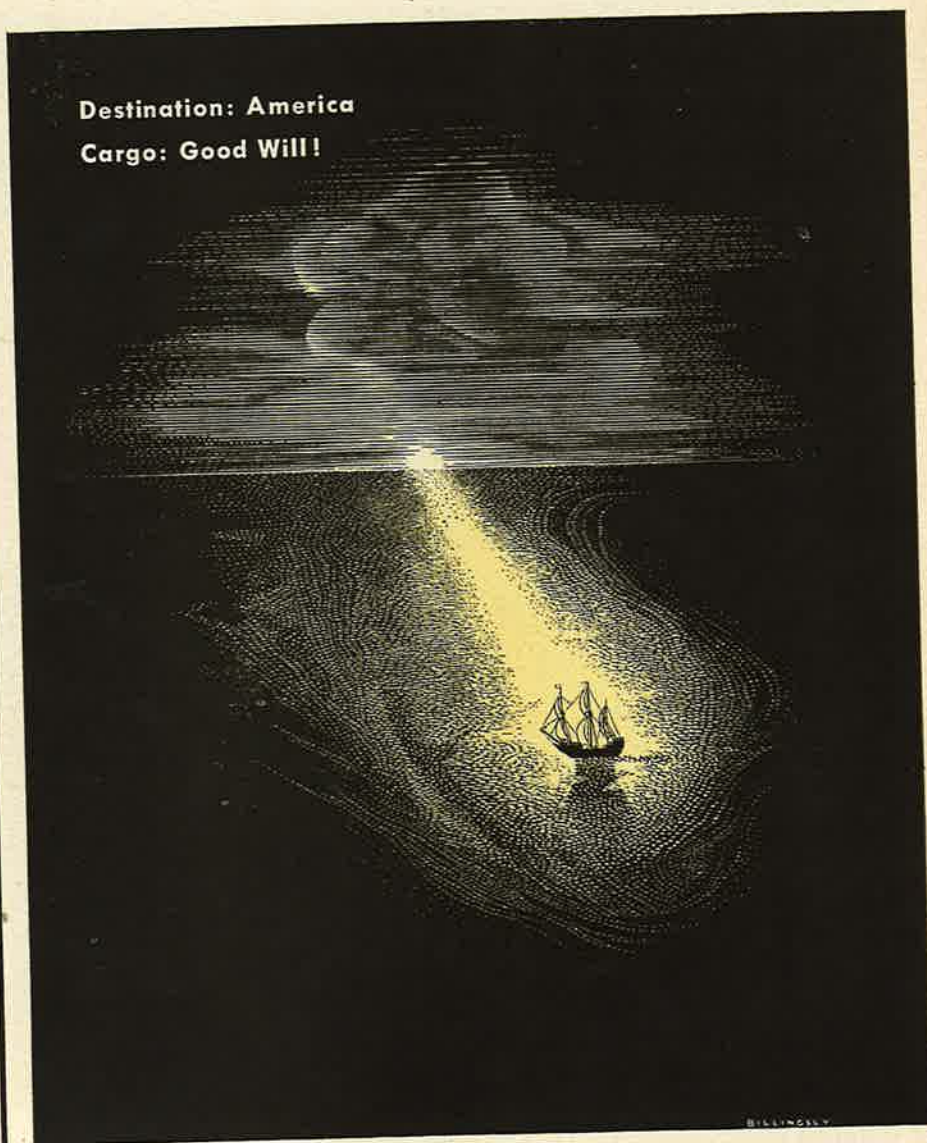


It was a walk in the woods, many years ago, that launched my wife and me on our quest of the mysterious mushroom. We were married in London in 1926, she being Russian, born and brought up in Moscow. She had lately qualified as a physician at the University of London. I am from Great Falls, Mont. of Anglo-Saxon origins. In the late summer of 1927, recently married, we spent our holiday in the Catskills. In the afternoon of the first day we went strolling along a lovely mountain path, through woods crisscrossed by the slanting rays of a descending sun. We were young, carefree and in love. Suddenly my bride abandoned my side. She had spied wild mushrooms in the forest, and racing over the carpet of dried leaves in the woods, she knelt in poses of adoration before first one cluster and then another of these growths. In ecstasy she called each kind by an endearing Russian name. She caressed the toadstools, savored their earthy perfume. Like all good Anglo-Saxons, I knew nothing about the fungal world and felt that the less I knew about those putrid, treacherous excrescences the better. For her they were things of grace, infinitely inviting to the perceptive mind. She insisted on gathering them, laughing at my protests, mocking my horror. She brought a skirtful back to the lodge. She cleaned and cooked them. That evening she ate them, alone. Not long married, I thought to wake up the next morning a widower.

These dramatic circumstances, puzzling and painful for me, made a lasting impression on us both. From that day on we sought an explanation for this strange cultural cleavage separating us in a minor area of our lives. Our method was to gather all the information we could on the attitude toward wild mushrooms of the Indo-European and adjacent peoples. We tried to determine the kinds of mushrooms that each people knows, the uses to which these kinds are put, the vernacular names for them. We dug into the etymology of those names, to arrive at the metaphors hidden in their roots. We looked for mushrooms in myths, legends, ballads, proverbs, in the writers who drew their inspiration from folklore, in the clichés of daily conversation, in slang and the telltale recesses of obscene vocabularies. We sought them in the pages of history, in art, in Holy Writ. We were not interested in what people learn about mushrooms from books, but what untutored country folk know from childhood, the folk legacy of the family circle. It turned out that we had happened on a novel field of inquiry.

As the years went on and our knowledge grew, we discovered a surprising pattern in our data: each Indo-European people is by cultural inheritance either "mycophobe" or "mycophile," that is, each people either rejects and is ignorant of the fungal world or knows it astonishingly well and loves it. Our voluminous and often amusing evidence in support of this thesis fills many sections of our new book, and it is there that we submit our case to the scholarly world. The great Russians, we find, are mighty mycophiles, as are also the Catalans, who possess a mushroomic vocabulary of more than 200 names. The ancient Greeks, Celts, and Scandinavians were mycophobes, as are the Anglo-Saxons. There was another phenomenon that arrested our attention: wild mushrooms from earliest times were steeped in what the anthropologists call *mana*, a supernatural aura. The very word "toadstool" may have meant originally the "demonic stool" and been the specific name of a European mushroom that causes hallucinations. In ancient Greece and Rome there was a belief that certain kinds of mushrooms were procreated by the lightning bolt. We made the further discovery that this particular myth, for which no support exists in natural science, is still believed among many widely scattered peoples: the Arabs of the desert, the peoples of India, Persia and the Pamirs, the Tibetans and Chinese, the Filipinos and the Maoris of New Zealand, and even among the Zapotecs of Mexico. . . . All of our evidence taken together led us many years ago to hazard a

CONTINUED



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