yellow buddleia, bougainvillea, maroon and white valerian, the ballooning, soap-bubble clumps of hydrangeas, the massed glooms of laurel and blackish-green holly.

From Beechen Cliff or the road to Longleat the city's crescents, circuses and squares, laid out in arcaded and colonnaded and pedimented Bath stone, glow with that reduced "white glare" which Jane Austen's heroines found so febrile and exhausting: but now, in the cool light of early autumn, it looks like a landscape on the moon.

At the hospital, I am having an X-ray taken before my trip to Malaya. Fists behind back, elbows out, chin well up, I stand half-naked at the cold block of glass, in the tense attitude of one awaiting execution by a samurai sword. One chill tear of sweat and apprehension trickles from each armpit and slowly roller-coasts my racked ribs. There is suddenly a piercing light from behind: I am a helpless moth, a butterfly skewered by a blazing pin that seems to pierce the dead centre of my spine. It's over in a second. I dress and wait for the lifesize, translucent photograph, big as a 21-inch television screen. It shows me to be no more than an abstract pattern of bones and tartan hanks of muscle, sinews like twists of smoke, phantomesque and ambisexual. The report says: "The lung fields appear to be clear."

Back home, I undress and lie in bed holding the huge, cold photograph in my arms, trying to warm the dead bones into flesh. I stand it beside my bedside lamp and try to read into its curious negative my life's meaning or lack of it, gazing warily

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at the impersonal, elemental system that is myself, that screen through which experience flows, sometimes leaving marks and stains as if from illnesses, fractures, deformities, wounds. And there, between one beat and another, the heart in its grate of ribs burns like a lump of coal under the smouldering lung.

A fortnight later and I am aboard a middle-class, middle-aged liner that is to leave Southampton for Penang by way of Gibraltar, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Bombay.

With the utmost reluctance I have bought my first dinner-suit: in the first-class dining-room, the glittering brochures inform me, one is expected to dress for dinner. What would happen if I went in wearing my nice dark lounge-suit instead? Would they refuse to serve me? I must try it on.

A gale has been blowing all day and night in the Channel. It is cold in Southampton, whose modern centre is mercifully lit and blessed by swooping gulls.

The captain is ill, though apparently the passengers are not supposed to know this. A friendly bar steward gave me the information as, feeling already semi-colonial, I sipped a well-chilled lager and lime. Our sailing is delayed until the arrival of another captain.

After lunch, the passengers are treated to a free coach-tour to view the vintage cars at Beaulieu Abbey, a delightful jaunt. In Southampton Roads, as we bowl along in our hired coaches, we can see the great ocean liners lying high up in the water, like anchored clouds.

Already on the coaches the usual shipboard friendships and flirtations are beginning, peculiarly shallow, too shallow to be heartless. Behind my smoked glasses tinged with pink, I remain happily unmolested and anonymous. Is this a good thing? I had determined that this time I would collect people as well as objects and places. I must try a little harder, but not just yet.

There are some bands of Chinese, vast families of them going to Singapore or Hong Kong: they too keep to themselves, steering away from the British. At tea-time in the Abbey Cafeteria the Chinese all sit at the same long table, chattering away animatedly in Cantonese with its complaining intonations that sometimes sound like cross, extra-rapid French.

The Voyage

A few of the British children have Chinese amahs who are unobtrusive, quiet, dutifully devoted to their spoil, demanding charges. These amahs seem to have extinguished self: they wear black or white cotton jackets with high, stiff collars, wide black satin or lacquered silk trousers, hair severely cut and brushed straight back. One of them still has a long, sleek, black pigtail. The impersonal efficiency of these Chinese women is taken for granted by the children whose every whim they obey.

No one dresses for dinner on the first night. We sit anywhere we like; later we will be assigned to our tables, and also, I'm afraid, to our table-companions. A nondescript couple and an old lady with a rosary share my table to-night. They talk very little; I not at all. A few drinks at the swimming-pool bar after dinner. Not a word to anyone: the people all look awful so I go down to my cabin and read the only modern travel book I've been able to find about Malaya, and incidentally the best one: Donald Moore's *The Young Traveller in Malaya and the China Sea*.

We leave England in the middle of the night. I wake up about 4 a.m. The whole liner creaks and groans as we heave and battle our way down the stormy Channel.

Because of my Viking ancestry, I am never sick at sea. There are only half a dozen people for breakfast in the vast dining-room where the tablecloths are damped to prevent the plates and dishes from sliding about. I am alone at my table. The wooden frames or "fiddles" are in place round the edges of the tables, on which the shivering, slithering cutlery keeps up a constant, chiming chatter like the tintinnabulation of chilly wet elfin bells. The high, dismal waves keep lifting beyond the portholes that look like sick eyes opening and closing their lids in laboured winks as the racing ramparts of water drop and lift with head-aching regularity.

There are Indian, Italian and British stewards. I have a charming Indian table steward from Bombay; he is married, he tells me, to a beautiful Goanese girl, a Roman Catholic like himself, and they have three children, all boys, a fact of which he is very proud. My cabin steward, Ramsbottom—"call me John"—is from Lancashire. He is very efficient and friendly, and does not overburden me with "service": but after breakfast as I loll on my bunk doing nothing he looks in and says:

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"You all right, sir? Not feeling sick?" He comes in for a chat and borrows my copy of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* which he enjoyed. "I never read a book like that before," he is to tell me later, shaking his northern bullet-head and smiling a canny smile at this memory of queer and unexpected pleasure.

Lunch. Only four people. The wine waiter is Italian, from Livorno. He deplors the lack of Italian wines on the wine-list of this very British ship. But I notice some of my favourite French and German dry sparkling hocks and burgundies. They are very cheap, too, less than half what one pays for them in England, and the best vintages.

Towards the end of lunch, as I toy with a *bombe surprise* tasting slightly of ether, the ship gives two particularly bad, lurching rolls: a whey-faced young woman at the next table suddenly claps her hand over her mouth and rushes to the door. Pity. Just too late.

Rounding Ushant it is very rough indeed, and the Bay of Biscay is severely agitated. I wander round a ghost liner, deserted except for the crew, the polite, smiling stewards and a few irrepressible children who are impervious to the storm.

I recline on deck, swathed in rugs, lashed by the flying foam, sleeping, reading, drinking iced hock that adds its scented mist to the salt spray on my rose-tinted sun-glasses.

A few days later. There is a tender twilight view of the Rock of Gibraltar spangled with lamps and gem-like neon. I long to walk those nightfall streets of a strange port, but we're not calling here after all.

The Mediterranean brings us calm seas and sunny weather and perfect, star-crusted nights. Unfortunately it also brings all the other passengers out of their cabins, and they all have tales to tell about their sea-sickness. The ship swarms with unpleasant people and their squalling kids. There is an extraordinary number of pregnant young matrons and O.K. hubbies. The only quiet retreat is my cabin. First boat-drill.

Three people appear at my table, and I prepare for "social contact." One of my table companions, a nurse going back to Hong Kong, is very sweet, and her lively chatter and friendly attentions turned out to be most welcome.

Port Said. Its low waterfront reminds one that it was built on the sand dredged up when the Suez Canal was dug. The

The Voyage

"bum-boats," small craft manned by one or two Levantines, are loaded with tourist junk: they come out to meet the ship which will spend a few hours here. They fuss round the big liner in their dozens even before she is properly tied up to the gently-bucking pontoons. The Egyptian boys start bargaining and shouting to the passengers leaning over the rails, some of whom let down baskets on ropes which are hauled up again containing loathsome bits of junk. From a distance, the bum-boats look pretty, their brightly-coloured wares appear like masses of flowers. But as they draw nearer I notice the shifty, cunning look on the vendors' faces, often so much at variance with the beauty of their semi-naked brown bodies, and turn my gaze away from the piles of hideous merchandise—multi-coloured leatherware, poufs, writing-cases, wallets, slippers; brass ashtrays, rugs, straw hats, neckties, cheap rings, watches, beads and bangles.

I walked in the afternoon town's sweltering heat for two hours, returning exhausted to the ship with impressions of filth, uncharm, roguery, poverty, disease, ignorance, nastiness, dirty postcards. Crowded, dilapidated slum houses round a few splendid new mosques. Fly-blown cafés and souvenir shops; some odd names here—Simon Arzt and Harry Lauder. And always that horrid look of the calculating cheat behind the flash smiles on the shopkeepers' faces. At night, from the ship, the place looks a little better; but nothing would tempt me back into that horrid little hell. We sail at midnight.

Next day is Sunday. The ship's service, which I do not attend, is crowded. "Onward, Christian Soldiers" rings out as the ship begins to manoeuvre for position before entering the Suez Canal. Cargo-boats, troop-ships and liners are deployed like a war-time convoy, all white, orange and black under a hot sky of poisonous blue. The hubbies stream out of the service, making straight for the bar; their wives in smart hats obviously enjoy it as a social occasion; I have the feeling that even non-churchgoers attend, simply because it's something to do, somewhere to take the kiddies and keep them more or less quiet for an hour.

The Canal's dun-coloured banks run straight through the glum desert, with here and there a slight bend. Arab workmen are hacking dispiritedly at stone and cement fortifications placed

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at depressingly regular intervals along the otherwise featureless banks. In response to encouraging shouts from the lower decks two of the Arab labourers go through vaguely lubricious motions with one another. The heat is stunning, the humidity paralysing: one moves an arm and one is soaked in sweat. The pool is packed.

The brasswork, polished by red-capped Goanese in slow silence, has an evil glitter. In the dining-rooms the scuttles are out over the portholes in order to catch the slightest breath of a breeze.

Soon I am in a state of almost total collapse under the broiling sun of the Red Sea, an ocean of utter tedium. I sleep out in a deck-chair on the top deck all night. It is delightful to waken there after a gentle doze and blink at the gross, scrumptious stars, to watch the gently-rolling masthead lights describing their slow, small arcs among the constellations, to hear the swish and slap of the sea above the growling of engines and ventilator-shafts. It is lovely to walk alone in the warm, grey-pink dawn, with aching hair, in this great house on rollers, watching the leisurely Goanese swab great scarlet reflections of the sunrise across the faintly-swinging decks.

Breakfast: my first meal for several days. The white waves run past the dipping portholes like people waving and drowning. Then a light lunch on deck as we steam towards the Straits.

These last few evenings, at the hour when the crew use the swimming-pool by the bar, there have been full, dark-orange moon risings, hauntingly strange, intensely passionate. It is a dramatic moment when the great brownish-apricot moon hoists its monstrous bulk above the black sea-horizon; sometimes the deep-golden disc is barred picturesquely with one long, thin black cloud. The stars are like sharp crystal studs loosely screwed into an old Venetian glass cloudy with age. The moon's face, seen looking over the horizon at such apparently close quarters, is more than ever like the face of a man. He looks like a Chinese good-luck god. The face is slightly tilted, which adds to the impression of good-natured jollity. At such moments, it is good to lean over the rail alone with a freezing-cold Dry Martini: I always spit the first mouthful into the ocean, as a libation to everything.

Awful competitive deck-games have been going on ever