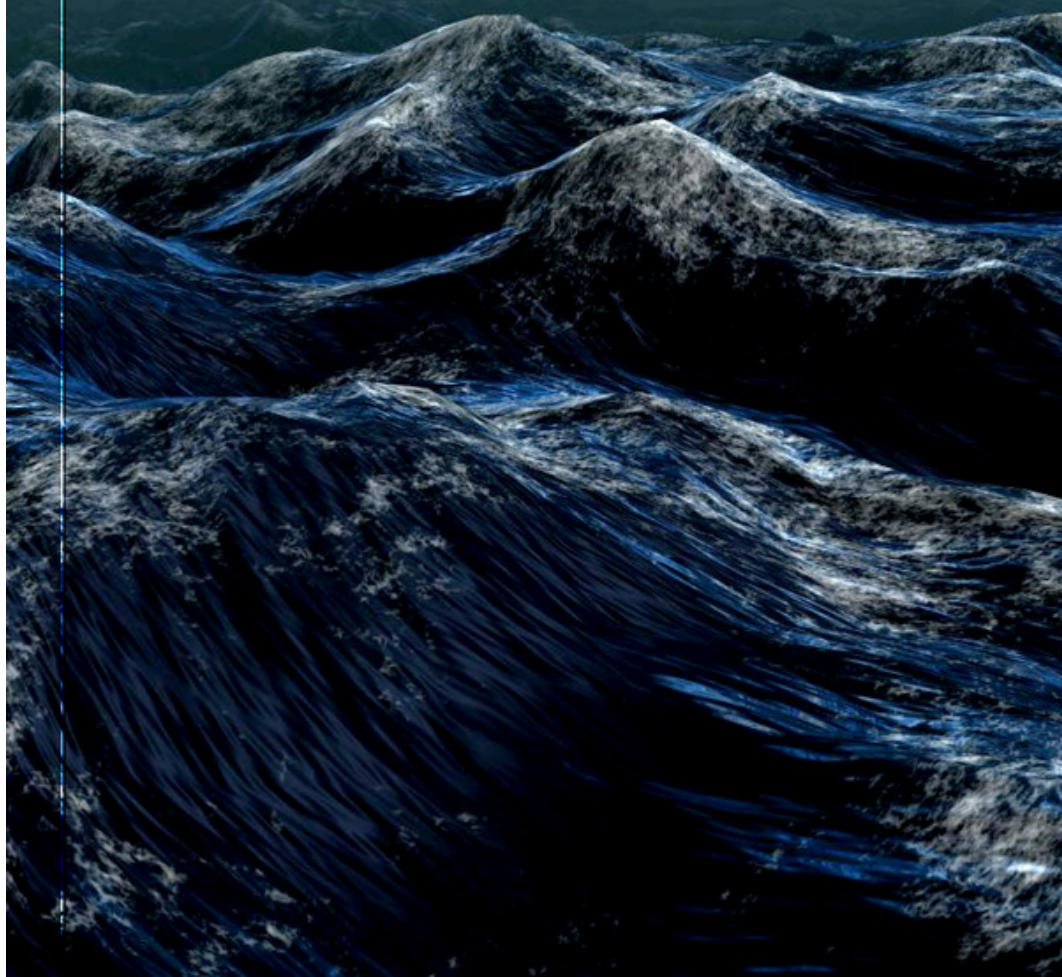


*What Every Girl Wants*

*Phyllis Bottome*



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# What Every Girl Wants

## By Phyllis Bottome

*Miss Alice Devine and life, and how they finally got together, and what she thought of it. A modern climax for an old-fashioned upbringing.*

She flung herself into his arms, sobbing and screaming, and Alice put on her own belt

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**W**HAT really seemed odd to Alice Devine was that the doctor should have called to see *her*.

Didn't he realize that her mother was dead? The end of thirty years' love, and of five years' intensive nursing was over. Nothing was left of them, except the half-filled medicine bottles on the table upstairs.

Alice gazed at Dr. Martlett with dull, sleepless eyes. She felt like an imprisoned goldfish butting its head against glass walls.

Didn't this man know that he would be paid? she asked herself bitterly. That was one thing there was no trouble about. She had three thousand dollars a year now, having never had a penny of her own before, and was rich for life; if there had been any life to be rich for.

"You see, Miss Devine," the doctor continued earnestly, "you must begin to think of yourself now." This seemed such a silly thing to say that Alice did not even attempt to answer it.

"You have relations, I know," Dr. Martlett went on. "Your mother told me—an aunt and cousins at Cheltenham, but you don't seem to have been on terms of great intimacy with them."

“I never had an intimate relationship,” Alice told him rather dryly, “except with my mother. We knew other people, of course, but they didn’t count.”

“That’s just it,” Dr. Martlett explained. “That’s just what I’m afraid of. Miss Devine, you’re only thirty, and from the look of you—when you’re not worn out—you might be much younger. Have you ever asked yourself what life is for?”

“I’ve watched you for years; you’ve got into the habit of giving way all the time to an older person. You’ve lived hitherto a daughter’s life—not a woman’s. Oh, I know you were her only child and she was a war widow, and that you adored each other. And I know you’re feeling as cold and hard as a peeled potato. But can’t you see that her having died is just your chance? Go out into the world, meet people—see what there is to be seen. Find out what you’re really like by knocking up against other people. Don’t go and stay with your relatives after the funeral. Go on one of these cruises by yourself.”

“GO on—what?” Alice gasped. Her head went round and round. Had their good Dr. Martlett, so kind, wise and attentive, gone suddenly mad? A cruise—straight from her mother’s deathbed!

The doctor, having thrown his bombshell, bustled off, without waiting to see what had been blown up in Alice.

What would her mother have thought about a cruise? Alice asked herself.

They had always rather enjoyed going to the seaside together, but the seaside wasn’t, of course, the same thing as the *open* sea!

Her mother had never liked the idea of Alice risking herself in a boat on the water. It was quite different sitting on the sea front, drinking up the ozone, and watching waves that wouldn’t go very much farther up the beach than you had expected. Was this perhaps what Alice needed now? “A breath of ozone,” her mother had often said, “is so good for us, dear, before the winter sets in.” Well, the rest of her life, Alice thought, would be the winter setting in; perhaps it would be a good thing to get a breath of ozone first. A large ship—and cruises, Alice knew, were always taken on large ships—might not be so alarming after all.

Before her aunt arrived for the funeral Alice had bought a ticket for the South Sea Islands. Naturally it hurt and shocked her aunt very much, but,

having bought a ticket, Alice felt safe, for she belonged to a family that went to entertainments and to places for which tickets had been bought.

**A**T first it seemed to Alice as if this cruise were a mistake. She felt more lonely on this strange ship than she could ever have felt at Cheltenham.

The sea, too, seemed unnecessarily big; nor, having once got on it, could you easily get off. The people on board were stranger than was the ship; they played games and laughed; ate and drank too much; danced in the evenings; and even when they weren't young behaved as if they were. Worse still, they made love. Now Alice had no real objection to love being made, provided that it was done at a safe distance from herself and respected the proprieties.

But people on cruises apparently make love all over the place; and without considering propriety.

They made it most obviously and inconsiderately in or about the swimming pool. Alice had learned to swim and swam rather well. Swimming, she told herself severely, was what swimming pools were for. Still, partly owing to the swimming pool and partly on account of Ray Vincent, Alice began to overlook lovers and to enjoy her cruise.

Ray Vincent was a tall, tidy-looking young man who swam better than Alice did, his head under water for long and apparently peaceful periods; and he helped Alice to swim harder and faster than she already did, and with far less spluttering.

He had nice gray eyes that looked straight at Alice as if they had nothing to hide, and nothing whatever to worry about. Once or twice after meeting Ray Vincent's eyes, a strange feeling came over Alice, as if there *were* really very little to worry about. Her grief still possessed her, but, after all, you had to take your mind off grief while arranging your deck chair and holding on to things that slid about.

The first few days of the voyage were rough, and Alice, who turned out to be an unexpectedly good sailor, saw a good deal of Ray Vincent. She might have gone on seeing a good deal of him, even when the sea became smooth, had she been less well brought up.

**D**IRECTLY the weather calmed down, however, a peachlike predatory blonde, with letter-box lips, called Milly Carter, appeared and made

short work of Alice.

Alice was not bad-looking herself. She would have had a particularly good figure if she had not crouched; her upper lip was short and her nose had a certain finish (quite denied to Milly Carter, who simply carried her nose off); Alice's eyes were dark and velvety, but unfortunately she had not learned how to use them, and generally cast them down.

When Milly pounced on Ray Vincent, Alice instantly withdrew, crouched more than ever, and cast down her eyes all the time.

Milly didn't mean anything very much; all she was out for was a little fun; her eyes and lips were made for cruises. Ray Vincent liked fun. When Alice withdrew, disapproving obviously of Milly, and disapproving all over, Ray thought she was rather a spoil sport and felt disappointed in her.

Alice hadn't told Ray that she had just lost her mother, or he might have understood her withdrawal.

She dressed in black but not conspicuous black, with a little white here and there. She had had a feeling that if she didn't tell Ray about her mother, she could bear it better.

They had had plenty of other things to talk about—swimming, books, movies, and whether one had to be a Nazi or a Bolshevik; and if not—why not?

He answered slowly, but still he answered: "Well, yes—I suppose she is rather on the dull side."  
It was enough for Alice.

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Now they didn't talk at all, because Alice always went somewhere else the moment she saw Ray coming; and at table Milly sat next to Ray and Alice opposite them; so that Alice spoke only to an elderly clergyman on one side of her—whom she didn't like—and to a maiden lady on the other—who didn't like her. Few people can talk well to those who dislike them, or whom they themselves dislike; and Alice was not one of the few.

Unfortunately the less you talk, the more you have to listen.

Alice had to listen to a good deal that Ray and Milly were saying to each other; and she liked none of it.

Once she even overheard them by accident, when they had no idea she was on the other side of a lifeboat. Ray Vincent said: "Let's ask Miss Devine to play deck tennis with us—I'm sure she could, she's as active as a fish in the pool." And Milly Carter said, "And about as dull as a fish too, isn't she?"

Ray Vincent answered slowly, but still he answered:

"Well, yes—I suppose she is rather on the dull side." He only supposed it; but it was enough for Alice. She went to her small, neat stateroom, and cried herself sick.

While everybody was thinking what an exceptionally calm, hot, reliable day it was—quite the kind of day agents for cruises hawk about as chronic certainties and expect once in a lifetime—the crew began to tie up everything loose on deck and put it away.

**T**HINGS were said about the barometer that meant nothing at all to Alice, but appeared to mean a good deal to the ship's officers.

The sky was an unearthly, radiant blue, pock-marked with little white balls of cloud, like cream puffs lightly frosted. These innocuous cloudlings swirled up from all directions at once, as if summoned from a witch's cauldron, until they became one immense and luminous mass. There had been very little air all day; now there was an occasional hot puff, that drew, like the claw of an invisible animal, a little puckered path across the oily blue floor of the ocean.

People who were playing bridge said for the first time what they really thought of one another's game. Even people who didn't drink wanted one; while those who did drink wanted more than one. Children behaved worse than the savages they always are; and the French chef gave the purser notice.

By sunset, the brilliant clouds had turned black. The storm broke, like the sudden rip of stout calico. Lightning leaped continuously from end to end of the black ridge of cloud. Waves heaped themselves up out of the profoundly quiet ocean, until they ceased to look like waves at all, and looked like prison walls under the impression that they had to behave like omelets.

Alice, gazing at the sea from the glass promenade, wondered what it would feel like to have to climb up and down those inverted hollows puffing

themselves up to gigantic proportions one moment and sinking into chasms the next.

Alice wasn't exactly afraid of the storm. She had spent all her life observing, so she went back to the lounge, where most people sat, and went on observing.

A great many passengers went on playing games with a sort of sick absorption, as if their interest in something else might keep the storm at bay. It was their own nerves, Alice thought, that they really wanted to keep at bay and were not succeeding; nor were those who fell back on drink succeeding any better.

Some people were unusually quiet and stayed close together; a very small remnant surrounded the elderly clergyman, who looked embarrassed until a firm, unmarried lady who knew how to set the clergy off suggested hymns. These were, Alice thought, for those who liked them, rather a success.

Every now and then a great wave slapped the ship's side with the careless, familiar whack of a slum mother correcting her offspring.

Dinner was served as usual, and stewards heroically fought to keep an incredible balance. Nobody ate very much; no ship's officers were there except the chief purser and the doctor, who were dangerously cheerful, and talked as if they weren't on the sea at all. It was, Alice thought, kind of them, but quite useless, because by now everyone knew that they had been caught by a hurricane. The "tail end" of a hurricane, the more optimistic hastened to add. Night fell and most people went to their cabins. Alice was on her way to hers when she met Ray Vincent. He said: "Look here—don't go to bed. Come into the smoking room with me."

He spoke as if there had been no break in their friendship, as if something, behind silences and evasions, had gone on at its own pace, drawing them nearer to each other.

Alice said: "All right, I'll come."

People were still talking in the smoking room, though in order to hear one another they had to shout.

Alice said as her chair swung close to Ray's: "There is danger, I suppose?"

Ray did not try to juggle with her fears; he said: "Have a cigarette. I suppose so. Shall you try for one of the boats—if they attempt to get them



out?”

Alice told him with quiet certainty: “I shan’t try for anything.”

Ray’s eyes, meeting hers, looked rather accusingly at her. “That’s just the trouble, isn’t it,” he said; “you never do try for anything, do you?” Alice didn’t ask him what he meant.

**M**ILLY, dressed as usual in something extraordinarily fetching, and wholly inappropriate for a storm at sea, heaved herself across the room, and sank into a third chair that slipped as if on purpose toward them. Her eyes were wide with terror.

She said: “If—if anything goes wrong, I have to be saved, haven’t I? I can’t swim like you and Miss Devine. They do save women and children first still, don’t they? What are lifeboats for, anyway? I wish I hadn’t come on this damned cruise!”

Ray Vincent said reassuringly, but not, Alice thought, at all fondly: “There isn’t the slightest danger, of course. This boat will weather anything—but naturally, if there should be any danger, you would be saved first.”

The wind sounded as if a zoo had been let loose and the contents tactlessly mingled together. The voices of the gale were multitudinous.

A wave crashed down upon the smoking room with an overwhelming thud. A piece of wall opened—a lilting, dancing gray wave wandered aimlessly across the room, over the neat linoleum floor, working in and out of chairs and tables, till it crashed against the bar, upsetting all the bottles of expensive drinks, so expensive that you paid a shilling for the smallest glasses of anything—and scattered their contents on the floor.

A steward came in, his arms full of life belts, and began distributing them as if they were potato chips. He hovered kindly over flustered women, and helped them into the belts, as if he were an experienced lady’s maid. Ray took three belts from a chest near the smoking-room door. “Just for fun!” he told Milly. She flung herself into his arms, sobbing and screaming, and Alice put on her own belt, and then fastened Ray’s because he could not get his arms free.

The wave receded, and for a long time nothing further happened; everything seemed to get quieter. People stopped scolding one another, the ship’s company, or anyone else whose fault it was that they were suddenly menaced—never of course their own.

**T**HEN a ship's officer came into the doorway and told people to go to their boat stations: as a precautionary measure, he said.

Very few of the passengers knew where their boat stations were; but the doors were all swung open, and they could go on deck if they liked. Indeed they could do anything they liked, had there been anything they liked to do!

This situation seemed quite familiar to Alice; and she was luckier than most of the other passengers because she knew exactly what she wanted to do, and had it in her power to do it.

She wanted to stay near Ray Vincent until the last possible moment; and this, it appeared, was what he wanted as well.

"Take her other arm," he told Alice, referring to Milly, who was screaming at the top of her voice and drumming with her heels on the boat, as it pushed itself up under her, or fell completely away. Ray took her other side and between them they half dragged, half carried her out onto the deck.

It was "the open sea" all right, Alice told herself rather grimly, as they leaned against the wind. The noise in the smoking room had been a gentle murmur compared to the wild shouts of the hurricane on deck. The steady wall of sound was torn up, from time to time, by harsh and hideous shrieks.

Alice could not see any waves, only huge masses of black water, with a line of white foam on their blind, eager lips, lurching toward the ship as if they knew their time had come. Groups of passengers struggled waist-deep in water round the lifeboats, held back by officers and crew. Only the lifeboats on the port side could be used; the rest had gone, or were stove in by the waves.

Ray told Alice which to try for, and where he thought they could push Milly in.

He let go of her for a moment to strike her across the mouth; this seemed to make Milly sensible enough to do what she was told. "When I say go—go—when I say stand fast—stand fast," Ray shouted to Alice. She nodded—the deck emptied itself of water, and across its awful slant they lurched with their burden. Alice was enthralled by the effort. It seemed to use the very core of her heart, to get Milly into the boat. The stout wedge they made, the decisiveness they used, with none of the frantic fluster of a personal stake, just sufficed, with the extra help of a ship's officer, at the last moment. They pushed, shoved, dragged, lifted Milly—into the lifeboat. There was no time to be polite. No one pushed Alice forward when she moved back. Only Ray

shouted urgently: “Try—try—for yourself—Alice!” But Alice had no such intention. She stepped back, into an alcove of railing, by Ray’s side.

“There isn’t any sense in it!” she shouted into his ear. “I don’t want to!”

The boat was lowered. It was incredible to see it arrive unspilled far down in a black chasm, and then climb up, and over an incredible peak. After that it vanished.

“A ghost of a chance!” Ray shouted in Alice’s ear. “We’ve about as much—or as little here!” Alice felt the pressure of his arm round her, and thought how strange it was to be so happy—a little unfair too—since all the struggling mass that hadn’t been able to get into the lifeboats wailed and sobbed, or stood trembling and aghast at being made to face, with no alternative, the grim plunge toward death. You can’t, Alice thought, really face death, because if you’re happy, it’s not there—and if you’re not, you’re too frightened to know what is there!

Ray didn’t appear to be either frightened or unhappy. He held Alice close against his side, and watched with her the breaking up of the ship. She did not break up, nor turn turtle at all suddenly. At first she merely shuddered violently and kept turning from side to side, like a fever patient in a heated bed; then she shook off what she could.

The waves tore and ripped at her, as if to help her to free herself. Once she nearly stood on her head, like a duck, but recovered herself and fell back again with a great spill and rattle of anything left loose to spill or rattle inside her; and then once more she reared higher and higher, while the slippery deck turned into a precipice. Alice thought she heard Ray say, “Goodby, darling!” A roar closer than the scream of the wind drove with her, headlong into the sea.

Alice felt the weight of the icy water strike her whole body, and then suck her under; after a long suffocating tussle in the dark, in which she remembered only to keep her mouth shut and kick, a faint light shuddered through her wet eyes.

She found herself rising on the lift of a vast wave; she swam up it in a leisurely way, assisted by her body belt, and was not surprised, though pleased, to see Ray pushing a spar toward her, at the top.

It was a sulky dawn, but they could see each other’s faces quite plainly. They held on to the spar, and looked at each other. Alice said: “What made you think me dull?”

Ray looked surprised but answered instantly: “Did I? Well, I don’t now! I always liked you—but not so much, of course!”

This seemed satisfactory, though Alice reminded herself they mightn’t have very long to be satisfied with it. For the moment the body belts held, but the water was icy cold, and a wave like the wave that had drawn them together might just as easily fling them apart.

“I wish you’d kiss me,” Alice found herself shouting. “Nobody ever has!”

“I will if I can,” Ray told her, “but it’s a bit difficult.” He shifted his arms cautiously along the spar, bent over toward her, and their cold lips touched, and fell apart. They sank down and down into a vast chasm, and on coming up again found themselves confronted by a wooden cliff dangerously close to their heads.

**I**T was the ship’s raft and the wireless operator sat in the middle of it. When he saw their floating heads he eagerly threw them a rope, and helped them climb onto the raft. This was the worst of the whole business. The raft kept hitting Alice and bruised her all over; then it threatened to turn over backward on them, all three; and suddenly after seeming to tear itself away from them forever, they found it had slid under their feet.

There they were on it, with Wireless, in a pallid dawn. “There’s a ship within fifty miles of us—heading our way!” Wireless informed them. This did not sound very near, but when they got used to the raft and what it could do but probably wouldn’t, and what it wouldn’t do but probably could, Wireless opened a little hatchway and produced some dry food and a bottle of rum.

“This,” Alice thought to herself, while munching salt pork and drinking turn by turn with the men out of the flask of rum, “is the happiest moment of my life—it’s what I always wanted, and now I’ve had it, it doesn’t much matter whether I get saved.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *What Every Girl Wants* by Phyllis Bottome]