

## **PROTECTION OF OCEAN LINERS {8}--1914**

The loss of the Empress of Ireland awakens feelings somewhat different from those the sinking of the Titanic had called up on two continents. The grief for the lost and the sympathy for the survivors and the bereaved are the same; but there is not, and there cannot be, the same undercurrent of indignation. The good ship that is gone (I remember reading of her launch something like eight years ago) had not been ushered in with beat of drum as the chief wonder of the world of waters. The company who owned her had no agents, authorised or unauthorised, giving boastful interviews about her unsinkability to newspaper reporters ready to swallow any sort of trade statement if only sensational enough for their readers--readers as ignorant as themselves of the nature of all things outside the commonest experience of the man in the street.

No; there was nothing of that in her case. The company was content to have as fine, staunch, seaworthy a ship as the technical knowledge of that time could make her. In fact, she was as safe a ship as nine hundred and ninety-nine ships out of any thousand now afloat upon the sea. No; whatever sorrow one can feel, one does not feel indignation. This was not an accident of a very boastful marine transportation; this was a real casualty of the sea. The indignation of the New South Wales Premier flashed telegraphically to Canada is perfectly uncalled-for. That statesman, whose sympathy for poor mates and seamen is so suspect to me that I wouldn't take it at fifty per cent. discount, does not seem to know that a British Court of Marine Inquiry, ordinary or extraordinary, is not a contrivance for catching scapegoats. I, who have been seaman, mate and master for twenty years, holding my certificate under the Board of Trade, may safely say that none of us ever felt in danger of unfair treatment from a Court of Inquiry. It is a perfectly impartial tribunal which has never punished seamen for the faults of shipowners--as, indeed, it could not do even if it wanted to. And there is another thing the angry Premier of New South Wales does not know. It is this: that for a ship to float for fifteen minutes after receiving such a blow by a bare stem on her bare side is not so bad.

She took a tremendous list which made the minutes of grace vouchsafed her of not much use for the saving of lives. But for that neither her owners nor her officers are responsible. It would have been wonderful if she had not listed with such a hole in her side. Even the Aquitania with such an opening in her outer hull would be bound to take a list. I don't say this with the intention of disparaging this latest "triumph of marine architecture"--to use the consecrated phrase. The Aquitania is a magnificent ship. I believe she would bear her people unscathed through ninety-nine per cent. of all possible accidents of the sea. But

suppose a collision out on the ocean involving damage as extensive as this one was, and suppose then a gale of wind coming on. Even the Aquitania would not be quite seaworthy, for she would not be manageable.

We have been accustoming ourselves to put our trust in material, technical skill, invention, and scientific contrivances to such an extent that we have come at last to believe that with these things we can overcome the immortal gods themselves. Hence when a disaster like this happens, there arises, besides the shock to our humane sentiments, a feeling of irritation, such as the hon. gentleman at the head of the New South Wales Government has discharged in a telegraphic flash upon the world.

But it is no use being angry and trying to hang a threat of penal servitude over the heads of the directors of shipping companies. You can't get the better of the immortal gods by the mere power of material contrivances. There will be neither scapegoats in this matter nor yet penal servitude for anyone. The Directors of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company did not sell "safety at sea" to the people on board the Empress of Ireland. They never in the slightest degree pretended to do so. What they did was to sell them a sea-passage, giving very good value for the money. Nothing more. As long as men will travel on the water, the sea-gods will take their toll. They will catch good seamen napping, or confuse their judgment by arts well known to those who go to sea, or overcome them by the sheer brutality of elemental forces. It seems to me that the resentful sea-gods never do sleep, and are never weary; wherein the seamen who are mere mortals condemned to unending vigilance are no match for them.

And yet it is right that the responsibility should be fixed. It is the fate of men that even in their contests with the immortal gods they must render an account of their conduct. Life at sea is the life in which, simple as it is, you can't afford to make mistakes.

With whom the mistake lies here, is not for me to say. I see that Sir Thomas Shaughnessy has expressed his opinion of Captain Kendall's absolute innocence. This statement, premature as it is, does him honour, for I don't suppose for a moment that the thought of the material issue involved in the verdict of the Court of Inquiry influenced him in the least. I don't suppose that he is more impressed by the writ of two million dollars nailed (or more likely pasted) to the foremast of the Norwegian than I am, who don't believe that the Storstad is worth two million shillings. This is merely a move of commercial law, and even the whole majesty of the British Empire (so finely invoked by the Sheriff) cannot squeeze more than a very moderate quantity of blood out of a stone. Sir Thomas, in his confident pronouncement, stands loyally by a loyal and distinguished servant of his company.

This thing has to be investigated yet, and it is not proper for me to express my opinion, though I have one, in this place and at this time. But I need not conceal my sympathy with the vehement protestations of Captain Andersen. A charge of neglect and indifference in the matter of saving lives is the cruellest blow that can be aimed at the character of a seaman worthy of the name. On the face of the facts as known up to now the charge does not seem to be true. If upwards of three hundred people have been, as stated in the last reports, saved by the *Storstad*, then that ship must have been at hand and rendering all the assistance in her power.

As to the point which must come up for the decision of the Court of Inquiry, it is as fine as a hair. The two ships saw each other plainly enough before the fog closed on them. No one can question Captain Kendall's prudence. He has been as prudent as ever he could be. There is not a shadow of doubt as to that.

But there is this question: Accepting the position of the two ships when they saw each other as correctly described in the very latest newspaper reports, it seems clear that it was the *Empress of Ireland's* duty to keep clear of the collier, and what the Court will have to decide is whether the stopping of the liner was, under the circumstances, the best way of keeping her clear of the other ship, which had the right to proceed cautiously on an unchanged course.

This, reduced to its simplest expression, is the question which the Court will have to decide.

And now, apart from all problems of manoeuvring, of rules of the road, of the judgment of the men in command, away from their possible errors and from the points the Court will have to decide, if we ask ourselves what it was that was needed to avert this disaster costing so many lives, spreading so much sorrow, and to a certain point shocking the public conscience--if we ask that question, what is the answer to be?

I hardly dare set it down. Yes; what was it that was needed, what ingenious combinations of ship-building, what transverse bulkheads, what skill, what genius--how much expense in money and trained thinking, what learned contriving, to avert that disaster?

To save that ship, all these lives, so much anguish for the dying, and so much grief for the bereaved, all that was needed in this particular case in the way of science, money, ingenuity, and seamanship was a man, and a cork-fender.

Yes; a man, a quartermaster, an able seaman that would know how to jump to an

order and was not an excitable fool. In my time at sea there was no lack of men in British ships who could jump to an order and were not excitable fools. As to the so-called cork-fender, it is a sort of soft balloon made from a net of thick rope rather more than a foot in diameter. It is such a long time since I have indented for cork-fenders that I don't remember how much these things cost apiece. One of them, hung judiciously over the side at the end of its lanyard by a man who knew what he was about, might perhaps have saved from destruction the ship and upwards of a thousand lives.

Two men with a heavy rope-fender would have been better, but even the other one might have made all the difference between a very damaging accident and downright disaster. By the time the cork-fender had been squeezed between the liner's side and the bluff of the Storstad's bow, the effect of the latter's reversed propeller would have been produced, and the ships would have come apart with no more damage than bulged and started plates. Wasn't there lying about on that liner's bridge, fitted with all sorts of scientific contrivances, a couple of simple and effective cork-fenders--or on board of that Norwegian either? There must have been, since one ship was just out of a dock or harbour and the other just arriving. That is the time, if ever, when cork-fenders are lying about a ship's decks. And there was plenty of time to use them, and exactly in the conditions in which such fenders are effectively used. The water was as smooth as in any dock; one ship was motionless, the other just moving at what may be called dock-speed when entering, leaving, or shifting berths; and from the moment the collision was seen to be unavoidable till the actual contact a whole minute elapsed. A minute,--an age under the circumstances. And no one thought of the homely expedient of dropping a simple, unpretending rope-fender between the destructive stern and the defenceless side!

I appeal confidently to all the seamen in the still United Kingdom, from his Majesty the King (who has been really at sea) to the youngest intelligent A.B. in any ship that will dock next tide in the ports of this realm, whether there was not a chance there. I have followed the sea for more than twenty years; I have seen collisions; I have been involved in a collision myself; and I do believe that in the case under consideration this little thing would have made all that enormous difference--the difference between considerable damage and an appalling disaster.

Many letters have been written to the Press on the subject of collisions. I have seen some. They contain many suggestions, valuable and otherwise; but there is only one which hits the nail on the head. It is a letter to the Times from a retired Captain of the Royal Navy. It is printed in small type, but it deserved to be printed in letters of gold and crimson. The writer suggests that all steamers should be obliged by law to carry hung over their stern what we at sea call a "pudding."

This solution of the problem is as wonderful in its simplicity as the celebrated trick of Columbus's egg, and infinitely more useful to mankind. A "pudding" is a thing something like a bolster of stout rope- net stuffed with old junk, but thicker in the middle than at the ends. It can be seen on almost every tug working in our docks. It is, in fact, a fixed rope-fender always in a position where presumably it would do most good. Had the Storstad carried such a "pudding" proportionate to her size (say, two feet diameter in the thickest part) across her stern, and hung above the level of her hawse-pipes, there would have been an accident certainly, and some repair-work for the nearest ship-yard, but there would have been no loss of life to deplore.

It seems almost too simple to be true, but I assure you that the statement is as true as anything can be. We shall see whether the lesson will be taken to heart. We shall see. There is a Commission of learned men sitting to consider the subject of saving life at sea. They are discussing bulkheads, boats, davits, manning, navigation, but I am willing to bet that not one of them has thought of the humble "pudding." They can make what rules they like. We shall see if, with that disaster calling aloud to them, they will make the rule that every steamship should carry a permanent fender across her stern, from two to four feet in diameter in its thickest part in proportion to the size of the ship. But perhaps they may think the thing too rough and unsightly for this scientific and aesthetic age. It certainly won't look very pretty but I make bold to say it will save more lives at sea than any amount of the Marconi installations which are being forced on the shipowners on that very ground--the safety of lives at sea.

We shall see!

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To the Editor of the Daily Express.

SIR,

As I fully expected, this morning's post brought me not a few letters on the subject of that article of mine in the Illustrated London News. And they are very much what I expected them to be.

I shall address my reply to Captain Littlehales, since obviously he can speak with authority, and speaks in his own name, not under a pseudonym. And also for the reason that it is no use talking to men who tell you to shut your head for a confounded fool. They are not likely to listen to you.

But if there be in Liverpool anybody not too angry to listen, I want to assure him or them that my exclamatory line, "Was there no one on board either of these ships to think of dropping a fender--etc.," was not uttered in the spirit of blame for anyone. I would not dream of blaming a seaman for doing or omitting to do anything a person sitting in a perfectly safe and unsinkable study may think of. All my sympathy goes to the two captains; much the greater share of it to Captain Kendall, who has lost his ship and whose load of responsibility was so much heavier! I may not know a great deal, but I know how anxious and perplexing are those nearly end-on approaches, so infinitely more trying to the men in charge than a frank right-angle crossing.

I may begin by reminding Captain Littlehales that I, as well as himself, have had to form my opinion, or rather my vision, of the accident, from printed statements, of which many must have been loose and inexact and none could have been minutely circumstantial. I have read the reports of the Times and the Daily Telegraph, and no others. What stands in the columns of these papers is responsible for my conclusion--or perhaps for the state of my feelings when I wrote the Illustrated London News article.

From these sober and unsensational reports, I derived the impression that this collision was a collision of the slowest sort. I take it, of course, that both the men in charge speak the strictest truth as to preliminary facts. We know that the Empress of Ireland was for a time lying motionless. And if the captain of the Storstad stopped his engines directly the fog came on (as he says he did), then taking into account the adverse current of the river, the Storstad, by the time the two ships sighted each other again, must have been barely moving over the ground. The "over the ground" speed is the only one that matters in this discussion. In fact, I represented her to myself as just creeping on ahead--no more. This, I contend, is an imaginative view (and we can form no other) not utterly absurd for a seaman to adopt.

So much for the imaginative view of the sad occurrence which caused me to speak of the fender, and be chided for it in unmeasured terms. Not by Captain Littlehales, however, and I wish to reply to what he says with all possible deference. His illustration borrowed from boxing is very apt, and in a certain sense makes for my contention. Yes. A blow delivered with a boxing-glove will draw blood or knock a man out; but it would not crush in his nose flat or break his jaw for him--at least, not always. And this is exactly my point.

Twice in my sea life I have had occasion to be impressed by the preserving effect of a fender. Once I was myself the man who dropped it over. Not because I was so very clever or smart, but simply because I happened to be at hand. And I agree with Captain Littlehales that to see a steamer's stern coming at you at the

rate of only two knots is a staggering experience. The thing seems to have power enough behind it to cut half through the terrestrial globe.

And perhaps Captain Littlehales is right? It may be that I am mistaken in my appreciation of circumstances and possibilities in this case--or in any such case. Perhaps what was really wanted there was an extraordinary man and an extraordinary fender. I care nothing if possibly my deep feeling has betrayed me into something which some people call absurdity.

Absurd was the word applied to the proposal for carrying "enough boats for all" on board the big liners. And my absurdity can affect no lives, break no bones--need make no one angry. Why should I care, then, as long as out of the discussion of my absurdity there will emerge the acceptance of the suggestion of Captain F. Papillon, R.N., for the universal and compulsory fitting of very heavy collision fenders on the stems of all mechanically propelled ships?

An extraordinary man we cannot always get from heaven on order, but an extraordinary fender that will do its work is well within the power of a committee of old boatswains to plan out, make, and place in position. I beg to ask, not in a provocative spirit, but simply as to a matter of fact which he is better qualified to judge than I am--Will Captain Littlehales affirm that if the Storstad had carried, slung securely across the stem, even nothing thicker than a single bale of wool (an ordinary, hand-pressed, Australian wool-bale), it would have made no difference?

If scientific men can invent an air cushion, a gas cushion, or even an electricity cushion (with wires or without), to fit neatly round the stems and bows of ships, then let them go to work, in God's name and produce another "marvel of science" without loss of time. For something like this has long been due--too long for the credit of that part of mankind which is not absurd, and in which I include, among others, such people as marine underwriters, for instance.

Meanwhile, turning to materials I am familiar with, I would put my trust in canvas, lots of big rope, and in large, very large quantities of old junk.

It sounds awfully primitive, but if it will mitigate the mischief in only fifty per cent. of cases, is it not well worth trying? Most collisions occur at slow speeds, and it ought to be remembered that in case of a big liner's loss, involving many lives, she is generally sunk by a ship much smaller than herself.

JOSEPH CONRAD.