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"I am John Harper's last convert"

A story from the Titanic's sinking not commonly reported



Born in Scotland on May 29, 1872, John Harper became a Christian when he was thirteen. His life was challenged by adversity and punctuated by tragedy. Throughout it all faith was his anchor. As a toddler he fell into a well nearly drowning. By the time he was seventeen he was preaching and trained at the Baptist Pioneer Mission in London. In his mid twenties he was swept out to sea and six years later he was stranded in the middle of the Mediterranean on a leaky ship. By 1896 he established the Paisley Road Baptist Church that began with 25 members. Happily married he soon became a widower raising his daughter Nina after his wife died. A little over a decade later his small parsonage had grown to 500 members. An evangelist John possessed a deep passion for souls. As a pastor he would often spend the whole night pacing up and down the aisle of his house of worship praying for church members by name. He professed the simplest of doctrines saying that it was "the Word of God."

The early spring of 1912 found the Scottish pastor looking forward to the voyage across the Atlantic to the Moody Memorial Church. For £33 he booked his passage and excitedly began to pack. His six-year-old daughter Nina would be accompanying him as well as his sister Jessie Wills Leitch who would tend to Nina as her nanny. John Harper and his small family boarded the Titanic as 2nd Class passengers at Southampton on Wednesday 10th April 1912, destination: Chicago Illinois United States.

The Titanic was no run of the mill ship. It was the epitome of luxury and power advertised as "a floating hotel, a small town at sea." John Harper and his family waved fondly at thousands who gathered to watch it set sail. Later on as the orchestra played John Harper stood on the deck in the afterglow of the sunset watching the red western sky, he said, It will be beautiful in the morning. At 11:40 p.m. a giant iceberg scraped the starboard side of the world's biggest man-made moveable object. The deck was showered with ice, as it buckled the sides ripping open six watertight compartments. The sea poured in and the stern of the huge ship began to reel upwards. A few minutes later a deep rumble could be heard echoing from the holds of majestic queen of the White Star fleet.

Jessie had been awakened by John. Grabbing the sleeping Nina from her berth she took her on deck clad only in her little night gown, wrapped in a blanket and then again in Jessie's cloak. The Carpathia located sixty miles away rescued both girls who had made it safely to the life boats. As Jessie stood shivering in the cold night air a woman insisted on throwing a heavy ulster over her. They would spend the night huddled in the corner of the ship's library. Nina and Jessie would not learn the fate of John until they arrived in New York. Harper scrambled up the deck calling, "Women, children and unsaved into the lifeboats!" Someone told him there was an explosion but in reality the ship was breaking in half. People began jumping off the decks and into the dark ocean below. While other people were trying to buy their way onto the lifeboats John Harper flung himself into the 28-degree water. Over 1500 people jumped or fell into the icy water and as hypothermia quickly set in many died of exposure. Only six of the 1,500 people in the water were eventually rescued, one by one each gradually drowned or froze to death.

Harper gave up his lifejacket to one man and was seen swimming frantically from one passenger to another offering the salvation of Christ. Survivors report that he then began witnessing to anyone who would listen. John Harper clung to a board for nearly an hour listening to the feeble cries as he called out trying to comfort the frightened.

The Titanic disappeared three hours later into the inky, bitter waters of the North Atlantic. Even after the great ship was at the bottom of the sea, the newspapers announced that the Titanic was "absolutely unsinkable." The headline in New York Evening Sun the following afternoon read: "All Saved From Titanic After Collision."



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When news of the disaster exploded around the world. The unsinkable Titanic had sunk, a wail of sorrow swept through the civilized world at the thought of over a thousand lives being lost. Survivor Eva Hart, about the same age as Nina at the time said in an interview before her death in 1996, "The wreck of the Titanic is a monument to man's arrogance."

A message soon arrived at John Harper's church saying, "Miss Leitch and Nana (sic) arrived well. Lost everything. When they were taken to the upper decks the women and children did not know it meant separation. No opportunity for farewells. We have no hopes Mr. Harper is rescued." Sometime perhaps later that month Jessie Leitch wrote a brief account for the grieving parishioners of the church where John Harper was heading. It was found between two pages in the minute book for the executive committee of the Moody Memorial Church, near the minutes for April 17, 1912:

About midnight Mr. Harper came to our stateroom and told us that the vessel had struck an iceberg. While I was dressing he went to learn further particulars, and returned to say that the order had been given to put on the life belts. We did so, and, picking up Nana (sic) in his arms, he took her up to the deck. There the women were ordered to the upper deck. I had to climb a vertical iron ladder, and Mr. Harper brought Nana (sic) after me up to the ladder, and the men at the top lifted her up to me again.

There was no opportunity for farewell, and, in fact, even then we did not realize the danger, as we were assured again and again that the vessel could not sink, that the Olympic would be alongside at any minute, and that the women and children were to be put into the boats first and the men to follow, and that there were boats sufficient for all. Our boat was well manned- it was the eleventh to leave the vessel.

After about half an hour the Titanic went down. We were about a mile away, but even then I hope and expected that Mr. Harper was in one of the other boats, many of which reached the Carpathia before ours did. How eagerly I looked for his face on the deck as we approached that vessel, but when all the boatloads had come aboard I feared the worst.

The last day we spent on the Titanic was Sunday. Mr. Harper asked me to read the chapter at our morning family prayers, and later we went to the Sunday morning services. The day was quietly and pleasantly spent, and when Nana (sic) and I went to look for Mr. Harper at about 6 o'clock to go to dinner I found him earnestly talking to a young Englishman whom he was seeking to lead to Christ. That evening before we retired we went on deck, and there was still a glint of red in the west. I remember Mr. Harper saying, "It will be beautiful in the morning." We then went down to the staterooms. He read from the Bible and prayed, and so he left us. I caught hold of something and clung to it for dear life, the wail of the perishing all around was ringing in my ears. (Hears Ship Strike Iceberg)

Of the half dozen survivors that were rescued from the icy waters that night, one of them was a young man Harper had spoken to while they floated among the debris. Historian Elesha Coffman tells about John Harper's last convert:

Four years later a Scotchman rose in a meeting in Hamilton, Canada, and said, "I am a survivor of the Titanic. When I was drifting alone on a spar that awful night, the tide brought Mr. John Harper, of Glasgow, also on a piece of wreck near me. 'Man,' he said, 'are you saved?' 'No,' I said. 'I am not.' He replied, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.'

The waves bore him away; but, strange to say brought him back a little later, and he said, 'Are you saved now?' 'No,' I said, 'I cannot honestly say that I am.' He said again, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,' and shortly after he went down; and there, alone in the night, and with two miles of water under me, I believed. I am John Harper's last convert. (Sacrifice at Sea)

When the Titanic sank John Harper was 39 years old. He had preached numerous times in Ulster, especially East Belfast not far from the Harland & Wolff shipyards where the Titanic was built. There were many heroes that fateful night aboard the Titanic and one was Pastor John Harper. In 1922 the Harper Memorial Baptist



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Church in Glasgow, Scotland was renamed for the evangelist. John Harper's body was never recovered.

- Originally published by Colin Maxwell