

The Loss of the Morro Castle

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FIRE DISASTER AT SEA AMERICAN LINER OVERWHELMED - 180 LIVES LOST About 180 people are believed to have lost their lives when the SS Morro Castle, bound from Havana to New York, was destroyed by fire early yesterday morning off the New Jersey coast only 20 miles south of Scotland light, which stands at the entrance to New York harbour. The ill-fated liner was returning from a vacation cruise carrying 318 passengers and a crew of 240. The fire which sent her to her doom was first discovered by a night watchman, who, upon entering the ship's library about 3.30 am, found it in flames. Forty minutes later, after all attempts to check the spread of the fire had failed, the chief wireless operator sent out the first SOS message. This was soon followed by a second, which announced that fire was blazing beneath the wireless room, and concluded with the ominous words "We can't hold out much longer". Thereafter no further word came from the ship. The first SOS was picked up by several vessels in the vicinity, but it was nearly 6 am before the first of them reached the scene of the disaster. By that time the Morro Castle was wrapped in flames from bow to stern, and the rescue ships could only pick up such survivors as they could find in the surrounding water. The heavy toll of life was due partly to the extraordinary speed with which the fire engulfed the liner, and partly to the fact that a strong north-easterly gale was blowing at the time and greatly hampered rescue work. Flames swept through the interior of the ship, filling the companion ways and cutting off staircases before any word of warning could be carried to sleeping passengers. Most of those numbered among the survivors had cabins on the upper deck and were able to escape through their windows. It is believed that the majority of those with cabins on the lower decks were trapped in them and perished in the flames. Even those who succeeded in reaching open deck often found themselves cut off from the lifeboats, several of which were already ablaze. Only eight of the Morro Castle's 12 lifeboats appear to have been launched, and the complete disorganization into which the rescue work aboard the liner was thrown is vividly revealed by the fact that five of the eight lifeboats carried away only 85 persons between them, though each was intended to accommodate 70.

AIRMEN TO THE RESCUE Many of the passengers, finding themselves unable to reach a lifeboat, jumped into the sea to escape the flames. Several of these were later picked up by rescue ships, while a hardy few managed to make their way to the New Jersey shore some eight miles distant. One of the crew - a Cuban cabin boy - actually swam ashore without the assistance of a life preserver. The heavy sea that was running told heavily, however, against the chances of those who took to the water, and rescue work at the scene of disaster was further hampered by driving rain and mist which made visibility bad. No final list of survivors is yet available, but according to a statement issued this afternoon by the Ward Line, owners of the Morro Castle, 226 passengers and about 150 members of the ship's company have been accounted saved. One of the first vessels to reach the scene after the Morro Castle had sent out an SOS was the British liner Monarch of Bermuda, which played a leading part in the rescue work, saving 71 people and earning the especial praise of survivors. The American ships City of Savannah and Andrea F. Luckenbach also did valiant work. As soon as news of the disaster was received on shore numerous coastguard cutters and fishing boats put out from neighbouring harbours in an effort to lend assistance, but high seas and driving mist drove most of them back to shelter. Considerable help was given to rescuers in their search for survivors by National Guard airmen, who at great personal risk flew low over the waters surrounding the blazing ship indicating the position of victims whom they located in the sea. Accounts of the scenes which were enacted on board the Morro Castle during the last tragic hours vary greatly. The truth probably is panic and heroism. Each played its part. It would appear, however that orderly attempts to evacuate the liner broke down before the swift advance of the flames, which soon cut off all contact between the fore and stern parts of the

ship. This is said to account for the fact that several of the lifeboats which succeeded in putting away from her were occupied almost entirely by members of the crew. For the most part the survivors among the passengers seem to be agreed that the crew did all that was possible in the circumstances.

SURVIVORS'S STORIES Survivors of the disaster from their beds in hospitals or in improvised shelters along the New Jersey coast told widely varying stories of their experiences. One of the most vivid accounts was given by Dr Charles Cochrane, a well-known surgeon of Brooklyn, New York: "I was awakened from a sound sleep (he said) at just what time I don't know, by clouds of suffocating smoke filling my cabin. At almost the same time someone banged and hammered on my cabin door and shouted something unintelligible. Confused by my sudden awakening, and choking, and unable to see because of the dense smoke in the cabin, I tried vainly to find the door. Just in time my groping hands came in contact with a porthole. I crawled through it and dropped to the deck outside. There was no apparent panic. The crew was making a frantic effort to launch the boats. All the time the flames were creeping nearer. Someone gave me a violent push, and I half fell, half staggered, into a lifeboat. There was trouble in launching it, and it seemed almost half an hour before we were in the water and pulling away from the ship. The front of the ship was a pillar of flames by this time. A strong gale was whipping up the sea. It seems miraculous that the boat lived through it and brought us ashore". There was no panic where Dr. Cochrane was, but Antonio Giorgio, an oiler, who was brought ashore in a boat at Spring Lake, New Jersey, told of "a bedlam of fighting men". He was resting in the petty officers' room after a spell of duty which had ended at midnight when he was awakened by screams and found the room filled with smoke. He opened the door and found flames everywhere. Three times (he said) I started upstairs, and three times my legs were grabbed and I was dragged down as men fought like beasts to get up a narrow ladder stairway. The flames were thickest on the port side. It was there that most of the women were gathered. I saw many women burned to death, but could not get near them because of the terrible heat from the fire. I finally reached the deck and crawled into one of the lifeboats. It quickly filled with people. We were frightened when we found it would not swing over the side - the tackle was jammed - but finally an electrician got the boat free. Before he could do it though, many of the people had jumped into the sea. We got the boat into the water, but could not row because of the high seas. But fortunately the wind came and blew us ashore. We were half swamped and had to bail all the time. Once a wave swept the chief engineer out of the boat and another brought him in again. He broke his arm.

SWIMMING TO SHORE Miss Una Cullen said that she was having cocktails with three friends in the lounge about 4 am. They saw smoke, but were told by stewards not to worry; the fire would be put out easily. They went out to see what was going on, and "suddenly fire just jumped at us". Miss Cullen said she went below, awakened her room-mate, and got a coat and a life-preserver. She tripped going down a rope ladder and fell into the sea. She was in the water seven hours, she thought. While she was waiting to be rescued she saw the mother of one of her friends suddenly let go and drown. Five married couples, possibly more, jumped hand in hand from the ship's deck in the hope of swimming to the shore. Two couples reached the coast safely after more than six hours in the water. A man and his wife named Cohen had only one lifebelt between them, and the wife could swim only a few strokes. But the husband was a powerfully-built former football player, and he brought her through without any other harm than exhaustion. They were picked up off Seagirt. A Mr and Mrs Panimo, who had a similar experience, said that they had jumped off the ship because there was no use making for the lifeboats, of which five were already on fire. They had life-preservers, and the wind and current carried them towards Seagirt, where they were rescued from the shore. Mrs Edward Brady, wife of a physicist, had the tragic experience of seeing her husband die of exhaustion after he had kept up alongside her for seven hours in the ocean. She tried to hold him up, but with the last of his strength he pushed her off and told her to save herself. She was rescued a few minutes later.

COMPLETE MYSTERY The cause of the fire is a complete mystery. Some of the early survivors asserted that the ship had been struck by lightning, but this explanation is not given much credence, nor is it in accordance with the accounts of later survivors. The consensus of opinion is that the fire began in the library or smoking room, though there are some who declare it must have broken out in several places at the same time to have enveloped the entire ship with such terrifying speed. The speed with which the fire spread is particularly striking in view of the fact that the Morro Castle was equipped with

patented devices designed expressly to prevent such a conflagration. An 11,520-ton passenger liner built in 1930 at a cost of \$5,500,000, the Morro Castle was regarded as one of the most luxurious and up-to-date ships in the American mercantile marine. She had undergone inspection by State officials as recently as last August. According to some of the crew, the rapid spread of the fire was due to the fact that the water pressure failed at the critical juncture, but this is not yet officially substantiated. The all-important fact is, however, that the Morro Castle was reduced to a mere burning hulk in a matter of five hours or less. An attempt was made about noon yesterday to bring her into New York harbour, and two tugs and a coastguard cutter succeeded in taking her in tow. About 7 pm, however, the burnt-out liner broke away and, driven by high wind and strong currents, eventually ran ashore off Asbury Park, New Jersey.

CAPTAIN'S DEATH The commanding officer, Mr E.F. Warms, and 13 of the crew managed to remain on board the Morro Castle until late yesterday afternoon. They were forced to huddle together in the extreme bow of the vessel to escape the flames, and even in this position the intense heat of the ship's plates burnt the soles of their feet. One of the most dramatic elements in the disaster lay in the fact that the master of the Morro Castle, Captain Robert Willmott, who had commanded her ever since her first voyage, died suddenly on the bridge less than six hours before his ship caught fire. This individual tragedy had led to all entertainment aboard the ill-fated liner being cancelled - a fact which explains why, although it was the last night of the voyage, virtually all the passengers were asleep in their cabins when the fire started. A rigorous inquiry into the cause of the disaster as well as both the behaviour of the crew and their training for such an emergency has been ordered by the Secretary of Commerce, Mr Roper. At the same time Mr Martin J. Conboy, the United States Attorney for New York, will hold a separate investigation. The police at Havana have also announced that they intend to hold an inquiry into suggestions that the Morro Castle was the victim of a sabotage plot arising from labour troubles on the Cuban waterfront. These rumours are, however, discounted by officials of the Ward Line.

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