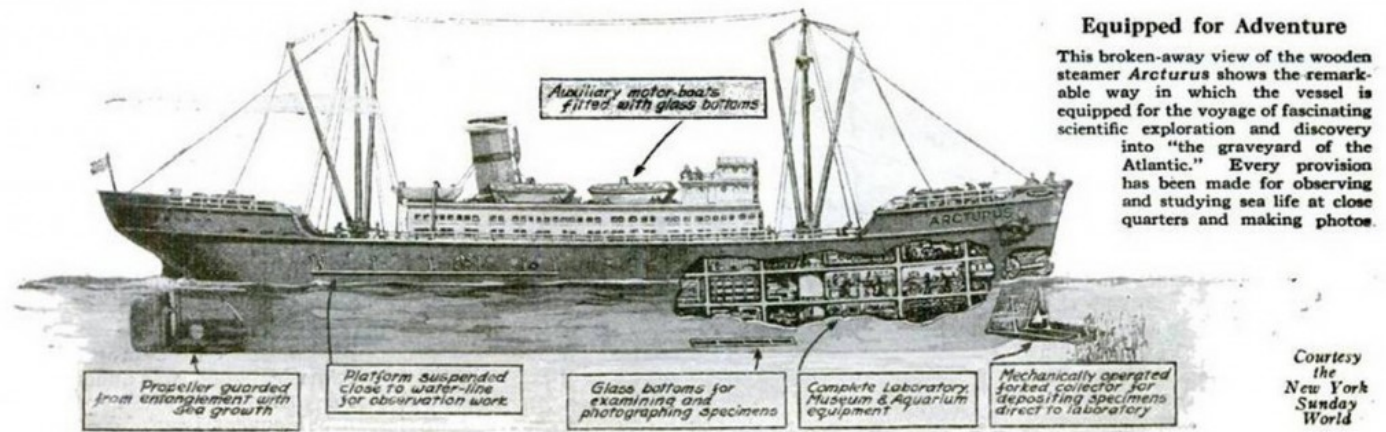


# Living on the Arcturus



***Arcturus* diagram, *Popular Science*, May 1925** [a click will enlarge image]

*This post shares a little about shipboard daily life on the Arcturus. A later post will be about Isabel's artistic work aboard the ship.*

Isabel Cooper got on the *Arcturus* at Newport News, Virginia, in Mid-February, 1925. The *Arcturus* sailed first into the mid-Atlantic to investigate the Sargasso Sea. The ship spent about a month in the Atlantic.

Then the expedition passed through the Panama Canal and into the Pacific where William Beebe's goal was to study the Humboldt Current and return to the Galapagos waters for further study.

Isabel returned from Balboa, Canal Zone, on the *Kroonland*, along with Dorothy and David Putnam and a few others, leaving on June 24, 1925, and arriving in New York on July 1st.<sup>1</sup> The *Arcturus* continued briefly back into the Atlantic and did some dredging off New York.

## **Life aboard the *Arcturus***

Isabel Cooper wrote dozens of letters from the journey to Charles Mahaffie, reporting on her experiences and her colleagues.

She had journeyed by ship six or seven times before, on trips to British Guiana, and once prior to the Galapagos on the *Noma* in 1923. But this was to be an extended ship-board expedition, and daily life on the ship was a recurring topic.

Early in the voyage, a stop at Bermuda was possible. Though only six or seven days out, that brought thoughts of luxuries she already missed. In addition to the chance for mail and fresh vegetables, she wrote, "Should like a horseback

ride. Also a shampoo, though this, of course, I do not mention. All very well for the womenfolk to be dainty and all that, but the processes by which this pleasant condition is achieved are merely tedious and call forth loud sneers on the part of the gentlemen, who can see no reason why you should waste valuable time in beauty parlors and suchlike.<sup>ii</sup>“

The daily round took up a routine pattern: “I am dreadfully busy: breakfast at 7:30; sketching from 8 to 12; luncheon; more sketching; snatches of reading, etc., when there is not a rush of work; dinner at 5:30, to let the stewards and mess boys get through their pretty hard day as early as possible. Evenings spent in different ways. Sometimes the more learned members give lectures on something—‘jaw bones of eels,’ or something equally stimulating. I mend socks while this is going on... Most evenings, however, I put in at my little flivver of a typewriter. I have an idea of an essay and am working on it.<sup>iii</sup>“

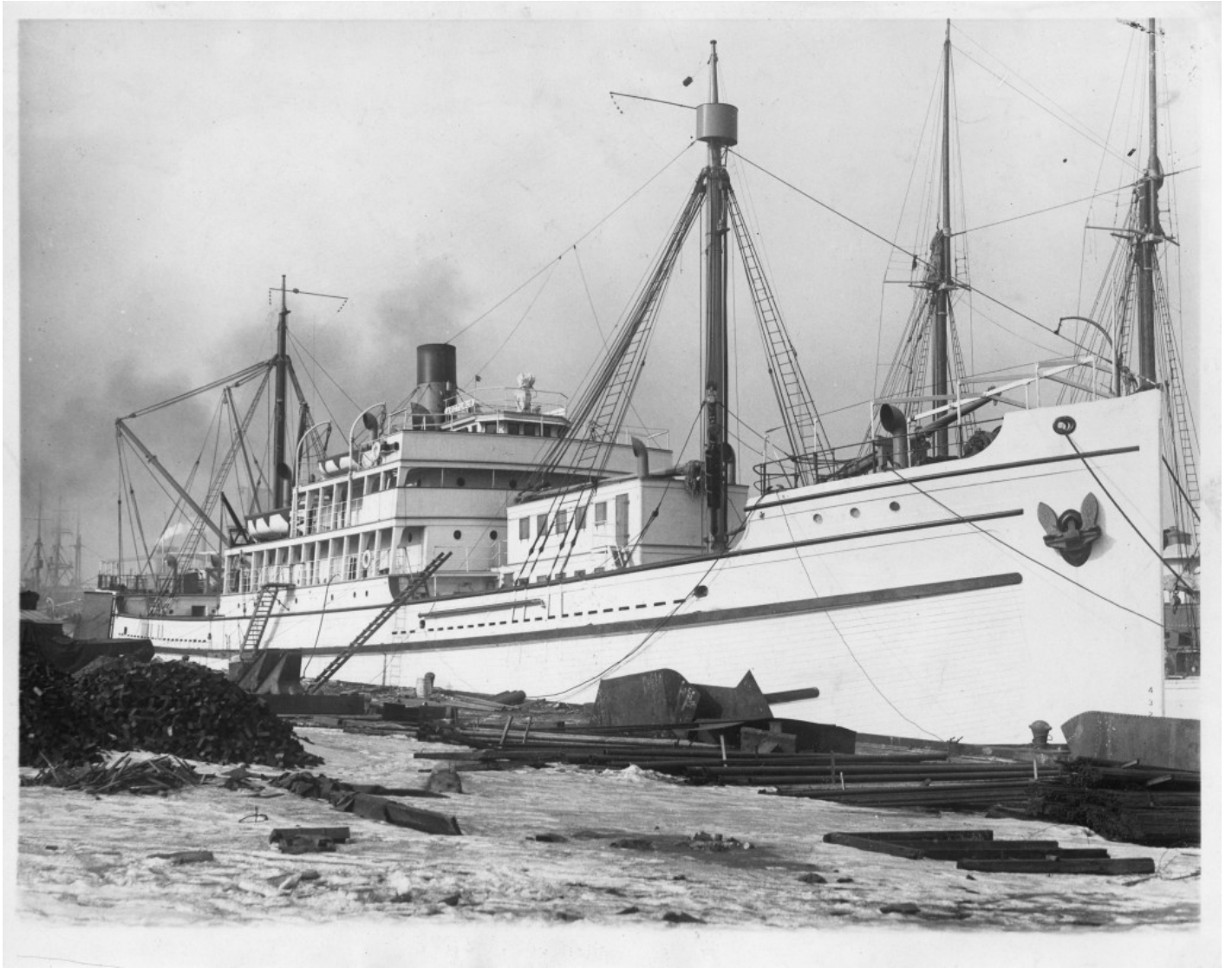
A *New Yorker*, “Talk of the Town” account reported a shipboard day this way: The staff “will see each other three times a day around the dining table. For the rest of the day each expects to be so busy with his own work that meeting in the evening will be an event. And from the number of gay shawls and scarfs most of these events promise to be gala.”<sup>iv</sup>

In other letters to Charles, it’s clear Isabel liked to get proper exercise (as she exhorted him to do repeatedly). On the ship, she looked for chances to do that: “We had one beautiful calm day, nothing but big slow swells. So we climbed over the side on a rope ladder and took a swim. Glorious! It is so hard to get enough exercise on a boat. I have found a substitute for parallel bars: the upper rods of two enormous deep-sea dredges which are now stored in the hold. So I am managing to get thoroughly shaken up at least once a day.”<sup>v</sup>“

As the journey wore on, she didn’t give up the idea of simple luxuries.

“Economy of a life aboard ship is an extraordinary thing. You forget all about bath salts and pleasantly varied temperatures of fresh water in the gruesome problem of finding some combination of alkalis and fats which will consent to dissolve in cold salt water. Eating, too, loses its complex civilized charm. I haven’t seen a leaf of lettuce for weeks, and that is hardship for me! Also, the oranges and apples are becoming more limp and dejected every day. One of the ice plants has cashed in. Result, much meat overboard, and no cracked ice. But as the food deteriorates, our appetites improve. Ratio keeps about even...<sup>vi</sup>“

## **Seasickness**



### The Arcturus, 1925 press photo

An book on Beebe's work says that Isabel suffered from seasickness (and malaria, which she told me still gave her occasional fevers when she was in old age). "Isabel deserved special credit, as she endured repeated bouts of malaria and never ceased to grow hopelessly seasick whenever there was a swell. The weight and stability of the *Arcturus* made deep dredging feasible, but the Atlantic was uncooperative. Distant storms produced deep rolling swells that made life miserable enough, but as soon as the captain stopped to make the detailed soundings necessary for dredging, the *Arcturus* turned across the swells and wallowed miserably, sending Isabel to her cabin with plenty of company."<sup>[vii](#)</sup>

Isabel didn't confess to suffering it in her letters to Charles, though she reported sharing her seasickness "dope" with others. She told Charles the "fish sculptor [Dwight Franklin] has been quite consistently green in the face since we left and is afraid to take my dope. Funny thing for a man to be scared of something a mere slip of a girl is able to toss off quite naturally."<sup>[viii](#)</sup>

But to whatever extent she suffered from seasickness, Isabel kept at her work, and completed hundreds of illustrations for the expedition.

---

[i](#) Passenger manifest, familysearch.org

[ii](#) Letter, IC to CDM, from aboard the *Arcturus*, February 17, 1925,

[iii](#) Letter, IC to CDM, from aboard the *Arcturus*, March 1925 (date not given).

[iv](#) "Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, February 21, 1925.

[v](#) Letter, IC to CDM, from aboard the *Arcturus*, March 1925 (date not given).

[vi](#) Letter, IC to CDM, from aboard the *Arcturus*, April 10, 1925.

[vii](#) Carol Grand Gould, *The Remarkable Life of William Beebe Explorer and Naturalist*, Island Press, 2004, p. 244, 247.

[viii](#) Letter, IC to CDM, February 18, 1925.