

A BLOODY BUSINESS

A THRILLER

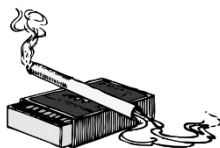


STEPHEN A. RODDEWIG

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BY STEPHEN A. RODDEWIG



Chapter 1: An Inconvenience Of Titanic Proportions

April 1912

MARTIN WILLIAMS SWORE as icy seawater swamped his socks.

“Bollocks! I just bought these shoes. You know what saltwater does to dockers?” he cried out to no one in particular.

The corridor in front of him was empty. The rest of the passengers in the tiny cabin had fled when the freezing water started slipping under the door.

“Come on, Will!” one of the dumb bastards had said, using the false name on his ticket.

“Not without my bloody Imperials,” he had spat back, shrugging away the man’s tugging hand. “Like

hell I'll let Poseidon have them with everything else he's pilfering if the ship is going down."

As he scrambled up the passage, Martin noticed that the floor's tilt had increased. Pausing to catch his breath, he held on to a bulkhead as he patted his jacket pocket where the pack of Imperials rested securely. *That damn sea god may have ruined my shoes, but he won't get my cigarettes without a fight*, Martin thought, resolving to smoke the entire pack before he drowned if it came to that.

It was one of the few things that had gone right for him since he could remember. Gambling was the only pastime Martin had found to take his mind off his dull life. However, enjoyment does not equate to proficiency, and by the time he realized this basic fact, he was in deep with the worst sort of men. Several broken bones and a missing pinkie later, they had cut him a deal: work for them, and they would exchange services provided for the thousands of pounds he owed.

When his bosses had told him that he would be going aboard a ship for his next assignment, he had been delighted at the prospect of his first trip to America. *God knows I could use a vacation*, he had thought. It would be his maiden sea voyage. His first time leaving the gray moors and bleak skies of England, for that matter.

Instead of a relaxing trip across the Atlantic, he had received his first omen of trouble ahead when his

handler, the black-haired worm that masqueraded as a man named Filchers, handed him his ticket.

“Steerage class?” Martin had exhaled. If it hadn’t been for the shock stealing the air from his lungs, he would have roared the words.

Filchers’ smile had deepened. “Budgets are tight, Mr. Williams. We are all making sacrifices to ensure the continuation of our enterprise.”

Sure, I’ve got to make cutbacks. Meanwhile, the amount of grease that goes into those weeds you call hair probably costs more than this bloody ticket, Martin had thought.

Instead, he responded, “That’s just bloody great. So what’s the name of the ship?”

“Ah, now that’s a bit of better news. Her name is *Titanic*. Brand new. State of the art. I’m sure even the most basic accommodations will be something to behold.”

Martin looked around at the “accommodations” now filling up with green wash. His fingers were going numb where they gripped the bulwark as the sea chilled the entire ship. *All for the best. After spending four days with three other blokes snoring and farting, only the crushing oblivion of the deep could scour that cabin clean.*

Hearing the swish of the water growing louder, Martin turned to find the sea had closed the distance, intent on ruining his dockers a second time.

“No such luck, you bastard,” he said, thumbing his nose at the waterline before resuming his trek toward

the stairs to the upper deck. All the while, his feet squelched as every step squeezed seawater from sodden socks.

Navigating the stairs at an angle wasn't easy, but at last Martin made his way to the deck. What he found there was chaos: men and women in white life jackets screaming and scrambling up the ship. Wherever was farthest from the sea's incessant advance.

But Martin's focus was quickly wrested by the sight directly in front of him: the "business" he had been sent to take care of stood against the rail, puffing at a cigarette with shaking fingers.

A man after my own heart. Martin strolled from the doorway, careful to keep from losing his footing as he walked perpendicular to the slope of the wooden deck. Taking a position next to the man, he pulled out his Imperials as his other hand gripped the railing for balance.

"Got a light, chap?" he asked, taking one cigarette between his teeth.

The man nodded and pulled out a matchbook. Martin could not help but admire the man's dexterity as he struck the match with the same hand. Leaning toward the flame, Martin held his free hand up to keep the sea breeze from smothering the stray bit of warmth. Just the sight of the pitch-black North Atlantic chilled him as he looked out and took a deep drag.

Martin knew he should be wary, but they were surrounded by calamity. Nobody was paying any attention to two men who appeared to have no intention of saving themselves. If anyone even noticed them, they were merely two less people trying to steal spots in a lifeboat.

What's the hurry? he thought. *Let the man enjoy his cigarette.*

The black water in front of them lit up as a distress flare arced from the top of the ship, casting everything in the brilliant white of phosphorus for a few moments before the darkness closed back in.

Tobacco smoke and his own condensing breath mingled together as Martin exhaled. Ten feet below, the water was spilling over the railing onto the next deck.

"Can't say I'm much looking forward to that," Martin remarked as he raised his head to look at his companion. "It's Richard, right? Richard Oblensky?"

"That's right," the man answered absently. Then he paused. "How did you—"

Martin pointed to the straps of Richard's life jacket hanging loose at his sides. "You might want to get those tied, mate. Going to need them before long."

Water swirled farther down the deck, inching toward them. Looking back, Richard nodded and started to fumble with the straps. "You're right. Though I was hoping to finish more of my cigarette case before—"

"You and me both, mate." Martin clamped his cigarette between his teeth, freeing his hands. With one, he grabbed the life jacket. With the other, he pushed Richard out of it and over the railing.

Richard's grunt of surprise morphed to a scream before the water enveloped him. Nobody noticed over the groans of the ship and the panicked shouts of passengers. Taking another drag from his cigarette, Martin looked over and watched as Richard flailed in the freezing water. Without the life jacket, the man's clothes were weighing him down. Still Richard attempted to swim back to the sinking ship.

"Bad move," Martin shouted down to him. "The ship will pull you down with her."

Whether Richard heard him or not, Martin could not tell. In the same moment, the suction he had warned of yanked the man beneath the surface.

Martin looked up to see a ship's officer moving toward him. *Better to be safe than sorry.*

"Man overboard, sir." Martin pointed to the water beneath him.

The blue-coated officer didn't even pause as he walked past. "Who won't be in a few minutes?"

"A fine point, sir," Martin said, finishing his Imperial and flicking it into the water where Richard had flailed about a moment ago.

I had planned to push the fool over the side during one of his smoke breaks. If no one saw, Titanic would plow right on

ahead and Richard would be left in a vast ocean with no chance of being rescued. Somehow, this is the one part of the assignment that still went to plan. Lucky me.

Whether Richard deserved to die was not Martin's call to make, but he had observed the man several times over the voyage as he formulated his now completed plan, and one moment stuck out to him. Richard and his wife had been taking a stroll along the upper deck to enjoy some sunshine when he had broken the leisurely pace and crossed the gap between them in a single step.

She had flinched. A deep grimace where the limbs draw in and the back arches to move the head toward the center of her mass. The sort of reaction that triggers when the body senses a primal danger. Martin had read Darwin, and here was part of the survival instinct that had preserved her ancestors on the plains of Africa wresting control. But Richard was not a pouncing hyena like those that had ingrained this response in her forebearers. At least, not on the outside.

The Firm cared little about abuse. Instead, they had marked Richard because his business ventures in colonial Africa had not produced the profits he promised they would share in. As Martin knew well, his employers did not take kindly to money lent that was not returned in due time. But the letter detailing Martin's latest assignment had also noted the horrific treatment of the natives employed in Richard's ventures.

Why would they make a point of calling that out? The debt was reason enough.

Martin shook his head. There was a strange logic to how his superiors picked his assignments that he could never quite tamp down.

The groan of straining metal brought Martin back to the matter at hand. *Titanic* would not be afloat much longer.

"Now," he said to himself, "which hotel am I booking in New York?"

He had come for a vacation, and like hell would he let Poseidon rob him of his first ever trip to America.

"The Ritz. Might as well treat myself after the subpar lodgings aboard this tramp steamer," he said as he climbed over the railing. He took a breath, timing his drop to land next to the upturned lifeboat that was drifting by.

Don't need to break a bone by hitting the thing. He smiled as he sailed through the air. *Wouldn't that be some irony? Saved from drowning by snapping my neck instead.*

The icy water robbed his senses for several moments, but then he broke the surface and forced a mouthful of air into his lungs. His blood resumed its movement through his limbs, and he started swimming for the white planks of the capsized lifeboat.

But then he paused and clenched his soaked jacket pocket.

"Bloody hell, my cigarettes!"

Don't miss Chapter 2, where Martin joins the British Expeditionary Force and goes off to fight in World War 1. And/or complete a job for the Firm in the trenches. Sure, there's more people shooting back than he's used to, but who can complain about drawing two checks for the same job?

And stick around for the rest of the book, where Martin finds himself...

...starting the Great Depression...

...fighting Communist agents...

...in both theaters of World War 2...

...and much more!

Grab your copy in print, digital, or audio form at the link below and find out just how bloody this business gets:

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