

Voyage of Shadows: Murder on the *S.S. Normandie*

●●●by Dana●●●

Author Notes: This title is inspired by the detective novel, *The Floating Admiral*, co-written by Agatha Christie and her fellow members of the Detection Club. How cool is it that Agatha Christie engaged in group round robin stories, too? I have done exhaustive research about the *SS Normandie*, but unfortunately, there just isn't as much information available as I would have liked. I tried to make my depiction of the ship as factual as possible, but there may be instances throughout this story where I had to supply my own best-guess description because of a lack of information. Many thanks to Susan, Julia, and Mary for their edits, which definitely made the chapter stronger. Word count: 4,127.

Chapter One: The Floating Ambassador

August 22, 1939

Le Havre, France

Eighteen-year-old Honey Wheeler took in the sights around her as she and her parents strolled toward the luxury ocean liner docked at the end of the pier. The Wheeler family was being escorted to the *SS Normandie* by an officer employed specifically to escort Première Class passengers to their decadently luxurious suites. Behind them, stewards dealt with some of the family's luggage pieces. A society matron, a debutante, and a captain of industry required a good number of bags to properly tour the continent for two months, but most of their trunks had been sent ahead and would be waiting for them in their stateroom or stored in the cargo hold for the duration of the crossing. The stewards would deliver these few pieces to the state room just moments after the Wheelers themselves arrived, upholding the highest French traditions of impeccable service for which the *Normandie* was legendary.

Honey listened passively to the conversation between the companionable French officer—probably in his late twenties by the looks of him—and her father as the small group moved toward an archway marked “Première Classe,” one of three separate entrances leading to the ship. Two other archways much farther down—and with many less officers escorting many more passengers, who carried their own luggage—were marked “Touriste” and “Cabine.” For a moment, Honey looked longingly at those passengers. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy her family's social status, because she was grateful to live in comfort and have the opportunity to experience the amazing continental journey she had just embarked on, but more and more often she wondered about the fun to be had outside of her sometimes stuffy world.

Still, that world had allowed the young debutante to partake in a whirlwind tour of the continent, despite Matthew's nearly canceling the trip after Czechoslovakia had fallen to the Nazis in March and then again when Hitler had signed his “Pact of Steel” with Italy in May. Matthew Wheeler had given in to his wife's pleading to not cancel, but he had carefully planned their travels to avoid any areas of unrest or tension. Despite the threat of war surrounding her in Europe, Honey remained a young, carefree girl, with Madeleine and Matthew Wheeler keeping as much of the serious war talk away from her as possible.

Although they didn't want her to grow up sheltered, they didn't want any of the mounting tensions to ruin Honey's coming-of-age trip, either. Madeleine had wanted her daughter's trip to be as magical as her own had been, and she had succeeded in that. Honey had thoroughly enjoyed herself and learned so much about the culture of the continent, reveling in the beauty of the art and architecture and scenery of Europe. The Cotswolds in Great Britain and the Alps of Switzerland had particularly captivated her sense of imagination, but she had loved everything, from the fun and rousing beer halls of Bavaria to the

stately and sedate Vatican buildings; from the glamour of tropical St. Tropez and the rest of the French Riviera to the quaint canals of casual Amsterdam.

Matthew and Madeleine had chosen not to take their daughter to Berlin, where Hitler was rising in his menacing and twisted power more each day. Instead, the Wheelers had visited the southern part of the country, enjoying high-spirited Bavaria after spending some time in Austria and then moving through Belgium over to the Netherlands. Of course, even in the Netherlands tensions were growing. It was as if the Dutch knew that Hitler would bring his darkness to their country. In the meanwhile, staid and stoic Switzerland was clearly, but quietly, preparing for the inevitable, even with its history of neutralism.

The attitude was much different in other countries, like Great Britain, which was steadying itself for a solid fight. In contrast, the French had seemed completely unaware of the increasing shadow of the Fatherland as it moved toward their country. They laughed and reveled as if no danger lurked around the corner. Paris had been as charming and romantic as ever, although even Madeleine had sensed a faint, tense undercurrent that she had not felt in the past, one that belied the surface frivolity.

Italy and Spain had been different. Those countries already had Mussolini and Franco, respectively, ruling with iron fists. Honey and her parents had enjoyed the rugged beauty of Catalonia, but the mood in Barcelona was rather somber and fearful. The Catalonians were resentful of being dragged into the Spanish state by Franco but too fearful of reprisal to fully revolt. Italy was a chaotic place, full of a passion that contrasted with the stately ancient Roman structures and the ornately baroque buildings standing in testament to Italy's role in the Renaissance. Florence was one of Madeleine's favorite cities, full of breathtaking beauty and life and art, and Honey had found it lovely enough, but it was the natural scenery that spoke to her graceful soul—the magnificent white and grey Alpine peaks or the rolling green English fields dotted with fluffy white sheep nestled beneath a clear blue sky itself dotted with fluffy white clouds that provided a symmetry to the ground below. Madeleine loved that her daughter was so moved by bucolic beauty and wished that she hadn't had to grow up in the concrete jungle of Manhattan.

During their continental travels, Madeleine had had an epiphany while watching her daughter marvel at nature's beauty while only being slightly moved by the historic, and sometimes ancient, art and architecture surrounding her. She planned to speak to Matthew when they got home about purchasing a country house somewhere outside of New York City, a pastoral place where they could escape from the city hustle. Maybe a cute little manor house in a quaint little community along the Hudson in upper Westchester County. Maybe they'd even get a stable full of horses for Honey to ride. She did so enjoy horse riding at camp. When she'd told Honey her idea, the girl had been absolutely delighted, thoroughly loving the idea of a family country getaway.

Of course, these thoughts were far from the socialite's mind as she took in the fabulous ocean liner before her. The black hull gleamed in the sunlight, two of the three red stacks belching out smoke as the engines readied for departure, those tall, red structures towering over the landscape. As the Wheelers looked up, they could see already-boarded passengers strolling along the promenade. Many of them, looking as tiny as ants compared to the hulking luxury ocean liner, waved to the boarding passengers below. Honey smiled and waved back.

Their French Line escort beamed with pride as he noted the awed reactions of the Wheelers. "*Bienvenue!* Welcome to the *SS Normandie*, France's floating ambassador to the world."

Honey turned to her mother, an excited grin alighting her smooth and delicate features. “This is amazing, Mother. She’s beautiful!”

Madeleine smiled down at her only child. “A fitting end to a magical trip,” she agreed.

Madeleine could hardly believe that their tour of the continent was over already. The two months had positively flown by as they had explored so many European countries. One thing that had not come to fruition for her daughter, and for which she was somewhat disappointed, was that Honey had not met a man who captivated her fancy. Perhaps Madeleine was just romanticizing her own coming-of-age trip, but finding the man of her dreams on it had solidified the magic of the experience, and she had wished the same for her daughter, even though she knew that Honey did not care in the least.

There had been many eligible young men at Honey’s coming out party, a magnificent debutante ball held on Long Island in a historic manor, and some of them were genuinely good boys in addition to being “eligible,” which was just a fancy term for being “connected” or “well-bred.” Matthew and Madeleine had agreed wholeheartedly, however, that Honey’s heart would be the most important factor in her marriage—not status, not making the proper business connections among families, nor any of that other nonsense. If Honey was in love, and her chosen beau treated her like the princess that her father thought that she was, that was good enough for her parents. It was important that he was a good man, not that his last name happened to be Vanderbilt or Du Pont or Rothschild.

Honey had had a marvelous adventure across the continent, so her mother was happy enough with that. Honey had just turned eighteen. There was plenty of time for her to find her soul mate. And, as far as Matthew was concerned, that day could come far into the future for all he cared. He’d be happy to have his little girl all to himself in the meantime.

Before they knew it, after marveling at the three-deck-high first-class entrance hall with its walls of onyx accented with bronze and glass, the Wheelers were ensconced in their lavish Première Class suite, one of the so-called Grande Suites de Luxe. They had been booked in the Grand Suite de Luxe Deauville, or simply, the Deauville Suite. It sat on the Sun Deck with its sister suite, the Grand Suite de Luxe Trouville, the only accommodations located on that deck. Also unique to the Deauville and Trouville, each suite also had its own promenade that overlooked the lovely open-air seating of the Café-Grill below.

Honey took a few moments to marvel at the chic and modern art deco décor of the suite, appreciating the rich woods, handsome sculptures, enormous glass panels, and the Gaveau baby grand piano with its blond wood. She then went to go claim one of the suite’s four bedrooms as her own. In the meantime, Matthew Wheeler opened a pair of wood-paneled doors to reveal a well-stocked bar. He selected a bottle of champagne that he knew that Madeleine loved, a particularly good vintage of Moët & Chandon, and removed the cork with a loud and celebratory “pop!” Madeleine and Matthew both laughed at the sound, thinking how lucky they were to be enjoying such lavish accommodations before returning to New York and the “real world.” Matthew quickly grabbed two crystal flutes to capture the bubbly liquid, and the two toasted a successful—and *safe*—European grand tour.

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As the Wheelers settled into the Deauville Suite, the Beldens, who had planned on settling comfortably in Touriste Classe, which offered midrange, second-class accommodations, were marveling at the luxuriousness of the Trouville Suite, a gracious upgrade paid for by Harold as a gift when his younger brother had decided to relocate his family to the United States. It was a handsome upgrade, and the

Beldens, although rather well-off and used to creature comforts, were in awe of the spectacular “apartment,” which included a private dining room, a baby grand piano, four large and elegant bed rooms, five bathrooms, servants’ quarters, and a private deck on which to enjoy the sea air. Harold had also encouraged his brother’s family to cross the English Channel and board the legendary French art deco ocean liner in Le Havre, her point of origin, rather than boarding the following day near Southampton. It had been an easy sell, especially once the Belden family realized the magnitude of their accommodations.

“This is really too much, Peter,” Helen said in awe as her blue eyes took in the opulence surrounding her, from the Aubusson tapestries to the ivory leather that lined the room. “Harold really shouldn’t have done this! I would have been happy in tourist class! And what exactly are we going to do with a baby grand piano?”

Peter pulled his awed wife into his arms for an affectionate embrace. “I quite agree, but that’s Harold, you know. There were any number of regular first class suites he could have upgraded us to, and I agree that he needn’t have done even that, but putting us into one of the two best suites on the entire ship...”

He paused for a moment as he shook his head. “Harold, since making his considerable fortune, has become used to opulence, and he couldn’t imagine the six of us as a family in Touriste Classe accommodations, which he thought would be too cramped. My goodness! He thought that a family of six would be too crowded in a regular suite in first class! It is nice, though, to be able to spread out a bit during the voyage. Bobby and Beatrix can each have the two smallest bedrooms, and Mart and Brian can share the next largest, or one of them can stay in the servant’s quarters if they want, since Lord knows we haven’t brought any servants onboard! And you and I—” he paused to kiss the top of his wife’s head, her blonde curls tickling his nose, “—will ensconce ourselves in the master bedroom.”

Helen smiled up at her husband. “What a blissful crossing this is going to be!” she said before tucking her head and nestling herself deeper into her husband’s embrace.

“And what a wonderful future we’ll have in the States,” Peter agreed. “I know it may not be a popular course for those who want to stay and ‘give ‘em hell,’ but I’m thankful that we’re escaping before Hitler goes any further, which that madman is bound to do. I know Britain will never fall to his conniving ways, but if there’s a war, I want to know that my wife and children are safe, especially since Harold and Andrew already have migrated.”

Just then, Peter and Helen’s only daughter, Beatrix, who had turned eighteen years old a few months before, bounded through the main door of the suite and into the salon, as the French called the living room or parlor. Although Trixie knew that, outside of Britain, the British were known for their reticence and “stiff upper lip,” her parents belied this stereotype and had never been afraid of showing affection even in front of their children, so it didn’t faze the young woman to see her parents being so affectionate with each other.

“You should see the swimming pool!” she exclaimed without preamble, her sandy blonde curls—so much like her mother’s—bouncing with the vibrant energy that she always displayed, unless it was chore time, of course. Her clear blue eyes—also exactly like her mother’s—were wide with excitement. “It’s amazing, and that’s where I am going to spend *all* of my time!”

Helen let out a laugh. “That’s only because there isn’t a stable full of horses on the ship.”

The young woman's eyes twinkled at her mother. "That's probably very true, Moms," the teenager agreed, using the nickname for Helen Belden that she had been using all of her life. She had been the first to call Helen that, but her older brothers, Mart and Brian, had soon followed suit, and eleven-year-old Bobby didn't know any other name for his mother.

"It even has a terraced shelf for younger kids, so Bobby will love it, too, and be quite safe," the young woman said, speaking with the authority of an older sister who had spent a good deal of time babysitting and knew exactly the kind of scrapes her younger brother was capable of getting into.

"I do hope that you'll at least join us for a meal or two, Beatrix," Peter said, a twinkle alighting his own dark eyes as he admired her spark of life. This was why they were "escaping" from their little isle off the coast of Europe to America. He never wanted that light to dim—or be extinguished. War could so easily do either.

Unaware of her father's serious thoughts, the young blonde was wrinkling her nose at him. "Can't you please call me Trixie? Please, Dad. Beatrix is so...so...stuffy. Trixie sounds much more American," the girl declared.

Peter smiled, even as a small sigh escaped his lips. He knew he was not going to win this one, no matter how hard he tried, so he might as well give up now—but not without a little token modicum of protest. "But, darling, Beatrix is a family name. My favorite aunt carried the name." He shook his head. "But we are going to America, and you have grown into quite a young woman, so I suppose I should ask, will you be joining us for at least a meal or two, Trixie?"

"It depends," Trixie said, the mischievousness in her voice unmistakable as she handled her victory with grace. "Are the boys going to be in attendance?"

Helen's laugh rang out, even as she tried to look sternly at her daughter. "You know that you enjoy the company of your brothers—no matter how much you try to claim otherwise!"

Trixie grinned at her mother but did not admit to anything, her one-track mind returning to thoughts of the pool. "There's even a shallow end, a sort of training 'beach' for Bobby," she repeated.

Helen nodded approvingly. "He'll enjoy that very much."

"Do I always have to be the one to watch him, Moms?" Trixie asked. "I know it's *technically* a girl's job, but I'd like to have a bit of a chance to explore the ship on my own. Can I split Bobby-sitting duties with Mart and Brian? Just this once?"

Helen smiled. "I think it would be only fair for you to have some time to explore the ship, just as Mart and Brian will. This is rather a vacation for this family, and you deserve to have a vacation, too."

Trixie's eyes lit up and a huge grin split her face. She threw her arms around Helen impulsively. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" she exclaimed.

Helen's youthful laugh nearly matched the exuberance of Trixie's own as she hugged her daughter back. "You're welcome, Bea...Trixie. Now tell me all about this pool," she said as the two settled down together on the lavish settee.

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August 23, 1939

Southampton, England

The next day, after the *Normandie* had traveled across the English Channel and docked off of the Isle of Wight near Southampton to pick up her remaining passengers, the Lynches gratefully settled into their Spartan accommodations. It had been a long three years of scrimping and saving, especially once the “baby” Kathleen had been pregnant with had become “babies.” It shocked Kathleen to think that they had gone from a three-person family to a seven-person family in less than three years. Considering how stretched the family finances already had been before the arrival of Lawrence and Terrence, it was a miracle that they had been able to save enough to make the voyage at all, even with Edmund taking on three jobs and Kathleen taking in others’ laundry and children to earn extra money.

But, by the grace of God, they had done it. Now here they were, traveling on one of the most luxurious ocean liners to cross the Atlantic. Of course, they would not see any of that luxury. Even though the French ship line that had designed and built the *Normandie*, Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, commonly known as CGT or the French Line, had tried to make steerage class sound more glamorous by renaming it “Cabine Classe,” the accommodations still were most decidedly steerage.

The reason that the Lynches had been able to afford this crossing at all was because of the way the ship had been designed. The French Line had put all of its efforts into the first class areas of the ship—and none into the Touriste and Cabine Classes. As a result, only those who could afford to sail in the Première Classe wanted to sail on her. With scant passengers interested in sailing in the tourist and cabin classes, the ship was not commercially profitable. This, despite the fact that many considered the lavish ship to be the one of the greatest of all ocean liners. After all, she had been the largest and fastest passenger ship afloat when she had been launched and no ship had surpassed her yet. The *Normandie* even twice held the prestigious Blue Riband award for the fastest transatlantic crossing. Even with all of her accolades, being unprofitable meant that the French government was helping to subsidize the ship, and fares in the lesser classes were much more reasonable on the *Normandie* than they were on her rival, the Cunard Line’s *RMS Queen Mary*.

Even though the Lynches had to share a tiny cell-sized room with bunks stacked three high, and they had to share a bathroom with several neighboring rooms, they could put up with anything for a week if it meant that they had the opportunity to make their way to America. America was the land of dreams...if you were willing to work hard, and Edmund and Kathleen were. Kathleen was thrilled that her wee ones would have the opportunity to be anyone that they wanted to be, that they wouldn’t know the oppression of their mother country, where the station in life in which you were born was usually the one in which you died. As much as she loved Ireland, and was fiercely proud of being Irish, she was not so blinded by patriotism that she couldn’t see her homeland with clear eyes. She knew the limitations of her beloved Emerald Isle. She would miss the old country, for sure, but now that she had said her goodbyes, she was only looking forward to their new lives.

Kathleen’s oldest, Diana, had helped the family settle into the tiny room. She and the boys would sleep on the floor, while the girls would share one of the bunks. Kathleen and Edmund would take the other two bunks. Kathleen had offered hers to Diana, but blessed child that she was had refused, saying that it would be an adventure to sleep on the floor with her brothers. Kathleen was ever grateful for her oldest child’s good cheer and infinite optimism. Diana was a good sport about just about everything, never complaining and always offering her mother a helping hand around the house and watching her two younger sets of siblings.

To thank her daughter, Kathleen had let Diana go exploring as soon as the twin girls, Rose and Violet, were settled on the lowest bunk sleeping, and Larry and Terry were quietly looking at a picture book in the corner of the room.

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As the Lynches settled into their meager quarters, Jim Frayne and Dan Mangan were excitedly boarding the *Normandie* feeling like the two lucky chaps that they were. Ever since the two had run into each other in the pub doorway while trying to avoid being soaked, the pair ran together around the streets of London, looking out for each other. They had become as close as two brothers, each feeling fortunate to have found someone they could call family after having lost so much so young. It was amazing how similar their stories were—both only sons, both losing their fathers first, and then a few years later, their mothers. Neither with any other family to speak of, both forced to survive on the streets.

Jim's mother and father had often spoke of Win's uncle, James Winthrop Frayne, whom Jim was named after. Uncle James lived in America, outside of New York City, and Jim thought that if he could just reach him, he might have a chance at a house...a home. The trouble was that passage to America cost money. He'd tried to get a job on a cattle boat, but even though he was a strong, husky lad, no one would hire him because he was too young. They wanted a man who had proven himself capable of the work. The fact that he and Dan were a package deal, and Dan was slighter of frame, also had hampered the efforts.

But the day before, something incredible had happened. He and Dan had managed to win a pair of tickets on the *Normandie* in a game of cards. And the ship was going right to New York City! Finally, *finally*, the duo might have a chance at normalcy and a real home.

Even now, as they navigated the narrow corridors of the magnificent ocean liner, it didn't seem real. They had been down on their luck so much in their young lives that it was hard to believe that luck could actually smile on them for a change. They headed down the corridors of Cabine Classe, eager to find their room on the ship that would take them to their new lives.

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One last author note: Please forgive the *Titanic* plot device I used to get Jim and Dan onboard. Originally, I had them getting jobs on the ship, but then I realized that they'd never be around to participate in the mystery, which would never do. I'll leave stories with absent Bob-Whites having to do chores to KK, TYVM!