

## The Turn of a Card

by Senan Molony

### ***Titanic Research***

Wednesday 25 November 2009

HERE is the Two of Hearts&hellip; signed by three survivors of the sinking of the RMS *Titanic*.

on Sunday April 21, 1912.

It seems richly symbolic of the hand dealt by fate that night &ndash; depicting as it does how three men survived, and one died, on the turn of a card.

This is how the reported the story:

**THREE LIVE OF FOUR  
THAT WERE AT BRIDGE**

From the Interrupted  
Game.

**AMERICAN PLAYER LOST**

The Three Frenchmen Autograph the Pack for Souvenirs.



*Titanic*

*The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, which he had taken to read on board the liner.

He also had the remarkable experience of remaining in the water forty minutes without having his monocle displaced.

In describing the scene that took place later, he said:

"When three-quarters of a mile away we stopped. The spectacle before our eyes was in its way magnificent. In a very calm sea, beneath a sky moonless but sown with millions of stars, the enormous lay on the water, illuminated from the water line to the boat deck. The bow was slowly sinking into the black water."

(*New York Sun*

The article discloses a fact not known in modern times &ndash; that signed cards from the very pack saved off the were posted to friends in France. Remarkably, none of these souvenirs &ndash; to the best of knowledge &ndash; has ever turned up publicly for sale or auction.

's family has disappeared in the intervening decades. And nobody knows of the "friends" who may have received others.

The cards were a gilt-edged variety manufactured for the White Star Line by Goodall & son Ltd of London. The

FRENCHMEN'S ACCOUNT.  
PASSENGERS' FAITH IN THE SHIP.

In a special edition the *Matin* published the following narrative signed by three French survivors of the disaster—M. Pierre Maréchal, an aviator; M. Omont, a manufacturer of Havre; and M. Chèvre, a sculptor :—

We were quietly playing auction bridge with a Mr. Smith, of Philadelphia, when we heard a violent noise similar to that produced by the screw racing. We were startled and looked at one another under the impression that a serious accident had happened. We did not, however, think for a moment of a catastrophe, but through the portholes we saw ice rubbing against the ship's sides. We rushed on deck and saw that the Titanic had a tremendous list. There was everywhere a momentary panic, but it speedily subsided. To the inquiries of a lady one of the ship's officers caustically replied, "Don't be afraid; we are only cutting a whale in two." Confidence was quickly restored, all being convinced that the Titanic could not founder. Captain Smith nevertheless appeared nervous; he came down on deck chewing a toothpick. "Let every one," he said, "put on a life-

*Le Matin*. This account was translated into English and subsequently carried in *The Times*. It referred to them each as 'M. (surname),' which is nothing more than 'Monsieur,' equivalent to the 'Mr' prefix in English. The

The account repeats the fact that they were playing bridge:

"We were quietly playing auction bridge with a Mr Smith from Philadelphia,

when we heard a violent noise, similar to that produced by the screw racing. We were startled and looked at one another under the impression that a serious accident had happened. We did not, however, think for a catastrophe, but through the portholes we saw ice rubbing against the ship's sides. We rushed on deck and saw that the had a tremendous list. There was everywhere a momentary panic, but it speedily subsided."

After telling the rest of the story, the piece concluded:

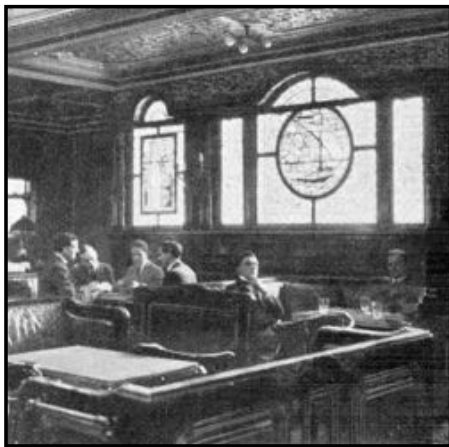
*Sherlock  
Holmes*

There was no mention of the pack of cards, but this is surely insignificant as the had proved its existence. Such treasures would be certain auction 'hot cakes' today. They are intrinsically emblematic of the uncertain vagaries in the deadly game of chance enacted that night &ndash; when icebergs were trumps.

The illustrated Two of Hearts card carries the word  
'*Carpathia* .'

*Titanic.*"

No mention is made of the fourth person at table. Obviously Lucien Smith was not in a position to sign the card, but he is not remembered upon its face.



It is as if he were the dummy in the game of bridge they were playing.

Only one player can win the auction in a game of bridge. Thereafter their partner's hand is displayed face-up on the table for all to see, and the winning bidder directs the play out of that hand (dummy).

It's impossible to know who partnered whom, but in bridge notation the partners are known by the pairs North & South and East & West.

If the names of the four players, and the order of partners, were to be considered alphabetically &ndash; purely whimsically, and for the fun of the game &ndash; then

**White Star Line publicity picture shows a card game**

in the corner of the smoking room aboard the *Baltic*

would be partnered with Smith, the American, as East and West. Rather an appropriate combination, considering their nationalities.

Hearts is the second highest-ranking suit. A bid of 'two hearts' would be a fairly standard winning contract, requiring the successful bidder to win two tricks over the standard seven (meaning nine tricks out of 13).

A trick comprises four cards, one played by each of the quartet, with the winning bidder directing dummy. A player who becomes dummy would frequently excuse themselves in this situation, going to have a cigarette, pour a drink or fetch food.

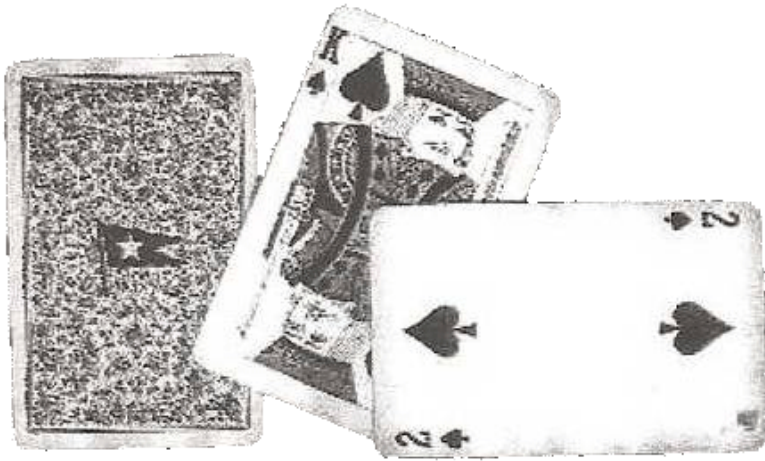
He could also be the first to collect a little ice.



and Omont

There is no evidence, of course, as to the nature of the specific game being played, except that one was underway. We do not know if hearts were trumps, or if any individual was dummy. Perhaps the bidding process had not been concluded.

But assuming the auction process was still underway, it would be all too easy! Unplayed hands placed face downwards could be gathered up in the order of North, East, South and West &ndash; the order in which players must be sitting so that both sets of partners face each other.



Dealing 13 cards 'off the top' from the pack to each player in turn would allow the game to be exactly resumed on the — had all the players survived, and had they wanted to return to aimless and amusing pastimes after the great trauma they had endured.

But now comes an interesting consideration.

It may be odd, even ghoulish, to imagine — but since Smith did not survive, he could become the de facto dummy on the Cunarder.

Omont would then literally be playing the dead man's hand.

There is a reason meanwhile for contemplating, wistfully, that the auction might already have been won and the game underway.

The winning bidder always directs the game, controlling the cards out of dummy.

now signs.

If the cards are being signed according to the notation and etiquette of the game of bridge — and it would be very appropriate to think they were - then it would be fitting if a dash or a space were to be inserted between the names where Smith's signature should go.



Lucien Smith

The sequence is always N, E, S, W. If Smith had been East, for example, a sequence conforming to the card game would have shown Signature, dash, Signature, Signature. Smith would be announcing a "pass" from beyond his watery grave.

Instead there are three signatures in strict order. This might also subtly suggest that Smith was indeed West in the game of bridge being played by these gentlemen on the that night.

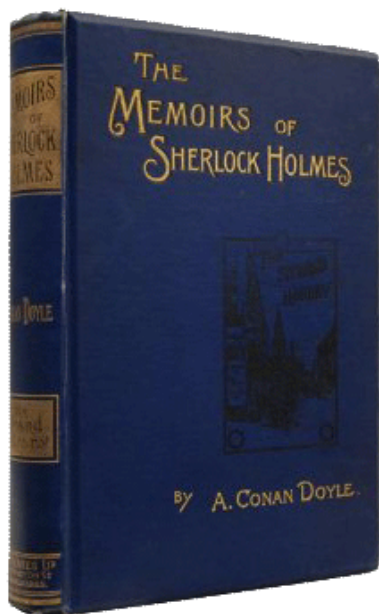
One thing is sure - while they all had been going west, Smith was the sole card player to have 'gone west' by daylight.

Naturally, all this is a case of 'Gilding the Lily'- in what is an already gripping and tragic human-interest story, garlanded with gaming cards.

But there's no harm in wondering &ndash; after all, it was Lewis Carroll in And one of the pair in this exercise was the Two of Hearts.

Yet there is also a serious point in all this. We know, unfortunately, what befell poor Smith, whose wife subsequently gave birth to their baby. But what on earth became of all these signed cards sent to friends?

## THE MYSTERY OF THE PROFESSOR'S WHEREABOUTS *Including* THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE BERG IN THE NIGHT-TIME



What became of the book, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, which metaphorically allowed the famous detective to escape from the sinking &ndash; even if a modern book, a Holmes pastiche, would put him back on it?\*

But there are two sinkings in separate stories in this volume &ndash; involving vessels named the and *Norah Creina*.

In the latter case, three men leave a dead man &ndash; and escape in a rowboat.

And in the very last story, *The Final Problem*, Holmes himself goes down to a torrential demise in the Reichenbach Falls.

Sherlock Holmes first editions fetch commanding prices. One that had cheated destruction in the sinking of the would be worth a fortune.

\* *Sherlock Holmes and the Titanic Tragedy*, William Seil, Breese Books, 1999

With thanks to Daniel Dupont and Olivier Mendez of the

Senan Molony's new book *Titanic Scandal: The Trial of the Mount Temple* is now available, published by Amberley Books.

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Courtesy of Senan Molony

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