

Dangers of the Night: The Carpathia's Valiant Rescue of the Titanic Survivors

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"Although I was running a risk with my own ship and my own passengers, I also had to consider what I was going for... I had to consider the lives of others."

– Sir Arthur Henry Rostron

A hazy mist covered the glassy surface of the Atlantic Ocean. The sea was calm, the air was bitterly frigid, and small chunks of ice floated serenely in the inky blackness of the night. Suddenly, disturbing this tranquil scene, came a ship. This vessel, a steamer, cut through the sea at a breakneck pace, its frame creaking and groaning as water splashed away from its charging bow. As the ship sailed determinedly on a path that took it steadily northward, its crew sighted an iceberg dead ahead, mirrored in the light of a shining star.¹ Never stopping to break pace, the ship deftly dodged the deadly fragment of Arctic debris. Shortly thereafter, another iceberg appeared out of the darkness, and the *Carpathia* once again maneuvered masterfully around the ice, her hull straining from the stress. The ship continued to bob and weave its way through a veritable minefield of ice, never slowing nor changing its audacious course. The early morning hours of April 15th, 1912, are often remembered as the hours in which the *Titanic* foundered after striking a massive tower of ice; few, however, remember them as the hours in which the *Carpathia* and her crew heroically pushed their ship above and beyond its limits in a desperate attempt to reach the *Titanic* in time to save her passengers and crew from a terrible fate.

When the *Carpathia*'s wireless operator first received the *Titanic*'s distress call, the ship's captain, Arthur Rostron, had already retired for the night. Captain Rostron, who was a bit of a "stickler for

discipline,"² was shocked when his first officer and wireless operator burst into his quarters with the news that the *Titanic* had struck an iceberg and required urgent assistance. To his credit, Captain Rostron did not hesitate; still half asleep, he began to take action, leaping out of bed and ordering that his ship should immediately prepare to hurry to the aid of the *Titanic*. "I... sent for the chief engineer," he later said, and "in the meantime I was dressing and seeing the ship put on her course. The chief engineer came up. I told him to call another watch of stokers and make all possible speed to the *Titanic*, as she was in trouble."³ Unfortunately, the *Carpathia* was 58 miles away from the last coordinates that the *Titanic* had given, and at her usual speed of 14 knots, it would take her four hours to reach the larger vessel. The *Titanic* would not last that long.⁴

Facing a race against time he knew he could not win, Captain Rostron chose to run anyway; the stokers below decks shoveled coal into the boilers at a breakneck pace, and everything else, including the ship's heating, was neglected. Every ounce of steam the old vessel could produce was thrown into the engines in a frantic dash to reach the *Titanic* in time.⁵ The ship started to move north, rapidly picking up speed, accelerating from 14 to 17 knots. This was a pace that no one had dared to dream the *Carpathia* could make.⁶ Captain Rostron, meanwhile, issued several more orders. Among them were the following commands: that "each doctor... have supplies of restoratives, stimulants, and everything

² Lord, *Night*, 138.

³ Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Commerce, "Titanic" Disaster: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, Sixty-Second Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 283, Directing the Committee on Commerce to Investigate the Causes Leading to the Wreck of the White Star Liner "Titanic" 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1912, S. Rep 726, 20.

⁴ Lord, *Night*, 138.

⁵ Lord, *Night*, 138.

⁶ Lord, *Night*, 140. According to Lord, "Everyone was wild with excitement, and the *Carpathia* herself trembled all over. A sailor later remarked that 'the old boat was as excited as any of us.'"

¹ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955), 143.

to hand for immediate needs of probably wounded or sick;" that "all spare berths in steerage... be utilized for *Titanic's* passengers;" that "heaving lines [be] distributed along the ship's sides for boat ropes or to help the people up;" and that "company rockets [were] to be fired at 2:45 a.m. and every quarter of an hour after to reassure [the] *Titanic*."⁷

The United States Senate Committee that later investigated the *Titanic* disaster believed "the course followed by Captain Rostron of the *Carpathia* [was] deserving of the highest praise and [was] worthy of especial recognition. Captain Rostron fully realized all the risk involved... and notwithstanding such risk pushed his ship at her very highest limit of speed through the many dangers of the night."⁸ Despite

his exhaustive efforts, Captain Rostron had taken on a Sisyphean task; he was unable to win his desperate race against time, and the *Titanic* slipped into the ocean approximately an hour and a half before the *Carpathia* arrived on scene. However, as a direct result of Captain Rostron's courageous actions, the lives of the 706 survivors were spared. His crew literally pulled several frostbitten victims out of their lifeboats, snatching them away from the clutches of death. For these actions—for showing such courage in the face of adversity—Captain Rostron earned the eternal, heartfelt gratitude of the forlorn souls that his actions saved on that tragic April night.

⁷ Senate Committee on Commerce, "Titanic" Disaster: Report of the Committee on Commerce of the United States Senate Pursuant to S. Res. 283 Directing the Committee on Commerce to Investigate the Causes Leading to the Wreck of the White Star Liner "Titanic," 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1912, S. Rep. 806, 15.

⁸ Committee on Commerce, *Titanic Disaster: Report*, 15.

Works Cited

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