

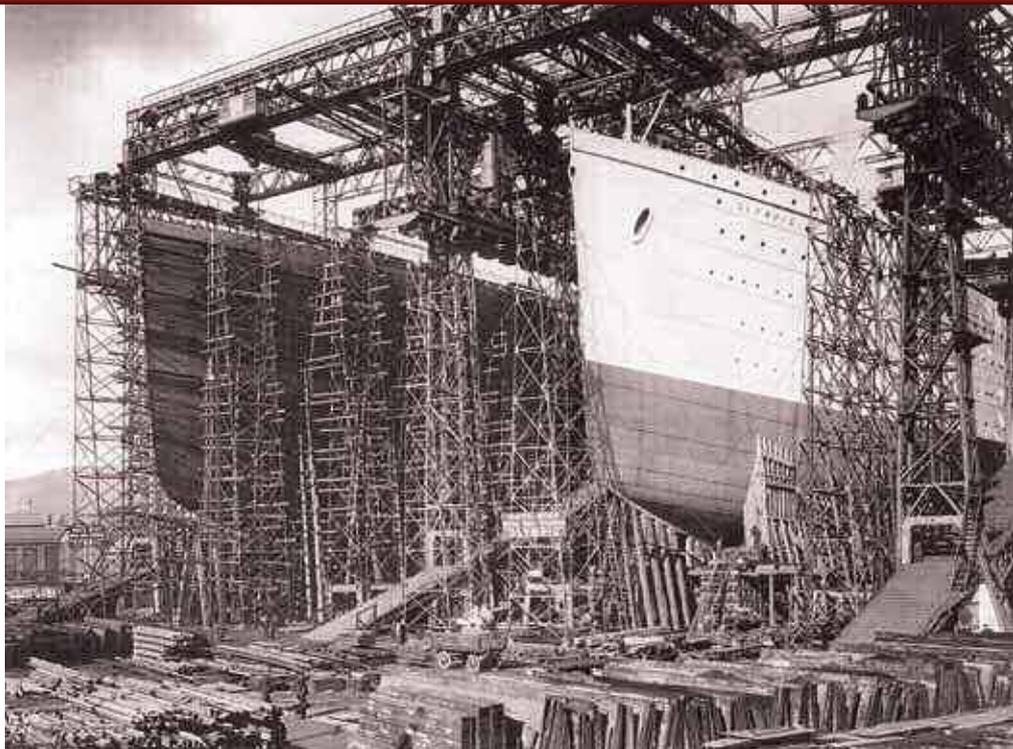
# Titanic Failure

In April of 1912, one hundred years ago, the “unsinkable” luxury passenger ship *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank, taking 1,513 men, women, and children with it.

by Jack Kenny

**M**organ Robertson is not a household name, but the obscure novelist should be remembered as a prophet in his time. As Walter Lord recounted in his 1955 book, *A Night to Remember*, Robertson in 1898 produced a fictional account of an ocean liner far larger than any ship ever built. The 800-foot-long behemoth carried 3,000 people on its maiden voyage, including many of the rich and famous. It had lifeboats for only a fraction of that number, though that hardly seemed to matter, for the ship had been declared “unsinkable.” Then the ship plummeted to the bottom of the sea on a cold April night after colliding with an iceberg. The ship’s name? The *Titan*.

Perhaps it was merely coincidence that the White Star company chose the name *Titanic* for one of the three ships it was planning in the spring of 1907. Cunard, a rival British firm, had announced plans for two ships, the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*, that would be considerably more spacious than the White Star’s latest, the *Adriatic*. The Cunard ships were still under construction when Bruce Ismay, White Star’s chairman and managing director, met with Lord William Pirrie of the Northern Ireland shipbuilding firm Harland and Wolff



**The *Titanic***, designed to be the largest moving object ever built, towered over its surroundings at the Harland and Wolff Shipyard in Northern Ireland.

to plan their next project. They would build three luxury liners, each 50 percent larger and 100 feet longer than Cunard’s new giants. The trio, to be named in turn the *Olympic*, *Titanic*, and *Gigantic*, would be not only the largest ships at sea, but the largest moving objects ever built by man.

Work began on the *Olympic* at the Harland and Wolff Shipyard on Queen’s Island in Belfast’s River Lagan on December 16, 1908. Fifteen months later, the keel of the *Titanic* was laid. Nearly 15,000 workers were employed in riveting, forging, and hammering into shape the pair of gargantuan vessels, each weighing more than 26,000,000 pounds and each, at 882 feet, nearly as long as three football fields. Each hull was made of more than 2,000 inch-thick plates, held together by more than three million steel rivets. Both ships were equipped with rudders weighing 15,000 pounds and each had three anchors, with the center anchor, at 15 tons, moved through the shipyard by a team of eight horses.

When the *Titanic* made its first run on the river, more than 100,000 people watched from the shipyard and from nearby housetops, ship masts, and riverbanks. The Lord Mayor of Belfast and American banking and railroad magnate J.P. Mor-

gan, whose capital was heavily invested in White Star, joined Ismay and Lord Pirrie on the reviewing stand.

The *Titanic* exceeded the *Olympic* in size (1,000 pounds larger), style, and luxury. Along with stained-glass windows, thick carpeting, and elaborate chandeliers, the *Titanic* offered passengers a squash court, a swimming pool, a fully equipped gymnasium, and a Turkish bath. Indeed, the ship offered the amenities of a floating city, with a large on-board barbershop, a clothes-pressing room, a lending library, and a wireless telegraphy installation. There were even accommodations for dogs accompanying passengers in first class.

The ship’s passengers would include emigrants in third-class passage embarked on their first Atlantic voyage, as well as well-heeled passengers well accustomed to the comforts of first-class travel. Colonel Jacob Astor, with a personal fortune estimated at \$100 million, topped the list of millionaires on board for the trip to New York. Others included Isidor Strauss, an owner of Macy’s department store and former member of Congress, and George Widener, heir to the richest family in Philadelphia. Major Archibald Butt, military advisor and close personal friend of Presi-

**This grand staircase** was one of many luxurious accommodations offered first-class passengers on the *Titanic*.

dent Taft, was also on board, returning from an overseas trip he had made on the President's behalf.

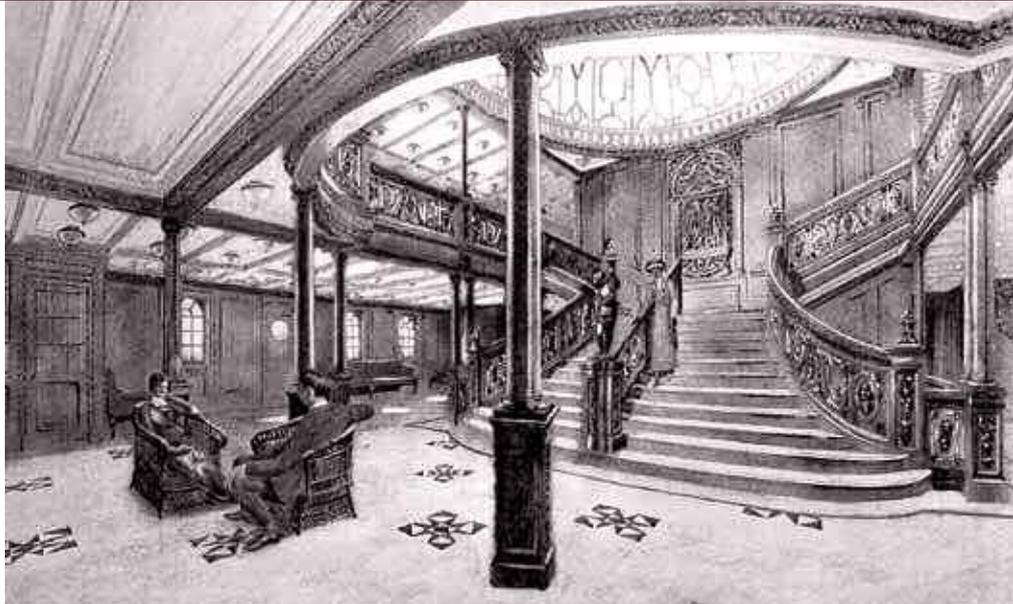
Before it ever set out to sea, the ship had achieved a reputation as "unsinkable." Later, White Star officials would be at pains to point out that an advertising brochure claimed not that the ship *was* unsinkable, but that it was "designed to be unsinkable." Few at the time noticed the fine verbal distinction.

It was, according to legend, a deckhand on the *Titanic* who assured a nervous second-class passenger that "God himself could not sink this ship." Whether or not that boast was actually uttered, it was essentially the same conviction that, absent the theological implications, had been published in a *New York Times* editorial a year earlier.

"We have come to believe," the *Times* assured its readers, "that our great modern liners, with their water-tight compartments, safeguarded by unceasing vigilance and rigid discipline, are secure against loss by collision, that even after the most violent shock they will be kept afloat." Edward John Smith, captain of the *Titanic*, radiated that same sunny confidence in the march of progress and triumph of technology. "I cannot imagine any condition which would cause a ship to flounder," Smith, had said years earlier when he captained the *Adriatic*. "I cannot conceive of any vital disaster happening to this vessel. Modern shipping has gone beyond that."

A veteran of nearly 40 years at sea, Smith was fond of the word "uneventful" to describe his long career. Yet only a few months before taking the *Titanic* to sea, he had been in command of the *Olympic* when it collided with and nearly capsized the Royal Navy cruiser *Hawke*. Though a Court of Inquiry later faulted the *Olympic* for the collision, Smith remained a favorite with both White Star passengers and management. "He was a man in whom we had entire and absolute confidence," Ismay later said.

Original plans called for 64 lifeboats aboard the *Titanic*. The number was later cut in half, then halved again, as the ship departed with but 16 wooden boats,



enough to satisfy the Board of Trade regulations. With the addition of four collapsible boats, the *Titanic* had lifeboat capacity for 1,178 people, barely half the 2,224 passengers and crew on board. Yet that provision exceeded by 17 percent the lifeboat requirements at the time.

The *Titanic*, "Queen of the Seas," left South Hampton for its historic journey under a sunny sky shortly after noon on Wednesday, April 10, 1912. As it pulled away from the harbor, its wake was so powerful that it broke the moorings of the *New Yorker*, berthed nearby. The smaller ship was headed straight for the *Titanic* and only fast maneuvering by Captain Smith and the harbor pilot averted a collision.

"That's a bad omen," second-class passenger Thomas Brown remarked at the time. The incident was soon forgotten, however, as the ship reached the open sea. For Captain Smith, the historic launch began the final journey of his long and celebrated career. It would be, he announced, his final assignment. He could not have known how final and irrevocable that decision would be.

### "Only the *Titanic*"

The first three days of the voyage seemed remarkable only for the unusual calm of the North Atlantic. If there was trouble ahead, most of the passengers were blissfully unaware of it. Yet on Thursday there were already ice reports from other ships in the region. On Friday there was a telegraph message from a French ship that had passed through a "thick ice field." On Sat-

urday the steamer *Rappahannock* reportedly alerted the *Titanic* that she, too, had encountered a massive ice field.

Despite the warnings, the *Titanic* continued across the calm and quiet sea at a brisk clip. After the last stop in Queens-town, Ireland, Captain Smith unleashed the power of the great engines: The ship traveled 386 miles on Friday, 519 miles on Saturday, and 546 miles on Sunday, April 14. By then the *Titanic* was only three days away from its much-anticipated arrival in New York.

On Sunday more ice warnings poured into the ship's wireless room, where Marconi operators John Phillips and Harold Bride were frantically trying to keep up with the pile of messages sent by first-class passengers, the volume increased by a backlog from the night before when the wireless had broken down. At 9 a.m. they received a message from the *Caronia*: "Bergs, growlers and field ice 42° N from 49° to 51° W." At 11:40 a.m., the *Noordam* radioed with a warning of "Much ice," and at 1:42 p.m. the *Baltic* warned of "icebergs and large quantities of field ice" at a location close to the *Titanic's* route. The warning was handed to the captain, who passed it on to Ismay, the White Star chairman who was on the ship for its maiden voyage. Ismay placed the message in his pocket and went to lunch. Later he casually shared the information with some of the first-class passengers.

"I suppose you're going to slow her down," said one passenger, who would later recall Ismay's answer: "Oh no. On

the contrary we're going to let her run a good deal faster and get out of it."

At 5 p.m. Phillips and Bride received another warning of two icebergs from the eastbound liner *Amerika*. At 7:30 they intercepted a caution from a nearby ship, the *Californian*: "Thee large bergs three miles to the south of us." That message never did reach the captain, however, who was in the ship's restaurant as guest of honor at a dinner party hosted by the Wideners.

At 11:05 the overworked Phillips hastily dismissed yet another alert from a ship just ten miles away. While working frantically to relay passengers' personal messages to Cape Race in Newfoundland, the site of the first wireless communication station, he was abrupt when the *Californian* cut in with something about icebergs.

"Shut up, shut up!" came the response from the *Titanic*. "I am busy; I am working Cape Race." The operator on the *Californian* shut down his wireless when his shift ended at 11:30 p.m. A ship's officer came by and asked what ships were in the vicinity.

"Only the *Titanic*," the operator replied.

### "Blimey! We've Struck an Iceberg!"

At 11:40 p.m. the *Titanic* was still zipping across the dark sea at 22-1/2 knots when lookout Frederick Fleet, his watch nearly over, saw something darker than the night itself directly ahead of the fast-moving ship. He banged the crow's nest bell three times, then picked up the phone to call the bridge.

"Iceberg right ahead," he reported. Fleet and lookout Reginald Lee then watched for what may have been the longest 37 seconds of their lives as the ship continued straight ahead, drawing ever closer to the iceberg. Finally it swung hard to starboard and then to port, and at the last second, they saw the massive berg float by on the starboard side. Tiny splinters of ice reflected bright colors when caught in the glow of the deck lights. The men breathed a momentary sigh of relief as the *Titanic* moved on.

Some on the ship's crew barely noticed the collision. Fireman John Podesta was in his bunk when he heard "what sounded like tearing a strip off a piece of calico — nothing more, only a quiver. It did not even wake those who were in a good sleep." In the boiler rooms and the engine room the impact and the grinding noise were felt

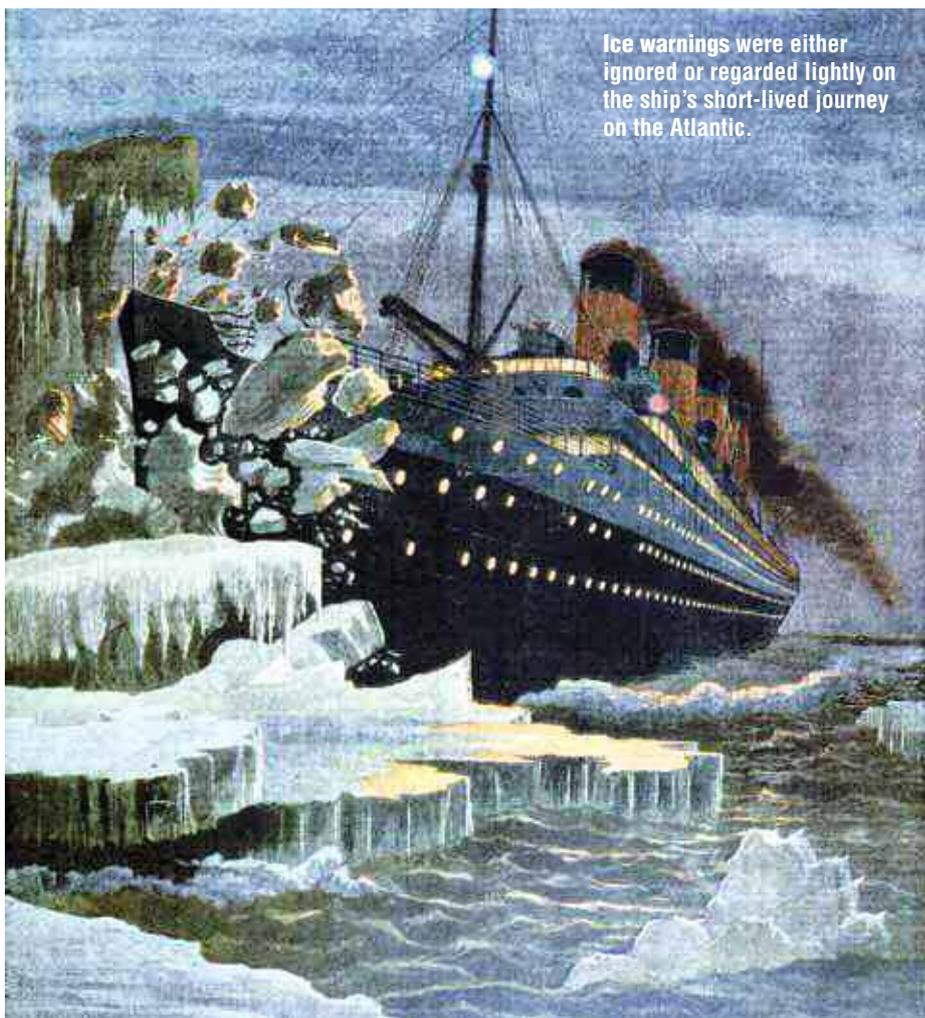
and heard more keenly. A rumor quickly spread that the ship had gone aground off the banks of Newfoundland. It was squelched even more quickly when an off duty trimmer came by with the news: "Blimey! We've struck an iceberg!"

Seaman Joseph Scarret had been enjoying a smoke when he felt the ship shaking. "Those in the crew who were asleep in their bunks all turned out," he recalled, "and we all rushed out to see what was the matter. We found the ship had struck an iceberg as there was a large quantity of ice ... on the starboard of the foredeck. We did not think it very serious so we went below again, cursing the iceberg for disturbing us."

Many of the passengers likewise considered the brush with the iceberg as more

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disturbance than danger. Some, apparently, were even jubilant over the event. A first-class passenger would recall hearing one young lady say to another, "Oh, come and let's see the berg — we have never seen one before." Others expressed a quiet but determined confidence. Benjamin Hart left his quarters to inquire about the collision. When he returned, his daughter recalled, he announced, "We've hit an iceberg...."



Ice warnings were either ignored or regarded lightly on the ship's short-lived journey on the Atlantic.

Colonel Archibald Gracie would remember all his life the “agonizing cries of death from over a thousand throats, the wails and groans of the suffering, the shrieks of the terror-stricken and the awful gaspings for breath of those in the last throes of drowning.”

They’re going to launch the lifeboats but you’ll all be back on board for breakfast.”

Soon both bed and breakfast would be among the furthest things from the minds of both passengers and crew. A spur of ice jutting from the berg below the waterline had cut a 300-foot-long gash into the ship’s underside. The impact and the grinding sound brought Captain Smith rushing out of his cabin next to the wheelhouse. On the bridge he found First Officer William Murdoch.

“Mr. Murdoch, what was that?” the captain asked.

“An iceberg, sir,” the first officer replied.

“Close the emergency doors.”

“The doors are already closed.”

But it was too late. The ice had damaged the inch-thick plates in at least five of the watertight compartments. The *Titanic* was unable to stay afloat if more than four were flooded. No one knew that better than Thomas Andrews, managing director of Harland and Wolff. As the *Titanic*’s builder, Andrews was on board for the first cruise to look for any minor problems that might need correcting on a ship built, in his words, “as nearly perfect as human minds can make her.” Smith summoned him and quickly apprised him of the situation.

“How long have we?” the captain asked. Andrews did some quick calculation.

“An hour and a half,” he

**The ship that “God himself could not sink”** went down on its maiden voyage, taking with it the lives of 1,513 passengers. The name *Titanic* has since become synonymous with “disaster.”

replied. “Possibly two. Not much longer.”

It was “women and children first” as the lifeboats were being lowered, though on the starboard side, men were allowed in if there were no women or children in sight. At least one male passenger was discovered in a lifeboat with a shawl over his head to disguise his gender.

White Star’s Ismay “patrolled the deck in his pajamas and his slippers,” wrote Barry Denenberg in *Titanic Sinks!*, “frantically barking out ineffectual and incomprehensible orders to the crewmen, who don’t know who he is and are too busy to care.” In the general confusion and the frantic efforts to escape the sinking ship, many of the boats left only partially occupied. Ismay himself was later criticized for his escape, though he later testified at a Senate inquiry that “the officer called out if there were any more women, and there were no passengers left on the deck.” As Peter Thresh noted in *Titanic: The Truth Behind the Disaster*, the explanation did not spare the White Star chairman widespread scorn and ridicule. A mock poem that appeared in the *Chicago Journal* gives some idea of Ismay’s standing in the court of public opinion:

To hold your place in the ghastly face  
of death on the sea at night

Is a seaman’s job, but to flee with the mob

Is an owner’s noble right.

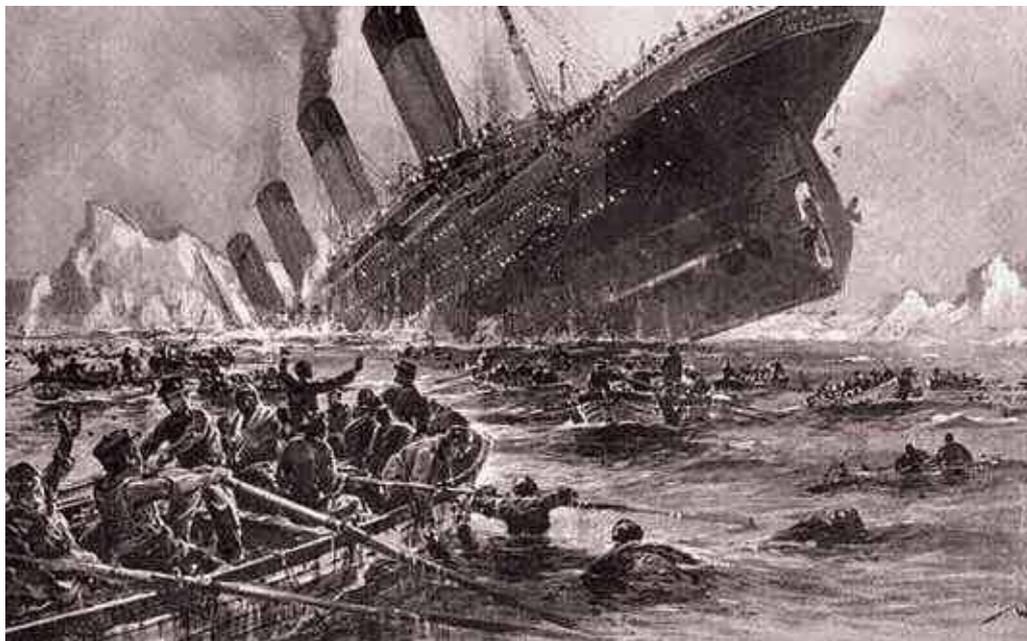
## *Carpathia to the Rescue*

Distress rockets were fired, “SOS” signals were flashed, and calls for help went out over the wireless. The *Californian*, but a few miles away, was herself hemmed in by ice and unable to respond. Finally came word that the Cunard liner *Carpathia* had heard the call and was coming fast toward the *Titanic* — from 58 miles away.

While the ship’s band played upbeat tunes, Benjamin Guggenheim and his valet, Victor Giglio, abandoned their life-jackets and returned to the deck in elegant evening clothes, prepared, Guggenheim said, to “go down as gentlemen.... No woman shall be left aboard this ship because Ben Guggenheim is a coward.”

Those who made it into the lifeboats faced an agonizing ordeal of hours afloat in bone-chilling temperatures, waiting and praying to be rescued. Others were still less fortunate. Ruth Becker, 12 years old at the time, felt the anguish of seeing people in the water and being unable to help.

“We wanted to pick up some of those swimming, but this would have meant swamping our boat and further loss of life for all of us,” she recalled. Colonel Archibald Gracie would remember all his life the “agonizing cries of death from over a thousand throats, the wails and



groans of the suffering, the shrieks of the terror-stricken and the awful gaspings for breath of those in the last throes of drowning.” Yet John Thayer, a survivor in Collapsible Boat B, recalled seeing people in boats only partially filled refusing to pick up swimmers.

“There they were, only four or five hundred yards away, listening to the cries, and still they did not come back,” Thayer said. “If they had come back several hundred more would have been saved.”

At 4 a.m., the *Carpathia* arrived and the survivors were hauled to safety. “Swings were lowered to take us up,” Ruth Becker recalled. “I was the first one to be put into the swing and tied in because I was so numb I couldn’t hold on.”

### Courage and Music

Aboard the ship, the five postal workers had missed whatever chance they might have had to get on board the lifeboats as they struggled to save 200 sacks of mail. None of the mail was ever recovered. Father Thomas Byles, a Catholic priest, remained on board, hearing confessions and

giving absolution to those who shared both his fate and faith. At the New York office of White Star that day, faith of a different kind was expressed by a company official who could scarcely believe reports that the ship was in trouble. “We place absolute confidence in the *Titanic*,” insisted vice president P.A.S. Franklin. “We believe the boat is unsinkable.” Unknown to Franklin, the “unsinkable” boat was already at the bottom of the sea.

There were 2,224 people, passengers and crew, on the *Titanic*; 711 were rescued. Many of the 1,513 who perished in the icy waters of the Atlantic that night faced death with remarkable courage and kindness. They included officers who stayed on deck to launch the last of the too-few lifeboats, the engine-room crew that remained below deck to keep the power and lights going, and the wireless operators who stayed at their posts after the captain had released them from their duty. There were passengers who gave up their seats on the lifeboats to give others a chance to live.

There remains some uncertainty over what the last song was that the band played

just before the ship went down. According to one popular story, it was “Nearer My God to Thee,” while by other accounts it was the Episcopalian hymn, “Autumn.” None of the musicians lived to tell about it.

“One irrefutable fact, however, remains,” wrote historians John Eaton and Charles Haas: “the musicians stayed on until all hope of rescue was gone. Who can say how many lives they saved? The final moments of how many were cheered or ennobled by their music?... The memory of the bandmen and their courageous music will never die.”

Perhaps the lives of those bandmen and others on the great ship might have been spared had there been more lifeboats aboard, had the warnings of ice given rise to a greater caution, and had the supreme confidence in the invincible “Queen of the Sea” and the men and machines that created her been tempered by the remembrance that “pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.” The Earth has long been a graveyard of indispensable nations and men. Its oceans remain burial places of man’s “unsinkable” ships. ■