

*A White Boat
from
England*

A WHITE BOAT
FROM
ENGLAND

GEORGE MILLAR



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Introduction

TRUANT WAS A SENSIBLE CHOICE for George and Isabel Millar's first vessel. She was hefty, workmanlike, equipped with powerful engines and allowed Isabel to think of her as her home, it being a delicate matter for a man with an inclination for sea-going to entice a new wife to accompany him. Luckily for George, Isabel took to yachting like a bee to nectar. A half Spanish, half English lady with rare courage, she showed no fear on horseback, or on the sea. Not for her a ritual of safety measures: she was more interested in exploration and, as the daughter of a diplomat, showing the flag, and she was happy to meet any challenge head on.

George and Isabel must have studied the passing yachts from *Truant* in 1946 as they progressed from England to Greece through the canals and the Mediterranean*. The appearance of a vessel became important to them and they came to appreciate long overhangs and a graceful sheer line. So a fast, close-winded vessel with low freeboard and more than a touch of elegance must have seemed the appropriate way to go, and the 46ft *Serica* was just that. She had the breathtakingly elegant lines of Robert Clark, who still is one of the most aesthetically admired yacht designers in the world.

Isabel was able to point out *Serica* with pride when at her berth, not only on account of her lovely shapely looks, but also because at that time just after the war few people owned yachts, and those that did seldom ventured further than their home waters. One can feel George and Isabel's pride of ownership when George, who had studied architecture at Cambridge, gives a summary of the other English yachts in comparison to *Serica*. Clearly George took a close interest in naval architecture as well as giving his emphatic opinion on sundry buildings that they encounter.

One soon becomes captivated, as one always is, by George's unusually acute powers of observation and his ability to ascertain and record exactly what was going on at every stop. Surely only George could have established exactly why the troop of schoolgirls at the rue Oudinot in Quimper needed an escort of no less than two mistresses and eight policemen, and could then relate the feud that caused it in graphic detail? When George takes his reader bullfighting we

* *Isabel and the Sea* by George Millar, Heinemann, 1948, reissued by Dovecote Press 2006

can clearly visualise the fighters and practically smell the bull. When we get transposed to Dorset we feel more than a whiff of the reality and excitement of foxhunting—poor brave Isabel, though badly damaged when her horse failed at a jump, had no thought for her own predicament, only the other riders—George makes us feel that we are right there, in the thick of it. No wonder, when before the war and working as a journalist for the Daily Express, young George soon came into Lord Beaverbrook's inner circle. He even tells us individually how the fashionable folk of Cascais dispose of their cocktail sticks.

One of the joys of George's colourful prose is that we share his innermost thoughts, even to what kind of figure he would like for his husband if he had been born a woman; and he shares with his reader the rather personal confidences of his acquaintances, such as why the Spanish prefer to shave in late evening... indeed George is fond of throwing in the occasional shocker. He is also fond of occasional long involved sentences, for example his description of Glasgow trams employed a sentence running to twenty lines, and there is so much intriguing detail within that we forgive him, and may even choose to read this massive sentence twice or more.

As befitting a war hero and his wife George and Isabel were well-connected, and it is no surprise that they met the King and Queen of Spain, as well as three Admirals. It becomes apparent that they have a gift of making friends, as well as being able to distinguish sincere, kind and modest people from their more pretentious fellows. Amusingly George avoids making any personal remarks when he meets Don Juan, King of Spain. Almost everyone else he meets is made game for richly spiced remarks about their appearance and behaviour. Persistent offenders earn a nickname such as 'The Bluebottle'. On the other hand those who come to help George and Isabel, he having completed their word picture, are rewarded with generous praise and even have their photographs published. One wonders how many of George's rather frank comments got back to their subjects...

George repeatedly pleads inexperience in yachting matters while others deny him the luxury of such an excuse. The fact was that both of them were at risk in matters of seamanship outside their experience, though they had swiftly become expert in others. They made up for the gaps in knowledge using their robust human qualities of common sense, utter determination, stamina and raw courage. When *Serica* was caught out in a ferocious *levante* off Gibraltar all this was heftily put to the test once again. After the first tremendous night-time squall George makes light of the physical effort needed to lower the jib, recover the tattered remains of the blown out mainsail and set the trysail during the storm, nor does he mention that, without about 24 hours' worth of sustained work at the pump, *Serica* would very soon have sunk. Only inexperienced sailors would have chosen

to sail into the Atlantic Ocean with decks that leaked like a sieve, not that they were aware of the extent of the problem when they set off from Lisbon. If George had managed to go slower and head down the seas, the deck would not have had green waves aboard, too many of which were finding their way below.

Serica's classic lines gave her the enviable ability to sail to windward on her own, but this quality was not an advantage when the untired George and Isabel went for a swim from their becalmed vessel a mile off the Spanish coast. As they enjoyed the cool sea suddenly, to their horror, the breeze came in firmly and *Serica* was off like a liberated stallion. A chase seemed quite hopeless, but thanks to Isabel's resolution the runaway was eventually boarded, the alternatives being grim. This incident is the most memorable of the eventful cruise and it is much to the credit of George that he records such invidious occurrences with absolute accuracy, just like all the others.

George Millar's accounts of his adventures are always like a box of jewels each giving dazzling pleasure and glorious entertainment, and never better than in this deservedly revived book.

PETER BRUCE

Lymington

February 2015

Preface

UNLIKE MOST OTHERS WHO HAVE WRITTEN on the sea and boats I know little about either, and this has advantages as well as disadvantages, since to describe some experiences on the sea in a manner understandable to landsmen may be easier for a novice like me than for one of the experts whom I so greatly admire. If I dare now to give an account of a journey by sea in a small boat from England to the Mediterranean it is because I enjoyed it and suffered it and wanted to share those feelings. What I must make clear is that I am not pretending to teach in describing so ordinary a journey. As a novice, my envy for those navigators who know—or seem to know—exactly what they are about is occasionally tempered by a suspicion that I get at least as much enjoyment out of our little promenades as they do out of their great ones. The reader will soon discern my method, for it is simple. After taking all reasonable precautions to see that hull, gear, sails, and crew are sound, I fling myself (and my wife) on the waters. Then we pick up the remains. The process is wonderfully stimulating.

The sea has really been very decent to us, and I like its smell, its unreliability, and its capacity for making the delights of the land seem desirable beyond the dreams of Alcibiades.

We have also been lucky with our boats. (I scarcely like, so early in my book, to write the Dutch word ‘yacht’. Though I have no great dislike for the word, it is said to have an opulent sound, and I am a poor man living in proletarian days. I know that some yachtsmen would not have me call a yacht a boat—but what else? a ship, as many of them do? ridiculous!) We bought the first one soon after the end of the 1939-45 war, a thirty-one-ton ketch (with much auxiliary power) called *Truant*. We sailed her to Greece, where we sold her to a delightful cavalryman, the late General George Clark, who sailed her home again. *Truant* is in good hands today, as she deserves, and is much to be seen in English waters with a cheerful family crew. Our second boat, *Serica*, an exceptionally fast sixteen-ton sloop designed by Mr. Robert Clark, is an absolute contrast to our first. Where *Truant*, the converted Looe lugger, with her great beam, stumpy masts, straight stem, and transom with gilded dolphins, gives an impression of strength and great seaworthiness, *Serica*, graceful, slender, tall-masted, and with long overhangs for a modern boat, may look pretty rather than practical. *Truant* is a fine sea-boat, yet

I have no hesitation in saying that *Serica* is the better in all weathers, and is the more comfortable cruiser. If I had to ride out a full gale in either I should choose the Bermudian sloop—for all her high mast—because when the sea runs high and the wind begins to whistle its threats she gives such a wonderful ‘feel’, as a horse-man says of his mount.

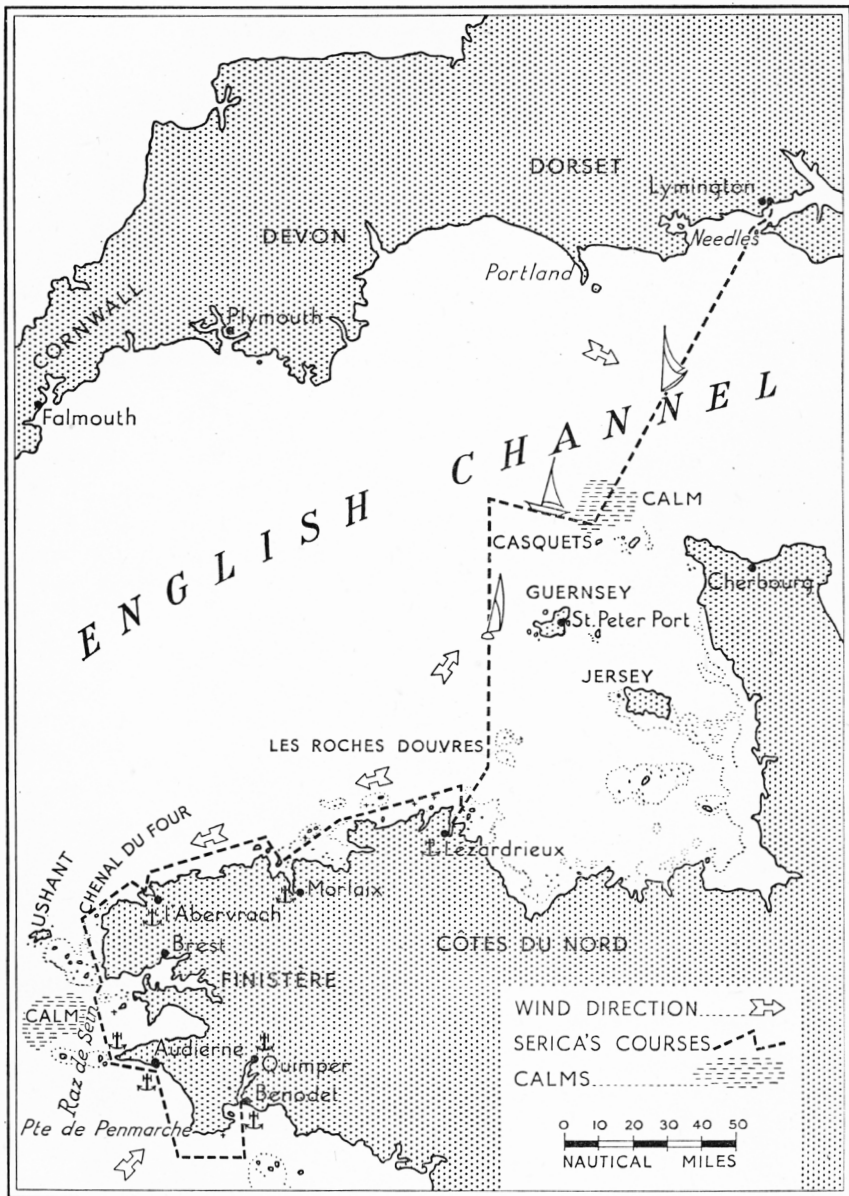
I have to thank Mr. Clark for the measured drawings which appear in this book. When I wrote asking for these I also asked what he had aimed at when he designed *Serica* (she was built in 1938 by the Sussex Yacht Building Company at Shoreham-by-Sea). He replied:

I wanted to provide cruising accommodation with sufficient space and displacement for the comfort that is usually found in a twenty-tonner; to keep the boat as small as possible for economy and easy handling; and at the same time to design a hull form and rig that would give the boat a really good all round performance. I particularly wanted the boat to be fast to windward, a comfortable sea-boat, and a pleasure to steer, because a boat that does not possess these qualities cannot give the sort of pleasure that is the great delight of sailing. We have also built three other boats to the same design, *John Dory*, *Corinna*, and *Phantom Light*. These boats have demonstrated their ability to win ocean races against the best in Europe.

I must also thank my friend Mr. May of the Berthon Boat Co., Ltd., for giving me leave to publish the aerial photograph of the Lymington River.

We left England in *Serica*, not intending to break any records or to cover vast watery spaces, but merely to move about Europe economically and in comfort, great comfort according to true standards. We sailed round the coasts of France, Spain, and Portugal, to the Mediterranean. I think we chose this route because we had taken *Truant* through the canals and rivers of France from Le Havre to Marseilles, and although we loved the inland waterways (and we often long to go back to them) we had both felt that that easy route was something of a cheat, and we wondered what it was like to sail round the outside.

*A White Boat
from
England*



ENGLISH CHANNEL

CHANNEL

WIND DIRECTION →
 SERICA'S COURSES - - -
 CALMS ▨

0 10 20 30 40 50
 NAUTICAL MILES

The Channel

UP THE RIVER THE YACHTS LAY THAT NIGHT with their flanks in nests of soft mud, deep mud said to be dangerous. The mud swallows everything; objects such as knives it devours, but lighter-density objects are sucked down slowly, slowly. Old men come to the yacht yard with metal cages on the ends of poles. They sift at the creamy edges of the mud and lift out carpet slippers and egg-whisks, which they regard with capricious interest before returning them to that smooth, all-consuming maw. How many yachtsmen have dismembered their mistresses and slid torsos, femurs, clavicles, and delicate, folded ears into the Lymington mud?

Beside the creek the agreeable town of Lymington slumbered with dignity, its sash windows reflecting the shining velvet of the night. An airless night, the sky clear of any shred of cloud, and unusually hot for June. The people of Lymington pushed down their all-wool blankets, and lay in the half-life of sleep, covered only by sheets.

At 4 a.m., when Isabel and I went on deck, the tide had whispered its moon-drawn saunter over the mud-banks, lifting the yachts, including ours, from their nests. The creek had become a river, wide, sullen, leaden, with the tide chuckling and the nervous yachts shivering against each other's fenders. Tall masts pricked a low sky that seemed to be a greater version of the river; some of the masts were painted white, but the majority, our own included, were varnished to display the golden wood that is known as silver spruce.

Aware of those who lay sleeping near us, we whispered, and stepped delicately on rubber soles as we set about the unfamiliar business of getting under way. It was a Saturday morning. Empty cars were herded in the yacht yard between the creosoted sheds. Week-enders were going sailing. An ocean race was to begin later that morning.

No wind... our engine proved to be unusually silent. Soon we were moving downstream between two lines of moored boats, past the Isle of Wight ferry, past the Royal Lymington Yacht Club, whose balconies were empty, whose slips, clustered round with snub-nosed, short-bodied, broad-bosomed dinghies, were deserted. On the balconies the telescopes on tripods stretched out their glinting eyes to the Solent and the mist-enshrouded island.

While, in the murmurous interior of the yacht, I was setting breakfast dishes

on a tray I felt from a liberated swing of movement that we had cleared the river mouth. Isabel called from the cockpit: would I give her the bearing to pass the Needles? That landmark should have been visible, but we were brushing through a heat haze. Above us the sun was a sphere whiter than the surrounding whiteness, around us white tendrils were heaped on the smooth water. No wind... Now and then the mists trembled to the bray of a big ship probing up to Southampton with pilot, echo-sounder, radar. On the radar screen we were visible as the smallest of small dots moving toward France. A forty-ton yawl came out from the coast of the Isle of Wight and crossed our bows, motoring. Her sails hung damply. Her professional skipper, perched behind the wheel, was rolling a cigarette. He gave us a nod, knowing, confident, neither friendly nor hostile. We saw no land after the sedgy mouth of the Lymington River (and were to see none for two days and a night). The red eggs of buoys, Trinity House spawn marking the channel between Hurst Point and the Needles, appeared out of the haze and vanished.

As the waking sun began to lick the haze off the water a flicker of wind came from the west. We hoisted the mainsail and the big Genoa. It was an unusual English Channel, flat, oily, hot. Even in the cockpit, under the sickle-shaped scoop of the mainsail, it was hot. Gently she sailed south, and while she sailed we felt her tiller and watched the ripples her form swept into the smooth water, and listened to her sailing noises. We lunched in the cockpit: omelette *fines herbes*, watercress salad, strawberries, Stilton, iced lager... The light airs that were sending *Serica* along at four and five knots would scarcely have filled the mainsail of a slower type of boat.

At the end of May (twelve days before the night with which this book opens) we had determined to sail *Serica* to foreign waters. She had then been for twenty months in a shed on dry land. We hurried south from Sutherland (at the northern end of Britain) to Lymington (at the southern), lived aboard while the fitting-out was done—and now we were at sea, bound for the Mediterranean.

We had made no detailed plans before setting out, but had contemplated sailing down-Channel for Brest, or for the north-western corner of France. Now, with the westerly fading and hot stillness all around, we chose to go to Guernsey, and began to study the Sailing Directions, charts and Tide Tables, with a view to entering St. Peter Port. I was perplexed by the tidal data because, apart from a rushed crossing from the Hamble River to Le Havre in *Truant* (before thankfully squeezing the ketch into the canals of France), my navigating had been done in the all but tideless waters of the Mediterranean and the Ægean, or on the stones and grit of the Lybian desert. There is nothing complicated about navigating in tidal waters (I was soon to learn) once the navigator knows where to look for information in Admiralty or other publications. I was more seriously worried by

my compasses, which differed by a margin that could only be termed enormous, namely eleven degrees. An experienced yachtsman (who writes practical books about yachting) had advised me to buy a hand-bearing compass of a type used by the Royal Air Force. I had mounted this instrument on a teak bracket inside the doghouse. By taking it out and sighting it along the yacht's centre line I could check the bearing on the big steering compass, mounted centrally at the forward end of the cockpit.

'The error will be in the big compass,' I said.

'The big one looks the more reliable to me,' Isabel said.

Although I had little respect for such reasons as she advanced for her preference, I decided to steer on a mean between the two compass readings, and at 8 p.m. we heard a fog signal booming ahead that we identified as the diaphone on the Casquets. We were therefore on our course for St. Peter Port.

The wind had died. Isabel suggested that since the weather was so remarkably peaceful we might go to bed. The last few days had been exhausting... I took down the Genoa, double-reefed the mainsail (more to see if I knew how to do it than to accomplish any useful purpose), and lashed the tiller. The evening was so sultry that we felt the need of air, and we lowered the dinghy overboard in order to clear the saloon skylight. I hung the riding light on the forestay, and we were soon in bed and asleep.

A few hours later I woke. *Serica* was sailing herself in narrow circles, and at the same time was being carried by the powerful tide. Occasionally I would hear the cold beat of a ship's engines. I had convinced myself that the tides would take us north and west, and believed that there was no chance of our hitting land that night. But at 3 a.m., hearing more wind as well as tide, I could stay in bed no longer. Isabel, less nervous, slept on.

I eased the mainsheet, hoisted the Genoa, and found myself sailing on a southerly course. When I had the feel of the yacht in the darkness—and very lively she was—I lashed the short tiller and shook out both reefs in the mainsail. The pram dinghy danced after me, pushing before its raised prow a boisterous moustachio of foam. (We had bought the dinghy at a London garage; it was the smallest yacht's tender available, being only six feet long. Although it was well built of silver spruce and mahogany, we were to agree that it had not been a wise purchase... When we had fitted out *Truant* for a cruise to Greece I had acquired too much gear of every description, and had loaded the ketch with stores that we never used. On *Truant* I had insisted that we must carry a ten-foot sailing dinghy. *Serica*'s baby pram, all of *Serica*'s gear, and indeed *Serica* herself, represented the swing of the pendulum.)

When Isabel came on deck we hove to. We lifted the dinghy, lashing it to its chocks on the coach roof, and continued with mainsail and No. 3 jib. (*Serica* car-

ried the following sails: mainsail, trysail, spinnaker, Nos. 1, 2, and 3 jibs—No. 1 being the Genoa, No. 2 a big jib, and No. 3 of more manageable proportions—and a storm jib of heavy oiled canvas.)

That day the south-east wind was gusty, and raised a short, grey sea. We sailed through morning, afternoon, and evening, at six or seven knots, close-hauled, and spent much of the time wondering where the devil we were. The horizon was banked with clouds that formed mirages, land and citadels and hamlets and the openings of mighty rivers.

Although the yacht had almost ceased to make water when on an even keel, she was now sluicing her white topsides, which had dried out and become porous during her long sleep ashore; she leaked so copiously that I had to pump every hour. (The bilge pump, excellent so far as its capacity for spewing forth water is concerned, is an exhausting contraption; the operator, kneeling on the floor under the doghouse, turns a brass handle in a horizontal clockwise movement.)

Wind and sea stiffened during the dark afternoon. The yacht increased her pace. Her decks were wet enough, since her sharp bows sliced through the tops of the seas and the wind flung the spray aft, but in the cockpit, protected by the curve of the doghouse and by the coamings, we were dry. Wondering about our landfall on a dangerous and unfamiliar coast in worsening weather, I was yet exhilarated by the lightness of the tiller in my fingers, the steadiness and drive of a balanced sailing machine, the long, tormented thread of our wake. Isabel dosed herself with a new medicine to prevent seasickness, and said that the effect was a kind of paralysis. She took her turns at the tiller, and between turns slumbered at my side.

In the evening I woke her and announced with distaste (since navies at sea are often a nuisance to yachts) that I had sighted ahead the combined fleets of the Russophobe powers. Those fleets, the B.B.C. had earlier informed us, were doing exercises off the coasts of France. Looking through the binoculars (which were encrusted with salt) I picked out the aircraft carrier H.M.S. *Implacable*, which was, I knew, flying the flag of Admiral Sir Rhoderick McGrigor.

We soon realised that the fleet, though we could see foam at the bows and sterns of all the units, was stationary, and when we had sailed a mile or two nearer we saw that it was no fleet but a collection of grey rocks upon the bases of which the sea rushed with a fury that, like aerial bombardment, was as terrifying as it was senseless. A Breton fishing-smack was working nets close to the rocks. She was about three times the size of *Serica*, but as she carried no sail she behaved stupidly, standing on end and rolling her scuppers under, while we, by comparison, were steady and nimble. We sailed close to her, and hailed.

Où sommes nous?

The dripping men on board answered in a chorus that came to us like the

barking of sea lions. At length we made out: *Les Roches Douvres*.

We gybed *Serica* (for the first time) without difficulty save for a *contretemps* with the jib sheets, whose pull I had underestimated, and sailed with wind and sea on our port quarter, heading south-west. Now there was a flurry of charts and Sailing Directions. Where was the nearest anchorage? (With us in such circumstances the nearest is always the best.) A place called Lezardrieux situated some distance up the tidal Rivière de Pontrieux, of whose dangers the compilers of the Sailing Directions write in a tone even more tartly warning than usual. Lezardrieux it would have to be.

The light had slipped away; I was not sure of my compasses and had had no opportunity to test the patent log. What little was to be seen of the land to port more than confirmed the nightmarish outlines on the charts. Was this indeed the coast of Brittany, land of pink shrimps and cider, and butter white as Irish linen, this growling line of rocky defences so thick, so venomous?

I am of an inequable temperament, prone to sudden and foolish exaltation or despair. That evening I was low, miserable, puny, and afraid. Although Isabel always has a stouter heart, the anti-seasickness medicine seemed to be relaxing its druggy grip at the very moment when elements and circumstance were increasing their pressure. It was she who pulled us together... she made out a buoy which she identified on the chart, and that buoy was the key to the river.

Fate is a queer bird. The night before I had ordered my charts Mr. Adlard Coles had climbed down our ladder to have a look at us and *Serica*. He happened to mention the anchorage at Lezardrieux. So I had ordered, with some seventy charts covering the coasts between Lymington and Italy, a full-scale one of the Pontrieux River. On the chart the river looked small, but in the darkness (and we were entering at approximately high water) it proved to be vast. A sea writhed and in places boiled on the bar, but we buffeted through it. I had been so obsessed with navigation and so keen to get somewhere as quickly as possible that it had not occurred to me to reduce sail. Sailing at that speed with breakers audible and sometimes visible on either hand was too much for me, and I got down the main-sail. I had vaselined the track and the slides, and was agreeably surprised at the ease of handling a Bermudian sail. The engine started at the first touch of the button. We passed beacons, buoys, a cluster of wind-flattened islands, and then entered the land between hills. Leading lights guided us up the main channel. A bend, more leading lights, and the swell had changed to a ripple. The patent log showed ninety-five miles for the day's run. We dropped anchor in eight fathoms at the top of the last reach before the village.

How welcome, how precious the steadiness, the calm, the land-lockedness of the anchorage! Wind hissed through the trees on the slopes above us. Down-river roared the sea. And there we were alone, comfortable, suddenly hungry. No mat-

ter how rough the passage, you have but to find good anchorage and there, in the boat, are warmth, light, food, books, alcohol, tobacco, comfortable beds, violins, daggers. It is to enhance such contrasts with the sea and the wind that the truly wise yachtsman sails in the company of a beautiful or an intelligent woman—it may be his wife.

The yacht, now wind- now tide-ode, was uneasy at her anchor. She fretted with the cable as a blood mare that travels smoothly at any pace, and over any obstacle, may fret when held by the dismounted rider.

Cheating the Century

A BRISK MORNING, GUSTY, WITH ALTERNATIONS of sun and swift shadow... The voluminous headsails had to be dried, folded, and squeezed each into its canvas bag. I learned how best to do this by experience, and I was slow that morning, indeed at moments the task seemed impossible. We had left the hot weather in England. A few rusty trawlers chugged out past us, their crews in faded berets, square men. It was a joy to scrub *Serica's* teak deck, to see the water gushing off it and the wood whitening as it dried. The wavelets of the river plopped against our waterline. The yacht's bows rose and dipped, pointing downstream. We were anchored at the end of a reach about a mile long and rounded at either end. The river has there torn its way deep and wide into the land. No houses were in sight, only a lighthouse, a few beacons, fields, cattle, orchards, woods and a soft road—a stream of dust—with goats tethered on its verges.

We beached the pram in the shingle, and carried it easily between us to above the high water marks. Ashore the temperature was some fifteen degrees warmer than on the boat. A grass snake squirmed away from our feet as we followed a path through the woods, climbing.

We had the incomparable sensation—one that never stales—of being behind the enemy lines, of having cheated the twentieth century. No passports, no Customs, no fellow-travellers, no tickets, no timetable, no preachers, no responsibilities... I might have landed in France in a dream. The sensation was deepened by the swing of balance that long hours in a small boat induce; the land was alive, for it gently pulsed as I trod it.

We found our way to the centre of Lezardrieux, to the bar of the *Hôtel Garibaldi*, where the *patronne* made us a meal. She was helped by her husband, who rolled thin wisps of smoked ham, and sliced tomatoes with a razor.

For eighty francs we hired a tandem bicycle and rode into the accidented interior. The south-east wind blew a rainstorm into our faces. We perched the machine under the eaves of a café. Inside, on the ground floor, there was only space for a kitchen and a dark narrow room with rectangular tables, marble-surfaced, iron-legged. A staircase with yellow linoleum on the treads mounted to the upper rooms. A girl came forward. The rain streamed over the windows and crept under

the ragged edge of the door. For so small an establishment there was an unusual stock of drink behind the bar, champagnes, brandies, armagnacs. And why was the girl so well-dressed? Square pegs in round holes are, I think, rarer in France than in England. We heard noises upstairs, a man's voice and a woman's, then feet on the floor above our ceiling. The man whistled and called: '*Thérèse!*' The girl ran to him.

'Only two English people off a yacht at Lezardrieux,' we heard her say.

'*En ce cas...*'

The girl reappeared and turned on the gramophone. *Sombreros et Mantillas* came storming out, and protected by that lively café noise, the couple negotiated the stairs. The woman wore a raincoat buttoned to the throat, and when she reached the last step she drew the hood over her black hair. A middle-aged woman, handsome enough, she gave us a look full of curiosity, and without a word stalked into the rain. Through the window I could see the water bouncing off her impermeable hood. The man was dressed in a dusty, blue, town suit of good cloth; his brown boots had been made in the country for the country. He ordered white wine, and went to the lavabo behind the café.

'A rich miller from...' the girl whispered to us, naming a small town fifteen miles away, '*et un très bon client de la maison, gentil comme tout...*'

Her description scarcely seemed to fit. The miller was corpulent, and the lines round nose, mouth, eyes, were deeply eaten in. He was short of breath; he gasped and puffed like Mr. Jogglebury Crowdy. He talked to us between puffs, attempting to shine before Thérèse.

'I envy you that life,' he said. 'I would give a million francs (if I had such a sum) to sail off in your yacht, to sail perhaps to Madagascar or some such romantic corner of the earth. Would you come with me to Madagascar, Mademoiselle Thérèse?'

'To the ends of the earth,' she answered.

'We must drink to our adventure.' He ordered a special bottle. While the girl was away he came to our table, and leaning both elbows on the marble, approached his face to mine, saying with an air of importance: 'D'you know who she is, the little (puff)? She's the only daughter of (wheeze) the Colets.'

'Who are they?'

He recoiled. Did we never read the newspapers? The Colets! They had been arrested at last, taken to Brest, and soon they would be on their way to an important trial in Paris.

'What have they done?'

What had they not done? They had embezzled millions from the insurance companies, millions. According to the miller the Colets had moved about France for years buying properties, insuring them, burning them. 'God knows what their

real name is, for I believe they've answered to thirty names in the last fifteen years,' he said. 'Thérèse says its Forbin, but how can you believe a word uttered by the child of such parents?... A wonderful girl,' he said. 'A perfect sample. It's my belief she knew all her parents were up to. She may have been the brains of the bunch... And extremely (*ex-trême-me-ment*) well built.'

She came with the bottle and four glasses. The rain had stopped. When we had drunk one glass with the miller we shook hands and left them. His hand was dry, hot, muscular, at odds with the fleshiness of his neck and his tormented breathing. He sounded as though he had swallowed an old bulldog.

'Well,' the woman at the *Garibaldi* said when we returned the tandem, 'I expected to see you both half-drowned.'

We told her the name of the café where we had sheltered.

'And you met Thérèse? There's a clever minx. The richest miller for fifty kilometres round eats out of her hand. He'll marry her, for his wife lies dying at the mill. Thérèse is in no hurry; she's only nineteen.'

'We thought her younger.'

'I said she was clever.'

'We met a miller at the café, a big man with heavy breathing...'

'That's him. Thérèse is lucky.'

'She's unfortunate in her parents.'

'Perhaps, but they haven't done much. A few permutations and combinations at the expense of the insurance companies. They'll go behind bars for a year or so, and when they come out Thérèse may be in a position to support them as a daughter should.'

'The miller gave us to understand that the parents had embezzled millions.'

'I keep on telling you that Thérèse is clever. She's also a considerate daughter. Which is it better to be, the daughter of the pickpocket who gets nabbed for pinching a lottery ticket, or the daughter of the burglar caught with the Rajah's diamond? She knows how to tell her story, our Thérèse, and sing! there's nobody like her. At Mass she can pipe the 'Agnus Dei' solo in a manner that brings tears to my eyes, and I assure you that when you've been in commerce as long as I have the tears are as stiff to draw as rusted nails from the oak... In sum, Thérèse is a girl who'll end well.'

The *patronne* exhorted us to tell all men of the excellence of her hotel. *Les yachtsmen britanniques* were the type of clients she wanted, she said. And her husband was a fine cook. 'At one moment he was chef to Madame —, the mistress of Monsieur —, who was then Chef de Cabinet to Monsieur —, who was then Minister of the Interior.'

Hers is, *yachtsmen britanniques*, an excellent hotel. It has (or had) no bath, no

inside lavatory flushed with pure water, no spring mattresses; it has no place to sit in except the bar, no telephone except the one behind the bar, no page boy, no lift. But the owner can cook, and his wife is lively.

After our excursion inland it was exciting to see the yacht again. We saw her first from the woods three hundred feet above the water. She was rolling her tall mast. There was a fierce little chop on the river.

We sailed at dawn. Conditions were quiet in the estuary, and there, with the large-scale chart and a score of landmarks to choose from, we were able to check our two compasses. The big steering compass proved, contrary to my expectations, to be accurate, even with the engine running, while the hand-bearing compass showed errors as outrageous as twelve degrees.

We turned west with the breeze aft, and when the sun came up there was all the wind we wanted with unreefed mainsail. When we picked up speed the propeller shaft, free-wheeling, revolved just audibly under the cockpit. We sailed on and off the coast, with a good deal of gybing. I took down the jib, continuing under mainsail alone. There was only a pleasant weight on the tiller, sailing like that, though I had expected the yacht to be nearly uncontrollable. We travelled fast, logging seventy miles from inside the Lezardrieux River to outside the entrance to Morlaix, and covering that distance in eight hours fifty-one minutes. Off Morlaix the sky darkened. When we came on the wind it was stronger than I had realised, we did not need the engine, and sailed in with the jib alone, so agile was the yacht, so quick on her helm. We found it difficult to distinguish the channel to Morlaix, a harbour that looks vast enough on the charts, where the water inlets form a bunch of tattered grapes dripping into the land. To the stranger and the novice the Brittany coast presents an astonishing plethora of feature; it is hard to identify the essential landmark from a multitude of landmarks. We entered on a compass bearing from Stolvezen, the buoy marking a rock off the entrance.

All the boats in the anchorage were wind-rode, and shuddering on their cables. Among them was a big British ketch of the Colin Archer type. We continued up-river, sounding, until I calculated that we should have three feet under our keel at low water. We felt the wind, but the water was restricted enough to be flat. Still higher up the river, we saw another Blue Ensign, on a small, workman-like cutter. The anchorage was beautiful: an expanse of troubled water, sloping, buff-coloured land, red mooring buoys, white houses, a village appearing in the fold of the river bed, and another across the water, a profound impression of space and loneliness.

Had *Serica* drawn less water we should have spent the next day at Morlaix and

tried to navigate round the bend of the river; but she is of a dangerous shape to go adventuring among tidal sandbanks and shallows.

Outside the harbour we had a stout breeze abeam, and made tremendous speed. Far ahead of us was an impressive vessel. She was at first only a white tower in the distance, but her outline grew clearer and we recognised her for the Colin Archer ketch.

When we turned to parallel the coast, making for l'Abervrac'h, the wind was nearly aft, and the jib would not draw. It seems incredible to me now, but I took down the jib, and carried on in a good weight of wind and with a high following sea, under mainsail alone. I can only suppose that I was nervous about getting down the mainsail, as even in those early days, when *Serica* was still a stranger, I must surely have realised that we should have gone at least equally well with a headsail and no mainsail, and that there would not then have been the constant danger of an accidental gybe. However, the foolish sometimes profit from their foolishness, and we flew on, overhauling the ketch. A small French sloop, double-reefed and with a mere wisp of a jib, came out from the land and passed close under our counter in a smother of spindrift. She was very yachty: we could see the ropes coiled like table mats on her deck, the rigging screws of polished brass. The two young men in the cockpit were excited about something. They yelled at us and waved their arms, but we could not distinguish a word, and we were too busy to pay attention, for we were about to pass the big ketch, and at the same time were trying to edge to seaward of a buoy without gybing. The ketch carried reefed mainsail, staysail, and a raffee on her square-sail yard. She surged along, and judging by the foam and bother an onlooker might have thought her to have the greater speed, but we passed her as a swallow would pass a heron. Her decks were crowded with men and women passengers. When we were clear of her we took down the mainsail (no easy matter that day) and hoisted the No. 2 jib to turn for the rocky fangs guarding the entry to l'Abervrac'h. We had then logged thirty-seven miles at an average of 8.3 knots.

The weather was getting fierce. Inland, well on their way to harbour, we saw the lobster-boats chugging to shelter as fast as their screws would drive them, their earth-coloured mizzens full of wind.

We picked out the Libenter buoy. Isabel warned me twice that I was sailing too direct a course for Libenter, and she showed on the chart a series of underwater rocks. I was inclined to sneer at her warnings until a jolt from the keel shook the whole boat (and its occupants). Looking over the port quarter, we saw the rock below us, a mercifully-flat surface of ivory-coloured stone. I lost no time in steering seaward, and we did not touch again. Had we set fast on the rock we should have lost at least the yacht, for the sea had turned vicious, and was racing pell-mell at the jagged coastline, while the wind shrieked and buffeted. Greatly

shaken by our 'touch', we worked our way cautiously into a big and (that day) dismal natural harbour. We passed the jetty off the dark village of l'Abervrac'h, passed the lobster-boats, some twenty of them anchored in a companionable clump, high-bowed, squatting back on their counters, and dropped anchor in a sandy creek. Three men at once came rowing from the nearest smack. The holding ground in the creek was poor, they said, and the weather was very threatening. They advised us to anchor near the fishing-boats. We accepted their advice gratefully. *Serica* splashed around angrily in the lop, sawing at her cable.

Next morning saw the east wind tormenting the shore, pushing smoke down chimneys, pulling it from windows, tearing curtains, breaking flowers, whirling hats down the street. But how good the wind smelled as it rose to us off the white-capped sea! We managed to land in the dinghy without getting too wet. The jetty was long, and rather new and ill at ease. An old man was daubing the iron rings and bollards with black tar, another was sweeping sprays of dust into the wind. Below us, drawn up on the beach for repairs or scraping, lay five of the smacks, equally handsome out of the water as in it with their dashing flares, bold bows and practical buttocks. (And what a genius the French have for colours! Is there a minor God, some Winged Foreman, who makes it his business to look into every French paint pot? If so we should do all in our power to induce him to spend a few years in England, for which country he evidently has no natural liking.)

At the end of the windswept jetty a woman nervously approached us. Her brown eyes glistened in an unhealthy face, wrung, it seemed, by sleeplessness or sadness.

'Excuse me, but if you speak a little French I have a somewhat unusual request to make,' she said. 'My father is very, very ill. He once made a trip to your Folkestone, and when we showed him the yacht through the window, he said he would like to see the captain. Would you very much mind coming to see an old invalid? I know that you must be in a hurry. If you could spare only five minutes?'

The house, constructed of massive stone cubes, was one of three standing at a bend on the road to Brest. It was as though three dominoes had been laid end to end to form a right-angled Z. The walls were spread with thriving pear and cherry trees. Every door and window of the centre house was shut. Old newspapers (*Figaros*) were stacked on the stoves and in every corner of the interior. The atmosphere could have been sold as that strange perverted foodstuff of the white man—cheese. It seemed remarkable that human beings could live in that place, and God knows I am no believer in 'fresh air'; I would usually rather have the window shut than open, the fire and the heating on than off, too many clothes on than too few, the sea too hot than too cold... A fatty suggestion of simmering

bouillon came from the back premises. We were conducted to a front room with a heliotrope wallpaper, an upright piano, framed photographs (one of Marshal Foch). On the tasselled woollen tablecloth lay the silver-mounted horn of a musk ox and a fretted box of pink coral. The woman told us that her father had been a lawyer in the town of Brest.

‘Specialising in maritime cases, he was known for his great heart and for the volume and sweetness of his voice,’ she said. ‘He was successful (that it would be false for me to conceal), but he worked too long, and now he pays for those weary hours. His disease is extremely arduous... growths... vegetable-like growths all over the body... I’m embarrassed to show him to strangers. I’d like you first to look at this photograph. Here is papa as he used to be, and here mama, and this is Monsieur Caproni, who was then of the *Inscription Maritime*...’

Her father stood in the coloured photograph a pace or two apart from his companions. He had struck a pose, with one hand thrust away from his body as though a falcon perched on the wrist and the other hand gripping with all but the little finger the carved handle of an umbrella. A bold-looking animal, stout, but well-built, with his daughter’s dark eyes, a narrow forehead, full cheeks, a startling tie-pin edged with brilliants (which the photographer had coloured blue).

‘Will Monsieur come upstairs,’ she said. ‘I must ask your forgiveness, Madame, but I think it wiser that you should wait here. It was “the captain” that papa asked to see. He is precise by nature, and when he is ill I must humour him, you understand?’

She opened the door. An appalling stench of cigar smoke. The air was a milky blue. My eyes smarted and watered. The clean wind rattled angrily at the windows, but found no chink. The man in the bed picked up a lustre bowl, and after a few preliminaries of a loosening and menacing character, spat and voided his nose. He wore a bedshirt and a muffler was twisted round his throat. His face had vanished into the swellings or growths of which his daughter had spoken. The two dark eyes were preserved as in the photograph, as in his daughter. A small cigar or cheroot protruded from the mouth, and flared periodically to stinking combustion. From his bearded jowls hung a growth like a medium-sized parsnip tinged pink at the end. I stood by the bed, and lifted one of his heavy hands. When I released it it fell deep into the soft feather mattress. The woman talked to him brightly. I was sorry for him if she always treated him with such Christian brightness (preserve me from Christianity if I am ever sick or wounded—it’s sometimes hard enough to bear when I’m well). He did not appear to listen to her as she rattled on about us and our ‘*si beau yacht*’. His eyes would steal a glance at me, roguish as the eyes of a boar, and then flicker off into the past or the future.

The cigar began to swing like a turreted gun. Held in grooved tongue, it came forward from his mouth. It moved to the corner of the mouth, and was drawn

securely in. Was he going to speak? The woman leaned forward apprehensively. After a few distant coughs and tunnel-like rumbles, he did speak.

'C'est bien un anglais.'

The few words were followed by a torrent of guffaws. I dearly wanted to stand my ground until that disturbing laughter had stopped or given way to further speech, but his daughter hurried me from the room. She was full of apologies. I had liked the look of the old scamp in the bed.

* * * *

There is a type of restaurant in France that sets itself out (in a French way) to look as forbidding as one of our grisly English tea-rooms filled with 'cottage' furniture and with dark oaken beams across the ceilings. The French type (also mock-old and showing somewhat flimsier beams) can usually give you a decent meal, whereas the tea-room inevitably carries out the threatened assault on senses and digestion. Mock-old is the restaurant of the *Hôtel de la Baie des Anges* at l'Abervrac'h, but in it we fared well, and after the meal I bought from the chef three kilos of exquisite butter, which we carried back to the refrigerator on the yacht.

(Possibly it would not be out of place here to inform the reader that on this trip we had the intention of being economical, if not parsimonious, for we carried with us in Travellers' Cheques no more than the £100—£50 each—allowed us by the current British regulations for spending money abroad. We had loaded up at Lymington with a month's generous Board-of-Trade ration of ship's stores. But why eat bad butter made God knew how long ago in God knew what country by God knew what factory processes when fresh French butter was available?... Say what you like about Danes and other dairy farmers: the French, of all the peoples, understand how to make butter... During a previous visit to France I sat—I must apologise for mentioning so rare an experience—beside a Duchess, whom I complimented on the excellence of her butter. She told me that she had taken a heavy truck and had driven the length of France to Normandy, where she had bargained with the farmers. She returned to her villa on the Mediterranean shore with two tons of butter, which she stored in a deep-freezing apparatus... Yet some would have it that the upper classes are degenerate!)

I mentioned the refrigerator... Our galley on *Serica* was a little unusual. We had done away with the bottled-gas cooker and had installed a paraffin-operated refrigerator in its stead. The only cooking apparatus on *Serica* was one Primus stove swung in gimbals on a shelf above the refrigerator. We had several gadgets for the Primus, including a pyramidal toaster and a pressure cooker big enough for cooking a whole chicken. We had discovered on our trip to Greece that a gal-

ley fully-equipped with ovens and so forth was unnecessarily elaborate. Generally speaking, when I am afloat I like to consume wine and fruit in that order, being, so far as wine is concerned, quite typical of most Mediterranean sailors. Sometimes in France when it comes to ordering the wine the *serveuse* will say of me: '*Un vrai marin, celui-là.*' I hold fast, dear reader, to that thread, for in no other respect (as you must discern if you know anything about the sea) am I anything of a sailor.

While on the subject of gadgets I might mention the 'Tiny Tim'. This pigmy charging motor was stowed in the forecastle and when needed for the batteries was screwed with two brass thumbscrews to the cockpit seat and connected to a plug inside the doghouse. The useful toy has a self-starter, charges at fifteen amps, will run for about three hours on a pint of petrol, and makes a good deal of noise. We only started it prior to making excursions ashore. Isabel detested the Tiny Tim; but I enjoyed it, and it proved to be a reliable servant.

* * * *

We bought our tickets for the bus to Brest at a greengrocer's that was also a bar. The bus was overcrowded and smelled pleasantly of *Gauloises* cigarettes. We entered an undamaged part of Brest, and I noted the interesting name of a small bar near the Citroën factory, the *Six Cylindres Bar*. I began to recognise the streets, and to look for a restaurant where I had eaten almost supernaturally well as the guest of a French naval officer in 1939. But as we neared that site the town disintegrated; the *pavé* turned into beaten sand and clay, the stone buildings into huts made of boarding and paper. The old streets, sometimes sinuous as river beds on plains, had been replaced by roadways intersecting at right-angles and lined with impermanent shops selling impermanent goods. This new, temporary part of the town, although tawdry and unattractive, although combining the soullessness of a Great Exhibition with the dirt of a gypsy fair, seemed to suck the life from the old town. Here, within and around the hollow cubes of compressed cardboard, business was being done, money was being made... We searched for linen hats of the type that sailing people wear in England and America. We were shown many hats, but could bring ourselves to buy none, though tempted by the black velvet men's 'Homburges', and also by the high-crowned 'shooters' hats', wide-brimmed, and made of a quilted-khaki waterproof material, that were common to all the hat shops.

Enormous langoustes stretched out vermilion claws from the yellow stippled walls of the restaurant. The *patronne* came to ask if the steak was good, and I answered with unusual honesty that it had not quite come up to our expectations. She lowered her voice to tell us that things were going worse than they should in

her restaurant because her husband had become erratic in his life. He was seldom in the kitchen.

'Politics, politics, and again politics,' she said. 'What business has a man who can cook to go meddling with politics?'

I disliked her, I am afraid, for the plaster lobsters, the expensive food, and the discontented faces of her maids.

'You and Madame are off a yacht at l'Abervrac'h,' she said, and laughed at my surprise. 'A client told me. Oh no, I haven't been to l'Abervrac'h for ten years, and doubt if I shall go again... A client told me. They tell us all that goes on in the peninsula. Yes, we have a good business. That's why I keep impressing on my man that he should stick to his saucepans. Politics are not for those in commerce, politics are for men who can do nothing else; now if a man can cook as he can cook...'

I looked round the restaurant, recognised a face, and caught the man's eye. He bent over his fish. I had seen him in l'Abervrac'h. A thin man, anaemic, intelligent-looking, in a dark suit and a loud American tie. Secret police, I thought at once. Yes, he was drinking sparkling Vouvray; obviously a policeman. He had followed us to Brest, which was still an important naval arsenal. I shuddered, for I dislike policemen, particularly Latin ones, having seen something of their habits and of their stupendous capacity for error.

Returned to l'Abervrac'h, I determined to water the yacht, using the dinghy and two four-gallon cans. (*Serica's* water tank, moulded to the shape of the hull, is beneath the saloon floor; it holds forty-five gallons, and is filled from the deck.)

At the fountain in the street several women, foremost among them a very fat one, engaged me in talk when I had asked them if the water was drinkable, and they had answered that it was unreliable in its natural state.

'Bad weather,' the fat woman said.

'Yes, Madame, too much wind.'

'*Ah! ça ne vous plaît pas, le vent?*'

I thought that it would not please her either, if she lived at the foot of the high mast yawing beyond the fishing-boats.

'Our men think nothing of wind,' she added. 'But then they are well accustomed to it.'

On my next trip ashore I was accosted by a drunk fisherman, a very young man.

'What do you make of l'Abervrac'h?' he asked in a somewhat truculent manner.

'Most agreeable,' I hastened to answer, but he exploded at my tact, heaping all sorts of epithets on l'Abervrac'h, and telling me that he and all the other fisher-

men there came from a town where men could without shame live, marry, and rear families—namely, Audierne. The boat in which he crewed, the *Jean Jaurès*, was sailing for Audierne the next day. This interested me, for we had considered going there ourselves, but the Sailing Directions were particularly unenthusiastic regarding two tidal races, the Chenal du Four, and the Raz de Sein, which lay between us and Audierne. I mentioned the races, and he laughed at me.

‘The Chenal du Four? nothing to it. The Raz de Sein? equally childish.’

‘Why, since you come from Audierne, do you fish at l’Abervrac’h?’

‘*Puisque les langoustes ne nous suivent pas—suivons les langoustes.*’

‘And the men of l’Abervrac’h?’

‘Neither the money to build stout boats nor the hearts to man them.’

‘Our sloop draws two metres; will she be able to lie afloat in Audierne harbour at low water?’

‘Yes, the yachts anchor below the bridge and take stern warps to the bridge. Like that you can lie in a pool that has three metres when the rest is nearly dry... Three in the morning, we leave. We should reach Audierne at high water in the evening. The weather will be good tomorrow,’ he said, swivelling an inflamed but positive eye at the mottled firmament. Then he began to tell me of his experiences ashore in England when he had served with the Gaulliste navy...

The crew of a big smack were unloading their catch on the shingle below the pump. There were sixteen of them, and they formed a human chain, each man holding the handle of a basket in either hand. The baskets, brown in colour and overflowing with dark purple langoustes, were alternate links in the chain that shuffled diagonally across the stones and seaweed, negotiated the ramp mounting to the level where we stood, crossed the street, and awkwardly penetrated the passage leading into a tenement behind us. I asked the young man (who was talking about a fight in Liverpool) where they were taking the catch.

‘To the entrepreneur, a Parisian. When they’ve weighed and graded the catch you’ll see him go off to the bistro with the captain to fix the payment.’

The fishermen came out, some of them silently on bare feet, massive feet and hard legs supporting the strongest, though far from the supplest, bodies in Europe, some in high, white, rubber boots made in England, some trailing *sabots*. Finally the captain, a hoary walrus, barnacle-encrusted, and following him the entrepreneur. The latter was the man I had taken for a secret policeman in the restaurant in Brest.