

STEPHEN HENIGHAN
ONE NIGHT IN HER LIFE

England, 1912

AFTER HIS FATHER BECAME A PASTOR at the First Baptist Church in Port Byron, New York, Sidney decided to take orders and join him. As he explained to his domineering Victorian grandfather, from whom he hoped to elicit a donation for his religious work: "I've earned a most enviable reputation for preaching, and I dare say I can lend him a hand. We're spreading the Lord's word."

"I suppose it suits you to wear a gown," his grandfather replied. As though impatient, he added: "When are you leaving?"

"On the tenth of April. I've secured a cabin in a vessel where I'll have ample space to convey my parents' belongings to America."

"Come with me," his grandfather said. "I have something for you."

Sidney followed him back to the main hall of the family estate. They walked past the black wrought-iron railing on the veranda and the coal fire in the front room. In his bedroom, his grandfather circumvented the hip bath. By the wispy, acrid light of a gas lamp he opened the bottom drawer of his chest and handed Sidney a pair of new long johns produced at his textile factory.

"They say winters can be jolly cold in the state of New York," he laughed. "Long johns are all you're getting from me, and you'll be thankful for them!"

Two weeks later Sidney caught the train to Southampton with his parents' belongings. He was met at the docks by his Aunt Ruth, who was pleased to see him leave. Sidney's grandfather had driven away any potential suitors, leaving her unmarried, and she hoped to survive old age on her inheritance.

"My dear Sidney, two girls I know are on your crossing. I'm placing

them in your charge.” A dark-haired girl with a low-brimmed hat and a bright smile appeared. “This is Miss Marion Wright, who is travelling to New York to join her fiancé.”

Miss Wright turned to introduce a woman in her thirties. “And this is my friend Miss Kate Buss. She’s travelling to California to marry her fiancé. I shall be sure to keep Kate by my side; otherwise, I’m certain you’ll make love to me!”

Sidney fell silent. He had never made love to a girl—not even in the innocent sense these words had in 1912. At the age of twenty-five, he had met many girls he admired and whose polish he yearned to equal, but he was still waiting to meet a girl he wished to court.

When he showed his second-class passage at the top of the gangway, a gruff purser read out: “The Reverend Mr. Sidney Clarence Stuart Collett. That’s a mouthful! What say we put you down as Mr. Stuart Collett?”

“All right,” Sidney mumbled, though he never used this name.

Miss Wright and Miss Buss giggled. He hoped these girls wouldn’t follow him around. He had been planning to spend the voyage in his cabin with the trunk that contained his treasures. He had buried his grandfather’s long johns beneath fine silks—garments in which, afforded the privacy of a cabin, he could luxuriate for hours and feel the spirit of the Lord.

At a hymnal service in the second-class lounge the evening before the ship set sail, Miss Wright, her dark hair loose, sang

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd’st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

Watching her, Sidney felt the hollowed-out admiration that certain young women inspired in him. He did not desire Miss Wright, but he envied her soaring voice and her elegance.

The start of the voyage was uneventful, and Miss Wright and Miss Buss proved to be a credit to Sidney. Older men took him seriously on learning that the young ladies were in his charge, and Sidney basked in these gentlemen’s attention.

As the ship steamed across the Atlantic, Sidney watched the sunsets grow ever more beautiful. He was convinced that the Lord was heralding the work he would do in America.

One night he was awoken by a shock, as though an impact had shuddered through his whole body and then rebounded. Confused, he got to his feet, put on his clothes, and went out on deck. People milled about in the icy gusts, sharing rumours about what had happened. The ocean, heaving in the darkness, terrified him.

Men rushed to ready the lifeboats.

“She’s not sinking, is she?”

“Women and children first,” the stout gentleman beside him said. “A man’s duty is to go last or go down with the ship.”

Duty! His duty was to Miss Wright, Miss Buss, and the parishioners at the First Baptist Church in Port Byron, New York, who were waiting to hear the Lord’s word. He thumped on the doors of the young women’s cabins. “They’re readying the lifeboats. We must abandon ship!”

He helped them on deck. His faith had not prepared him for the surging and tossing of the endless black ocean. This was not how he had wished to meet the Lord!

His legs trembled as he led the ladies to a lifeboat. Women and children were scrambling in, overseen by an officer who waved them to their places with a revolver.

Miss Wright and Miss Buss entered the lifeboat.

The officer raised his revolver. “Your duty . . .”

“My duty is to the young ladies in my charge!”

The officer thrust his revolver against Sidney’s chest.

Miss Wright closed her eyes. “I can’t bear to see people being turned away!”

Sidney returned to his cabin. His body hot with fear, though frozen by the wind, he opened his trunk and reached for the comfort of his silks. He took off all his clothes, including his long johns, and put on thick woolen stockings and a sweeping gown. As the ship lurched, she selected a shawl, high-heeled shoes, and a hat. She pulled the hat down around her ears, as Miss Wright did, and stuffed the other clothes into a satchel that she slung over her shoulder.

She left her cabin and paraded the deck.



Willy Stöwer, *Der Untergang der Titanic* (Titanic Sinking, 1912)

“This way, madam,” a man said, taking her by the elbow and leading her to a lifeboat. The officer waved her past with his revolver, and a few minutes later the lifeboat was lowered into the Atlantic.

When the trembling, frostbitten passengers were rescued by the *Carpathia*, a man with a list asked him his name.

“Collett,” he squeaked.

“There’s been a mistake,” the man said. “It says here ‘Mr. Stuart Collett.’ I guess it should be ‘Mrs.’”

That was the name that appeared on the list of survivors printed in the newspapers. When her father read the list, he decreed that Sidney would never preach again, as Americans could not respect a coward. Instead, Sidney was sent to Denison University in Granville, Ohio, to receive a North American education.

Changing trains in New York City, Sidney could not help but slip out of Grand Central Station to buy a dress. One night at Denison, she put it on and stood at the window, imagining walking along the street below.

Out on the street, a rawboned boy stared up from beneath a lighted lamp.

The next night the boy came to his door, his big hands dangling as though he didn’t know what to do with them. He was an appealing lad with a Scandinavian look about him.

Without knowing why, Sidney quickly changed into the dress.

When she opened the door, six boys in masks broke into her room and held her down on the floor. She screamed at the top of her lungs. The young men opened her dresser, pulled her long johns out of the top drawer, and stuffed them into her mouth.

She fought for breath, her movements slowing.

Then the boys branded her forehead with nitrate of silver.

Sidney left Granville and returned to Port Byron. His father sent him to a doctor, who applied acid to remove the marks left by the silver nitrate, but it only made his disfigurement worse. When Americans asked about his face, he said he had gotten frostbite escaping from the *Titanic*.

Sidney returned to England and married a dour lady whose Christian principle it was to disdain appearances. After Grandfather’s death, his eldest son, Sir Charles Collett, became head of the family. Sir Charles made a point

of honour of banning Sidney from the family estate and excluding him from family gatherings. When asked why Sidney was excluded, he explained: “If he were a man, he would have gone down with his ship!”

Sidney passed away in 1941, his death ignored amid the destruction of the London Blitz. He left no child or inheritance behind—only a closet full of dresses that his wife donated to a Church of England charity, claiming they belonged to her.