

### Chapter III

## TWENTY MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

At 5 minutes to 9pm, *Titanic* time, on Sunday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1912, Captain E. J. Smith came out onto the navigating bridge of *Titanic* to confer with his second officer, Charles Lightoller, who was Officer of the Watch at the time. Much of the discussion pertained to the expected approach of ice up ahead and the difficulty that they may encounter in seeing field ice and icebergs:<sup>1</sup>

“At five minutes to nine, when the Commander came on the bridge, he remarked that it was cold, and as far as I remember I said, ‘Yes, it is very cold, Sir. In fact,’ I said, ‘it is only one degree above freezing. I have sent word down to the carpenter and rung up the engine room and told them that it is freezing or will be during the night.’ We then commenced to speak about the weather. He said, ‘There is not much wind.’ I said, ‘No, it is a flat calm as a matter of fact.’ He repeated it; he said, ‘A flat calm.’ I said, ‘Yes, quite flat, there is no wind.’ I said something about it was rather a pity the breeze had not kept up whilst we were going through the ice region. Of course, my reason was obvious; he knew I meant the water ripples breaking on the base of the berg...I said, ‘It is a pity there is not a breeze,’ and we went on to discuss the weather. He was then getting his eyesight, you know, and he said, ‘Yes, it seems quite clear,’ and I said, ‘Yes, it is perfectly clear.’ It was a beautiful night, there was not a cloud in the sky. The sea was apparently smooth, and there was no wind, but at that time you could see the stars rising and setting with absolute distinctness...We then discussed the indications of ice. I remember saying, ‘In any case there will be a certain amount of reflected lights from the bergs.’ He said, ‘Oh, yes, there will be a certain amount of reflected light.’ I said, or he said; blue was said between us - that even though the blue side of the berg was towards us, probably the outline, the white outline would give us sufficient warning, that we should be able to see it at a good distance, and, as far as we could see, we should be able to see it. Of course it was just with regard to that possibility of the blue side being towards us, and that if it did happen to be turned with the purely blue side towards us, there would still be the white outline...We knew we were in the vicinity of ice, and though you cross the Atlantic for years and have ice reported and never see it, and at other times it is not reported and you do see it, you nevertheless do take necessary precautions, all you can, to make perfectly sure that the weather is clear and that the officers understand the indications of ice and all that sort of thing. That is a necessary precaution that is always taken...The Captain said, ‘If it becomes at all doubtful’ - I think those are his words - ‘If it becomes at all doubtful let me know at once; I will be just inside.’”

It was an absolutely beautiful night with no moon or clouds in the sky. The sea was extremely smooth, not a hint of wind, nor was there any noticeable swell. The stars were seen to rise and set with absolute distinctness on the horizon, which itself was somewhat uncommon. Despite all this, Captain Smith and his officers expected that there would be a certain amount of reflected star light coming off any ice that they might encounter to give them sufficient time to avoid it. In fact, Lightoller said that they expected to be able to see

low-lying growlers at a distance of 1½ miles with the visibility they had.

The last words of Captain Smith before he left the bridge at 9:25pm were, “If it becomes at all doubtful let me know at once; I will be just inside.”<sup>2</sup> And with that, the 62 year old Commander of *Titanic* left the bridge and went to his quarters just aft of the wheel house on the starboard side, confident that the ship was in good hands and that all precautions necessary had been taken.

The time that Captain Smith left the bridge was about the time that Charles Lightoller expected his ship to enter the ice region. Earlier that day Lightoller was handed one of several ice warnings that *Titanic* received by wireless. The one that he received at about 12:45pm had come several hours earlier from the SS *Caronia*. Logged at 7:10am New York time, it read:

West-bound steamers report bergs, growlers and field ice in 42 N. from 49 to 51 W.

Lightoller said that he did a quick calculation in his head and made a mental note that the ship should expect to be approaching longitude 49°W by about half past 9. According to Lightoller, Sixth Officer James Moody also did a calculation and came up with an estimate that they could be up to the ice around 11pm that night. Moody’s estimate, however, was based on a different wireless message, probably the one that came later from the SS *Baltic* that stated that the Greek liner *Athinai* reported ice in 41° 51’N, 49° 52’W. The longitude of 49° 52’W is about 1 hour 45 minutes of steaming at 22 knots beyond 49°W, the longitude where Lightoller expected to be at around 9:30 that night.<sup>3</sup>

The latitude given in the *Baltic*’s ice report was just a few miles north of the track that *Titanic* was on. There was absolutely no doubt about the region they were headed into. It was not a matter of *if* they were to reach the ice, but a matter of exactly *when* they would reach it. There was never any serious talk of slowing down as long as the visibility remained perfectly clear, which it was. And so the SS *Titanic* raced across the Atlantic at more than 22 knots toward an extensive region of field ice and icebergs with her commander and officers having the utmost confidence in their ship and their personal skills to avoid the danger that lurked ahead. What was ahead of them was neither unforeseen nor unexpected. What was to happen to them, however, was.

Soon after Captain Smith left the bridge, Second Officer Lightoller sent a message to the two lookouts up in the crow’s nest, Archie Jewell and George Symons, to “keep a sharp look out for ice, particularly small ice and growlers,” and to pass the message on to the next pair of lookouts that would relieve them.

At 10pm First Officer William Murdoch came on the bridge to relieve Charles Lightoller. As Murdoch was getting his eyes used to the dark, Lightoller gave him the usual briefing about the course being steered by standard compass, the temperature being about freezing then, and that they “would be up around the ice at any time now.” Lightoller also mentioned to Murdoch about his conversation with Captain Smith, and that he had sent word up to the nest, to the carpenter, and to the engine room as to the temperature being near freezing, and things like that.

At the same time that Murdoch came on to relieve Lightoller as the Officer of the Watch, lookouts Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee went up to the nest to relieve lookouts Jewell and Symons. The word was passed from Jewell and Symons to Fleet and Lee, “keep a careful look-out for ice and growlers in particular.” Also at that time, Standby Quartermaster Robert Hichens relieved Quartermaster Alfred Olliver at the wheel. Olliver now became the Standby Quartermaster as he repeated to Hichens, “North 71 West,” the compass course to steer by that was posted on the dimly lit course board in the wheelhouse.