Charles Herbert Lightoller

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by Pat Winship
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Charles Herbert Lightoller was born on March 30, 1874, to Frederick James Lightoller and Sarah Jane Widdows Lightoller in Chorley, Lancashire. He was the youngest of five children, and the second son. His mother died of scarlet fever after he was born, followed by two of his siblings, Richard Ashton and Caroline Mary. His father remarried two years later, on January 6, 1876 to Margaret Barton. Their marriage was childless, and Margaret died in 1881.

James Lightoller then had an affair with the family's maid, Joyce Gladwin, resulting in an out-of-wedlock daughter, Janet. He emigrated to New Zealand, leaving his son Herbert, 10, his daughters Gertrude, 15 and Ethel, 12 with family in England, and taking his eldest daughter, Jane with him. Joyce and Janet soon followed, and she and James were married in Auckland, September 11, 1885. James remained in contact with the rest of his children in England, as much as he could.

Herbert attended the Chorley Grammar School. He was a bright, undisciplined boy, of great potential, but difficult to manage. Finally, when he was thirteen, possibly in the aftermath of a punishment for some escapade, he asked if he could go to sea. This was a bluff on his part, but his family called it. He was apprenticed to the William Price Line of Liverpool, and was soon aboard the *Primrose Hill*, a large sailing ship, bound around Cape Horn for San Francisco. As he said, "I chuckled at my good luck, as they no doubt chuckled at their good riddance."

Herbert Lightoller spent his teenage years in sailing ships. He experienced a shipwreck on a desert island, a fire at sea, and adventures too numerous to relate. His apprenticeship expired, and he passed the examination for his Second Mate's certificate. After one more voyage in sail, he made the painful decision to go into steamships, in the Royal African Mail service.

He nearly died of malaria on one of his voyages, and decided to leave the West African run. While contemplating his next career move, his attention was caught by a newspaper advertisement promoting Edmonton as the best route to the Yukon goldfields. As he tells it, "Five minutes earlier I had no idea of going , but just on the impulse of the moment, I said to myself 'I'm off.' Putting the paper down, I strolled out of the room and with a touch of the dramatic, informed my people that I was going out to the Klondyke. (The rush by this time had started)"

"Opinions were somewhat varied, but only to the extent of what particular degree of fool I was! However I was sufficiently pig-headed and self confident to ignore the opinions of people, who certainly knew what was good for me far better than I knew myself—at least, so it has sometimes appeared in the light of later days. But on the whole I have never regretted the decision that took me out to the Canadian North-West, nor one single experience with which the days were filled. I certainly did not make a fortune; in fact, not only made nothing but lost all I had. But I had a grand time."

He went out as a prospector, and came back as a hobo, to resume his career as a ship's officer. After a brief return to the African service, he sat the examination for his Master Mariner's certificate, which he passed on the second attempt. As an expression of his resolve to turn over a new leaf, he applied to the prestigious White Star Line of Liverpool, where he would serve for the next twenty years. He must have made a good impression, for he was accepted, and to his great surprise, was assigned to a ship almost immediately. He was to sail as the Fourth Officer of the *Medic*, inaugurating the Line's new Australian service. Also on the *Medic*, as Third Officer was William McMaster Murdoch. Despite very different personalities, they became fast friends. Besides carrying passengers, the ship stopped at Capetown to pick up soldiers wounded in the Boer War and at Durban on the way back, carrying fresh troops from Australia.

Herbert's first voyage to Sydney was uneventful, the second nearly ended his brief career with the White

Star Line. He and two teenaged apprentices contrived to fire a large gun at Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour in the small hours of the morning, having run up a Boer flag on the fort's flagpole— nicely calculated to produce the maximum reaction from the Australians, who were supplying many troops to fight in the Boer War. The incident baffled the police, and a question was even raised in the New South Wales Parliament about the security of Sydney Harbour. Notwithstanding, they were not caught in Sydney, but on the way home, someone, probably one of the apprentices, told the captain. He referred the matter to the Marine Superintendent at Liverpool, Captain Joseph Hewitt. Herbert was called on the carpet, and went with his written resignation in his hand.

> "The Marine Superintendent, dear old Daddy Hewitt—now long since passed beyond—put me on the carpet, and gave me the darndest dressing down I ever had in my life; but before making his final decision, he insisted on my giving him full and complete details. Thinking that as I had the order of the boot anyway, it was of little consequence how I told it, or how he received it, I simply told it in my own words, neither hiding nor elaborating anything. I suppose I enthused a bit towards the end, for I noticed that he kept putting his hand up and rubbing his old grey beard—not that I paid much attention—until, just as I had finished, he went off into a roar of laughter. My dejected spirits immediately shot up, and I thought, 'Come, it isn't so bad if he can laugh,' and in the end it wasn't. He picked up my resignation which was lying in front of him, tore it in half, and growled out, 'Get out of here, and back on board your ship.'"

Herbert was assigned to the North Atlantic service. This amounted to a promotion of sorts—although his first service there was on the Line's cattle boats. One suspects that Captain Hewitt was giving the young officer a chance to develop a measure of maturity and discipline where he was less likely to embarrass the White Star Line. After all, in pulling off his crazy prank, he had demonstrated nautical and command skills that were worth having if he could learn to keep his mischievous inclinations under control. He applied himself for the most part, although he somehow slipped up in 1903, and was sent to the Australian service for one voyage on the *Suevic* as a punishment. There he met the 18-year-old Sylvia Hawley-Wilson, who was returning to her home in Sydney. A classic shipboard romance ensued, and the two were married December 15, 1903 at Christ Church in Sydney.

For the next nine years, Herbert Lightoller served on the most prestigious ships of the White Star Line— the *Majestic*, the *Cedric*, the *Celtic* and his great favorite, the *Oceanic*. He described her lovingly as:"A wonderful ship, built in a class of her own, and by herself. The usual custom is to build twin ships, as with the *Britannic* and *Germanic, Teutonic* and *Majestic*. Then, in lone and stately majesty came the *Oceanic*. She was an experiment, and a wonderfully successful one; built by Harland and Wolff, regardless of cost, elaborate to a degree, money lavished where it was necessary, but never gaudily as is so common nowadays. Her smoke room doors were a masterpiece in themselves, and cost £500. There was eighteen carat gold plating on the electric light fittings throughout the saloon and staircase, and paintings by well-known artists, worth a cool thousand apiece. Hand carvings of delicate work, and the joy of souvenir hunters. Every deck plank was picked wood."

He had been promoted regularly, rising to First Officer, and temporary Chief Officer on the *Majestic* for a while. He and Sylvia had two sons, Frederick Roger, born in 1904, and Richard Trevor, born in 1908, and were living in a spacious home at Netley Abbey. He was on holiday there when he received word that he had been assigned as First Officer to the pride of the White Star Line, the new liner *Titanic*.

He and her two other senior officers, David Blair, Second, and William Murdoch, Chief, were soon on their way to Belfast to meet her. The introduction was a little uneasy. Herbert Lightoller said, "It is difficult to convey any idea of the size of a ship like the *Titanic*, when you could actually walk miles along decks and passages, covering different ground all the time. I was thoroughly familiar with pretty well every type of ship afloat, from a battleship and a barge, but it took me fourteen days before I could with confidence find my way from one part of that ship to another by the shortest route… No doubt with the help of a plan, it would have been fairly simple, but a sailor does not walk round with a plan in his pocket, he must carry his ship in his head, and in an emergency such as fire must be able to get where he wants by sheer instinct —certainly without a chance of getting lost on the way."

They took the great ship through her trials in Belfast Lough, then with a party of company officials on board, brought her to Southampton at midnight on April 3, 1912. The next few days were filled with a thousand tasks related to the final preparation of the ship for her maiden voyage. The Board of Trade inspection was endured.

> "The Board of Trade Surveyor, Captain Clark, certainly lived up to his reputation as being the best cursed B.O.T. representative in the South of England at that time. Many small details, that another surveyor would have taken in his stride accepting the statement of the officer concerned was not good enough for Clark. He must see everything, and himself check every item that concerned the survey. He would not accept anyone's word as sufficient—and got heartily cursed in consequence. He did his job, and I'll certainly say he did it thoroughly."

For reasons that are debated to this day, a shakeup of officers occurred at this point. As Lightoller tells it,

> "Unfortunately, whilst in Southampton, we had a re-shuffle amongst the Senior Officers. Owing to the *Olympic* being laid up, the ruling lights of the White Star Line thought it would be a good plan to send the Chief Officer of the *Olympic*, just for the one voyage, as Chief Officer of the *Titanic,* to help, with his experience of her sister ship. This doubtful policy threw both Murdoch and me out of our stride; and, apart from the disappointment of having to step back in our rank, caused quite a little confusion. Murdoch, from Chief, took over my duties as First, I stepped back on Blair's toes as Second, and picked up the many threads of his job, whilst he,--luckily for him as it turned out—was left behind. The other officers remained the same. However, a couple of days in Southampton saw each of us settled in our new positions and familiar with our duties"

April 10 was sailing day for the Titanic. Shortly before noon, Second Officer Herbert Lightoller, Chief Officer Henry Wilde, and Bo'sun Nichols with a gang of seamen, took their stations on the fo'c'sle of the huge ship, to supervise casting off the moorings. At the thunderous blast of the ship's deep-toned whistles, the sailors sprang into action, loosing her last ties with the land. Six tugs took her lines and towed her into the channel. At the command "Slow Ahead," the engines began to turn. The maiden voyage had begun.

As the *Titanic* gathered way, the suction from her propellers pulled the liners New York and Oceanic away from the piers where they were tied up. The New York's hawsers snapped with sounds like rifle shots, and she drifted towards the Titanic. A collision appeared to be eminent. But the tug Vulcan managed to get a line on board the New York, and Captain Smith gave the Titanic a touch ahead on her port engine, washing the New York away and averting an accident which would have delayed her departure by days.

Lightoller wrote,

> "To the casual observer the whole incident would have been just a thrill—perhaps not much more even though there had been a collision. For us it would have been something much deeper. It is difficult to describe just exactly where that unity of feeling lies, between a ship and her crew, but it is surely there, in every ship that sails salt water. It is not always a feeling of affection either. A man can hate a ship worse than he can a human being, although he sails on her. Likewise a ship can hate her men, then she frequently becomes known as a "killer," and in the days of sail, would regularly kill a man voyage after voyage."

After stops at Cherbourg and Queenstown (Cobh), the *Titanic* turned her head westwards, and set out into her proper element—deep water. Passengers settled into shipboard routines and enjoyed the amenities of the magnificent new liner. Lightoller was approached by Lookout George Symons, asking for the binoculars that should have been in the crow's nest. Former Second Officer David Blair had taken them from their bag in the crow's nest, and Lightoller was unable to find where he had put them. Symons and the lookouts were told that they must do without them for this voyage.

As the *Titanic* steamed across the Atlantic, wireless messages of good wishes for the ship's maiden voyage were interspersed with ice warnings from other ships. As Lightoller tells it. "Wireless reports were coming

in through the day from various ships, of ice being sighted in different positions. Nor was that anything unusual at this time of the year, and none of the reports indicated the extent of the ice seen. A report would read "iceberg (or icebergs) sighted in such and such a latitude and longitude." Later on in the day we did get reports of ice sighted in larger quantities, and also two reports of field ice, but they were in positions that did not affect us. The one vital report that came through but which never reached the bridge, was received at 9-40 p.m. from the *Mesaba* stating 'Ice report in Latitude 42N to 41-25N. Long. 49 to Long. 50-30 W. Saw much heavy pack ice, and great number large icebergs. Also field ice. Weather good, clear.'"

On the evening of April 14, Lightoller took over the bridge from Chief Officer Wilde at 6:00 PM. At 7:00, First Officer Murdoch relieved him until 7:30, so he could have dinner. After dinner, Lightoller took his sextant, and with Third Officer Pitman handling the chronometer, took an excellent set of stellar observations. Before Pitman could get down to calculating the ship's position, the next shift of junior officers arrived at 8:00, with Boxhall and Moody relieving Lowe and Pitman. As Boxhall took over the navigational chores, Lightoller asked Sixth Officer James Moody when he thought they would reach the vicinity of the ice, and received an answer of around 11:00. When Lightoller ran the calculation in his head, his results indicated 9:30. He did not take the junior officer to task for this, thinking that Moody had probably calculated from a different ice warning. However when he asked the young man to call the crow's nest and tell the lookouts to "keep a sharp look out for ice, particularly small ice and growlers," Moody neglected to mention growlers. Lightoller ordered him to call again, and repeat the message correctly.

At 9:00 or thereabouts, Captain Smith came on the bridge. They discussed the cold, and the potential difficulties of spotting ice on a moonless night in a flat calm.

He says,

> "For the last hour of my watch on that never-to-be-forgotten night I had taken up a stationary position on the bridge, where I had an unobstructed view right ahead, and perhaps a couple of points on either bow. That did not signify that I was expecting to see ice, but that there was the possibility of seeing ice, as there always is when crossing The Banks; ice may be sighted. In point of fact, under normal conditions, we should have proved to be well south of the usual ice limit; only in this case the ice limit had moved very many miles south, due solely to the immense amount of ice released in the Arctic. Ten p.m. came and with it the change of the officers' Watches. On the bridge, after checking over such things as position, speed and so forth, the officers coming on deck usually have a few minutes chat with their opposite number, before officially taking over. The Senior Officer, coming on Watch, hunts up his man in the pitch darkness, and just yarns for a few minutes, whilst getting his eyesight after being in the light, when he can see all right he lets the other chap know and officially 'takes over.' Murdoch and I were old shipmates and for a few minutes—as was our custom—we stood there looking ahead, and yarning over times and incidents part and present. We both remarked on the ship's steadiness, absence of vibration, and how comfortably she was slipping along. Then we passed on to more serious subjects, such as the chances of sighting ice, reports of ice that had been sighted, and the positions. We also commented on the lack of definition between the horizon and the sky—which would make an iceberg all the more difficult to see—particularly if it had a black side, and that should be, by bad luck, turned our way."

Lightoller passed on the "items of interest"-- course, speed, weather conditions, ice reports, wished Murdoch joy of his watch, and went below to spend the next half-hour, making his rounds of the ship before turning in for the night.

He had just settled himself in his warm bunk, when he felt what he describes as "a grinding jar" forward. He leapt out of his bunk and ran on deck barefoot and in his pajamas, but saw nothing on either the port or the starboard side. With that, he went back to his cabin and waited, thinking that if he was needed, it was best to be where he was expected to be. He did not have to wait long. In about ten minutes, Fourth Officer

Boxhall came in, saw Lightoller awake and said "We've hit an iceberg."

"I know you've hit something," Lightoller replied.

"The water is up to F deck in the mailroom."

As Boxhall left to wake Lowe and Pitman, Lightoller threw on trousers, shoes and socks, a sweater and an overcoat over his pajamas. He went to the bridge, the exhausts on the massive funnels venting steam with a deafening roar that made conversation impossible. As he arrived, Captain Smith gave the order for the lifeboats to be uncovered and prepared to swing out. Lightoller took charge of the even numbered boats on the portside, and with taps on the shoulder and gestures, set the sailors to work.

When the task was done, Lightoller went to Chief Officer Wilde and asked whether he should swing the boats out. "Wait" said Wilde. At that moment, Captain Smith came by. Shouting through cupped hands, Lightoller asked if he should swing the boats out. "Yes, swing them out, "said E.J. As soon as this was done, Lightoller once again asked Wilde if he should begin to load the women and children. Once again Wilde said "Wait" and once again, Lightoller asked the captain, "Shall I get the women and children away, sir?" Captain Smith nodded, and Lightoller began to load the portside boats.

It was first thought that the best way to load the boats was to let them down to the level of the enclosed promenade on B-Deck. Boat No 4 was lowered to that level; then it was discovered that a special tool was needed to open the windows, and no one could find it. For the moment, boat No 4 was left where it was, and Lightoller moved on to Boat No. 6. It was difficult to persuade women and children to enter the lifeboat, but at last he got around 25 people in, including Margaret Tobin ("Molly") Brown and began to lower. Halfway to the water, someone called "We have no seaman in this boat." Lightoller called "Any seamen here." At first no one answered, then Major Arthur Peuchen volunteered, "I am not a seaman but I am a yachtsman, if I can be of any use to you." Lightoller looked Peuchen up and down and said, "If you're seaman enough to get out on those falls and get down into that boat, then go ahead. Peuchen gathered his courage, climbed down the falls and was the only adult male passenger allowed into a portside boat.

In Lightoller's words, "The quiet orderliness amongst the passengers, and the discipline amongst the crew, is a thing never to be forgotten. Many of the former came quietly with offers of help. The Bo'sun's Mate and six of the watch having been lost to me, the work had become very heavy, and still heavier, as I detailed two of the remaining Watch to go away with each boat as it was lowered. The practice was, to lower each boat until the gunwale was level with the boat deck, then, standing with one foot on the deck and one in the boat, the women just held out their right hand, the wrist of which I grabbed with my right hand, hooking my left arm underneath their arm, and so practically lifted them over the gap between the boat's gunwale and the ship's side, from the boat."

There was a small emergency stairway for the use of the crew, from the boat deck down to C-deck. Lightoller visited it in between launching boats to see how far the Titanic had gone down, and how fast she was going. "That cold, green water, crawling its ghostly way up that staircase, was a sight that stamped itself indelibly on my memory. Step by step, it made its way up, covering the electric lights, one after the other, which, for a time, shone under the surface, with a horribly weird effect." By now the ship's foredeck was under water. Boat after boat was launched, Lightoller adhering to "women and children—only." However it was difficult to find enough women and children to fill the boats, despite the fact that there was enough lifeboat space for 1700 of the ship's 2200 passengers and crew.

The band was playing the whole time-- "I could hear the band playing cheery sort of music. I don't like jazz music as a rule, but I was glad to hear it that night. I think it helped us all." he remembered.

The ship was going down rapidly now, and Lightoller was anxious to launch the last boats. "Just before launching the last two lifeboats, I had made my final hurried visit to the stairway. It was then conclusively evident that not only was she going , but that she was going very soon, and if we were to avoid the unutterable disgrace of going down with lifeboats still hanging to the davits, there was not one single

moment to lose." As he prepared Boat No 2, the emergency cutter, Chief Officer Wilde ordered him into the boat, "You go with her, Lightoller." "Praises be, I had just sufficient sense to say, 'Not damn likely,' and jump back on board; not with any idea of self-imposed martyrdom—far from it—it was just pure impulse of the moment, and an impulse for which I was to thank my lucky stars a thousand times over, in the days to come. I had taken my chance and gone down with the rest…"

> "About this time I met all the engineers, as they came trooping up from below. Most of them I knew individually, and had been shipmates with them on different ships of the Line. They had all loyally stuck to their guns, long after they could be of any material assistance. Much earlier on the engine-room telegraphs had been 'Rung off'—the last ring made on board ships at sea, and which conveys to the engine-room staff the final information that their services below can be of no further use, that the case (from whatever cause) is hopeless. At the same time it releases engineers and stokers from duty, leaving them free to make the best of their way up to the boats. Of course, in theory, each had his appointed place in a given boat."

However, there were no more boats left.

Lightoller and the remaining crew set about attempting to get the collapsible boats hauled down off the roof of the officers' quarters and launched. Collapsible C had been launched from the davits, containing, among others, J. Bruce Ismay, the chairman of the White Star Line. Will Murdoch was struggling to get the falls cleared to put Collapsible A in the water. Collapsible B had been slid off the roof and landed upside down. And suddenly there was no more time…

> "Just then the ship took a slight but definite plunge—probably a bulkhead went—and the sea came rolling up in a wave, over the steel-fronted bridge, along the deck below us, washing the people back in a dreadful, huddled mass. Those that didn't disappear under the water right away, instinctively started to clamber up that part of the deck still out of water, and work their way towards the stern, which was rising steadily out of the water as the bow went down. A few of the more agile leapt up on top of the officers' quarters where Hemming and I were at the moment. It was a sight that doesn't bear dwelling on—to stand there above the wheelhouse, and on our quarters, watching the frantic struggles to climb up the sloping deck, utterly unable to even hold out a helping hand."

Lightoller jumped into the frigid water. Momentarily disoriented by the shock, he swam toward the crow's nest on the foremast, then he thought rationally and began to swim away from the ship. But he didn't get far…

> "On the boat deck, above our quarters, on the fore part of the forward funnel, was a huge rectangular air shaft and ventilator, with an opening about twenty by fifteen feet. On this opening was a light wire grating to prevent rubbish being drawn down, or anything else being thrown down. This shaft led direct to No. 3 stokehold, and was therefore a sheer drop of close on hundred feet, right to the bottom of the ship."
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> "I suddenly found myself drawn, by the sudden rush of the surface water now pouring down this shaft, and held flat and firmly up against this wire netting, with the additional full and clear knowledge of what would happen if this light wire carried away. The pressure of the water just glued me there whilst the ship sank slowly below the surface."
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> "Although I struggled and kicked for all I was worth, it was impossible to get away, for as fast as I pushed myself off I was irresistibly dragged back, every instant expecting the wire to go, and to find myself shot down into the bowels of the ship."
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> "Apart from that, I was drowning, and a matter of another couple of minutes would have seen me through. I was still struggling and fighting when suddenly a terrific blast of hot air came up the shaft, and blew me right away from the air shaft and up to the surface."

> “The water was now swirling round, and the ship sinking rapidly, when once again I was caught and sucked down by an inrush of water, this time adhering to one of the fiddley gratings. Just how I got clear of that, I don’t know, as I was rather losing interest in things, but I eventually came to the surface once again, this time alongside that last Engelhardt boat which Hemming and I had launched from on top of the officers’ quarters on the opposite side—for I was now on the starboard side, near the forward funnel.”

He clung to a rope on the side of the collapsible boat, as the forward funnel crashed into the sea, missing him by inches, and flinging the boat clear of the sinking ship. A few men scrambled onto the bottom of the boat…

> “The fore part, and up to the second funnel was by that time completely submerged, and as we watched this terribly awe-inspiring sight, suddenly all lights went out and the huge bulk was left in black darkness, but clearly silhouetted against the bright sky. Then, the next moment, the massive boilers left their beds and went thundering down with a hollow rumbling roar, through the bulk-heads, carrying everything with them that stood in their way. This unparalleled tragedy that was being enacted before our very eyes, now rapidly approached its finale, as the huge ship slowly but surely reared herself on end and brought rudder and propellers clear of the water, till, at last, she assumed an absolute perpendicular position. In this amazing attitude she remained for the space of half a minute. Then with impressive majesty and ever increasing momentum, she silently took her last tragic dive to seek a final resting place in the unfathomable depths of the cold grey Atlantic.”

> “Almost like a benediction, everyone round me on the upturned boat breathed the two words, ‘She’s gone.’”

> “Fortunately the scene that followed was shrouded in darkness. Less fortunately, the calm still silence carried every sound with startling distinctness. To enter into a description of those heart-rending, never-to-be-forgotten sounds would serve no useful purpose. I never allowed my thoughts to dwell on them, and there are some that would be alive and well to-day had they just determined to erase from their minds all memory of those ghastly moments, or at least until time had somewhat dimmed the memory of that awful tragedy.”

The men on the overturned collapsible boat were far from saved. If a man collapsed, the ones standing did not have the strength to help. And the buoyancy compartments of the boat were gradually filling, the water rising up their legs. To try and keep it afloat, Lightoller had the men stand in a line, with himself at the head and wireless operator Harold Bride at the foot. At his commands, they leaned left or right, to help keep their precarious craft on an even keel, and hopefully afloat until they could be picked up. He asked Bride what ships he had contacted, and was able to encourage the shivering survivors that help was on the way, if they could only hang on.

As dawn came, and the *Carpathia* came into view Lightoller saw another lifeboat in the distance. Shouting did not attract her attention, but he still had his officer’s whistle. Several shrill blasts, and Lifeboats 12 and 4 began rowing slowly toward them. Lightoller ordered the men not to scramble and risk capsizing both themselves and their rescuers, and the 28 half-frozen survivors managed to make the transfer safely. Most went into Lifeboat 12; overloading the boat, but there was no other option. Lightoller took command, and concentrated all his skills on keeping her afloat in a rising sea. Mrs. Elizabeth Mellenger took off her cloak and draped it around his shoulders, and they began to row, slowly and carefully, toward the little Cunarder. As he tells it, “I trimmed the boat down a little more by the stern, and raised the bow, keeping her carefully bow on to the sea, and hoping against hope she would continue to rise. Sluggishly, she lifted her bows, but there was no life in her with all that number on board.”

Remembering the scene, James Bisset, then Second Officer of the *Carpathia* said that Lifeboat 12’s gunwales were three inches above the water. Two waves splashed over the bow of the boat, then she reached the sheltering side of the ship. The passengers were taken off with bo’sun’s chairs, and rope

ladders for those who could manage them. Lightoller was the last man rescued.

Lightoller counted heads, and found that there were 705 survivors of the 2,201 persons on board the *Titanic.* He was the only living senior officer, and so took the responsibility of leading the crew. Passengers also approached him, asking about the possibility of their loved ones having survived. After some soul-searching, he decided that the kindest thing was to tell them the bitter truth, as gently as he could. Many others came forward to help—he mentions the Countess of Rothes as being one of them, as the *Carpathia* ran for New York.

As the Titanic's passengers disembarked from the *Carpathia*, the officers and crew were escorted on board the Red Star liner Lapland by E.F. Wright, P.A.S.Franklin, C.M. Thomas, F(red) Toppin, and Mr. Ridgway, officials of the White Star Line, where they had dinner, and talked late into the night. The press was kept away, and plans were made for them to sail for England as soon as possible. However, they planned without consulting U. S. Senator William Alden Smith (R., Michigan), chairman of the Subcommittee on Commerce. The Senator subpoenaed J. Bruce Ismay and the crew to conduct an American inquiry into the sinking, a totally unexpected development.

First in New York, then in Washington, Lightoller testified, with an increasing sense of annoyance. Senator Smith took it upon himself to ask questions that the most nautically ignorant American might want to have answered. Naturally, it appeared to the *Titanic*'s officers that the Senator was a fool, a buffoon, and an insult to their intelligence. Lightoller led a small mutiny of the ship's officers over their accommodations in Washington—probably more out of frustration than any real problem. Somehow he dealt with his own grief over the death of many friends, with the crew's issues, and with relatives of people who were lost. He managed to seize a moment to write a letter to Sylvia on U. S. Senate stationery, which Senator Smith franked for him. It reads:

> *"My dearest*
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> *I am at present waiting for one of the Senators & do not know if I shall have another opportunity to drop you a line this mail - I have a pocket full of letters to answer - you can understand, that being the only surviving off(icer), that stayed to the last, I am delayed with requests for interviews & letters re some of the poor folk. So, dearie, I am giving my time wholly to assisting others and I know you will willingly wait contented in the knowledge that you still have your dear ones with you."*
>
> *" Herb"*

At last, on the 11th of May, Lightoller, Ismay, and the rest of the *Titanic'*s surviving officers set sail on the Adriatic for Southampton, to face the British Board of Trade Inquiry. This was the more important of the two, at least as far as Lightoller's career was concerned. As he put it, "In Washington it was of little consequence, but in London it was very necessary to keep one's hand on the whitewash brush. Sharp questions tht needed careful answers if one was to avoid a pitfall, carefully and subtly dug, leading to a pinning down of blame on to someone's luckless shoulders. How hard Mr. Scanlan and the legal luminary representing the interests of the Seamen and Firemen, tried to prove there were not enough seamen to launch and man the boats. The same applied to the passengers, and quite truly. But it was inadvisable to admit it then and there, hence the hard fought legal duels between us. Mr. Scanlan's conquest of the higher legal spheres of recent years proves he was no mean antagonist to face." Lightoller and Scanlan sparred with each other throughout the British Inquiry, with Lightoller feeling at the end that he had achieved at least a draw.

When it was finally over, Herbert Lightoller resumed his career as an officer of the White Star Line. His first assignment after the *Titanic* was First Officer of the *Majestic*, with his close friend, David Blair as Second Officer, who probably helped him ease back into his job. Soon, he returned to his beloved *Oceanic*, where he served happily as First Officer until August 1914, when war broke out in Europe. The liner returned to England, and was armed as a merchant cruiser. Her First Officer, a member of the Royal Naval Reserve, was called up as Lieutenant Lightoller, and remained with his ship. They had a new Royal Navy

skipper, Captain William Slayter, who shared command with the regular captain, Henry Smith, an arrangement that had caused trouble on other ships, and was to do so now.

The Oceanic was assigned to patrol around the northern end of the British Isles, a treacherous area for which a ship of her size was totally unsuited. It was a navigator's nightmare, compounded by the fact that Captain Slayter had ordered the ship's clocks set back forty minutes from Greenwich time. Thus handicapped, David Blair was attempting to navigate the ship on a foggy morning when she piled up on the rocks of the Shaalds. All attempts to free her failed, and she was finally abandoned, but not before Lightoller managed to go back to his favorite ship, and remove the bridge clock from its housing.

After a brief period of patrolling the coast in small vessels, ended by an attack of measles and a stay in a military hospital, Lightoller was assigned to the Grand Fleet, on the seaplane carrier, *Campania*, a converted Cunard liner. As he humorously put it, "I was appointed Watchkeeper, for when there was anything to watch, and Observer for when there was anything to observe." He did achieve one notable first, in a naval exercise— he was the observer in the first plane ever to spot an "enemy" fleet from the air. However, he soon had enough of the notoriously unreliable seaplanes, and when the old ship was sent away for a refit, he pulled a few strings, and got another assignment—his first command.

This was the HMTB (Torpedo Boat) 117, assigned to the Nore Defence Flotilla, patrolling off the Thames, and he was delighted with her. She was no beauty, but she had a nice turn of speed. Best of all, she was his. He settled into a good working relationship with his crew, which he was to continue throughout his naval career, as he never had to discipline a man on any of his ships. In July of 1916, German Zeppelins were making night air raids on London and other coastal areas. The Nore Defence Flotilla was deployed to help stop them, and on one occasion, Lightoller and his crew thought they had shot down Heinrich Mathy's enormous L31. Although they were not successful, their fire was accurate enough to cause Mathy to dump his bombs—on them-- and head for home. As a reward, Lightoller received the Distinguished Service Cross and a new command—the destroyer *Falcon*, and a new assignment: the Dover Patrol

He was not altogether thrilled with the change. He would have to move Sylvia and the children again. The *Falcon* was one of the old "thirty knotters" and should have been scrapped fifteen years ago. However there were a few advantages. "Not a great deal of space, unencumbered by guns and torpedo tubes, but palatial, particularly below decks, compared with the Torpedo Boat I had just left. A fair sized wardroom, and best of all, my own cabin to sulk in."

He and *Falcon* had many adventures. One of the wildest moments was when they blundered through a minefield with another destroyer following them, cheerfully assuming that Lightoller would not lead them wrong. Both ships were lucky and escaped without hitting a mine, although the commander of the other ship got a nasty shock when Lightoller told him where they'd just been.

On a wet, foggy April 1, while escorting a convoy, the *Falcon* collided with the trawler *John Fitzgerald*. She was cut almost in two, and after Lightoller evacuated all the crew but himself and two officers, the forepart broke off and sank. The stern section, with the three men on board floated for long enough to raise hopes that they could save at least part of their ship. However it was not to be, and they barely were able to save themselves.

They spent some anxious hours in the water before they were picked up by a trawler, her attention drawn to them by Lightoller's old friend, his whistle. He had to stand a court martial, of course, having lost one of His Majesty's ships, and it was an almost comic affair. He was totally unaware of how these things were done—when told he could bring a "Friend" with him—meaning an attorney—he took it literally and asked one of his friends to come along! However, since it was clearly an accident, and not a matter of negligence on his part, he was exonerated, promoted, and given a new command.

This was the River Class destroyer *Garry*. In her, he did mainly convoy duty. Having evolved his own system of escort placement, he put it into practice, and only lost one ship of several hundred from the convoys he commanded. He also had his own system of fishing. While rather expensive compared to more traditional methods, a couple of depth charges dropped at the right spot could bring up a fine catch. On one

occasion, he was actually commended for his prompt action in attacking a submarine, when, in fact, he was just getting some fish for his crew!

The German submarines were having a less and less easy time of it in 1917-18. The nets and minefields of the Dover Barrage were in place, there were lights, there were armed trawlers and destroyers. The Flanders U Boat Flotilla was taking 80 percent casualties. However, Leutnant Werner Fürbringer's UB 110 managed to get out, and was stalking the channel. He spotted a heavily escorted convoy, and despite the odds, decided to attack it.

But the UB 110 was seen, and the convoy escorts were warned. Lightoller on the *Garry* saw the periscope, made full speed for the spot, and dropped a pattern of depth charges. The submarine's plates were damaged, her dive planes jammed, and she lost trim. She surfaced, and her commander could not do anything about it. Lightoller brought the *Garry* round, and rammed the submarine.

Fürbringer opened the hatch and began to evacuate his crew, but the UB 110 did not sink. Lightoller considered whether his ship could stand it, then came about and rammed the sub again, sending her to the bottom. The Garry's bows were nearly torn off by the second effort. Lightoller attended immediately to his damaged ship, and did not pay any attention to the German crew in the water. According to Fübringer, all 38 of them got out alive. 15 survived.

Lightoller then performed one of his showiest feats of seamanship. He brought the Garry all the way home to the Humber, rather than making for the nearest port; steaming stern first, making 8 knots. Bows hanging by a veritable thread, forward bulkhead threatening to collapse at any moment, the Garry barely made it, but fortunately for all on board, she did.

The war ended before Lightoller could receive a new naval command. He resigned and went happily back to the White Star Line, as chief officer of the *Celtic*. As he tells it, "The men were completely out of hand—although that did not trouble me much. I'd handled them all my life and my sympathies were wholly theirs, so we soon found common ground." Eventually he had everything running smoothly, and was hoping to be assigned the premiere ship of the line, the *Olympic*, when she finished refitting. It did not happen.

Herbert Lightoller felt that his association with the *Titanic* was the cause. It may have had something to do with it, although it probably was not the only reason. Finally, on February 6, 1920, he sent in his resignation, receiving this reply from Marine Superintendant Charles Bartlett, former commander of the *Titanic*'s ill fated sister ship, *Britannic.*

> *February 13, 1920*
>
> *Dear Sir:*
>
> *I am in receipt of your letter of the 6th inst., and regret to note that you have decided to resign your position as Officer in this Company's Organization. I have arranged for Mr. Alcock to relieve you tomorrow morning, the 14th inst., and shall be glad if you will hand everything over to him in connection with the steamer. Your resignation will date from the 14th inst. I may say the Company will be very pleased to answer enquiries at any time regarding your long service with us. Wishing you every good luck in your new venture*
>
> *, Yours faithfully,*
>
> *Charles A. Bartlett,*
>
> *Captain RNR Marine Superintendant*

Ending his career with the White Star Line brought on a period of financial difficulty for Herbert Lightoller and his family, now consisting of Sylvia, and children Roger, Trevor, Mavis, Doreen, and Brian. A

fur-importing business failed, a job as political correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor fell through. Finally, at Sylvia's suggestion, they turned their home into a guest house. This gave them an income, and fed the family. As their situation improved, they were able to purchase leases, and financial security returned.

Herbert was able to once again get back on the water, first in outboard race boats, then in a much larger craft, the 58-foot motor yacht *Sundowner*, converted from an old teak-hulled Navy steam pinnace by a local barge-builder. *Sundowner* was his pride and joy, and as a conspicuous mark of his esteem, he installed the Oceanic's clock in her cabin. He, Sylvia, and the children made numerous European trips in her, sometimes venturing as far as the Mediterranean.

In 1932, he embarked on a highly successful chicken farming venture from the family's new residence in Hertfordshire. Starting out selling eggs to local retailers, he was soon supplying Sainsbury's and Fortnum and Mason's. He became a leading authority on the subject, and devised several innovations to improve production.

As the thirties ended, the Lightollers' children married and moved away. Finally, it was only Herbert and Sylvia who sailed on the *Sundowner,* as war began to loom on the European horizon. One night, two men came to their house, and asked him to come with them. It seemed that Naval Intelligence needed someone to conduct a clandestine survey of the German coast. He had emerged as the perfect candidate. He accepted the assignment, and he, Sylvia and *Sundowner* went out as spies.

They managed it successfully without being caught, although there was one close call—saved by Herbert pretending to be drunk! The war came, and on the very first day, September 3, 1939, came tragedy for the Lightollers. Their youngest son, 22-year old Herbert Brian, a bomber pilot, was killed on an air raid over Wilhelmshaven when his plane hit a barrage balloon. It was a terrible blow, and yet Brian had given his father a bit of information that would save many lives in the Dunkirk evacuation.

When Operation Dynamo—the Dunkirk evacuation-- began, there was a call for any craft in the South of England that would float and could cross the Channel. Most boats were commandeered from their owners and sailed by navy men and civilian volunteers, but a few were sailed by their brave owners. Herbert Lightoller was not about to send *Sundowner* into harm's way under anyone's command but his own, so he and his eldest son, Roger, and Sea Scout Gerald Ashcroft made the trip. It was June 1, 1940, bright and clear, ideal conditions for the Luftwaffe pilots who were having a field day on the ships of the evacuation flotilla.

Sundowner made it in unscathed except for some strained seams from near misses by bombs. Owing to the calm weather, Lightoller took on a load of 127 men, packing 75 of them into the cabin like sardines, all instructed to lie down and stay down, with the rest on deck. They set men to watch fore and aft, Herbert stood on the bow, Roger took the helm, and Gerald fended debris and bodies away from the propellers with a boathook, as they cast off from the destroyer Worcester, and set out for home. The heavily loaded boat was attacked several times by German aircraft, but Brian had told his father how to tell when an ME 109 was going to open fire. *Sundowner*, even overloaded, was superbly quick on the helm. They dodged everything the Luftwaffe threw at them, and made it across the Channel, to astonish everyone on the dock at Ramsgate by the stream of men who kept pouring out of the little motor yacht. It was the sort of practical joke Herbert Lightoller relished.

For the rest of the Second World War, he served with the Small Vessels Pool, organizing transport of military supplies on inland waterways during the war, and had to relinquish Sundowner to their service. Sadly, another devastating loss came to him and Sylvia when Roger was killed in France in 1945. Trevor, their second son and both their daughters survived the war.

At 72, Herbert Lightoller was ready to tackle a new line of work, very close to his heart. He went into the boat building business, first with an outside partner, then with son Trevor. Richmond Slipways, located at 1 Ducks Walk specialized in police launches. He and Sylvia lived over the shop. *Sundowner* was retrieved and refurbished, but no longer sailed as far afield as she once had done.

Herbert Lightoller died on December 8, 1952, of heart failure, having survived four shipwrecks, two World Wars, and his own lifelong love of adventure.

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