

At Sea

Was the disappearance of Armand de Potter an accident?

By Joanna Scott



SETTING SAIL? Armand de Potter traveled to Constantinople (shown here in a family photograph) as part of his life as an antiquities collector before boarding the *Regele Carol* (shown here in a 1916 postcard), the ship from which he disappeared.

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It is close to midnight on the *Regele Carol*. The last of the passengers have finally returned to their rooms, the stewards have stacked the deck chairs, and Armand is alone at the rail, searching the darkness in an effort to make out the coast of the nearest island. By his calculations, Lemnos should be a half mile off their starboard side, close enough to swim to if the steamer foundered. But he isn't worried that the steamer will founder, not tonight, not with the sea perfectly calm, the sky starlit, the breeze barely strong enough to disperse the smoke from his pipe.

He pictures his wife bundled in blankets in her hotel room in Lausanne, the window open a crack to let in the cool night air. In the morning she'll ring for room service and enjoy her tea and brioche in bed. Later she will walk into town to shop with Victor, or maybe they'll take a stroll along the Esplanade de Montbenon and have lunch on the terrace at La Grotte.

If he'd had the foresight to recognize in the midst of his foolishness that his actions would lead him here, to the rail of the *Regele Carol*, he would have attempted to design a different outcome, including joining his wife and son tomorrow for lunch at La Grotte before boarding the train to return to Cannes. Instead he is compelled to stick to the original plan, to keep on leaning against the rail, to lean a little more and a little more, not far enough to fall, but far enough for his pencil to slip from his breast pocket and plummet into the boiling foam below.

He feels a momentary pang but then reminds himself that he won't be needing his pencil anymore. He won't be needing much of anything where he's going. He won't need his pipe. He won't need his buttermilk dress coat trimmed with silk lapels. He won't even need his hat.

He's not sure which his wife will receive first: his last two letters or the official notice that he is missing at sea. He expects that she will weep for the appropriate period, perhaps even longer. But she is a resourceful woman, and sooner or later she will dry her eyes. After taking stock of her new circumstances, she will rebuild her life and watch over her son at Grand Bois.

In the shorter of his last two letters to her, he included instructions on how to handle the estate. He couldn't bring himself to warn her, however, that when she attempts to withdraw money from the Crédit Lyonnais she will find the account has been closed, and then when she continues to the Société Générale, she will discover that their joint account contains far less than she thought and their fortune has shrunk to almost nothing. Divesting all their remaining assets won't satisfy the creditors clamoring for payment. Only the sale of the De Potter Collection at its full value, along with the ample indemnity from his paid-up life insurance policy, will enable his wife and son to remain in their beloved home.

He'd tucked the photograph of them into his pocket, and he takes it out now to examine it. Aimée with her funny topknot the size of an acorn. Victor with his melancholy eyes. Is it possible that he would never see them again? Why, it's very possible! See how possible it is?

He glances over his shoulder to check that the deck behind him is still empty. He looks toward the wall that hides the bridge from view to confirm once more that the quartermaster on watch can't see him. Shadows moving below the light on the front deck catch his attention; he traces them up a pole to a pair of flags fluttering in the light wind. This, he tells himself, is as good a time as any to make his exit, and he would, he will . . . except that right then he hears a quick, muted thud that could have come from the interior of the ship

or might signify that somewhere nearby a door has been opened and swung shut again.

He looks around to see if he has company. A moment later he thinks he hears the same thud again, but it is fainter this time, and he wonders if he'd been mistaken. No one is in sight. Still, he is flustered.


He takes a puff from his pipe to steady his nerves and looks down at the water. As he watches the white froth roll away from the hull into the night, breaking into patches and dissolving into the same wine-dark sea that the ancients sailed, the bitter thought comes to him that they might be passing over a sunken galley full of looted treasures.

He is sorry to have created such a mess for his dear wife to clean up. That it has come to this and he must cause his family such anguish in order to protect their happiness is a reality as absurd as it is unavoidable. He is teetering above the ocean, about to fly away from his life on the presumption that he must take responsibility, he must make sure his creditors are paid, he must remove himself as the target of his enemies and keep his family from being turned out of their home—he can accomplish all this with one simple action, shattering the surface that hides death from human consciousness, subjecting himself to the cruelest agony because he must, he must . . . good God, he must pull himself together!

He reaches for his pocket watch before remembering that he left it in the trunk in his room. He turns to see if the clock on the wooden pedestal inside the unlit dining room is visible through the window behind him. He can't see the clock, but he does notice the steward and stewardess embracing near the funnel on the upper deck, locked in a kiss.

When did they arrive? Everybody is supposed to be in bed by now. It is essential that his last act go unwitnessed. If the couple looks up just as he is throwing himself overboard, they will alert the crew and try to save him. Imagine being reeled back onto the ship, flopping and sputtering while passengers and crew gather round! Even if they don't succeed in saving him, they will be asked for a full report of the incident, and their testimony would be enough proof that Armand de Potter's death at sea wasn't accidental.

He wouldn't have predicted that love would get in the way—love, with its impractical hope. Love is the reason he is standing here. How he loves his wife and son and wants only to protect them. How jealous he is of the young couple kissing on the upper deck.

He could go to the back of the boat, where the couple wouldn't be able to see him. But in truth he is relieved that they have intruded into the scene he has so carefully arranged. He is reassured by the evidence that the two young people are persisting in their devotion, despite all the obstacles the world has thrown in their way, and he doesn't mind if he has to wait for them to get their fill of each other before he proceeds with his plan. On this journey he won't miss a connection just because he is a little late. Keep kissing, he would like to urge the couple, kiss for as long as it pleases you. Though it's unusual for him, the gentleman leaning against the rail of the *Regele Carol* is not in any hurry. 

Tour the Tour

An exhibition based on Joanna Scott's novel, *De Potter's Grand Tour*, and the historical materials saved by her family that Scott used in her research for the book will be on display at Rush Rhees Library this spring. *To Travel Is to Live: Joanna Scott's De Potter's Grand Tour* will be on view in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections from January 10 through May 10. For hours and more information visit: <http://www.library.rochester.edu/rbscp>.