

# The Sunken Palace

I see myself as incarcerated, guilt and grief my jailors, sentenced to sail on what is nothing more than a hulk, albeit a luxurious one.

I'm not sociable and dread the formal dinners. My table sits eight, although one chair will remain unoccupied. Even the absence of a potential inquisitor doesn't calm me, for that empty space only serves to remind me of my wife. I left England immediately after her funeral, funded by the first, inadequate, offer for our house. I needed to escape. Every chamber and ornament reminded me she was gone. Her perfume crept through the dark, empty rooms like a ghost.

I breakfast in my cabin and decline the offer of lunch. The ship boasts an impressive library, so I can immerse myself in a book rather than sit on deck and gaze at the grey, endless sea. But in the evening there is no escape. I must eat, and protocol forces me to share the table with six strangers, only four of whom appear the first night.

John H. Stevens is a brash American. He is returning home after a vacation, as he calls it, in Europe, which he never ceases to mention is second-rate compared with his homeland. He boasts of bountiful Texan oil wells, which he plundered for a pittance from a farmer impoverished by the civil war. He has reinvented himself as a "movie magnate" and also runs a popular newspaper. Stevens wishes to boost its circulation through lurid exposés of sin and skulduggery. His wealth and contacts are no doubt his only attractive features for his wife, Lorelee. Lorelee claims to be an actress who starred in a cinematic work directed by her husband's main rival. She's never heard of Shakespeare, and even though speech is not a feature of moving pictures, I am cynical about how she obtained her leading role. My suspicions are bolstered by my observing she pays more attention to the young stewards than her husband. Theirs is a marriage based on power and money, unlike my own, initiated by love and respect.

Mrs Sophia Fitzherbert is accompanied by her maid. I am curious why this servant shares our mealtimes. Neither possesses any vestige of beauty. I observe their common features: earlobes a little longer than normal, aquiline noses and small mouths set in permanent scowls. Mrs Fitzherbert flaunts her copious jewellery, but her dresses are faded

and torn in places. My thoughts turn to reports in the newspapers the day we left of a mother and daughter suspected of not only stealing the Countess of Kent's tiara but attempting to blackmail a prominent member of the House of Lords. Rumours are spreading of thefts of bracelets and rings on the ship.

I spend the next day walking the rain-lashed deck. I've returned my books. All tell of love or death, and I don't wish to be reminded. I contemplate borrowing a guide to New York, in the hope it might provide assistance when I disembark, but decide to lounge under the shelter of an upper level, swathed in a blanket, gazing at a grey nothingness. The ocean is empty, like my soul, as lonely as my heart. A steward brings me cocktails every hour, but even they cannot dull my memories of what I've lost.

So once again, I find myself surrounded by my new acquaintances. Tonight the Browns have joined us. Unlike the others, I detect no falseness in their relationship. Mr Brown has retired from a career as a bank manager and is rewarding his wife for her years of devotion with a trip to California. She is loquacious, and tells me she suffers from "mal de mer", which caused them to miss the previous night's dinner. She insists on calling the waiter "garçon" although her vain attempts at French cannot disguise a Birmingham accent.

I sit and deflect their enquiries about my wife. They know she has passed, but I believe they respect my grief. Mrs Fitzherbert, whose intonation suggests Newcastle, echoes my sorrow when she expresses her despair over the loss of her husband, a wealthy man of independent means. I wonder who else notices her maid smirking at this revelation. When their conversation returns to me, I confess I was a professor of botany at Cambridge. Mrs Brown takes over, telling us about her garden, and asking me about the best shrubs for a shaded corner.

The wine flows freely, and the gentlemen end the evening with large glasses of brandy, the ladies with sherry. My spirits are lifted, and I am prepared to disclose a little about my late spouse, her beauty, her interests, and the terrible circumstances of her death. Stevens, now red-faced and more objectionable, laughs at the irony of her consuming poisoned fungi when I'm supposed to be an expert in plants. I retort by telling him I was absent that night, a circumstance for which I can never forgive myself. I almost weep as Mrs Brown touches my arm, oozing sympathy. Stevens merely shrugs and embraces Lorealee while whispering in her ear. She briefly shudders and scowls before her lips form a smile. She permits him to lead her from the table, his hand slipping down her back to rest on her buttocks. Mrs Brown tuts.

Mrs Fitzherbert and her so-called maid depart soon after, leaving me alone with the Browns. I find them entertaining. Mrs Brown's pretentiousness is amusing, while her husband enjoys recanting anecdotes about their previous holidays. For the first time in weeks I relax, and tell them more about my wife: how we met, her career as a writer of romantic stories, our honeymoon in Venice. The Browns seem fascinated by that city in the Adriatic lagoon and implore me to continue. Another glass of Armagnac adds more encouragement.

I speak of the glories of St Mark's Square and the exquisite glassware from Murano and praise our quaint little hotel perched over a canal on the edge of the city. I cannot help mentioning that, besotted with the ambiance, my wife based her most famous work, "The Sunken Palace", in Venice.

For every glass of spirit I imbibe, Mr Brown drinks two. His head slumps forward. A snore rumbles from his open mouth. His wife tuts again and returns to quiz me on our trip to Italy. Her speech is slurred, and her hand rests on my thigh. She whispers how she appreciates men of intellect. My brain clouds until I find myself in my cabin. Thank God I am alone.

I awake the next morning to a headache and a fear I have been indiscrete. I seek solace in the sea, declining every offer of a cocktail from the too-attentive stewards. From my secluded advantage point, I see Lorelee standing too close to a steward by the rail, her hand touching his. Mrs Fitzherbert's maid hurries past, casting frequent backward glances. She clutches a handbag which, even to my uncultured eye, seems inconsistent with her outfit.

I muse on what I recall from the previous night. I've no concept of how much a bank manager earns, but the Browns' accounts of their travels and their presence in first class fires my imagination about how easily someone in his position could glean unearned wealth.

I am now certain I share my table with criminals and adulterers. Perhaps I am not embarked on a pathway to a new world, but instead on a journey into Hell. I imagine the grey swell before me, not as an ocean, but the River Styx.

Evening comes too soon. To my relief, my companions act as if nothing untoward occurred the last time we convened. The conversation turns to books. Lorelee is unsurprisingly silent. Her husband once browsed a novel about cowboys by an unknown author called Zane Grey and wants to buy the film rights. The Fitzherbert party share a passion for steamy romances but has little to contribute. Mr Brown favours non-fiction. Only his wife has read anything with proven literary merit, and she spends fifteen minutes comparing Jane Austin to Charlotte Bronte. I am content to nod sagely at her pronouncements.

She shatters my complacency. Intrigued by our previous conversation, she's discovered the ship's library holds a copy of "The Sunken Palace" and devoured it in a day. She asks for my forgiveness, but she found the denouement a little too passé. I nod in false agreement.

Her critique continues. What surprised her were the author's notes. The protagonist in the work is a restaurateur, and my wife apologises that, although edible fungi often occur in Venetian cuisine, she loathes mushrooms and hence her descriptions may be incorrect. I preempt Mrs Brown's conclusion. I tell her my wife braved a wild mushroom risotto and, delighted with the taste, became a convert. Meanwhile Stevens ignores us, arguing with a waiter over what qualifies as a well-done steak, while Mrs Fitzherbert and her alleged maid disappear to the ladies' powder room.

I sense Mrs Brown is unconvinced. Did I mention my wife's dietary foibles during last night's intoxicated ramble? Or her unforgiveable infidelity? I may even have hinted how easy it is to convert the toxins from a Death Cap into a tasteless potion.

It might prove awkward should she repeat her suspicions in the presence of a sensation-seeking newspaperman and two blackmailers. I remain sober and alert for the next four hours, while the others lapse into drunkenness. I retire to my cabin, satisfied that nothing embarrassing has arisen.

Running and shouting outside my door wakes me in the small hours of the morning. When the steward brings my breakfast, he tells me a woman is missing, and the captain fears she may have fallen overboard. He then asks me to keep this revelation to myself, something I am content to do.

The Browns do not appear for dinner this evening. Lorelee suggests another bout of seasickness.

Again, I refrain from drinking too much. While I have recognised the sins of my companions, only one uncovered mine, and I have assured her silence.

My premonitions of Hell subside as the evening progresses and the orchestra plays. In under two days, the Titanic docks in New York and I shall be free.