

THE TITANIC AND THE LITERARY COMMENTATOR

BY E. B. FRENCH

Bernard Shaw
on Mock
Heroics

Mr. Bernard Shaw's disgust with the newspaper comments on the first reports of the *Titanic* disaster was not at all surprising to the readers of his plays and prefaces. It was not to be expected that the author of *Arms and the Man* would have much patience with journalistic raptures over heroism, even if the facts lent themselves to a heroical interpretation. Mr. Shaw loathes heroics and the glamour of romance and in no conceivable circumstances would he find an excuse for them. But the facts of the *Titanic* disaster were, he contended, peculiarly unsuited to romantic treatment, and it was only by lying that the newspapers made them out heroic. Why, he asked, does a sensational catastrophe always drive a modern nation not into transports of grief or sympathy, or into prayer, but into "an explosion of outrageous romantic lying"? He refers it to certain romantic demands which must be met by disregarding the facts or by distorting them. Thus, one demand of romance is that everybody must face death without flinching; so that is the way the papers must present it. But what is the actual evidence?

The captain and officers were so afraid of a panic that though they knew the ship was sinking, they did not dare tell the passengers so, especially the third-class passengers, and the band played rag-time to reassure the passengers, who, therefore, did not get into the boats and did not realise their situation until the boats were gone and the ship standing on her head before plunging to the bottom.

What happened then Lady Duff-Gordon has related, and the witnesses at the American inquiry could hardly bear to relate. I ask, what is the use of all this ghastly, blasphemous, inhuman, braggartly lying? Here is a calamity which might well make the proudest man humble and the wildest joker serious. It makes us vainglorious, insolent and mendacious.

Another romantic demand is, "Women and children first," and seldom, says Mr. Shaw, was there a sublimer chorus on the strict observance of this rule than in the first accounts of the wreck in the London papers containing the story of Lady Duff-Gordon.

She described how she escaped in the captain's boat. There was one other woman in it and ten men—twelve all told—one woman for every five men.

Again, romance requires that all the men except the foreigners shall be heroes, that the foreigners shall be kept from a cowardly stampede by British pistols, and that the captain shall be a super-hero—

a magnificent seaman, cool, brave, delighting in danger, and a living guarantee that the wreck was nobody's fault, but, on the contrary, a triumph of British navigation.

Such a man Captain Smith was enthusiastically proclaimed on the day when it was reported (and actually believed, apparently) that he had shot himself on the bridge. . . . Writers who had never heard of Captain Smith to that hour wrote of him as they would hardly write of Nelson.

The only thing positively known was that Captain Smith had lost his ship by deliberately and knowingly steaming into an ice field at the highest speed that he had coal for. He paid the penalty, so did most of those for whose lives he was responsible. Had he brought them and the ship safely to land, nobody would have taken the smallest notice of him.

As to the steadiness and bravery of the officers the verdict of the press was unanimous, although the principal fact known at the time was

that boats which were not full refused to go to the rescue of those who were struggling in the water in cork jackets. The reason was frankly given—they were afraid.

The fear, says Mr. Shaw, was natural, and nobody at home dare blame them,

but why assure the world that only Englishmen could have behaved in so heroic a manner? Such, he says, was the attitude of the press toward the disaster.

Did the press really represent the public? I am afraid it did. Churchmen and statesmen took much the same tone. The effect on me was one of profound disgust—almost national dishonour. Am I mad? Possibly. At all events that is how I felt and how I feel about it.



(Image added: GBS by Max Beerbohm)

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