

THE TITANIC AND
THE LITERARY
COMMENTATOR

BY E. B. FRENCH

Sir A. Conan Doyle after a none too careful reading of Mr. Shaw's letter, replied to it with much heat, saying that he had never found so much that was false written within an equal compass. To be sure there were ten men to two women in one boat, but how about the others? Mr. Shaw knew as well as everybody else that in the very next boat sixty-five out of the seventy occupants were women. As to Captain Smith, Sir Arthur declared he would gladly present the Fabian Society with £100, if Mr. Shaw would show him the work of any responsible journalist in which Captain Smith is described in the terms of Nelson. To insinuate as Mr. Shaw did that the officers had not done their duty was a "poisonous suggestion." To say that the wreck was hailed as a triumph of British navigation was proof merely that Mr. Shaw valued a sensational phrase more than the truth. Sir Arthur expresses the highest admiration for the officer who told Mr. Ismay, the managing-director, to "go to hell," when the latter seemed to be interfering with the life-saving work. But Mr. Shaw, he says, quotes this remark as if it were a crime. Finally

As to the general accusation that the occasion had been used for the glorification of British qualities, we should indeed be a lost people if we did not honour courage and discipline when we see it in the highest form. That our sympathies extend beyond ourselves is shown by the fact that the conduct of the American male passengers, and very particularly of the much-abused millionaires, has been as warmly eulogised as any strange feature of the whole wonderful epic. But surely it is a pitiful sight to see a man of undoubted genius using his gifts in order to decry his own people, regardless of the fact that his words must add to the grief of those who have already had more than enough to bear.

This letter by ignoring the essential fact that the Shaw diatribes were directed against, the journalistic misuse of the early and incomplete reports, brought forth a thumping rejoinder. The newspapers, said Mr. Shaw, wrote columns of gushing eulogy on the strength of information that indicated anything but heroic conduct.

My case is that our journalists wrote without the slightest regards to the facts; that they were actually more enthusiastic in their praise of the *Titanic* heroes on the day when the only evidence to hand was evidence of conduct for which a soldier would be shot and a navy sailor hanged, than when later news came in of those officers and crews who did their best, and that it must be evident to every reasonable man that if there had not been a redeeming feature in the whole case, exactly the same hogwash, as Mr. Cunninghame Graham calls it in his righteous disgust, would have been lavished on the veriest dastards as upon a crew of Grace Darlings.

The captain positively lost popularity when the deliberate and calumnious lie that he shot himself was dropped. . . .

Sir Arthur accuses me of lying, and I must say he gives me no great encouragement to tell the truth; but he proceeds to tell against himself what I take to be the most thundering lie ever sent to a printer by a human author. He first says that I quoted, as if it were a crime, the words used by the officer who told Mr. Ismay to "go to hell." I did not. I said the outburst was very natural, though not in my opinion admirable or heroic. . . .

"But," Sir Arthur goes on to say, "I could not imagine a finer example." . . . Yes, you could, Sir Arthur, and many a page of heroic romance from your hand attests that you often have imagined much finer examples. Heroism has not quite come to that yet, nor has your imagination contracted or your brain softened to the pathos of seeing sublimity in a worried officer telling even a managing-director (God-like being) to "go to hell."

