

The Extraordinary Voyages of Amélie Bertrand

by Joanna Russ

In the summer of 192- there occurred to me the most extraordinary event of my life.

I was traveling on business and was in the French countryside, not far from Lyons, waiting for my train on a small railway platform on the outskirts of a town I shall call Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont. (This is not its name.) The weather was cool, although it was already June, and I shared the platform with only one other passenger: a plump woman of at least forty, by no means pretty but respectably dressed, the true type of our provincial *bonne bourgeoisie*, who sat on the bench provided for the comfort of passengers and knitted away at some indeterminate garment.

The station at Beaulieu, like so many of our railway stops in small towns, is provided with a central train station of red brick through which runs an arch of passageway, also of red brick, which thus divides the edifice of the station into a ticket counter and waiting room on one side and a small café on the other. Thus, having attended one's train on the wrong side of the station (for there are railroad tracks on both sides of the edifice), one may occasionally find oneself making the traversal of the station in order to catch one's train, usually at the last minute.

So it occurred with me. I heard the approach of my train, drew out my watch, and found that the mild spring weather had caused me to indulge in a reverie not only lengthy but at a distance from my desired track; the two-fifty-one for Lyons was about to enter Beaulieu, but I was wrongly situated to place myself on board; were I not quick, no entrainment would take place.

Blessing the good fathers of Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont for their foresight in so dividing their train depot, I walked briskly but with no excessive haste towards the passage. I had not the slightest doubt of catching my train. I even had leisure to reflect on the bridge which figures so largely in the name of the town and to recall that, according to my knowledge, this bridge had been destroyed in the time of Caractacus; then I stepped between the buildings. I noticed that my footsteps echoed from the walls of the tunnel, a phenomenon one may observe upon entering any confined space. To the right of me and to the left were walls of red brick. The air was invigoratingly fresh, the weather sunny and clear, and ahead was the wooden platform, the well-trimmed bushes, and the potted geraniums of the other side of the Beaulieu train station.

Nothing could have been more ordinary.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the lady I had seen knitting on the platform

was herself entering the passage at a decorous distance behind me. We were, it seems, to become fellow passengers. I turned and raised my hat to her, intending to continue. I could not see the Lyons train, but to judge by the faculty of hearing, it was rounding the bend outside the station. I placed my hat back upon my head, reached the center of the tunnel, or rather, a point midway along its major diameter—

Will you believe me? Probably. You are English; the fogs and literature of your unfortunate climate predispose you to marvels. Your winters cause you to read much; your authors reflect to you from their pages the romantic imagination of a *refugé* from the damp and cold, to whom anything may happen if only it does so outside his windows! I am the product of another soil; I am logical, I am positive, I am French. Like my famous compatriot, I cry, "Where is this marvel? Let him produce it!" I myself do not believe what happened to me. I believe it no more than I believe that Phileas Fogg circumnavigated the globe in 187- and still lives today in London with the lady he rescued from a funeral pyre in Benares.

Nonetheless I will attempt to describe what happened.

The first sensation was a retardation of time. It seemed to me that I had been in the passage at Beaulieu for a very long time, and the passage itself seemed suddenly to become double its length, or even triple. Then my body became heavy, as in a dream; there was also a disturbance of balance as though the tunnel sloped *down* towards its farther end and some increase in gravity were pulling me in that direction. A phenomenon even more disturbing was the peculiar *haziness* that suddenly obscured the forward end of the Beaulieu tunnel, as if Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, far from enjoying the temperate warmth of an excellent June day, were actually melting in the heat—yes, heat!—a terrible warmth like that of a furnace, and yet humid, entirely unknown to our moderate climate even in the depths of summer. In a moment my summer clothing was soaked, and I wondered with horror whether I dared offend customary politeness by opening my collar. The noise of the Lyons train, far from disappearing, now surrounded me on all sides as if a dozen trains, and not merely one, were converging upon Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, or as if a strong wind (which was pushing me forward) were blowing. I attempted to peer into the mistiness ahead of me but could see nothing. A single step farther and the mist swirled aside; there seemed to be a vast spray of greenery beyond—indeed, I could distinctly make out the branches of a large palm tree upon which intense sunlight was beating—and then, directly crossing it, a long, thick, sinuous, gray serpent which appeared to writhe from side to side, and which then fixed itself around the trunk of the palm, bringing into view a gray side as large as the opening of the tunnel itself, four gray columns beneath, and two long ivory tusks.

It was an elephant.

It was the roar of the elephant which brought me to my senses. Before this I had proceeded as in an astonished dream; now I turned and attempted to retrace my steps but found that I could hardly move *up* the steep tunnel against the furious wind which assailed me. I was aware of the cool, fresh, familiar spring of Beaulieu, very small and precious, appearing like a photograph or a scene observed through the diminishing, not the magnifying end, of an

opera glass, and of the impossibility of ever attaining it. Then a strong arm seized mine, and I was back on the platform from which I had ventured—it seemed now so long ago!—sitting on the wooden bench while the good bourgeoisie in the decent dark dress inquired after my health.

I cried, “But the palm tree—the tropical air—the elephant!”

She said in the calmest way in the world, “Do not distress yourself, monsieur. It was merely Uganda.”

I may mention here that Madame Bertrand, although not in her first youth, is a woman whose dark eyes sparkle with extraordinary charm. One must be an imbecile not to notice this. Her concern is sincere, her manner *séduisante*, and we had not been in conversation five minutes before she abandoned the barriers of reserve and explained to me not only the nature of the experience I had undergone, but (in the café of the train station at Beaulieu, over a lemon ice) her own extraordinary history.

“Shortly after the termination of the Great War” (said Madame Bertrand) “I began a habit which I have continued to this day: whenever my husband, Aloysius Bertrand, is away from Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont on business, as often happens, I visit my sister-in-law in Lyons, leaving Beaulieu on one day in the middle of the week and returning on the next. At first my visits were uneventful. Then, one fateful day only two years ago, I happened to depart from the wrong side of the train station after purchasing my ticket, and so found myself seeking to approach my train through that archway or passage where you, Monsieur, so recently ventured. There were the same effects, but I attributed them to an attack of faintness and continued, expecting my hour’s ride to Lyons, my sister-in-law’s company, the cinema, the restaurant, and the usual journey back the next day.

“Imagine my amazement—no, my stupefaction—when I found myself instead on a rough wooden platform surrounded on three sides by the massive rocks and lead-colored waters of a place entirely unfamiliar to me! I made inquiries and discovered, to my unbounded astonishment, that I was on the last railway stop or terminus of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of the South American continent, and that I had engaged myself to sail as supercargo on a whaling vessel contracted to cruise the waters of Antarctica for the next two years. The sun was low, the clouds massing above, and behind me (continuing the curve of the rock-infested bay) was a jungle of squat pine trees, expressing by the irregularity of their trunks the violence of the climate.

“What could I do? My clothing was Victorian, the ship ready to sail, the six months’ night almost upon us. The next train was not due until spring.

“To make a long story short, I sailed.

“You might expect that a lady, placed in such a situation, would suffer much that was disagreeable and discommoding. So it was. But there is also a somber charm to the far south which only those who have traveled there can know: the stars glittering on the ice fields, the

low sun, the penguins, the icebergs, the whales. And then there were the sailors, children of the wilderness, young, ardent, sincere, especially one, a veritable Apollo with a broad forehead and golden mustachios. To be frank, I did not remain aloof; we became acquainted, one thing led to another, and *enfin* I learned to love the smell of whale oil. Two years later, alighting from the railway train I had taken to Nome, Alaska, where I had gone to purchase my *trousseau* (for having made telegraphic inquiries about Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, I found that no Monsieur Bertrand existed therein and so considered myself a widow) I found myself, not in my Victorian dress in the bustling and frigid city of Nome, that commercial capital of the North with its outlaws, dogs, and Esquimaux in furs carrying loads of other furs upon their sleds, but in my old, familiar visiting-dress (in which I had started from Beaulieu so long before) on the platform at Lyons, with my sister-in-law waiting for me. Not only that, but in the more than two years I had remained away, no more time had passed in what I am forced to call the real world than the hour required for the train ride from Beaulieu to Lyons! I had expected Garance to fall upon my neck with cries of astonishment at my absence and the strangeness of my dress; instead she inquired after my health, and not waiting for an answer, began to describe in the most ordinary manner and at very great length the roast of veal which she had purchased that afternoon for dinner.

“At first, so confused and grief-stricken was I, that I thought I had somehow missed the train for Nome, and that returning at once from Lyons to Beaulieu would enable me to reach Alaska. I almost cut my visit to Lyons short on the plea of ill-health. But I soon realized the absurdity of imagining that a railway could cross several thousand miles of ocean, and since my sister-in-law was already suspicious (I could not help myself during the visit and often burst out with a *‘Mon cher Jack!’*) I controlled myself and gave vent to my feelings only on the return trip to Beaulieu—which, far from ending in Nome, Alaska, ended at the Beaulieu train station and at exactly the time predicted by the railway timetable.

“I decided that my two-years’ holiday had been only what the men of psychological science would entitle an unusually complete and detailed dream. The ancient Chinese were, I believe, famous for such vivid dreams; one of their poets is said to have experienced an entire lifetime of love, fear, and adventure while washing his feet. This was my case exactly. Here was I not a day—nay not an hour—older, and no one knew what had passed in the Antarctic save I myself.

“It was a reasonable explanation, but it had one grave defect, which rendered it totally useless.

“It was false.

“Since that time, Monsieur, I have gone on my peculiar voyages, my holidays, *mes vacances*, as I call them, not once but dozens of times. My magic carpet is the railway station at Beaulieu, or to be more precise, the passageway between the ticket office and the café at precisely ten minutes before three in the afternoon. A traversal of the passage at any other time brings me merely to the other side of the station, but a traversal of the passage at this particular time brings me to some far, exotic corner of the globe. Perhaps it is Ceylon with its

crowds of variegated hue, its scent of incense, its pagodas and rickshaws. Or the deserts of Al-Iqah, with the crowds of Bedawi, dressed in flowing white and armed with rifles, many of whom whirl round about one another on horseback. Or I will find myself on the languid islands of Tahiti, with the graceful and dusky inhabitants bringing me bowls of *poi* and garlands of flowers whose beauty is unmatched anywhere else in the tropical portion of the globe. Nor have my holidays been entirely confined to the terrestrial regions. Last February I stepped through the passage to find myself on the sands of a primitive beach under a stormy, gray sky; in the distance one could perceive the roarings of saurians and above me were the giant saw-toothed, purple leaves of some palmaceous plant, one (as it turned out) entirely unknown to botanical science.

“No, monsieur, it was not Ceylon; it was Venus. It is true that I prefer a less overcast climate, but still one can hardly complain. To lie in the darkness of the Venerian night, on the silky volcanic sands, under the starry leaves of the *laradh*, while imbibing the million perfumes of the night-blooming flowers and listening to the music of the *karakh* — really, one does not miss the blue sky. Although only a few weeks ago I was in a place that also pleased me: imagine a huge, whitish-blue sky, a desert with giant mountains on the horizon, and the lean, hard-bitten water-prospectors with their dowsing rods, their high-heeled boots, and their large hats, worn to protect faces already tanned and wrinkled from the intense sunlight.

“No, not Mars, Texas. They are marvelous people, those American pioneers, the men handsome and laconic, the women sturdy and efficient. And then one day I entrained to Lyons only to find myself on a railway platform that resembled a fishbowl made of tinted glass, while around me rose mountains fantastically slender into a black sky where the stars shone like hard marbles, scarcely twinkling at all. I was wearing a glass helmet and clothes that resembled a diver’s. I had no idea where I was until I rose, and then to my edified surprise, instead of rising in the usual manner, I positively bounded into the air!

“I was on the Moon.

“Yes, monsieur, the Moon, although some distance in the future, the year two thousand eighty and nine, to be precise. At that date human beings will have established a colony on the Moon. My carriage swiftly shot down beneath one of the Selenic craters to land in their principal city, a fairy palace of slender towers and domes of glass, for they use as building material a glass made from the native silicate gravel. It was on the Moon that I gathered whatever theory I now have concerning my peculiar experiences with the railway passage at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, for I made the acquaintance there of the principal mathematician of the twenty-first century, a most elegant lady, and put the problem to her. You must understand that on the Moon *les nègres*, *les juifs* even *les femmes* may obtain high positions and much influence; it is a true republic. This lady introduced me to her colleague, a black physicist of more-than-normal happenings, or *le parapsychique* as they call it, and the two debated the matter during an entire day (not a Selenic day, of course, since that would have amounted to a time equal to twenty-eight days of our own). They could not agree, but in brief, as they told me, either the railway tunnel at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont has achieved infinite connectivity or it is

haunted. To be perfectly sincere, I regretted leaving the Moon. But one has one's obligations. Just as my magic carpet here at Beaulieu is of the nature of a railway tunnel, and just as I always find myself in *mes vacances* at first situated on a railway platform, thus my return must also be effected by that so poetically termed road of iron; I placed myself into the railway that connects two of the principal Selenic craters, and behold!—I alight at the platform at Lyons, not a day older.

“Indeed, monsieur” (and here Madame Bertrand coughed delicately) “as we are both people of the world, I may mention that certain other of the biological processes also suspend themselves, a fact not altogether to my liking, since my dear Aloysius and myself are entirely without family. Yet this suspension has its advantages; if I had aged as I have lived, it would be a woman of seventy who speaks to you now. In truth, how can one age in worlds that are, to speak frankly, not quite real? Though perhaps if I had remained permanently in one of these worlds, I too would have begun to age along with the other inhabitants. That would be a pleasure on the Moon, for my mathematical friend was age two hundred when I met her, and her acquaintance, the professor of *le paraphysique*, two hundred and five.”

Here Madame Bertrand, to whose recital I had been listening with breathless attention, suddenly ceased speaking. Her lemon ice stood untouched upon the table. So full was I of projects to make the world acquainted with this amazing history that I did not at first notice the change in Madame Bertrand's expression, and so I burst forth:

“The National Institute—the Académie—no, the universities, and the newspapers also—”

But the charming lady, with a look of horror, had risen from the table, crying, “Mon dieu! My train! What will Garance think? What will she say? Monsieur, not a word to anyone!”

Imagine my consternation when Madame Bertrand here precipitously departed from the café and began to cross the station towards that ominous passageway. I could only postulate, “But madame, consider! Ceylon! Texas! Mars!”

“No, it is too late,” said she. “Only at the former time in the train schedule. Monsieur, remember, please, not a word to anyone!”

Following her, I cried, “But if you do not return—” and she again favored me with her delightful smile, saying rapidly, “Do not distress yourself, monsieur. By now I have developed certain sensations—a *frisson* of the neck and shoulder blades—which warns me of the condition of the passageway. The later hour is always safe. But my train—!”

And so Madame Bertrand left me. Amazing woman! A traveler not only to the far regions of the earth but to those of imagination, and yet perfectly respectable, gladly fulfilling the duties of family life, and punctually (except for this one time) meeting her sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance Bertrand, on the train platform at Lyons.

Is that the end of my story? No, for I was fated to meet Amélie Bertrand once again.

My business, which I have mentioned to you, took me back to Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont at the end

of that same summer. I must confess that I hoped to encounter Madame Bertrand, for I had made it my intention to notify at least several of our great national institutions of the extraordinary powers possessed by the railway passage at Beaulieu, and yet I certainly could not do so without Madame Bertrand's consent. Again it was shortly before three in the afternoon; again the station platform was deserted. I saw a figure which I took to be that of Madame Bertrand seated upon the bench reserved for passengers and hastened to it with a glad cry—

But it was not Amélie Bertrand. Rather it was a thin and elderly female, entirely dressed in the dullest of black and completely without the charm I had expected to find in my fellow passenger. The next moment I heard my name pronounced and was delighted to perceive, issuing from the ticket office, Madame Bertrand herself, wearing a light-colored summer dress.

But where was the gaiety, the charm, the pleasant atmosphere of June? Madame Bertrand's face was closed, her eyes watchful, her expression determined. I would immediately have opened to her my immense projects, but with a shake of her head the lady silenced me, indicating the figure I have already mentioned.

"My sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance," she said. I confess that I nervously expected that Aloysius Bertrand himself would now appear. But we were alone on the platform. Madame Bertrand continued: "Garance, this is the gentleman who was the unfortunate cause of my missing my train last June."

Mademoiselle Garance, as if to belie the reputation for loquacity I had heard applied to her earlier in the summer, said nothing, but merely clutched to her meager bosom a small train case.

Madame Bertrand said to me, "I have explained to Garance the occasion of your illness last June and the manner in which the officials of the station detained me. I am glad to see you looking so well."

This was a clear hint that Mademoiselle Garance was to know nothing of her sister-in-law's history; thus I merely bowed and nodded. I wished to have the opportunity of conversing with Madame Bertrand more freely, but I could say nothing in the presence of her sister-in-law. Desperately I began: "You are taking the train today—"

"For the sake of nostalgia," said Madame Bertrand. "After today I shall never set foot in a railway carriage. Garance may if she likes, but I will not. Aeroplanes, motor cars, and ships will be good enough for me. Perhaps like the famous American, Madame Earhart, I shall learn to fly. This morning Aloysius told me the good news: a change in his business arrangements has enabled us to move to Lyons, which we are to do at the end of the month."

"And in the intervening weeks—?" said I.

Madame Bertrand replied composedly, "There will be none. They are tearing down the

station.”

What a blow! And there sat the old maid, Mademoiselle Garance, entirely unconscious of the impending loss to science! I stammered something—I know not what—but my good angel came to my rescue; with an infinitesimal movement of the fingers, she said:

“Oh, monsieur, my conscious pains me too much! Garance, would you believe that I told this gentleman the most preposterous stories? I actually told him—seriously, now—that the passageway of this train station was the gateway to another world! No, many worlds, and that I had been to all of them. Can you believe it of me?” She turned to me. “Oh, monsieur,” she said, “you were a good listener. You only pretended to believe. Surely you cannot imagine that a respectable woman like myself would leave her husband by means of a railway passage which has achieved infinite connectivity?”

Here Madame Bertrand looked at me in a searching manner, but I was at a loss to understand her intention in so doing and said nothing.

She went on, with a little shake of the head. “I must confess it; I am addicted to storytelling. Whenever my dear Aloysius left home on his business trips, he would say to me, ‘*Occupe-toi, occupe-toi, Amélie!*’ and, alas, I have occupied myself only too well. I thought my romance might divert your mind from your ill-health and so presumed to tell you an unlikely tale of extraordinary voyages. Can you forgive me?”

I said something polite, something I do not now recall. I was, you understand, still reeling from the blow. All that merely a fable! Yet with what detail, what plausible circumstance Madame Bertrand had told her story. I could only feel relieved I had not actually written to the National Institute. I was about to press both ladies to take some refreshment with me, when Madame Bertrand (suddenly putting her hand to her heart in a gesture that seemed to me excessive) cried, “Our train!” and turning to me, remarked, “Will you accompany us down the passage?”

Something made me hesitate; I know not what.

“Think, monsieur,” said Madame Bertrand, with her hand still pressed to her heart, “where will it be this time? A London of the future, perhaps, enclosed against the weather and built entirely of glass? Or perhaps the majestic, high plains of Colorado? Or will we find ourselves in one of the underground cities of the moons of Jupiter, in whose awesome skies the mighty planet rises and sets with a visual diameter more than that of the terrestrial Alps?”

She smiled with humor at Mademoiselle Garance, remarking, “Such are the stories I told this gentleman, dear Garance; they were a veritable novel,” and I saw that she was gently teasing her sister-in-law, who naturally did not know what any of this was about.

Mademoiselle Garance ventured to say timidly that she “liked to read novels.”

I bowed.

Suddenly I heard the sound of the train outside Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont. Madame Bertrand cried in an utterly prosaic voice, "Our train! Garance, we shall miss our train!" and again she asked, "Monsieur, will you accompany us?"

I bowed, but remained where I was. Accompanied by the thin, stooped figure of her sister-in-law, Madame Bertrand walked quickly down the passageway which divides the ticket room of the Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont station from the tiny café. I confess that when the two ladies reached the mid-point of the longitudinal axis of the passageway, I involuntarily closed my eyes, and when I opened them, the passage was empty.

What moved me then I do not know, but I found myself quickly traversing the passageway, seeing in my mind's eye Madame Bertrand boarding the Lyons train with her sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance. One could certainly hear the train; the sound of its engine filled the whole station. I believe I told myself that I wished to exchange one last polite word. I reached the other side of the station—

And there was no Lyons train there.

There were no ladies on the platform.

There is, indeed, no two-fifty-one train to Lyons whatsoever, not on the schedule of any line!

Imagine my sensations, my dear friend, upon learning that Madame Bertrand's story was true, all of it! It is true, all too true, all of it is true, and my Amélie is gone forever!

"My" Amélie I call her; yet she still belongs (in law) to Aloysius Bertrand, who will, no doubt, after the necessary statutory period of waiting is over, marry again, and thus become a respectable and unwitting bigamist.

That animal could never have understood her!

Even now (if I may be permitted that phrase) Amélie Bertrand may be drifting down one of the great Venetian rivers on a gondola, listening to the music of the *karakh*; even now she may perform acts of heroism on Airstrip One or chat with her mathematical friend on a balcony that overlooks the airy towers and flower-filled plazas of the Selenic capital. I have no doubt that if you were to attempt to find the places Madame Bertrand mentioned by looking in the Encyclopedia or a similar work of reference, you would not succeed. As she herself mentioned, they are "not quite real." There are strange discrepancies.

Alas, my friend, condole with me; by now all such concern is academic, for the train station at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont is gone, replaced by a vast erection swarming with workmen, a giant *hangar* (I learned the name from one of them), or edifice for the housing of aeroplanes. I am told that large numbers of these machines will soon fly from *hangar* to *hangar* across the country.

But think: these aeroplanes, will they not in time be used for ordinary business travel, for scheduled visits to resorts and other places? In short, are they not even now the railways of the

new age? Is it not possible that the same condition, whether of infinite connectivity or of hauntedness, may again obtain, perhaps in the same place where the journeys of my vanished angel have established a precedent or predisposition?

My friend, collude with me. The *hangar* at Beaulieu will soon be finished, or so I read in the newspapers. I shall go down into the country and establish myself near this *hangar*; I shall purchase a ticket for a ride in one of the new machines, and then we shall see. Perhaps I will enjoy only a pleasant ascension into the air and a similar descent. Perhaps I will instead feel that *frisson* of the neck and shoulder blades of which Madame Bertrand spoke; well, no matter: my children are grown, my wife has a generous income, the *frisson* will not dismay me. I shall walk down the corridor or passageway in or around the *hangar* at precisely nine minutes before three and into the space between the worlds; I shall again feel the strange retardation of time, I shall feel the heaviness of the body, I shall see the haziness at the other end of the tunnel, and then through the lashing wind, through the mistiness which envelops me, with the rushing and roaring of an invisible aeroplane in my ears, I shall proceed. Madame Bertrand was kind enough to delay her own holiday to conduct me back from Uganda; she was generous enough to offer to share the traversal of the passage with me a second time. Surely such kindness and generosity must have its effect! This third time I will proceed. Away from my profession, my daily newspaper, my chess games, my *digestif*—in short, away from all those habits which, it is understood, are given us to take the place of happiness. Away from the petty annoyances of life I shall proceed, away from a dull old age, away from the confusions and terrors of a Europe grown increasingly turbulent, to—

—What?

The above copy of a letter was found in a volume of the Encyclopedia (U-Z) in the Bibliothèque National. It is believed from the evidence that the writer disappeared at a certain provincial town (called "Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont" in the manuscript) shortly after purchasing a ticket for a flight in an aeroplane at the flying field there, a pastime popular among holiday makers.

He has never been seen again.