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Natural Disasters

武汉测绘科技大学出版社

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1 *The Sinking of the Titanic, 1912*

From somewhere down below, there had come a strange tearing sound. It was as if a great fingernail had scratched the ship from one end to the other. But this first sign of trouble was hardly even noticed.

Only the men in the boiler rooms, at the bottom of, the world's biggest passenger ship, knew that something terrible had happened.

Many of the passengers were asleep in their cabins. But, in the first-class part of the ship, a few wealthy gentlemen were still drinking and playing cards, or sitting in comfortable chairs in the smoking room. Other men and women in evening dress were walking along the top decks looking up at the stars.

It was easy for these people in their fine clothes to believe that they were on the safest ship ever built. For it did not really seem like a ship at all.

The *Titanic* was like a hotel on water. There was every luxury you could imagine on board. The rich first-class passengers slept in large cabins with thick carpets and beautiful furniture, and with expensive pictures on the walls. There were also special small cabins for their servants. The smoking room was so large, it reminded the gentlemen of their clubs back in London. Certainly for these wealthy passengers the *Titanic* was the finest ship in the world. And, as everyone knew, she could never sink. The men who had built her had promised that nothing could sink her!

On the lower decks, of course, life was not quite so comfortable. The second and third-class passengers were not nearly so well looked after. Their cabins were smaller, the beds were

smaller and they could not expect nearly as good a service as in the first class.

Yet they too felt sure that the *Titanic* would never sink. For the ship was built to keep out the seawater! She had a double bottom which was divided into sixteen 'watertight' compartments. She could still float if any two of the compartments filled with water. No one imagined that more than two could ever be flooded, even if there was a collision at sea. This was why the *Titanic* was unlike any other ship yet built.

This great ship, nearly one-sixth of a mile long and 104 feet high, set off on her first voyage across the Atlantic from Southampton to New York on 10 April 1912. On board were 2 207 men, women and children. There were many famous names among them.

On the first night of the voyage the sea was calm. The weather was clear and bright but very cold. Radio messages received that morning, had warned the Captain of icebergs.

Twenty minutes before midnight, Frederick Fleet, standing at the look-out point high above the ship, suddenly saw something in the sea ahead of them. It seemed to grow bigger and bigger.

Fleet shouted, 'Iceberg!' and rang the warning bell three times. For a few seconds it looked as if nothing could stop the *Titanic* from crashing into the iceberg. It stood about a hundred feet above the water. Then the bow of the ship slowly began to swing away. But it was too late. Although the *Titanic* appeared to miss hitting the iceberg, it struck the knife-sharp ice hidden beneath the water. The ice tore a hole 300 feet long along one side of the ship.

Down in boiler room number six, two members of the crew were talking when the warning bell sounded. Suddenly the

whole side of the ship seemed to break open. The freezing sea poured in uninvited, and the two men ran for their lives.

Up on top, pieces of ice broke off from the floating mountain on to the deck as the *Titanic* went past. A few first-class passengers, out for a last walk before bed in their expensive fur coats, laughed and started making snowballs. They didn't for a moment imagine they were in any danger.

They did not notice at first that the ship's engines had stopped. But the Captain of the *Titanic*, Edward J. Smith, rushed out of his cabin next to the bridge and asked his First Officer: 'What on earth was that?'

'We've hit an iceberg sir,' he told him. But none of them yet knew that there was any serious damage.

Captain Smith gave orders quickly to his officers: 'Find out what is going on down below!'

Edward Smith was a splendid-looking gentleman of fifty-nine, with a full white beard. He was a natural leader and all the passengers and crew admired him. But even he could not believe that his fine ship was badly hit.

It was not long, however, before one of the crew came rushing up from the lower decks with the bad news: 'She's taking in water fast!' he shouted.

Then Captain Smith knew in his bones that the *Titanic* would sink. He sent for the one passenger on board who might know how to save her. This was Thomas Andrews, the man who had built the *Titanic*. He was travelling on her first voyage in order to discover if there were any problems. He understood ships in the way that some men understand women or horses! But even he hardly noticed the scratching sound from below, because he was working late. There was a problem with one of the kitchens.

He and Captain Smith went together to the lower parts of the ship to see what had happened. Water was now spreading everywhere.

Thomas Andrews saw to his horror that the first five 'water-tight' compartments were flooded. He told the Captain that if three, or even four, of the first five compartments were flooded, the *Titanic* could probably still float. But not all five. For the bow of the ship would sink so low that water would start to pour into the sixth compartment. And so on.

'There is nothing we can do,' said Andrews, 'The *Titanic* cannot stay afloat.' The two men looked at each other for a moment. Would she really sink?

The passengers in the cheapest cabins, in the lowest part of the ship and nearest to the bow, were beginning to ask the same question. One passenger climbed out of his bed to see what was happening and stepped into cold water. By the time he had put on some clothes, the water covered his feet.

And higher up, second-class passenger Lawrence Beesley was having difficulty going down the stairs to his cabin. It seemed as if the steps were sloping downwards! His feet did not fall where they should. And, although it was a calm sea, the ship was leaning over on one side.

Some of the first-class passengers left their rooms. Not because they knew anything of what was going on beneath them, but because the engines had stopped. When they asked what was happening, they were told that there was nothing to worry about... There was not much excitement.

In the first-class smoking room, the gentlemen in their dinner jackets continued their game of cards as before.

On Deck 'E', however, it was a very different story. There, the third-class passengers were so frightened that they seized

their luggage and began pushing their way up to the higher decks.

At 12 : 05 a. m. , Captain Smith turned to his First Officer. 'Uncover the lifeboats, ' he said, 'and tell the passengers to gather together immediately on the decks. '

Then the Captain, with his broad shoulders held back, went to the radio room.

'Put out a call to all ships for help, 'he told the two men on duty. It was now just over half an hour since the collision with the iceberg.

In the first class, the stewards went from cabin to cabin knocking lightly on the doors. They asked the sleeping passengers very politely to put on warm clothes and go to 'A' deck with their lifebelts on.

Some of them, unable to believe what they were hearing, refused to leave their warm beds. And even those who obeyed the stewards felt no fear because they, like everyone else, knew that the *Titanic* could never sink.

The gentlemen just put coats over their pyjamas. But some of the ladies dressed themselves as though they were preparing for a pleasant evening out! They felt they must look their best even at a time like this.

In the second class, the orders to go to the lifeboats were given less politely. For example, Chief Steward John Hardy threw open the doors of at least twenty cabins and shouted: 'Everybody on deck with lifebelts on, at once!'

The third-class passengers were, in general, left alone to find their own way out. The less you paid, the less you mattered on the *Titanic*. The result was that most of them wandered around without knowing where to go or what to do.

Even in the second class, there were problems. Two women

tried to go through a gate into the first class to reach the lifeboats. But an officer stopped them. 'The boats will be lowered to your deck,' he told them.

Almost until the end, the crew tried to prevent third-class passengers from entering the first-class boat deck. When the boats were finally lowered, one officer actually fired his gun to keep passengers on the lower decks from jumping into his lifeboat, as it went down.

So sure were the builders of the *Titanic* that she could never sink, that there were only sixteen large lifeboats made of wood. There were also four other lighter ones that were kept on deck. None of the passengers knew that there would not be enough room for them all. Yet, if all twenty boats were full, there would still be over a thousand people left behind on the sinking ship.

The first-class passengers stood around on the boat deck, waiting to find out what to do next. On orders from Captain Smith, the crew began to swing out the lifeboats, ready to drop them down into the sea. It looked such a long way down! Most of the people could not believe they had to leave the ship. One person asked if she could have a pass so that she could return to the ship the next day!

Were they really expected to risk their lives by stepping into these small boats? The deck of the *Titanic* beneath their feet still seemed safer to them, even though it was sloping downwards.

The men in charge of the lifeboats cried out: 'Women and children first!' But not many stepped forward. One very large woman simply refused to go anywhere near the lifeboats. 'I've never been in an open boat in my life!' she cried.

As if to remind them of those first few happy hours on board the *Titanic* earlier that evening, the ship's band arrived to play

some light music. They were playing in the first-class lounge but decided to move up to the boat deck. It was the only way they would get an audience!

It was a strange sight. But their music was loud and gay and brought a few smiles to the faces of the passengers and crew.

Many of the women would not leave without their husbands. The officers allowed a few couples to climb into the boats and finally even single men. But there was no rush for the boats. In fact one of the boats was lowered with only twenty people on board. There was room for twice as many!

There was one person on board who still did not know what had happened. Almost an hour had gone by since the collision with the iceberg. But George Rowe, a member of the crew who was on duty alone at the stern of the ship, had heard nothing. He was astonished when he saw one of the lifeboats floating on the water. He phoned the bridge to tell them about it. It was only then that he knew that he was standing on a sinking ship.

If there was anyone who still believed that the *Titanic* was not in real trouble, he soon changed his mind at 12 : 45 a. m. For that was when the first signal rocket was sent up. The sky was lit up. Suddenly everyone knew that there was no time to lose. One young man who had only just got married kissed his pretty wife and whispered: 'It's all right. You go and I'll stay a while.'

There were twelve other couples on the *Titanic* who were on their honeymoon. It was a sad sight to see the young girls parted from their husbands.

One girl, waiting to climb into lifeboat number eight, cried out that she had left behind the picture of her husband Jack. Others tried to stop her but she ran off to her cabin to fetch it.

As more rockets exploded in the sky, there was greater eager-

ness to get into the boats among the women who were waiting their turn. One woman in her fifties missed the boat completely as she climbed over the side of the *Titanic*. The crowd screamed. But, as she fell between the two boats towards the sea below, someone seized her foot and held on. Three or four passengers pulled her up and helped her into the lifeboat.

Down in the third class, hundreds of people were still struggling desperately to find their way to the boats. The plan was to fill some of the boats as they went down with people from the lower decks. As the boats reached their deck, they would climb in. But the plan went wrong. For the doors through which they were going to escape were locked. So the boats left without them!

Many of the third-class passengers were crowded together, shouting and pushing, at the foot of the stairs on 'E' deck. It was a long and very difficult journey up to the boat deck. None of them knew how to get there. A steward tried to help but most of them did not understand English. Some managed to reach the second-class deck, but then got lost.

Two girls climbed up an emergency ladder and found themselves in the first-class restaurant. They stared astonished, at all the tables set with beautiful silver for breakfast the next day!

One group of third-class passengers managed to reach a door leading to the first class. But a member of the crew was standing there on guard. He took one look at their angry faces, shut the door, turned the key and ran. The passengers had to break down the door to get through.

It was hard for anyone now to walk more than a few yards without falling or slipping. For the bow of the *Titanic* was going down...down into the sea. A few passengers rushed off to get the belongings they had left behind. But many of them found

their cabins deep in water.

Most of the boats were away by 1 : 30 a. m. Many of them still had room for more people. One had only twelve on board.

To those left on the *Titanic*, watching the small boats pulling away from the ship, it was like a scene from a film. However, the freezing cold air and the lifebelts around their middles soon reminded them that this was all really happening.

Still the band played on. The pleasant sound of the music floated across the water to the passengers who had escaped in the small boats. On the *Titanic* all the lights were still on. Someone said it looked like a huge birthday cake.

One of the tragedies of that night was the fact that only ten miles away there was another ship, the *Californian*. Since 10 : 30 p. m. she had been unable to move forward or backward because of the dangerous ice all around.

The crew could see the lights of the *Titanic* in the distance. But they did not know the name of the ship, nor anything of the disaster which had happened. For the radio was switched off at 11 : 30 p. m. when the man on duty had gone off to bed. There was no one to take over from him. This practice — which would never be allowed today — was quite normal in those days. So no one on board the *Californian* heard the cries for help sent out from the radio room on the *Titanic*.

As the lights sank lower and lower on the horizon, it seemed to those on the *Californian* that the mystery ship was just steaming away. They saw the rockets, but they still did not understand what was happening. They thought there was a party on board!

Then, shortly after two o'clock in the morning, as the crew of the *Californian* slept in their beds, Captain Smith gave his final order to the hundreds remaining on the *Titanic*: 'Abandon

ship, every man for himself.'

The band was still playing but even they were now wearing lifebelts. And the music had changed. Now it was a slow sad piece called 'Autumn'. People stood in silence, staring at the water. They had to decide soon whether to jump or not. It did not take them long. The bow of the ship was completely under water and the stern was rising further and further out of the sea.

The deck became so steep that it was impossible to stand. Some people gave up and just fell down the slope towards the water at the other end of the ship. Others seized hold of anything that was fixed to the deck. They wanted to put off the moment when they too would find themselves fighting for life in the ice-cold Atlantic.

A crowd of third-class passengers had now worked their way up to the boat deck. But of course there were no boats left for them.

No one knew what happened to Captain Smith. He had been calling on everyone to 'be British'. Then, when the last boat had gone, he was seen walking back to the bridge. Some thought he stayed on the *Titanic* to go down with his ship. Others later said they had seen him in the water, struggling to save a child before disappearing beneath the waves for ever. There was even one story that he had shot himself. But no one could prove how he met his end.

Thomas Andrews was last seen standing in the first-class smoking room, with his lifebelt lying on a table nearby. When a steward asked him if he was going to leave, he gave no reply.

The stern of the ship rose higher in the air. It was as if some monster of the sea was lifting it up. Passengers and crew jumped into the water, bottles, glasses, chairs, tables, buckets, eggs,

suitcases and other belongings were flying everywhere.

Well away from the *Titanic*, the seven hundred or so men, women, and children in the lifeboats stared at the ship. Only a few hours before she was carrying them peacefully along on the voyage to America. Now this beautiful ship was standing on one end, preparing for the final dive to the bottom of the sea.

For some it was too painful to watch. They turned away and put their hands over their faces. But they could not shut out the cries of those drowning in the freezing water.

'She's gone, that's the last of her,' sighed one of the passengers.

Now everyone looked. All they could see was the horizon. But about three hundred yards away the water seemed angry. It took a few more seconds for the waves to become still. But then the sea was left once more quite smooth and undisturbed.

A total of 1502 passengers and crew drowned that night, most of them men. But 103 women and 53 children suffered the same fate.

However, it was the people in the third class who suffered the most. Out of 454 men, only 55 were saved. Out of 179 women only 98 were saved. And out of 76 children only 23 were saved. In the first class, 120 people drowned. Only five of those were women.

Not all of them went down with the ship. Many of the swimmers, struggling to reach the lifeboats, gave up in the ice-cold water. Very few—in fact, only thirteen—were picked up by the boats.

The eight members of the band played until the water was over their feet. They all drowned, after jumping into the sea.

One of those rescued was Mr Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line, the owners of the *Titanic*. Like Andrews, he

had joined the *Titanic* on its first voyage to see how well she sailed!

Those people still alive after one of the world's worst disasters at sea, sat silently in the boats. Many had so few clothes on that they were turning blue with cold. The various boats were spread out over the sea. When the morning light came to chase away the darkness, there were icebergs all around them.

The first ship to come to their rescue was the *Carpathia*. She had steamed at top speed (and at great risk to the crew) through the ice, ever since receiving the call for help. The ship was nearly sixty miles away, and it took her about four hours to reach the scene of the disaster.

The Captain of the *Carpathia* started to pick up the people in the boats at 4 a. m. It was not until over an hour later that the *Californian* arrived. The crew had only understood the mystery of the disappearing ship when they turned on the radio again in the morning.

'A ship has sunk.' said the radio man to the Captain. And then, as more news came through, he shouted: 'It's the *Titanic*! The *Titanic* has been hit by an iceberg!'

All over the world, news of the sinking of the *Titanic* was received with astonishment. The families of the passengers collected at the offices of the White Star Line in London and New York. At first they were told that all the passengers were rescued. It took some time for the terrible truth of the tragedy to come through.

Never again would anyone believe that a ship like the *Titanic* could not become a victim of the sea.

I. Vocabulary

- tearing [ˈteəriŋ] *adj.* pulling something apart 撕裂的
scratch [skrætʃ] *v.* cut or mark something with a rough or sharp thing 抓破
boiler [ˈbɔɪlə] *n.* big, metal container for heating water, etc. 锅炉
cabin [ˈkæbɪn] *n.* room on a ship 船舱
deck [dek] *n.* floor of a ship 甲板
luxury [ˈlʌksəri] *n.* something pleasant that you do not really need 奢侈品
watertight [ˈwɔ:tətaɪt] *adj.* through which no water can go 不漏水的
compartment [kəmˈpɑ:tmənt] *n.* one of the parts into which an enclosed space is divided, 分隔层
collision [kəˈlɪʒn] *n.* meeting and striking violently 相撞
captain [ˈkæptɪn] *n.* chief person on a ship 船长
iceberg [ˈaɪsbɜ:g] *n.* very big piece of ice that floats in the sea 冰山
bow [bau] *n.* the forward part of a ship 船头
swing [swɪŋ] *v.* hang and move from side to side or backwards and forwards through the air 摇摆
bridge [brɪdʒ] *n.* the raised part of a ship on which the captain and other officers stand when on duty 驾驶台
tragedy [ˈtrædʒədi] *n.* very sad thing that happens 悲惨事件
disaster [dɪˈzɑ:stə] *n.* very bad happening 灾难
mystery [ˈmɪstəri] *n.* strange happening or person that you cannot understand or explain 神秘的
abandon [əˈbændən] *v.* leave someone or something 抛弃
dive [daɪv] *v.* jump into water, with your hands and arms first 跳水
horizon [həˈraɪzn] *n.* line where the earth or sea seems to meet the sky 地平线
rescue [ˈreskju:] *v.* save someone or something from danger 救援
victim [ˈvɪktɪm] *n.* someone who suffers in an attack, murder, disaster, etc. 遇难者

I. Phrases and Expressions

at the bottom of: 在底部 There is sediment (沉淀) at the bottom of the bottle.

on board: on a ship 在船上 How many passengers are on board?

remind... of...: make you think of someone or something; 使...想起...

These photographs remind me of our holiday.

divide into: to separate into parts 分成; Divide this line into 20 equal parts.

set off; set out: start a journey, etc. 出发, 动身; Mr. Carter set out for London at 11 o'clock.

stop sb from doing sth: not allow someone to do sth. 阻止 He stopped the child from playing near the river.

be in danger: 处在危险中 You will be in danger if you walk on a railway line.

feel (know) in one's bones: to believe strongly though without proof 确信;

I am going to succeed in the examination! I can feel it in my bones.

worry about: to be anxious, esp. over a period of time 担心; Worrying about your health can make you ill.

put out 发出; The police have put out a general call to all public places.

prevent sb from doing sth: stop someone from doing something 阻止; She closed the gate to prevent the dog from going out of the garden.

keep someone or something from: stop someone or something from doing something 阻止; Keep your little brother from playing on the road.

be in trouble: have problems 处于困难中 I'll be in trouble if I get home late.

on guard: ready for attack 戒备着; There are soldiers on guard at the gate to prevent anyone getting in or out.

break down: to destroy, 打坏; The police broke the door down.

seize or get or take hold of: catch something 抓住; The drowning man seized hold of a straw.

put off: not do something until a late time; 推迟 I'm not well today, so I'll put off my visit until tomorrow.

III. Reading Comprehension

Read the text and do the following exercises. You are to choose the one best answer to each question from the four choices given.

1. Who were most likely in the greatest danger when the *Titanic* had been hit by the knife-sharp ice hidden beneath the water?

A. The first class passengers