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The Coasters

No matter how often one sets out, "for to admire, and for to see, for to behold this world so wide," he never quite gets over being surprised at the erratic manner in which "civilization" distributes itself; at the way it ignores one spot upon the earth's surface, and upon another, several thousand miles away, heaps its blessings and its tyrannies. Having settled in a place one might suppose the "influences of civilization" would first be felt by the people nearest that place. Instead of which, a number of men go forth in a ship and carry civilization as far away from that spot as the winds will bear them.

When a stone falls in a pool each part of each ripple is equally distant from the spot where the stone fell; but if the stone of civilization were to have fallen, for instance, into New Orleans, equally near to that spot we would find the people of New York City and the naked Indians of Yucatan. Civilization does not radiate, or diffuse. It leaps; and as to where it will next strike it is as independent as forked lightning. During hundreds of years it passed over the continent of Africa to settle only at its northern coast line and its most southern cape; and, today, it has given Cuba all of its benefits, and has left the equally beautiful island of Haiti, only fourteen hours away, sunk in fetish worship and brutal ignorance.

One of the places it has chosen to ignore is the West Coast of Africa. We are familiar with the Northern Coast and South Africa. We know all about Morocco and the picturesque Raisuli, Lord Cromer, and Sheppard's Hotel. The Kimberley Diamond Mines, the Boer War, Jameson's Raid, and Cecil Rhodes have made us know South Africa, and on the East Coast we supply Durban with buggies and farm wagons, furniture from Grand Rapids, and, although we have nothing against Durban, breakfast food and canned meats. We know Victoria Falls, because they have eclipsed our own Niagara Falls, and Zanzibar, farther up the Coast, is familiar through comic operas and ragtime. Of itself, the Cape to Cairo Railroad would make the East Coast known to us. But the West Coast still means that distant shore from whence the "first families" of Boston, Bristol and New Orleans exported slaves. Now, for our soap and our salad, the West Coast supplies palm oil and kernel oil, and for automobile tires, rubber. But still to it there cling the mystery, the hazard, the cruelty of those earlier times. It is not of palm oil and rubber one thinks when he reads on the ship's itinerary, "the Gold Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Bight of Benin, and Old Calabar."

One of the strange leaps made by civilization is from Southampton to Cape Town, and one of its strangest ironies is in its ignoring all the six thousand miles of coast line that lies between. Nowadays, in winter time, the English, flying from the damp cold of London, go to Cape Town as unconcernedly as to the Riviera. They travel in great seagoing hotels, on which they play cricket, and dress for dinner. Of the damp, fever-driven coastline past which, in splendid ease, they are travelling, save for the tall peaks of Tenerife and Cape Verde, they know nothing.

When last Mrs. Davis and I made that voyage from Southampton, the decks were crowded chiefly with those English whose faces are familiar at the Savoy and the Ritz, and who, within an hour, had settled down to seventeen days of uninterrupted bridge, with, before them, the prospect on landing of the luxury of the Mount Nelson and the hospitalities of Government House. When, the other day, we again left Southampton, that former departure came back in strange contrast. It emphasized that this time we are not accompanying civilization on one of her flying leaps. Instead, now, we are going down to the sea in ships with the *vortrekkers* of civilization, those who are making the ways straight; who, in a few weeks, will be leaving us to lose themselves in great forests, who clear the paths of noisome jungles where the sun seldom penetrates, who sit in sun-baked "factories," as they call their trading houses, measuring life by steamer days, who preach the Gospel to the cannibals of the Congo, whose voices are the voices of those calling in the wilderness.

As our tender came alongside the *Bruxellesville* at Southampton, we saw at the winch Kroo boys of the Ivory Coast; leaning over the rail the Sœurs Blanches of the Congo, robed, although the cold was bitter and the decks black with soot-stained snow, all in white; missionaries with long beards, a bishop in a purple biretta, and innumerable Belgian officers shivering in their cloaks and wearing the blue ribbon and silver star that tells of three years of service along the Equator. This time our fellow passengers are no pleasure-seekers, no Cook's tourists sailing south to avoid a rigorous winter. They have squeezed the last minute out of their leave, and they are going back to the station, to the factory, to the mission, to the barracks. They call themselves "Coasters," and they inhabit a world all to themselves. In square miles, it is a very big world, but it is one of those places civilization has skipped.

Nearly every one of our passengers from Antwerp or Southampton knows that if he keeps his contract, and does not die, it will be three years before he again sees his home. So our departure was not enlivening, and, in the smoking-room, the exiles prepared us for lonely ports of call, for sickening heat, for swarming multitudes of blacks.

In consequence, when we passed Finistere, Spain, which from New York seems almost a foreign country, was a near neighbor, a dear friend. And the Island of Tenerife was an anticlimax. It was as though by a trick of the compass we had been sailing southwest and were entering the friendly harbor of Ponce or Havana.

Santa Cruz, the port town of Tenerife, like La Guayra, rises at the base of great hills. It is a smiling, bright-colored, red-roofed, typical Spanish town. The hills about it mount in innumerable terraces planted with fruits and vegetables, and from many of these houses on the hills, should the owner step hurriedly out of his front door, he would land upon the roof of his nearest neighbor. Back of this first chain of hills are broad farming lands and plateaus from which Barcelona and London are fed with the earliest and the most tender of potatoes that appear in England at the same time Bermuda potatoes are being printed in big letters on the bills of fare along Broadway. Santa Cruz itself supplies passing steamers with coal, and passengers with lace work and post cards; and to the English in search of sunshine, with a rival to Madeira. It should be a successful rival, for it is a charming place, and on the day we were there the thermometer was at 72°, and every one was complaining of the cruel severity of the winter. In Santa Cruz one who knows Spanish America has but to shut his eyes and imagine himself back in Santiago de Cuba or Caracas. There are the same charming plazas, the yellow churches and towered cathedral, the long iron-barred windows, glimpses through marble-paved halls of cool patios, the same open shops one finds in Obispo and O'Reilly Streets, the idle officers with smart uniforms

and swinging swords in front of cafés killing time and digestion with sweet drinks, and over the garden walls great bunches of purple and scarlet flowers and sheltering palms.

The show place in Santa Cruz is the church in which are stored the relics of the sea-fight in which, as a young man, Nelson lost his arm and England also lost two battleflags. As she is not often careless in that respect, it is a surprise to find, in this tiny tucked-away little island, what you will not see in any of the show places of the world. They tell in Santa Cruz that one night an English midshipman, single-handed, recaptured the captured flags and carried them triumphantly to his battleship. He expected at the least a K.C.B., and when the flags, with a squad of British marines as a guard of honor, were solemnly replaced in the church, and the midshipman himself was sent upon a tour of apology to the bishop, the governor, the commandant of the fortress, the *alcalde*, the collector of customs, and the captain of the port, he declared that monarchies were ungrateful.

The other objects of interest in Tenerife are camels, which in the interior of the island are common beasts of burden, and which appearing suddenly around a turn would frighten any automobile; and the fact that in Tenerife the fashion in women's hats never changes. They are very funny, flat straw hats; like children's sailor hats. They need only "*U.S.S. Iowa*" on the band to be quite familiar. Their secret is that they are built to support baskets and buckets of water, and that concealed in each is a heavy pad.

After Tenerife the destination of every one on board is as irrevocably fixed as though the ship were a government transport. We are all going to the West Coast or to the Congo. Should you wish to continue on to Cape Town along the South Coast, as they call the vast territory from Lagos to Cape Town, although there is an irregular, a very irregular, service to the Cape, you could as quickly reach it by going on to the Congo, returning all the way to Southampton, and again starting on the direct line south.

It is as though a line of steamers running down our coast to Florida would not continue on along the South Coast to New Orleans and Galveston, and as though no line of steamers came from New Orleans and Galveston to meet the steamers of the East Coast.

In consequence, the West Coast of Africa, cut off by lack of communication from the south, divorced from the north by the Desert of Sahara, lies in the steaming heat of the Equator today as it did a thousand years ago, in inaccessible, inhospitable isolation.

Two elements have helped to preserve this isolation: the fever that rises from its swamps and lagoons, and the surf that thunders upon the shore. In considering the stunted development of the West Coast, these two elements must be kept in mind—the sickness that strikes at sunset and by sunrise leaves the victim dead, and the monster waves that rush booming like cannon at the beach, churning the sandy bottom beneath, and hurling aside the great canoes as a man tosses a cigarette. The clerk who signs the three-year contract to work on the West Coast enlists against a greater chance of death than the soldier who enlists to fight only bullets; and every box, puncheon, or barrel that the trader sends in a canoe through the surf is insured against its never reaching, as the case may be, the shore or the ship's side.

The surf and the fever are the Minotaurs of the West Coast, and in the year there is not a day passes that they do not claim and receive their tribute in merchandise and human life. Said an old Coaster to me, pointing at the harbor of Grand Bassam: "I've seen just as much cargo lost overboard in that surf as I've seen shipped to Europe." One constantly wonders how the Coasters find it good enough. How, since 1550, when the Portuguese began trading, it has been possible to find men willing to fill the places of those who died. But, in spite of the early massacres by the natives, in spite of attacks by wild beasts, in spite of pirate raids, of desolating plagues and

epidemics, of wars with other white men, of damp heat and sudden sickness, there were men who patiently rebuilt the forts and factories, fought the surf with great breakwaters, cleared breathing spaces in the jungle, and with the aid of quinine for themselves, and bad gin for the natives, have held their own.

Except for the trade goods it never would be held. It is a country where the pay is cruelly inadequate, where but few horses, sheep, or cattle can exist, where the natives are unbelievably lazy and insolent, and where, while there is no society of congenial spirits, there is a superabundance of animal and insect pests. Still, so great are gold, ivory, and rubber, and so many are the men who will take big chances for little pay, that every foot of the West Coast is pre-empted. As the ship rolls along, for hours from the rail you see miles and miles of steaming yellow sand and misty swamp where as yet no white man has set his foot. But in the real estate office of Europe some Power claims the right to "protect" that swamp; some treaty is filed as a title-deed.

As the Powers finally arranged it, the map of the West Coast is like a mosaic, like the edge of a badly constructed patchwork quilt. In trading along the West Coast a man can find use for five European languages, and he can use a new one at each port of call.

To the north, the West Coast begins with Cape Verde, which is Spanish. It is followed by Senegal, which is French; but into Senegal is tucked "a thin red line" of British territory called Gambia. Senegal closes in again around Gambia, and is at once blocked to the south by the three-cornered patch which belongs to Portugal. This is followed by French Guinea down to another British red spot, Sierra Leone, which meets Liberia, the republic of negro emigrants from the United States. South of Liberia is the French Ivory Coast, then the English Gold Coast; Togo, which is German; Dahomey, which is French; Lagos and Southern Nigeria, which again are English; Fernando Po, which is Spanish, and the German Cameroons.

The coast line of these protectorates and colonies gives no idea of the extent of their hinterland, which spreads back into the Sahara, the Niger basin, and the Soudan. Sierra Leone, one of the smallest of them, is as large as Maine; Liberia, where the emigrants still keep up the tradition of the United States by talking like end men, is as large as the State of New York; two other colonies, Senegal and Nigeria, together are 135,000 square miles larger than the combined square miles of all of our Atlantic States from Maine to Florida and including both. To partition finally among the Powers this strip of death and disease, of uncountable wealth, of unnamed horrors and cruelties, has taken many hundreds of years, has brought to the black man every misery that can be inflicted upon a human being, and to thousands of white men, death and degradation, or great wealth.

The raids made upon the West Coast to obtain slaves began in the fifteenth century with the discovery of the West Indies, and it was to spare the natives of these islands, who were unused and unfitted for manual labor and who in consequence were cruelly treated by the Spaniards, that Las Casas, the Bishop of Chiapa, first imported slaves from West Africa. He lived to see them suffer so much more terribly than had the Indians who first obtained his sympathy, that even to his eightieth year he pleaded with the Pope and the King of Spain to undo the wrong he had begun. But the tide had set west, and Las Casas might as well have tried to stop the Trades. In 1800 Wilberforce stated in the House of Commons that at that time British vessels were carrying each year to the Indies and the American colonies 38,000 slaves, and when he spoke the traffic had been going on for two hundred and fifty years. After the Treaty of Utrecht, Queen Anne congratulated her Peers on the terms of the treaty which gave to England "the fortress of Gibraltar, the Island of Minorca, and the monopoly in the slave trade for thirty years,"

or, as it was called, the *asiento* (contract). This was considered so good an investment that Philip V of Spain took up one-quarter of the common stock, and good Queen Anne reserved another quarter, which later she divided among her ladies. But for a time she and her cousin of Spain were the two largest slave merchants in the world.

The point of view of those then engaged in the slave trade is very interesting. When Queen Elizabeth sent Admiral Hawkins slave-hunting, she presented him with a ship, named, with startling lack of moral perception, after the Man of Sorrows. In a book on the slave trade I picked up at Sierra Leone there is the diary of an officer who accompanied Hawkins. "After," he writes, "going every day on shore to take the inhabitants by burning and despoiling of their towns," the ship was becalmed. "But," he adds gratefully, "the Almighty God, who never suffereth his elect to perish, sent us the breeze."

The slave book shows that as late as 1780 others of the "elect" of our own South were publishing advertisements like this, which is one of the shortest and mildest. It is from a Virginia newspaper: "The said fellow is outlawed, and I will give ten pounds reward for his head severed from his body, or forty shillings if brought alive."

At about this same time an English captain threw overboard, chained together, one hundred and thirty sick slaves. He claimed that had he not done so the ship's company would have also sickened and died, and the ship would have been lost, and that, therefore, the insurance companies should pay for the slaves. The jury agreed with him, and the Solicitor-General said: "What is all this declamation about human beings! This is a case of chattels or goods. It is really so—it is the case of throwing over goods. For the purpose—the purpose of the insurance, they are goods and property; whether right or wrong, we have nothing to do with it." In 1807 England declared the slave trade illegal. A year later the United States followed suit, but although on the seas her frigates chased the slavers, on shore a part of our people continued to hold slaves, until the Civil War rescued both them and the slaves.

As early as 1718 Raynal and Diderot estimated that up to that time there had been exported from Africa to the North and South Americas nine million slaves. Our own historian, Bancroft, calculated that in the eighteenth century the English alone imported to the Americas three million slaves, while another 2,500,000 purchased or kidnapped on the West Coast were lost in the surf, or on the voyage thrown into the sea. For that number Bancroft places the gross returns as not far from four hundred millions of dollars.

All this is history, and to the reader familiar, but I do not apologize for reviewing it here, as without the background of the slave trade, the West Coast, as it is to-day, is difficult to understand. As we have seen, to kings, to chartered "Merchant Adventurers," to the cotton planters of the West Indies and of our South, and to the men of the North who traded in black ivory, the West Coast gave vast fortunes. The price was the lives of millions of slaves. And today it almost seems as though the sins of the fathers were being visited upon the children; as though the juju of the African, under the spell of which his enemies languish and die, has been cast upon the white man. We have to look only at home. In the millions of dead, and in the misery of the Civil War, and today in race hatred, in race riots, in monstrous crimes and as monstrous lynchings, we seem to see the fetish of the West Coast, the curse, falling upon the children to the third and fourth generation of the million slaves that were thrown, shackled, into the sea.

The first mention in history of Sierra Leone is when in 480 B.C., Hanno, the Carthaginian, anchored at night in its harbor, and then owing to "fires in the forests, the beating of drums, and strange cries that issued from the bushes," before daylight hastened away. We now skip nineteen hundred years. This is something of a gap, but except for the sketchy description

given us by Hanno of the place, and his one gaudy night there, Sierra Leone until the fifteenth century utterly disappears from the knowledge of man. Happy is the country without a history!

Nineteen hundred years having now supposed to elapse, the second act begins with De Cintra, who came in search of slaves, and instead gave the place its name. Because of the roaring of the wind around the peak that rises over the harbor he called it the Lion Mountain.

After the fifteenth century, in a succession of failures, five different companies of "Royal Adventurers" were chartered to trade with her people, and, when convenient, to kidnap them; pirates in turn kidnapped the British governor, the French and Dutch were always at war with the settlement, and native raids, epidemics, and fevers were continuous. The history of Sierra Leone is the history of every other colony along the West Coast, with the difference that it became a colony by purchase, and was not, as were the others, a trading station gradually converted into a colony. During the war in America, Great Britain offered freedom to all slaves that would fight for her, and, after the war, these freed slaves were conveyed on ships of war to London, where they were soon destitute. They appealed to the great friend of the slave in those days, Granville Sharp, and he with others shipped them to Sierra Leone, to establish, with the aid of some white emigrants, an independent colony, which was to be a refuge and sanctuary for others like themselves. Liberia, which was the gift of philanthropists of Baltimore to American freed slaves, was, no doubt, inspired by this earlier effort. The colony became a refuge for slaves from every part of the Coast, the West Indies and Nova Scotia, and to-day in that one colony there are spoken sixty different coast dialects and those of the hinterland.

Sierra Leone, as originally purchased in 1786, consisted of twenty square miles, for which among other articles of equal value King Naimbanna received a "crimson satin embroidered waistcoat, one puncheon of rum, ten pounds of beads, two cheeses, one box of smoking pipes, a mock diamond ring, and a tierce of pork."

What first impressed me about Sierra Leone was the heat. It does not permit one to give his attention wholly to anything else. I always have maintained that the hottest place on earth is New York, and I have been in other places with more than a local reputation for heat; some along the Equator, Lourenço Marquez, which is only prevented from being an earthen oven because it is a swamp; the Red Sea, with a following breeze, and from both shores the baked heat of the desert, and Nagasaki, on a rainy day in midsummer.

But New York in August radiating stored-up heat from iron-framed buildings, with the foul, dead air shut in by the skyscrapers, with a humidity that makes you think you are breathing through a steam-heated sponge, is as near the lower regions as I hope any of us will go. And yet Sierra Leone is no mean competitor.

We climbed the moss-covered steps to the quay to face a great white building that blazed like the base of a whitewashed stove at white heat. Before it were some rusty cannon and a canoe cut out of a single tree, and, seated upon it selling fruit and sun-dried fish, some native women, naked to the waist, their bodies streaming with palm oil and sweat. At the same moment something struck me a blow on the top of the head, at the base of the spine and between the shoulder blades, and the ebony ladies and the white "factory" were burnt up in a scroll of flame.

I heard myself in a far-away voice asking where one could buy a sun helmet and a white umbrella, and until I was under their protection, Sierra Leone interested me no more.

One sees more different kinds of black people in Sierra Leone than in any other port along the Coast; Senegalese and Senegambians, Kroo boys, Liberians, naked bush boys bearing great burdens from the forests, domestic slaves in fez and colored linen livery, carrying hammocks swung from under a canopy, the local electric hansom, soldiers of the W.A.F.F., the

West African Frontier Force, in Zouave uniform of scarlet and khaki, with bare legs; Arabs from as far in the interior as Timbuktu, yellow in face and in long silken robes; big fat "mammies" in well-washed linen like the washerwomen of Jamaica, each balancing on her head her tightly rolled umbrella, and in the gardens slim young girls, with only a strip of blue and white linen from the waist to the knees, lithe, erect, with glistening teeth and eyes, and their sisters, after two years in the mission schools, demurely and correctly dressed like British school mams. Sierra Leone has all the hall marks of the crown colony of the tropics; good wharfs, clean streets, innumerable churches, public schools operated by the government as well as many others run by American and English missions, a club where the white "mammies," as all women are called, and the white officers—for Sierra Leone is a coaling station on the Cape route to India, and is garrisoned accordingly—play croquet, and bowl into a net.

When the officers are not bowling they are tramping into the hinterland after tribes on the warpath from Liberia, and coming back, perhaps wounded or racked with fever, or perhaps they do not come back. On the day we landed they had just buried one of the officers. On Saturday afternoon he had been playing tennis, during the night the fever claimed him, and Sunday night he was dead.

That night as we pulled out to the steamer there came toward us in black silhouette against the sun, setting blood-red into the lagoon, two great canoes. They were coming from up the river piled high with fruit and bark, with the women and children lying huddled in the high bow and stern, while amidships the twelve men at the oars strained and struggled until we saw every muscle rise under the black skin.

As their stroke slackened, the man in the bow with the tom-tom beat more savagely upon it, and shouted to them in shrill sharp cries. Their eyes shone, their teeth clenched, the sweat streamed from their naked bodies. They might have been slaves chained to the thwarts of a trireme.

Just ahead of them lay at anchor the only other ship beside our own in port, a two-masted schooner, the *Gladys E. Wilden*, out of Boston. Her captain leaned upon the rail smoking his cigar, his shirt-sleeves held up with pink elastics, on the back of his head a derby hat. As the rowers passed under his bows he looked critically at the streaming black bodies and spat meditatively into the water. His own father could have had them between decks as cargo. Now for the petroleum and lumber he brings from Massachusetts to Sierra Leone he returns in ballast.

Because her lines were so home-like and her captain came from Cape Cod, we wanted to call on the *Gladys E. Wilden*, but our own captain had different views, and the two ships passed in the night, and the man from Boston never will know that two folks from home were burning signals to him.

Because our next port of call, Grand Bassam, is the chief port of the French Ivory Coast, which is 125,000 square miles in extent, we expected quite a flourishing seaport. Instead, Grand Bassam was a bank of yellow sand, a dozen bungalows in a line, a few wind-blown cocconut palms, an iron pier, and a French flag. Beyond the cocconut palms we could see a great lagoon, and each minute a wave leaped roaring upon the yellow sand-bank and tried to hurl itself across it, eating up the bungalows on its way, into the quiet waters of the lake. Each time we were sure it would succeed, but the yellow bank stood like rock, and, beaten back, the wave would rise in white spray to the height of a three-story house, hang glistening in the sun and then, with the crash of a falling wall, tumble at the feet of the bungalows.

We stopped at Grand Bassam to put ashore a young English girl who had come out to join her husband. His factory is a two days' launch ride up the lagoon, and the only other white

woman near it does not speak English. Her husband had wished her, for her health's sake, to stay in his home near London, but her first baby had just died, and against his unselfish wishes, and the advice of his partner, she had at once set out to join him. She was a very pretty, sad, unsmiling young wife, and she spoke only to ask her husband's partner questions about the new home. His answers, while they did not seem to daunt her, made every one else at the table wish she had remained safely in her London suburb.

Through our glasses we all watched her husband lowered from the iron pier into a canoe and come riding the great waves to meet her.

The Kroo boys flashed their trident-shaped paddles and sang and shouted wildly, but he sat with his sun helmet pulled over his eyes staring down into the bottom of the boat; while at his elbow, another sun helmet told him yes, that now he could make out the partner, and that, judging by the photograph, that must be She in white under the bridge.

The husband and the young wife were swung together over the side to the lifting waves in a two-seated "mammy chair," like one of those *vis-à-vis* swings you see in public playgrounds and picnic groves, and they carried with them, as a gift from Captain Burton, a fast melting lump of ice, the last piece of fresh meat they will taste in many a day, and the blessings of all the ship's company. And then, with inhospitable haste there was a rattle of anchor chains, a quick jangle of bells from the bridge to the engine-room, and the *Bruxellesville* swept out to sea, leaving the girl from the London suburb to find her way into the heart of Africa. Next morning we anchored in a dripping fog off Sekondi on the Gold Coast, to allow an English doctor to find his way to a fever camp. For nine years he had been a Coaster, and he had just gone home to fit himself, by a winter's vacation in London, for more work along the Gold Coast. It is said of him that he has "never lost a life." On arriving in London he received a cable telling him three doctors had died, the miners along the railroad to Ashanti were rotten with fever, and that he was needed.

So he and his wife, as cheery and bright as though she were setting forth on her honeymoon, were going back to take up the white man's burden. We swung them over the side as we had the other two, and that night in the smoking-room the Coasters drank "Luck to him," which, in the vernacular of this unhealthy shore, means "Life to him," and to the plucky, jolly woman who was going back to fight death with the man who had never lost a life.

As the ship was getting under way, a young man in "whites" and a sun helmet, an agent of a trading company, went down the sea ladder by which I was leaning. He was smart, alert; his sleeves, rolled recklessly to his shoulders, showed sinewy, sunburnt arms; his helmet, I noted, was a military one. Perhaps I looked as I felt; that it was a pity to see so good a man go back to such a land, for he looked up at me from the swinging ladder and smiled understanding as though we had been old acquaintances.

"You going far?" he asked. He spoke in the soft, detached voice of the public-school Englishman.

"To the Congo," I answered.

He stood swaying with the ship, looking as though there were something he wished to say, and then laughed, and added gravely, giving me the greeting of the Coast: "Luck to you."

"Luck to YOU," I said.

That is the worst of these gaddings about, these meetings with men you wish you could know, who pass like a face in the crowded street, who hold out a hand, or give the password of the brotherhood, and then drop down the sea ladder and out of your life forever.