

from Exploring the Titanic

Robert D. Ballard

Have you ever heard about the *Titanic*, the ocean liner that hit an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage in 1912? Perhaps you have seen the popular movie about the disaster. In this excerpt from *Exploring the Titanic*, Robert Ballard gives a suspenseful narrative of the *Titanic's* last hours. He uses historical records and first-person accounts to weave together stories of the passengers and crew. Even though you know what happened to the *Titanic*, you will be kept in suspense as you read.

As the story opens, the *Titanic* begins its tragic voyage:



At noon on Wednesday, April 10, the *Titanic* cast off. The whistles on her huge funnels were the biggest ever made. As she began her journey to the sea, they were heard for miles around.



The *Titanic* slowly passes two ships tied up to a dock. Suddenly, the mooring ropes holding the passenger liner *New York* snap. The enormous pull created by the *Titanic* has caused the ropes to break. Jack Thayer, a passenger on the *Titanic*, watches in horror as the *New York* drifts closer and closer to the *Titanic*.



“It looked as though there surely would be a collision,” he later wrote.

Vocabulary Development

collision (kuh LIZH uhn) *n.* coming together with a sudden violent force; a crash

◆ Literary Analysis

This moment is filled with **suspense**.

What does Jack Thayer think is going to happen?

◆ Reading Check

What is the *Titanic*?

◆ Reading Strategy

In the bracketed paragraph, underline statements of **opinion**.



◆ Literary Analysis

What do you think is the answer to this question? Write it on the lines.

◆ Reading Check

What kind of warnings has the *Titanic* been receiving?

At the last moment, some quick action by Captain Smith and a tugboat captain nearby allowed the *Titanic* to slide past with only inches to spare.

It was not a good sign. Did it mean that the *Titanic* might be too big a ship to handle safely? Those who knew about the sea thought that such a close call at the beginning of a maiden voyage was a very bad omen.

Jack Phillips, the first wireless operator on the *Titanic*, quickly jotted down the message coming in over his headphones. "It's another iceberg warning," he said wearily to his young assistant, Harold Bride. "You'd better take it up to the bridge."



Bride hands the message to Captain Smith. He thinks the captain does not seem very concerned by the message. But then, Bride has been told that ice floating in the sea lanes during April was not unusual. Besides, how could an unsinkable ship be in any danger from a few pieces of ice?



Jack Thayer's parents had been invited to a special dinner for Captain Smith, so Jack ate alone in the first-class dining room. After dinner, as he was having a cup of coffee, he was joined by Milton Long, another passenger going home to the States. Long was older than Jack, but in the easy-going atmosphere of shipboard travel, they struck up a conversation and talked together for an hour or so.



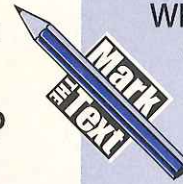
That evening the radio room receives three more warnings of ice ahead. At about 9:00 P.M., Captain Smith goes up to the bridge.



He and his officers talked about how difficult it was to spot icebergs on a calm, clear, moonless night like this with no wind to kick up white surf around them. Before going to bed, the captain ordered the lookouts to keep a sharp watch for ice.

◆ Literary Analysis

What fact in this paragraph adds to the suspense of the story? Circle the fact.



After trading travel stories with Milton Long, Jack Thayer put on his coat and walked around the deck. "It had become very much colder," he said later. "It was a brilliant, starry night. There was no moon, and I have never seen the stars shine brighter . . . sparkling like diamonds. . . . It was the kind of night that made one feel glad to be alive." At eleven o'clock, he went below to his cabin, put on his pajamas, and got ready for bed.

◆ Reading Strategy

In the second bracketed paragraph, underline one sentence that expresses an **opinion**. Draw a circle around a sentence that expresses a **fact**.



◆ ◆ ◆
The radio room receives the seventh ice warning of the day. It is clear that floating icebergs lie ahead. The radio room does not even give that message to the Captain. At 11:40 P.M., Fred Fleet is on watch high up in the crow's nest on the forward mast.

◆ ◆ ◆
Suddenly, Fleet saw something. A huge, dark shape loomed out of the night directly ahead of the *Titanic*. An iceberg! He quickly sounded the alarm bell three times and picked up the telephone.

◆ Stop to Reflect

An iceberg has been spotted directly ahead of the *Titanic*. What do you think is going to happen now?

◆ ◆ ◆
Immediately orders are given to turn the wheel and reverse the engines. The ship slowly starts to turn. It looks as though they will miss the iceberg. But it is too late! They have avoided a head-on crash, but the iceberg strikes the side of the ship. The *Titanic* comes to a stop.

◆ Reading Check

What does Fleet see in the ocean?

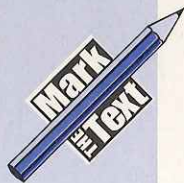
◆ ◆ ◆
Many passengers do not know the ship has hit anything. Most people have already gone to bed. Everything seems normal, except that the engines have stopped. But

◆ Stop to Reflect

Why is it important to remain calm in case of an emergency?

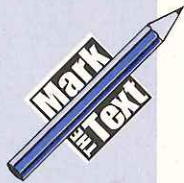
◆ Reading Strategy

In the bracketed paragraph, underline three facts that do not support the opinion that the ship is unsinkable.



◆ Reading Check

Why is Phillips joking while sending the distress call? Circle the answer in the text.



down in the bottom of the ship, things are very different. Cold water is rushing in, sending the crew running for safety.

Twenty minutes after the crash, Captain Smith and the ship's builder, Thomas Andrews inspect the damage below decks. The mail room, boiler rooms, and forward holds are filling up with water. The ship has been designed to float if only the first four watertight compartments are flooded. But water is already pouring into the first five. One by one all the remaining compartments will flood, and the ship will sink. Andrews tells the captain the ship can last an hour, an hour and a half at the most. Captain Smith orders Harold Bride and Phillips in the radio room to send out a call for help.



Phillips began to send the Morse code "CQD" distress call, flashing away and joking as he did it. After all, they knew the ship was unsinkable.

Vocabulary Development

watertight (WAH tuhr tīt) *adj.* put together so that no water can get through

REVIEW AND ASSESS

1. When did the *Titanic* begin her journey? _____
2. What do the messages received by the *Titanic* warn about?

3. What is the Captain's reaction to the messages? In the chart, write what it says in the text about the Captain's reaction.

Captain's Reaction

The first message	
The second three messages	
The seventh message	

4. **Literary Analysis:** Which of the following events add to the **suspense** of the story? Put a checkmark before each one that does.
 The *Titanic* almost runs into the *New York* when leaving the dock.
 A message comes reporting icebergs ahead.
 Jack Thayer's parents have been invited to a special dinner with the Captain.
 The radio room receives three more warnings of ice ahead.
 Jack Thayer put on his coat and walked around the deck.
5. **Reading Strategy:** Put an *F* before each sentence that is a fact. Put an *O* before each sentence that is an opinion.
 At noon on Wednesday, April 10, the *Titanic* cast off.
 A close call at the beginning of a maiden voyage was a very bad omen.
 Harold Bride hands the message to Captain Smith.

(Continued)

___ He thinks the captain does not seem very concerned.

___ It is difficult to spot icebergs on a calm, clear night.

Writing

Express your opinion about what the Captain of the *Titanic* should have done. Then, support your opinion with facts from the story.

My opinion: _____

Fact 1: _____

Fact 2: _____

Fact 3: _____
