3. The Woman Who Survived Three Ship Disasters

Three encounters with maritime disaster would be enough to make most people abandon a career at sea. Violet Jessop did the opposite. She survived a collision aboard the Olympic, escaped the sinking of the Titanic and later lived through the loss of the Britannic. Behind this remarkable sequence was a working woman whose job brought her into direct contact with passengers, emergency procedures and the risks of early twentieth-century ocean travel.

Born in Argentina in 1887 to Irish parents, Jessop moved to England with her family while still young. When her mother became unwell, Violet helped support the household by becoming a stewardess. The work involved looking after passengers' needs on long voyages, often in demanding conditions. A stewardess did not experience the ship as a holidaymaker would: she was paid to work while other people travelled. This helps explain why Jessop found herself aboard several vessels belonging to the same company. She eventually joined the White Star Line, operator of three closely related ocean liners: the Olympic, the Titanic and the Britannic.

The first disaster occurred on 20 September 1911. Jessop was serving on the Olympic when the huge liner collided with HMS Hawke, a British naval vessel, near the Isle of Wight. The collision tore holes in the Olympic's side and caused serious damage, but the ship stayed afloat and returned to Southampton. There were no deaths. The crew and passengers had been fortunate, but the damage was real. Repair work delayed the ship's normal schedule. The Olympic was repaired and continued its career; describing this incident as a shipwreck would be misleading.

In April 1912, Jessop transferred to the Titanic for the ship's much-publicised maiden voyage from Southampton to New York. Late on 14 April, the Titanic struck an iceberg. As water entered the ship, passengers and crew faced a desperate evacuation. There were lifeboat places for far fewer people than were on board, and some boats left without being filled. The Titanic sank in the early hours of 15 April, and roughly 1,500 people died.

Jessop escaped in lifeboat 16. In her later memoirs, she recalled that an officer instructed her to board and handed her a baby to care for. The rescue ship Carpathia collected survivors from the lifeboats. Jessop said that a woman took the baby from her arms aboard the Carpathia. This is her personal recollection, not proof that every detail of the baby's identity is known.

The third emergency came during the First World War. The Britannic, built as the Titanic's sister ship, had been converted into a hospital ship. Jessop served on board in a nursing role. On 21 November 1916, the Britannic struck a mine near the Greek island of Kea in the Aegean Sea. The ship flooded rapidly and sank in approximately 55 minutes.

The evacuation brought another deadly danger. Some lifeboats were launched while the Britannic's propellers were still turning, and boats were drawn towards them. Jessop jumped into the sea to escape. She struck her head but survived and was rescued. Thirty people died in the sinking, while more than a thousand survived.

Remarkably, Jessop eventually returned to passenger service and continued working at sea until 1950. She died in 1971. Jessop later wrote about her experiences, giving readers a view from behind the scenes rather than from the most expensive passenger cabins. Her account is important, but personal memories and confirmed historical facts are not always identical. She did not survive three sinkings: the Olympic's collision was the incident in which the ship remained afloat. Nevertheless, her experiences connect three famous vessels and remind us that maritime history is also the history of the people whose livelihoods depended on sailing.