

PASSAGE TO AFRICA

S.S. Changuinola
21st November 1961

Darling Mummy and Daddy and Jonathan,

I've just come down from giving Pete a lesson in French on the Top Deck. It's wonderfully sunny now and we are woken by the tropic glare at about 6.39. Our Steward, Cazzy (short for Casanova), brings us tea at 7.15, and we lie about until we feel like having a bath or shower. Breakfast is at 8.30, and we start with fruit juice, cereal, a vast assortment of grills, etc. and coffee, which is revolting because of the falsity of the milk. The luxury of this ship is something very special: we occupy State Room No. 7. We have two port-holes looking onto the deck, two beds, "A" and "B", an enormous dressing-table between them brightly lit as in a theatre dressing-room with a mirror and jazzy side-lights, an electric fan, two armchairs, and a magnificent bathroom. There are only eleven fellow passengers, most of them nice, and the crew are very pleasant.

Last night we were invited to the Captain's quarters for cocktails, and we had a glimpse of white uniforms with high collars, and the ladies, looking rather sunburnt, all of us drinking whisky on the rocks, etc. Two of our companions know the Camerouns well, and are very attached to the country. The more we hear of Bamenda, the more fabulous it appears. It seems our house is one of four situated in the hills, overlooking a drop of 1000' to the valley below. Everybody envies us staying in such a lovely spot.

Today was perfect, the sea calm and deep green under the burning sun, turning to black later on. Diddy and I saw a school of porpoises dancing by, but all subsequent glimpses proved to be nothing but endless interpretations of the glittering waves: what seemed to be the turning of a smooth black back only the oily dazzle of the water. We've been on deck all day, wearing as little as possible, playing games and read, and it seems so odd to think that not a week ago I was with you all in the wintry cold. ...

22nd November

Another lovely day: we saw a great number of flying fishes looking like nothing so much as a flock of starlings skimming and bouncing over the water. The binoculars are tremendously useful, and Pete and I dash from one side of the boat to the other, training them on all ships that pass. Yesterday the whole ocean was filled with vessels, mostly fishing boats from far away, Lima, Japan, Russia and Finland; but one that passed close with ragged brown sails and a frail-looking cabin had Douarnenais painted on the back. With the breeze cooling us as we stood watching on the deck, we felt very much like spectators at a private regatta.

We have been told much of a strange effect when the sun goes down at sea in the tropics. As you will imagine, it is very large and ruddy, and it looks somehow liquid and three-dimensional. It disappears very rapidly beyond the horizon, and its echo rises instantly in the East as though both were balanced on the ends of a see-saw. At the moment of the sun's vanishing we are led to expect a green flash over the whole horizon and a bang, like the report of an early camera, but diligent watching this evening brought no such marvels to our eyes.

24th November

We had a most exciting time yesterday. The Captain had heard that the Queen would be at Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, in the evening, and adjusted his course so as to be able to strike the harbour about the time that the Queen's Yacht would be leaving it. After supper we all went up to the top deck and sat together watching the moon over the water. After a little, Didy saw a light on the horizon, and asked if it might be Africa; but we eventually came to the conclusion that it was a ship, and thought no more about it. We had retired to our cabins for about half an hour when suddenly we sighted out of the port-holes a brilliant chain of lights beyond the blackness. I quickly woke Didy, and Pete and I rushed to the front of the ship taking the binoculars with us. Although it was still distant, we could see that they were letting off fireworks, and slow plumes of shimmering blues, greens, reds, and silver rose, lightly fluctuating, above the little collar of harbour lights. It being night, and our not being able to make out the rest of the shore, it seemed as if we had an island before us *en fete*. We cruised around for a while under the moonlight, waiting for the yacht to appear; and at about a quarter to twelve, when the fireworks had ceased, a bright little complex of lights detached itself from the main strand and moved slowly away.

In the afternoon, while we were resting, a school of porpoises passed by, rather more spectacular than those we had seen before. They seemed to be vying with each other in their sportive leaps, throwing themselves high in the air, and executing a few balletic frisks of the tail before dropping with superb *ballon* into the sea again.

We have only one more full day on board, which we regret, since we have enjoyed it all so much. The food has been delicious – six course meals, if we should want them – and we have been kept entertained throughout the journey by the odd flutter at Bingo and Horse Racing. Pete is a dab hand at deck-tennis, and I persevere at Shuffle Board. I didn't tell you that earlier we discovered a dog on board, by the name of Tandy, travelling to join its mistress. It was fearful at first, having been confined to a mean sort of sty for a couple of days and nights; but Didy stretched her wrist to it and managed to calm it, so that we were able to take it for brisk runs round the deck.

27th November

Our last day was very sad, and we celebrated our evening with a splendid dinner in which two wines were served. We had Oporto Fruit Cup, Darné of Tay Salmon Hollandaise, Roast Norfolk Turkey with Cranberry Sauce, and Raspberry Coupe. After Dinner we had a game of Scrabble with Olive, a girl who had come out, filled with terrible apprehensions, to join her husband. Then we went on to Pontoon which we played until 1 o'clock, and which I managed to win with a run of luck that was prodigious. We went to bed, and I seemed to have hardly closed my eyes, when Didy was roughly shaking my shoulder and calling my name. I wound a sheet around me and followed her onto the deck where, peering down the rail, we had our first sight of the Camerouns, a great hulk of a barge swarming with Africans who had come to help unload. It bobbed up and down in the murky water for a while before casting off into the darkness. This was a stopping point called Victoria, and there a pilot would guide us through the creeks to Tyko. I stayed with Didy for a while staring at the big island shapes that we passed swiftly by – one of them was called Casement Isle, and was where Casement had lived, in a house that was now a ruin and swallowed up in the bush – and we became aware of a tremendously sweet and powerful smell all about us – almost a greenhouse smell – which we drank in, although not able to trace directly its origin, as the first intimations of a lavishness of Nature never before granted to us.