

# 1

## **THE CUNARD FLYER *MAURETANIA* CROSSING THE BAR**

**“HEAR THAT?”**

“Hear what?” asked Archie.

“Fast motorboat.”

“You have ears like a bat, Isaac. All I hear is the ship.”

Isaac Bell, a tall, lean man of thirty with a golden head of hair and a thick, impeccably groomed mustache, strode to the boat deck railing and stared intently into the dark. He wore the costume of a sober Hartford, Connecticut, insurance executive: a sailing day suit of Harris tweed, a low-crowned hat with a broad brim, made-to-order boots, and a gold watch chain draped across his narrow waist.

“It’s not the ship.”

They were sailing home to America on the Cunard flyer

*Mauretania*, the fastest liner in the world, bound for New York with twenty-two hundred passengers, eight hundred crew, and six thousand sacks of mail. Down in the fiery darkness of her stokehold, hundreds of men labored, stripped to the waist, shoveling coal to raise steam for a four-and-a-half-day dash across the Atlantic Ocean. But she was still creeping quietly in the channel, crossing the Mersey Bar with mere inches of tide beneath her keel and a black night ahead. Six decks above her furnaces and five hundred feet ahead of the nearest propeller, Isaac Bell heard only the motorboat.

The sound was out of place. It was the crisp rumble of a thirty-knot racer powered by V-8 gasoline engines—an English-built Wolseley-Siddeley, Bell guessed. But such exuberant noise spoke of a Côte d’Azur regatta on a sunny day, not a pitch-dark night in the steamer lanes.

He looked back. No boat showed a light. All he saw was the dying glow of Liverpool, the last of England, eleven miles astern.

Next to the ship, nothing moved in the invisible intersection of inky water and clouded sky.

Ahead, the sea buoy flashed intermittently.

The sound faded. A trick of the wind gusting in from the Irish Sea perhaps, rattling the canvas that covered the lifeboats suspended outside the teak rail.

Archie opened a gold cigar case with a ceremonial flourish. He extracted two La Aroma de Cubas. “How about a victory smoke?” He patted his vest pockets. “Forgot my cutter. Got your knife?”

Bell drew a throwing knife from his boot in a flicker of mo-

tion quicker than the eye and cut the Havanas' heads as cleanly as a guillotine.

Archie—redheaded Archibald Angell Abbott IV, a socially prominent New Yorker—looked like a well-off man-about-town, a gilt-edged disguise he adopted when he traveled with his young wife, Lillian, the daughter of America's boldest railroad tycoon. Only the ship's captain and chief purser knew that Archie was a private detective with the Van Dorn Agency and that Isaac Bell was Van Dorn's chief investigator.

They lighted up, sheltering from the wind in the lee of a web support, to celebrate capturing a Wall Street stock swindler whose depredations had shut mills and thrown thousands out of work. The swindler had fled to a luxurious European exile on the mistaken assumption that the Van Dorn detectives' motto—"We Never Give Up! Never!"—lost its teeth at the water's edge. Bell and Abbott had run him to ground in a Nice casino. Locked in the *Mauretania's* forward baggage room in a lion cage rented from a circus—the liner's brig already occupied—he was headed for trial in Manhattan, guarded by a Van Dorn Protective Services operative.

Bell and Abbott, who had been best friends since fighting a legendary intercollegiate boxing match—Bell for Yale, Archie for Princeton—circled the boat deck alone. The hour was late, and the cold wind and fog had driven the *Mauretania's* First, Second, and Third Class passengers to their respective staterooms, cabins, and galvanized-iron berths.

"We were discussing," Archie said, only half in jest, "your not-so-impending marriage to Miss Marion Morgan."

"We are married in our hearts."

Isaac Bell's fiancée was in the moving picture line. She had caught the last boat train from London after photographing King Edward VII's funeral procession for Picture World News Reels. Cine-negatives from the taking machines she had stationed along the route had been immediately developed, washed, dried, and printed. Tonight—only nine hours after old “King Teddy” had been buried—five hundred and twenty feet of “topical film” was showing in the Piccadilly theaters, and the hardworking director was enjoying a hot bath in her First Class room along the *Mauretania's* promenade deck.

“No one doubts the ardor of your courtship,” Archie said with a wink so suggestive it would have earned any other man a fist in the eye. “And who but the blind could fail to notice the colossal emerald on her finger that signifies your engagement? Yet friends observe that it's been a while since you announced . . . cold feet?”

“Not mine,” said Bell. “Nor Marion's,” he added hastily. “We're both so busy we haven't time to nail down a date.”

“Now's your chance. Four and a half days on the high seas. She can't escape.” Archie gestured with his cigar up at the *Mauretania's* darkened bridge and asked casually, as if he and his wife had not conjured up this conversation the day they booked passage, “What do you say we ask the captain to marry you?”

“Miles ahead of you, Archie.”

“What do you mean?”

A big grin lighted Bell's face with a row of strong, even teeth that practically flashed in the dark. “I've already spoken with Captain Turner.”

“*We're on!*” Archie grabbed Bell's hand and shook it vigor-

ously. "I'm best man. Lillian's matron of honor. And we've got a boatload of wedding guests. I snuck a look at the manifest. *Mauretania* is carrying half the 'Four Hundred' and a fair slice of *Burke's Peerage*."

Bell's grin set in a determined smile. "Now all I have to do is corral Marion."

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**ARCHIE, WHO WAS RECUPERATING** from a gunshot wound, announced abruptly that he was going to bed. Bell could feel him trembling as he helped him through a heavy door that led into a companionway.

"I'll walk down with you."

"Waste of good tobacco," said Archie, holding tight to the banister. "Finish your cigar. I'll make it under my own steam."

Bell listened until Archie had safely descended. Then he stepped back out on deck, where he lingered, his ears cocked to the dark sea.

He leaned over the rail. Sixty feet below, the water swirled in the lights of the pilot boat lumbering close, belching smoke and steam. The helmsman pressed his bow skillfully to the moving black cliff of the *Mauretania's* riveted hull. The pilot who had guided the mammoth steamer out of the river and over the sandbar descended a rope-and-wood Jacob's ladder. It was neatly done, and in another minute the two vessels disengaged, the smaller extinguishing her deck lights and disappearing astern, the larger gaining speed.

Bell was still peering speculatively into the night when he

heard the crisp V-8 rumble again. This time it sounded nearer. A quarter mile or less, he estimated, and approaching rapidly. The motorboat closed within a hundred yards. Bell still could not see it, but he could hear it running alongside, pacing the steamship, no small job in the steepening seas. He thought it odd, if not plain dangerous, that the vessel showed no lights. Suddenly it did—not running lights but a shielded Aldis signal lamp flashing code.