

TITANIC: THE UNTOLD STORY

by

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“Ere’s to our Jamie!” announced my Pa, raising his ale to me and beaming around the room. “Selected as one of the Assistant Electricians, he is!” he boasted, the whole pub cheering and winking at me. “Gonna go all the way to America on our Titanic’s Maiden Voyage!” he crowed, to thunderous applause.

My Pa needn’t have announced this, every man in the pub had worked on the Titanic for the past 3 years and knew who’d be going along to ensure a smooth crossing. I was thrilled to be thought of as good enough to be taken along. She was the pride of Belfast, and every mother’s son what called themselves Irish was proud to have had a hand in her creation.

“Now you come back to us, Jamie! Don’t you get distracted by some pretty Yank in New York!” guffawed the men, slapping my back. The celebrations for completing the grandest ship in the world would continue for days, the shipbuilders finally able to rest. I was still in a daze; couldn’t believe I would see America! Twenty years old, and never left Ireland, and here I’d earned a space aboard the world’s biggest liner.

“Now listen to me, boy,” said Pa, whispering into my neck as the pub broke into another celebratory song. “I want you to take this,” he said, cramming some folded notes into my hand, “take this and send us a telegraph every day. So we won’t be cut-off, see?”

“Pa, I can’t - ,” a lump gathered in my throat. That £20 must have been more than three months of his wages.

“And then I’ll read them to this lot in the evenings!” he said, closing my hand over the notes, “You’ve done us proud boy!”

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I caught the train early next morning to Southampton, 10th April 1912. Sailing Day. And there she was. Moored like a great leviathan with her rivets and portholes winking at me, her four funnels belching out steam. She towered over the port buildings, her stern not even visible from the front, that’s how long she was. My pride soared as I donned my new White Star Line uniform, the gold buttons embossed with the company’s emblem, sunlight glistening off the huge liner as she waited for her passengers.

As Assistant Electrician, I reported to First Engineer Mr J. Bell, and it was my duty to attend to all the switches, bulbs, fuses and electrics along the ship. The ship was completely open to me, there was nowhere I wasn’t allowed to go! Long promenades, grand dining rooms, smoking rooms, opulent lounges, not to mention the staterooms. It gave me great pleasure to check the lights in First Class, flicking the switches off and on, watching the glow of the chandeliers reflected off the glossy wood panelling and grand furnishings! Pride of Belfast, indeed!

So absorbed in my task, I was quite shocked when passengers started coming onboard; the ship’s sharp, shrill horn rattling the windows in the port buildings, announcing our imminent

departure. The ship hung over the jetty like an extraordinary sheer cliff, with everywhere admiration flowing on the imposing sights: the height of the funnels, the even taller masts, the grand appointments.

At midday we finally set off; the launch was magnificent, but of course, I had work to do in checking my electrics, and I found myself envious of the passengers who watched our departure while I worked. To feel the power of the ship beneath us, a ship capable of braving the vast ocean in total security, to know that I helped build her, is humbling.

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At dusk we made our first stop at Cherbourg, France; a tiny port town whose harbour was too small for us to steam in. I relished in the fact that our ship showed our Superiority over the French, my pride swelling to unprecedented highs. More passengers came aboard, and by 8 pm we were steaming onto Queenstown, Ireland for our final batch of passengers. I took the opportunity to send my first telegraph to Pa, excitement bubbling inside me.

Telegraph 1: Titanic is Ship of Dreams. Like floating palace, so grand and fine. Very busy with electrics.

Telegraph 2: Stopped in Cherbourg, France. We too big for French harbours. No one can build a ship like the Irish.

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“Your boy sent two telegraphs in one day, eh? He’s made it and no mistake!” My Pa read my messages to the pub to raucous applause. The celebrations were continuing, with only a half day at work to reward the workers. The shipyards stood empty and silent, content in their achievement. The ale flowed freely, Belfast pride rising higher and higher as the newspapers praised our floating paradise.

“France, eh? Your boy’s a real world-traveller now!”

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Day 2: 11th April 1912. The excitement onboard is fantastic, and I even sent two telegraphs yesterday, so much did I have to share! No one was in a hurry to go to bed last night, and today we reached Queenstown, to pick up our final passenger lot. Seeing the last bit of land slip away was thrilling. Now the Big Adventure begins: the Atlantic Ocean lies before us. And a flock of lights and cables lies before me!

Telegraph 3: Left Queenstown with more passengers for America. Final tally 2 208 people. We built a floating city.

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“Your boy’s done us proud, Tom!” was the pub’s consensus, making my Pa beam. The men were back at work now, but their pride continued to soar, secure in the knowledge that nothing

could harm their creation. Newspapers heralded Titanic's speed and luxury, a testimony to the British Empire, but there was none prouder than the Irishmen of Harland and Wolff shipyard.

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Day 3: 12th April 1912. Today while I was reporting to First Engineer Bell, Mr Ismay, Director of White Star Line, and therefore, owner of my ship, interrupted us for a meeting with Mr Bell. From the meeting, I surmised that the decision had been made to set sail at maximum speed as soon as weather permits. Mr Ismay seems like quite a pushy man, his arrogant little moustaches twitching as he forced his way. But with the weather looking fine and the crossing appearing to be straightforward, I can only surmise that we are now steaming full-speed ahead.

Telegraph 4: *Weather perfect. Titanic ordered full-steam ahead. Nothing ahead of us but open ocean.*

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Belfast had tracked the daily progress of their ship with pride. The little town was decorated with bunting and banners; anyone would be forgiven for thinking they were celebrating the end of a war. My Pa's pub, *The Commodore*, rejoiced with each telegraph I sent home. Fitters, carpenters, even other riveters like my Pa, all gathered to listen, swelling with the news that one of their own was making that great Transatlantic crossing. 14 000 men had built her, and now with their cloth caps on the bar, and ales in their hands, they savoured success.

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Day 4: 13th April 1912. I was called to check the lamps in the First Class Grand Staircase. It seems a fuse blew. Easy enough to fix, but my attention kept drifting. It's the grandest space I've ever seen, the height of elegance; rising from one deck to another, crowned with a dazzling glass and-wrought iron dome. I even wandered a bit after that: it's an-incredible world, you could easily get lost in the mazes of-corridors and gangways. I found myself envious of the FirstClass finely carved woodwork and beautiful fireplaces, contrasting it with my simple, yet clean, berth. With a twinge, I realised this ship might be too good for the likes of me now, too good for the likes of all those who built her back home, with their calloused hands and rough overalls.

Telegraph 4: *Explored our ship today. Saw First Class and went right to Steerage. It's like our social system set to water.*

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Day 5: 14th April 1912. Sending my telegraph today, I received an unexpected pleasure. Phillips, the radio-telegrapher; concentrating on hearing the magical signals, which for him, were not just a simple tapping noise, but a melody revealing news from faraway shores and ships; told me I didn't have to pay for my message today since I'd sent one every day so far. A lucky stroke I say! Especially since sending telegraphs is so expensive! Pa's money is almost gone! He also explained to me the seemingly strange string of dots and dashes and sequence of metallic sounds called

Morse Code. He'd received six iceberg warnings on it, just today alone! Astonishing, but nothing to worry about, he said. Still full-steam ahead for us!

Telegraph 5: *Nearing the coast of Newfoundland. Should reach New York by 17th. Hope all is well. God Bless.*

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Shock! Shock hit me! Probably just like Titanic hit the Iceberg. I was thrown out of bed with a jolt, a great crunching and popping sound punctuating the black night. "Emergency! Emergency!" cried my cabin mates; our cabin, just one deck above the waterline, was privy to the night's beginning drama. I climbed back to bed; it was near midnight, and the ship was unsinkable! No need for worry! Minutes later, and worry was indeed needed. The temperature in our cabin was dropping, and a soft flow of water could be heard that wasn't the gush of water at the bow.

It was something else. Jumping from my berth to flick the light on, a sharp shock of icy water up to my ankles woke me with a jolt.

"Heaven preserve us," I whispered, crossing myself. But still, I told myself, the ship had security measures like watertight compartments to prevent her going down. She might be wounded, but surely not fatally.

"Lads! Hop to!" The face of First Engineer Bell, pushed our door open with a crack. "All hands to the Engine Room! You're needed double sharp!"

"Sir!" said one of my mates from the berth, "is...is something wrong?"

"Hit an iceberg, son, but I don't think it's too bad," said Bell in his fatherly voice, negating fear.

"And what are we to do?" said my mate, a fellow assistant, dreading the answer.

"Keep the lights on. Keep it on as long as we can if things get nasty."

"Nasty, sir?" I said, the cold water rising by millimetres.

"Do our duty!" he snapped and left the cabin.

"At least we know where the lifeboats are," said my mate with a hopeful smile.

"Lifeboats don't matter where our duty is concerned," I said quietly, pulling on my White Star uniform.

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The men in Titanic's engine room heroically kept the lights blazing to the end. I, Jamie Watson, include myself in that number. And though we couldn't save Her, I'd like to think our efforts made the final moments for hundreds a little less frightening. The stories of the portholes blazing as the ship plunged into the darkness is to our credit. We did our duty. Until the end.

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"*Titanic Sinks. 1500 lost!*" read the newspaper headlines.

"*Carpathia to the Rescue*" read others. Belfast was in shock. Jamie's Pa looked out at the shipyards, remembering how her prow had sat cradled in its metallic forest, towering up towards the sky. She sat empty now, the waters still.

"He might have survived, Tom," said someone softly, patting his shoulder.

“Aye,” murmured Jamie’s Pa, eyes glazing over, “he might have done.” He continued to look out, but inside, he knew the truth. The pub, once so raucous, was silent, cloth caps twisting anxiously in hands, shirtsleeves rolled up in agitation, bunting and banners finally coming loose.

She had sailed for only four days, taking more than one thousand five hundred people down with her on the morning of April 15th, 1912. Along with the dreams of a city.