

Tickets

by Roy Wnek



I found myself in Bremen on the last morning of my continental tour. The ticket office of the North German Lloyd Shipping Company was utter bedlam. The night train from Vienna had earlier disgorged a mass of travelers; I was one of them. From their determined faces and herded children, I presumed the vast majority wanted to go where they were headed. I didn't.

It was the spring of 1912 and I found the continent a fascinatingly frightening place. Everyone seemed to want something and most seemed willing to do anything to get it—although it must be said, largely at the expense of their neighbors. And the rest simply wanted to leave; America was their destination of choice. While I found the majority interesting, I admired the remainder.

I would stay on another season, trying new adventures, revisiting old haunts, or whatever. Anything but the inevitable return to London appealed to me. My uncle, and benefactor, Sir Richard Kent, had indulged my Bohemian travels so far. No doubt he felt that any experience could be good for trade. Although not nearly as good as the right social connections he had vehemently urged and I had steadfastly ignored. But now Sir Richard beckoned and my beleaguered funds would have me comply.

I had a few hours to pass until I was to meet a certain Mr. Greene, a grim-faced henchman of my Uncle's firm who I remembered from London years ago. He apparently had papers from Sir Richard to deliver to me, undoubt-

edly private letters of reprimand and precise instructions on the conduct of my life. I wanted to run back to that Vienna train.

I used the possibility that Greene might be carrying tickets purchased by my uncle as excuse for not booking my own passage. While waiting, a cup of warm mulled wine and some discrete crowd-watching seemed perfectly in order. I enjoyed the wine and the crowd. I would forget my uncle for the moment.

Shortly, my interest was taken up by a young, slight woman in animated disagreement with a caged ticketing agent. The woman shot periodic glances back to a pile of quite plain baggage upon which two young girls sat. The heads of the two girls seemed to dart everywhere as if to gather in every possible detail of their surroundings. I watched for a short while.

When the slim woman returned to her bags and girls, she appeared quite upset. She stared at a clutch of documents, which I surmised to be tickets and other travel documents. She shuffled the papers with wishful hands and desperate eyes.

Several motivations drove my approach to the woman, curiosity, boredom, and perhaps gallant altruism stood in the conscious column of the ledger. Avoidance of my uncle and his impending henchman hid behind the sub-conscious column.

A “Good Day” in my less-than-crisp High German and tip of my hat were returned with suspicious eyes. Venturing further, I asked “Madam, may I assist you with your tickets.”

The woman must have mistaken me for a shipping company official. A torrent of rapid questions and complaints ensued, overwhelmed my ability to decipher the woman's broken, dialectal German. Easing her rush with patient gestures, I estimated a Slavic tongue in the woman. I ventured a few words of very bad Polish, I had acquired during a well-misspent week in Warsaw last fall. In return, the woman reciprocated with comparably poor English that I gathered she acquired from her husband in America.

So in our Troika of languages, we communicated well enough.

"I go to America with children," the woman explained while presenting her two, eager-faced girls, "to be with husband."

"I understand. Do you have tickets?" My question returned a hesitant nod from a worried face.

"Is there a problem with your tickets? Maybe I can help," I asked without much thought as what I could possibly do other than speak with the ticketing agent myself. I assumed that might well be enough to solve any ordinary issue.

"This is not problem with tickets," the woman said as hopelessness moistened her eyes. "Tickets are not good for us. I want different tickets."

"I think I understand," I said with some hesitance, "Madam, would you be so kind as to show me your tickets?"

Without releasing a two-handed grip in on the tickets, the woman held them up to me for my inspection. I read

and nodded at each as she shuffled them. “Bremerhaven to Southampton; Southampton to New York... Wait a moment... You have bookings on the Titanic?!”

“Yes, yes, Titanic. It special boat,” she insisted and I heartily agreed.

“How on earth did you get these? My god, these must be scare as hens’ teeth by now,” my exclamation was met by a puzzled stare. I realized her lack of idiomatic understanding and so nodded a reassuring, “You are a very lucky woman; a lucky woman, yes?”

The woman shot back an immediate disagreement, “Tickets are no luck for us. Husband buy for us. I do not like these tickets. ”

“Why?” I asked in honest bewilderment.

The woman’s determined eyes spoke greater volumes than her words, “Tickets cost too much, we must take two boats, and we make other stops. I want to go straight to America and be with husband sooner. If I can buy cheaper tickets, we have extra money. But they not let me.” She shot a scornful glance at the ticketing agents.

“I understand now, you are having trouble with the ticketing agent,” I said to her cautious agreement. “Well, come with me and let’s see what we can do about it. Yes?”

My light prompt and her stern warning to the girls had the slight woman accompanying me to the ticketing agents. We encountered a queue. My mind contemplated a winning approach to persuade a determined German bureaucrat if a straight-forward request were to be refused. I estimated my uncle’s name would likely be of no conse-

quence. Perhaps when Mr. Greene arrived, he would have ways. Then again, Greene was a man neither to grant personal favors nor to attend the plight of a complete stranger.

I stewed in the dark shadow of my uncle, my beckoned return, and the impending unpleasant Mr. Greene. Impulse broke upon me. From my wallet, I rushed a count of my remaining resources. I turned to the woman.

“How much... how much did the tickets cost?” I asked in such excitement over my scheme that I repeated myself in each of mutual languages. The woman kept a seriously bewildered expression even as she checked the tickets and other papers. The older of the girls was called into the inquiry and her fingers nimbly tabulated quantities and conversions. The resulting cost seemed correct from what I knew of the latest passage tables. Also it would easily afford the woman and her girls passage on any less-prestigious ship with a significant remainder. Best of all, my remaining wallet could absorb the blow and I would be on my way to New York instead of London.

“May I buy your tickets, Madam?” I made the offer with a ready display of Reichsbank notes.

The woman looked at me, my money, and pulled me from the queue. I was dragged in front of the large shipping board, detailing all sailings by ship and date. She seemed to find a direct sailing to Boston that she liked and a bespectacled man at the Information desk confirmed availability and fares to her satisfaction.

Our exchange brought on the exuberant woman’s grateful bows, enthused hand shaking, and a rush of appreciative words in all the languages she could muster.

Wishing to usher her demonstration to a conclusion, I said “You are most welcome, but it is I that must thank you for—never mind, just thank you. Now, please, you must purchase your new tickets now, while they are still available. And I must be off to meet someone with a bit of unwelcome news. So, I will wish you a safe journey and a happy life in America.” I walked towards my uncle’s representative with an uplifted spirit and the woman’s accolades in my ears.

My uncle and I would both later characterize my meeting with Mr. Greene as coldly business-like. He would mean it a compliment; I would not.

Greene stood waiting at the front desk of the shipping office lounge. He extended me a flat “Sir Richards trusts your health,” along with a large envelope.

“Hello to you too,” I said somewhat put-off. Turning the envelope and waving off Greene’s offered receipt pad and pen, I asked “What is this?”

‘Your commission in the Royal Fusiliers.’

“My what? You mean I am in the army?” I had always suspected that my uncle had such a scheme in mind and procuring a commission would be well within his means.

“Yes but it is not an active posting. Sir Richard will address that upon your return.”

I shoved the envelope under my arm and told Greene, “Please inform my uncle that my return may not be for some time, seeing as I have just arranged passage to New York.”

“I see,” Greene nodded in reply, replaced his hat, and left the lounge in one seamless motion.

Greene never sat during his 29 measured words or showed the slightest hint of humanity. But I simply could care less because I had a ship to board.

I’ve always assumed the slight woman and her girls made it safely to America. At Southampton, my uncle—his name anyway— allowed me to trade the trio of steerage tickets for an upper class berth.

And yes, I did, in fact, survive the sinking of the RMS Titanic. Manhandled by a burly crewmember into a half-empty lifeboat, I was supposed to be demonstrating the boat’s safety to a mass of terrified ladies. Nevertheless, an impatient boat crew lowered me away with only a mere handful of the convinced. I spent the next two years in America, enjoying a brief, overly-polite visit to my cousin in Connecticut and enduring an extended, overly-indulgent drunken stay with my second cousin in New York.

I did return to London two years later, on borrowed funds and inaccurate news of my uncle’s failing health. No passage on a prison ship or slaver could have lowered my mood. The rounds of ultimatums and refusals that ensued between my uncle and me mirrored events all over Europe that late spring and summer. The war that would break out and my taking up the King’s commission almost seemed a relief to the inventible.

I understand this disaster would come to be called the Great War. For me, there was neither any greatness nor duration to speak of. I had been in France for less than a week. My company rested along a trail one afternoon.

There were reports of a victorious cavalry engagement ahead of our advancing forces earlier in the day.

Still, we had been listening to prolonged and quite disturbing sounds to our far front. As it unfolded, our initial order to patrol the area and investigate their source quickly changed. The “victory” of which we were told, had actually been a total failure. Further, too few of the cavalymen survived to do the grisly work of putting hundreds of maimed, crazed, and dying mounts out of their misery. It would be left to us.

My war ended after a short walk that warm evening as we topped a crest and first saw—. The same machine gun that had done its gristly work earlier also caught me and the rest of my company.

I know that I once had a name; it was even inscribed on one of a field of white headstones. But that field has been churned over many times during that war and the next. I no longer have use of a name.

