

IN THE TRACKS OF THE TRADES

THE ACCOUNT OF A FOURTEEN THOUSAND
MILE YACHTING CRUISE TO THE HAWAIIIS,
MARQUESAS, SOCIETIES, SAMOAS AND FIJIS

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS
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CHAPTER X

BY THE ABSINTHE ROUTE

THE French islands of the South Pacific perform satisfactorily the regulation duty of all the other of that republic's tropical colonies—that of furnishing a retreat for a governor, secretary, judge and three or four other high officials during such time as they may require to accumulate fortunes sufficient to permit them to return to Paris and ease for a good portion, if not all the rest, of their lives; also for a small army of minor officials who have no chance to accumulate enough to take them to Paris. These latter young gentlemen work—or rather sit at desks—six hours a day, drink absinthe six hours, and dream absinthe dreams the remainder of the twenty-four.

Besides a regiment of soldiers and a gunboat or two, it takes something over half a thousand officials to administer the affairs of dreamy Tahiti. Departments which in India, Java or even the Philippines would be handled by two or three men, with enough time over for morning horseback rides and tennis or cricket in the evenings, are here in the hands of a substantial mob. There are about a half dozen cases of petty larceny, and the same number of battery, a year, but the bench is occupied by close to half a score of august judges. The annual value of the shipping of all the 150—more or less—French islands in the Southeastern Pacific—the Marquesas, Paumotos and Societies—is not equal to a season's output of a single large Hawaiian sugar mill, yet the financial and commercial officials are numbered in three figures.

What do they all do? Probably no one really knows; but come into the gentlest of contacts with the government, even as a passing tourist, and you will begin to get an inkling. You are not likely soon to forget those two days in which you cooled your heels in fourteen different corners of Pomare's old palace in endeavouring to make your honour white in the matter of that box of Havanas you forgot to declare when you landed. That cost you forty francs in all, didn't it? And then there was that day and a half that you and the Consul spent in trying to find out to whom you should apologize because your boatmen tied up for ten minutes to the butt of an old cannon that was sacred to the mooring lines of that majestic gunboat, Zelee. You conferred with twenty-one underlings and eight overlings—most of them through interpreters—before you found that it was the Capitaine de Gendarmes you must tell you were sorry. And then there was that mess you got into the time you inadvertently strolled down the path to a leper's gardenia-wreathed doorway and asked for a drink of coconut water. You were perfectly willing to go and take a formaldehyde shower-bath, but was it really necessary to be marched about by a squad of gendarmes to eight different departments in order to have that auspicious event officially recorded?

Yes, while Tahiti continues to harbour law-breaking visitors like yourself there is going to be ample work for all of those five hundred officials. But at your worst, you are only going to be able to claim their attention during six hours of the day, leaving them eighteen hours for their own affairs. What is it occupies them in their "lighter hours"? Men are more readily judged at play than at work. You have seen them at work; now let us watch them at play. The Cercle Colonial, it is said, will show us what we want to see.

The Cercle is a low, rambling structure of aching white, cooled by green trees, green blinds and green drinks. You have seen in the great republic's tropical outposts these little clubs which have not been shaded by green trees; one or two may even be recalled which have not had the green blinds; but a Cercle Colonial or Militaire without the green drinks—never.

"Where flaps the tri-colour, there flows the absinthe."

You are not certain who first enunciated this great truth, nor where you first heard it; sufficient that it has become a law as inflexible as that of gravity. Haul down the one, and the other will cease to flow. Stop the flow of the other, and the one will cease to flap. Certain French patriots who are strangers to the French tropics may indignantly question the truth of the latter statement; these you may respectfully request to cite you a single instance where those respective symbols of their republic are flapping and flowing independently.

Certain of the best paid Tahitian officials straggle home to France every other year or so by Suez or America, others send intermittent letters to their loved ones by the irregular post; but when all is said and done the only really well established line of communication between the island paradise and Paris is the "absinthe route."

“I’d envy these poor devils their nocturnal trips from ‘hell to home’,” one of the foreign consuls in Papeete is quoted as saying, “if it wasn’t for the fact that they are always doomed to sail with return tickets. Coming out of any old kind of a dream is more or less of a shock; but coming out of the Mussulman paradise of an absinthe dream is staggering. Just about one a month of these young chaps decides that twelve hours is too long to wait for the inauguration of another dream, and in the pale of the dawn launches himself off on the journey for which no return ticket can be foisted onto him. The suicide rate in Noumea, the prison colony, is higher than here, and, I am told, Saigon, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Cayenne are worse still. Funny thing, too, they all do it at the same time—sunrise—probably because it’s the hour when the dream shapes begin to grow thin and intangible, and day, with its galling grind of realities, looms blankly in pitiless imminence.”

“A poor lot,” you say. Perhaps. But before judging let us watch them for awhile at the Cercle Colonial.

It is there that they are to be seen embarking, and in transit on, and returning by, “the absinthe route.” It is four o’clock of a May afternoon in Papeete, and the stream of the Southeast Trade, clogged and obstructed by the suffocating puffs of humid air that have rolled in since morning from the oily sea which stretches in unheaving indolence to the equator, has ceased to flow. The glaring coral streets throw back the blazing sunlight like rivers of molten tin; the distended blossoms of hau and hibiscus fall heavily in the puddly air, to break and scatter like glass on striking the ground. Everything of the earth glows, everything of the air gasps in the swimming waves of the clinging heat.

The shaded walls of the Cercle Colonial hold still a modicum of last night’s coolness, and the closely-drawn green blinds of the lounging room check the onrush of the calid flood from without. The man with the gold lace on his ripped-open collar, sitting on the comer toward the silent billiard room, is an officer from the barracks; he with the tanned face and the imperial in the opposite corner is the commander of the gunboat in the harbour; the youth with the opera bouffé moustache and the eyes of a roué at the table by the palm is the disgraced son of a rich Marseilles merchant, whose quarterly remittances are payable only in Papeete. They all know each other, but by an unspoken mutual understanding have separated as widely as possible. Men do not drink for sociability on a day like this, for he who lives in the tropics realizes what the inhabitant of cooler latitudes knows but hazily, that the mental consciousness of human propinquity, even without the effort of conversation, raises temperature.

The government offices across the way have just brought their short day of perfunctory work to a close, and such of the officials as have membership in the Cercle Colonial come hurrying—the first unlistless movement they have made since morning—up the blossom-strewn walk. They slip through the green spring doors like thieves in jealous efforts to shut out the furnace-like blast which pursues them into the tepid interior, and a low growl of disapproval from all sides greets the man who is so thoughtless as to enter leisurely.

Each goes to a separate table, and when there are no unoccupied tables left the newcomer drags his chair to a window ledge or up to the encircling wall-shelf at the top of the wainscoting.

The waiters work noiselessly and expeditiously.

There are no orders taken. Each man is noted by the watchful garçon, and to him is instantly brought a large glass of cracked ice and a green bottle. After that, except for occasional replenishings of the ice, he needs no attention.

Before long a change comes over the spirit of the place, a revivification like that which comes to a field of drought-parched wild flowers at the first touch of long-awaited raindrops. Watch it working in that yellow-skinned youth by the darkened window. Plainly a “transfer” from the prison colony at Noumea, he, with the dregs of the pernicious New Caledonian fever still clogging his blood. By the ink on his forefinger you put him down as in some kind of a departmental billet.

He slipped through the door but a moment ago and the garçon had his glass of ice and bottle ready on the window ledge almost before he was seated. He spilled the absinthe over the sides of the glass in his eagerness to fill it, and in spite of the cracked ice it still must have been far from the delectable frappé of the connoisseur when he gulped it down. A second pouring of the warm liqueur took up the remaining ice and he has called for more.

But now note him as he waits for his glass to be replenished. Has a spirit hand passed across his brow and smoothed out those lines of weariness and ill-health? Perhaps not, but they are gone nevertheless, and a tinge of colour is creeping into the sallow cheeks. Now he gathers his relaxed muscles and pulls his slender frame together. The thin shoulders are thrown back, the sunken chest expanded, and with open mouth and distended nostrils, like a man who comes from a hot, stuffy hall out into the cool air of the open street, he takes several deep, quick breaths.

You, who know the futility of drinking anything alcoholic or narcotic in endeavouring to keep cool and have, therefore, only sipped your glass of lime juice and soda, can swear that the air of the place, far from growing fresher, is getting closer and hotter every moment. But don't waste your time trying to convince the young man by the window to that effect. It's cooler air to him—yes, and to every one else in the room but yourself with your foolish lime juice and soda. See them sitting up and inhaling it all around you.

You have seen the stolid Britisher thaw out and wax sociable after his first or second brandy-and-soda, and perhaps you expect something of the kind is going to happen here. But no—the brandy-and-soda and the absinthe routes start from the same place, but their directions are diametrically opposite. The brandy-and soda addictee expands externally, the absinthe drinker expands internally; the one drink strikes out, the other strikes in. The Britisher cannot forget himself until he has had a couple of brandy-and-sodas; with two glasses of absinthe the Frenchman only commences to realize himself. Don't look for any

flow of the soul to accompany the flow of the bowl, then; these exiles are only going the absinthe route; they are off for home.

Turn your attention again to the youth by the darkened window. A fresh glass of cracked ice is before him and he is pouring himself another drink. Ah! there is your real absinthe artist now. See with how steady a hand he pours that unvarying thread of a trickle; not faster than that must it go, not slower. See him turn the glass to the light to mark the progress of the green stain in the white body of the cracked ice. As it touches the bottom the pouring stops, the glass is twirled once or twice and then lifted to the lips and drained. Just as much water as a thread-sized trickle of warm absinthe will melt from the ice in finding its way to the bottom of the glass and back to the rim; offer it to him any other way, after those first mad gulps, and he would probably refuse it. Thus absinthe à la Cercle Colonial de Papeete.

At five or half past, an army officer looks at his watch, stretches himself, yawns, pours a final hasty glass and picks his reluctant way to the door and out into the still, stifling air. Two officers of the gunboat follow suit, and from then on till seven o'clock dinner-time, by occasional twos and threes, but for the most part singly, a half, perhaps, of the strange company—at the call of family, military or social duties—takes its departure.

The residue—unmarried officers, departmental officials and a few unclassified—is made up of the regular voyageurs; you will find them still in their places when you look in again after dinner.

As you saunter down to the hotel in the gathering twilight, you note that the hot, humid air-body of the afternoon is cut here and there with strata of coolness which, descending from above, are creating numerous erratic little whirlwinds that dodge hither and thither at every turn. In the west hangs the remains of an ugly copper-and-sulphur sunset, in the north is an unbroken line of olive-and-coal-dust clouds, and, even in your inexperience, you hardly need to note the 29.70 reading on the hotel *lanai* barometer to tell you that there is going to be wind before midnight. The air is vibrant with the thrill of “something coming,” and from the waterfront, where they have known what to expect since morning, rises the rattle of winches, the growl of hurried orders and the mellow, rhythmic chanting of natives swaying on anchor chains and mooring lines as the trading schooners are “snugged up” in their berths along the sea-wall.

Nine o'clock at the Cercle Colonial. The jalousies have been opened during your absence and are now being closed again, this time to keep out the scurrying vanguards of the rising wind. The air is cooler now, and you give the waiter the recipe for an American gin fizz, to receive something in return which refuses to fizz and is built, apparently, on a bayrum base. You solace yourself with the thought that you didn't come for a drink, anyway, and turn your attention to your friends of the afternoon, the voyageurs by the absinthe route. Most of them seem to have “arrived” by this time, and if they are aware at all of the relief of the cooling atmosphere, it is only to tell themselves that it is good to breathe again the air of la belle France after those accursed tropics. Each sits solitary, as

when you left two hours ago, but where they were then separated by a few scant yards at the most, they are now scattered from Paris to the Riviera, from Chamonix to Trouville.

But it is plain that it is Paris with the most of them. The youth with the yellow face is still in his chair by the window, but his eyes are now fixed admiringly on a coloured lithograph of a ballet dancer—an Illustration supplement—in its black frame upon the wall. Maybe he's doing the Louvre, you think, and looking at the pictures. But no—look at his eyes. That picture is flesh and blood for him. She's the headliner at the *Folies Bergere*, and she's coming down to drink with him as soon as the crowd stops those accursed encores and lets her leave the stage. And don't those eyes tell you how well worth waiting for he knows she is?

That dapper young chap with the "spike" moustache and the lieutenant's epaulettes who sits so straight in his chair, where is he? The Champs Elysées, without a doubt. Riding? No, walking. Don't you see the swagger of his shoulders ; and that twitching movement of the fingers is the twirling of his cane? Didn't you see him stiffen up and twist his moustaches as he looked your way just now? No, he didn't care a rap about impressing the Yankee visitor to Tahiti; you were a carriage or a motor car with the latest opera favourite in it pulled up against the curb.

That tall civilian there, with the grey hair at the temples and the dissipated but high bred face—you recognize him now as one of the highest officials on the island, who, they told you at the hotel, had been "reduced" to Tahiti as punishment for his peculations while occupying an important place in Algeria—is at Maxim's. That chair across the top of which he is gazing so intently is not as empty to him as it looks to you. There, didn't you see his lips move? You wonder who she is and what he is telling her.

That other civilian with the clear cut profile and the concentrated gaze of the professional man and thinker—ah, he is the learned Parisian doctor from whom the medical world has awaited for two years the announcement of the discovery of a cure for the dreaded elephantiasis. He had his goal and deathless renown in sight months ago, you have been told, when, in a spell of homesickness, he began drinking and "seeing green," and since that time, through the demoralization of his special hospital and the loss of certain cultures of incalculable value, has slipped back almost to where he began. That must be a clinic for which he is drawing those intricate sketches with his cigarette holder on the marble table top.

But what of that portly old gentleman with the benevolent smile and the beaming eyes? That's a Colonel's uniform, is it not? How well he looks the part! But do you think he is with the others in the cafés chantant or on the boulevards? Look again, you world dried dog. Didn't you note the tenderness in that smile? The old Colonel has—or has had—a wife and children. A look like that for a concert hall girl! Not ever. He is in the bosom of his family. May he be the last of them all to wake from his dream.

Ah, you know that bronzed giant with the shoulders and brow of a Viking and the eyes that pierce like rapiers of steel with their eagle glance. He was shipped off to the

“Islands,” a “Ticket-of-Leavester,” from Sydney five years ago, and since then he has gained the reputation of being the most daring “black-bird,” smuggler and illicit pearler in the South Pacific. He’s rolling in money and lives like a prince, with “establishments” in every group between the Marquesas and New Zealand. Last night you were inclined to scoff when he came off to the yacht and told how he had won his “Triple Blue” at Cambridge, played in Interregimental polo at Hurlingham and raced his own string at Newmarket.

You had heard his type of “bounder” rattle on before, you said. But now look at him. There’s more manhood and less depravity in the devil-may-care face than there was last night. And note the set of his shoulders, the tenseness of his hands. Pulling an oar? No. You don’t know cricket, do you? Well, ten to one you “Ticket-of-Leavestser” thinks he is at Lord’s, and batting to save his County. What an incongruous figure he is amongst the rapt boulevardiers! But listen to the noise outside! The hurricane is sweeping in from the sea and the outer reef is roaring like an avalanche. But why no sign of excitement from the silent dreamers? Is it because they are telling themselves that it is only the roar of the traffic on the Parisian pavements? Listen to those clanging bells and the frantic choruses of yells which sound above the threshing of the trees and the grind of the surf! Only a fire—fires are common in Montmartre—they tell themselves, and go on with their dreams.

Now the batteries of the storm have got their ranges and the shot begins to fly. Snap! Bang! Hear those coco trunks cracking, and right around the club, too. Ah! this will rouse somebody.

With a heavy crash the top of a broken palm is thrown against a shuttered window and the glass and bottle of the sallow-faced youth smash to pieces upon the floor. That will fetch him surely. But still no. Pouf! Broken glass is as common as diamonds at the Folies.

He beckons for the waiter to bring him more absinthe and ice and turns again his eager eyes to his picture lady, where she is still pirouetting through another interminable encore.

But hark again! There is a fresh tumult outside, this time a shrill whistling and the tramp of feet on the veranda, followed by a banging at the door. A moment more and a captain of gendarmes appears and shouts something in excited, gesticulative French. You fail to catch the drift of it and ask a waiter. A half dozen schooners are pounding to pieces on the sea wall, screams the garçon as he is hustled off by a gendarme, and the police are impressing all the men they can lay hands on for rescue work—the “law of the beach” through all the South Pacific.

Dazed and speechless with consternation, the unlucky dreamers are hustled to their feet by the not any too gentle officers and shoved out into the night, where half a minute of rain and wind and driving spindrift punch the return portions of their round-trip tickets to Paris and leave them on the Papeete water front with an incipient hurricane ahead of them and the rough-handed gendarmes behind.

The awakening is not always so violent as this, but there is no such thing as a peaceful disembarkation at the end of the return trip by the absinthe route, whoever puts up the gangway.