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.