

Encyclopedia
Titanica

www.encyclopedia-titanica.org

**This article is copyright Encyclopedia Titanica and its licensors © 2003
It may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without permission.**

The Browns Prepare to Abandon Ship

by David Haisman

Her father stood in the doorway of their cabin and said, "There's talk that the ship has hit an iceberg." It was those fateful words that were to change their lives forever.

Edith, along with her mother Elizabeth, were sharing a Second Class cabin onboard the Titanic. Her father, Thomas W.S. Brown, was sharing another Second Class cabin further along the passageway.

It was almost midnight on Sunday, 14th of April 1912 when Thomas still in evening dress, made this announcement to his wife and daughter. Just 15 minutes previous to this, both women had been woken up by what only could be described as a shudder and several soft bumps. At that precise moment, Edith occupying the upper berth, switched on her bunk light, parted the surrounding curtains, and peered down at her mother lying on the bunk below.

Elizabeth had also heard the noises and, on turning on her own bunk light, stared up at her daughter in total bewilderment. Edith quickly threw back her bed covers, swung her feet out and on turning, descended step by step down the little varnished bunk ladder to the cabin floor. Crossing the cabin to the porthole, she pulled the neat little curtains apart, opened the port glass and stared out into the blackness. At first, she could see nothing until her eyes became accustomed to the darkness and then gradually, she began to make out the ships lights reflecting on the black water far down below. The sea was flat calm with no wind and looking up, she could see a mass of stars in the night sky. Looking down again towards the stern of the ship she could see great swirls of foam and turbulence as the ships propellers churned up the water, apparently, going full astern. This in turn caused a great deal of vibration around the cabin with the clinking of glasses in the wash stand, creaking and squeaking of wood panelling about the room and door handles rattling.

Edith drew her head back in from the porthole to enable her mother to see for herself that the ship was stopping. Elizabeth looked down at the water for a brief moment and then, drawing her head back in, crossed the cabin back to her berth. Sitting on the edge of her bunk with a worried look on her face, she said to Edith in a somewhat shaky voice, "I wonder what this is all about then?"

The excessive vibration experienced just a few moments ago, had now stopped as Elizabeth, sitting on the edge of her bunk, now rose to cross the cabin floor to turn on the main overhead cabin light. The

THE BROWNS PREPARE TO ABANDON SHIP

only sound now audible was the distant whine of an electric motor from somewhere far inside of the ship. The night air from the open porthole made the cabin feel colder and Elizabeth, sitting down again on the edge of her bunk, said to Edith, "Pass me my dressing gown from the wardrobe please dear." After passing her mother's dressing gown to her, Edith crossed again to the porthole to see if anything else was happening. Once again, after her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, she could see that all was quiet, the turbulence had ceased and the ship was now motionless on a flat calm sea.

On closing the porthole, Edith crossed the cabin to sit alongside of her mother on the lower berth saying to her mother, " Everything seems so quiet." It was shortly after this that Thomas had tapped the door and informed them about the iceberg. He had advised them to put on warm clothing and life jackets and to follow him back up on deck. Elizabeth looked at her husband in utter disbelief at such a suggestion. Thomas on the other hand was not to be deterred and on entering the room, reached up to the top of the wardrobe and pulled down two lifejackets. Elizabeth was an extremely nervous person by nature and this action by her husband wasn't helping matters any. Edith at 15 years of age was not too worried at this stage and obediently did as she was told, knowing her father never made any rash decisions.

Both women proceeded to put on their long grey serge topcoats before Thomas began to help them on with their life jackets. Elizabeth remained speechless as her husband busied himself about her, adjusting the bulky life jacket and finally tying the tapes in front with a large bow. The life jackets were made up with cumbersome hard square chunks of cork, held together by stitched duck canvas and when placed over the head, hung from the shoulders and tied at the waste. With these on over their heavy clothing, both women looked and felt twice their size, causing Edith to giggle for a moment, forgetting the seriousness of the situation briefly.

Before leaving their cabin to go up on the boat deck Edith said to her father, "Why aren't you wearing your life jacket father?" to which he replied, "Don't let that worry you for the moment my dear. Let's get you and your mother organised first and then I can get myself sorted out later." Edith thought how typical of him. Always putting us first at all times.

Making their way out of their cabin, they proceeded along the plush carpeted passageway to the first flight of stairs, which would take them up to the Second Class Promenade Deck. At this time there were just a few passengers moving about the passageways and stairs, some in evening dress, others with coats over night attire, and some with life jackets on. There was a bedroom steward with a tray of dirty cups

THE BROWNS PREPARE TO ABANDON SHIP

and saucers balancing on the palm of one hand, tapping cabin doors with the knuckles of his other hand calling out, "Everyone up with life jackets on please!" He continued with this until arriving at the night pantry at the far end of the passageway. There was little response, the whole scene quite relaxed with the odd quip about having a good night's sleep being disturbed and others, not even bothering to answer the stewards call.

They continued up the stairs with their carved banisters and beautiful wood panelling on the walls, passing other passengers returning to their cabins, remarking that it was too cold to remain on deck for any length of time. They arrived at the top of the final flight of stairs and stepped out onto the boat deck into the cold night air, joining a group of people already gathered around lifeboat no.14. Thomas had noticed whilst in their cabin the small notice behind the door saying that occupants of that cabin would assemble at lifeboat station no. 14. during any emergency.

Below their position on the boat deck, they could hear lively music being played by the ship's orchestra, with Elizabeth remarking to her husband nervously, "Some people don't seem too worried about this situation Tom." His reply was, "It's better to be prepared in case things get out of hand and we may have to get into those boats." Other people stood around engaging in light-hearted conversation as they watched some seamen take the covers off of the boats and prepare them for lowering down to the water.

Edith was feeling tired after being woken from a deep sleep and between yawns began to think about her comfortable bunk and said to Thomas, "When do you think we'll be able to go back to bed father?" "Soon dear. Soon." he replied. Her mother however was far from tired and was showing some considerable concern as the crew continued working at clearing away the boats. Her father, fully realising her mother's fears at the way things were developing, did his best to calm her down by saying that he didn't think it would be too long before he would be taking them below again and tucking them in for the night, once the emergency had been called off.

There was considerable talk about ice being thrown about by some of the steerage passengers on the forward Well Deck. There was also mention that some Third Class passengers at the forward end were leaving the Well Deck area carrying their suitcases and belongings. Up to this point in time, there had been no official indication that anything was wrong, other than some stewards directing passengers to go up on deck with their life jackets on. There had been no alarm bells, hooters or announcements from ship's officers that there was a problem, hence the relaxed attitude of the passengers.

THE BROWNS PREPARE TO ABANDON SHIP

Edith and her parents continued to wait patiently, watching and listening to the goings on around them as more people continued to arrive on the boat deck. Many were still in evening dress and apparently in good spirits, attempting a witty remark now and then as the ship's orchestra continued to play lively music from the deck below. Amongst the chatter there was wild speculation as to what had actually happened with rumours that the ship would need to undergo urgent repairs whilst others spoke about the emergency being over reacted and would soon be called off. Apart from all of this, passengers and crew alike were behaving in an orderly fashion although the look on Thomas's face revealed that he wasn't too happy at the way things were developing.

The night appeared to be very still now with the ship stopped, but very cold with several passengers returning to their cabins to put on extra clothing and some, unbelievably, returning to go back to bed. This was not to last however as ship's stewards, stewardesses and all other crew members were given strict orders that all cabins would have to be evacuated immediately and told to proceed to the boat deck with life jackets on.

The crew were performing their duties in an orderly professional manner, treating all classes firmly and politely. Elizabeth was becoming increasingly distressed as more boats were being prepared for lowering and, once at deck level, people ordered into them with greater urgency. Thomas was doing his best to calm her down by saying, "Don't upset yourself my dear. I shall probably get into another boat once all the women and children are sorted out first. " He knew this didn't sound very convincing but what else could he say at a time like this? Edith held tightly onto her father's arm with both of her arms, stamping first one foot and then the other in order to maintain some circulation around her feet. She began to think about how fortunate she had been by bringing her Wordsworth Birthday Book with her as she would never leave that behind whatever the circumstances. She remembered leaving behind in it's place, her gold and coral necklace that her father had recently bought for her in London and would certainly bring that along with her if ever going back to the cabin for any reason.

Lifeboat No. 14, being their designated boat, had Fifth Officer Lowe in command. He was a Welshman in his late twenties and well known as a bit of a disciplinarian, ordering people into the boat in no uncertain terms. His voice had authority and could be heard on more than one occasion, shouting at the crew to, "Get a bloody move on!"

More and more people were beginning to arrive on the boat deck from the decks below as Elizabeth said to Thomas in a faltering voice, " How on earth do they expect to get this lot into those tiny boats.?" Her

THE BROWNS PREPARE TO ABANDON SHIP

husband could see her point but dared not say anything other than, "It's quite amazing just what those boats will hold."

At this time the Reverend Carter rejoined the "Browns" at lifeboat No.14, after taking his wife, Lillian, to her respective lifeboat. The Carters had been their dining companions since leaving Southampton and they had all become good friends during the voyage but now, Earnest Carter would remain with Thomas until the end. Edith had always remembered this turn of events regarding Lillian Carter, throughout her lifetime, as there were questions that just didn't add up. If she had gotten into a lifeboat, then how come she was listed as drowned? Or perhaps she had decided to leave her boat before lowering to rejoin her husband the Reverend Carter in order to be with him until the very end? The Titanic will no doubt keep some of these secrets forever.

As more people assembled around the boats there was an instant almighty deafening roar high above their heads as super heated steam exploded out of one of the waste pipes at the top of one of the funnels. This caused screams and shouts with people ducking almost as one, thinking for an instant that the ship would blow up beneath them.

The deafening roar of steam that had to be vented off due to the enormous build up of pressure from the boilers was now blocking out all other sounds as the crew and officers continued to shout through cupped hands and wave their arms around in their efforts to be understood. After some twenty minutes or so, the noise had abated somewhat to just a loud hiss and the ship's orchestra could be heard once again, this time playing on the boat deck.

"Look father! There's a light over there." Thomas followed his daughters outstretched arm to a light twinkling on the horizon. "Yes my dear !" he replied quickly. "I do believe you're right !" With that the Rev. Carter also agreed that there was indeed a light on the horizon. Edith then said excitedly, "Do you think they will come to help us father?" "Yes" replied Thomas. "I certainly hope so."

The time had now come for Edith and Elizabeth to get into lifeboat 14 and Edith was dreading the thought of leaving her father on the boatdeck and how it would effect her mother.

Adapted from David Haisman's story about his mother's experiences on the Titanic. More about this book *"I'll See You In New York"* can be found on the web site www.haisman.org.uk or e-mail <titanicanme@aol.com>