Opening extract from

# Going Solo

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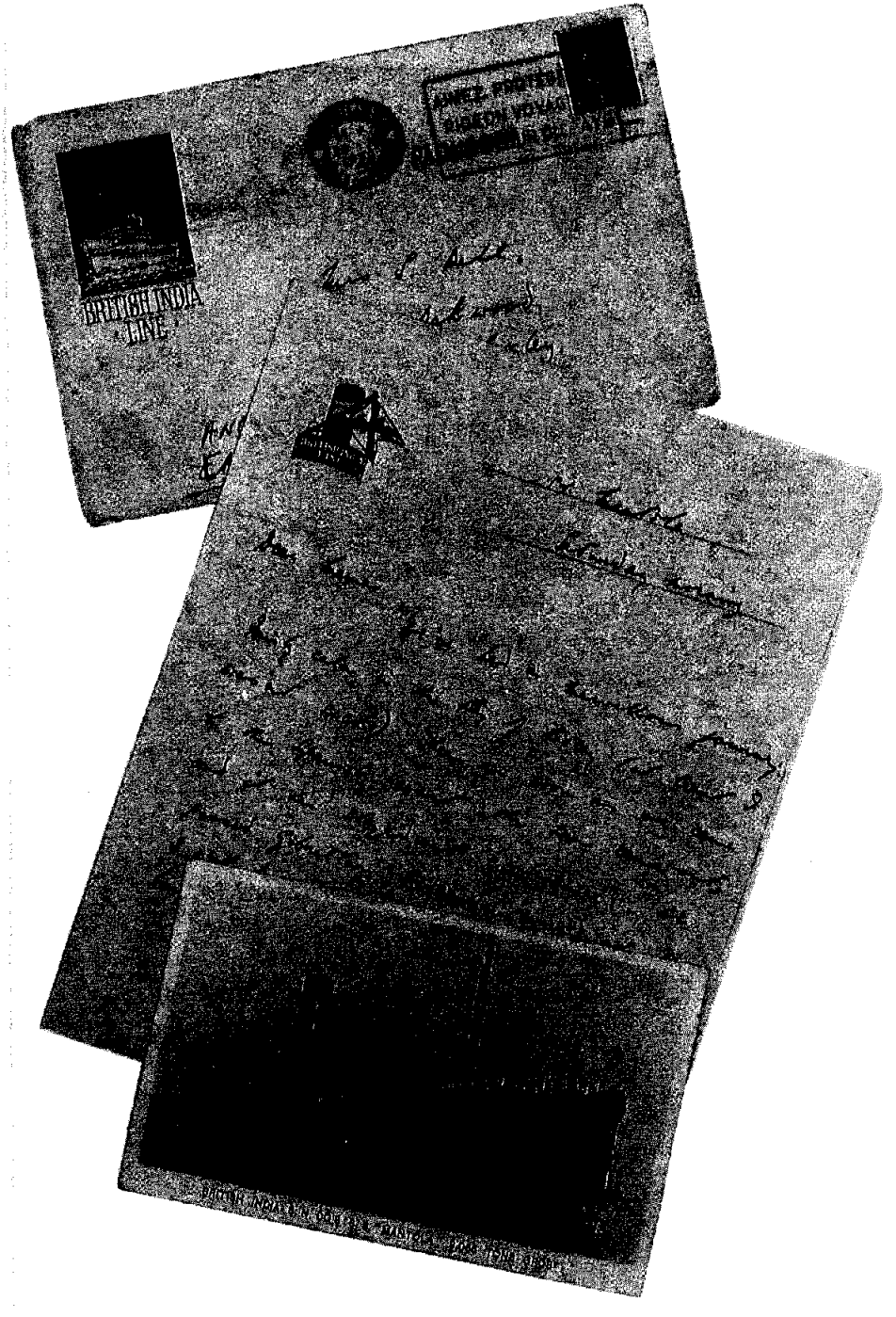
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# *The Voyage Out*

The ship that was carrying me away from England to Africa in the autumn of 1938 was called the SS *Mantola*. She was an old paint-peeling tub of 9,000 tons with a single tall funnel and a vibrating engine that rattled the tea-cups in their saucers on the dining-room table.

The voyage from the Port of London to Mombasa would take two weeks and on the way we were going to call in at Marseilles, Malta, Port Said, Suez, Port Sudan and Aden. Nowadays you can fly to Mombasa in a few hours and you stop nowhere and nothing is fabulous any more, but in 1938 a journey like that was full of stepping-stones and East Africa was a long way from home, especially if your contract with the Shell Company said that you were to stay out there for three years at a stretch. I was twenty-two when I left. I would be twenty-five before I saw my family again.

What I still remember so clearly about that voyage is the extraordinary behaviour of my fellow passengers. I had never before encountered that peculiar Empire-building breed of Englishman who spends his whole life working in distant corners of British territory. Please do not forget that in the 1930s the British Empire was still very much the British Empire, and the men and women who kept it going were a race of people that most of you have never encountered and now you never will. I consider myself very lucky to have caught a glimpse of this rare species while it


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still roamed the forests and foot-hills of the earth, for today it is totally extinct. More English than the English, more Scottish than the Scots, they were the craziest bunch of humans I shall ever meet. For one thing, they spoke a language of their own. If they worked in East Africa, their sentences were sprinkled with Swahili words, and if they lived in India then all manner of dialects were intermingled. As well as this, there was a whole vocabulary of much-used words that seemed to be universal among all these people. An evening drink, for example, was always a sundowner. A drink at any other time was a chota peg. One's wife was the memsahib. To have a look at something was to have a shufti. And from that one, interestingly enough, RAF/ Middle East slang for a reconnaissance plane in the last war was a shufti kite. Something of poor quality was shenzi. Supper was tiffin and so on and so forth. The Empire-builders' jargon would have filled a dictionary. All in all, it was rather wonderful for me, a conventional young lad from the suburbs, to be thrust suddenly into the middle of this pack of sinewy sunburnt gophers and their bright bony little wives, and what I liked best of all about them was their eccentricities.

It would seem that when the British live for years in a foul and sweaty climate among foreign people they maintain their sanity by allowing themselves to go slightly dotty. They cultivate bizarre habits that would never be tolerated back home, whereas in far-away Africa or in Ceylon or in India or in the Federated Malay States they could do as they liked. On the SS *Mantola* just about everybody had his or her own particular maggot in the brain, and for me it was like watching a kind of non-stop pantomime throughout the entire voyage. Let me tell you about two or three of these comedians.

I was sharing my cabin with the manager of a cotton mill in the Punjab called U.N. Savory (I could hardly believe those initials when I first saw them on his trunk) and I had the upper berth. From my pillow I could therefore look out of the port-hole clear across the lifeboat deck and over the wide blue ocean beyond. On our fourth morning at sea I happened to wake up very early. I lay in my bunk gazing idly through the port-hole and listening to the gentle snores of U.N. Savory, who lay immediately below me. Suddenly, the figure of a naked man, naked as a jungle ape, went swooshing past the port-hole and disappeared! He had come and gone in absolute silence and I lay there wondering whether perhaps I had seen a phantom or a vision or even a naked ghost.

A minute or two later the naked figure went by again!

This time I sat up sharply. I wanted to get a better look at this leafless phantom of the sunrise, so I crawled down to the foot of my bunk and stuck my head through the port-hole. The lifeboat deck was deserted. The Mediterranean was calm and milky blue and a brilliant yellow sun was just edging up over the horizon. The deck was so empty and silent that I began to wonder seriously whether I might not after all have seen a genuine apparition, the ghost perhaps of a passenger who had fallen overboard on an earlier voyage and who now spent his eternal life running above the waves and clambering back on to his lost ship.

All of a sudden, from my little spy-hole, I spotted a movement at the far end of the deck. Then a naked body materialized. But this was no ghost. It was all too solid flesh, and the man was moving swiftly over the deck between the lifeboats and the ventilators and making no sound at all as he came galloping towards me. He was short and stocky and slightly pot-bellied in his nakedness, with a

big black moustache on his face, and when he was twenty yards away he caught sight of my silly head sticking out of the port-hole and he waved a hairy arm at me and called out, 'Come along, my boy! Come and join me in a canter! Blow some sea air into your lungs! Get yourself in trim! Shake off the flab!'

By his moustache alone I recognized him as Major Griffiths, a man who had told me only the night before at the dinner table how he had spent thirty-six years in India and was returning once again to Allahabad after the usual home leave.

I smiled weakly at the Major as he went prancing by, but I didn't pull back. I wanted to see him again. There was something rather admirable about the way he was galloping round and round the deck with no clothes on at all, something wonderfully innocent and unembarrassed and cheerful and friendly. And here was I, a bundle of youthful self-consciousness, gaping at him through the port-hole and disapproving quite strongly of what he was doing. But I was also envying him. I was actually jealous of his total don't-give-a-damn attitude, and I wished like mad that I myself had the guts to go out there and do the same thing. I wanted to be like him. I longed to be able to fling off my pyjamas and go scampering round the deck in the altogether and to hell with anyone who happened to see me. But not in a million years could I have done it. I waited for him to come round again.

Ah, there he was! I could see him far away down the deck, the gallant galloping Major who didn't give a fig for anybody, and I decided right then that I would say something very casual to him this time to show him I was 'one of the gang' and that I had not even noticed his nakedness.

But hang on a minute! . . . What was this? . . . There was someone with him! . . . There was another fellow scooting along beside him this time! . . . As naked as the Major he was, too! . . . What on earth was going on aboard this ship? . . . Did *all* the male passengers get up at dawn and go tearing round the deck with no clothes on? . . . Was this some Empire-building body-building ritual I didn't know about? . . . The two were coming closer now . . . My God, the second one looked like a woman! . . . It *was* a woman! . . . A naked woman as bare-bosomed as Venus de Milo . . . But there the resemblance ceased for I could see now that this scrawny white-skinned figure was none other than Mrs Major Griffiths herself . . . I froze in my port-hole and my eyes became riveted on this nude female scarecrow galloping ever so proudly alongside her bare-skinned spouse, her elbows bent and her head held high, as much as to say, 'Aren't we a jolly fine couple, the two of us, and isn't he a fine figure of a man, my husband the Major?'

'Come along there!' the Major called out to me. 'If the little memsahib can do it, so can you! Fifty times round the deck is only four miles!'

'Lovely morning,' I murmured as they went galloping by. 'Beautiful day.'

A couple of hours later, I was sitting opposite the Major and his little memsahib at breakfast in the dining-room, and the knowledge that not long ago I had seen that same little memsahib with not a stitch on her made my spine creep. I kept my head down and pretended neither of them were there.

'Ha!' the Major cried suddenly. 'Aren't you the young fellow who had his head sticking through the port-hole this morning?'

'Who, me?' I murmured, keeping my nose in the cornflakes.

'Yes, you!' the Major cried, triumphant. 'I never forget a face!'

'I . . . I was just getting a breath of air,' I mumbled.

'You were getting a darn sight more than that!' the Major cried out, grinning. 'You were getting an eyeful of the memsahib, that's what you were doing!'

The whole of our table of eight people suddenly became silent and looked in my direction. I felt my cheeks beginning to boil.

'I can't say I blame you,' the Major went on, giving his wife an enormous wink. It was his turn to be proud and gallant now. 'In fact, I don't blame you at all. Would *you* blame him?' he asked, addressing the rest of the table. 'After all, we're only young once. And, as the poet says . . .' he paused, giving the dreadful wife another colossal wink . . . 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'

'Oh, do shut up, Bonzo,' the wife said, loving it.

'Back in Allahabad,' the Major said, looking at *me* now, 'I make a point of playing half-a-dozen chukkas every morning before breakfast. Can't do that on board ship, you know. So I have to get my exercise in other ways.'

I sat there wondering how one played this game of chuckers. 'Why can't you do it?' I said, desperate to change the subject.

'Why can't I do what?' the Major said.

'Play chuckers on the ship?' I said.

The Major was one of those men who chewed his porridge. He stared at me with pale-grey glassy eyes, chewing slowly. 'I hope you're not trying to tell me that you have never played polo in your life,' he said.

'Polo,' I said. 'Ah yes, of course, polo. At school we used to play it on bicycles with hockey sticks.'

The Major's stare switched suddenly to a fierce glare and he stopped chewing. He glared at me with such contempt and horror, and his face went so crimson, I thought he might be going to have a seizure.

From then on, neither the Major nor his wife would have anything to do with me. They changed their table in the dining-room and they cut me dead whenever we met on deck. I had been found guilty of a great and unforgivable crime. I had jeered, or so they thought, at the game of polo, the sacred sport of Anglo-Indians and royalty. Only a bounder would do that.

Then there was the elderly Miss Trefusis, who quite often sat at the same dining-room table as me. Miss Trefusis was all bones and grey skin, and when she walked her body was bent forward in a long curve like a boomerang. She told me she owned a small coffee farm in the highlands of Kenya and that she had known Baroness Blixen very well. I myself had read and loved both *Out of Africa* and *Seven Gothic Tales*, and I listened enthralled to everything Miss Trefusis told me about that fine writer who called herself Isak Dinesen.

'She was dotty, of course,' Miss Trefusis said. 'Like all of us who live out there, she went completely dotty in the end.'

'*You* aren't dotty,' I said.

'Oh yes, I am,' she said firmly and very seriously. 'Everyone on this ship is as dotty as a dumpling. *You* don't notice it because you're young. Young people are not watchful. They only look at themselves.'

'I saw Major Griffiths and his wife running round the deck naked the other morning,' I said.

'You call that dotty?' Miss Trefusis said with a snort. 'That's *normal*.'

'*I* didn't think so.'

'You've got a few shocks coming to you, young man, before you're very much older, you mark my words,' she said. 'People go quite barmy when they live too long in Africa. That's where you're off to, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said.

'You'll go barmy for sure,' she said, 'like the rest of us.'

She was eating an orange at the time and I noticed suddenly that she was not eating it in the normal way. In the first place she had speared it from the fruit bowl with her fork instead of taking it in her fingers. And now, with knife and fork, she was making a series of neat incisions in the skin all around the orange. Then, very delicately, using the points of her knife and fork, she peeled the skin away in eight separate pieces, leaving the bare fruit beautifully exposed. Still using knife and fork, she separated the juicy segments and began to eat them slowly, one by one, with her fork.

'Do you always eat an orange like that?' I said.

'Of course.'

'May I ask why?'

'I never touch anything I eat with my fingers,' she said.

'Good Lord, don't you really?'

'Never. I haven't since I was twenty-two.'

'Is there a reason for that?' I asked her.

'Of course there's a reason. Fingers are filthy.'

'But you wash your hands.'

'I don't *sterilize* them,' Miss Trefusis said. 'Nor do you. They're full of bugs. Disgusting dirty things, fingers. Just think what you do with them!'

I sat there going through the things I did with my fingers.

'It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?' Miss Trefusis said. 'Fingers are just implements. They are the gardening implements of the body, the shovels and the forks. You push them into everything.'

'We seem to survive,' I said.

'Not for long you won't,' she said darkly.

I watched her eating her orange, spearing the little boats one after the other with her fork. I could have told her that the fork wasn't sterilized either, but I kept quiet.

'Toes are even worse,' she said suddenly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'They're the worst of all,' she said.

'What's wrong with toes?'

'They are the nastiest part of the human body!' she announced vehemently.

'Worse than fingers?'

'There's no comparison,' she snapped. 'Fingers are foul and filthy, but *toes*! *Toes* are reptilian and viperish! I don't wish to talk about them!'

I was getting a bit confused. 'But one doesn't eat with one's toes,' I said.

'I never said you did,' Miss Trefusis snapped.

'Then what's so awful about them?' I persisted.

'Uck!' she said. 'They are like little worms sticking out of your feet. I hate them, I hate them! I can't bear to look at them!'

'Then how do you cut your toenails?'

'I don't,' she said. 'My boy does it for me.'

I wondered why she was 'Miss' if she'd been married and had a boy of her own. Perhaps he was illegitimate.

'How old is your son?' I asked, treading carefully.

'No, no, no!' she cried. 'Don't you know *anything*? A