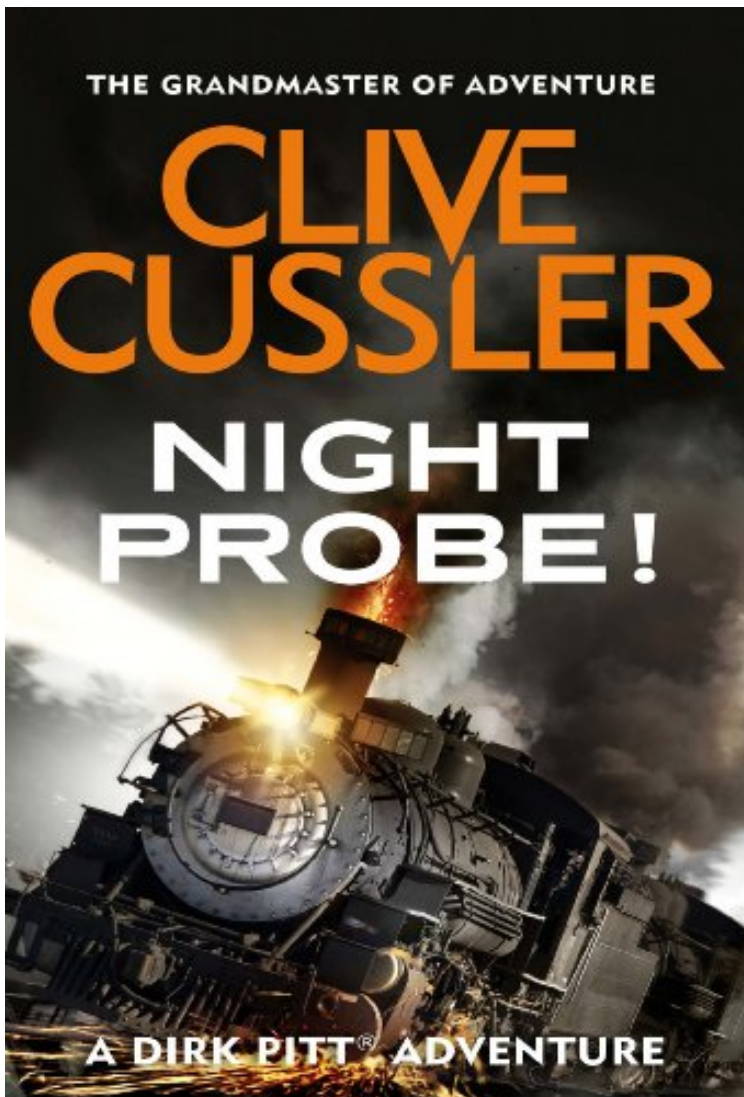


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# Night Probe!



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMay 1914. Two diplomats hurry home by sea and rail, each carrying a document of world-changing importance. Then the liner Empress of India is sunk in a collision, and the Manhattan-Line express plunges from a bridge - both dragging their VIP passengers to watery oblivion. Tragic coincidence or conspiracy?In the energy-starved, fear-torn 1980s, Dirk Pitt discovers that those long-lost papers could destroy whole nations, throwing him into his biggest challenge yet. Racing against hired killers, he launches his revolutionary deep-sea search craft and faces the horrors of the sea bed to hunt for the documents. 'Night Probe' has begun . . .ExtraitMAY 1914UPSTATE NEW YORK1Streaks of lightning signaled a threatening thunderstorm as the Manhattan Limited hurtled over the ballasted rails piercing the New York countryside. Coal smoke burst from the locomotives stack in a drumstick plume that dusted the stars stippling the night sky. Inside the cab, the engineer slipped a silver Waltham watch from the pocket of his coveralls, sprung the

lid and studied the face in the glow from the firebox. It was not the approaching storm that worried him, but the relentless crawl of time that sought to rob him of his precious schedule. Gazing out the right side of the cab, he watched the creosote ties sweep under the eight huge driving wheels of the 2-8-0 Consolidation-type locomotive. Like the captain of a ship who lived with his command, he had been at the same throttle for three years. He was proud of Gallopin Lena, as he affectionately called the 236,000 pounds of iron and steel.

Built by Alcos Schenectady Works in 1911, she was burnished in gloss black with a red stripe and her number 88 neatly hand-painted in gold. He listened to the steel wheels pounding out a moving rhythm against the rail joints, felt the momentum of the locomotive and the seven cars that followed. Then he pulled the throttle up another notch. In the seventy-foot private Pullman that brought up the rear, Richard Essex sat at a desk in the vestibuled library. Too tired to sleep and bored with the tedium of the trip, he composed a letter to his wife to pass the time. He described the ornate interior of the car, the elaborately carved Circassian walnut, the handsome brass electrical lamps, the red velvet revolving chairs and the potted palms. He even mentioned the beveled mirrors and ceramic tile floors in the lavatories of the four spacious sleeping compartments. Behind him in a richly paneled observation parlor, five army guards in civilian dress played cards, the smoke from their cigars drifting in a blue cloud toward the brocade ceiling, their rifles laid casually about the furniture. Occasionally a player would lean over one of the brass spittoons dotting the Persian carpet. It was perhaps the highest level of luxury any of them had ever enjoyed, Essex speculated. The palatial transportation must have cost the government nearly seventy-five dollars a day, and all for the movement of a scrap of paper. He sighed and finished his letter. Then he sealed it in an envelope, which he stuffed inside his breast pocket. Sleep still evaded him, so he sat and stared through the arched bay windows at the darkened landscape, listening for the wail of the engines whistle just before a village depot or country crossing flashed past. Finally he stood up, stretched and walked to the elegant dining room, where he sat down at a mahogany table covered by a snowy cloth enhanced by crystal glasses and silver service. A glance at his watch told him it was a few minutes before two in the morning. What is your pleasure, Mr. Essex? A black waiter had appeared as if by magic. Essex looked up and smiled. I know its quite late, but I wonder if I might get a light snack. Happy to oblige, sir. What would you like to order? Something that will help me close my eyes. The waiter flashed a toothy grin. May I suggest a small bottle of Pommard burgundy and a nice hot bowl of clam bouillon. That will be fine, thank you. Later, as he sipped his wine, Essex couldnt help wondering if Harvey Shields was also finding sleep so elusive. 2Harvey Shields was experiencing a nightmare. His mind refused to accept any other explanation. The shriek of steel and the cries of agony and terror beyond the darkness that smothered him were too hellish for reality. He struggled to retreat from the devilish scene and drift back into a peaceful sleep, but then the pain began gnawing at his senses and he realized it was no dream. Somewhere below he could hear the rush of water as though it was surging through a tunnel, followed by a gust of wind that squeezed the breath from his lungs. He tried to open his eyes, but the lids felt glued shut. He was not aware that his head and face were coated with blood. His body was gripped in an immovable fetal position against cold, unyielding metal. An acrid electrical smell stung his nostrils and combined with the increasing pain to prod him onto a higher plateau of consciousness. He tried to move his arms and legs, but they refused to respond. A strange silence settled around him, broken only by the murmur of lapping water. He made another attempt at breaking clear of the unseen vise that clutched him. He took a great breath and then exerted every muscle in his limbs. Suddenly an arm tore free and he gasped as a jagged piece of metal sliced his forearm. The agony swept him to complete awareness. He wiped the congealing wetness from his eyes and gazed about what had once been his stateroom aboard the Canadian luxury liner bound for England. The large mahogany dresser was gone, as was the writing desk and the nightstand. Where the deck and starboard bulkhead should have been was a massive cavity, and across the twisted edge there was only the fog-shrouded darkness and the black water of the St. Lawrence River. It was as if he was looking into a bottomless void. Then his eyes caught and focused on a soft reflection of white and he knew he was not alone. Almost within touching distance a young girl from the next stateroom was buried in the debris with only her head and one pale shoulder protruding from the broken ceiling. Her hair was golden and rained in loose strands nearly three feet long. Her head was twisted at a grotesque angle and blood seeped from her lips, streaming down her face and slowly dyeing her cascading hair crimson. Shields initial shock receded and a spreading sickness took its place. Until now the specter of death had not crossed his mind, but in the lifeless corpse of the girl he could read his own diminishing future. Then a sudden thought burst inside him. In despair his eyes vainly probed the debris for the hand case he had never let out of his sight. It was gone, swallowed up in the wreckage. Sweat erupted from his every pore as he

fought to extricate his torso from its prison. The effort was fruitless, there was no feeling below his chest and he knew with fearful certainty that his back was crushed. Around him the great liner was in its death throes, rapidly listing and settling into the cold water that would forever be its grave. Passengers, some in evening dress, most in sleeping clothes, were milling about the slanting decks trying to climb into the few lifeboats that were launched or leaping into the cold river, clutching anything that would float. Only minutes remained before the ship would take her final plunge a scant two miles from shore. Martha? Shields stiffened and turned his head toward the faint cry that sounded from beyond the demolished partition separating him from the inside corridor. He listened intently, and then it came again. Martha? In here, Shields shouted. Please help me. There was no reply, but he heard sounds of movement through the pile of rubble. Soon a fallen piece of the ceiling was pushed aside and a face with a gray beard poked through. My Martha, have you seen my Martha? The intruder was in a state of shock and his words came hollow and without inflection. His forehead was badly lacerated and his eyes darted about frantically. A young girl with long blond hair? Yes, yes, my daughter. Shields motioned toward the body of the girl. I'm afraid she's gone. The bearded man feverishly forced a larger opening and crawled through. He approached the girl, his face numb with incomprehension, and lifted the bloodstained head, smoothing back the hair. For several moments he did not utter a sound. She did not suffer, Shields offered gently. The stranger did not reply. I'm sorry, Shields murmured. He could feel the ship listing sharply to starboard. The water was rising faster from below and there was little time left. He had to penetrate the father's grief and somehow persuade him to rescue the hand case. Do you know what happened? he began. Collision, the answer came vaguely. I was on deck. Another ship came out of the fog. Buried her bow in our side. The father paused, took out a handkerchief and dabbed the blood from the dead girl's face. Martha begged me to take her to England. Her mother was reluctant, but I gave in. Oh God, if only I'd known . . . His voice trailed off. There is nothing you can do, Shields said. You must save yourself. The father turned slowly and looked at him with unseeing eyes. I killed her, he whispered hoarsely. Shields was not getting through. Anger smoldered within him and ignited in a flame of desperation. Listen! he cried. Lost in the wreckage is a travel case with a document that must reach the Foreign Office in London! He was shouting now. Please find it! The water swirled in small eddies a few feet away. The flood that would engulf them was only seconds away. The rising tide was stained with the slime of oil and coal dust while the night air outside was torn by the screams of a thousand dying souls. Please listen to me while there is still time, Shields begged. Your daughter is dead. He was beating at the restricting steel with clenched fists, uncaring of the pain as his skin shredded away. Leave before it's too late. Find my travel case and take it with you. Give it to the captain, he'll know what to do. The father's mouth trembled open. I cannot leave Martha alone . . . she fears the dark . . . He muttered as though he were speaking at an altar. It was the deathblow. There was no moving the grief-stunned father as his mind entered delirium. He bent over his daughter and kissed her on the forehead. Then he dissolved into a fit of uncontrolled sobbing. Strangely, the fury of frustration fell away from Shields. With the acceptance of failure and death, fear and terror no longer held meaning. In the few short moments left he slipped beyond the boundaries of reality and saw things with abnormal clarity. There came an explosion deep in the bowels of the ship as her boilers burst. She rolled over on her starboard side and slid stern first onto the waiting riverbed. From the moment of the collision in the darkness of early morning until she vanished from view of the mass of humanity struggling to stay afloat in the icy water, less than fifteen minutes had elapsed. The time was 2:10 a.m. Shields did not try to fight it, to hold his breath staving off the inevitable for a few more seconds. He opened his mouth and gulped in the foul-tasting water, gagging as it poured down his throat. Into the airless tomb he sank. The choking and the suffering passed quickly, and his conscious mind blinked out. And then there was nothing, nothing at all.

3A night bred in hell, thought Sam Harding, ticket agent for the New York Quebec Northern Railroad, as he stood on the platform of his station and watched the poplar trees bordering the track lean horizontal under the battering gusts of a violent windstorm. He was experiencing the end of a heat wave that had baked the New England states; the hottest May since 1880, proclaimed Wacketshires weekly newspaper in red-letter Bodoni typeface. Lightning hurtled through the predawn sky in jagged patterns, accompanied by a twenty-four-degree drop in temperature in one hour. Harding caught himself shivering at the sudden change as the breeze whipped at his cotton shirt, dampened by sweat from the oppressive humidity. Down on the river he could see lights from a string of barges as they nosed their way against the downstream current. One by one their dim yellow glows blinked off and then on again as the barges passed under the foundation piers of the great bridge. *Revue de presse* Praise for Night Probe! and the Dirk Pitt novels A rich tale . . . an absorbing, carefully told mystery with plenty of surprises. Los Angeles

Times Dirk Pitt is a combination James Bond and Jacques Cousteau. New York Daily News