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# Morning after . . . where were the bodies?

By Jan C. Nielsen

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It was April 23, 1912, at daybreak, out on the North Atlantic. The seascape looked every bit like a well-adorned graveyard, with an overcast sky, rolling fog and, as far as one could see, pieces of wreckage that bobbed in the swells.

Doors, pillows, chairs, tables, and scattered remains were everywhere. White fragments dotted the debris --- clustering and moving along the waves like flocks of seagulls. Actually, these white specks were dead passengers and crew members, in their white life belts, left over from the *Titanic* disaster six days ago.<sup>1</sup>



Left: old "fittings" photograph of the *Titanic*. Right: rare card postmarked May 7, 1912, which identifies the photograph as the steamship *Titanic* but that is, in fact, the *Lusitania*. Postcard and photo are from the author's collection. All rights reserved. Copyright 2002 by Jan C. Nielsen.

A "cutter" with five men aboard entered the sanctuary on its first run for that day. The oars groaned in the oarlocks, then became silent as the men approached one of the bodies. The ocean loudly washed against the sides of the little boat and, with an occasional thump, kicked up surf over the gunwale. As such, the men couldn't hear the waves as they crested over the body's head . . . "tish-sh . . . tish-sh . . . tish-sh."

The life belt held the victim's shoulders out of the water. Sometimes a larger wave made her entire body disappear. Her head was drawn back, and she faced upward, in the form of a figurine broken off an old ship's bow. The woman's hair and arms frolicked around, affording the men a glimpse at the water's angelic playfulness.

No doubt, the thirty-year old Swedish emigrant was dead --- Alma Pålsson had been cut off from her four children, who went down with the *Titanic*,

and from her husband in Chicago. Hundreds like her buoyed between the clefts of waves. As the crewman pulled her sea-drenched body into the boat, the steamer *Mackay-Bennett* stood nearby.<sup>2</sup>



Men from *Mackay-Bennett* attempt to recover *Titanic's* overturned life boat, or "raft," Collapsible "B." Postcard from author's collection. All rights reserved. Copyright 2002 by Jan C. Nielsen.

An overturned lifeboat in the sea between the cutter and the steamer seemed painted into this scene. Little more than a raft, with canvas sides, the broken boat resisted efforts to recover it. But, not the men's axes.

It eventually faded from sight.

Mrs. Pålsson was brought back to *Mackay-Bennett* for identification. In her pockets were a letter from husband, Nils, in Chicago, 65 Swedish kronor, and her steamship ticket. The items were carefully tagged. Then she was put on ice in the ship's hold. After another day or two of this gruesome business, *Mackay-Bennett* returned to Halifax, Nova Scotia.<sup>3</sup>

### **Bodies in the North Atlantic**

Mrs. Pålsson was one of several hundred bodies recovered by various ships, in April and May 1912, after the *Titanic* disaster. Roughly 1,526 people died when the ship foundered at 2:20 a.m., on April 15, 1912. Most people went down with the ship. But several hundred were either buried at sea or brought back, claimed by relatives, or buried in Halifax.

*Why are the bodies important?*

The bodies found floating in the sea were mostly third class passengers, emigrants and crewman.<sup>4</sup> They included children, mothers and fathers. As the rank and file, they were, by far, the most vulnerable of *Titanic's* victims.

The cruelty of the disaster is most evident with the bodies. Indeed, some of them appeared battered, bruised, and cut up from the event of the sinking. They were frozen in the treacherously cold north Atlantic, at night, and were bleached by the sunlight, during the day. As if an amusement for a cruel sea,

they bobbed, had their faces repeatedly dunked in the water, and became wrinkled and discolored as they decomposed.



Left: postcard photographs of bodies recovered from the wreck of the steamer *S.S. Eastland*, which capsized in the Chicago River on July 24, 1915. Photographs of the bodies recovered in the *Titanic* disaster were made for identification purposes, and are rare. However, the postcards shown here were commonly sold and distributed after the *Eastland* disaster by manufacturers such as Max Stein, and others. These cards are from the author's collection. All rights reserved. Copyright 2002 by Jan C. Nielsen<sup>5</sup>

These were people with hopes, ideals, struggles --- each had an important story to tell. Brothers, sisters, parents, and children had loved them. Most of them had families and careers. Later, in Halifax, photographs were taken of them. As we shall see, the images of the bodies may be the starkest, most unalterable and truthful testimony to the ravages wrought by the *Titanic's* foundering.

### Witnesses see “fields” or “scores” of bodies

#### Wilburn and Evans accounts

There are many witnesses to the fact numerous bodies were present in the sea surrounding *Titanic's* foundering, on Monday, April 15, 1912. The sea “became littered with bodies,” according to one survivor, Mary Davis Wilburn, who noted “The dead came up holding children in their arms. The poor people never had a chance.”<sup>6</sup>

Seaman Frank O. Evans, who went back to the wreckage to recover any survivors after *Titanic* sank, noted that the water had “scores” of bodies, so “you couldn't hardly count them”:<sup>7</sup>

Senator SMITH. Any dead?

Mr. EVANS. One died on the way back, sir. There were plenty of dead bodies about us.

Senator SMITH. How many? Scores of them?

Mr. EVANS. You couldn't hardly count them, sir. I was afraid to look over the sides because it might break my nerves down.

Evans further testified that he was still amongst the bodies at daybreak when the rescue ship *Carpathia* appeared:

Senator SMITH. A good many dead?

Mr. EVANS. Yes.

Senator SMITH. Did you see any women dead in the water?

Mr. EVANS. No, sir; mostly men.

Senator SMITH. Was it daylight at this time?

Mr. EVANS. Just breaking daylight.

### **Buley's, Scarrot's and Poingdestre's accounts**

Able seaman Edward J. Buley also noted that his boat was among the bodies and the wreckage when *Carpathia* appeared.

Senator FLETCHER. Did you get very far away from where the Titanic went down before the *Carpathia* was in sight?

Mr. BULEY. No, sir. When the *Carpathia* came and hove to, we were still amongst the wreckage looking for bodies.

Another seaman, Joseph Scarrot, testified at the British Inquiry that the water was thick with bodies, near the *Titanic's* wreckage. He stated that there were "more bodies than there was wreckage":

Mr. Scarrot: The boats were made fast and the passengers were transferred, and we went away and went among the wreckage. When we got to where the cries were we were amongst hundreds, I should say, of dead bodies floating in lifebelts.

440. Was it dark then? - Yes.

441. Still dark? - Yes, and the wreckage and bodies seemed to be all hanging in one cluster. When we got up to it we got one man, and we got him in the stern of the boat . . . the wreckage were that thick - and I am sorry to say there were more bodies than there was wreckage . . . We made sail and sailed back to take our other boats in tow that could not manage themselves at all. We made sail then, but just as we were getting clear of the wreckage we sighted the "*Carpathia's*" lights.

At the British Inquiry, *Titanic's* seaman John Poingdestre in life boat number 14 admitted that he saw bodies in the water, at daylight:

2991. How far away from the "Titanic" were you? - About 150 yards.

2992. After she sank did your boat pull in towards the place where she sank? - Yes.

2993. For what purpose? - To pick up anybody who was there.

2994. Was there anybody there? - I never saw anybody.

2995. Did you see any corpses? - No.

2996. You saw nothing? - I saw some by daylight.

Thus, when *Carpathia* appeared, at daylight (approximately 4:10 a.m.), the bodies were seen by persons in life boats, near the wreckage left by the *Titanic*.

#### **Collins, Senegal's and Ray's accounts**

Assistant cook, John Collins, another *Titanic* crewman, testified that he saw *Carpathia* picking up bodies that were washed alongside the ship:

MR. COLLINS. She stopped in the one place, and, I think, lowered two or three of her own boats, and her own boats were kept in the water when one of our boats, the sailboat, went up alongside of her.

Senator BOURNE. Why did the *Carpathia* lower any of her boats as long as none of your boats were in distress?

Mr. COLLINS. To take up some of the bodies that had been washed up by the side of her.

A *Carpathia* passenger, Simon Senegal, observed that the "water was thick with bodies." The *Oakland Tribune* reported on April 19, 1912:

#### **MANY DEAD ON RAFT, SEEN BY MERCHANT**

NEW YORK, April 19. Simon Senegal, a Montreal merchant, who was a passenger on the *Carpathia*, said that after his vessel had rescued boatloads of women, a life raft on which were about twenty-four person was seen.

"One-half of these were dead," said Senegal. "One of the *Carpathia's* boats went to the raft and took off the living, leaving the dead." "The water was thick with bodies." The crew of the *Carpathia* in their work of rescue came across numerous bodies floating in the water. I know of seven instance of persons who had been rescued dying on board the *Carpathia* and being buried at sea."<sup>8</sup>

Poingdestre, Evans, Scarrot and Wilburn, strongly corroborate that the bodies were out there and visible to persons on the morning of April 15, 1912. Further, the Collins and Senegal accounts would appear to specifically establish that the bodies were seen, at least by some persons, from *Carpathia*.

Partial corroboration of Senegal's account of the "raft" is found in the testimony of Frederick Ray, the *Titanic's* saloon steward, who - like Senegal - says that saw the overturned life boat, from *Carpathia*.

Senator FLETCHER. Did you see the collapsible boats?

Mr. RAY. No sir; not that I know of; I did not see any collapsible boats.

Senator FLETCHER. In the morning?

Mr. RAY. No, sir; only one that was turned upside down in the morning.

Senator FLETCHER. Where was that; how far away from the wreck?

Mr. RAY. They were floating away. I saw that later on in the morning after I got on the *Carpathia*.

Senator FLETCHER. There was nobody in that boat then?

Mr. RAY. No, sir; they had been taken off.

### **Ward's account**

Finally, *Carpathia* eventually made it to the wreckage where the overturned life boat had been, and the bodies reasonably could be seen. Another Saloon Steward from *Titanic*, William Ward, testified that *Carpathia* came within "half a mile or so" of the site of the foundering to pick up his life boat, number 9:

Senator FLETCHER. Did the *Carpathia* come to you or did you go to the *Carpathia*?

Mr. WARD. We partially rowed and she partially came some of the way. We saw her at a distance. She was headed our way. She stopped and slued around a little, and we surmised that she was then picking up a boat. It was hardly light enough to see at the time. It was just breaking day at that time, but we could see her lights. Then, of course, we started to pull toward her. I think we were about the fourth or fifth boat to be picked up.

Senator FLETCHER. You were picked up about how far from where the *Titanic* went down?

Mr. WARD. I should not think it would be more than about half a mile or so.

*Carpathia*, however, left without picking up any more bodies.

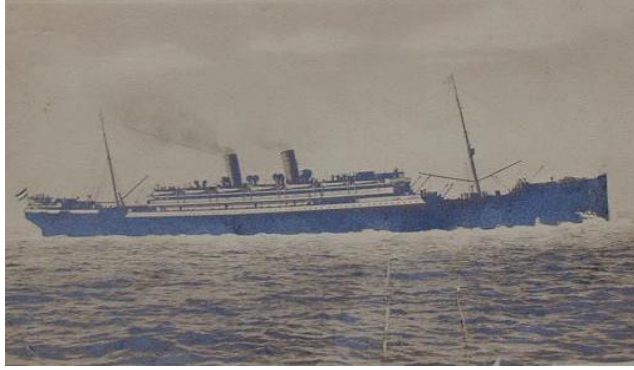
### ***Mackay-Bennett* is immediately dispatched to recover bodies**

Meanwhile, that morning in Halifax, Nova Scotia, *Titanic's* owners had already chartered the *Mackay-Bennett* to go to the scene. She was outfitted with embalming fluid, coffins, and canvas bags, for a body recovery mission. On Wednesday, April 17, 1912, at 12:35 p.m., she left Halifax for the scene of the disaster.<sup>9</sup> When *Mackay-Bennett* arrived at the scene, her crewman saw hundreds of bodies in the water:

the bodies were found close together and once they saw more than a hundred that looked to the wondering crew of the *Mackay-Bennett* lie a flock of sea gulls in the fog, so strangely did the ends of the life belt rise and fall with the rise and fall of the waves.<sup>10</sup>

### ***S.S. Bremen's* passengers view the *Titanic* disaster site**

Many other witnesses saw "fields of bodies" floating in the abyss, for example, when the *Nordeutscher Lloyd* passenger liner *Bremen* bypassed the disaster site on Saturday, April 20, 1912.



Old postcard of the Nordeutscher Lloyd steamship S.S. Bremen.  
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The sight was appalling. It included a woman clasping a dog, several men held to a raft of deck chairs . . . even one woman who was purportedly holding a baby. The Chicago Daily Tribune reported, on April 25, 1912:

#### GERMAN SHIP SAILS THROUGH FIELD OF TITANIC VICTIMS

Captain and Passengers Say They Saw More than 150 Bodies Floating Near Scene of Disaster

New York, April 24-[Special]-- Capt. Wilhelm and passengers of the Bremen, which arrived today from Bremen, reported that between 3 and 4 o'clock last Saturday afternoon, while in latitude 42 N, longitude 49.23 W., in the vicinity of where the Titanic foundered, his vessel ploughed through fields of bodies of the victims of the disaster. "They were everywhere," the captain declared, "There were men, women, and children. All had life preservers on. I counted 125, then grew sick of the sight. There may have been as many as 150 or 200 bodies." "A short time before, about fifty or sixty miles north, we passed five icebergs in succession. Our lookout sighted them in time, however, and we had no difficulty in avoiding them." "Why didn't you slow down and take on some of the bodies," he was asked. "It was absolutely useless, for the simple reason that we had no means for caring for them." He said that he knew that the cable steamer Mackay-Bennett was searching for bodies and that he had communicated with its commander, informing him of where the bodies were.<sup>11</sup>

One of *Bremen's* passengers remarked that "*We could see the white life-preservers of many more dotting the sea, all the way to the iceberg.*"<sup>12</sup> The passengers and crew of *Bremen* recalled, in particular, seeing the overturned life boat in the waters at the time they saw the bodies.<sup>13</sup>

#### Officers deny seeing bodies

On the morning of April 15, 1912, *Carpathia's* Captain Arthur Henry Rostron, like *Mackay-Bennett* and *Bremen*, saw the overturned life boat. He observed the entire four mile wide area, at daybreak. It was horrific, with wreckage, and lots of ice. He accounted for all the lifeboats.<sup>14</sup> After recovering the survivors in the life boats, Rostron left the scene.



The *Carpathia*, Captain Rostron's ship, which rescued the survivors of the *Titanic* disaster. She was torpedoed during World War I.  
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In testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee, Rostron depicted what he saw when he first arrived:

By the time we had the first boat's people it was breaking day, and then I could see the remaining boats all around within an area of about 4 miles. I also saw icebergs all around me. There were about 20 icebergs that would be anywhere from about 150 to 200 feet high and numerous smaller bergs; also numerous what we call "growlers." You would not call them bergs. They were anywhere from 10 to 12 feet high and 10 to 15 feet long above the water. I maneuvered the ship and we gradually got all the boats together.

#### **Rostron's, Boxhall's, Lightoller's and Lord's accounts**

At the British inquiry, Rostron explained that until he reached the last life boat, he hadn't come close to any of *Titanic's* wreckage. In both the U.S. Senate and the British inquiries, Rostron reported seeing "one body."

25496. Did you see any wreckage at all of the "Titanic"? - (Rostron) The only wreckage we saw there was very small stuff - a few deck chairs and pieces of cork from lifebelts, and a few lifebelts knocking about, and things of that description, all very small stuff indeed. There was very little indeed.

25497. Any bodies in the water? - We only saw one body.

25498. Would this be between four and six o'clock or something like that? - When we got up to the wreckage it would be about twenty minutes to eight, or a quarter to eight, or something like that.

25499. But you had been close to the spot for some time, had you not? - Yes, but we had not seen this wreckage. We had been dodging about picking up the other boats. I had not any idea where the wreckage was. As soon as we had finished taking the passengers from the boats I cleared off to another boat to pick them up, and was dodging about all over the place to pick them up. It was only when we got to the last boat that we got close up to the wreckage. It was close up to the wreckage. It would be about a quarter to eight when we got there.

25500. (The Commissioner.) I understand you to say those boats were spread over an area of five miles? - Four to five miles, yes.

*Titanic's* officer Joseph G. Boxhall, also reported seeing the single body, as follows:

Senator SMITH. Did you see any floating bodies?

Mr. BOXHALL. I saw one floating body, sir.

Senator SMITH. That of a man or woman?

Mr. BOXHALL. A man, sir.

*Titanic's* Second Officer, Charles Lightoller, who was on the overturned life boat near the scene of the sinking, claimed not to have seen any bodies:

Senator SMITH. I understood you to say that. What I particularly desired to know was whether at that time you saw any of the wreckage or floating bodies, dead or alive?

Mr. LIGHTOLLER. I saw none.

Captain Stanley Lord of the *Californian*, also sailed around the wreckage, and claimed to have seen no bodies, whatsoever. At the British Inquiry he testified:

7029. Did you see any wreckage anywhere? - I did.

7030. Where? - Near the "Carpathia."

7031. What did you see? - I saw several boats, deck chairs, cushions, planks.

7032. Collapsible boats? - I saw two collapsible boats [note: probably referring to "C" and "D," not Collapsible "B"]

7033. Did you see any bodies? - No.

7034. Any lifebelts floating? - No.

7035. Any wreckage? - Yes.

7036. Much? - Not a great deal.

7037. Did you cruise round and search? - I did.

7038. To see if you could find any bodies or any living persons? - I did. I did not see anything at all.

Rostron got close to the wreckage before he had finished getting everyone aboard, in other words, before 8:30 a.m. Notably, Rostron then sent everyone inside for a memorial service.

At 8:30 all the people were on board. I asked for the purser, and told him that I wanted to hold a service, a short prayer of thankfulness for those rescued and a short burial service for those who were lost . . . I then got an Episcopal clergyman, one of our passengers, and asked him if he would do this for me, which he did, willingly. While they were holding the service, I was on the bridge, of course, and I maneuvered around the scene of the wreckage.

The Senators questioned Rostron about the one body, and he explained:

I did not take him aboard. For one reason, the *Titanic's* passengers then were knocking about the deck and I did not want to cause any unnecessary excitement or any more hysteria among them, so I steamed past, trying to get them not to see it.

The above testimony is somewhat inconsistent with Rostron's British inquiry testimony, where he says he "dodged about all over the place" to pick up the life boats, not to avoid passengers seeing bodies. In any event, his American inquiry testimony suggests that he "maneuvered" or "dodged" to avoid passengers seeing a dead body or, perhaps, *bodies*.

### **Rostron "swung out" *Carpathia's* boats**

Meanwhile, Rostron says he had "swung out" *Carpathia's* boats:

Of course lots of gear had been knocked out of the boats and thrown out of the way of the people as they were getting up; so, while they were holding this service and while I was cruising around, I had had all of my boats swung out, ready for lowering . . .

While the passengers are inside at the service, and while he was maneuvering the ship, Rostron has his boats swung out, ready for lowering. *For what?* Rostron seems to imply that were out to recover "gear" that "had been knocked out."

### **Rostron "heard" Tuesday afternoon, after leaving the disaster site, that *Titanic's* passengers had worn life belts**

Rostron admitted that he knew that *Titanic's* passengers were wearing lifebelts --- but, he testified, he learned about the life belts later, on Tuesday afternoon, from passengers.

He noted "that was the only time I had anything to do with the people." Apparently without knowledge that *Titanic's* passengers wore life belts, he purported to "cruise all around the vicinity of the disaster" to see if there were any such "people afloat."

Mr. ROSTRON. I had very little opportunity of being amongst the passengers or any of them. To tell you the truth, I have been on the bridge, or about my duties most of the time. I had, however, one or two conversations with the passengers on Tuesday afternoon. That was the only time I had anything to do with the people, as I heard then that all the people on the *Titanic*, as far as they could see, had lifebelts on. They had all been supplied with lifebelts.

Senator SMITH. I assume that you kept watch to see whether there was any of these people afloat?

Mr. ROSTRON. Precisely. I was cruising all around the vicinity of the disaster.

Senator SMITH. How long did you cruise around there?

Mr. ROSTRON. In the actual vicinity of the disaster?

Senator SMITH. Yes.

Mr. ROSTRON. Half an hour.

Passengers in the life boats approaching *Carpathia* were wearing life belts. Rostron saw those boats. *Why did Rostron say that he learned only later on, the afternoon of the next day, Tuesday, that passengers aboard the Titanic had worn life belts?*

### ***Where were the bodies?***

It seems incredible that literally “fields” of bodies could be seen days later by *Bremen’s* passengers, and “scores” of bodies, by *Scarrot*, only hours before *Carpathia* came up --- yet Rostron and Boxhall reported seeing only one, and Lightoller and Lord, none whatsoever. Senator Smith, too, noted the incongruity, and said so in his questioning of Boxhall.

Senator SMITH. Is that the only body you saw?

Mr. BOXHALL. That is the only body I saw.

Senator SMITH. The only body you saw either dead or alive?

Mr. BOXHALL. Yes; dead or alive.

Senator SMITH. There must have been hundreds of bodies in the water about the Titanic.

Mr. BOXHALL. No one ever saw any, at all.

*Who is to be believed?* The answer calls for reading between the lines and connecting the “dots” . . . the “white dots,” in particular.



*S.S. Bremen.* Postcard from author’s collection.  
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**Captain Rostron: a “company man”**

To begin with, Rostron was a career company man. Like most people, he was afraid of losing his job. Both immediately during the rescue, and thereafter, he constantly checked with company management. Moreover, during the trip back to New York, he checked out much of what he did with C. Bruce Ismay, the managing director of the *Titanic's* owner. Rostron admitted that even he, as captain, could be "liable to dismissal" at the hands of the "owners of the vessel."

Senator SMITH. You say the captain of a ship is vested ordinarily with absolute control and discretion over the movements of his vessel?

Mr. ROSTRON. Absolutely. I wish to qualify that, however. By law, the captain of the vessel has absolute control, but suppose we get orders from the owners of the vessel to do a certain thing and we do not carry it out. The only thing is then that we are liable to dismissal.

It is worth noting that, months later, in November 1912, when Captain Stanley Lord of the *Californian* contacted him about his testimony, Rostron rebuffed him, wrote back that he had nothing further to say about what he saw that morning, and dutifully reported Lord's contact of him to Cunard's management.<sup>15</sup>

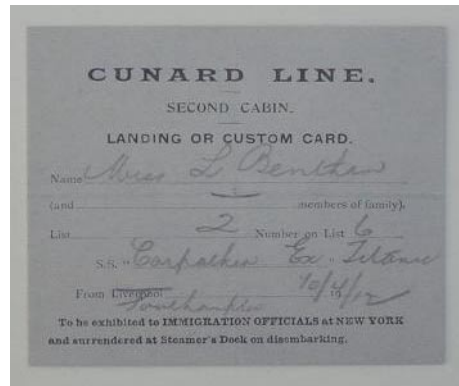
A company man has no secrets from his bosses.

#### **Rostron's testimony**

As set forth above, with his accounts above having "swung out" the boats, and learning about life belts in the afternoon, Rostron does not appear to have been a credible witness to the Senate Committee. Concededly, the Senators flattered him for rescuing the survivors. But Rostron evaded questions, gave some silly answers, and adopted a company man's posture.

As of Friday, April 19, 1912, when Rostron testified, it had not yet been reported that passengers aboard the *Bremen* had seen "fields of bodies." Further, Rostron testified on the first day of the proceedings and, as such, didn't know what the passengers would say. Perhaps they would contradict him . . . perhaps they saw all the bodies out there . . . maybe they saw him lower *Carpathia's* life boats to pick up bodies washed alongside . . . as John Collins testified.

Rostron did what most company men do when they are called as witnesses. He didn't offer much testimony, supported the status quo, and constantly tried to leave himself openings so that he could rehabilitate his testimony, if necessary.



Reproduction of Cunard's landing card aboard the *Carpathia*.  
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For example, his “one body” story, obviously, left open the possibility that if other passengers saw many bodies, he could amend his statement to say, “*Oh, yes, further out, there were several more . . .*”

#### **Rostron defends Smith and the steamship companies**

Frankly, the aftermath of the *Titanic* disaster was not a time for company men to beguile the public. But Rostron did. He defended Captain Smith, even likened himself to Smith in running his ship at top speed. Additionally, Rostron tried to rationalize the British Board of Trade's inadequate life boat regulations as legitimate because newly-designed ocean liners were “life boats” in themselves.

Senator SMITH. Are these regulations of the British Board of Trade new regulations or old regulations?

Mr. ROSTRON. They are of recent date.

Senator SMITH. The fact that, under these regulations, you are obliged to carry 20 lifeboats and the *Titanic* was only obliged to carry 20, with her additional tonnage, indicates either that these regulations were prescribed long ago -

Mr. ROSTRON. (interposing): No, sir; it has nothing to do with that. What it has to do with is the ship itself. The ships are built nowadays to be practically unsinkable, and each ship is supposed to be a lifeboat in itself. The boats are merely supposed to be put on as a standby. The ships are supposed to be built, and the naval architects say they are, unsinkable under certain conditions.

#### **Senator Newlands caught him when he went out on a limb:**

Senator NEWLANDS. How do you account for the fact that the Board of Trade of England, as the size of these ships has increased, has not compelled an increase in the number of life boats? Your maximum, as I understand, is 20 boats, is it not?

Mr. ROSTRON. Yes, I believe it is. But they have compelled a different construction of the ship itself. That is where the thing has come in.

Senator NEWLANDS. You regard each ship itself as a lifeboat?

Mr. ROSTRON. Yes, sir.

Senator NEWLANDS. That expectation was not realized in the case of this ship?

Mr. ROSTRON. It has been an abnormal experience as regards the *Titanic*.

Even though he would later rebuff Stanley Lord, when Lord asked for his help, Rostron came to Captain Smith's defense. Rostron initially dodged the question of whether, like Smith, he would have run his ship at top speed, in an ice field. Then, incredibly, he drew an analogy between himself and Smith.

He said that he ran his ship at top speed into ice, and made it:

Senator SMITH. What would be a safe, reasonable speed for a vessel of that size on such a course and in proximity of icebergs?

Mr. ROSTRON. Of course I do not know the ship. I know absolutely nothing about her.

Senator SMITH. How would you have felt yourself about it. Suppose you had been taking that course with your ship; how fast would you have felt it prudent to go in such a situation?

Mr. ROSTRON. I can only tell you this, gentlemen, I knew there was ice about.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. ROSTRON. I knew the *Titanic* had struck ice. Therefore, I was prepared to be in the vicinity of ice when I was getting near him, because if he had struck a berg and I was going to his position I knew very well that there must be ice about. I went full speed, all we could -

Senator SMITH. You went full speed?

Mr. ROSTRON. I did, and doubled my lookouts, and took extra precautions and exerted extra vigilance. Every possible care was taken . . .

Senator SMITH. You had a smaller ship, however, and it would respond more readily to a signal?

Mr. ROSTRON. No.

Senator SMITH. Would it not?

Mr. ROSTRON. No, sir; it would not. I do not maintain that, for one moment.

So, in effect, just like *Titanic*, Captain Rostron took the risk, went at a high speed into an ice field, and came out of it still afloat. Thus, he contended, going full speed wasn't necessarily improper.

### **Rostron takes Ismay to New York**

The Senators also became skeptical when Rostron told them that he was absolute master of his ship. They believed that he curried favor to C. Bruce

Ismay in immediately sailing back to New York, and otherwise accommodating Ismay's desires, including, no less, collaborating on marconigrams, and maintaining a level of silence vis-à-vis the shore, for a long while.

Not surprisingly, Rostron anticipated the question, and volunteered his reasons for going back to New York. The Senators then questioned him about whether a managing director has any status aboard ship. Even though, earlier, he conceded that the company might fire him if he did something without management's approval --- Rostron, once again, told the committee that a managing director has "no authority whatever":

Senator SMITH. Captain, is it customary to take orders from a director or a general officer of the company aboard?

Mr. ROSTRON. No, sir.

Senator SMITH. From whom do you take orders?

Mr. ROSTRON. From no one.

Senator SMITH. Aboard ship?

Mr. ROSTRON. At sea, immediately I leave port until I arrive at port, the captain is in absolute control and takes orders from no one. I have never known it in our company or any other big company when a director or a managing owner would issue orders on that ship. It matters not who comes on board that ship they are either passengers or crew. There is no official status and no authority whatever with them.

While, perhaps, technically true, Rostron's other statements, and his constant checking with C. Bruce Ismay relative to any of his actions, seemed to beguile his representation that persons such as Ismay had "no authority" aboard *Carpathia*. Further, everyone knew that members of the shipping industry's management, such as Ismay, were exceedingly powerful. They held wide influence in the industry, even with Cunard's executives, such as its Managing Director, Booth, who was Rostron's boss.

Senator SMITH. And you immediately reversed your course?

Mr. ROSTRON. I came right around for New York immediately, and returned to New York. Would you like to know my reasons for coming back to New York?

Senator SMITH. Yes.

Mr. ROSTRON. The first and principal reason was that we had all these women aboard, and I knew they were hysterical and in a bad state. I knew very well, also, that you would want all the news possible. I knew very well, further, that if I went to Halifax, we could get them there all right, but I did not know how many of these people were half dead, how many were injured, or how many were really sick, or anything like that. I knew, also, that if we went to Halifax, we would have the possibility of coming across more ice, and I knew very well what the effect of that would be on people who had had the experience these people had had. I knew what that would be the whole time we were in the vicinity of ice. I took that into consideration. I knew very well that if we

went to Halifax it would be a case of railway journey for these passengers, as I knew they would have to go to New York, and there would be all the miseries of that. Furthermore, I did not know what the condition of the weather might be, or what accommodation I could give them in Halifax, and that was a great consideration - one of the greatest considerations that made me turn back.

These don't sound like very good reasons, or truthful ones. In fact, Rostron may not have immediately turned his ship around and headed for New York. Wireless officer Harold Cottam testified that they originally aimed for Halifax.

Mr. COTTAM. ... Yes; I believe I did mention something about Halifax, sir, simply because the captain was bound for Halifax first, and then he changed his mind and was bound for New York. I may have mentioned Halifax. I can not quite remember whether I mentioned Halifax at first.

Senator SMITH. You say the captain was bound for Halifax?

Mr. COTTAM. Yes, sir.

Senator SMITH. How do you know?

Mr. COTTAM. I went and asked the captain, sir. Three or four ships around about wanted to know where we were bound for, and the captain said he was not decided, he thought he was bound for Halifax; but later on in the morning he changed his mind.

Senator SMITH. At what time?

Mr. COTTAM. I can not remember the time.

Senator SMITH. About what time? Was it forenoon?

Mr. COTTAM. It may have been about noon.

Senator SMITH. Was it necessary to change his course, in changing his mind?

Mr. COTTAM. Slightly, sir

Seaman George Moore also seemed to indicate that *Carpathia* did not immediately head out for New York:

Senator NEWLANDS. Well, the ship [Carpathia] soon took a direction toward the southwest, did it not?

Mr. MOORE. I could not say.

Senator NEWLANDS. It must have done so in order to go to New York.

Mr. MOORE. I should say it went to the westward, sir.

*Titanic's* owners had actually chartered a train there to pick up the survivors and return them to New York. Thus, P. Franklin and the owners in New York do not appear to have influenced the decision, since they were willing to move the passengers out of Halifax. Obviously, the senators strongly suspected that Rostron came back to New York, and not Halifax (even though Halifax was closer), at the instigation of Ismay. Rostron argued that he was

“perfectly right” in making this decision to go to New York, purportedly without yet having Cunard's approval --- pretty gutsy for a company man.

He told the Senators:

Senator SMITH. And you took the chance?

Mr. ROSTRON. It was hardly a chance. Of course it was a chance, but at the same time I knew quite what I was doing. I considered that I was perfectly free, and that I was doing perfectly right in what I did.

Senator SMITH. I suppose no criticism has been passed upon you for it?

Mr. ROSTRON. No.

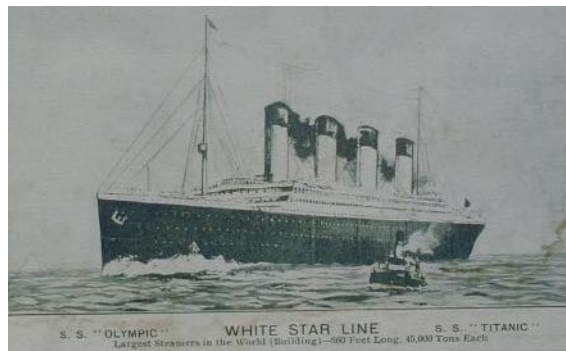
### **Rostron's pomposity**

Rostron became so self-assured during the course of the interrogation that he refused to answer some of the Senators' questions, suggesting that he didn't want to speculate. He even levied a shot at ordinary passengers.

Senator SMITH. Have you any kind of knowledge at all regarding the force of the impact which wrecked the *Titanic*?

Mr. ROSTRON. I know nothing about it, sir. I have not asked any questions about this kind of business. I knew it was not my affair, and I had little desire to make any of the officers feel it any more than they did. Mind you sir, there is only this: I know nothing, but I have heard rumors of different passengers; some will say one thing and some another. I would, therefore, rather say nothing. I do not know anything. From the officers I know nothing. I could give you silly rumors of passengers, but I know they are not reliable, from my own experience; so, if you will excuse me, I would prefer to say nothing.

Rostron presented himself as a patronizing, self-assured company man who defended the organization, and the industry. Based on the foregoing, he did not turn out to be a particularly credible witness.



Above: postcard of Olympic Class ship. From the author's collection.  
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## **An overturned life boat**

But between the lines, and among the dots, even the articulate company man of the *Carpathia* revealed some key facts which would connect him to the bodies. For example, Rostron admitted that he saw the overturned life boat "near the wreckage" . . . as did the *Bremen's* passengers, *Mackay-Bennett*, and several of *Titanic's* crew, who saw the overturned life boat near the bodies.

Senator SMITH. How many of those were there?

Mr. ROSTRON. We accounted for two. One of these berthon boats capsized. That was three.

Subsequently, at the British inquiry in London, Rostron mentioned that he had, indeed, seen all of *Titanic's* life boats that morning, including the overturned lifeboat:

25476. You picked up that boat. Altogether how many boats did you pick up? - We got 13 lifeboats alongside, two emergency boats, two Berthon boats. There was one lifeboat which we saw was abandoned, and one of the Berthon boats, of course, was not launched from the ship, I understand. That made twenty altogether.

25477. My impression is there is one collapsible still unaccounted for in that? - Oh, yes; I beg your pardon, one bottom up; one that was capsized. That was in the wreckage. That was the twenty.

25478. You picked up and actually took on board the "Carpathia" 13 of the "Titanic's" lifeboats? - Precisely.

25479. One of them you saw; the occupants of the boat were rescued and taken on your boat, but the boat was left in the water? - Yes, she was damaged.

25480. You did not bother any more about her? - No.

25481. That made the 14 lifeboats. Then there were the two emergency boats; were they taken on board the "Carpathia," or abandoned? - I cannot say which were the boats we took up. I took them as they came along, and after the whole thing was over we got as many boats as we could. I did not notice which they were.

25482. There were two emergency boats, and besides that there were -? - The two Berthon boats.

25483. The two collapsibles? - Yes; and there is one Berthon boat which we saw amongst the wreckage bottom up. It was reported to me that there was another Berthon boat still on board the ship.

25484. That makes 19 out of the 20? - No, excuse me. It makes the 20 if you reckon the one still left, but I am not reckoning that. It comes to the same thing. If you reckon that one in, of course it accounts for the lot.

Rostron pinpointed the over turned life boat as being "in the wreckage" which, as set forth above, he approached at the very end of his "maneuvers." All

the while he had *Carpathia's* own lifeboats swung out on davits. In addition to seeing the overturned life boat that every other one of the "bodies" witnesses saw, Rostron admitted he had seen "one" body. He knew there were passengers in lifebelts, he searched the vicinity of the wreckage, sent passengers into a memorial service, maneuvered the ship so that people wouldn't see something, and then hurriedly left the scene.

It seems obvious that something was out there that he didn't want his passengers to see. If it was only "one" body, then he could easily have lowered one of *Carpathia's* boats to recover that. In fact, as Collins and Senegel have stated, there *were* other bodies out there. Rostron's diaphanously veiled actions that April morning, suggest he saw the *bodies* --- not just one body.<sup>16</sup>

His "gear" and "knocked about" explanation for setting *Carpathia's* boats in the davits doesn't make sense. Further, Collins flatly contradicts it. In his British Inquiry testimony he doesn't mention anything about the thing with the "gear."

More likely, Rostron saw the bodies out there, had the boats in davits, and seriously considered whether to perform a body recovery operation while passengers were in the memorial service.

But he changed his mind and, instead, left the scene in a hurry.<sup>17</sup>

### **Flocks of seagulls**

Additionally, Rostron's peculiar testimony about the *Titanic's* passengers having worn life belts, which he says he only learned from passengers on Tuesday afternoon, well after leaving the disaster scene, deepens the mystery.

*Did Rostron see Titanic's passengers as the "flocks" of seagulls that Mackay-Bennett witnessed, or the "white dots" that Bremen's passengers saw?*

*Did he realize that the seagulls or dots were Titanic's passengers in life belts?*

Rostron wasn't asked these specific questions. But, his curiously defensive response, along with expressions of skepticism about passengers' "rumors" --- suggests that he was posturing himself to answer those two questions in the affirmative.

Assuming he had seen the white dots, he would have excused his overlooking the bodies on the grounds that he was not informed, at the time, that those objects could have been *Titanic's* passengers and crew. Of course, as set

forth above, this excuse lacks merit. Rostron obviously saw the life belts on passengers who came in life boats to his ship, and saw at least one body floating in a life belt. He knew *Titanic's* passengers wore life belts.

### **The embarrassment of leaving the bodies behind**

*Why does it matter that Rostron left the bodies behind?*

Leaving hundreds of people out there floating around may have made sense, given the circumstances that Rostron was faced with, including over 700 survivors in severe emotional and physical distress.

But one never knows how the public perceives something. Leaving the bodies behind might have been embarrassing for Cunard.

Indeed, as set forth above, one of the British company's competitors, the German steamship company, *Nordeutscher Lloyd*, saw to it that the horrifying word about the bodies got out when its steamships, *Rhein* and *Bremen*, traversed the site on April 20, 1912. The Germans steered very close to the bodies, and went public with the lurid details.

Although newspapers reported that *Mackay-Bennett* had left Halifax for the disaster sight, there were no reports about the bodies rendered from that ship which were as horrifying as those of passengers aboard the *Bremen*.

### **Conclusion: "Morning after . . . the bodies were seen from *Carpathia*"**

In any event, there is direct evidence (Collins' testimony, and Senegal's account), that the bodies were seen from *Carpathia*. Additionally, the circumstantial evidence is strong: Scarrot, Evans, and the other seaman and saloon steward from the *Titanic* saw "scores" of bodies at daybreak, when *Carpathia* arrived. Collapsible "B," the "raft," was purported to be in the wreckage, with the bodies. It was later seen there, along with "fields of bodies, by *Bremen* and *Mackay-Bennett*.

Ward reported that *Carpathia* was near the scene where *Titanic* had foundered.

Rostron saw the collapsible, admits to seeing "one" body, and his suspicious actions in sending the passengers inside, and hanging *Carpathia's* boats out suggest that he saw more out there than cork, wood and a capsized boat. Perhaps he prepared for some sort of body recovery operation.

The manner of his testimony about being told on Tuesday that *Titanic's* passengers wore life belts suggests, albeit remotely, that he may have witnessed the white dots that were the *Titanic's* passengers, bobbing in the sea.

Finally, Rostron is a disappointing witness. He was a company man in the uniformed veneer of a ship's captain,<sup>18</sup> defending his captain colleague, Edward Smith, sticking up for the British Board of Trade's life boat regulations, and characterizing the *Titanic* as a "life boat." He took it upon himself not to answer questions. Then, he tried to deny that he had curried favor to Ismay, and even showed contempt as he discounted "passengers silly rumors."

He says he "immediately" steered for New York when, in fact, other testimony indicates that he may not have. Rostron expressed a grave concern that he could be "liable to dismissal" if he did something without Cunard's approval, then self-assuredly insisted that he was "perfectly right" in going to New York without seeking anyone's approval.

On April 15, 1912, at about 9:30 a.m., Rostron turned the *Carpathia* west and steamed off, leaving the wreckage. Mrs. Pålsson, along with hundreds of others, buoyed about --- her shoulders, head and face up, eyes almost closed, mouth agape. She would silently suffer through six more days and nights of humility, after one last affront. According to the hero of the *Titanic* disaster, she wasn't there. The *Carpathia's* wake lapped on her forehead . . . *tish-sh . . . tish-sh . . . tish-sh.*

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<sup>1</sup> Descriptions are based in part on excerpts from the Diary of Frank Hamilton, published at [http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/documents/people\\_hamilton\\_f\\_diary.shtml](http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/documents/people_hamilton_f_diary.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> See the biography of Alma Pålsson, which includes a photograph of her and husband Nils, on the Encyclopedia Titanica website, at: <http://www.titanica.org>.

<sup>3</sup> A total of 328 bodies were found by various ships. Three ships, *Mackay-Bennett*, *Minia* and *Montmagny*, were dispatched from Halifax, Nova Scotia. One ship was from St. John's, Newfoundland, the *Algerine*. The *Oceanic* eventually recovered three bodies left in *Titanic's* Collapsible life boat, "A," *Carpathia* purportedly recovered four bodies, and *Ilford* recovered one body. (Source: Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, at: <http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mma/research/titanicfaq.html>.)

<sup>4</sup> Seaman Frank Osman testified that "The steerage passengers were all down below, and after she got a certain distance it seemed to me all the passengers climbed up her." <http://www.titanicinquiry.org>.

<sup>5</sup> For information on the *S.S. Eastland* disaster, check out the following website: <http://www.eastlanddisaster.org>.

<sup>6</sup> "Oldest Survivor of Titanic Dies," *Syracuse Herald Journal*, July 30, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> All testimony of persons is taken from <http://www.titanicinquiry.org>.

<sup>8</sup> One of *Titanic's* boats actually went to the "raft," or "collapsible," and rescued those on board. But, although Senegel's story suggests that *Carpathia's* boats went to the raft, the perception may have been generated from the perception, at least according to one witness, Collins, that the *Carpathia's* boats *were* recovering some of the bodies. Certainly, Senegel's account corroborates that of Collins, from the vantagepoint that *Carpathia* "came across numerous bodies floating in the water."

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<sup>9</sup> Halifax Evening Mail, "The Story In Detail of the Mackay-Bennett's search for bodies of victims of Titanic disaster," April 30, 1912, published at [http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/documents/mackay-bennett\\_diary.shtml](http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/documents/mackay-bennett_diary.shtml).

<sup>10</sup> Jay Henry Mowbray, *The Sinking of the Titanic*, Ch. XXI, "The Funeral Ship and Its Dead" (1912).

<sup>11</sup> Article courtesy of *Encyclopedia Titanica*, <http://www.titanica.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Logan Marshall, *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Great Sea Disasters*, Ch. 21, "Bremen sighted More Than A Hundred Bodies," pgs. 246-247 (1912).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, Marshall, *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Great Sea Disasters*, pgs. 246-247.

<sup>14</sup> This boat was *Titanic's* collapsible "A," which was later found out at sea by the steamship, *Oceanic*, several weeks later.

<sup>15</sup> Rostron wrote a "confidential" letter to Cunard's Managing Director, Mr. Booth, in Liverpool, and enclosed Stanley Lord's letters. The letter is published at the Titanic Historical Society's website, at: <http://www.ths.org>.

<sup>16</sup> Some have suggested that the bodies sank, then refloated, for reasons discussed elsewhere, the author has discarded such theories as improbable.

<sup>17</sup> According to his testimony, Captain Lord followed a wide circle around the site of *Titanic's* foundering, then left. Purportedly, one of his officer, Groves, saw some "seals" on a large piece of ice. Days later, the *Mackay-Bennett* received a message from another ship to the effect that it should check for bodies that may have washed up on the ice. (Source: Message Board, *Encyclopedia Titanica*).

<sup>18</sup> The author's criticism of Captain Rostron is not intended to discount any credit he has received for rescuing the passengers of the *Titanic* that morning, for which he has received more than enough praise, and characterized by author Walter Lord in *The Night Lives On* as "the electric spark." This article focuses on a different aspect of the disaster.