

# THE MEDITERRANEAN . . . BOTH SHORES \*

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CERTAIN things give you an urge to express yourself; great joy, great sorrow, hunger, music, bad temper and War. It's this War that forces words from me; words that are not written to be read, not even by my grandchildren's children. Once I've set them down, I can forget them, just as I forgot yesterday's gruelling route march, the days of snow and rain, the slit trench out of which I tried to crowd the sleet.

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Not many days ago, we 'anded in Africa. "Crashed" is better, for owing to twisted signals, nobody knew we were landing, with the result that we were magnificently brushed off by individuals and companies that should have welcomed us. Eventually, however, we get settled, and last night our Headquarters Officers entertained the local garrison big-wigs at dinner . . . the Colonel, Major de Garrison, Commissaire de Police and the Colonel's A.D.C, who is also the interpreter.

My sergeant-cook excelled himself with the meal; a thick rice soup bulging with chicken livers, roast chicken with a slice of roast beef, plenty of vegetables and an orange custard for dessert. Before the meal, we had whiskey sours and very tasty *hors d' oeuvres*—celery stuffed with cheese, olives (why not?) and toast with cheese and nuts spread richly on its sun-tanned surface. During dinner, we drank Seagram's rye, which I hadn't seen for years, and after dessert everything was cleared from the table except the beakers we used for the rye and which did duty for port glasses! I made a speech, recalling that so many gallant soldiers of France had left their memories in our country, we hoped to do the same in this garrison. Then, I proposed a toast to the Republic, at which moment the brass band, sneaking up to the Mess in the darkness, broke into the *Marseillaise*, thus surprising and pleasing the guests mightily. Next, the King, after which we settled down to *talk*. My head swam with all the conversation, and I was reminded of my mother's Tower of Babel parties in Ottawa, Polish, Austrians, French, Yugoslav and South American diplomats seated in happy harmony at her table, and translating from one language to another was everybody's business. I had to keep alert to see that no Frenchman climbed down the throat of his listener. You know how

\* From letters addressed by Captain MacBeth to his mother, Mrs. Madge MacBeth, Ottawa, just after the landings in Northern Africa.

foreigners creep up on you, closer and closer, speaking with increasing intensity? At the same time, I had to guess what was being said to me. When the guests left at ten-thirty, they left me utterly exhausted.

At noon yesterday, five of us went to a Barracks for lunch . . . In a tent set in a garden, we ate. Fountains played and turbaned, white-robed Arabs served us. The scene was like something from *La Patrie*, or perhaps *Beau Geste*. Many courses, including chicken giblets roasted on a spit. Couscous came later. Delicious! On Saturday, we shall have the Artillery officers to dine. *Toujours la fête!* In another month I should be ready for the psychopathic ward, but my French is improving.

Tomorrow, I go to an Arab luncheon. A "meshwee" (phonetic spelling). Roast mutton, whole—barbecued—is the main dish in a group of sixteen!

Did I mention that the Commandant presented me with a fez? Very smart model. My batman made a hat-box for it, so that it won't get crushed. The cute little number is built on a straw base, you know, and I expect to look like Major Hoople in it.

Weather at the moment good, though cold owing to season and elevation. The mountains, as the sun strikes them, are beautiful beyond description. They are something I won't forget.

Nor shall I forget the Arab luncheon! Our host was an ancient fellow covered with French decorations. Really, he was Somebody!

My car was a small P.U., not the last word in comfort, and the motor had not much power. The mountain roads writhed and twisted like our Rocky Mountain trails. Sheer cliffs on one side and thousands of down-dropping space on the other. No guard rail of any kind, and the road only a car and a third wide! After the climb, there were twenty miles of desert driving, over a caravan route.

We left at 7 a.m. Dark. Rainy, which meant clouds in the mountains. In one car sat the Garrison Major, the Commissaire of rural police, ditto of urban police, our host's son (himself my host at my first *cous-cous*) head of the local "Scotland Yard," an Arab, of course. With him was his sister, madly excited at the prospect of seeing her father for the first time in 3 months. She is four and a half, and looked like an adorable Arab doll. I fell wildly in love with her. Then, there was a

cousin; a swarthy gent who gave me the impression that he would do any type of genteel murder for a couple of shillings, although he may be a pillar of the church. Oh, yes, all of the above were in one car designed to hold—uncomfortably—four persons. In my car sat another cousin, two brothers, and the A. D. C. to the Commandant.

At 8.30 there was sufficient light to turn off our head lamps, which, made for the English black-out, were not very safe in the dark gorges. We drove for 5 hours, passing through Arab villages, beside Bedouin tents, Nomads' camps, camels grazing on pretty scrubby grass, sheep, Arabs on magnificent horses, the cantle of their saddles looking like the back of a rocking chair, and I was interested in a group of Touregs—men who veil their faces like the women, and yet are the savage fighters of the desert.

Our destination was a village built inside a square of mud walls. Very old and somehow futile looking. The houses were made of mud, and from the outside suggested hovels, but inside . . . Oh! Our host was the head man of the village, not the kaid, as I had believed. His was a posh house, the interior inspiring gaudy Hollywood imitations. In our muddy feet it was a shame to enter the "dining room," so the old fellow laid down some cardboard, the side curtains from some kind of a car, and turned back a few of the rugs. Those that were visible, however, were simply gorgeous. Such colours!

Before making ourselves too comfortable indoors, we were invited to watch the meshwee preparations, going through an archway into a court yard and passing a pit whose edges were stained with what looked like blood. It was! The owner of the blood we discovered a little farther along. He was not enjoying his lot very much, having a la ge pole running the entire length of his body. One end of the pole rested on the ground, and the other was being turned by a squatting Arab. Beneath the victim a fierce wood fire burned and—oh, yes, its front legs were wrapped around its neck. I didn't see the hide, but the ram's insides, so they told us, having been removed, made space for onions, savouries, butter and what-nots. Another Arab squatted at the head of the beast, with a long stick covered with a rag. His job was to dip the rag in melted butter and caress the animal as it turned over the fire.

After regarding the late lamented, we returned to the house. Our host had found a few chairs and tables for us, although the cushions customarily used lay on the floor against the walls.

There was oilcloth on the table, a bit of display for important guests, and obviously a family heirloom. The same must be said for the plates and cutlery. A jarring note was struck—literally—by a cheap alarm clock, and on the walls hung two chromos; one, a study in still life, and the other, a ravishing female of the type seen in Paris. The white man's civilizing influence, doubtless!

The kaid appeared with his second-in-command. Much hand-shaking and murmurs of "May your tribe never grow less!" Likely, the chap had 70 children at the moment and two more before we left. Salaams, and the salute where the hand goes to the mouth, and they disappeared while we went on with the meal.

I forget the courses. We started with mint tea and then had croquettes. I thought of the ram's insides which we hadn't been shown. But the dish seemed tasty, and I ate. The old desert fighters appeared a hardy lot. Who was I, to go squeamish? Well, there were courses and more courses, including cous-cous and then the main item. Before our eyes, the two assistant cooks carried in the roasted beast, and some other labourers of the State placed a huge brass tray on the floor. With many grunts, in which the ram would have joined had he been alive, they extracted the pole (probably used ordinarily to hang saddle and blankets on) and the three bore the tray to the table. The fight began. Knives flashed. Arms whirled. The choice part was the outer skin, toasted a golden brown. The method is to make an incision with your knife, place the index finger on the cut, close the thumb against the finger and pull. The meat stretches and finally comes away with a splash of gravy and a cry of triumph.

After the meshwee, came honey cakes and coffee, and then—of course—the polite burp.

The drive home was awful. Let's skip it, but I'd like to remember the visit with the Commissaire de Police, to a native theatre. Shortly after 10 p.m. we got in on what looked like the last of a 22-act drama of love and intrigue. Unable to understand much of it, I gave some attention from my box to the audience. Rich and poor. Arab soldiers, civvies and "bums." There were a few women, wearing what I imagine was their best head dress. Instead of the usual wool business over their faces, they had a silk affair across the bridge of the nose.

I didn't care much for the dancing, but then I'm just an uncivilized Canadian.  
All in all, it was a great day, however!

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We have crossed not the Rubicon but the Mediterranean, and are now in Italy. Who ever prefixed the word sunny? Nine days of hellish rain and cold. I've worn my greatcoat *plus* my left mitt (right hand must be free for signing Orders, etc.) and I put on my Algerian fez in the forlorn hope of keeping my head warm.

Blankets are warm and hard to leave in the morning. There is a roof over our heads and . . . incredible, almost . . . there's glass in the windows. My batman has too big a job to serve all the officers, so we have filled in with Italian boys. The youngest is 8 and the oldest 14.

I get a dram of hot water each morning, but the men have to wash and shave outside in the coldest water, in the coldest temperature a weather man expert in methods of refined torture could devise. Poor devils!

Well, of course, there's a War on and I'm glad we haven't to endure the comforts of the town. It gives out odours that halt the breath and quicken the steps. To identify them is worse than not knowing what causes them. Garbage, what little is thrown away, lies in the street until the dogs dispose of it. If there is no garbage, there are carcasses of dogs. Flies, too, gather to enjoy the pickings. Oh, there's a lot more to war than confronting a human enemy and getting a bullet through your gizzard!

I have been to Sorrento. Excuse all the I's in my writing. But after all, whose story is it? At the end of a long and dusty drive, my two companions and I were glad to peel off our clothes and swim. From the hotel, perched on top of a cliff, we tramped 247 steps to a small jetty. No beach at that spot. One simply slid into the water and kept a sharp lookout for rocks.

The Mediterranean is just what one would expect, utterly satisfying in its loveliness, but 247 steps up to our perch took some of the enjoyment out of it. We dined on a snack of lobster, steak, potatoes and fresh peaches; then made arrangements for a boat to take us to Capri in the morning.

At 6.05 we were swimming again. The sun hadn't come over the mountains, but many fishermen were out in the bay. They carry what looks like a garbage can, the bottom made of

glass. Through this, they're able to spot any creature asleep in the deep. Before it can move a fin, it is speared through an embarrassing place and dragged to the surface. We saw one fellow raise a small octopus. He bit some portion of it off before throwing it into his tub—a hard death for both parties, I reflected.

Capri is too well known to profit by any description of mine. We sailed to the Grotto, trans-shipped to small boats, were rowed to a floating cashier, who extracted 20 *lire* each from us, and were flung into the cave on top of a wave and beneath a slightly odouriferous oarsman who like us had to lie flat in the boat so as to pass without accident through the small entrance.

I'll pass lightly over our trip to San Michele—up 777 steps to a view that is unequalled anywhere. Even Axel Munthe didn't do it justice in his book. Immediately below the terrace lay the jetty. Our boat looked like a cigarette stub carelessly thrown on the water. Signs in the villa garden, filled with mosaics, columns and statuary once belonging to some old Roman tycoon, warned us that thieving would close the place to *soldiery*! Just in case . . . an American M.P. followed us around, a cannon strapped to his thigh. As if we didn't pack enough heavy equipment, without adding a Roman Senator—or something—to our load!

Descending by a different road, we passed the Piccola Marina (small beach, to you non-linguists) where Gracie Fields owns a combination bathing and cocktail establishment. Now requisitioned by the Government. Overlooking the beach, stands a villa belonging to Countess Ciano—or should I say the widow Ciano?

Before joining our Volga boatmen, we visited the monastery (no town complete without one; Cassino papers please copy!) Interesting. Recently built . . . in 1370 . . . by a man whose two wives produced only girls. So he tried a third time, advising God in a confidential interview that he would erect a monastery in exchange for a son. Evidently, he picked the right doctor.

The Carthusians occupied the monastery until Napoleon's troops, under Murat, arrived in 1808. There were no fine villas to requisition in those days, so the monks' quarters had to serve. When the soldiers left, another Order took over, but having no contact with the Carthusians, they didn't know what the place had been like. During their clean-up they discovered

murals on most of the walls; one painted at the founder's request. It showed the entire family, the two wives with their herds of daughters and the third smirking over her infant son. Colours brilliant and unfaded.

Another collection of pictures was presented by a German who had lived on the Island and whose canvasses were too large for any other building. The subjects were mostly religious, but a few others, like the Birth of Venus, struck me as unfit subjects for a religious institution. However, that's up to the chief Monk, isn't it?

*Viva Capri!* One of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. Of course, with places as with people, types of beauty vary, and one might put first—in their types—our Rockies, the Laurentians in autumn, the Chilterns and Cotswolds, the Devon Coast and the view from the farm I am going to buy as soon as I get home. Neither must I forget the first tavern in Wrightville, Que., after a day on skis among the hills of the Gatineau.

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*Ah, si, si . . . Assisi!* That's the title of a song I'm going to write.

Well, carnage being slack for us, a week-end seemed a good idea, and the "transit hotel" in Assisi had been given good marks by those who had stayed there. The Military Authorities assume that people have to travel, so they arrange for a civilian hotel to be run for nomadic soldiery. The management draws Army rations (much to the delight of the proprietor, his family and friends), but a military supervisor keeps an eye on things.

Such was the Albergo Subasio.

A long drive, mostly along the shores of the Adriatic. Under the blue Italian sky, the ocean sparkled, each little wavelet kissed by the warm sun. (Thos. Cook's *Italy from a Steerage Window*, page 118!) Anyway, the ocean was beautiful. Some fellows might have thought the going monotonous. Not much to see except the odd—odd is right—town and the ocean. But to an old salt like me, reared beside the Rideau Canal, so much water is a deep delight. It reminds me of someone who asked "Where would the British Navy be, but for a lot of water?"

Not wanting to plunge into unknown territory at night, we arranged to do our journey by daylight. Before reaching the town, we passed through a gorge almost as spectacular as one in the Rockies. Not so many trees, for the Italian hills are rather naked, but the rock formations are terrifying in their rugged

grandeur. This part of the country had been evacuated by the Boche in a hurry, so was not badly beaten up. The road, except for a few Bailey bridges, was as well made as any highway at home, although the curves are not banked. Native cars are built low to the ground.

Because of the narrow writhing streets, I nearly missed the hotel in Assisi. It was located in what appeared to be the high rent district, and presented an encouraging front. So I entered, signed my military history and asked for a reliable garage. Around the next corner and down 2450 feet lurked the basement, containing a shelter for the jeep. The ancient caretaker went into raptures at the way I backed the car through the long lane leading into the garage. Always back into a garage. It makes the get-away easier! The walk up an interior stairway was like climbing up the service stairs of the Chrysler Building, but finally I made the front lobby, handed my gear to a Buttons and followed him to my room. It was furnished with a bed, dresser and clothes press; a basin and two taps! Reminded me of Nicky C.'s description of the hotel he manages . . . "Every room with hot and cold running chambermaids."

The memorable part of the trip was a visit to the church of St. Francis. The Saint was born in the late 1100's and canonized two years after his death, which is quite a record. Because everyone knew he was a saintly man, many of his clothes and personal belongings were saved. There are cupboards full of them.

Now, the High Altar of the Inferiore . . . In one of the steps, there's an open grill through which may be seen a lighted lamp, and below the glare of the flame a solid block of stone. That block covers the coffin of St. Francis. It is in a sort of crypt below the Altar. In bygone days, monasteries rivalled each other in obtaining bodies or parts of bodies of holy persons. Assisi was determined not to allow St. Francis's body to be snatched—and I mean snatched—from the city, so they buried it as explained and set the grill in the steps, so that the people could see that their sacred relic was still intact.

The Father Superior of the monastery was showing a group of United States and British soldiers around one day, and one of them observed, "You speak pretty good English for an Eyetie." Replied the Father Superior, "Why not, *you dope?* I was born in the Bowery."

The Superiore, almost modern . . . 1280 or so . . . yielded up an amusing story. A little while ago, the authorities noting



that the floor needed replacing, called an Italian contractor in. This latter agreed to replace the *original* floor with a brand-new tile one, if what he took out would be given to him. Agreed! He laid the new tiles, was paid for the job and then sold the original stone flags to wealthy United States women at exorbitant prices.

Trust the Eyeties—or don't—if you understand me!

*Veni . . . vidi . . .* I collapsed . . . We left our nest at (censored) 10.30 on a *certain* morning. It wouldn't do for the Hun to know where or when. We drove and drove, finally coming to the outskirts of Cassino. Remember the Hitler and Gustav Lines—the Liri Valley show? That terrain was cited in the German and Italian General Staff teachings as the ideal defensive position. Someone told me that for 60 years the Boche had taught tactics based on Cassino as the hinge, and the Liri Valley as the killing ground. They were right about the latter, anyway!

We drove through the Valley. Cassino, nothing but a gravel pit, struck me as the perfect example of total destruction. Signs warned us against mines and booby traps. The river that once flowed through the town was a stream of green and slimy mould. Debris littered the highway as far as the eye could see. Guns yawned at the blue summer sky, and no doubt missed their nurses. Concrete pill-boxes leaned at all angles. Corn grew in the fields and peasants were working, again. They have no time to worry about trivia such as war. They've been tilling the land for generations, and a slight disturbance such as the Liri Valley affair must not interfere with the agricultural programme laid down for them by their Fascist boss.

Past Pontecorvo and many other places unworthy of mention compared with news of our elections and a strike or two. Why bore you by telling where Canadian boys died, when the So-and-So union is demanding a few more cents an hour? I hope the unions get a generous increase, for I'm sure the cost of living is higher than that of dying. The latter doesn't cost a farthing. Get some of the strikers to come over and try it!

And so to Rome.

I was privileged to have an audience with His Holiness the Pope. An impressive ceremony, taking place in a long narrow room with a dais at one end. On it were gathered a few of the higher ranking Officers and Nursing Sisters. From there to the other end of the room, ran an aisle—about 7 feet in width—hemmed by two barricades, against which crowded the spectators.

The Pope, preceded by a group of dignitaries, was carried in at the far end by eight liveried bearers. The barricades could scarcely restrain the people who extended beads and hands to be touched and blessed. When His Holiness reached the dais, he left the chair and sat in a sort of Throne in front of which was a mike. After a few appropriate words in French and English, he rose and greeted us on the dais. Shaking hands with me, he asked:

"British?"

I said Canadian. He wanted to know how long I'd been away, whom I'd left behind and then said;

"I send your family my blessing."

Simple! Gracious! Moving! I was very conscious of the honour conferred upon me and the dignity of the occasion.

Time nagging at us continually, we took the sights that were nearest. Step into the Coliseum! I had seen pictures of it, but was not prepared for its size. Five tiers of balconies overlooked the arena and would hold from 60,000 to 90,000 spectators, according to the temperament of the guide. There were 4 types of performances; gladiator against gladiator, gladiator against beast, beast against slaves or Christians, and—*naval battles!* The first three were familiar from childhood reading (*Peck's Bad Boy, Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, Horatio Alger* and the *Calgary Eye-Opener*) but the aquatic sports were new to me. The arena floor was made of boards resting on ledges of stone, probably so that the boards could be taken away and scrubbed after each performance. For the water sports, a river was diverted and some 20 feet of water directed into the arena. Boats filled with 6 or 8 men fell on each other and slugged it out. The guide observed that the water needed frequent changing, especially when the wind blew towards the Royal Box. This had two entrances; one through the public aisles and the other underground from the palace on a neighbouring hill. If the Emperor attended in official capacity (i.e. with 16,482 bodyguards) he took the first route. If fed up with life, or if a discredited playmate was slated for consumption by the lions, he could sneak in by the private tunnel.

No 3-day exercise was ever more exhausting than our intensive sight-seeing, and at that most of what we wanted to see had to be left till the next time. But something of the spirit of Rome stayed with us on our drive back to (censored) and something of it will remain with me though I never visit the city again.

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I've driven across half of Europe into Holland.

And now, after months . . . years . . . of struggle and hoping, it's all over. Victory, so we're told, is ours. It came with bewildering suddenness. The first inkling we got that unusual events were in progress was when we were told to lay a telephone line into No Man's Land, there to meet a party of Boche linemen on a similar mission. Our men wore their best gear. Their vehicles were spotless, their equipment gleaming. We were given a rendezvous, but we built up the line so fast, we were well past it when the Boche came along . . . on foot. No vehicles; no petrol, or no both. Our men held up the splicing until they had telephoned back to me and I went down to eye-witness the event. Each party of linemen tested back to its own exchange, and as cameras clicked, the joint was made.

We left a maintenance crew and went back to "our side." Arrived in a small town to inspect a telephone exchange, we were surprised to see our General's outriders followed by the General himself. In a moment he was joined by Prince Bernhardt, and a bit later they watched a weather-beaten car pull up, and out stepped two German officers. The entire party disappeared into a little hotel. "Aha!" I said to myself. "Something is cooking. Ja?" And something certainly was!

The Germans wanted a full 24 hours to get word of the truce down to their troops. Then, we moved into German territory.

Well, as I said, I crossed into occupied Holland. In case of trouble, I took my driver and batman, all of us carrying sufficient equipment to put up a 3-man battle. We had no trouble. Instead of weapons, we should have had suits of antique armour to protect us from the shoulder slapping.

We approached the barrier marking the German forward positions; a small creek spanned by a Bailey bridge. Our sentry stood on one side. The Boche sentry on the other. The bridge led to a town trembling with flags and bunting, glowing with orange hats, arm-band and stockings. The people were hysterical. We were historical. The war was over!

As our jeep approached one crowd after another, Boy Scouts made a sort of lane for us. Scouts and Girl Guides wore their uniforms for the first time in 5 years. Often, hysteria overcame our protectors and we were swamped. The general intention seemed to be to pound our shoulders and then climb aboard our car.

Now, a jeep is labelled; "5 cwt." Our combined weight was about 459 pounds, leaving only 41 more for "guests". It should

have allowed for 41 guests! Because of the crowds climbing aboard, it was impossible to drive. I could only sit, signing autographs and shrinking from the merciless if hearty pummeling. Some women brought their babies to us, just to touch the liberators. At one intersection, an aged crone crawled to the jeep saying he was 80 years old and for 40 of them had lived in Niagara Falls. Worked for the Carborendum Company.

Many Germans witnessed the scenes of gladness. Expressionless were their faces. The Dutch ignored them. One old Volksturner driving a farm wagon so far forgot himself as to wave to us. We ignored him.

The Past crashes against the Present. Leaving Canada . . . the thin, dark haze that marked the last sight of our land. Men in the rigging gripping home with their eyes until the last moment. England . . . the welcome; the cold; the first Christmas away from home. France and the British Army. Dunkirk . . . the honour of knowing those RAF boys. The Dieppe show and first of my men to die . . . Algeria . . . Farther from home! The Sahara, the sand in the food, orphans of the Army. Arabs. Bedouins. Fleas. More sand.

Italy . . . singers and barbers, dirt and lice, malaria, desert ulcers and blood poisoning. Cold cellars, colder mud, muddier mud. Ortona, the Hitler line, Cassino . . . slit trenches, mines and booby traps, peasants searching the ruins . . . Rome, Florence, Capri . . . Lord, how lovely!

France . . . Germany . . . destruction. Dazed civilians . . . Holland, a lovely land. Pine forests reminding of Petawawa. Clean friendly people; generous. Giving us the tinned food they had saved for the great liberation . . . England promised; England delivered! I've had the honour of fighting with the Empire's great armies. Now, it's finito. Where do we go from here, Mother Army?

Home! The thin haze that is my country will grow larger as I seek it with my eyes. The dream will become a solid fact as I step to the shore. I shall look at grey old Halifax with deep affection and beyond it, into the future.

Life begins!