

Chapter IV

THE MIDDLE WATCH

At 8pm Sunday evening, April 14, 1912, *Californian's* third officer, Charles Victor Groves, took over as Officer of the Watch from Chief Officer George Stewart. After giving Groves the usual briefing about the weather conditions and the course being steered, Stewart informed Groves that wireless messages had been received giving warning of ice ahead. Soon Stewart went below and Captain Stanley Lord came up with similar information for Groves, telling him to keep a sharp lookout for ice. The night was dark and clear with almost no wind. The sea was a flat calm, and the horizon was only discernible by the fact that the stars could be seen to disappear below it. In contrast to the somewhat complacent attitude carried on board *Titanic*, Captain Lord doubled his lookout by putting a sailor on the forecastle head in addition to the one that was already up in the crow's nest, and more importantly, remained on the bridge of his ship as it proceeded westward at 11 knots through icy cold waters.

Somewhere near 10:15pm Captain Lord observed a "brightening along the western horizon." About six minutes later, his third officer perceived several white patches in the water ahead at about the same time that Captain Lord ordered his helm be put Hard-aport (right full rudder) and rang down full speed astern on the engine-order telegraph. As he described it in his 1959 affidavit (see Appendix F):

"At 10.21 I personally rang the engine-room telegraph to full astern and ordered the helm hard aport. As these orders came into effect the lookout men reported ice ahead. Under the influence of the helm and the propeller going astern the ship swung round to E.N.E. by compass (N.E. true)."

Despite the near perfect seeing conditions of the night, this field of pack ice was recognized at less than 400 yards from the bridge of *Californian*.

As a result of the actions taken to avoid the ice barrier ahead, *Californian* swung around to starboard from her S89°W (269°) true courseline and came to a stop facing northeastward. From that time until about 5:15am the following morning, *Californian* lay stopped "about a quarter of a mile off the edge of the field." There she lay surrounded by loose ice while drifting southward with the local current and slowly swinging around to starboard in the "light airs and calms" that prevailed that night.

About 10 to 15 minutes after stopping, Captain Lord instructed his third officer that he was to be informed in case any vessel was seen approaching them:

"When I came off the bridge at half-past ten I pointed out to the officer that I thought I saw a light coming along, and it was a most peculiar night. We had been making mistakes all along with the stars, thinking they were signals... We could not distinguish where the sky ended and where the water commenced."

Captain Lord then went down to the lower bridge on the Saloon deck leaving his third officer to stand watch by himself on the exposed upper bridge of *Californian*. Lord then sent for his Chief Engineer to inform him that they would be stopped until daybreak, but to keep up steam in case they began to bump against the ice. During this time, Cyril Evans, *Californian's* wireless operator, came by to inquire as to why the ship had stopped.

“Well, Sir, he [Captain Lord] was talking about the ice then; he was talking to the Chief Engineer. I asked him if anything was the matter, and if he wanted me. A little after that he came along to my cabin to talk to me... He asked me what ships I had got...I said, ‘I think the *Titanic* is near us. I have got her.’... He said, ‘You had better advise the *Titanic* we are stopped and surrounded by ice.’”

This last exchange between Captain Lord and Cyril Evans took place a little before 10:55pm.¹

At 10:55pm *Californian* time [9:05pm NY time], Cyril Evans tapped out an informal message to *Titanic*, “Say, old man, we are stopped and surrounded by ice.” At the time, *Titanic*’s senior wireless operator, Jack Phillips, was busy receiving passenger related messages from the powerful wireless land station at Cape Race, Newfoundland, located about 800 miles away. When Evans’ signal came in, it interfered with the signal being received from Cape Race because of the relative proximity of *Californian* to *Titanic*. The response back from Jack Phillips on *Titanic* was an abrupt, “Shut up, shut up, I’m working Cape Race,” followed by a message to Cape Race that said, “Sorry, please repeat, jammed.”²

It is not clear whether Jack Phillips bothered to copy down what Evans was trying to tell him. He was interrupted while trying to copy a message from Cape Race by the much stronger received radio signal from the relatively nearby *Californian*. The message from Evans was a casual one, from one wireless operator to another. Captain Lord should have sent a Master Service Message (MSG),³ a priority message with regard to navigation from the master of one vessel to another. An MSG was second in priority only to a CQD or SOS distress signal.

After receiving this reprimand from Phillips, Evans continued to listen to Phillips exchange messages with Cape Race for about a half hour more before he hung up the headphones of his receiver to turn in for the night. He made no further effort to contact *Titanic* despite the importance of the information that he had intended to convey.

According to Captain Lord’s account, the light of a steamer was seen to come up from the eastward on *Californian*’s starboard side some time close to 11pm. Allegedly, this was just before he went to the wireless cabin to talk to Evans. At first, according to Lord, he saw only the masthead light of a vessel. Later on, as he was casually watching the approaching vessel from *Californian*’s lower bridge, he was able to make out a mast light, a green (starboard-side) navigation light, and what he described as “a few deck lights.” Then sometime around 11:30pm, according to him, the vessel appeared to have stopped. He estimated her distance to be about 5 miles off, and described the vessel as something like *Californian*, a medium-sized tramp steamer.

On *Californian*’s upper bridge, Third Officer Groves first noticed the mast light of a steamer around 11:10pm.⁴ When he first saw the light he judged it to be about 10 to 12 miles away “by the look of the light and the clearness of the night.” A little while later he started to take more notice of the steamer when it appeared to be approaching his vessel from abaft the starboard beam. Groves’ impression at the time was that the steamer was a passenger vessel since it appeared to him to have “a lot of light.”

In accordance with standing orders, Groves decided to go down to the lower bridge to inform Captain Lord that a steamer appeared to be approaching them. At the time he went below, around 11:30pm [11:42pm *Titanic* time], *Californian* was facing northeast by compass. It was about this time that this steamer appeared to have stopped according to Captain Lord.

When Groves arrived at the chart room, Captain Lord asked him, “Can you make anything out of her lights?” to which Groves said, “Yes, she is evidently a passenger steamer