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Written for "The Listener"

by J. R. MINOGUE

OMEWHERE about midnight on December 29 we went aboard the De Grasse at Southampton. She had come that day from Le Havre and there were not many more than a hundred passengers to join her in England. The ship was brightly lit but seemed deserted. It was very cold.

I was gazing in a jeweller's shop window in the main entrance when I met my first fellow passenger.

"Say, have you just come on?" "Yes."

"Wal, I hope you enjoy it. Boy, is this it is so." ship dead!"

"Have you been on since Le Havre? One day?

"Yup."

"You haven't given it much time." He shrugged.

"Long enough," he said gloomily. "It stinks, I'm telling you. Wal, maybe I'll see you to-morrow." He went below.

Not long afterwards I followed suit. My cabin in the second class was far below and small. The other occupant was already in bed but not asleep.

"Hullo."

"Hullo. You're in bed early."

"I thought I might be sick."

"Oh, a bad sailor?" I tried to sound ing?" casual.

"Awful," said the voice and its owner laughed lightheartedly. I raised by eyebrows and looked at her as she turned over. She was young, pleasant-looking, and the name on the suitcase was Miss Mary O'Connell. We said good-night, I undressed in silence and clambered up into the top bunk. Always the ruddy top bunk, I thought, and then it was morning again and we were heaving a little somewhere down the English coast.

There was a storm over Europe and it had already caught us up. Inside the ship it was hot-too hot, and brilliantly lit; outside the wind screamed through the stays and hail lashed down upon the streaming decks while, oblivious to all but their nauses, prostrate bodies moaned in deck chairs, wretched figures wove faltering paths along the corridors, and the lounge and bar were almost empty.

"Lucky thing, you can still eat," said Miss O'Connell, and she looked at me in wan admiration before turning her face to the wall.

"WHERE are you from?" asked the ready seated. 'American at my table. He was peeling an orange delicately and looked like Robert Taylor.

"New Zealand."

"Been in Europe? What countries?"

"France and Switzerland."

"Which did you like best?"

"I don't know."

"What d'you mean, you don't know? That's ridiculous."

"It's impossible because they are both so different." He made a gesture of contempt and addressed his remarks to the Frenchman beside me.

"France for me any time. Chamonix. That's the place. Give me a bit of honest French dirt.'

"Ah, yes." said the Frenchman, "It is a pity about the Swiss."

"What's a pity?" I asked. "What's the matter with them?"

He spoke deliberately. "They are too clean and too sad. No, don't laugh, for

"Why are they sad, I wonder?"

"Because," he said, "they are too clean," and with a melancholy air he sliced open an apple.

On the third day Miss O'Connell got

up for lunch. She was soon back.
"Oh, hullo," she said, "Isn't it awful? I'm going to be sick again." She realised her expectation with silent efficiency and sat down on her bunk.

"All that lovely fruit," she said sombrely and then brightened.

> "I'm sitting all by myself with three men and they don't say anything so I have to chatter all the time."

"Do they understand what you're say-

"I hope so. Only one is a foreigner. A Czech. A beastly person."

"A Czech sits next to me and he's nice."

"Oh, this one's all right, really. But, you see, I sit with my back to the dining-room and can't see a thing and I asked him to change places with me and he laughed and said that I must think him a very silly person and he was a Czech, not an Englishman. The others laughed, too, and I felt such a fool. The nasty thing can speak good English. Can yours?"

"No, we've only French in common. He comes in and says Good-morning, Madame, and I say Good-morning Monsieur and he says you slept well? and I say Very well thank you, and you? and he says I also, thank you, and then he says The sea is very calm and the weather is good, don't you think? and I say Yes and feel cross because I was going to say that myself and he beat me to it."

LEFT Miss O'Connell giggling and went to lunch, finding the Czech al-

"Good afternoon, Monsieur."

"Good afternoon, Madame."

"You are happy to be nearing the United States?" I said.

"Pardon, Madame?"

"You are I tried it another way. happy to leave Czechoslovakia?"

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