

THE ESCAPOLOGIST

(Extract from a Novel)

COLIN SWATRIDGE

Colin Swatridge wrote poetry in the 1970s, which was published in small magazines. He wrote six novels in the 1980s, none of which was published—it was always more attractive to embark on the next novel than to peddle the last. One such was *The Escapologist*. This was born out of a fascination with the Titanic disaster and the person of Harry Houdini (Christophe in this account)—both are powerful metaphors. He is presently engaged in the writing of a narrative with a Hungarian background, *Something Beginning with T*.

I decided to climb up towards the stern, and then down to the third-class accommodation, to express solidarity, as it were, with the servants. I had not thought of interviewing anyone; but I felt I should have a readier sympathy with those escaping their past, than with those thinking to return to it. The third-class passengers had never had a lot to lose, yet—again paradoxically—they had most to lose. The future for the first-class passengers would have been more of the same; for those in steerage, the future would have been all the life they had to speak of. I hoped I should not find that they had been drinking as heavily as their betters.

Until now, it seemed, the third-class passengers had kept to their own decks, in the stern quarters of the ship. Whether this was because they were conditioned to remaining in their stations or because they had been ordered to do so, I wasn't sure (till I remembered what the steward had said about the threat of infection). But it was only now that I saw, as I climbed up through the connecting doors into the third-class accommodation, groups of them coming down, behind the third-class chief-steward. I doubt that they would have found their way along all the alleyways if they had not been guided, since they had been confined to the lower decks throughout the voyage. Only now were those who had fallen or been pushed down snakes all their lives being allowed to climb ladders that led nowhere. Most carried suitcases and heavy bags with them, in spite of instructions to the contrary; and many mothers, their faces drawn, carried babies, asleep or screaming. As I moved on up into the public rooms and stair-wells, I met more groups of passengers who had not secured the services of a steward. These rushed down a corridor with slung kitbags, then doubled back, and ran into another group, cursing and milling aimlessly, and getting in each other's way, until the chief steward returned. He rounded up as many of the stragglers as he could, shouting to them to follow him to the after well-deck, and so up into the second-class accommodation. I wondered what it was they were being taken to, now that there were no boats: whether the exercise was designed to prevent unrest; or whether the officers feared that an inquiry would hold them to account for the plight of steerage passengers denied access even to the possibility of rescue. I was not persuaded that any purpose was being served by taking so many bewildered people up on to a cold, already-overcrowded deck, so that someone's tardy concern for justice might be put on record—if

there was to be any record, besides this poor thing of mine. But just because I myself had lost hope, I knew, was no reason to take it away from others; so when a German on his own pleaded with me in fractured English to be shown the way to the boat-deck, I carried one of his bags for him, and led him up gladly enough. As we went by the way that I had come, we collected others—Irishmen, a pair of Orthodox Jews, and a motley bunch of Slavs and Eastern Europeans—bowed under all that they possessed. We slid down one alleyway after another until we came to the stairs to the second-class deck, and up by the library to the barber-shop, down the long corridor by the surgeon's office, and the private saloon for the maids and valets, and so to the first-class stairs up to an exit between funnels on to the boat-deck. We said nothing all the way up; but I was aware of gaspings and wonderment among the men who followed me at the magnificence of the carpets, and the panelling, and the sconces and framed woodcuts and other ornaments. They kept close to my heels all the way for fear that they'd be lost, until we reached the boat-deck door. Then they drew breath at the sudden cold, and blackness, and hesitated. One of the Irishmen turned to me and said:

“They tried to keep us down at first on our steerage deck. They didn't want us to come up to the first-class place at all. They put up ropes and locked the gates on us they did. When we tried to get up, an officer waved us back with a gun in his hand. One young Italian rushed the barrier, but the officer stopped him and said he'd fire. And I think he would. Where do we go from here, Mister? Is there a ship? I've heard tell there's a ship.”

I hardly knew what to say, but I said he'd be best climbing over the railings to the second-class deck-space, up astern. Numbers of people were clutching on to the deck-houses trying to save themselves from sliding and losing their footing on the icy boards. I saw more than one elderly passenger slip into the water that came up to meet any that fell. A lone steward was still dispensing life-preservers to those who understood their purpose; one seaman abaft of me busied himself arranging deckchairs, whilst another—equally systematically—threw them into the sea. As I turned to enter the labyrinth once more, one of the passengers following me pressed a Balkan silver coin into my hand.

If my shepherding had done any good at all, I supposed I could do more. But when I retraced my steps, I could find no-one to whom I could be of any further use. I had not seen other steerage-passengers venturing upwards and forwards, than those who had been shepherded by the third-class steward, and those that I had led up into the open air myself. I had imagined, in my second-class patronizing way, that all third-class passengers were mild and deferential, as submissive to this act of man as they had been to acts of God down the centuries. It was naïve of me, but I had taken Mr. Williams on Thursday (was it?) outside Queenstown, to mean that the Irish, at least, had been so cowed by the militia, by poverty, famine and other misfortunes, that any spark of rebellion in them had flickered and died. I had imagined that they would all be clutching rosaries, like Mr. Connors, and commending their souls to the Mother of God; that they would be packed like fish in their dormitories, opening and closing their mouths, uttering—barely muttering—not imprecations, or oaths, but acts of contrition. Those who did not speak English—Greeks, and Turks, and Poles, and others—even the hard-bitten ones, I had supposed, would await orders and stand in queues, and take their turn, as they had done at customs-posts, and emigration crush-barriers, and embarkation assembly-points. They had been treated like cattle, and so, I supposed, they would behave like cattle.

I have never seen cattle stampede; but I have heard that it happens—and that it takes only one or two crazed animals to infect others with their panic. I had not seen or heard it happen, but I learned only minutes later that it *had* happened: that a gang of third-class men had broken out of the accommodation reserved to them, and had headed a rush of easily-led men and their wives up and on to open decks, where they could see for themselves the empty davits that I had seen. This bursting out from below must have been coincident with my own pitiful attempt to do justice to the downtrodden—in misplaced pity for the underdog. It is no wonder that I imagined all steerage passengers were meek and obedient men and women: by the time I had stirred myself to abandon the comfort of the second-class apartments these were the only sort of passengers left to whom I could be of any use. I could never have been of any use to men who had taken what had passed for law into their own hands.

I need not have feared that the third-class passengers would be drunk, for the only two bars that I could see in these quarters were closed. I walked under bare light-bulbs, between bare tables, on broad uncarpeted floors; but if everything was simple, and unadorned, it was scrubbed as clean as any proud housewife might have wished.

I had just passed out of the bar when there was the most alarming crash, at once wooden, cacophonous, musical and metallic, in the games room that I was about to enter. I feared at first that it was a part of the ship's engine that had torn loose from its moorings—and that this was the beginning of the chaos of the end. But when I peered inside I saw at once a grand piano, wedged into a corner, its castors spinning, and its frame vibrating still, against the bulkhead. Certain of the keys had spilled out of their places, and the strings that had not snapped jangled madly among themselves as if competing to be loudest or longest.

As it had careered across the room, it had collided with heaped wooden benches, and reared up, breaking its front legs, and bending its pedals. It now stood at a crazy angle, its keyboard jammed against the bulkhead, its curving side splintered, and its pine body bared. It had not been a concert grand, but a solid working piano on which, for four days, a self-taught pianist would have banged out music-hall songs, and home-tutor versions of Hungarian Rhapsodies, and Bizet. It did not deserve an obsequious tribute—an elegy on the death of music; the wreckage of one undistinguished piano was of a piece with the end of all else. But there is a limit to the quantum of tragedy that a mind can grasp. For this reason—and not because I set this ruined instrument above desperate people—I stood and stared at the turning castors, and shattered lid, and thought the sight more pathetic than any other that I had seen. I had been shocked out of composure by the noise, too, so that I wanted some moments in which to recover, until the piano was silent. Had this accident happened at half past eleven, I should readily have accepted it as an explanation of the grinding noise that I had heard—even of the twisting of the cabin that I had felt. I should certainly have preferred it to talk of whales and ice-floes.

I supposed that what had seemed to me to be a noise that would turn heads and stop hearts, had been heard by everybody from the stern rail to the drowned engine-room; but when I passed out of the games room, through a lobby, into the canteen, a new and just as unexpected noise succeeded the piano's dying discords. The floor of the canteen was covered with linoleum, designed to look like parquet; the tables were long and sturdy, and more than a dozen chairs had been lined up on each side of them. These chairs were now for the most part on their sides, or stood at crazy angles, arms and legs locked, and jammed

under the tables, and in the corners of the room. The walls were white and bare, except that a large clock in a plain pine case hung above a side-table, stopped at twenty minutes to twelve. A strong smell of stew and onions lingered; and though they had been washed down, there were still circles of spilled beer on the deal table-tops. The noise came from a large group of worshippers, sitting, wailing, and fingering beads in the middle of the floor. They swayed in time to their half-sobbing, half-singing, raising their voices every so often as one or another of them led the group in improvised prayer. They might have been Irish Catholics, or Waldensians from the Piedmont. It hardly mattered when there was so little time before judgement. A German priest emerged from shadows where I fancied he had been listening to a countryman's confession, and shouted something like "Prepare to meet God!" in his own language. At this call, a number of men and women dressed in black who had been standing by the door, fell on their knees about the German priest, and raised their arms and faces and voices to the ceiling.

I was affected by the noise and the tears as any man must have been who thinks and feels. The sight of so many poor people struggling to remain upright on the grotesquely slanted floor, holding on to each other for physical and moral support, crying as openly and wildly as children, was pitiable. It did nothing to raise my onetime Church of England spirits, since this demonstration was as far from me in social space as my own childhood is far behind me in time. Yet I could no more have laughed at any of these weeping people than I could have mocked you—to whom I am writing still—my own mother. I could not dispute with them because I have no meaning for what is going on that I could put in place of theirs. I could not join in their prayers as I joined in the final hymn for Mr. Tallboys and Mr. Percival, because we all have our billets, and we stick to them. And I could not stay in the dining-room any longer, because I could not do any good there. There is no more good that anybody can do anywhere.

It was as I climbed back up out of the third-class apartments that I became aware of the noise of shouting and violence ahead. I use the word climbing advisedly, not merely of the companionways and stairs, but of all the floors and landings on every deck. There was not one horizontal plane left on the entire ship—or on what was left of that. Climbing stairs towards the immersed bows called for a delicate balancing on the leading edges of the treads; whilst in order to mount those that led up towards the stern, one had effectively to pull oneself up by the hand-rail, or risk slipping back and bruising shins on stairs set at what by now must be an angle of thirty, or thirty-five degrees. Not many people were going up or down the stairs now, either way. Even passing up the corridor by the library, I was constrained to steady myself every so often, by grasping the moulding of the panelled walls with my fingers, and by clutching at door-jambs, and fixed pier-tables from which the vases of flowers had long since tumbled, to smash and be strewn in remote corners. The carpet here did not have the thickness of pile of the carpeting in the lounges, and first-class saloons, to give one a good foothold. I planted my feet on each of the treads of the stairs up to the barber's shop, so that its right-angle engaged with the leading edge of my heel. I had made no more use of the barber's shop than of the tennis court. The man who pays another man to shave him in the morning is the same man who pays a third to lay his pyjamas out at night. The leather travelling-case given me by Ducie Street contains a very comprehensive and serviceable shaving-kit. My late colleagues and employers did not expect that I should

resort to the ship's barber to do what today's young men do for themselves without a second thought.

I then half slid, half ran down the same long corridor by the surgeon's office that I had descended with the third-class passengers twenty minutes or so previously. Again, I wondered what work the surgeon had been put to on this abbreviated voyage, until I remembered that Mr. Williams had spoken of the birth of twins in the third class; but then I doubted that that event called for the offices of a London surgeon. By the time I reached the private saloons for the valets and ladies' maids, the noise of some sort of rampage was unmistakable. The ladies' maids must have gone with their mistresses in the boats, I supposed, since—if they were not ladies in the social, or perhaps economic sense of that word, the sense in which their mistresses would have used that word of themselves, where they would not have used it of their servants—they were ladies in the eyes of the shipping company, and of custom. I certainly did not begrudge them their places; if it was mine to give, they would have the vote besides. But I should have wanted to ask a few schoolmaster's questions myself if I thought that the valets had been taken off, with the gentlemen whose morning suits they brushed, whose pyjamas they laid out at night—who paid the barber to shave them, when the King himself, and the Captain, go bearded. I hoped the schoolmaster was mistaken in his belief that the ship's owner, in his dapper court-shoes, with his hair brushed sleekly close to his head, had made good his escape. I am sure there are others on board more deserving.

The last hours have been filled with noises at whose cause I have had to guess. The noise now was of hauling and banging—of heavy objects colliding—and of raucous yells. It got louder and louder as I picked my way gingerly up the first-class stairs, at once curious and apprehensive. I kept my eyes on my feet as I climbed, transferring my weight from one to the other with care. Near the top, I almost trod on a white hand, palm uppermost, hanging from a white sleeve. I stopped and grabbed for the hand-rail to steady myself. There was a man's body, lying across the stairs, tucked into the angle of the topmost tread, in a white shirt, black evening-dress trousers, and a black bow-tie. If I did not shout out loud, I know I gasped, and very nearly lost my balance. I turned my head to see the man's face, and recognized the sunken cheeks and dark eyebrows of Mr. Williams, the lounge-bar steward. There was a hammer with a bloodied head, on his chest; and his face ran with gore, and bloody matter, from a deep wound just above his left ear. I shut my eyes and swallowed, so that I should not retch at the sight. There was nothing that I could do; Mr. Williams was beyond anyone's help. I could not bring myself to step over him—over the body—for some seconds; yet I could not keep my balance any longer where I was. I wondered in what foolish heroic act the steward had been brought down; what injury or damage he had tried to stop. I heard further sounds of jarring above my head. That we shall all have gone within a little more than an hour made the slaughter of this good man a still more gratuitous piece of barbarism than it might otherwise have been. Nothing that his assassin was doing can have added to his chances of escape, and survival; and nothing that the steward did to stop him can have lessened them. Where I was curious and apprehensive before, I was frankly terrified now. Mr. Williams had had rather pronounced views about Frenchmen and Americans; he might have made as many enemies as friends. The seaman who had tried to unlace my life-preserver might have recovered from his fall, and sought out Mr. Williams, to sort him out before nature took its own course. Anyone of a number of

underlings might have resented his sharp tongue; anyone of a number of passengers might have been surprised in some lawless act.

I left Mr. Williams where he was. I could have spent my last hour in the library—and perhaps I should have done. This record would then have come to an end on a civilised note. Had I sat at my bureau on my return from below, I should not have seen the steward's body; and I should not have seen what was happening on the boat-deck—though I might have heard it. I should not then have had quite as low an opinion of men as I do, howbeit my opinion matters little now, if it ever did. I should have forgotten myself in Emerson, or spent still longer scribbling portentous last words. Who knows what thoughts I might have had about life and death, as events concentrated my mind? As it is, I have not time for more than a bare record of what I saw on the boat-deck—and that will be more than enough.

To judge by the hammer that I had already stepped over, and the axes and mallets that I afterwards saw wielded, someone had broken into Mr. Cameron's tool-store and helped himself to all the heaviest, most destructive tools that he could find. As soon as I stepped over the brass threshold of the exit between the funnels, the cause of all the noise was plain: men from steerage had rushed the officers' quarters, and were sacking the still unsubmerged portions of the ship's superstructure that I took to include the bridge. I heard shots from berths and companionways that had once been up above, but that were now down below me. What the men were doing, and what they thought to do, I could only guess at. They cannot have supposed that they would do anything that had not already been done to prevent the ship from sinking, or to alert other ships to our plight. More likely perhaps was that they suspected that the officers had privileged access to life-boats, or other means of preserving themselves, that they might commandeer. Whether—if this was indeed what the third-class men suspected—there were good grounds for this suspicion, I have no means of knowing; but one does not have to have read one's *Lear* or one's *Measure for Measure* to know that there is one law for the rich, and another for the poor. I had wondered myself why I had seen so few officers with much in the way of gold braid on their sleeves and shoulders, before and since the life-boats were lowered, and the bows began to settle in the water. Stewards, cabin-staff, and ordinary seamen had borne most of the responsibility for clearing the lower decks, and filling the life-boats, and in other ways attending to passengers' needs. I had no doubt the officers were busy about things beyond my understanding; but it did occur to me that they owed it to us all to be seen to be busy, about public and immediate needs, in those parts of the ship where most passengers were now crowded. The presence of officers might still do something to stem panic, and even—who could tell?—to concert efforts to fashion, or to discover, whatever might serve as a life-raft, or buoy, so that some few more of us might be added to the tally of survivors. I had no ambition myself to float adrift in a packing case, or on a bed-frame, since I know I should succumb to the cold within minutes. That I die a little daily from the finger-tips, from November to March is the price I pay for thin blood, and spare build. But there must be scores—if not hundreds—of people, big enough and resilient enough to survive the cold, who might still be saved; and there must be hundreds of chairs and tables, and sofas, and tea-chests, and trunks, and bar-stools, and lengths of timber that would serve to cling to, or to sit on—even to stand upright on, perhaps—once the ship has gone down. Why were these items not being brought up? And why were the officers not supervising their being brought up? Where were the officers, and what were they doing? Where was the Captain, and the Com-

mander, and Lieutenant-Commander, and the lieutenants, and sub-lieutenants, and the Purser, and the Petty Officer? Where are they now? Are they writing in log-books, or checking inventories of passengers' valuables, or auditing each other's expenses claims, or salvaging ship's papers, or consulting company regulations, or reading maritime law? Or are they defending the bridge against emigrants past playing patience, bent on anarchy, and the maximum of noise?

As I stood, just inside the threshold, asking myself these thoughtless questions, an officer came clambering up towards me, clutching at makeshift handles with his right hand, and gripping an unholstered pistol in his left. As he came on, bareheaded though he was, with his collar broken open, and his jacket-arm torn, I could see that it was the tall, slim young Englishman who had superintended the lowering of the life-boats on the port side, who had threatened the Italian, and shouted at him: "Don't you understand plain English?" He had seemed to be in command of himself, and of everyone else, then. He had filled the boats, and had had them clear the ship in good order. Now, there was a wildness about him, and the smell of fear. I stood aside, in some fear myself, and caught an acrid whiff from the gun as he struggled past, and down (or up) the way that I had come. I could not tell whether he was chasing, or being chased; but I guessed it was the latter. There had been a struggle from which he had escaped—that much was plain. But there did not seem to be anybody after him. The noise of whatever was taking place continued forward, unabated. It seemed from the shouting, and muffled pistol-shots, as though the emigrants might have prevailed against the officers. I could only regret that the ship would go down with anarchists in charge—on the bridge, perhaps even at the helm—if I had more confidence in the good governance of those in uniform whose job it had been to sail a tight ship. As it was, we had all eaten well, and had slept well, and there had been orchids, and Médoc, and prayers, and ragtime; I am sure the qualified masseuse knew her business, and I had never doubted who was master in the second-class lounge-bar. The towels in my cabin had been kept spotless and warm; and the ink-well in the bureau in the second-class library had always been full. But we had stove in a fishing-boat, and loaded dry coal; we had exploded, and collided with ice—and now there is no place in a life-boat for me, because I am a second-class man. I am half inclined to agree with the angry schoolmaster that a troop of boy-scouts could have done things better.

There was a crashing noise behind me that might have been the tall, slim officer falling on the stairs, but that might have been much more. And there was more noise on all sides of me, out on the deck. I clung to the door-jamb, and watched as heavily-built men (they might have been crew-members or passengers, I could not tell in the darkness) clambered up from beyond the funnel forward of me, shouting, and swinging firemen's axes at their sides. They shouted at each other, and at nobody in particular, and raged about in a fury of activity, that must have been more satisfying to them than endless, time-passing games of cards on their blankets, down in the heat of steerage. They took their firemen's axes to the wooden seating that ran in parallel rows to port and starboard. This I should have thought a sensible course of action had they co-operated and divided the seats into units of a reasonable size—the length and breadth of a life-raft, for one person or more. Instead, they broke them up into pieces far too small to be serviceable for any conceivable purpose, as much—it seemed—to spite each other as to share the spoils justly. They shouted at each other as they struck the timbers, and in venom, destroyed the portion of the

seat on which their neighbour had been working. Whether any of these men managed to salvage a portion big enough to float on I rather doubt. Already, two of the men were exchanging blows beside a good length of seating that might have accommodated both of them. I had no wish to stay until they had taken axes to each other as I feared they might, and as to judge by subsequent howlings, I was convinced they did. I had as soon put a funnel between myself and those desperate men as I could.

I had got no farther away than this, when I observed that there was a fire up ahead, whose flames shot skywards almost to the height of the funnel itself. I made for this fire, almost as much for the warmth that it would lend, as out of curiosity about that it was that was burning. As I groped my way round raised hatches, and ventilators, I bumped into the seated figure of the junior wireless-operator. I could tell it was him, even in the semi-darkness, from his fair hair, and his slight, nervous way of holding himself. He was hunched and shivering, half-sitting, half-leaning on a large wooden chest from which I had seen deck-hands take games apparatus. Had I not bumped into him, I should not otherwise have imposed myself upon him, he was so obviously distressed. I was quite sure that, by this time, all but the stoical or the unimaginative must be distressed likewise; but there was something about this young man's quiet heaving that suggested he was wracked by more than self-pity. As I said "sorry," automatically, he raised a face to me that was a picture of anguish.

"Mister," he said. "They've done for Mr. Cooper. I know they have. They barged into the office when I was there, and overpowered us both."

I remembered that Mr. Cooper was the senior wireless-operator. The young man had said his name before. I asked him who 'they' were, though I suppose I knew.

"They were big men. I don't know where they came from. But they broke the door down with sledgehammers, and said they'd have a go at us next if we didn't show them how to work the signals and the phones. Mr. Cooper told them he'd been sending messages non-stop but if there were ships near enough to pick them up, they'd long since turned off their sets and gone to bed. The only replies we'd been getting for the last hour were ships too far away to do any good. But they've altered course anyway. When there's a mayday signal you've no choice. But they said we'd been sending business messages, and that we'd not told the truth.

"They wouldn't listen. Mr. Cooper told them time and time again it was no good. He said he'd tried everything, and the Captain himself had said there was nothing more to be done, except save ourselves. I'd only gone down there to get him to come up. But he would keep sending, in spite of what the Captain said. One of them hit him, and he went down. They told me to show them what to do, or I'd be next. I could hardly press the keys I was trembling so much, with these two standing right behind me. But I showed them what to do—there's really nothing to it. Then they shoved me off my chair, and started tapping away for all they were worth. There were the same signals as before, but garbled sort of. There was something jammed already. But they'd have thought there was something wrong whatever they'd heard. They wouldn't have understood. They banged the keys, and shouted into the phones as if they thought they'd hear voices. And when all they heard was static electricity, they got impatient, and they did things to the set that couldn't possibly do any good. They wrecked it, what was left of it.

"I think they killed Mr. Cooper. I should've stayed, only I knew they'd've started

on me. There was nothing to do. The set was all stove in...I got out while I could. Mr. Cooper was hunched up on the floor."

The young man said something else that I couldn't catch. I comforted him as best I could, and said he'd done the right thing, no-one could have done more, and so on. I said I was sorry about Mr. Cooper. I didn't say he might as well have gone that way as any other. Then it struck me that I still wore my life-preserver, though I had never seriously considered that it would preserve my life. I gave the young man my brief-case to hold—I didn't want it to go careering down into the water just yet. I tugged at the laces that Mr. Williams had tied, with more understanding of the mechanism than I had had at first. I held it up in front of the wireless-operator, and told him to lift up his arms, and to raise his chin. He would have refused, but I wouldn't listen.

"I shan't use it," I said. "I want you to have it. If they did...kill Mr. Cooper, there'll be no-one to say what messages there'd been, when there's an enquiry. You'll be needed. Mr. Marconi will depend on you; they all will. There's bound to be an enquiry. And there's no-one else can say what you can say..."

I wished I had let the wireless-operator into the secret of the burning coal, when we'd spoken in my cabin. I would have trusted him with the story, as I had been trusted myself; but this was not the time; and it all seemed less important now. There would be someone who could tell the truth: one of the seamen in the life-boats must know. I might have given the young man the facts even now—but I suspected that what might have seemed a significant event at the time had been overtaken by others of still greater significance. There were so many terrible truths, it was hard to choose between them.

The young man resisted for a time; but he could tell I was in earnest. He let me lace him into the life-preserver as a child might yield to his nurse's hands, buttoning up his bodice. I was amused to see that the young man was running his finger around the initials of my name, incised above the clasp on the brief-case.

"You've everything to live for," I said. "No-one will think the worse of you for saving yourself." I did not say to him: "You must not give up life; you are young," because I am young myself.

I took back my brief-case, but I only left him when I was sure that he would do what he could for himself. He might have found it more difficult to leave me than I him. I let my hand rest on his head a second as I left him, and then withdrew it, feeling a little foolish that I had played the priest, treating the young man as if he was a mere boy, and I was sacrificing my life for him, from some saintly height, when it wasn't like that at all. I was angry with myself; but my anger was doubtless wasted along with everything else.

The flames rose from a rude building of deck-chairs. I drew near to it, attracted by the heat. The chairs had been flung into the angle between the deck and a raised metal platform, topped by a wooden grille. Even as one set of men—Irishmen from steerage by the sound of them—threw deck-chairs, one after the other from a tall stack, on to the fire, another group—seamen, passengers yelling in different languages, and broken English—were pitching them by twos and threes over the side. There were even seamen, red in the face with rage and exertion, seizing deck-chairs from the fire, even as the canvas caught alight, and hurling them, smoking, over the rail. The fire was so hot, I could smell the tar burning between the planks of the deck, and the paint peeling off the metal platform.

"Pity the poor devils in the sea," one of the crewmen shouted. "They've nothing to

hold on to. The boats have all gone. Do you want them to drown?”

“What about the rest of us, stuck ’ere?” one of the Irishmen shouted back. “The telegraph’s gone. There’s no more rockets. Who’s to know where we are?”

“She’s going down! There’s no ship to see your damn’ fire!”

“There’ll be ships soon enough You’ll see!”

“Leave those! We need those!”

“If you burn that lot, there’ll be nothing left to hold on to when she goes!”

“There’s lots left. There’s the crates yet!”

“We’ll burn the decks if need be. If we can’t be seen we’re done for anyway.”

It was a scene of utter confusion. If there was a side to be taken, I am not sure which it was. There would soon be a lot of people in the water; that was certain. The ship could not last much above thirty, forty, fifty minutes now—and already people were slipping into the sea forward, helpless to prevent themselves falling. They must have something to cling to, or to clamber on to, for the water must be paralysing. Though I was within yards of the fire—and dare not stand closer—I was rigid with cold. Yet if there were ships within less than an hour’s steaming time of us, they must be informed about our position without delay. There must be no risk of their circling us, without so much as a moon to see us by. Wasted minutes would mean still more wasted lives, there was no doubt of that at all.

The confusion was worse confounded when the stack of deck-chairs from which the Irishmen were feeding the fire toppled over, and skittered down the deck, lodging, some of them, against bulkheads, and under the empty davits whilst others of them slid straight into the water that still crept up towards us, that would claim us all before long. One man was pinioned to the deck by the tumbling chairs, and I fear his arm might have been broken, or that he had been burned, or worse. His screaming was little attended to in the chaos of crashing seats, of men losing their balance and holding on to spars of wood that would not be held, and of burning brands and clothes alight. I was, happily, astern of the pile; had I not been, I should certainly have been knocked off my feet, as almost all the Irishmen below me were. There was no regaining one’s footing on a plane that by now must have inclined at nearly forty degrees. The poor fools that had been feeding the flames a moment before, might now be thankful for deck-chairs to cling to that they had been so eager to burn. No-one now was so hopeful, or so far-sighted as to seek to re-kindle the fire from within the mess of smouldering deck-chairs. Sparks had flown up when the stack had toppled; now there was little more than a plume of smoke to bear witness of the last attempt that could be made to draw the world’s attention to our whereabouts. Soon, we should have no whereabouts, and all that would bear witness to us would be the laden life-boats, empty deck-chairs, and hats. I was certain no-one could live in that water for more than the time it takes for a man to drown; but there were several people who thought otherwise, who grabbed at anything that might float, and who jumped, or let themselves drop into the sea, rather than hang on to the stern-rail, and unreasonable hope.

There was nothing more for me to see or do on deck. While there was still light and warmth in the library, that is where I wanted to be. I was just about to make my way here, clinging to hand-rails, and to my brief-case, all the way, when two burly men irrupted on to the deck from the double doors, sweating and swaying under the weight of what must have been Christophe’s coffin—the coffin that I had seen him enter, whose lid I had seen nailed down, that Christophe had been cast off in, some twelve hours before. It did not

seem so long; and yet that had been another world. There were other men behind the couple who carried the coffin: all of them struggled for a footing, bent at the knees, arms outstretched to clutch at anything firm. Hours before, I should have said they were drunk. Now, it was how we were all having to get about, those of us fool enough to be on the move at all. I stood aside to let these men out on to the deck, there must have been five or six of them. They can't all have thought they'd fit on top of the coffin, or inside it.

One of the men asked the question I wanted to ask myself:

"What's happened to Christophe, anyway? Where is he now?"

"He'd know what to do," another said.

"'Aven't you 'eard? He jumped overboard..."

"He never. I keep telling you. He was pushed."

"Not then, I don't mean..."

"They 'ad it in for 'im, 'cause 'e was a Jew. An' 'e sejuiced one of their women..."

"No, 'e came back again. This is 'is coffin, innit? Afterwards, I'm talking about. He jumped over afterwards. He's escaped. He covers 'imself with something so he can stay in cold water for hours and hours..."

"He wouldn't go off on 'is own. He's somewhere, I know 'e is. He said we'd all be saved, don't you remember? Last night: he said we'd all be taken care of..."

"Get away! That was just 'is way of talking. He didn't mean..."

I didn't hear any more. Still more men came up—third-class men all of them, I think—groping, swearing, but determined, as if their minds were fixed on something. These men, too, were talking about Christophe: arguing heatedly, cursing the ship's officers, the absurd angularity of everything, and their fellows. One set up a shout as soon as he stepped out on the slope of the deck: "Christophe! Christophe!" he shouted over and over again. Others soon joined in, until the whole poop-deck seemed to be shouting: "Christophe!". The chant rang eerily in the freezing air. There was no echo somehow, as if the cold was a curtain that absorbed every call the moment it was uttered. Christophe's name hung for no longer than it took for everyone to shout it, and then there was silence, and then the shout rang out again, like a damped bell. The shout went up countless times: "Christophe! Christophe!", as if the people thought that if they shouted long and loudly enough Christophe must appear. It seemed that there was nothing they would not believe of the man. It gave them comfort, perhaps. They were all doing something together—something they could believe in. If a ship would not see us, now that the fire had gone out, at least, I thought, it would hear us; though what anyone would make of the noise I had no notion.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had harboured the thought that Christophe might still make use of his coffin. It had not occurred to me—it was not a serious proposition; nobody had resolved the uncertainty, and I had not inquired—that Christophe might still be submerged on the end of his rope, attached along with the collapsible boat, to a stanchion on D-Deck. He had said we should pull him behind us—alive or dead—all the way to New York; but this had been bravado. He must have clambered aboard the surf-boat when the ship's engines were stopped, if the man in the life-boat had not hauled him in long before. Besides, the boat would have been wanted for saving lives, and must have been occupied, and be gone. Talk of Jonah, in the mouth of Christophe himself, and the speculation about the whale that had been cut in half—and other references, in addition—had sug-

gested to me that Christophe would make further use of his coffin. It had been no more than a half-formed idea: but I had pictured Christophe, like Ishmael, sole survivor of the crew of the Pequod, floating round and round the vortex that the ship had left, until by chance he found the coffin-lifebuoy floating at his side. Now this was not to be.

I stood for a moment watching the men who had just passed me, clambering up the deck, skidding, jumping, searching, flinging open chests and doors, shouting as they went: "Christophe! Christophe!" like men possessed. I was astonished by their enormous energy. They ran, and leaped, and scaled the deck, hauling anything wooden to the side, breaking up whatever would be broken, unravelling ropes, heaving at what had seemed to be fixed and solid. And I had thought these men would lay themselves down on their bunks, and quietly die!

There was something altogether too desperate about it all—too doomed, I suppose—for me to want to stand watching any longer. I took one last look at the ring of chanting passengers, clinging to the stern-rail, silhouetted against the stars, at the men ram-paging, and finally—and hopelessly—at the line of darkness where the stars stopped. There were one or two very distant, very faint points of light on the sea that I took to be those of the last of our life-boats, but no sign of a ship. It was no comfort to me to think that the ladies who sat in the cold in open boats were no more certain of rescue than the hundreds of us who remained on board. Nor, of course, should it have been.

I came below, heart-sick, though my spirits can sink no further. I am quite numb now. There is no feeling in me at all. Even at this lurching stern-end, where there is still heat and light, there is no life left to speak of. When people move at all, they move like zombies.

I wonder how many people have died in their beds, as I suppose we all hoped we would. It has all happened too slowly, since the explosion, for anyone to have been surprised by the sea. No-one can have been drowned in their sleep, even on the lowest deck of all. The stewards saw to that.

I wonder if my cabin is underwater yet, with my office-suits in it, and the shirts from Kendals that I can't have worn above half a dozen times; and the leather case from Ducie Street; and Lucy's letter to me, written on the powder-blue paper that she's used since I was at Chad's, with a DV on every other line. And I wonder whether the wireless-operator has escaped yet, with my life-preserver on; and whether there'll be a mention of me on the Recreations Page of the *Manchester Guardian* on Saturday. I'll be listed among the missing in a good few papers, I suppose; and fellows who were at Wilmslow with me will say: "Edwin Robertson? I was at school with an Edwin Robertson," or: "He was at Chad's with me. Had a crisis of faith, I seem to remember. Fell foul of the Tübingen School. The poor devil, what a way to go." As for the Ducie Street people: one or two might rue their generosity when I left; some of them'll raise a tankard to me, and say they knew me, to make them feel important, like I should have done in their place—and then they'll forget all about me. There'll be a lot of people who'll say my name for a day or two. Mr. Cook, on the Manchester train, might miss me for a while. I shall be news as long as this marvellous damned ship is news.

I took one last look at the first-class accommodation as I came down. Mr. Cameron was sitting, as if stunned, in the middle of the first-class smoking-room; and another gentleman in evening-dress was half-sitting, half-lying, slicing open a spare life-belt with a

penknife, and showing his wife what was inside. Mr. Cameron sat with his arms folded, leaning against the slope. I have never seen a man—in stiff white shirt, Oxford shoes, and satin-collared suit; with a Wellsian moustache, and a good Scotsman's head of hair—I have never seen a living man look so much like a waxwork before. And yet, it seems to me, we are all waxworks before our time: a tableau that mocks understanding. And the fact that I walked whilst most others sat, drinking, reading, staring, praying, some of them, did not make me any less of a waxwork than anyone else. I contributed little to the tableau—I was not dressed up; I was neither stilled by fear, nor swayed by religion; I neither debated, nor caroused—but I could not detach myself from it, and argue that I was alive; more alive than those about me.

I passed the letter-box outside the library. I noticed it had a metal inside, and a flap above the mouth that pulled down, effectively shutting the box. Even so, I still thought better of dropping this notebook in there when I have finished with it: I shall place it in my rain-proof brief-case, and throw it overboard, in the hope that it might float until a Cunarder spots it among the abandoned deck-chairs and hats.

There are still men, and a very few women, at green-baize card-tables in the second-class library, with two legs of the tables folded away. There are passengers sitting reading on the over-stuffed sofas whom I've seen sitting reading there before. And there are still one or two letter-writers at the bureaux by the wainscoting, improbably writing letters. (I don't know why I say "improbably"; what I am doing is no less improbable, no less empty). The gentleman whom I had taken to be the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* is sitting at the bureau that I came to think of as mine, reading what looks like a back number of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. I am sitting at a crazy angle, at a bureau behind a fluted column, and I am therefore unseen by two gentlemen at a nearby table whose voices I recognize as those of Mr. Tallboys and Mr. Percival.

"They say the wealthiest man on board is going down with four thousand two hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket," says Mr. Percival. "And there's a famous book-collector in the first-class lounge, and in *his* pocket, they say, there's a first edition of the essays of Francis Bacon."

"It just goes to show," says Mr. Tallboys, mournfully. He is not the man he was two hours or so ago.

"But perhaps he'll have given it to one of the ladies to take with her, with instructions to add it to his collection. Posthumously."

I go on scribbling, though I know it's far too late—or perhaps it's far too early—to make any sense of what's happening. I'll go on writing while the dynamos are still working—if they are still working. The lights are dimmer now than they were, and there's a pinkness about them that there hasn't been before. There can't still be men down there keeping the lights burning for the likes of me to write by. I wonder whether the boilers will burst when the salt water reaches them. Surely, it must have reached them already; in which case we may yet go up in an explosion, instead of down in the flood. It hardly matters how we go. We might, after all, have gone at any time for days past. We should have done if the stokers hadn't done what England had had no right to expect.

Where is the tattooed stoker now? And the seaman in the jersey? And the cockney waiter, Mr. Getzels, Mr. Connors, and the lift-boy? Where is Alexei Kristoff, the little Russian; Christophe, the Frenchman Jew? Perhaps when you have been as many people as he

has, it comes easier to be no-one at all. Perhaps I have been more than one person myself, and that is why I seem to be so resigned to becoming another. I am sure I should be feeling much more than I am. But I am not.

I haven't talked to many people in the course of the voyage; and I've not come to know anybody at all. Not even Mr. Percival. Not even Dorothy. Dorothy, above all. I have invested as little in people as in things. If I value books and ideas more highly than things, it's to be doubted whether they should take the place of people. There are Pooters on all sides of me, with no more imagination than it takes to play gin rummy. Reading *The Diary of a Nobody* is a second-hand way of understanding people; writing the diary of an about-to-be-nobody is the work of a confirmed egoist. Yet I am surely less guilty of killing time than the card-players.

We must be at an angle of more than forty degrees now. Not only can I feel she's going; it's evident she's going soon. Dorothy (might she be thinking about me at all? Did we share anything beyond polite conversation?) will be well away from the ship by now. The boats will all have rowed as far away from us as they could so as not to be sucked into the vortex of our going down. Yet perhaps there will be no agitation of the water when we go down—just a momentary parting of the calm, and a dignified disappearance. Walnut panelling, rococo clocks, Victorian brocades, and Persian carpets; the Boulevard, the Café Parisien, the mock Tudor promenade deck, the first-class cathedral, and the third-class tabernacle; the glass dome on the stairs, the gymnasium, and the Turkish baths with their gilded cooling rooms will all go down with the man who built them and all his blueprints. Half of them have gone already.

The ship was born in a furnace and welded together in spitting heat; and she'll glide down into the cold—at the end of a glorious, pitifully short life. I can't face gliding down with her. If I jump into the ocean, will death be instantaneous? There's no other way I can go.

If it mattered, I'd work on some immortal lines. I'd say something choice about size and speed and the flawed machine; and the flawed men who conceived it. But all I can think of is you, Mother, wearing yourself out weeping.

People are looking at each other, murmuring. Mr. Percival has fallen silent, and the cards have stopped slap-slapping on the tables. We all know, and we're waiting.

There are some dull booms a long way down.

"The water-tight bulkheads are crumpling under the weight," Mr. Percival's whispering to Mr. Tallboys. Mr. Tallboys is whispering to God.

There's a lot of noise on the deck above: people rushing, clambering, panicking by the sound of it. There's no panic down here. It's difficult to see now; but nobody's stirring. One or two people are holding each other; sobbing a little. I think there's someone crying in the covered way outside.

I wonder where the Captain is. A man like that'll be going down with us, to add to all the other waste.

I look about me, and there's Christophe, stretched out on pillows on an upholstered bench at the stern end. I can't think how I didn't see him earlier.

He's lying—clenching and unclenching his fists, over and over again, like I saw him doing before.

More muffled explosions—dull and heavy—the movement of machinery. Just now, the lights snapped off—then there was a flash.
They're still burning, but they're red now.
It's time to go up.