

I WAS SAVED FROM THE TITANIC



*This Gripping First-Hand Story
Recaptures the Horror of a Great
Disaster*

by Lady Duff Gordon

A GREAT LINER steaming through the vast loneliness of the Atlantic, the sky jeweled with stars and a thin wind blowing ever colder straight from the ice fields, tapping its warning of approaching danger on the cosily shuttered portholes of the cabins, causing the lookout man to strain his eyes into the gloom.

Inside this floating palace, that spring evening in 1912, warmth and lights, the hum of voices, the gay lilt of a German waltz—the unheeding sounds of a small world bent on pleasure. Then disaster, swift and overwhelming—a story of horror unparalleled in the annals of the sea . . .

It is only now, after so long, that I can bring myself to look back to that terrible last night on board the doomed *Titanic*. For years the horror was too vivid to bear the searchlight of memory. I had only to close my eyes to see the rows of lighted portholes extinguished slowly row by row, until they sank under the black waters—to hear the hideous clamor that spread over the quiet sea.

I had not meant to sail on the *Titanic*, although urgent business called me to New York. To this day I cannot explain my reluctance when the clerk at the White Star offices said: “The only berths we have are on our new *Titanic*, which will be making her maiden voyage.”

“Oh, I should not care to cross on a new ship,” I told him. “I should be nervous.”

He laughed. “Why, the boat is unsinkable! Her watertight compartments would enable her to weath-

er the fiercest sea, and she is the last word in comfort and luxury."

In spite of his arguments, I refused to book my berth, and went home and told my husband Cosmo of my fears. He laughed, too, but when he realized I was in earnest he offered to come with me.

The first days of the crossing were uneventful. Like everyone else I was entranced with the beauty and luxury of the liner. I remember being childishly pleased at finding fresh strawberries on my breakfast table.

Everything aboard this lovely ship was reassuring, from the genial Captain Smith and his 25 years' experience as a White Star commander, to my merry Irish stewardess, with her tales of timid ladies she had attended during hundreds of Atlantic crossings.

And yet, nothing could persuade me to undress completely at night, and my warm wraps lay always ready at hand, along with my most treasured possessions.

The day of the disaster dawned calm and bright, but as it wore on the cold increased. At evening, as we walked round the deck, I shivered in my furs. "I have never felt so cold," I said to Cosmo. "Surely there must be icebergs around."

He made fun of my ignorance, and Captain Smith, who happened to be passing, assured us that we were far from the ice zone.

Miss Francatelli, my secretary, and I went into my cabin to get warm, but it was no use. When we three went down to dinner, we kept on our thick clothes.

I well remember that last meal on the *Titanic*. We had a big vase of beautiful daffodils on the table, as fresh as if they had just been picked. Everybody was gay, and people were making bets on the probable time of this record-breaking voyage. Bruce Ismay, chairman of the White Star Line, was at the next table, and he said undoubtedly the ship would establish a record.

At another table sat Col. John Jacob Astor and his young bride, coming back to New York after a honeymoon in Europe. I thought how much in love they were—poor things, it was the last few hours they were to have together.

They were joined by Isidor Straus, the multimillionaire, and his wife. These two so openly adored one another that we called them "Darby and Joan" on the ship. They told us laughingly that in their long years of married life they had never been separated for a day or night. Nor were they separated in death, for Mrs. Straus chose to die with her husband rather than leave the stricken ship without him.

AFTER DINNER, we went to our cabins on A deck. I had been in bed an hour when I was awakened by a funny rumbling noise. Then the boat stopped, and there was the frightful sound of escaping steam. I heard people running along the deck outside my cabin, but they were laughing. "We must have hit an iceberg," I heard someone say. "There is ice on deck!"

I went to Cosmo's cabin and woke him. "Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Even if we have grazed an iceberg, it can't do serious damage. Go back to bed and don't worry."

I returned to my cabin but the roar of steam still alarmed me. Presently it stopped and there came an infinitely more frightening silence. The engines had stopped. I rushed back to Cosmo.

He got out of bed unwillingly, but in ten minutes he was back, looking grave. "I have just seen Colonel Astor," he said. "He is going to ask his wife to dress, and I think you had better do the same."

I hurriedly put on my warmest clothes, including a thick coat. As I was dressing, Miss Francatelli came into the room, very agitated. "There is water in my cabin," she said, "and they are taking the covers off the lifeboats."

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Just then, a steward knocked. "Sorry to alarm you, madame, but Captain's orders are that all passengers must put on life belts."

Before we followed him out of the cabin, as I looked round it for the last time, a vase of flowers on the washstand slid off and fell with a crash to the floor.

On the port side was a scene of indescribable horror. Boats were being lowered in a pandemonium of rushing figures fighting for places, tearing at each other, trampling women and children underfoot. Over the confusion the voices of the ship's officers roared.

"Women and children first! Stand back!" Then I heard the sharp bark of a revolver.

"Come, dear," my husband said. "I must get you to the boats."

While I clung to him, insisting that nothing on earth would make me leave, people rushed by us headlong to get away from the hell of that struggling, yelling mob. There were heart-rending shrieks as one boat, too hurriedly launched, upset and its occupants were shot into the black water below.

"Come, let us try the starboard side," said Cosmo calmly. "It may be better there."

It was better: there were crowds, but there was no confusion. The boats were being quietly filled with women, while a number of officers and male passengers helped to launch them. When two officers tried to force me into a boat, I refused. Cosmo pleaded with me, but I only said: "Promise me that you will not let them separate us!"

Seeing it was no use resisting, he gave in, and we stood waiting with Miss Francatelli, who refused to leave us. Suddenly we saw that everyone in the vicinity had disappeared, except for some sailors who were launching a little boat. Seeing nobody else about, my husband asked the officer whether we might get into it, and on receiving

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his permission, we were helped in, followed by two American men who came up at the last moment.

I shall never forget how black and deep and forbidding the water looked below, and how I hated leaving the big, homely ship for this frail little boat. The officer called his last instructions.

"Pull away as quickly as possible, at least two hundred yards!"

Just as we touched the water I looked back. I could see a man on deck sending off rockets. As we rowed out into the darkness, I fixed my eyes on the *Titanic*.

I could see her dark hull towering like a giant hotel, light streaming from every porthole. As I looked, one row of these shining windows was extinguished. I guessed the reason and turned shudderingly away. When I forced myself to look again, still another row had disappeared.

"My God, she's going now!" Cosmo cried.

I saw the few remaining lights of the *Titanic* shining with steady brilliance, but only for a moment, and then they were gone. A dull explosion shook the air. From the doomed vessel there arose an indescribable clamor. I think it was only at this moment that many of those poor souls on board realized their fate.

A louder explosion followed and the stern of the great ship shot out of the water. For a few seconds she stayed motionless while the agonized cries grew in intensity, and then, with one awful downward rush, she plunged to her grave and the air was rent with awful shrieks.

I LAPSED into a sort of unconsciousness, from which I was aroused by dreadful seasickness which persisted through the rest of the night. Between bouts of sickness, I could see the dark shadows of icebergs surrounding us.

Once or twice I revived a little, and when the men rested on their

oars for a few minutes, we chatted of little unimportant things, as people do when they have been through a great mental strain. We had nothing to eat, but Cosmo found cigars in his pocket and shared them with the other men. They had only two matches, but somehow they managed to light the cigars and the smoke was reassuring.

Towards morning the sea began to get rough; as dawn broke, we saw rows of "white horses" racing towards our little boat, beautiful but very alarming. Then two lights showed on the horizon, and grew gradually bigger until they resolved themselves into the outline of an approaching steamer, the *Carpathia*.

I shall never forget the beauty of that April dawn, stealing over the cold Atlantic, lighting up the icebergs till they looked like giant opals. As we saw other boats rowing alongside, we imagined that most passengers on the *Titanic* had been saved like us; not one of us even guessed the appalling truth, that more than 1,500 of the 2,224 on board had perished.

As we drew beside the *Carpathia*, the dreadful experiences we had gone through seemed to have passed away like a nightmare.

The moment I stepped on the *Carpathia's* deck, a motherly stewardess flung a rug around my shoulders and we were taken below, given brandy and hot coffee, and offered changes of clothing. Soon I was put to bed in a beautiful cabin, which two passengers gave over for Cosmo and myself.

I did not wake until the following morning, and for the moment I forgot the events of the last 48 hours. Then a stewardess came in with tea, and on seeing her instead of my Irish stewardess of the *Titanic*, suddenly everything swept over me in a tide of remembrance.

I saw the *Titanic* as I had last seen her, plunging to her grave under the Atlantic; I heard again those heart-rending cries from her

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decks; and, burying my face in the pillows, I sobbed uncontrollably. For it was the first time that the full realization of the horrible disaster had come over me.

Coronet

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