

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

## THE MORRO CASTLE



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I think it's fair to say the Doctor's idea of a break is slightly different to mine – and by “the Doctor”, I mean this *current* Doctor and not the younger man I originally met in Lanzarote. That Doctor was fine. That Doctor was... well, fun.

So, how about a trip to Titan Three, to be a hermit? No, thank you. Fishing for Gumblejack somewhere really exotic? Well yeah, sure that *sounds* great doesn't it? But when he can only catch a pathetic specimen of a fish, we're soon off again (in what looks suspiciously like a huff).

OK, so, *yes* he did promise to take me home to see my family – that was nice of him, sure. And *yes*, he even wore a tailored black suit for the occasion, rather than that awful “Joseph's Technicolor *nightmare* coat” of his. But, of course he took me to the wrong time and of course it was the wrong part of the country... and of course things went wrong. Very, very wrong.

And the less said about Blackpool, the better.

So, I think you'll forgive me for being a little bit cynical when he suggested taking me to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century USA to witness a good time.

Prohibition America, he assured me, was a really interesting place. Well, how interesting could it be, I wondered sullenly, if you couldn't even buy liquor from the corner store?! And then he gave that infuriating look of superiority that he has when he knows something you don't. Or was it one of his generic looks of disapproval? Who knows?! Whichever it was, I decided to just ignore it and carry on, commenting that if prohibition America was so interesting, then why were we on a boat, at sea, rather than on dry land?

It turns out that the land was just that: 'dry' – but we were on the return leg of the route between New York and Havana that was popular for people wanting to holiday *and* drink alcohol. This was the proper stuff too, rather than the 'made in a bath-tub' liquor you got in dingy speak-easy bars.

The Doctor smiled and marvelled at the ingenuity of it all. I couldn't believe it: one minute he'd be getting all gooey at the sight of George Stephenson's Rocket, the next he'd be

riling against the Daleks... and now he was all agog at what was essentially a glorified booze cruise.

But, you know what? It was fun. Real fun. As a lot of the passengers on board were keen to keep reminding us, it was “*one helluva trip.*” Many of the people here were regulars and it goes without saying that you needed to have *money* in order to embark on a trip like this – this was 1934 after all. So, yeah, the people here were really *made*.

“1934?” the Doctor looked horrified as he repeated it in a hoarse whisper. “But prohibition ended last year. Well, in relative terms it was last year and...”

“Yes, Doctor,” I interjected, hoping to curtail what was probably one of his long diatribes about the web of time, causal nexuses and so on. No, I didn’t have a clue what he was going on about either and I quietly suspected that, half the time, neither did he.

“My dear Peri,” he spoke slowly and precisely as if I was a particularly dumb kid – God how I *hated* that, “if prohibition has ended then how come we are on a cruise whose very *purpose* is to very neatly circumvent the prohibition laws, hmmm?”

The rest of the passengers had already gotten used to this “eccentric Englishman” and most of them were too smashed to care what he said or thought, no matter how loud he was. Some city bigshot, who’d somehow managed to come out of the Wall Street crash on top, told us the end of prohibition meant nothing: *this cruise was tradition, dammit.* It was also the final night of the voyage and it was *party time!*

Well, more specifically, it was *dinner* time, not that most people seemed aware of that, given how they were behaving and all. Don’t ask me how, but the Doctor had gotten us a place on the captain’s table – “with all the great and the good, of course!” he told me.

One of the “great” and “good” people was part-slumped right next to me: a particularly obese, cigar-smoking, lecherous Manhattan businessman. You know the sort: they have a dribbling conversation with your chest, rather than your face? Anyway, he informed my chest and me that we were on board *The Morro Castle*, part of the *Ward Line of America* fleet of ships. And it really was great: all lavishly furnished... no expense spared... and in its four years of service it probably saw more drunken debauchery than most land-based establishments see in four decades.

Sitting to the other side of me, the Doctor found out it was Friday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1934. Due in port in New York at eight o’clock on the following morning. He told me this over and over in a low, serious whisper. Well, he actually said “Friday 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1934...” – funny how for an alien he always used the English way of announcing the date.

“So,” I sighed, eventually giving in to him, “what’s wrong? What happens then?”

Then he gave such a huge beaming smile that I couldn’t help but join him. “I have absolutely no idea! Isn’t that marvellous?” And he seemed genuinely pleased to be in blissful ignorance, for once.

The fat man to the right of me – I wish I could remember his name – was unhappy, drunk and complaining about the insult of being kept waiting by the absent Captain. The Doctor’s mood can change as if by the flick of a switch, and he went from content and happy to restless and curious. He really is never one to sit down and watch events unfold – he has to be at the center of things – so he was on his feet and striding off to investigate with surprising speed for a man of his size. And since I’m not one to remain next to a man with wandering, sausage-fingered hands, I joined him.

The Captain, we had discovered, was a popular man. Unfortunately, by the time we found him, he was popular and also very dead. Chief Officer William Warms tried to stop us from entering his cabin, but... well, you know what the Doctor is like: full of authority and bluster when the moment takes him. And being called the “Doctor” actually helps in situations like this.

Situations like *what*, you might ask. Well, apparently the Captain had his dinner delivered to his quarters earlier that evening but later felt unwell. Warms said it appeared to be a heart attack and the Doctor quickly agreed that, yes, it did *appear* that way. The emphasis was not lost of me: he was so fond of reminding me that appearances can be deceptive – and this was one such instance.

As he was leaning in for a closer examination of the body, the most extraordinary thing happened: flame leapt from the dead man’s belly and half his torso turned to ash in an instant. There was a “whoompf” of noise, like an old boiler firing up and an acrid smell in the air. A ball of glowing light hung in the air before us all, with tiny fingers of fire dancing about its surface. The only one of us not looking shocked and diving for cover – or a fire extinguisher – was the Doctor. Instead, he gave it a cheery “Hello!” – the sort of greeting you’d give to a really old friend on seeing them for the first time in years.

It was an eerie sight, but strangely mesmerising at the same time. Mind you, that’s true of fire in general, isn’t it? Hypnotic? It was totally enthralling, moving like a child’s spinning top made of flame. And then it gave one final spin and was gone through the floor, leaving the tiniest of scorch marks on the highly polished wooden surface.

The Doctor sniffed the air, then looked round the room. There was the tiniest hint of alarm on his face as he registered something I clearly hadn’t but I had other things on my mind right then. “What the hell was that thing?!” I asked after a moment when I found my voice. I tried to be calm about it all, but I suspect the question came out as a blurt of panic.

“Once again, I haven’t a clue!” said the Doctor cheerily, clambering to his feet. “But it’s not from round these here parts, that’s for sure!” he added, effecting the poorest Deep South accent I’ve ever heard. And also at the most inappropriate time.

“Doctor!” I hissed. “A man is dead here – barbecued to a crisp before our eyes! Show some respect!”

The Doctor’s face clouded at being spoken to like that and I braced myself for words of chastisement in return. But his manner changed and for a moment he seemed almost – I don’t know – *grateful* that I was there to remind him of the gravity of the situation. No, that’s not quite right – it was a reminder of the *humanity* of the situation. “You’re right of course, Peri. Come on! Chief Officer William Warms, you’re in charge!” And with that he was out of the door in a flash of green shoes and orange spats. I gave what I hoped was an apologetic look and then followed him before he got too far on his own.

There was a storm outside – did I mention that? Maybe I should have said earlier. A lot of people went to their cabins early when the wind and rain had built up that evening. That was some time ago and now there were 30 mile an hour winds as we chugged our way up the eastern seaboard. I made a mental note not to be so critical of travel in the TARDIS.

News had spread of the Captain’s death – but not the exact nature of it, thankfully. And that was effectively that for the official festivities on board: the band no longer wanted to play and the lights were dimmed to encourage everyone to leave. The passengers took the hint and

soon moved off to their cabins where the less respectful amongst them continued partying into the small hours. *Sure, the Captain was dead, but why should it spoil their fun?*

Below decks, the distant sound of raucous laughter reached from above us as we hunted what the Doctor has deduced was some form of “living fire.” I often wondered how he made such intellectual leaps, but wasn’t in the mood for one of his lectures, so kept the question to myself for now.

A distant crash of thunder came to us, muffled through several decks of the ship, and was accompanied by a bright flash in the sky. “Thunder and lightning, very, very frightening....” I tried not to sound afraid, but I think the slight crack in my voice betrayed me.

“That, Peri, is not lightning. It’s the sound of the tearing down of a barrier between two distinctly different universes.” There was nothing condescending in his voice now – just a soft urgency. By his reckoning we were six hours from shore, which in my mind meant the boat was six hours from safety.

The vessel lurched to one side in the stormy seas and was it not for his surprisingly strong hold on me, I would have gone flying into the bulkhead. “Are you all right?” Genuine concern there, fuelling my belief that his usual bluster was just a front, hiding the true Doctor beneath. Sadly, it was only in life or death situations like this that it came to the surface.

And then we found it: another burn mark – this time on the ceiling. “What’s up there?” I wondered. The Doctor wore a thoughtful expression before a look of realisation crossed his features. “The library!” he said, as if cursing himself for not thinking about it sooner. “Of course!”

“What? You think it’s bored and wants to catch up on some pulp fiction?”

“Think about it, Peri! BOOKS. Lots of lovely *combustible* books!”

By the time we got there it was too late; the library was already ablaze. A distant commotion told us we weren’t the only ones to be aware of the situation but we were the only ones on the actual scene, so we had to do something. The Doctor was grappling with the ship’s elaborate fire-control system with growing annoyance and I looked on with a growing feeling of helplessness. And the fire? Well, it was just growing.

The Doctor gave a final grunt of infuriation as the fire fighting kit refused to work. As he threw the useless apparatus to the ground, I could see him suddenly eyeing the structure of the vessel we were trapped in and realised he was wearing that same expression I saw – and ignored – earlier. This time I followed his gaze as it scanned the floor, the walls, the doors, the ceiling and gasped in horror as the realisation struck home. The elegant decor that surrounded us was a highly flammable mix of veneer, wooden surfaces and glued, ply panelling. It was an arsonists dream.

The fire surged and for a moment, I could have sworn I heard a voice in there: “*Feed the fire! Feed the fire! Feed the fire!*” it seemed to say. Despite the heat, I shivered at the low crackling sound. And the flames... They danced... I saw them... Dancing... This way and that... Swaying... Swishing... Mesmerising....

“Ignore it, Peri!” the Doctor snapped, his harsh tone bringing me to my senses.

“This is ridiculous!” I told him. “Fire can’t speak!”

“*Sentient* Fire, remember,” he said. “The TARDIS translation circuits are having a hard job making sense of it all... but there’s something there for it to latch on to....”

*Feed the fire! Feed the fire! Feed the fire! Feed the –*

“Snap out of it!” it was the Doctor’s voice, loud and authoritative in my ear again. He was right: the fire was spellbinding and I’d felt myself slipping under its charm.

Desperately he tried to get the fire extinguishers to work again. It was so obvious that it was a fruitless exercise, so now it was my turn to take control of the situation. I bundled him out of the smoke-filled room and into the open air. We fell onto the deck, coughing and spluttering as the smoke itched at our lungs.

“Peri! We need to stay in there and put that fire out!”

“With what? A few harsh words and your dazzling coat? Are you hoping to blind it to death?”

We weren’t alone now, but the crew didn’t seem to know what to do. I scrambled to my feet and grabbed the nearest person I saw – a steward of some sort, I think. “You’ve got to do something!” I screamed at him above the rising noise. “Get to the lifeboats! Abandon ship! ANYTHING!”

Sparks and cinders from the inferno were dancing across the wooden decks of the stricken vessel, performing their own peculiar pirouettes and feasting and growing as they skipped this way and that. The steward took me a bit too literally and like a number of his colleagues, his first thought was for himself.

The Doctor was not idle, either. He had collared the ship’s chief engineer, grabbing him by the lapels and shouting into his face. “We need hoses! Get to it, now!” But the man just snorted, wriggled himself free and made for the first lifeboat to launch. Neither of us could believe it: the Doctor couldn’t comprehend that anyone would actually have the gall to ignore a direct instruction from him, whilst I was aghast at the crew abandoning those in their care. Six boats had launched so far, which should have meant over 400 survivors making their way to shore, but just 85 people had abandoned ship – and out of them, 80 were members of the crew.

It was a scene of chaos but I have been with the Doctor long enough to know to help where I can and try to restore order. I went to help those more experienced officers and seamen who’d not abandoned their duties, but the passengers were panicking: the fire was very much alive and dancing here and there, throwing arcs of burning cinders and flame across the decks. At one point an acrid smell hit my nostrils and I felt my hair start to burn and a voice whispering in my ear, “Feed the fire! Feed the fire! Feed the fire!” – but I put it out in an instant.

“Come ON!” I yelled at a young couple who were cowering from the fire. “You’ve got to get in the lifeboat, NOW!” But they didn’t want to risk running the gauntlet of flames and instead barrelled past us to the lower decks, thinking they’d be safer down there.

Even from this distance, you could tell the flames were alive – there was something predatory about the way they moved, dancing and toying with their stricken prey, reminding me of how a cat plays with an injured bird. The fire had been running amok for just over half an hour when it wanted a main course to follow its appetiser of wood, paper and varnish. Tasting human flesh for the first time – the Captain in his cabin – was an experiment, but now it remembered this taste and sought out more. It assembled into one giant entity and rose up into the air with a whoosh and then swooped below deck like a bird of prey, heading in the direction where it knew the humans to be trapped.

The Doctor caught my eye. “We’re still moving. Why are we still moving?”

He seemed overly concerned but I couldn't understand why. "What? We need to get ashore, don't we? It's safe there, isn't?"

"Safe, yes. But not for us. Or anyone on dry land. Think about it."

And then I understood what he meant. At the same time I realised that not all the fire had gone below decks. It already knew what I had only just realised: there would be more people to feast upon once it reached the shore and branches of it swooped away to see what it could do to speed this along. The human fascination with fire was being exploited by the fire itself and it was like watching a cobra hypnotising its prey. The passengers stood gazing at the brilliant colours as they flicked from yellows to crimson to scarlet, swooping and pirouetting towards them in a beautiful display. And then they were engulfed in a towering inferno and burnt to cinders instantly. The whoomf of their sudden incineration sounded like a roar of triumph.

Despite all this going on around them, the other passengers still ignored our instructions to abandon ship and they chose to hide from the flames instead. But as the decking itself sparked into life, snapping and chattering like the maw of a violently hungry beast, they eventually hurled themselves overboard. Some had the sense to grab lifejackets, others did not. All tumbled into the writhing mass of ocean and a new struggle for survival began in those choppy, angry waters.

To the Doctor, all this was a distraction. The ship was steaming at full speed into a steady head wind and the flames reared themselves in delight at being fanned into greater life like this. "We need to anchor the ship here – with any luck the fire will burn itself out."

We agreed to go in separate directions: he would drop anchor, while I would check on the response to the SOS. But at the radio room I was told the SOS hadn't even been sent because the crew on the bridge had refused permission to send one. Well, I thought, the Doctor isn't the only one who can come across all authoritative, so I stormed off towards the bridge to have a stern word or two with the acting Captain.

On my way I could see the Doctor making good progress with the anchor equipment, doing things with that sonic lance of his (yes, another one – he does get through them quickly) and in a moment, we lurched to a halt. A number of passengers fell to the deck and it was only hitting a bulkhead that stopped me doing the same. The fire screamed in torment and died a little – not enough to be of any significance but enough to give me my first feelings of optimism since this nightmare began. Still slightly winded, I gasped a short triumphant laugh and continued on my way.

I saw the acting Captain staring – no, glaring – at me through the window of the bridge and stopped dead in my tracks. This was not the man we encountered earlier that night. This was a man with a blank expression and fire literally burning in his eyes. He looked insane as a leering expression suddenly crossed his face and his skin seemed to boil in the light from the flames.

"Some sort of hypnosis," the Doctor surmised when I told him. I met him en route to the radio room where paint was now peeling off the walls in the intense heat. A curtain caught fire and plunged from the wall, creating a carpet of flame that set the room alight with a crackle that sounded like maniacal laughter.

*Feed ussssssssss. Feed ussssssssss. Feed ussssssssss.*

This time the radio operator also seemed to hear the voice from the flames and gasped with revulsion and terror, whilst being unable to tear his eyes away from the scene. The Doctor wasted no time introducing himself. "Never mind that. You must send an SOS!" he bellowed. "NOW!"

I shouted the Doctor's name in alarm. The fire knew it was being threatened in some way and sought out a means to both save itself and sate its appetite. He flinched and took cover, thinking he was the next target but instead it twisted and folded, snakelike, in the direction of a new source of combustion: the batteries powering the radio.

"Peri, get out of here! GO!" he shouted, but I was rooted to the spot again and he had to bodily push me from the room before going back in for the engineer.

A jostling crowd dragged me along in its wake and in the confusion, I was separated from the Doctor. I think I heard him shout something about "Spring Lake, New Jersey." Maybe he was suggesting where to meet up if we got separated. Well, we *were* separated, so I hoped that's what he meant as I was steered towards one of the remaining lifeboats, unable to disentangle myself from the fleeing horde.

The resulting explosion as the batteries ignited shook the deck and I caught my breath. This was shortly followed by another explosion. But I knew the Doctor had the luck of a dozen cats.

He was safe.

He *had to be* safe.

And there he was - singed but alive. The radio operator, too.

And then the fire was racing towards us, snaking like some living, breathing beast across the deck. The crewman next to me could not believe his eyes. Sparks were biting at the rope holding the lifeboat in place - and I really do mean BITING like hungry piranha. It was not trying to sever the boat from the main vessel, rather it was trying to get a purchase in order to reach us. Someone screamed - I think it might have been me - but then the rope snapped and we were away, dropping through the air towards the unforgiving sea below.

The lifeboat hit the water with a hard crash and then bobbed on the turbulent waves while the crewmen found the oars and set to work. There was a collective gasp of horror as a great arc of fire curved towards us through the air from the boat.

*Feeeed usss! Feeeed usss! Feeeed usss!*

By now, I definitely I knew I was not the only one to hear that whispering, taunting words - but not one else wanted to admit to it. The men, visibly shaken by what they refused to acknowledge, fumbled with the oars and I found myself rowing too, without even realising what I was doing. It was still coming at us, brilliant and twisting with its fiery maw widening to consume us all. I pounded the sea with the heavy oar, the blood pounding in my ears. No one was taking control and we all rowed out of rhythm, wooden poles slapping the sea like an insect, legs thrashing as it fought for life in a pool of water. But it was enough to change our direction and the roaring snake of flames plunging towards us missed and fell into the sea with a hiss that translated in my head like an agonised, dying scream.

OK. So. I heard that translated... which meant that the TARDIS was still doing its thing. So did that mean the Doctor was still alive, too? There was a sort of symbiosis thing going on there, so it wouldn't still work if he was dead, right? So he must be OK, still.

The Doctor was indeed still on board and active: I caught a flash of his coat as he made his way along the deck. He stopped suddenly and looked in my direction, although how he could have seen me in the darkness and confusion defied belief. Our eyes locked for a moment and he looked relieved that I was safe (relatively speaking). Then he was gone to assist two newlyweds, the husband struggling with his wife collapsed in his arms. Before he could reach them, a tongue of flame licked up from the floor and they were gone in an instant. Even from this distance and above all the noise, I could hear the Doctor's yell, a mixture of anguish and anger.

I could see two of the Captain's men attempting to cut the anchor cable with small hacksaws and tried to shout a warning to the Doctor. The wind was roaring; the sea was roaring; the fire was roaring. I tried again, louder this time, screaming out my alarm to my friend until my lungs burned with the pain of it, ignoring the looks of the other survivors around me. Whether he heard me or not, I don't know – but the next thing I could make out was an altercation as he arrived on the scene.

The walking, burning cadavers outnumbered him and the resulting tussle did not last long. To my horror, he was manhandled by the men and thrown overboard into the wild sea. My heart leapt in my mouth and I strained to see any signs of him in the raging waters by the boat. But there was nothing. The Doctor was gone.

I pleaded with the crewmen in the boat to take us back and search for him in the raging ocean, but they were coming to their senses now and regaining some semblance of authority. They just wanted to put as much distance as they could between us and that floating inferno.

Aboard the Morro Castle it took five hours for the possessed crewmen to saw through the anchor cable with the equipment at their disposal. The stricken vessel was set on its way once more, still glowing with that strange, living fire. It crackling and panted, hungry for more food; excited at the prospect of what lay ashore in the form of assembled, gawping crowds. But also desperate, as if time was running out.

The remaining crew had left the ship by now, their job for the fire having been completed. It let them go and I'm not sure I'll ever understand why. Regardless, the blazing vessel lumbered forward....

The strange, living flames were visible for miles around as they crackled and panted, hungry for more food and excited at the prospect of the fresh provisions lining the shoreline: the assembled, gawping crowds. Armed soldiers kept the public at bay, under instruction from.... Yes! There he was, wet and bedraggled like a half-drowned cat – but alive – the Doctor!

The boat was listing heavily, and I could see the Doctor smiling. In his hand was his sonic lance, dripping water like the rest of him. He later explained to me that he'd actually tried to sink the vessel while he was in the water. He was unsuccessful in that task, but what he did manage to do was induce enough of a list for her to change course.

So, instead of ploughing into Pier 13 as planned, the ship thundered into the shore with a great whoosh of displaced sand as it came to rest like a beached whale. As ever, it sparked this way and that, reaching out for more combustible food but no one and nothing was in reach – the Doctor had seen to that.

It screamed; it wailed; it hungered for more sustenance but there was nothing within reach. The Doctor took a step forwards and for a moment I feared he had been possessed by this creature in its death throes. I almost screamed out his name but then realised that he knew

what he was doing, as he took another step to ensure he was just out of reach of those tentacles of raw energy. The thrashing of flames seemed more laboured now, less manic and – to my surprise – the Doctor threw his arms wide, taunting them.

“Come on!” he cried. “You’re hungry, aren’t you? Feast yourself on ME!”

The man was an idiot. He was my friend, yes, but he was an idiot and I think I may have shouted out something to that effect. We’d both seen firsthand how this... this “thing” could turn a man to cinders in a moment and there he was telling the sentient fire to “bring it on.” If I did yell at him – and if he did hear – he did not react.

“Well?” he mocked. “What are you waiting for? Don’t you have a burning appetite?”

There was a burst of combustion from the vessel as an angry, fiery arm punched its way towards him. The Doctor looked disappointed as it thudded into the sand and died, well short of where he stood.

“Is that the best you can do?” I heard him cry out, his voice dripping with derision. “Really? Is it? Well, I’d say that’s PATHETIC!” He stood, with his head slightly tilted as if waiting to hear a reply. The retort was another explosion of flaring energy, pointing towards him like an accusing finger.

The breath caught in my throat but then escaped as a relieved gasp when it sizzled into the sand before him, again. Bizarrely, he just laughed and took another step closer. “Come ON!” he yelled and I could not tell if he was angry, mocking, deranged or all of the above. “Strike me down! End my life! Feast on ME!”

From deep within the ship, an angry reply was rumbling its way forth. In a moment it exploded into the open: a gargantuan tongue of screaming, writhing red heat with a noise that the TARDIS translated in my head as a single blaring word: “DIE!” I fell to my knees and covered my ears even though the noise was in my head rather than an audible sound.

The crowd screamed in terror as it lit up the sky and bore down upon this eccentric man on the beach. The Doctor’s face was illuminated in the fresh light too, but to my surprise he was looking pleased with himself, arms outstretched as if welcoming his imminent demise literally with open arms.

A face formed in the flames: an angry, malevolent face, discharging sparks and tiny tendrils of white flame. Eyes flashes, lips snarled, teeth snapped, burning spittle span into the air... and the furious mass plunged towards him.

I screamed out the Doctor’s name.

Then, acting as if he hadn’t a care in the world, he took one single slow and deliberate steps backwards and watched as the writhing ball exploded into nothing at his feet.

“Sorry,” he said, addressing the sand. “I’m not that stupid.”

His manner changed. His arms dropped to his sides. He exhaled deeply. Now he looked... I don’t know... almost sad as the exhaustion finally kicked in. Head slightly bowed, he remained where he stood and watched the fire literally die before his tired, old eyes.

Somewhere in the distance, I could just make out the sounds of fire trucks bearing down on the scene. He did too... and when the moment was right... we left the scene.

\* \* \* \*

Of course we exited, stage left, before too many awkward questions could be asked of us. Who exactly were we? Why was he taunting a burning ship like that? Was he insane?

Long story. Another long – and improbable – story. Very likely.

In the confusion that spread along the seafront we slipped away, finding the TARDIS nestled amongst the ironwork of the underside of the pier. The Doctor wasn't in the least bit surprised to see it there and he unhooked some seaweed from the door handle. He offered it to me and when I declined he seemed faintly disappointed and let it drop to the ground with a wet plop.

"HADS," the Doctor explained as he fished the key from his pocket. "Hostile Action Displacement System. When the TARDIS is under threat, it leaves the scene and rematerialises in a nearby, safer location." The Police Box door creaked open. "And before you ask, it's a bit temperamental."

He'd beat me to it. I was going to ask why the hell it hadn't worked before on the many occasions when we'd been under attack. But I was too exhausted to even make a sarcastic comment and stepped through the wooden doors of the outer shell and into the ship beyond. The Doctor followed me and soon we were on our way.

Normally, of course, that would be that and we'd simply leave the scene and move on to a new time in a new place and become embroiled in a new series of adventures. But there was something about this sequence of events that left us both feeling strangely uneasy. The Doctor tried to rationalise it as a "deep-rooted, primeval fear of fire," but I wasn't convinced.

We popped forward in time to find out what happened next and, according to the newspaper reports the Doctor found, an inquiry had indeed taken place. It couldn't establish the cause of the fire, but given what we'd seen and experienced how could it?

A dropped cigarette, some said. Yes, most people agreed, that sounded plausible didn't it? And the subject was closed.

"Ignorance is bliss," said the Doctor, ironically. And I had to agree.







## SEPTEMBER 7, 1934

After a series of failed attempts to show Peri a good time,  
the Doctor plans a trip to prohibition era USA,  
for a cruise from Havana to New York.  
As ever, he lands the TARDIS in the wrong time and in the thick of danger.

It's September 7th 1934 and disaster is about to strike  
the passengers and crew of the SS Morro Castle.  
A being from another reality has entered our own...and it's hungry.  
By the morning of September 8th the death toll will be high,  
but can the Doctor and Peri avoid being among their numbers?



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