

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.