

At Sea
February 1, 1942
[should be 1943]

Dear People,

What a long trip this has been! And what a monotonous one! It will be a fine long time again before I have the urge to travel by sea – at least three months, I should guess. Also, it will be quite a while before I will forget this one. I have come to the conclusion after sufficient study of the matter that the time to go voyaging on distant oceans is definitely not right now. The sea is still deep blue one day, jade green the next, beautifully stormy the third, glassy grey the fourth, lovely always; lovely as one of those man-eating [*cut out*]¹ ocean seems capable of absorbing the most hideous tragedies and remaining agonizingly aloof. Once we saw an empty life-boat drifting half-filled with water; obviously going to sink in a day or two. Another time we saw a life-raft with two or three stanchions still up in spite of the buffeting of waves. From a distance we thought the upright stanchions were men. We were all thinking that this was a wonderful thing to see – a few men rescued from the complete emptiness, and yet none of us said it, because we were so afraid it wasn't so, and that the things we saw were just what they later proved to be – sticks of wood. That life raft had been occupied. Which reminds one of what the army chaplain said, that no one is an atheist in a foxhole. And there we were with our feet firmly planted on the decks while our minds were tossing around on the empty little life raft.

The sun has been terrifically hot lately, which of course makes me supremely happy. My nice cabin is always breezy, however, and cool even at night, when of course we have to keep our blacked-out portholes closed tightly. Most of the day is spent reading borrowed books – our own have long since been finished. I got a hold of Cecil Brown's *Suez to Singapore*, and found it very difficult to put down even for an hour. The description of the sinking of the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales* is the highlight, but all of it is fascinating. I also enjoyed *Leonardo da Vinci*, and *Storm* was read luckily just as we were passing through a rather violent one, so that the ship's creaking and rolling and the sound of rain beating against the ports made fine incidental music for the book. Another good portion of the day is spent in, of all things, washing and ironing! Naturally in this warm climate we all wear washable things, and there being no laundryman [*cut out*]² are all forced to do our own things. The two missionary girls and I have somehow been wheedled into ironing the men passengers' shirts and shorts, with the result that endless hours are passed over the ironing board. At night after black-out hour we sit around the Captain's cabin talking or listening to the radio, and usually around eleven we make a quick raid on the icebox in the galley, bringing back ham and sausage and cheese and beer and whiskey and a general feeling of temporary well-being. The passengers and officers all have stories to tell. Father's candidate for a good story-teller (when we saw him at the docks that famous Sunday) has proven to be that and more. The chief mate is consciously or unconsciously, no one can decide which, terribly funny also. The other night he was talking about navigation (that [*censored*]³ subject), and about how he first tried to use the

¹ The original of this letter was written on both sides of two legal-length sheets. On the first sheet, Philinda mentioned a number of things that were censored by cutting out the controlled information with a razor or similar sharp blade. The result was that writing on the reverse side of the page was also lost. It seems likely in this case that the controlled information was on the opposite side.

² Controlled information was probably on the reverse. Most likely the missing words here were, “**aboard, we**”.

³ Possibly “**that's his subject**”

Bubble sextant. Unfortunately, said he, he read from the bottom instead of from the top, but he got an excellent appearing answer, and morsed over to the other ships in the convoy the course they would take according to his result. Hastily the next ship in line morsed back: You are steering a dangerous course. We are headed six miles inland on Cape M---. !! Another time, said the first mate, he was down in Para, in Brazil, headed down an inlet he was not familiar with. The current was so strong that for a day and a half the ship was aground on a sand bank with no one wiser, because whenever they looked out they saw the current flowing past and thought the ship was moving! Well, maybe. The chief mate has a dog named Cari of which he is very fond. He had her on the last ship he was on, which was torpedoed. For three days he and Cari were on a life raft. The mate says that Cari behaved very well all the time, but apparently her nerves suffered, for when she got on land she went wild, with the happy result that four puppies of dubious race were born on the next trip out, much to everyone's delight. The mate says Cari was as surprised as could be.

I am always hoping I will remember feelings and impressions and states of mind. When I was in France I kept saying to myself, you must remember how it is to be absorbedly interested in food, and you must remember how it feels to be hungry very often, and to become satiated with one plate of soup and two pieces of bread. Now I am hoping that I will remember how it feels to have the heavy weight of sudden death over you day and night, all the time. You go to bed at night in order to sleep so soundly that you forget the weight, and in the morning you wake up glad and somewhat astonished that you are still in your comfortable bunk, with the solid bulkheads around you. One more night's safety, but another day to fear. At first I didn't have that feeling, for some reasons which I can't mention, and also because when you don't know about a thing, you can't appreciate the dangers it carries with it. At [*censored*]⁴ Here on the ship, I am beginning to hear the stories of some of the officers and men who survived torpedoings before. One or two trips ago, seventeen men were picked up from a lifeboat, and we are beginning to hear about their experiences. Slowly the passengers began to realize why the Captain is so nervous that he must always be doing something, and always wants someone with him day and night, to talk to and laugh with. Little by little you begin to get the idea that you are walking in a dark night in the direction of a precipice which you know is ahead of you somewhere, but just when you will arrive at it you don't know. At first, you are ashamed, but by and by you see that the oldest hands at the game are the ones who wear their life belts day and night. Sudden sounds make them jump to attention, lights on the horizon at night make them silent, whales rising above water frankly scare them. There will be nothing of the cliché to me in the phrase "heroes of the merchant marine" when and if we get to port. The passengers are on this ship for one trip only, but the men have to go on till the end of the war or the end of them. It must take great courage and strong wills, and I don't wonder that they have to be bailed out of jail so often when they reach land. It's just a wonder they don't have to be bailed out of sanitoriums.

I hear the siren call of lunch.

And a very good lunch it was, as ever. My goodness how we do eat! The two new passengers who came on at [*censored*]⁵ ate very delicately at first, too, but after a week or so they too were eating like steam shovels. The food is very good; I don't think I've ever been on a ship with a better chef and better provisions. The busboy used to be a pastry cook, with the result that all our cream cheese comes to us with delicate designs on its milk-white surface, done with one of those bags. He made a cake the other day, and had all the lady passengers down to the galley to see how it's done. I was allowed to try my skill at writing "Happy Birthday" in frosting. It was quite an experience.

⁴ Best guess from remaining clues: "[at Port of Spain we saw ships] **with gaping holes in their sides.**"

⁵ Cut-out is 10 characters long, likely "**Trinidad**"

We have been missing the Commander⁶ and Mr. Donovan since we left [*censored*]⁷ and not a night passes but we drag out another one of the stories the dear old commander used to tell. We especially liked the one about the old Scottish first mate, appropriately named Duncan Campbell, who moped and wailed in his bunk for days after he was rescued at sea from a life boat. His rescuers thought he had been affected mentally by the horrors of the experience, and used to come in and try to cheer him up. Finally one of them asked him why he kept repeating "what'll I say, what'll I say?" Campbell replied: "My auld mother, my auld mother! I know she'll ask me wherrre is my father's gold watch and my grrrandfather's gold cuff links. I left them aboard when we werrre torpedoed, and what'll I say to herrr?" Then there's the story he used to tell about the Britisher in China, on the upper Yangtze. To get his exercise he used to bat tennis balls against a concrete wall. An old Chinese wise man would watch him for hours at a time. The Britisher one day asked him what he was thinking about as he watched. "I'm wondering why you, who are a wealthy foreigner, don't get a coolie to play while you take your ease." And the Captain has a tale about a Dane living in Buenos Aires. The Captain met him one night at a bar, when this Dane kept looking daggers at him across the room. Not to be outdone, the Captain looked daggers back at him. Finally he left the bar, and the Dane followed him out like a bloodhound. On the sidewalk the gloomy Dane put his fist under the Captain's nose and said "You're a dirty German, aren't you?" The Captain laughed and replied that he wasn't a German even if he did look it, whereupon the Dane apologized profusely and invited him to come along on a midnight adventure. The rest of the night was spent in a taxi hired for the occasion, with three B. A. Policemen also hired for the occasion in the back seat and the Captain and the Dane on the front seat with the driver. Every time the Dane saw a party of Germans he would leap from the taxi and start beating them up, while the three policemen busied themselves reassuring and keeping off the other policemen when they came up to stop the fights! A fine time was had by all. Well, we do have some good times aboard this ship, and if it weren't for the fact that we are constantly oppressed by the precariousness of our situation, it would be a grand trip, just as comfortable and gay as any peacetime cruise.

It's enormously pleasant to sit up on the top deck acquiring a suntan while you dry your hair without benefit of one of those ghoulish hot-air contraptions. It's wonderful to think that if all goes well we will be in the goal of my desiring in X number of days. It's smugly nice to know that while we are basking in the hot sunshine of a certain part of the ocean which bears a romantically adventurous name, the snow is falling and the cold winds are howling at home. It's almost as nice as ever to go up to the bow and watch the clean cut made by the ship in the water, and see the flying fish zooming along beside us. At night the phosphorescence (well, I haven't got a dictionary with me) lights up the water as the electric lights used to in pre-blackout days, and we see constellations which are unfamiliar to most of us... But what we all want silently but ardently is land on the horizon, and an end to this seemingly endless journey. This ship has become our home in a new world, out of time and out of space, unrelated to the past and the future. Literally and metaphorically, we want to be back on solid ground again, with a real world around us and somewhat more of a real future in front of us. What an incalculable difference it makes in one's entire psychology to be sure of what one is going to do tomorrow, and where one will be! I keep wondering if it is possible eventually to become accustomed to complete insecurity, and if so what changes must be made in one's fundamental thinking processes. As I said before, all this makes one proud to know the people who make up our crew, who stoically face their fate and know that they must continue to face it. It would be easier for them if they could go back to their homes and families from time to time. They haven't for three or four years, and they all have slightly heart-rending snapshots which they

⁶ U. S. Navy Commander Philip Van Horn Weems

⁷ Cut-out is about 12 characters long, likely "Port of Spain"

will drag out and show you at the drop of a hat. You can read about that sort of thing for days at a time and think that's-too-bad-isn't-it, but it comes up and hits you for a knockout when you're living with it for a month or two. They don't know whether their families are doing as well as can be expected or whether they are out of the running completely; and to top it all off they know that a fair proportion of their friends that were on this side of the fence by some good luck, have been killed, and that they are themselves unnaturally lucky to be around still at this late date. Briefly, complete insecurity. My admiration for their good spirits is colossal, and I'd like to shout it out all around the world. May Allah and Thor and Buddha guide them all back home safely and from the bottom of my heart I say they deserve the very best of everything.

I must have been sleep-walking when I packed, because everything I really need on the trip is down in the hold, whereas I had one large suitcase filled with evening dresses put in my cabin. We never wear anything save slacks and shorts, day and night. Also, not knowing what a long trip it was going to be, I didn't take along enough toothpaste and so forth for the ocean phase of the journey. But everyone seems to be in the same fix, for the phrase "I have some but it's down in the hold" has become the motto of the ship. I completely forgot to pack one of the twelve toothbrushes I bought into my overnight bag, so I had to buy one from a missionary girl before we got to Shangri-La. And having only two blouses put in the bags which were put in the cabin, I have to wear one while I wash the other, with the result that I have to wash and iron every single day. Thank goodness stockings are a thing of the distant past.

Hopefully we have been planning magnificent parties for after we arrive, on board and ashore. The captain has promised to dash ashore and get Bill on as soon as possible, and our police officer has agreed to give my hero a pass to board the ship. The police officer (as perhaps I told you) is none other than Mr. Collins, with whom Bill spent a pleasant week-end last winter at Tarqua Bay. If you look at the snapshots Bill sent me of the party, you will see both Mr. Collins and his wife, who is also on board. Mr. Collins is very funny indeed. He has a standing argument with one of the missionary girls, who is also quite amusing. She says there is such a thing as flying fish, and they have wings. Mr. Collins says there is no such thing, and anyway they don't have wings. To prove his point, he had the radio operator put an annex on the news sheet which comes out daily, announcing that in New York during the course of the conference held by the Entomological Society of America, the well-known authority on marine flora and fauna, Dr. W. Aquaticus Dolphin revealed that after much scientific experimentation and research it has been discovered that there is no such thing as a flying fish, and that in reality the fish which is popularly known as such has a pair of intricate ducts on each side of his body which emit a thin stream of water that is often confused with wings, since the sunlight gleaming on these streams of water gives the appearance of solidity! Mr. Collins was greatly pleased and astounded upon reading this news in the bulletin, but was even more astonished the next day when he read that on the final day of the entomological Conference being held in New York, the President of that august body was forced to announce with regret that their former respected colleague, Dr. Dolphin, had just been found to be none other than the infamous Looie the Lobster, of Fulton Street Fish Market. Representatives of the Press were unable to contact Looie after the conference, since his whereabouts were unknown. But it was added, according to the bulletin, that unofficial sources usually well informed had been quoted as saying that Looie was last seen making a desperate attempt to board an outgoing ship, destination unknown. It's a great fight, but it hasn't been settled yet, and we all feel that it won't be settled before we reach port.

I have written to Mr. Johnston, the Blisses, and Mrs. Murphy (the nice lady in the Coconut Grove Library). I want to work up the energy to write to Aunt Jondie and Rufus, too, but sad to say a kind of tropical languor usually envelopes me after the laundry is done. In order to compensate for the enormous meals we eat, I have been doing daily dozens like mad

before breakfast each day, something which also cuts into my small supply of energy. I only wish I hadn't used up all my yeast, because I feel sure that would give me the required verve. As the saying goes, I have some more but it's down in the hold. I gravely fear that when I get to port I will be too busy to write for some time, and between then and now stands a perfectly monstrous pile of laundry which simply must be done, and nails which simply must be gotten ready for inspection, and hair which simply must be washed, and re-packing which simply must be done. It's appalling.

This morning when I went out on deck to borrow this typewriter they were all out taking pictures of each other in those Men-from-Mars rubber life suits which we discarded from among our handy equipment as soon as we left cold waters. In the tropics they are valueless. The suits are becoming to one and all, as you will see when I send you the picture. The boots are big enough to fit the most generously-proportioned feet, and the waistline has been so designed as to fit over a gargantuan tummy plus a kapok life preserver. I was told by kindly critics that mine was perhaps a half size too large on me. I didn't have to be informed that I took a smaller shoe size than the one I was wearing, because in those boots I shuffled around like a dancing bear, only not so gracefully. In the picture I am leaning in careless ease against the side of a convenient life boat, grinning like an ape to complete the anthropoidal leitmotif which runs through the photograph. I am anxious to see it developed. One of the missionaries says he is sure that Bill will want a copy to carry next to his heart always, but I maintain that one's family should come first.

Well, it's almost over now. When I get to port I will be enormously glad I did it, happy to have had the experience, proud to think that I have shared the dangers that These Men have to face for such a much longer period, and terribly, extremely glad to be safe. Whereupon I intend to forget everything (except the courage of These Men) and set to work being happy with Bill.

Much love to one and all, chickadees!

P.S. If ever you reach the fabled state where you have an extra penny lying around idle, make me happy by contributing it for the relief of survivors of the Allied Merchant Marine, and you know which ally I mean.

P.P.S. No time to write about the wedding – next time!

[Since the letter is written on legal length (14 inch = 355 mm) paper, it is impossible to show each page completely. Here, each page is shown in two sections, divided at paragraph breaks.]

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At sea

February 1, 1942

Charles 1943

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Dear People,

What a long trip this has been! And what a monotonous one! It will be a fine long time again before I have the urge to travel by sea- at least three months, I should guess. Also, it will be quite a while before I will forget this one. I have come to the conclusion after sufficient study of the matter that the time to go voyaging on distant oceans is definitely not right now. The sea is still deep blue one day, jade green the next, beautifully stormy the third, glassy grey the fourth. lovely always; lovely as one of those man-eating oceans seems capable of absorbing the most hideous tragedies and remain agonizingly aloof. Once we saw an empty life boat drifting half filled with water; obviously going to sink in a day or two. Another time we saw a life-raft with two or three stanchions still up inspite of the buffeting of waves. From a distance we thought the upright stanchions were men. We were all thinking that this was a wonderful thing to see- a few men rescued from the complete emptiness, and yet none of us said it, because we were so afraid it wasn't so, and that the things we saw were just what they later proved to be- sticks of wood. That life raft had been occupied. Which reminds one of what the army chaplain said, that no one is an atheist in a foxhole. And there we were with our feet firmly planted on the decks while our minds were tossing around on the empty little life raft.

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The sun has been terrifically hot lately, which of course makes me supremely happy. My nice cabin is always breezy, however, and cool even at night, when of course we have to keep our blacked-out portholes closed tightly. Most of the day is spent reading borrowed books—our own have long since been finished. I got a hold of Cecil Brown's Suez to Singapore, and found it very difficult to put down even for an hour. The description of the sinking of the Repulse and the Prince of Wales is the highlight, but all of it is fascinating. I also enjoyed Leonardo da Vinci, and Storm was read luckily just as we were passing through a rather violent one, so that the ship's creaking and rolling and the sound of the rain beating against the ports made fine incidental music for the book. Another good portion of the day is spent in, of all things, washing and ironing! Naturally in this warm climate we all wear washable things, and there being no laundryman ~~are~~ are all forced to do our own things. The two missionary girls and I have somehow been wheedled into ironing the men passengers' shirts and shorts, with the result that endless hours are passed over the ironing board. At night after black-out hour we sit around the Captain's cabin talking or listening to the radio, and usually around eleven we make a quick raid on the icebox in the galley, bringing back ham and sausage and cheese and beer and whiskey and a general feeling of temporary well-being. The passengers and officers all have stories to tell. Father's candidate for a good story-teller (when we saw him at the docks that famous Sunday) has proven to be that and more. The chief mate is consciously or unconsciously, ~~no~~ no one can decide which, terribly funny also. The other night he was talking about navigation (the _____ subject), and about how he first tried to use the Bubble sextant. Unfortunately, said he, he read from the bottom instead of from the top, but he got an excellent appearing answer, and morsed over to the other ships in the convoy the course they would take according to his result. Hastily the next ship in line morsed back: You are steering a dangerous course. We are headed six miles inland on Cape M---. !! Another time, said the first mate, he was down in Para, in Brazil, headed down an inlet he was not familiar with. The current was so strong that for a day and a half the ship was aground on a sand bank with no one the wiser, because whenever they looked out they saw the current flowing past and thought the ship was moving! Well, maybe. The chief mate has a dog named Cari of which he is very fond. He had her on the last ship he was on, which was torpedoed. For three days he and Cari were on a life raft. The mate says that Cari behaved very well all the time, but apparently her nerves suffered, for when she got on land she went wild, with the happy result that four puppies of dubious race were born on the next trip out, much to every one's delight. The mate says Cari was as surprised as could be.

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I hear the siren call of lunch.

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I have written to Mr. Johnston, the Blissess, and Mrs. Murphy (the nice lady in the Coconut Grove Library). I want to work up the energy to write to Aunt Jondie and Rufus, too, but sad to say a kind of tropical languor usually envelopes me after the laundry is done. In order to compensate for the enormous meals we eat, I have been doing daily dozens like mad before breakfast each day, something which also cuts into my small supply of energy. I only wish I hadn't used up all my yeast, because I feel sure that would give me the required verve. As the saying goes, I have some mofe but it's down in the hold. I gravely fear that when I get to port I will be too busy to write for some time, and between then and now stands a perfectly monstrous pile of laundry which simply must be done, and nails which simply must be gotten ready for inspection, and hair which simply must be washed, and re-packing which simply must be done. It's appalling.

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This morning when I went out on deck to borrow this typewriter they were all out taking pictures of each other in those Men-from-Mars rubber life suits which we discarded from among our handy equipment as soon as we left cold waters. In the tropics they are valueless. The suits are becoming to one and all, as you will see when I send you the picture. The boots are big enough to fit the most generously-proportioned feet, and the waistline has been so designed as to fit over a gargantuan tummy plus a kapok life preserver. I was told by kindly critics that mine was perhaps a half size too large on me. I didn't have to be informed that I took a smaller shoe size than the one I was wearing, because in those boots I shuffled around like a dancing bear, only not so gracefully. In the picture I am leaning leaning in carelessness ease against the side of a convenient life boat, grinning like an ape to combat the anthropoidal leitmotif which runs through the photograph. I am anxious to see it developed. One of the missionaries says he is sure that Bill will want a copy to carry next to his heart always, but I maintain that one's family should come first.

Well, it's almost over now. When I get to port I will be enormously glad I did it, happy to have had the experience, proud to think that I have shared the dangers that These Men have to face for such a much longer period, and terribly, extremely glad to be safe. Whereupon I intend to forget everything (except the courage of These Men) and set to work being happy with Bill.

Much love to one and all, chickadees!

P.P.S. No time to write about the wedding next time!

P.S. If ever you reach the fabled state where you have an extra penny lying around idle, make me happy by contributing it for the relief of survivors of the Allied Merchant Marine, and you know which ally I mean.

[This postscript is actually typed sideways in the left margin. Rotated here for convenience.]