

Passage Into Fear

by Charles Caratti

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DEDICATION

To Marsi, who was there at every step of the way.

STORY OF THE PLAY

It is 1917, and three years into the worst war anyone has ever seen. Kate, a young American woman, is approached by an elderly dowager, Mrs. Lillian Merriweather, as they board a transcontinental train from Venice, Italy to Zurich, Switzerland. Mrs. Merriweather insists she knows of a sinister plot—with vast international repercussions— involving the other passengers. She tasks Kate with ensuring the authorities receive a secret message if she is unable to deliver it herself. When she promptly disappears, Kate teams up with Ida, a young war orphan. Together they work against time to discover and thwart the plan. Who can they trust and who is involved? The other passengers include an Austrian doctor hiding an immense secret, a ruthless German countess, a Member of Parliament and his wife, and Spanish gypsies. The solution to Miss Merriweather's disappearance ultimately has its roots in understanding the very causes and history of the war itself.

AWARDS AND HONORS

“Passage Into Fear” playwright Charles Caratti is a multiple award-winning author and journalist. “Passage” was initially commissioned in 2016 by a So Cal historical society to coincide with a California State University exhibit memorializing the 100th anniversary of World War I. “Passage” was also performed in 2018 over a successful eight-show run at San Diego's esteemed Balboa Park Veterans Historical Museum.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 m, 5 w, 1 girl)

KATE HEDLEY: A young American woman, passionate and self-absorbed, but a tireless advocate for justice when she perceives wrongdoing.

MRS. LILLIAN MERRIWEATHER: An older dowager-type with a somewhat dotty demeanor—think Miss Marple.

IDA: An adorable, precocious little girl, Belgian, with a slight French accent.

GEFAHR: The train's conductor/porter/waiter, projects bumbling, endearing tones, including physical/vaudevillian humor. Ideally speaks with a Cockney accent. (*Pronounced guh-FAR.*)

COUNTESS GEMEINSTEN: An older matriarch, extremely wealthy and opinionated—and doesn't care who knows it. (*'Gemeinsten' means 'most vile' in German.*)

DOCTOR KURT HILFE: A handsome, well-appointed young Swiss man, with a slight German accent.

MP RICHARD LEIGHTON: A middle-aged, distinguished-looking Member of Parliament. He has a beard.

VIVIAN LEIGHTON: An attractive, confident, British woman, Leighton's wife, ideally a few years younger.

ESMERALDA VALESCU: A middle-aged, Spanish woman who emigrated to America when she was young, a college professor of Romani culture and history.

FORDAL VALESCU: A Spanish gypsy, Esmeralda's younger brother.

MALE PASSENGER #1: Relatively older man. Used primarily to help fill out scenes and create red herrings.

MALE PASSENGER #2: Used primarily to help fill out scenes and create red herrings.

SETTING

EXTERIOR BOARDING PLATFORM – An in-line row of US flats spans the entire stage. Long, wide, train-style windows are painted across the center area of each flat, and storage compartments filled with suitcases, bags, and boxes are painted across the top. Windows and/or compartments may be framed by curtains (real or painted). One window, located center stage in the row of flats, must be open so that items can be thrown through it. This window can be in-line with the others or slightly 'bumped-out,' creating some depth in an otherwise straight line. The open window is framed by very light curtains, which constantly move (with the aid of a hidden fan) to depict train motion in all scenes except ACT I Scenes 1 and 8, and ACT II Scene 2. DS is a relatively open area where most of the action takes place. A large trunk or several smaller boxes are set up for the duration of the play on the SL floor area. A 'VENICE' sign has been placed on a stand or wall.

COUNTESS' PRIVATE TRAIN CAR: A seat is USC in front of the car's only open window. There is a small table with a teapot and cups. There is also a chair in the DS area.

DINING CAR: Four small tables with two opposing chairs each are set up along the DS edge of the stage, representing tables in the train's dining car. USC there is an emergency cord. Later there is a bar USC.

BAGGAGE CAR: The stage is dressed with several trunks and suitcases.

TRAIN EXTERIOR: Several haphazardly angled white crosses and off-kilter tombstones are set up DSL and DSR, establishing a graveyard setting.

ACT I

Prologue: The March to War

(AT RISE: A musical theme from the early 20th century plays to a dark stage. Afterwards, we hear a voice over.)

MERRIWEATHER: *(V.O.)* It was hot for heaven. The peace and prosperity promised by the young century had burned off like new the mist in the morning sun. 1917. The fourth year of the worst war anyone alive could remember or imagine. Four years of false starts, stillborn promises, tragic losses, unrelenting sorrow. In 1914 the Germans marched through Brussels, the Belgian capital. One reporter described the three-day procession of men and matériel as “something uncanny, inhuman, a force of nature like a landslide, a tidal wave, or lava sweeping down a mountain. It was not of this earth, but mysterious, ghostlike — the menace of a fog rolling toward you across the sea.” The fighting that soon ensued was ceaseless and indiscriminate, birthing weapons and combat techniques no human had ever experienced, all to feed a maelstrom borne of ancient animosities that could only be slaked by blood.

Scene 1: Escaping the War

(LIGHTS come up on exterior train station boarding platform at dusk. SFX: people chattering, trains whistling and chugging, then a few distant, muffled explosions. A small amount of train ‘steam’ (via fog machine) emits from SR, with a sound to match. A large trunk or several smaller boxes are set up on the SL floor. GEFAHR enters SL, hunched and harmless, with bags and suitcases in his hands and under each arm. He deposits the luggage DSR then looks SL, at a large, heavy-looking steamer trunk. The trunk is sitting on-end, another piece of luggage blocking the audience’s view of the trunk’s base. He walks to the trunk and begins a series of vain attempts to lift it while SFX: comical music plays.)

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GEFAHR: What's in 'ere?... *(Strains futilely, then grunts.)* ...a body?!

(GEFAHR kicks aside the bag in front of it, revealing that the trunk is on wheels. With a dry expression, he effortlessly rolls the trunk to DSR, repurposing it still on-end as a sort of conductor's station. Gefahr takes a small notebook from his pocket and checks the passenger manifest. SFX: train station, steam, and faint bombing sounds increase.)

GEFAHR: *(Cont'd.)* Train from Venice, Italy to Zurich, Switzerland with connections east with proper documents to Germany, France, Belgium, and Great Britain. Departing in 10 minutes! All abooooaaard! *(Takes a whistle from his pocket and blows it.)*

(SFX: British musical theme begins as RICHARD LEIGHTON enters SL, carrying two tickets and a newspaper tucked under one arm, and walks SR. GEFAHR meets him. They talk as they walk CS toward Gefahr's 'station.')

LEIGHTON: Well, that was something of a near thing, wasn't it? I was all set to turn in for the evening when that infernal bombing started.

GEFAHR: You can say that again, sir! The Austrians seem to be done with us for now, but I won't be happy until we're safely across the Swiss border.

LEIGHTON: Agreed. You look like a conductor. *(Holds out tickets.)* Do I give these to you?

GEFAHR: It's a short train, sir, so that makes me the conductor, the porter, the chef, the one who mixes your drinkie, tucks you in at night. And, yes... *(Amicably takes the tickets.)* ... I'll take that ticket. Name's Gefahr.

(VIVIAN LEIGHTON enters SL, accompanied by MALE PASSENGER #1 who is carrying several pieces of luggage. Both GEFAHR and LEIGHTON watch them make their way SR. Gefahr nudges Leighton with an elbow and gestures with his head.)

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GEFAHR: *(Cont'd.)* Speakin' of which. Now, there's somethin' I wouldn't mind tuckin' in at night! In fact, I wouldn't mind... you know... a little bit o' the old heave ho...!

LEIGHTON: *(Emits a low whistle.)* Oh, yes, she's fine. *(Sigh.)* Ah, these older men with their beautiful, younger wives. What is this poor man so desperately trying to prove? *(Conspiratorially.)* Let's find out!

(LEIGHTON and GEFAHR strike humorous, wolf-like poses. MALE PASSENGER #1 sets down the bags. NOTE: Before each speaks to her, Vivian must make gestures to both male passengers that are intimate enough to make the audience think either man might be her husband.)

MALE PASSENGER #1: Here we are. I was happy to be of help. Sorry for any inconvenience.

VIVIAN: That's alright. It certainly isn't your fault that Venice is so near the Austria-Hungary border!

MALE PASSENGER #1: *(Picks up the bags again.)* I'll take these on board for you, ma'am.

VIVIAN: Thank you very much.

(MALE PASSENGER #1 bows slightly and carries the luggage CS. He gives his ticket to a confused GEFAHR before entering the train SR. While VIVIAN fusses with her purse, MALE PASSENGER #2, also carrying bags, enters SL.)

LEIGHTON: *(Nudges GEFAHR with an elbow.)* Ah, here we go, now.

MALE PASSENGER #2: Here are the rest of your bags. I'll take them on the train.

VIVIAN: How kind of you.

(MALE PASSENGER #2 walks CS and gives his ticket to an even more confused GEFAHR before exiting SR. Finally, VIVIAN moves CS and embraces LEIGHTON. Gefahr takes off his hat and kneads it nervously.)

End of Freeview

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