

## **Part I: GEORGIANS ON THE TITANIC**

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The most famous maritime disaster in history was the sinking of the Titanic. On its maiden voyage the "unsinkable" ocean liner collided with an iceberg and then, within three hours, plunged to the bottom of the North Atlantic Ocean in the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, with the loss of over 1,500 lives. The sinking of the Titanic was not, however, the worst disaster in maritime history. The Dona Paz, a Philippine ferryboat, collided with an oil tanker on Dec. 20, 1978, with an estimated loss of between 2,000 and 3,000 lives. The worst maritime disaster of all time occurred during World War II. On Jan. 30, 1945 the Wilhelm Gustloff, a German passenger liner overflowing with German civilians fleeing the advancing Red Army, was torpedoed by a Russian submarine in the Baltic Ocean. Over 8,000 persons died.

Hardly anyone remembers the Dona Paz or the Wilhelm Gustloff, but almost everyone knows about the Titanic. However, few know that four Georgians--three men and a woman--were aboard the doomed Titanic, and that the three men died in the catastrophe. The oldest of the men was a 67-year old philanthropist who many years earlier had lived in Georgia for almost ten years. The second man was a 46-year old army major who was a confidential advisor to and close personal friend of two presidents. The third man, who had celebrated his 37th birthday in a fashionable London restaurant only six days earlier, was a noted writer who specialized in detective stories. The only Georgian to survive was the 36-year old wife of the detective story writer. Isn't it therefore time to tell the story of Isidor Straus, Archibald Butt, and Jacques and May Futrelle--the four Georgians on the Titanic?

Isidor Straus was born in Rhenish Bavaria in 1845. At the time of his death he had for many years been a resident of New York City. Nonetheless, he may properly be regarded also as a Georgian, or at least an ex-Georgian, since he lived here for nearly a decade and received his formal education here. From 1854, the year he immigrated to the United States, until 1863, Straus lived in Talbotton, in Talbot County, Georgia, where he was educated at the Collingsworth Institute, a tiny private, religious school for boys. Straus, his parents, his sister, and his two younger brothers lived in a log house. Nine months of the year Straus and his brothers went barefooted, for reasons, it is said, of comfort and economy. In 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, Straus and his family moved to Columbus, in Muscogee County, where the 18-year old Isidor lived for a short time before leaving that same year for Europe with

another Georgian on a private venture to purchase a blockade-running steamboat.

The venture failed, and young Straus spent the next two years working in Liverpool and traveling around Europe, learning how to run a business and how to do bookkeeping. When the Civil War ended in 1865, Straus joined his family in New York City and with his father and brothers opened a wholesale crockery business. In 1874 the Strauses opened silverware, glass, and china departments at Macy's Department Store, and in 1888 they purchased a controlling interest in Macy's. From 1888 until 1912 he was one of the partners who owned Macy's. By the time of his death, Isidor Straus had become a very wealthy man and one of the world's best-known philanthropists, devoting his time to charitable and humanitarian causes.

The tale of how Isidor Straus and his wife of many years, Ida, bravely faced death has been told many times before, and has become part of the legend of the Titanic. After the ship struck the iceberg, Straus and Ida, along with Ida's maid, approached a lifeboat. The maid got into the lifeboat; Mr. Straus refused to enter the lifeboat until all the women and children were safe; and Mrs. Straus refused to enter the boat without her husband. Mrs. Straus did remove her expensive fur coat and place it around the shoulders of her maid, saying: "Keep warm. I won't be needing it." When a ship's officer urged her to enter the lifeboat, Mrs. Straus, who wore her hair the old-fashioned up-swept way, declined, saying: "No, we are too old; we will die together. I will not leave my husband." To her husband she said: "We have been living together for many years. Where you go, I go." When the Strauses were last seen they were standing on the deck of the ship, and Mrs. Straus was waving her handkerchief in farewell to the persons departing in a lifeboat.

The body of Isidor Straus, unlike the bodies of Archie Butt and Jacques Futrelle, was recovered from the sea. The body of Ida Straus was never recovered. Today there is a memorial fountain dedicated to Isidor and Ida Straus. Erected with private donations, the fountain is located at Broadway and West 106th Street in New York City.

## **Part II: ON THE TITANIC: ARCHIE BUTT**

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In 1912 Archibald Willingham Butt--called "Archie" by all who knew him--was, according to one biographer, "one of the best-known men in American public life." Born in Augusta in Richmond County, Georgia in 1865, Archie graduated from the University of the South in 1888, worked as a journalist with various newspapers in the 1890's, including The Macon Telegraph, and in 1898 joined the army at the outset of the Spanish-American War. After a decade of distinguished military service, Archie became military aide to President Theodore Roosevelt in April 1908. After serving Roosevelt for a year, Archie was for the next three years military aide to President William Howard Taft.

After Archie's death three volumes of his letters were published. Written, according to another biographer, in a "polished literary style" and filled with "keen observations," the letters provide intimate details about the innermost workings of the Roosevelt and Taft White Houses. All definitive biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft necessarily rely on information in Archie's letters. It is apparent from those letters that Butt was a great favorite of and an intimate advisor to both Roosevelt and Taft. Archie arranged the president's appointments, introduced dignitaries to the president, and was the chief of protocol. Usually in a full dress military uniform on official occasions, Archie would attend dinners and social functions with the president; he would go walking and horseback riding with the president; he would play tennis, golf or cards with the president; and he accompanied the president on all travels and official visits, usually riding in the same automobile or train car as the president. Archie's friends used to say that "what he didn't know about White House affairs was hardly worth knowing."

The tall, handsome, athletic Archie, who never married, seems to have been the gentleman's gentleman, a paragon of wisdom, discretion, and moderation. Theodore Roosevelt described Archie as "an exceptionally tactful and diplomatic aide-de camp" and "an exceptionally able and efficient officer." After Archie's death, Taft, his tears flowing freely, gave a speech in which he heaped praise on his dead aide, and said: "I can't go anywhere without expecting to see his smiling face or to hear his cheerful voice in greeting.... Archie Butt's character was single, simple, straightforward, and incapable of intrigue.... I never knew a man who had so much self-abnegation, so much self-sacrifice as Archie Butt."

Tragically, it was Taft's affection for Archie which led to Archie's taking the European vacation from which he was returning on the Titanic. Worried about a possible decline in Archie's health due to the exhausting amount of Archie's duties, Taft encouraged Archie to take a rest and travel to Rome in early 1912. When Archie, who was hesitant about taking the trip, cancelled his travel plans, Taft insisted that Archie reinstate them.

After the collision with the iceberg, Archie heroically assisted women and children into the lifeboats and encouraged the persons remaining aboard the sinking ocean liner. His last known words were uttered to a young woman friend he wrapped in a blanket and carried safely to a lifeboat: "Remember me to the folks back home." As President Taft noted, Archie "died like a soldier and a gentleman."

Did Butt have a premonition of death at sea? Months before he died he visited Atlanta and was heard to say: "My ambition is to die in such a manner as to reflect credit upon the name I bear." In one of the last letters he ever wrote before sailing for Europe, Archie told his sister-in-law that he was going to Rome "for a little holiday" and that "if the old ship goes down" she would find his affairs in perfect order.

Pursuant to a Joint Resolution of Congress, a marble fountain dedicated to the memory of Archie Butt was erected near the grounds of the White House in Washington, D. C. In 1914 the Butt Memorial Bridge, spanning the Augusta Canal, opened in Augusta, Georgia. Ex-President Taft attended and spoke at the dedication ceremonies on April 15, 1914, exactly two years after the Titanic met its fate.

### **Part III: ON THE TITANIC: JACQUES FUTRELLE**

Published in The Athens Observer, p. 6A (May 5-May 11, 1994). For additional information on Jacques Futrelle, see Freddie Seymour & Bettina Kyper, The Thinking Machine: Jacques Futrelle (Graphic Illusions: Dennisport, Mass. 1995).

One of America's best detective fiction writers, Jacques Futrelle was born in Pike County, Georgia in 1875. He worked as a newspaper journalist from 1890 to 1902, was a theatrical manager for two years, and then re-entered newspaper work. In 1912 Futrelle, who then was living in Massachusetts, was a well-known American author whose reputation rested on fifty short stories and a dozen novels.

Although he also wrote mysteries and romances, Futrelle's best-known writings were his detective stories. Futrelle is the acknowledged master of the Locked Room Problem; many of his stories feature escapes or disappearances from a locked room or building. Futrelle invented one of the great detectives of American fiction, Professor S. F. X. Van Dusen, better known as The Thinking Machine. Futrelle's masterpiece is his short story "The Problem of Cell 13," in which The Thinking Machine confidently announces that he can escape from a death row prison cell, actually carries out the escape, and then patiently explains how he did it. One biographer of Futrelle describes The Thinking Machine as someone who believes "in the power of sheer force of will to overcome adversity," and who thinks that "human logic [can] overcome all adversity." The Thinking Machine is certainly fond of saying such things as "Nothing is impossible," or "The mind is the master of all things."

It was horribly ironic that Jacques Futrelle decided to cross the ocean on the Titanic. The author who specialized in writing about escaping from a locked room had chosen to travel in a vessel crammed with closed, locked rooms--the watertight compartments which supposedly made the ship unsinkable. In the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, as those compartments relentlessly filled with water, inexorably dragging down the damaged Titanic, the creator of The Thinking Machine discovered that the force of human will alone cannot keep afloat a ship whose hull has been punctured by an iceberg, and that logic by itself cannot prevent passengers on board a foundering ship from drowning or freezing to death in icy water.

Shortly before the Titanic crashed into the iceberg, Jacques Futrelle complained of a headache, according to his wife. It may have been an ordinary headache. However, it is tempting to imagine that perhaps a subconscious presentiment of his impending death was creeping through the recesses of Futrelle's mind. It

would certainly appear possible that Jacques Futrelle, inventor of a fictional detective obsessed with a remorseless logic, subconsciously became aware of the perils facing the ship and its passengers, and that this unconscious realization produced the headache.

## **Part IV: MAY FUTRELLE SURVIVED TITANIC**

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May Futrelle, the Georgian who survived the Titanic disaster, was born in Atlanta. She had married Jacques Futrelle in 1895, and they had two children, a son and a daughter. Like her husband, May was an author.

Two weeks after the Titanic sank, May Futrelle wrote a two-part newspaper article which remains one of earliest and most authoritative eyewitness accounts of the catastrophe. She vividly describes her last evening on the doomed ship. After an exquisite dinner in the luxurious dining saloon where an orchestra played and the tables were crowded with wealthy men in formal wear and gorgeous, bejeweled women wearing expensive Parisian gowns, she and Jacques were in their stateroom preparing for bed when they felt “a slight concussion”--a shock wave that traveled the length of the ship. When she asked her husband what had happened, he replied: “Oh, I guess it's nothing. We have simply bumped into a baby iceberg. If that's what it is, it won't bother the Titanic any more than if it had struck a match.” Despite Jacques's reassurances, May became alarmed and insisted that he investigate whether anything serious had happened. “In a moment we ... understood that the situation was desperate, that the compartments had refused to hold back the rush of the water.”

Soon both were fully dressed and wearing life jackets. Only women and children were being allowed into the lifeboats. May threw her arms around her husband, hugging and kissing him, and would not leave him. After Jacques persuaded her to enter a lifeboat, May leaped out just as it was about to be lowered and went below decks in search of her husband. She found him, and for the last time they hugged and kissed. Refusing to enter a lifeboat himself, Jacques again directed May to get into one of the boats, reminding her of their children. He assured her, with a logic worthy of the creator of The Thinking Machine, that when the ship sank he would survive by clinging to one of the lifeboats until he was picked up. As he pushed May toward a lifeboat and she began to hesitate, he shouted: “For God's sake, go! It's your last chance, go!” An officer forced her into the lifeboat, and at that moment May Futrelle, in her own words, “gave up hope that [Jacques] could be saved.” Lifeboat No. 16, in which May Futrelle escaped, was, like many other of the ship's boats, only half-filled.

“The last I saw of my husband,” May wrote, “he was standing beside [the American financier and multimillionaire] Colonel [John Jacob] Astor. He had

a cigarette in his mouth. As I watched him, he lit a match and held it in his cupped hands before his face. By its light I could see his eyes roam anxiously over the water. Then he dropped his head toward his hands and lighted his cigarette.... I know those hands never trembled.”

May Futrelle died in 1967.