

A Narrow Escape

This story is taken from the book, *A Man Named Alma*, by Conway B. Sonne, (Horizon Publishers and Distributors, Incorporated, copyright 1988, p. 83).

In addition to booking passages and arranging charters, Alma had to make certain that missionaries and emigrants complied with custom and immigration regulations. For example, emigrants must have at least thirty American dollars in their possession, be free of any contagious diseases, declare all property, and observe luggage limitations. Each child under sixteen must be accompanied by at least one parent, and adults must not take any child not their own unless proper adoption papers are presented. There were also restrictions on emigrants over sixty years of age.

As his mission was drawing to a close, Alma and the missionaries who would be released at the same time planned their voyage to America. There had been much publicity about a huge White Star steamship, the biggest ever built. She was appropriately named the Titanic. There had never been a ship like her. She was registered at 48,328 gross tons and was 882.5 feet long and 92.5 feet wide. From her keel to the top of her four masts she measured 175 feet and from the waterline to boat deck 80.5 feet. She was, in fact, eleven stories high and almost three football fields in length. Water tight in construction with a double bottom and sixteen watertight compartments, unfortunately built too low, she was hailed as “unsinkable.” She was the pride of Harland & Wolff shipyards In Belfast, The Titanic was about to make her maiden voyage.

It was a chance in a lifetime to be a part of this first trip of the awesome leviathan, and Alma booked passage for the five missionaries to sail on 12 April 1912. Then a strange thing happened. Fred Dahle, the elder whom Alma had persuaded to serve a mission, sent a wire a day or two before their scheduled departure stating that he had been delayed and could not arrive by the 12th. He suggested that the other elders go on without him. Alma, for some inexplicable reason, cancelled their bookings on the Titanic and rebooked them on the Mauretania leaving a day later, “I did this on my own responsibility,” he later said, “and the others in the group manifested a little resentment because they were not sailing on the Titanic.”

This quirk of fate, if one wishes to call it that, haunted Alma for years. He attributed it to Fred Dahle’s acceptance of his mission call, reluctant though it was. Although he had little of Fred in

the intervening two years, he knew that Fred had been a successful and dedicated missionary. His friendship with Fred made the prospect of leaving him to travel alone unthinkable, and so the Mauretania sailed on 13 April with these five elders aboard: Alma Sonne, George B. Chambers, Willard Richards, John R. Sayer, and Fred A. Dahle.

Since 1907 the Cunard liner Mauretania had ruled the Atlantic and was capable of a speed of twenty-six knots. Not as large as the Titanic, she nevertheless was 30,696 tons, 762 feet long, and 88 feet wide with four large funnels. She had once made the eastward crossing in a record four days, 17 hours, and 21 minutes. This great ship plied the ocean for twenty-eight years before being broken up, ending the career of one of the most famous ocean liners.

After several days the purser told Alma in confidence that the Titanic had struck an iceberg and sunk. It is one of the most mysterious and incredible tragedies at sea. It happened about 1,600 miles northeast of New York City on a cold, clear, and moonless night 15 April 1912. The ship was traveling at 22.5 knots and after impact sank in less than three hours at 2:20 a.m. There were only 705 survivors: 1,517 passengers and crew were lost. The elders were stunned by the news and pondered the role of Providence in their narrow escape. As Alma and Fred walked up on the deck, they gazed into the dark waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Alma remembered Fred's letter after reaching England, when he wrote: "Thank God, you were on the map when I received the call to come on the mission." Alma turned to Fred and repeated almost the same words to him, "Thank God, Fred, you were on the map when I received my mission call."

"My folks thought I was on the Titanic when she sank," Alma later said, "for I had explained to them that I would return on the largest and fastest steamer afloat. My mother and sweetheart were very worried, but the moment I landed in the New York harbor and sent them a telegram. They were very much relieved."