

## ON THE TITANIC: JACQUES FUTRELLE

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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.