

# The Sinking of an Ocean Queen

by HANSON W. BALDWIN

How an iceberg's jagged claw sent a proud, "unsinkable" ship to the bottom of the Atlantic

THE WHITE STAR Liner *Titanic* sailed from Southampton on her maiden voyage to New York on April 10, 1912. She was not only the largest ship afloat but also the safest. Her builders had given her double bottoms and divided her hull into 16 watertight compartments which made her, men thought, unsinkable. She had been built to be a gigantic lifeboat.

There was little fuss and fanfare at her sailing; but her departure from England, though quiet, was not wholly uneventful. As the liner moved slowly toward the end of her dock, the surge of her passing sucked away from the quay the *New York*, moored just seaward of the *Titanic's* berth. There were sharp cracks as the *New York's* mooring lines parted. The liner swung toward the *Titanic's* bow, then was checked and dragged back to the dock barely in time to avert a collision.

On board the *Titanic* were 2,201 persons—men, women and children. Occupying the Empire bedrooms and Georgian suites of the first-class accommodations were many well-known men and women, among them J. Bruce Ismay, chairman and managing director of the White Star Line. And down in the steerage were 706 immigrants to the land of promise.

The third day out, Sunday, dawned fair and clear. In the Marconi cabin, Second Operator Harold Bride, earphones clamped, was figuring accounts; he did not stop to answer when he heard the nearby liner *Californian* calling the *Titanic*. The *Californian* had some message about three icebergs; he didn't bother to jot it down.

About 1:42 p.m. the wireless spoke again across the water. It was the *Baltic* calling the *Titanic*, warning her of ice on the Atlantic steamer tracks. Bride took the mes-

## Ocean Queen

sage down and passed it on to the *Titanic's* bearded master, Capt. E. C. Smith.

It was lunch time; the captain, walking along the promenade deck, saw Mr. Ismay, stopped and handed him the message without comment. Ismay read it, stuffed it in his pocket, told two ladies about the icebergs and resumed his walk.

Dinner that night in the Jacobean dining room was gay. It was bitter on deck but the night was calm and clear; the sky was studded with stars twinkling coldly. On the bridge Second Officer Lightoller was relieved at 10 o'clock by First Officer Murdoch. By that time at least five wireless ice warnings had reached the ship; lookouts had been cautioned to be alert: officers expected to reach the field any time after 9:30 p.m.

The steerage was long since quiet; in the first- and second-class cabins lights were going out; people were asleep. Murdoch paced the bridge, peering over the water, unruffled in the starlit darkness. The ship was a great, fast-moving shadow, with here and there a last winking light. Ahead lay a cold and silent sea.

There was a sudden clang as the great ship's bell struck out 11:30. In the crow's-nest, lookout Frederick Fleet, mindful of the previous warnings, strained his eyes, searching the darkness for dreaded ice. But there were only the stars and the sea.

In the wireless room, where First Operator Phillips had relieved Bride, the buzz of the *Californian's* set again crackled into the ear-phones:

*Californian:* Say, old man, we are stuck here, surrounded by ice.

*Titanic:* Shut up, shut up; keep out. I am talking to Cape Race; *you are jamming my signals.*

It was 11:40.

Then suddenly out of the dark it came—a vast, white, monstrous shape, directly in the *Titanic's* path. For a moment Fleet doubted his eyes. But it was deadly reality. Frantically he struck three bells—*something dead ahead.* He snatched the telephone and excitedly called the bridge: "Iceberg! Right ahead!"

There was a slight shock, a brief scraping, a small list to port. Shell ice—slabs and chunks of it—fell on

## Ocean Queen

the foredeck. Slowly the *Titanic* stopped.

Captain Smith hurried out of his cabin. "What has the ship struck?"

Murdoch answered: "An iceberg, sir. I hard-astarboarded her and reversed the engines. I have closed the watertight doors."

A few lights switched on in the first and second cabins; sleepy passengers peered through portholes; one casually asked a steward: "Why have we stopped?"

"I don't know, sir, but I don't suppose it's anything much."

But far below, in the forward holds and boiler rooms, men could see that the *Titanic's* hurt was mortal. In No. 6 boiler room, water was pouring through a great gash two feet above the floor plates. The ship was open to the sea. In ten seconds the iceberg's jagged claw had ripped a 300-foot slash in the bottom of the unsinkable *Titanic*.

ON DECK, in corridor and stateroom, life flowed again. Men, women and children awoke and asked questions; orders were given to uncover the lifeboats. But the passengers—most of them—did not know that the *Titanic* was sinking. The shock of the collision had been so slight that some were not awakened; the night was too calm, too beautiful, to think of death at sea.

Captain Smith ran to the door of the radio shack. Bride, partly dressed, eyes dulled with sleep, was standing behind Phillips, waiting.

"Send the call for assistance."

The blue spark danced: "CQD—CQD—CQD—Sinking!" Miles away Marconi men heard.

The *Carpathia* radioed, "Coming hard." The CQD changed the course of many ships—but not of one; the operator of the nearby *Californian* had just put down his earphones and turned in.

The sea was surging into the *Titanic's* hull. At 12:20 the lifeboats were swung out—slowly—for deckhands were late in reaching their stations, there had been no boat drill, many of the crew did not know to what boats they were assigned.

12:30 a.m. The word is passed: "Women and children in the boats." Stewards finish waking passengers below; life-preservers are tied on; some men smile at the precaution.

## Ocean Queen

"The *Titanic* is unsinkable."

12:45 a.m. Murdoch, eyes tragic but otherwise calm and cool, orders boat No. 7 lowered. The women hang back, they want no boat ride on an ice-strewn sea; surely the *Titanic* will not sink! The men encourage them, explain that this is just a precautionary measure: "We'll see you again at breakfast." No. 8 is lowered, and No. 5. Then No. 6 goes over the side. There are only 28 people in a lifeboat with a capacity of 65.

A sudden sharp hiss—a flare streaks high against the night. It explodes and a parachute of white stars lights up the icy sea. "God! Rockets!" The band plays ragtime.

1 a.m. The boats are more heavily loaded now, for the passengers know the *Titanic* is sinking. Women cling to each other and sob. Half-filled boats are ordered to come alongside the cargo ports and take on more passengers; but the ports are never opened and boats are never filled.

The water rises and the band plays ragtime.

1:30 a.m. As one boat is lowered an officer fires his gun along the ship's side to stop a rush from the lower decks. A woman tries to take her Great Dane into a boat with her; she is refused and steps out of the boat to die with her dog.

1:40 a.m. Mrs. Isador Straus puts her foot on the gunwale of a lifeboat, then goes back to her husband: "We have been together many years; where you go I will go." Col. John Jacob Astor puts his bride in a lifeboat, steps back, taps cigarette on fingernail: "Good-bye, dearie; I'll join you later."

2 a.m. The great ship is dying now; her bow goes deeper, her stern higher, and still the band plays. In the radio shack Bride has slipped a

**Hanson W. Baldwin, author and military analyst, is equally at home on land or sea. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, he resigned from the Navy after seven years to become a newspaperman. Since 1937 he has been military editor of the *New York Times*, for whom he has covered Army and Navy maneuvers throughout the world. Baldwin is the author of several books and has written extensively for national magazines. This article is taken from his book, *Admiral Death*, published at \$2.50 by Simon & Schuster, New York, N.Y.**

## Ocean Queen

lifejacket about Phillips as the first operator sits hunched over his key, sending, still sending—"41-46 N., 50-14 W. CQD—CQD—SOS—."

The captain's tired white face appears at the radio door: "Men, you have done your full duty. You can do no more. Now it's every man for himself." The captain disappears—back to his sinking bridge. The spark dances on.

2:10 a.m. In the gymnasium on the boat deck two gentlemen ride the bicycles and another swings casually at the punching bag. The band still plays, but not ragtime:

*Nearer my God to Thee*

*Nearer to Thee. . . .*

A few men take up the refrain; others kneel on the slanting decks to pray. The spark still signals and the lights still flare; the engineers are on the job.

People are leaping from decks into icy waters. A woman cries, "Oh, save me, save me!" A man answers, "Good lady, only God can save you now." Bandmaster Hartley calls for *Autumn* as the water curls about his feet, and the eight musicians brace themselves against the ship's slant.

*God of Mercy and Compassion!*

*Look with pity on my pain. . . .*

2:17 a.m. "CQ—" the *Virginian* hears a blurred CQ, then an abrupt stop. The blue spark dances no more. The lights flicker out.

The band plays in the darkness, the water lapping upwards:

*Hold me up in mighty waters,  
Keep my eyes on things above,  
Righteousness, divine atonement,  
Peace and everlast. . . .*

The forward funnel snaps and crashes into the sea; the ship up-ends to 50, to 60 degrees. Down in the black abyss of the stokeholds, in the engine rooms where the dynamos have whirred at last to a stop, the stokers and the engineers are reeling against hot metal, the rising water clutching at their knees.

The *Titanic* stands on end, poised briefly for the plunge. Slowly she slides to her grave—slowly at first, then more quickly—quickly.

2:20 a.m. The greatest ship in the world has sunk. From the calm dark waters there goes up, in the white wake of her passing, "one long continuous moan."

The boats that the *Titanic* had launched pulled safely away from the sinking ship, pulled away from

## Ocean Queen

the screams that came from the lips of freezing men and women in the water. The boats were poorly manned and badly equipped—only a few were heavily loaded.

It was 4:10 when the *Carpathia* picked up the first boat and learned the *Titanic* had foundered. The last of the moaning cries had just died away. Captain Rostron took the 711 survivors aboard. It was then that the fleet of racing ships heard the *Carpathia* report the death of the *Titanic*; they were too late. It was soon afterward, when her radio operator put on his earphones, that the *Californian*, the ship that had been within sight as the *Titanic* sank, first learned of the disaster.

And it was then, in all its white-green majesty, that the *Titanic*'s survivors saw the fatal iceberg, tinted with the sunrise, floating idly—pack-ice jammed about its base, other bergs heaving slowly nearby on the breast of the sea.

# Coronet

July, 1946

p. 73

