

AMERICAN MYSTERY CLASSICS

OBELISTS AT SEA

C. DALY KING



AMERICAN MYSTERY CLASSICS

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We encourage readers to consider the work critically and in its historical and social context.

**OBELISTS
AT SEA**

**C. DALY
KING**

Introduction by
**MARTIN
EDWARDS**

**AMERICAN
MYSTERY
CLASSICS**



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INTRODUCTION

OBELISTS AT SEA is a striking example of American Golden Age detective fiction at its most convoluted and self-confident. This novel launched the brief and remarkable career of Charles Daly King, whose contributions to the crime genre were as outlandish as they were intriguing. The book has an odd literary history which somehow typifies the unorthodox nature of King's writing.

King's stories exert a special appeal for connoisseurs of the curious, partly because the scarcity of his books has made them highly collectable, but also because at his best he was admirably ingenious and inventive. No author skilled enough to win the praise of such discerning novelists as E.C. Bentley, Dorothy L. Sayers, Anthony Boucher, Julian Symons, and (perhaps more surprisingly) Storm Jameson can sensibly be dismissed as a mere eccentric. King's fiction has a distinctive and sometimes pungent flavor and anyone who enjoys an intricately plotted whodunit may well develop a taste for it. Until the appearance of this edition, however, copies of his debut novel have been vanishingly scarce.

King summarizes the key distinguishing feature of the story in a prefatory note: "four psychologists, representing different schools within their science, apply their particular theories to-

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ward the solution of the mystery." The four men are passengers on the *S.S. Meganaut*, one of the most luxurious of the North Atlantic liners, and are travelling from New York, their ultimate destination a convention in London.

Victor Timothy Smith, a millionaire accompanied by his glamorous mistress, is killed after the lights suddenly go out in the *Meganaut's* crowded smoking-room. When emergency lighting illuminates the scene, a still smoking revolver falls from the hand of a shady lawyer called de Brasto. Not surprisingly, the lawyer is seized, but it soon becomes evident that the case against him is far from watertight.

As complication piles on complication, Captain Horace Mansfield decides that he cannot simply rely on the ship's detectives to solve such an unconventional puzzle. Desperate for enlightenment and having recently read "a tale of mystery in which a noted psychologist had successfully baffled the more ordinary agents of justice and had produced, at the conclusion, a brilliant train of reasoning through which the villain had been seized," he consults the psychologists.

As in so many Golden Age whodunits, the main characters are listed at the beginning of the book. The four amateur sleuths in the ship's company are: Dr Frank B. Hayvier, "a popular psychologist"; Dr Malcolm Plechs, "a fashionable psychologist"; Dr Love Rees Pons, "an earnest psychologist"; and Prof. Knott Coe Mittle, "a cautious psychologist." The jokey names reflect the men's specialisms and King's lack of interest in the realistic characterization of his puppets. They also illustrate his satiric approach to crime writing, as do the headings of the sections into which the book is divided. They include "Behaviour," "Conditioning," "Inferiorities," and "Dominance"—only for the final section to be headed: "The Criminal: Trial and Error."

There is fun to be had in the way each of the four men, in turn, approaches the task of explaining the apparently inexplicable, although some of the humor and theorizing is dated, while King's enthusiasm for psychology causes him to linger over the detail. The most appealing member of the quartet is Pons, whose interests reflects those of his creator. In one scene he seeks to elicit the truth from de Brasto through a technological gizmo called the "Marston-Troland voice-key" and by applying a "free association" test he reaches a "diagnosis of an unstable type with a serious organic inferiority, centering around the digestive system."

Each psychologist arrives at a distinct interpretation of events, but I hope it is not an unforgivable spoiler to reveal that they are all "at sea" in more than one sense. None of them comes too close to identifying the true culprit or the motive for the crime. King was playing a game with the detective form in a way that calls to mind Anthony Berkeley's legendary whodunit *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, first published in 1929. Berkeley—like E.C. Bentley in *Trent's Last Case* sixteen years earlier—aimed to satirize the notion of the omniscient detective by demonstrating that a particular set of facts might have a range of different interpretations. In his novel, the six members of the Crimes Circle come up with half a dozen contrasting explanations for a baffling murder. Berkeley's writing was highly influential and "multiple solutions" to cerebral whodunits soon came into vogue. A gifted exponent of this type of mystification was Ellery Queen, and an especially notable example is his *The Greek Coffin Mystery*.

Queen's novel appeared in 1932, the same year that saw publication of the first edition of *Obelisks at Sea*—in Britain. Surprisingly, the book was not published in the US until the fol-

lowing year; what is even stranger is that there were significant differences between the two editions.

The UK edition was published by John Heritage, a small firm whose list in the early 1930s also included early detective novels by the British author Cecil M. Wills. This edition also included a definition of “Obelist.” Since I have never found a dictionary which includes that word, I assume that King made it up; he doesn’t explain it in the text of the story. According to a note at the front of the John Heritage edition: “An Obelist is a person who has little or no value” However, when inscribing a copy to a friend, King amended this wording to read: “An Obelist is one who harbours suspicion.” For good measure he added a further comment: “It’s not my fault that the English don’t know their own language.” What explains this mysterious contradiction? Did King change his mind about what he meant, or did the UK publishers simply invent their own definition? We will probably never solve this bibliographic puzzle.

British reviewers were kind to the book. E.C. Bentley described it as “a most unusual and commendable story,” and there were also rave reviews in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Sunday Times*, *The New Statesman*, and *The Spectator*. It is unclear whether this enthusiastic reaction prompted Alfred A. Knopf to acquire the right to publish the novel in the United States, or whether he had already done so and John Heritage were simply quicker off the mark in bringing it to print.

What is undeniable is that there were several differences in the American edition. The prefatory note and the cast of characters, absent in the British version, were included. There were also some minor changes of character names: the British version featured John B. Hayvier, Rudolf Plechs, and Prof. Knott Mit-

tle, suggesting that King made emendations of his own to the text. The American edition also included King's preferred definition of an "Obelist."

On the dust jacket blurb, Knopf proclaimed that the book "has everything the hardened detective story fan seeks—a good murder, a novel setting, an exciting running down of legitimate clues, an author who plays fair with the reader, and a fair and completely satisfying solution."

This emphasis on fair play is reflected in the inclusion of an especially significant ingredient that was missing from the John Heritage edition—"The Clue Finder" at the end of the book. This is accompanied by the instruction "Do not open until you have finished the story." King, who seldom resisted the temptation to hammer a point home, adds: "Personable readers, even though they cheat at solitaire, never cheat at this." There follows a list of no fewer than thirty-six page references to hints within the text on such matters as "the opportunity to commit the crime" and the killer's "attempt to implicate the innocent."

King wasn't the first detective novelist to offer readers a clue finder. The earliest example that I have traced is to be found in J.J. Connington's *The Eye in the Museum*, published in 1929. The clue finder was no mere gimmick; its value as a means of demonstrating the author's commitment to fair play," while teasing the reader at the same time, was quickly recognized. The concept was borrowed—in varying forms - by writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Freeman Wills Crofts, Elspeth Huxley, Rupert Penny, John Dickson Carr, and Anthony Boucher. The last example in the twentieth century that I know of featured on the dustjacket of Kingsley Amis's *The Riverside Villas Murder* in 1973, which offers a paltry three clues. Almost half a century

on, I revived the clue finder myself in *Mortmain Hall* and *Blackstone Fell*, but there is no doubt that King is the supreme exponent of this particular device.

The British and American first editions of the book both included five diagrams—plans of different parts of the *Meganaut*—but the prefatory note, cast of characters, and clue finder were again absent from the Penguin paperback edition of 1938. This was presumably because the text was based on the John Heritage edition; as a result the “erroneous” definition of an “Obelist” was retained, no doubt to the author’s chagrin.

Charles Daly King (1895–1963) was born in New York City and graduated from Yale before serving as a lieutenant in the field artillery during the First World War. After working in textiles and in advertising, he turned to psychology and received his M.A. from Columbia University in 1928. He produced several books about psychology, including *Integrative Psychology*, co-written with his mentor William Moulton Marston and Marston’s wife Elizabeth. Marston was a pioneer of the systolic blood pressure test, which became an element in the polygraph or “lie detector,” while his wife was said to be the inspiration for his famous comic book creation “Wonder Woman.”

King dedicated his second novel, *Obelists En Route* (1934), to Marston. In the UK, it appeared under the prestigious imprint of Collins Crime Club, as did his next five books. Surprisingly, however, the novel failed to find an American publisher, although *Obelists Fly High* (1935), an outrageously ingenious story, was published by Smith in the US. *Obelists Fly High* became his most famous novel, mainly thanks to the praise accorded to it decades later by Julian Symons in *Bloody Murder* aka *Mortal Consequences*.

As a detective novelist, King was plainly influenced by

the success of S.S. Van Dine and Ellery Queen. Like Berkeley he was an innovator with a sharp sense of humor and mischief but my impression is that his novels were not rigorously edited. Sometimes he tested his readers' patience; those weird character names start to grate after a while. *Obelists En Route* is weighed down not only by seven diagrams and a clue finder but also by copious footnotes and a long and irrelevant conversation about economics between his series characters, Pons and the New York cop Michael Lord, that takes self-indulgence to an extreme.

King was promoted by Collins as an author of "the intelligent man's thrillers," while the writer and occasional detective novelist C.E. Bechhofer Roberts described him as "the Aldous Huxley of the detective story." Sayers—often an acerbic reviewer—was complimentary, calling him "the highbrow of highbrows." In addition to six novels, he was the author of the short story collection *The Curious Mr Tarrant* (1935). The 'episodes' in the book feature the enigmatic Trevis Tarrant, a specialist in impossible crimes. This is said to be the rarest and most sought-after of all the two-thousand-plus Collins Crime Club titles. In the US, it remained unpublished until a paperback edition appeared in 1977.

The domestic neglect that King suffered reflected declining enthusiasm among American publishers for cerebral whodunits at a time when hardboiled detective novelists such as Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain were rising to prominence. Like Berkeley, King seems to have lost his zest for the detective game. Although psychology became, in a variety of ways, central to post-war crime fiction, King proved unable to adapt to changing fashions in the genre.

Careless Corpse (1937), a novel whose structure resembles mu-

sical movements, did not appear in the US, and for the American edition of his penultimate title, *Arrogant Alibi* (1938), King moved yet again, to the publishing house of Appleton. He published no more novels after the underwhelming *Bermuda Burial*, a Crime Club title of 1940. In the US, *Bermuda Burial* appeared under the imprint of yet another American firm, Funk; in other words, astonishingly, he had a different publisher for each of the four novels that came out in the US while he was alive.

Frederic Dannay encouraged him to write two more Tarrant stories for *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; a third was published in *EQMM* after being found among King's papers after his death, while another appeared elsewhere as by Jeremiah Phelan (the name of Tarrant's narrator). These uncollected mysteries, along with those in the original collection, were ultimately gathered in *The Complete Curious Mr Tarrant*, published in 2003.

In 1946, Dannay tantalizingly mentioned the existence of an unpublished novel featuring Trevis Tarrant, with the characteristically quirky title of *The Episode of the Demoiselle d'Ys*. Since then, nothing further has been heard of it and I don't know of anyone who has read the manuscript. Nevertheless, I dare to hope that it still exists and that the book may eventually see the light of day.

In the meantime, it's a genuine pleasure to welcome back to print the first mystery of one of America's most extraordinary detective novelists. Enjoy your trip aboard the *Meganaut*—and then test your crime-solving prowess with that clue finder...

—MARTIN EDWARDS

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OBELISTS AT SEA

All the events in this story are fictitious.

Note. An Obelist is one who harbours suspicions.

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NOTE

IN THE following story four psychologists, representing different schools within that science, apply their particular theories toward the solution of the mystery. Lest any misconception should arise, I wish to state that the characters of Drs. Hayvier, Plechs and Pons and Professor Mittle are in no way intended as portrayals of any actual and living psychologists. I would beg the reader to consider these characters as, in reality, the embodiments of their own theories, but scarcely as the flesh-and-blood people of real life.

In certain quarters, I suspect, such a tale as the one I have concocted, may be charged with serving a propagandist purpose—namely, that of destructively criticizing the course of modern psychology. Such a purpose I would deny at once . . . propaganda seems both ridiculous and hopeless to

THE AUTHOR

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CONTENTS

PART ONE

ANONYMOUS: BEHAVIOUR	11
----------------------------	----

PART TWO

DR. FRANK B. HAYVIER: CONDITIONING	69
--	----

PART THREE

DR. MALCOLM PLECHS: INFERIORITIES	115
---	-----

PART FOUR

DR. L. REES PONS: DOMINANCE	175
-----------------------------------	-----

PART FIVE

PROFESSOR KNOTT COE MITTLE: MIDDLE GROUNDING	215
---	-----

PART SIX

THE CRIMINAL: TRIAL AND ERROR	267
-------------------------------------	-----

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DIAGRAMS

I	Plan of the Smoking-room, S.S. <i>Meganaut</i>	17
II	Plan of the Promenade Deck, S.S. <i>Meganaut</i>	25
III	Plan of the Boat Deck, S.S. <i>Meganaut</i>	43
IV	Plan of the Ship's Hospital, S.S. <i>Meganaut</i>	119
V	Plan of the Sun Deck, S.S. <i>Meganaut</i>	167

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OF THE SHIP'S COMPANY

OF THE PASSENGERS:

Victor Timothy Smith	<i>A gentleman of some importance</i>
Coralie	<i>Very beautiful indeed</i>
Young husband	<i>He travels for business</i>
John I. Gnosens	<i>He travels for pleasure</i>
de Brasto	<i>Of those suspected</i>
Bering Y. Stander	<i>de Brasto's friend and law partner</i>
Dr. Schall	<i>The doctor in the audience</i>
Dr. Frank B. Hayvier	<i>A popular psychologist</i>
Dr. Malcolm Plechs	<i>A fashionable psychologist</i>
Dr. L. Rees Pons	<i>An earnest psychologist</i>
Prof. Knott Coe Mittle	<i>A cautious psychologist</i>
Stymond	<i>A notorious character</i>
Gunne	<i>An elusive passenger</i>
Mme. Colette Sudeau	<i>An attractive gambler</i>

OF THE OFFICERS:

Captain Horace Mansfield	<i>Commanding the Meganaut</i>
Commander Terence Drake	<i>Executive Officer of the Meganaut</i>
Lieutenant Lane	<i>Police Officer of the Meganaut</i>

OF THE STAFF:

Dr. Pell	<i>Of course there is a ship's doctor, too</i>
V. Holt	<i>Chief Electrician of the Meganaut</i>
Bone	<i>A ship's detective hard at work</i>
Heddes	<i>Another</i>

Sailors of the Emergency Squad, stewards, bartenders, aviators, passengers, etc.

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PART ONE

ANONYMOUS:
BEHAVIOUR



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PART ONE

ANONYMOUS: BEHAVIOUR

ABRUPTLY a lightning flash lit up the sea. Where the watch officer paced slowly up and down there sprang up about him the standards supporting the control mechanisms, the instrument housings, switchboards, all the complicated apparatus by which the great vessel was temporarily under his command. The fore decks and hull, the towering mast and cluttered deck machinery stood clearly etched for an instant against the waves that stretched to port, to starboard and forward, an empty desert of tossing, hurrying rollers.

At once the scene vanished, and the officer closed his eyes for a few seconds to adapt them to the dark. Then he turned again to the blackness ahead. It was black; near at hand an occasional gleam of white declared the crest of a huge wave, beyond that—nothing. Only the officer's accustomed imagination could suggest, through the continually spattered windows, the slight difference between the dark sea and the greater blackness of the *Meganaut's* bow. Even his imagination failed to construct an horizon. Here there was only the constant whistling of the wind, the swish of spray thrown across the bridge a hundred

feet above the sea, the dull glowing of shaded instrument lights, and the slow roll and recovery of the mighty ship, as it yielded to the combined assault of waves and wind.



In the smoking-room the curtains had been drawn across the windows, but the doors to the enclosed promenade deck were open. The room, large as it was, was crowded; all the tables were filled and extra chairs had been brought in to accommodate the surplus. Everywhere was the chaotic noise of people talking, the frequent burst of laughter as some table responded to a witticism or unusual toast. Stewards flitted about deftly, like large cats, bearing trays of drinks, and behind the bar, stretching entirely across the forward side of the apartment, the bar-tender and his assistants were busy pouring and mixing for the replenishment of these trays and the service of the half-dozen passengers perched on the high stools along the bar itself. Near the service end of the bar the ship's doctor in his neat uniform leaned negligently against the tall counter.

Immediately before the bar a small space had been cleared. Here, at his table, the secretary of the ship's pool was rearranging his papers, while beside him his assistant, the chief steward of the smoking-room, pointed out to the evening's auctioneer the next number to be sold and the name of its owner.

For many of the voyagers the ship's pool constituted perhaps the most entertaining feature of their passage; it was this that accounted for the crowded condition of the room. Every evening they gathered, the majority of the ship's passengers, to observe or perchance to participate in the auctioning off of the numbers, one of which would correspond to the count of sea

miles traversed by the boat from noon of the previous day to noon of the next.

There is a peculiar isolation about a sea trip that clings even to the short, swift ferries across the North Atlantic. The land, with its familiar sights, sounds, activities, slips away. These things can still be talked of but no longer experienced; within twenty-four hours they become scarcely more real than one's childhood, as new faces, new voices, totally different activities replace those left behind. There is an interim, a definite hiatus. For a time the traveller is suspended, as if on a foreign planet; never again, perhaps, will he see his fellow passengers, and the bars of convention (such as are left to us) are dropped by common consent. All are companions, for a period, on a holiday from life. Thus it happens, since most of us are gamblers at heart, that even those who scorn to wager at home, find themselves prepared to try their luck at sea. It has frequently been noticed that courage rather than scruple usually determines whether they do so or not.

Although the auctioning of the ship's pool held an attraction for most of the passengers, by no means all of them were in attendance. In the great lounge amidships more than two hundred persons still lingered over their coffee and liqueurs, while a large orchestra played the newest dance music for those who preferred this form of exercise immediately after dinner. In the Ritz restaurant on the highest deck the lights were being lowered as the last party of strikingly clothed women and dress suited men strolled out to take part in the events of the evening.

Already a few couples and larger groups were invading the pink and gold ballroom aft, where the terraced tables and polished floor gleamed brilliantly under the lights and the curtains

had been drawn across the tall windows to the promenade deck and the french doors leading to the Veranda Cafe over the stern. No noise of the tempest without penetrated to these precincts; here the only sounds were those of careless gaiety, of melody and modulated laughter, and the only reminder of the sea was the slight list of the ship before the wind and the occasional slow slanting of the floors to the roll.



Mr. Victor Timothy Smith was a very wealthy man; he was either a copper king or a western railroad magnate, no one seemed to be sure which. At all events he was rich enough to have had a table reserved for him in the smoking-room; yet when he entered with his three companions, he attracted little attention. Making their way slowly into the room, they grouped themselves about the table indicated by a steward who, for the past forty minutes, had been dividing his efforts equally between his proper duties and watching for Mr. Smith.

Just as they were settling down, the auctioneer straightened up from an inspection of his records, and called for the attention of the room. His eye fell upon the new arrivals.

‘Just in time, Mr. Smith,’ he called. ‘Your number is next. Will you open the bidding?’

This request Mr. Smith acknowledged with a short nod. ‘Fifty dollars,’ he responded, and turned back to his companions, apparently dismissing the matter from his mind.

More or less perfunctorily the bidding progressed; not until it had reached the hundred and fifty dollar mark and all of the bidders except one had been eliminated, did the owner seem to take any interest in the sale of his number. Then, however,

he looked up calmly and mentioned, 'One hundred and sixty dollars.'

At once the general interest began to mount. It was appreciated that the auction of this number had settled down to a contest between two of the passengers. Heads were turned in the direction of the two contestants, and the auctioneer, unable to resist the belief that his own efforts were responsible for the rising bids, redoubled his exertions.

'That,' he acknowledged, 'is a bid.' He did not rub his hands together, but no one could have noticed his involuntary smile and thought of anything else. 'One hundred and eighty dollars for number 634; from Mr. de Brasto, I think?'

From the far end of the room the pale, dark-haired, semitic-looking gentleman nodded assent.

'One hundred and ninety.'

The bid came in a low, almost careless voice from Smith's table, the one on de Brasto's left. The passengers, now silently curious, saw a stocky man in correct evening dress, of ruddy complexion, his hair slightly greyed at the temples. It is doubtful, however, if, in the presence of his daughter's astonishingly blonde beauty, anyone especially remarked these distinguishing features.

'One hundred and ninety dollars,' repeated the auctioneer, his smile perceptibly broadening. 'The highest bid this evening, ladies and gentlemen. Now this is better, decidedly better. In my opinion not one of the very best numbers, but these gentlemen seem to like it. Will anyone join the competition? One hundred and ninety dollars for number 634.'

Apparently no one would.

'Two hundred,' snapped de Brasto.

‘Two ten.’

‘Mr. Smith bids two hundred and ten dollars,’ the auctioneer replied. ‘Come, gentlemen, the winner of to-day’s pool bids two hundred and ten dollars. This must really be a very good number. I am changing my opinion and I advise you not to let it slip away.’

‘Two hundred and twenty dollars!’ De Brasto’s voice conveyed a certain vehemence.

‘Three hundred and fifty,’ commented Smith negligently.

‘Three hundred and fifty; three hundred and fifty dollars for number 634. There can be no doubt that this is a very excellent number indeed! An opportunity, gentlemen, an opportunity. Am I offered three hundred and seventy-five? No. Well, three hundred and sixty. If it’s worth three fifty, it’s worth three sixty. Come, three fifty bid, three fifty?’

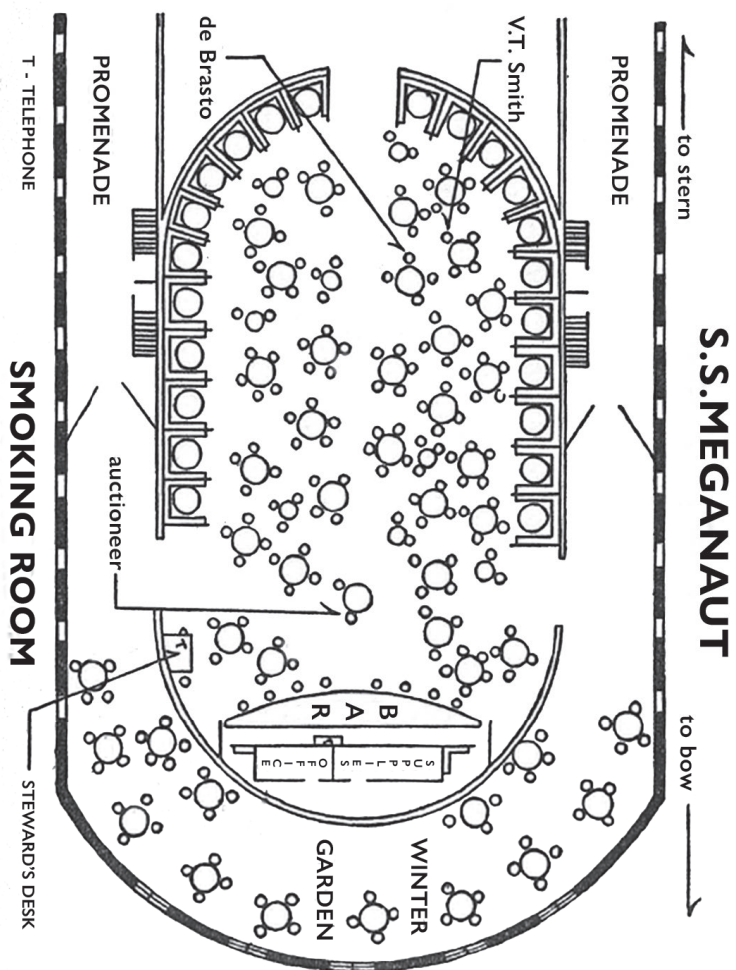
The auctioneer paused and looked around the room. ‘Steward,’ he called, ‘just move to one side, please. Mr. Mortimer? Would you care to bid for 634? Sir Henry? Mr. Duller? Mr. de Brasto?’

He paused again, as the *Meganaut* slowly heeled and recovered. ‘Come, come, gentlemen, am I bid no more? I’ll knock it down. Going once to Mr. Smith for three hundred and fifty dollars.

‘Going twice, number 634, one of the best numbers on the list!’ Inquiringly he looked towards de Brasto, who was looking elsewhere.

The auctioneer paused and looked around the room. ‘Mr. Smith, for three hundred and fifty dollars!’

As the auctioneer turned away to see that the sale was properly entered on the sheets, the talking rose again throughout the room. The stewards serving the tables sprang into activity, hur-



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rying back and forth to the corner of the long bar. The hubbub became general.

'Oh, Steward, two scotch and sodas and a side-car.' . . . 'My dear, it's a Paquin, I'm certain.' . . . '—and a poor number, too. Throwin' his money away, it seems to me.'

'Smith? Oh, he could buy them all, old chap, and never know the difference. Int'restin', isn't it? Only bids against the Jews, d'you notice? Fancy he intends to keep that fellow, de Brasto, out altogether. He wouldn't have got a number last night, but that Smith came in late. Amusin' show, not?' . . . 'Beers all around, Steward. Dark, please.' . . . 'Must be quite a blow outside; do you feel her rolling a bit now?' . . .

The stewards picked their way with difficulty among the crowded chairs. In the port doorway to the promenade a group of men stood talking; through the empty entrance opposite them could be seen the rain-splashed windows on deck, whose blankness was now and then illuminated by the lightning. The dark woodwork and fittings of the saloon reflected the gleams from the side lights, and the concealed lighting in the ceiling made brilliant flashes where it struck the jewels of the women and the white shirt-fronts of the men.

During the interlude many persons covertly observed the adjacent tables occupied by the recent rivals. De Brasto's party, it was evident, were discussing the situation with scarcely concealed anger. They numbered, besides de Brasto himself, a strikingly handsome Jewess, a small, animated brunette who might also have been Hebraic, and a portly, heavy featured man of indeterminate race. At Smith's table there was likewise a party of four, himself and next him his daughter, while opposite sat two younger men, one of whom was leaning forward to enforce some observation he had just made. They appeared entirely un-

conscious of the incident that was attracting so much actual, if unobtrusive, attention; as a matter of fact they were altogether absorbed in their discussion of the coming international polo matches on Long Island.

At the other end of the room the auctioneer still bent over the shoulder of the pool's secretary. While consulting the lists he wiped away the perspiration from his forehead and refreshed himself from a glass of cool champagne which, indeed, was not his at all, but belonged to his seated friend.

Then he turned away, and lifting his gavel, rapped sharply for attention. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began, and waited for the talking to die away.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we have now to consider perhaps the best number of the evening. Sir Henry Merton's number, 640. Let me read to you once more the last six runs on the third day east. They were 637, 638, 648, 634, 641, 645. The average was 640.5 This evening we are nearing the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and, as you have doubtless noticed, the sea is not very congested hereabouts. We have every reason to expect an average run.'

'How about the storm?' murmured someone close at hand.

'I am reminded by somebody,' continued the auctioneer, 'that we have run into a storm, but I am told,' glancing toward the chief steward for confirmation, 'that our speed has not been reduced, not yet, at any rate. Therefore I should say that the present number is the best chance of the whole evening. What am I bid for number 640? Sir Henry, would you care to open the bidding for your number?'

Sir Henry, from his large table in the centre of the room, where he was entertaining his own party as well as several ship-board acquaintances, made his perfunctory bid of fifty dollars.

'Fifty dollars is bid, ladies and gentlemen, fifty—'

'Fifty-five.'

'Sixty.'

'Sixty-five dollars, from the lady on the left. Sir Henry?'

'Seventy dollars.'

'Seventy-five.'

'Seventy-five from Mr. Mortimer. Seventy-five dollars for number 640, the best number on the list. Who will bid me eighty?'

'Eighty.'

'Eighty dollars I'm bid. Eighty-five, Mr. Mortimer. Ninety, Mr. Hughes. Ninety-five from the gentleman in the far corner. How about my friend at the bar,' said the auctioneer, turning suddenly about. 'Would you care to make it one hundred, sir? For our best number?'

The stout gentleman on the high stool, thus appealed to, nodded slowly.

'One hundred dollars,' cried the auctioneer. 'Splendid, gentlemen, but still much too low for this number. Sir Henry? Surely you won't lose this fine number?'

'One hundred and ten,' said Sir Henry.

'One hundred and twenty,' said the stout gentleman.

And there it stayed. In spite of all the urging the auctioneer could summon up, no one was found to advance the bidding higher. 'But gentlemen,' he pleaded, 'three hundred and fifty was paid for 634, a much poorer number, and you are allowing the best one of all to go for a hundred and twenty.' At this a general smile went round the smoking-room; it seemed well understood that number 634 had scarcely been sold on its merits.

'Very well,' the auctioneer acknowledged defeat. 'Once,

twice, and sold! For one hundred and twenty dollars, to the gentleman at the bar. Your name, sir? Thornton? Thank you. . . .’

‘And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have 648, Mr. de Brasto’s number. May I remind you that three trips ago the *Meganaut* made six hundred and forty-eight miles for this run? What am I bid for number 648?’

Not a few glanced with amusement toward Smith. It was easy enough, so the general opinion ran, for him to outbid de Brasto for his own (Smith’s) number, since the owner had only to pay into the pool half the price at which he bought it in. But now the number was de Brasto’s and the shoe was on the other foot.

‘Fifty dollars.’

‘Fifty dollars from Mr. de Brasto. Will someone kindly advance the bid for this very good number? Ah, fifty-five dollars from Mr. Fields.’

‘Sixty dollars.’

‘Sixty-five.’

‘Seventy.’

‘Mr. de Brasto bids seventy dollars. He likes his number, ladies and gentlemen, and I don’t blame him. It’s a good number, a fine—’

‘Seventy-five dollars.’

‘Seventy-five from Mr. Mortimer.’

‘Eighty.’

‘Eighty-five.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Fields. Eighty-five dollars I’m bid.’

‘Ninety.’

‘Ninety dollars. Mr. de Brasto bids ninety dollars for his own number. Are there no more bids, gentlemen? Surely you won’t see number 648 go for ninety dollars. Three trips ago this boat

made six hundred and forty-eight miles, don't forget that. Ninety I'm bid. Who'll say one hundred? Mr. Smith, are you interested? Will you bid me one hundred for 648?'

Smith interrupted the conversation at his table long enough to nod briefly to the auctioneer.

'One hundred dollars I am bid,' came the prompt response.

'One hundred and five dollars.'

'One hundred and twenty,' said Smith.

'A hundred and thirty.'

'One forty.'

The bids came rapidly, one tripping over the heels of its forerunner. At the three hundred mark they stopped.

'Three hundred,' urged the auctioneer, obviously enjoying his success. 'Mr. Smith bids three hundred dollars. You won't let him have your number at three hundred dollars, Mr. de Brasto. Three ten? Will you bid me three ten?' He paused. 'We still have several numbers to auction off. Three hundred I'm bid; will you make it three ten? Going once at three hundred dollars to Mr. Smith. Going twice. . . '

Disappointment was written on many faces in the room. Smith's determination to keep his opponent out of the pool was an unusual incident and the other passengers possessed the ordinary liking for a good fight. The many eyes turned curiously toward the two men saw a certain disturbance at de Brasto's table. His companions were evidently urging him to continue. With a characteristic disregard for appearances the taller Jewess slapped a packet of express cheques on the table and looked angrily at her neighbours. The auctioneer also observed these proceedings and delayed his sale of the number.

His set face paler than usual, de Brasto turned back to the

auctioneer. The room pricked up its ears; there was no concealing the renewed interest now.

‘Three ten, Mr. de Brasto?’

‘Yes!’

Not the slightest difference could be discerned between Smith’s voice now and when he made his first bid. ‘Three fifty,’ he said.

‘Three sixty!’

‘Four hundred.’

There was a slight pause, during which a steward made his way to Smith’s table. The darker of the two young men helped him unload his tray and distribute the drinks. He did so rather clumsily, or perhaps he was excited, for he used both hands to convey each of the glasses to the table. Then de Brasto’s voice, slightly strained, ‘Four hundred and ten.’

Still almost negligently, Smith said, ‘Five hundred.’

De Brasto’s air was that of a man who has thrown caution to the winds and proposes to win at any cost. ‘Five hundred and fifty.’

‘Six hundred and fifty.’

At last the auctioneer had controlled his delighted surprise. ‘Six hundred and fifty dollars,’ he interjected.

‘Seven hundred dollars!’

‘Eight hundred.’

It was just then that the lights in the smoking-room began to dim. Involuntarily everyone glanced up at them. Gradually they were growing fainter; like a curtain, gauzy and transparent at first, then steadily heavier, darkness seemed to descend from the ceiling. The entire assemblage sat as if struck dumb by surprise. In the face of the totally unexpected phenomenon all activity was suspended; everyone waited. . . . Only Smith and his