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Genie and Robert do Europe

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Growing up, I was intrigued by the stories I heard about my great-grandmother, who died two years before I was born. About my grandfather's "natural father" (as they used to say) we knew almost nothing; he'd disappeared from the scene before my grandfather was five years old, and a few years later my grandfather was adopted by his mother's second husband and his name legally changed from Clarke to Tuttle. Family lore claimed Queen Victoria had appointed the elder Clarke as Physician to the Court of St James.

As for great-grandmother—Eugenia Tuttle (neé Ash)—she sounded like quite the character; glamorous, widely traveled, prone to premonitions (one of which saved her from taking the *Titanic*), and she burned through three husbands and appeared in (at least) three silent movies. The legacy of her stories, among family folklore, were more than enough to fire my imagination. But, there were more to come.

According to my aunt, who grew up hearing Genie's stories, she "crossed the Atlantic 17 times." That number doesn't make sense for someone who was born and died in the United States (unless she also traveled at least once around the world, but surely that would have been something to brag about?) but never mind. In my research into her life, I've found evidence of at least eight trips to Europe (sixteen Atlantic crossings between 1891 and 1913). There might have been more!

Between 1907 and 1913 these trips were paid for, and mostly made with, her second husband, Clarence Tuttle. They were luxurious holidays that allowed Genie to escape the worst of Chicago winters and enjoy breaks in Paris or Rome, once traveling as far as Egypt. But her first trip abroad, with her first husband and their infant son, was slightly different. He was on the lam.

My grandfather's father, Robert Elliott Clarke, was born in New York in 1855, the son of Anglo-Irish immigrants. After leaving

school (at about fourteen), he worked as a clerk in his father's dry goods store in Brooklyn until his father felt the call to become a lay Methodist preacher and moved the family to Kansas. The land of Toto and Oz stood starkly different from that of New York City with scores of immigrants and burgeoning city streets filled with unknown faces. But how long the teenaged Robert stuck around, or what he did through the 1870s, may never be known.

In 1880, a confident and charming young man turned up in Philadelphia, advertising himself as R. Elliott Clarke, a teacher of elocution and vocal culture. After a while, he promoted a new school, hired teachers, collected fees, then fled his creditors. He turned up later in Paris, attempting some similar scam, then back to New York as a student at Columbia College Law School. In Chicago, in 1886, aged thirty, he met and married twenty-year-old Eugenia Ash of Washington, D.C. (I have no idea what either of them were doing in Chicago.).

He was always on the move, and now Genie followed suit, venturing from Chicago to Missouri to San Francisco, to Baltimore, where my grandfather (their only child) was born in 1889, and then back to Genie's hometown of Washington, D.C.

These are some of the headlines from Washington and New York papers, February 20 and 21, 1891:

> *Robert E. Clarke Disappears / He Left Many Checks, but No Bank Account*
> *His Wildcat Schemes / They Were Many and Clever, and Their Promoter Has Skipped*
> *The Remarkable Career of a Daring Swindler / Police Looking For Him*
>
> *From The Washington Post, Feb. 21, 1891:*
> Robert E. Clarke left Washington Thursday for Baltimore, telling his wife he would be back that evening. He has not returned, and many people are anxious about him. Mrs. Clarke, who is a remarkably pretty little lady – not much more than a girl, although she and Mr. Clarke have been married three or four years, and have a handsome child—has been made dangerously ill by her husband's conduct.
> The name of Robert E. Clarke, of Robert E. Clarke & Co. 'investment and real estate brokers' is familiar to

> newspaper readers everywhere. For months past his advertisements have been among the most conspicuous in all the great newspapers of Northern cities, as well as those of Washington.
>
> He did an enormous business and must have made a great deal of money, for his office was crowded during the business hours.
> His pervasive advertising brought all sorts of people to him, and he had so many schemes for people to invest in that he was able to offer something to almost everybody's taste.

It is not clear how much money my ancestor made from his schemes. I can find no reports of individuals reporting his deception or trying to sue him to regain their losses, suggesting that, individually, they were small. His bigger problem was debt. He owed the New York Sun alone $1,501; the New York Press and New York News also sent representatives to make claims; Washington daily papers—and the Sunday Herald which carried a full-page ad for Robert E. Clarke & Co. two days after his disappearance—kept quiet about the extent of their losses.

There was speculation that he had escaped to Canada, but in fact, a few weeks later he was, along with Genie and little Robbie, aboard the *Rugia*, a steamship on the Hamburg-American Packet Company which boasted the fastest times between New York and Hamburg. For $45 the little family could travel first class to Europe and remain safely out of reach of American creditors.

From Hamburg, they went to Berlin, 178 miles away. Americans did not generally need passports, but the situation in Germany at that time required all foreigners to register with the police within six days of arrival, presenting valid I.D. Thus, Robert Elliott Clarke applied for a passport (which also covered his wife and child) at the US Legation on April 6th.

Berlin was a popular destination for budget-conscious Americans, with an "American colony" of close to 2,000 expatriates. It was a clean, modern city, and much cheaper than London. Mark Twain, who lived in Berlin with his family in 1891-92, compared it to Chicago, although he didn't care for German bureaucracy or the fact

that the Germans taxed his American income.

If the Clarkes were on a budget, Berlin must have seemed a solid choice; the presence of other Americans was a requirement for Robert to earn a living, either legally as a voice instructor, or through some variety of confidence trick. No foreigner could expect to successfully con the locals, especially not in Berlin, where all aspects of life were highly regulated. Even the law-abiding Mark Twain had a run-in with the police for not filling in all the proper forms.

But if he could stay on the right side of the law, there was much to interest Robert. Berlin was the home of a medical school attracting American students. It is possible that Robert, a former law student, now toyed with the idea of becoming a physician, and attended lectures (which were free to audit). If the language defeated him, he might have hung out with English-speaking students.

I don't know when they left Berlin, but at some point, they moved to Paris. Family lore regarding their lifestyle there suggests they weren't broke: Genie had her French maid, and Robbie, a nanny who taught him French, so Robert must have found some way to make money. Possibly his new scheme blew up in his face. In 1894 Genie left her husband, took their son back to America, and managed to get a quickie divorce.

But because she stayed with her mother in Washington, Robert was able to find her and talked her into taking him back. They were re-united in Holy Matrimony by a Methodist minister in Boston on December 3rd, 1894, before sailing back to Europe.

I don't know what happened there, but a few months later the Clarkes headed for New York again, departing Southampton on April 4, 1895, onboard the *Manitoba*. One single page—the customs list of passengers, filed by the ship's master, R. Griffith, on April 16, 1895—is a gold-mine in comparison to what I know about the previous four months. Finally, the facts!

The *Manitoba*, built by Harland & Wolff of Belfast, was launched on 28 January 1892. She was a 5,670 gross ton ship, with one funnel (red with a black top), four masts, and a single screw engine. Speed: 13 knots.

The *Manitoba* was owned by the Atlantic Transport Line, which offered only first-class accommodation on the London-New York run. It wasn't cheap – one-way fare between $50 and $85 per adult – but it had an excellent reputation for a high standard of service, food, and comfort. Passengers were expected to enjoy each other's company as if they were at a country house party. In 1898, Mrs. Julia Potwin, who kept a diary of her first voyage abroad, described passengers and crew together as resembling one big, happy family with the Captain as "Papa." Richard Griffith, an experienced seaman who played "Papa" on the April 1895 voyage, was described a few years later (when he went down with a different ship) as "a capable man, of good nerve and not excitable."

In all, there were twenty-six passengers – fourteen from England, twelve Americans, pretty evenly divided between male and female. Robbie, at five, was not the youngest – Harold Churchill was only two years old. Apart from two teenagers, Eugenia at twenty-eight was the youngest of the women. The men included doctors, lawyers, merchants, an actor and the independently wealthy.

Bugle-calls summoned them three times a day to lavish, multi-course meals served family-style at long tables. There was no professional entertainment, but there was a Music Room as well as a Library, and evenings filled with a mixture of singing, dancing, and amateur dramatics in addition to games and general conversation. Divine Service was held every Sunday morning in the dining saloon, led by the ship's commander, who read the Church of England services. There were prayers for President Grover Cleveland and Queen Victoria, and they sang hymns. Easter Sunday fell that year on April 14th, while they were still at sea.

The Clarkes had just one piece of luggage. It was probably a large trunk—their handbags would not have been listed—but considering that it contained all their worldly goods, and by comparison with others on board, they were traveling very light. The Churchill family (an English importer, two female relatives, and an infant) had nine pieces of stowed luggage. An English couple took sixteen pieces for a planned visit of two months. There was just one other passenger with a single piece: actor and writer Rudolph de Cordova, who was on his way to New York to resume work with his partner, writing a Broadway play.

I wonder if in later years, Rudolph and Genie remembered their brief acquaintance on this voyage and if they ever met again. She moved to California in 1914, by which time he was working in the motion picture industry – might he have helped her to get her first screen role?

Besides the actor, there were three other people I find interesting to think of in connection with my great-grandmother. Dr. Archibald Keightly, his wife Julia W. L. Keightly, and their close friend, Mrs. Alice Leighton Cleather formed a group described, in the New York Tribune of April 21, 1895, as "a delegation of three prominent English Theosophists."

They were members of the "inner circle" of the Theosophical Society who had personally known Madame Blavatsky and were on their way to attend the annual meeting of the American section, held in Boston at the end of April.

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York City on September 1875 by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB), Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and William Q. Judge, amongst others. Blavatsky was a Russian mystic who emigrated to the U.S. in 1873. She claimed to be in touch with "the Masters" – an immortal brotherhood of adepts dedicated to preserving and passing on their esoteric wisdom.

Dr. Keightly was responsible for bringing Madame H.P. Blavatsky from America to Britain, where he and his Uncle Bertram funded her living expenses, and helped by typing and correcting her manuscript of *The Secret Doctrine*, as well as supervising its publication.

I remember – although I never read it – there was an old copy of *The Secret Doctrine* in the bookcase in my childhood home. It was probably one of the books my father inherited from his father – maybe he inherited it from his mother? It doesn't seem like a book my grandfather would have bought for himself! Undoubtedly, Genie would have been interested in Theosophy, a philosophical system which emphasizes the fundamental similarities of all major religions and teaches the importance of spiritual growth, believing that there are cosmic cycles of evolution to release the potential of consciousness. I know she was raised a Baptist and was a dedicated church-goer in her later years, but she also believed that she possessed psychic powers,

was highly superstitious and had long possessed an interest in "ancient wisdom." I don't know how evangelical Theosophists might have been, but surely Genie would have had some deep and influential conversations with the two women in the group.

Mrs. Keightly, born Julia Wharton Lewis Campbell forty years before, had been, as Mrs. Verplanck, a close associate of William Q. Judge (head of the Theosophical Society in America). She wrote under several pen names, including "Jasper Niemand." Her father, James Hepburn Campbell (the U.S. Minister to Sweden and Norway under President Lincoln), died in Wayne, Pennsylvania, while she was at sea.

Alice Leighton Cleather, 41, had also been close to HPB and was also extremely wealthy. She was an active participant in the bitter in-fighting that went on over the direction Theosophy should take following the death of Madame Blavatsky, and she was responsible for establishing the Theosophical Library (aka HPB Memorial Library) in Toronto.

All of this material fires my imagination, but what interests me the most among the facts on the manifest is Robert's announced profession: Physician.

Was it a whim, or had he adopted a new persona as a way of making money after leaving Berlin – maybe in Paris (where, on November 1892, the French government had outlawed all amateur medical practitioners) or in London? Most passengers did not fill in that blank – there was no requirement for any traveler to have a profession.

This story from the New York Herald, December 16, 1895, tells what happened next:

> An army of creditors, great and small, are looking for G. Elliott Clark [sic], who until lately lived at No. 160 West Twenty-third street and who, it is said, had the letters "M.D." on his cards, although he did not openly practice as a physician. Along with the creditors are many stout persons, whom he had advertised to relieve of their fat, but who aver they are lighter only in their pockets.
>
> Mr. Clark is in London. Thither he went about three months ago, as silently as the tide goes out. At least that

> is the statement of Miss Henriette, of whom he rented apartments in Twenty-third street, and who is one of his largest creditors. Sometime before he left her house, his wife, with whom he did not live happily, took their little child and went to Washington and is now living with her parents there.

This time, Genie did not make the mistake of staying where her unwanted husband could find her. After a year's residence in Chicago, she was able to get a divorce.

As for Robert Elliott Clarke, he continued to call himself a doctor but avoided practicing medicine without a license. In 1902 he married Gussie Sheldon, a wealthy widow, and for almost a decade they lived comfortably in Boston. But by 1912, her money had run out.

While attempting to re-establish himself as a teacher of vocal culture, Robert met an English spinster, Miss Amy Perkins, a student of music and spiritualism. He told her he was an expert physician who had studied medicine in France, Germany, and England, and flattered her wildly. He said they were twin souls. He promised to buy her a car, a sealskin coat, a retinue of servants, and all the flowers she wanted. He claimed to be wealthy, but he just needed a little bit of money to get started building their dream home in California. She gave him $3,000 worth of bonds and later went out to Pasadena. But he was not there as promised, and she soon learned his other promises were equally worthless: he was not a doctor, not wealthy, and not single. She sued for the return of her bonds, but the money was gone. Robert's wife attempted to support them by baking and selling cakes, and he showed signs of increasing mental illness.

On March 23, 1920, Robert Elliott Clarke died of "General Paralysis (cerebral type)" – this was usually the result of syphilis— in Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The Medical Record (New York) of April 17, 1920 (Vol. 97, issue 16, page 657) recorded his death thusly: "Dr. Robert Elliott Clarke, at one time medical advisor to Queen Victoria, died March 27 at the Matteawan Hospital, where he had been a patient for two years. He was sixty-six years of age."

Clarke's only son had married a doctor's daughter. I imagine that his father-in-law saw the notice and brought it to his son-in-law's attention – and that this is the source of our family legend.

My grandfather might not have believed it if he had read the longer, more detailed obituary (written, I suspect, by Clarke's adoring, gullible second wife) that appeared in The Poughkeepsie Eagle-News on March 26, 1920. Here is part of it:

> Dr. Clarke was born in New York City, a son of the Right Rev. John Clarke, a prominent Methodist Episcopal clergyman. Although he never attended college, he was a perpetual student and a man of distinguished ability. The quality of his voice won him recognition in Europe while he was still a comparatively young man, and his fame as a physician became widespread after he had cured the Earl of Eldesley of a case of shaking palsy which the best medical men in England had tried in vain to overcome. In recognition of his success, Queen Victoria admitted Dr. Clarke to membership in her cabinet.