

THE BLUE AND THE GRAY



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THE CAPTAIN'S TABLE

JOHN WALTER LORD, 1935



WITH a long blast from her whistle, the S.S. *Praeclarus* backed away from her pier, steamed slowly down the North River, past the Battery, and into the Narrows, bound for Europe. Gradually the passengers turned from watching New York's fast-disappearing skyline and descended to the dining saloon, where lunch was being served. One by one the six passengers assigned to the Captain's table filed into the saloon, where they were cordially greeted and introduced to each other by Captain Cullen. On the Captain's right sat Grace Lawrence, an English actress, who was beautiful but stupid and seemed to be excessively fond of expensive jewelry and clothing; next to her were an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. John C. Getz. Mr. Getz, a cripple, was a retired banker. A handsome French officer, Major André, who was returning to France after serving six years in the diplomatic corps at Washington, was seated next to Mrs. Getz, and on the Captain's left sat Peter Dale, a young, athletic American journalist. Captain Cullen proved himself a capable host by telling his guests sea stories and manufacturing general conversation. Indeed, by the time the meal was over, the passengers at the table were on very friendly terms.

It was on the third evening at sea that the gala dinner and ball were given. By that time the Captain's guests felt as though they had known each other for years. That

evening dinner was particularly gay; tin horns were blown, paper caps donned, and champagne flowed freely. Grace Lawrence sat, bestowed in diamonds, looking more beautiful than ever. Peter Dale and Mr. Getz were engaged in a political discussion, and Major André was telling whoever would listen one of his war experiences. In the midst of the festivities an officer hurried over to the table and whispered something to Captain Cullen. Saying that he would be back soon, Cullen begged the pardon of his guests and left the dining saloon with the officer.

Fifteen minutes had passed since the Captain had left the table when suddenly the chief steward called for silence. As soon as the joy-making and conversation had subsided, in a calm voice he announced, "Will all passengers please go to their boat stations with their life preservers immediately!" In an excited throng, the passengers poured out of the saloon and made their way to their respective cabins to procure their preservers.

When Peter Dale left his dinner companions, he doubted that the ship was in danger. Nevertheless, he was certain that there was some motive behind the muster which was taking place, but, although he searched his mind, he could not recall any incident during dinner that indicated disaster. Having fastened on his life belt, he mounted the stairs towards his boat station. On the way up he met his cabin steward coming down. When he asked what the matter was, the steward drew him aside and said, "During dinner we struck an iceberg on the starboard side; the reason that there was no shock was due to the fact that we struck the berg a glancing blow instead of head on. We're filling rapidly, and I'm afraid we shall not be able to float more than an hour longer." Continuing in a low voice, he told Peter, "There are enough

boats for the women and children only; the men will have to stay aboard and take their chances, and for those that remain, Mr. Dale, death is practically inevitable, for even if one should escape the suction of the sinking ship, the icy water would freeze him to death in no time at all; we're not telling the passengers because we're afraid of panic, and it would be ghastly if that happened."

Peter continued his way up the stairs to A deck and walked aft into the smoking room, where he ordered a drink. Sitting at a neighboring table were four men, joking about the collision. One of them, pointing at his brandy, said to a companion, "Just run along the deck and see if any ice has come aboard; I should like some for this."

Having paid for his drink, Peter descended to the promenade deck where the boats were being filled and lowered rapidly. There was much confusion and noise; somewhere a band was playing, but Peter did not know where. He was about to go inside again, when he saw Major André watching the proceedings. Peter went over and told him of his conversation with the steward. Having bade the Frenchman good luck, Peter again turned to go inside, when an officer called to him and asked his help in loading the boats. In half an hour the remaining boats had been launched, and Peter stood on the sloping deck of the steamer waiting for the inevitable end. Although a short time ago the ship had been on an even keel, the *Praeclarus* was now down at the bow and listing heavily to starboard. The lights still burned, but very dimly. Hundreds of men stood quietly on the tilting decks, calm in spite of the obvious peril of their situation. While standing by the rail, Peter saw a lifeboat about thirty yards off the starboard bow. He decided that if he jumped

overboard and swam to the boat, he might be saved. Running forward, he vaulted the rail and plunged into the sea. As he did so, the giant forward funnel of the liner, which was unbalanced because of the list, suddenly snapped its bearings, tottered for an instant, and then with increasing speed crashed into the water on top of Peter.

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As Grace Lawrence climbed the stairs leading to the boat deck, she wondered what would be the outcome of the strange proceedings that were taking place. She was confident she would be saved, for in all the stories of sea disasters she had ever read the women were always saved; it was the men who suffered. She also decided that the accident would add immensely to her declining publicity; in fact Grace Lawrence came to the conclusion that the accident might have a very fortunate outcome for her. Going out onto the boat deck, she was startled to find so much activity. Members of the crew were preparing the boats, stewards were running back and forth, and above all could be heard a deafening roar of steam escaping from the giant funnels. There was such a list to starboard that Grace found it difficult to stand. She slowly made her way aft, holding on to the rail to keep her balance. Confused by the uproar, it was some time before she realized that she must either get in one of the lifeboats or stay with the ship and drown. Accordingly she made her way towards one of the boats. Suddenly she remembered that she had left all her jewels in the trunk in her cabin. She considered the situation; if she entered the boat now, there was a certain chance of rescue; on the other hand, she would lose her jewelry, her most beloved possessions. It would take only several minutes to get them, and she

could then take her place in the boat with the other women; surely the ship would not sink during the few moments she was below decks. After an instant's hesitation, Grace Lawrence swiftly made her way into the foyer and descended the stairs to her cabin on C deck. It was only now that she realized how badly the ship was listing. As she walked down the steps, she had to grip the banisters to keep herself from slipping, and it was only after much difficulty that she finally arrived at her cabin, which was on the port side. She unfastened her wardrobe trunk and extracted her jewel box. As she did so, however, the ship suddenly lurched, and the lights blinked; the heavy bureau was thrown across the room against the door. Rushing over to the obstruction, Grace pulled with all her strength, but failed to budge it. The tilt of the floor plus the weight of the chest made it impossible to move it. She was still striving to open the door when the liner once again lurched. Her large trunk slid across the cabin, pinning her against the bureau. Simultaneously the port-hole, under the pressure of the sea outside, suddenly burst open, and the water gushed in in an uncheckable stream. The lights dimmed and went out.

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Mr. and Mrs. Getz were experienced travelers, and they realized that the ship was sinking, for otherwise the crew would not be launching the boats; nevertheless they resolved to keep together no matter how serious the accident might turn out to be. Having sat down on deck chairs on the boat deck, they silently watched the crew fill and lower the boats. The deck was crowded with men and women who stood shivering in the cold, waiting for orders. As soon as a boat was prepared for lowering, an

officer called for only women and children to fill it. Many of the women were unwilling to go, but partly by persuasion and partly by force most of them were made to enter the boats. As soon as a lifeboat had been loaded, it was immediately lowered into the black sea below. For half an hour these operations continued, until all but a few of the boats had left the sinking ship. At this time, Captain Cullen, who was directing the lowering of the boats, saw the Getzs standing by the entrance into the lounge. Going over to them, he said, "There's only one more boat, Mr. Getz, your wife will have to go now."

Mr. Getz replied however, "I can't persuade her to go in a boat, Captain Cullen; she refuses to leave me."

All persuasion was in vain; Mrs. Getz insisted on staying with her husband. "As we have lived, we shall die together," she simply said. Finally, Captain Cullen decided that he would permit Mr. Getz to accompany his wife in a boat, due to the latter's lameness and old age. However, Mr. Getz refused to go, saying that he would not take the place of a woman. Perceiving that it was of no avail to argue any longer, Captain Cullen departed for the bridge. In a little while it appeared that the final plunge would be only a matter of a few minutes; the forward part of the boat deck was awash, and the list had increased to such a degree that in order to maintain their balance, Mr. and Mrs. Getz had to cling to the superstructure of the deck. Suddenly from out of the first-class companionway poured a stream of stokers, firemen, and engineers, driven from below by the rising water. They swarmed out onto the deck, completely obscuring the Getzes from view. Then, with a lurch, the ship slowly rolled over and disappeared beneath the waves.

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Major André stood on the promenade deck watching the boats being filled and lowered. He wondered how long it would be before the men could be taken off, for surely there were enough boats for everybody. At that moment he saw Peter Dale, who walked over to him. To his surprise and horror, Peter told him that there were lifeboats enough for only the women and the men were doomed to go down with the ship. The awfulness of the situation staggered him; it seemed impossible that certain death awaited him in one short hour. How different was this death from that which he had planned for himself! He once imagined himself, lying mortally wounded, on some shell-torn battlefield urging his troops on against the foe. But how cruel fate was! No taps would ever be sounded over his grave; no gun salutes would ever be fired; instead he would be remembered only as one of the victims of a great Atlantic disaster. He began to think of France; no man loves his country like a Frenchman. He thought of Paris with its gay cafés and boulevards; he would never see any of them again. He pictured himself at his country home in Lorraine; what a joyful and happy life that was, but it was gone forever. But, why shouldn't he live? Certainly it would not matter if one man were saved; they might object to many men in the boats, but one would make no difference. Also, he might not even be noticed; in the confusion and darkness he had a good chance of entering a boat unseen. He could understand why older men, like Mr. Getz at the Captain's table, were not allowed in the boats, for their life's work was done, and it would be cowardly to save themselves when there were others more active; but he was a young man and had a brilliant future ahead of him; why should his life be snuffed out just because of a careless error on the part of

those who ran the ship? Such was Major André's train of thought. Accordingly, he slipped through the throng surrounding one of the fast-filling boats. He was about to climb in, when he was stopped by a tall, young officer, who told him, "Women and children only, you know, sir."

Silently Major André stepped back into the crowd, and crossed over to the other side of the ship. Here, apparently, there had been attempts to rush the boats, for officers were guarding them with cocked pistols. André decided that if he waited until a boat was being lowered, he could jump into it as it dropped down towards the sea. He might injure himself in the fall, but that was better than drowning. Finally he saw his opportunity; the crew were launching one of the boats. He quickly ran towards the rail, and as he did so, an officer called to him, "Stop, or I'll shoot; if you jump, you'll capsize the boat!" Heedless of the warning, he climbed over the rail, but simultaneously a shot rang out, and Major André fell back onto the deck with a bullet in his temple.

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Captain Cullen hurried up the stairs towards the bridge with the officer who had summoned him from dinner. "Tell me, how did it happen?" he asked. "It was all over so quickly, sir, I hardly know myself," replied the officer. "I was on duty on the bridge, when the lookout telephoned there was ice ahead. I ordered the helm to port, but before the ship turned, we struck the berg obliquely just aft of the mast. I stopped the ship and closed the bulkheads, but that was useless, for the gash is over 300 feet long, according to the Chief Engineer. He doesn't think we'll float for two hours."

Once on the bridge, Captain Cullen ordered the crew to prepare the boats for launching and the passengers mustered. Since there were enough boats for only one-third of the ship's complement, he ordered that only women and children should be placed in the lifeboats. He next made a personal inspection of the damage. In the engine room he saw firemen and stokers, working on the engines, up to their waists in black, oily water. After a short time below decks, he again mounted to the bridge, from where he supervised the lowering of the boats. While doing this, he observed Mr. and Mrs. Getz watching one of the last boats being prepared. He hastened to them and advised Mrs. Getz to leave the ship, but she refused, and insisted on staying with her husband. Since all the persuasion was in vain, he left them. Soon, all the boats had been launched, and there being nothing more to be done until the ship sank, Captain Cullen retired to his cabin, telling his steward not to disturb him unless something important happened. Until this moment, his mind had been so occupied with thoughts for the safety of his passengers that Captain Cullen had not thought about himself. Once inside his cabin, however, he considered his own situation. He realized he had to go down with the *Praeclarus*; even if every member of the passengers and crew had been saved, he knew that he would stay with his ship, for if he were saved, he would live in disgrace the rest of his life. The company had demanded a record voyage; consequently, he risked safety for speed. He wondered whether people would refer to him as one who gambled with lives and lost. He decided that they probably would. Even though dead, he would be branded with disgrace. He thought of the hundreds of people, doomed to die in one short hour, who had looked to him for the

safety and protection which he had failed to give. He was responsible for every one of them and it was his duty to see that their lives were not menaced. Hundreds of those who had had such faith in him were to fall, victims of his negligence. He could not bear to think of the many families and homes which would be stripped of happiness, all on account of his carelessness. Reaching for his revolver on his table, he pressed it against his head and fired.