

Chapter XI

DRIFTING ICE AND MEANDERING CURRENTS

As we have seen, when the SS *Californian* came alongside *Carpathia*, the two ships began signaling each other by semaphore flags. *Californian*'s Third Officer Charles Groves was reading the signals:¹

“The first signal shown was fixed on the jumper stay. That is a signal that she wanted to semaphore...I think the first question she asked was had we any survivors on board, survivors or people, I do not know which she said...We said, ‘No.’...We asked him if we could be of any assistance, and he said, ‘No.’...He told us the *Titanic* had struck an iceberg at 12 o'clock and had sunk at 3, and they had 800 or 700 - I am not sure which - people on board, including Mr. Bruce Ismay. When we asked him if we could be of any assistance they said, ‘No.’ And then Captain Lord suggested that we should search down to leeward.”

A very similar story is told by *Carpathia*'s Second Officer James Bisset.² When *Californian* came within ½ mile and stopped, an officer on *Californian* using hand flags signaled, “What's the matter?” Bisset said that it was he that replied with hand flags:

“*Titanic* hit berg and sank here with loss of fifteen hundred lives. Have picked up all her boats with seven hundred survivors. Please stay in vicinity to search for bodies.”

“We Could Not See One Body”

The semaphore flag signaling exchange was the first confirmation received by *Californian* that *Titanic* had actually sunk. Amongst the wreckage seen were several empty boats, some floating planks, deck chairs and cushions, some cork, and a few life belts floating around. Captain Rostron mentioned seeing but one body amongst the wreckage, but *Carpathia* did not get up to the wreckage until the last lifeboat was picked up.³

“We had not seen this wreckage. We had been dodging about picking up the other boats. I had not any idea where the wreckage was. As soon as we had finished taking the passengers from the boats I cleared off to another boat to pick them up, and was dodging about all over the place to pick them up. It was only when we got to the last boat that we got close up to the wreckage. It was close up to the wreckage. It would be about a quarter to eight when we got there.”

Lawrence Beesley, a second class passenger who survived in lifeboat No. 13, wrote:⁴

“So in the absence of any plan of action, we rowed slowly forward--or what we thought was forward, for it was in the direction the *Titanic*'s bows were pointing before she sank. I see now that we must have been pointing northwest, for we presently saw the Northern Lights on the starboard, and again, when the *Carpathia* came up from the south, we saw her from behind us on the southeast, and turned our boat around to get to her. I imagine the

boats must have spread themselves over the ocean fanwise as they escaped from the *Titanic*: those on the starboard and port sides forward being almost dead ahead of her and the stern boats being broadside from her; this explains why the port boats were so much longer in reaching the *Carpathia* – as late as 8.30 A.M. – while some of the starboard boats came up as early as 4.10 A.M. Some of the port boats had to row across the place where the *Titanic* sank to get to the *Carpathia*, through the debris of chairs and wreckage of all kinds.”

According to Captain Rostron, the lifeboats from *Titanic* were spread out over an area of 4 to 5 miles.⁵

At the US Senate investigation, Major Arthur Peuchen, a first class passenger who survived in lifeboat No. 6, was asked about the wreckage that was seen in the morning.⁶ His comments were:

“That is something that astonished me very much. I was surprised, when we steamed through this wreckage very slowly after we left the scene of the disaster – we left the ground as soon as this other boat, the *Californian*, I understand, came along – that we did not see any bodies in the water. I understood the *Californian* was going to cruise around, and when she came we started off, and we went right by the wreckage. It was something like two islands, and was strewn along, and I was interested to see if I could see any bodies, and I was surprised to think that with all these deaths that had taken place we could not see one body; I was very much surprised. I understand a life preserver is supposed to keep up a person, whether dead or alive.”

James Bisset, *Carpathia*'s second officer at the time of the *Titanic* disaster, remarked in his book *Tramps and Ladies*:⁷

“The dead bodies were there, totally or partially submerged, but, in the choppy seas, it was now almost impossible to sight them, as white lifejackets would have an appearance similar to that of the thousands of small pieces of floating ice or white-painted wreckage. A dead body floats almost submerged.”

Figure 11-01 is a photograph that was taken from *Carpathia* of the surrounding area in the early morning hours of April 15, 1912. Thousands of small pieces of floating ice can easily be seen along with a number of large icebergs in the background.

Carpathia took aboard 13 of *Titanic*'s lifeboats, leaving behind the rest among the wreckage. Included amongst those left behind was overturned collapsible lifeboat B that Second Officer Lightoller along with several others had managed to climb onto as the ship was going down.⁸ As was mentioned earlier, this overturned collapsible boat could not have drifted too far from the rest of the wreckage. After all, it got freed from the ship just as the ship started to go under, and those who managed to climb on top of its overturned bottom were certainly not doing any rowing. Luckily those men were taken aboard lifeboats No. 4 and No. 12 later in the morning, and were then taken to *Carpathia*. The overturned collapsible boat was then left adrift in the wreckage.

The answer to the mystery of why bodies were not easily seen was first touched upon by *Titanic* passenger Major Arthur Peuchen. At the US Senate investigation, Peuchen

