

## A New Anticipation of *Titanic*

*John Wilson Foster*

I have long since ceased to be startled by the extraordinary *Titanic* phenomenon. The great ship has not only cast a long shadow in the decades since she sank, but as we know, she cast a *foreshadow* too. No doubt all the anticipations of the ship and what befell it can be explained, but even so, it is the *number* of anticipations, of coincidences, of premonitions, that impresses—the sheer critical mass. So I was surprised but not startled by coming across a short story set on board *Titanic*—in 1908! This was four years before the tragedy, three years before the launch, two years before the keel was laid.

Anticipations in literature of the ship and/or the tragedy are various. An early one was the poem “A Tryst,” written by the American poet Celia Thaxter and published in the 1870s. It recounts the fateful and fatal conjunction of an iceberg sailing from the North and a “stately ship” in the Atlantic. In 1886 W.T. Stead, the campaigning English journalist, published a story, “The Sinking of a Modern Liner,” in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. In it a liner leaves Liverpool and picks up passengers and mailbags in Queenstown and heads across the Atlantic. The liner is in a collision five days out in its journey to New York and when it becomes clear that there are insufficient lifeboats, there is panic and the captain is forced to brandish a revolver to keep men in steerage from storming what boats there are (some of which leave without their full complement of passengers).

In 1892 Stead published “A Dramatic Incident” in the Christmas number of the *Review of Reviews*. English tourists travel to the New World on the White Star liner *Majestic*, captained by Captain E.J. Smith, with whom Stead had travelled in real life. The liner follows another ship that collides with an iceberg in mid-Atlantic, and seven passengers manage to clamber on board an icefloe. The shipwreck had been foretold by a passenger on board *Majestic* who ‘sees’ it happening beforehand. Smith is unconvinced when the seer ‘sees’ the fate of the survivors, so a hypnotised passenger ‘precedes’ the *Majestic* and commentates on what she ‘sees’. An ice-warning sounds on *Majestic*, the ice-fog lifts, Captain Smith sees the last man alive on the floe and saves him. The story justifies extra-sensory perception, in which Stead was a campaigning believer.

Some of the anticipations are just commonsense applied to the precautions taken or not taken when large liners head across dangerous waters with people on board. But in “A Dramatic Incident,” Stead thought that tragedies such as the *Titanic*’s could be foreseen in vision. How ironic that he did not foresee the tragedy in which he lost his life. Indeed, Stead’s spirit contact, ‘Julia,’ sent a message of good wishes on April 3<sup>rd</sup> for his voyage on *Titanic*. Stead’s knowledge was not foreknowledge but hindsight, for he allegedly communicated the story of his death on *Titanic* to several clairvoyants.

In May 1912 a story called “The White Ghost of Disaster” was published in *Popular Magazine*. By Mayn Clew Garnett, it had been written and had gone to press when disaster struck *Titanic*. The story was brought to the attention of readers by an intrigued reporter on the *San Francisco Examiner* on April 16<sup>th</sup>. In the first half of the story, a liner 800’ feet long (*Titanic* was 882’) tears through a smooth sea at 22 knots (*Titanic*’s speed) despite the conviction of the second officer (Mr Smith!) that there is ice amidst the fog. The lookout sees an iceberg too late, the liner plunges headlong into it and there is panic among the thousand passengers as the officers and crew try to maintain discipline. The captain returns to the chart-room while the ship sinks, retrieves his revolver and shoots himself.

The most famous anticipation was revealed by Walter Lord in *A Night to Remember* (1955): Morgan

Robertson's *Futility* (1898). The specifications of Robertson's *Titan* are alarmingly similar to those of *Titanic* and so are her speed across the Atlantic, her collision with an iceberg in April, the insufficiency of lifeboats. Robertson even used the notorious phrase "practically unsinkable." Robertson's novella severely tests one's explanation of mere coincidence.

I discuss these foresights in my book, *The Age of Titanic: Cross-Currents in Anglo-American Culture* (Merlin, 2002). But only in the past few weeks did I by accident come across a short story called "The Ship's Run." The story appears in a collection by M. McDonnell Bodkin. Bodkin invented the detective Paul Beck who first appeared in *Paul Beck, the Rule of Thumb Detective* (1898). "The Ship's Run" is in a follow-up collection, *The Quests of Paul Beck* (1908). The story opens on the deck of "the great ship *Titanic* as she slid in the grey dusk, a softly-moving island, in and out through the multitudinous shipping of New York harbour" on her way to Queenstown. *Titanic* of the "Blue Star" line is "the largest and fastest passenger boat afloat," of 23,000 tons (exactly half the tonnage of the real *Titanic*) and travels at 20mph (23 knots, just about the real *Titanic*'s speed).

The story involves card-sharps who rig the betting on the daily lottery on the ship's run, which I believe was indeed one form of gambling aboard the transatlantic liners. However, I did not know that the gamblers pre-dated *Olympic*, for a reporter on the *San Francisco Examiner* revealed, in a news item unconnected with *Titanic*, the presence of card-sharps on board that ship in a piece on April 10<sup>th</sup>, before *Titanic* collided with the iceberg. These "boatmen" had won \$15,000 on one voyage from wealthy smoking-room habitués. Either the presence of gamblers on board liners or this particular example of high-stakes gambling was the news in this item. If the former, then Bodkin imagined an activity on *Titanic* and other liners that came to pass. Perhaps readers of *CQD* can enlighten me on this. In any case, Walter Lord in *The Night Lives on* (1986) revealed the presence of three gamblers on board *Titanic* using aliases, and possibly a fourth, the notorious Jay Yates. In "The Ship's Run," it is the detective who uses an alias: Paul Beck.

Beck has been placed on board in disguise by the Blue Star line because "there had been too much professional gambling on their ships of late." In this case, passengers bid beforehand on figures representing the predicted distance the ship is likely to travel that day (between 485 and 520 miles). On the last day, after days of great distances, one gambler bets on the "low field," then an accomplice sabotages the ship to stop her and reduce the mileage. The swindlers are foiled by Beck. A naive young Irish landlord returning to Ireland stood to lose \$15,000.

Bodkin was a man of the archipelago. He was a deputy editor of *United Ireland*, a King's Counsel, a Nationalist M.P., an historical novelist, an Irish County Court judge and a detective writer. He was a strenuous Home Ruler but thought the English parliament the greatest club in the world, hero-worshipped Gladstone, and set all his detective stories in England. He recounts in his entertaining *Recollections of an Irish Judge* (1914) his voyage across the Atlantic to the St Louis Exposition of 1904, and this was presumably the source of "The Ship's Run."

But where did his ship's name come from? According to Eaton and Haas and McCluskie, the building of three great ships for the White Star Line was born as an idea at a London residence in the summer of 1907. How soon after that were the names of the proposed ships settled, and publicised? When might Bodkin have got wind of the name *Titanic*? But why name an imaginary ship of 23,000 tons *Titanic* when a real one of that name of 46,000 tons had been announced? (Was his story published in a magazine before it appeared in book form? In which case it is earlier than 1908.) Did Bodkin read the name *Titanic* in a newspaper or did he dream it up? Perhaps readers of *CQD* can throw light on this. The ship's run is not finished yet.