

1

March 1917

The Irish Sea

England emerged from over the murky horizon, the line between earth and sky partially hidden by shifting bands of rain. The coast was dark and barren but so very welcome after a stormy passage across the Atlantic that tested even Isaac Bell's notoriously iron stomach. Technically he hadn't spotted England but rather Angsley Island, off the north Welsh coast, that helped mark the passage into the Mersey Estuary and the port city of Liverpool.

Since the start of the war, the docks of Southampton on England's south coast had become Military Embarkation Port No. 1 and were used exclusively for pouring men and material onto freighters and troopships bound for France and the front lines and for seeing the return of the countless wounded. As a result Liverpool had become the principal port for all transatlantic traffic.

Bell had been bound for Liverpool once before but had never made it, as the *Lusitania* had been torpedoed as she turned northward around the southern tip of Ireland and the sheltered waters of the Irish Sea. He reasoned that even with the Germans once again unleashing their wolfpacks in the no-holds-barred doctrine of unrestricted submarine warfare, the odds of him being torpedoed twice in the same region were long enough to leave his mind at ease.

The ship he'd taken from New York was far from the luxurious Cunard liner he'd last sailed to England aboard. The *Duke of Monmouth* was barely five hundred feet in length and had

sailed under many different flags by even more different owners in the two decades since her launching. She sported a single funnel amidships and had just four decks for passengers. The first-class accommodations were on the top deck and were rumored to be adequate but dated.

For this mission, Bell was joined by Eddie Tobin, another Van Dorn detective. Like Bell, Tobin sailed on second-class tickets in keeping with their cover. They presented themselves as the employees of an art dealer who was shipping paintings back to England for a client who'd originally sent them to America at the start of the war for safekeeping. In truth they were escorting five hundred pounds of gold bullion that had been donated by dozens of prominent New York and Boston families to help the allied war effort. Once the crate landed on the pier in Liverpool their job was done.

Bell looked northward. A single British destroyer was on patrol, looking as lean and lethal as a stiletto. She seemed small and ineffective when compared to the mighty dreadnoughts the Admiralty had on hand to blockade Germany but her four-inch deck guns and torpedo launchers were more than a match for any lurking U-Boat.

A signalman on the warship's bridge was working the handle of an Aldiss lamp, sending a coded signal to the *Duke of Monmouth*. Bell turned to look up towards the liner's bridge and saw the blond woman. Like the other time he'd seen her on deck during the miserable crossing, he was struck by both her beauty and the graceful way she carried herself, even now after enduring what must have been a week *of mal de mer*. She didn't so much as look down. Bell allowed himself another moment to admire her profile and turned back to the sea once again.

The tides on the Mersey Estuary are among the highest in the British Isles and so it wasn't too much later that the ship began to approach the river and the city of Liverpool. A

black pall of coal smoke marked the distant city, far darker than the pewter sky that had seemed to have enshrouded the *Duke of Monmouth* since leaving New York. Ship traffic on the water had noticeably increased as freighters and oilers from the United States awaited their turn to unload at the over-taxed port. More navy ships were also present, mostly other destroyers of small armed launches that buzzed around the merchant flotilla like watchful sheep dogs attending to their flock.

After taking on a harbor pilot, the *Duke of Monmouth* entered the wide tidal estuary. On the left bank, the docks of Liverpool were total bedlam, with steam-powered cranes hauling pallets of cargo from countless ships' holds and armies of stevedores tramping down gangways loaded with sacks of American grain or Indian rice or casks of Jamaican rum. Small coastal boats ducked in and around the bigger ships bringing supplies while massive coal barges were kept in constant motion by tugs and tow boats to feed the freighters' voracious boilers.

Bell became concerned when his liner's course kept it away from the city and along the river's south shore. He was about to find an officer to get an explanation when the chief purser appeared at his elbow. A few of the crew had been made aware of the Van Dorn detective's mission if not the actual cargo. "Begging your pardon, Mr. Bell," the veteran purser said with a courteous tip of his cap. "Captain Abernathey's compliments."

"What is it, Tony? Why are we here and not over there?" Bell asked, pointing to the busy port they were slowly steaming past.

"A freighter is still in our berth. There was a problem with a crane and it's taking much longer to unload. Rather than have us wait, the harbor master is diverting us to an open dock

upriver a bit, near the Runcorn Gap. That'll put us in the Manchester Ship Canal for some miles."

Bell opened his mouth to ask a question, but the purser had an answer at the ready.

"Arrangements have been made to have your crate met just as if we'd docked in our original slot. You have nothing to worry about."

Eddie Tobin appeared just then. Where Bell was tall, and straight with blond hair and handsome features, Eddie slouched in a poorly fitted suit and his bulging eyes and thick neck gave him the look of a frog. His head was more scalp than thin gray hair, adding to the illusion. He worked out of the Van Dorn New York office, which had been Bell's preferred station for a couple of years now and specialized on the criminal activity in and around the city's countless docks, piers, shipping terminals, and every other place seafarers and fishermen could be found. Said to have saltwater in his veins, he'd had little trouble stomaching the rough Atlantic passage.

"Any sign of foul play," Eddie asked before Bell could.

"Foul play?" the purser said, cocking his head slightly.

"Sabotage of the crane at our assigned berth," Bell clarified, "to force us to switch last minute."

The Englishman's entire profession was predicated on keeping people happy and so it was clear by the look on his face he didn't know the answer to the question and hadn't thought to ask it himself. "I, ah..."

"Doesn't really matter, Isaac," Eddie reminded his boss. "Our job's done when the crate's off this tub. What happens to it here is on the local boys, not us."

“Call it a professional courtesy,” Bell said.

“We’ve got some time,” Tony the purser said. “I’ll have the wireless operator signal the harbormaster again and find out what exactly happened to that crane.”

Bell considered the offer and despite having no stake in the crate’s fate once on English soil, he agreed and sent the man off to the radio shack.

“You don’t ever quit, do you?” Eddie remarked, resting his arthritic hands on the rail.

“I don’t have it in me,” Bell agreed.

“And that’s why you’re old man Van Dorn’s chief detective and I’m still grubbing around the docks like some greenhorn.”

Bell chuckled.

At Eastham, a short distance upriver from Liverpool, the *Duke of Monmouth* entered the Manchester Ship Canal through a tight-fitting set of locks. Such was the state of the tide that they needed to only be lifted a couple of feet before the water in the lock equalized with that of the canal which, when it first opened in 1894, made the city of Manchester an actual seaport, though it sat some thirty miles from the coast.

More first and second-class passengers were coming out to the decks to take in the sights now that the ship was no longer tossing them about. Many still looked a little sickly but most had color returning to their cheeks and obvious relief in their voices as any threat of a submarine attack was well and truly over.

The canal hugged the southern bank of the Mersey River, which remained busy with the tide still up and the sandbars and shoals buried deep under the water. At low tide, much of the

estuary was a great mud flat that in the right conditions could smell something awful. At points the canal was narrow enough that it felt they were sailing through earthen fields rather than on water. Bell felt he could lean over the rail and pluck a skeletal branch from a tree growing on the berm separating the canal from the river.

A detective all his adult life, Bell relied as much on instinct as he did on intellect, both of which he honed to a keen edge with every opportunity. He loved what he did and was therefore very good at his job. His instincts were telling him something his intellect said was unlikely but he listened to his gut all the same. He turned around and looked up to where the first-class passengers were enjoying their superior view of the Lancashire country side. He caught the blond woman watching him. He smiled as he saw a slight blush against her alabaster skin. Bell tipped his hat and she flustered for only a moment before regaining herself. She turned away with a look that managed to elevate her haughtiness to some form of high hauteur.

That brief exchange quickened his pulse the same as the first time he'd seen her.

Quickly though, reality intruded as a noxious smell enveloped the liner in a cloud that sent multiple passengers back into the salons and reception areas.

"Lord, that's awful," Eddie remarked. This from a man who'd once sorted through several tons of rotten oysters to find a gun used to kill a dockside security guard.

The *Duke of Monmouth* had passed around Weston Point and was approaching the docks at Runcorn. They were about nine miles from the sea. The air was heavy with coal smoke and the other odors of the industrial revolution but atop it was the farm smell of animal manure, but somehow it was much worse, like the noisome discharge of a diseased herd already in the throes of death.

Another ship was tied to the dock that ran parallel to the canal. She flew the Canadian Ensign, a predominantly red flag with the Union Jack in one corner and the Great Seal of Canada towards the center. She was an animal transporter about half way finished unloading hundreds of horses destined for the front and hundreds more sheep destined for the soldier's mess. The passage had to have been even worse for the animals than it had been for the passengers aboard the Duke of Monmouth because the quay was awash in loose dung.

Men with hand-pumped hoses were washing the treacle into the canal, but that did little to alleviate the cloying stench. All the horses Bell could see stood with their heads low, their tails motionless and their mien listless. The sheep that had already been unloaded and fenced inside temporary corrals bleated miserably, their once white coats stained down almost to the skin.

The cowboys who'd tended the animals all the way from Hallifax, sleeping near their stalls and keeping them fed and watered despite the rough seas, were struggling to keep their charges together. Only a few had mounts well enough to ride, leaving just a handful of the ranchers to coax the seasick animals into a semblance of a line so they could be herded to a nearby railhead. From there they would be transported to farms around the south of England where they would be acclimated and then trained to become war horses.

Bell had read somewhere that the British were losing around three hundred horses per day on the front. It was early March. He doubted any of the animals below on the pier would see the summer.

The *Monmouth* slid past the livestock transporter and came up against its pier, the harbor pilot working the ship's rudder and engine to ease the liner up against the dock with barely a

kiss. Below, workers with scarves tied over their noses and mouths because of the smell prepared to unload the ship.

Bell assumed that whatever cargo and passengers she'd return with to North America would be loaded at her regular slot back in Liverpool. Providing for a nation that was fielding millions of men in a foreign country to fight a war no one really wanted was an exercise in precision timing and industrial might on a scale never seen in all human history.

One group of men on the pier caught Bell's eye. A couple were obviously dockworkers but two looked different. They wore plain clothes but had the look of cops, sharp-eyed and situationally aware. They stood around an open back lorry with a canvas cover protecting the driver and passenger compartment. The stevedores smoked cigarettes while the two police guards scanned the ship. They knew he was coming in as a second-class passenger and so ignored the people on the top deck already getting ready to depart the ship via a long switchback set of gangways.

Second and the third-class passengers returning to Europe after working in America wouldn't disembark until the premiere passengers had all cleared customs and were on their way to London or wherever they were headed. Just by interpreting their body language, the British police recognized the two Van Dorn men slouched against the *Monmouth's* railing. While other passengers gawked at the sights of the harbor and the canal traffic still moving past or stared in fascination at the chaotic unloading of the horses, Bell and Eddie Tobin watched the cops.

The older of the two cops pointed in Bell's direction. In turn Bell pulled a slender flashlight that was no bigger than a cigar and used the non-standard AA batteries from his overcoat pocket and flashed the Morse code of his initials: Dot, dot. Dash, dot, dot, dot. IB.

The policeman acknowledged the gesture. Bell swung his gaze towards the *Duke of Monmouth*'s bow. The forward hatch had already been knocked open and an operator was standing by the mast derrick. Near him was the ship's third officer, as previously arranged when the assignment had been discussed with the ship's owner and captain. Bell's cargo would be the first off the ship and the police in charge to receive it would be well on their way before anyone else cleared customs with their luggage.

As the crane hook vanished into the hold, Eddie nudged Bell and pointed at something happening on the dock. "Hey, Bossman, what is that thing?" he asked.

Bell wasn't sure. It was a wheeled tower made of metal struts with a ramp that spiraled down from the top all the way to the ground. The floor and outer wall of the helical were made of individual rollers that would spin freely if something were to pass over them or bump against them in the case of the outer wall.

"If I'd have to guess," Bell said as the odd tower was wheeled closer to the ship, "it's some Rube Goldbergian contraption for unloading steamer trunks. A guy on the ship sets a trunk on top and with a little shove it coils down and around the ramp until it reaches the bottom and another stevedore is there ready to heave it onto a waiting truck. If you notice, the struts can be jacked up or down depending on how high up on the ship the trunk storage compartments are."

"Damned clever."

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Bell said. "The Brits are facing a massive labor shortage with all their men off in the trenches, so they need to get creative."

Dockworkers pushed the unloading ramp towards the ship while the crate Bell and Eddie had been hired to protect rose from the forward hold. It looked like a standard packing crate,

maybe with thicker than average wood but unremarkable in all respects. Once the crate was high enough to clear the ship's rail, the boom was swung outward enough for it to lower the package directly onto the waiting truck. The two cops stepped back as the stevedore's craned their necks back and reached up with their arms to guide the load into position.

As soon as the crate landed on the truck's open bed, a carefully set trap was sprung.