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**April 20, 1912**  
SATURDAY  
Aboard the cable ship *Mackay-Bennett*  
ATLANTIC OCEAN  
THE GRAND BANKS  
600 MILES FROM HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA

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**JOHN SNOW**  
**THE UNDERTAKER**

Embalmers don't typically make house calls.  
If not buried with a splash from their ship,  
most casualties at sea are brought to me  
at the family parlor on Argyle Street.

In Halifax the water is unavoidable as death.  
And death is unavoidable as the water.  
Raised as I was in a Halifax funeral home,  
you might guess I'd grow up to accept them both.  
But I find the dead preferable to the sea.  
The dead are more predictable.

To ease my queasy stomach,  
I am lying down atop the empty coffins  
stacked neatly across the *Mackay-Bennett's* decks.  
Waves toss our small vessel as if it were a toy.  
The journey has been cold and slow,  
three days' steaming with half a day to go.

As night falls, Captain Larnder informs me,

"We should be among the wreckage soon—  
better sleep now, while you still can, Mr. Snow.  
The sun will be up soon enough."

Yes, I think. The sun will always come up.  
Even after the entire ship of humanity  
has struck its berg and sunk,  
the sun will rise.

“Good night, Captain Larnder,” I say.

“Good night, sir. Rest well,” he replies.

Later that night, in my berth below,  
I hear the ship’s engines finally quit.  
Silence fills the dark, and I know  
we have reached the spot where the *Titanic* foundered.  
They are out there in the water. The bodies. Among the debris.

My name is John Snow.  
You could say that my living is death.  
I am the undertaker.  
I have come for the bodies.

**PRELUDE**

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**PREPARING TO SAIL**

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**MONDAY, APRIL 1, TO TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 1912**

# THE SHIP RAT ∞

follow the food

follow the rats

scuttle, scuttle

follow the rats

scuttle, scuttle

follow the food

From all over Europe people are clamoring to buy tickets.  
The titled aristocrat and the anonymous clerk.  
The well-bred Brit with his old money,  
the boorish American with his new money,  
and the enthusiastic emigrant with little money at all.

Over dinner not so many years back,  
my associate, Lord Pirrie, and I conceived  
of a fleet of three immense sister ships  
the like of which the world had never seen.  
These ships would be larger than any other.  
The interior decor would be, in a word, palatial,  
thus attracting the most wealthy first-class passengers.  
And to attract those with lesser means,  
White Star Line's second-class accommodation  
would rival the Cunard Line's first class.  
Likewise our third class would be much nicer  
(and more costly) than the norm.

This last detail is important.  
While first class gives a ship prestige,  
third class is an ocean liner's bread and butter.  
If the lower classes are so hell-bent on leaving the continent,  
the White Star Line will be there to welcome them aboard —  
  
for a price.

The millionaire thinks *Titanic* is a ship of pleasure.  
The emigrant thinks *Titanic* is a ship of dreams.  
But they are both wrong. For *Titanic* is not a ship at all.

*Titanic* is just good business. *Very* good business.

Whenever two words will do,  
Mr. Ismay is certain to use ten.  
I'm not necessarily a man of few words,  
but to sum up *Titanic* I need just one:

*big.*

Ismay speaks of *Titanic*'s luxury:  
her elegant lines, like a yacht for the gods;  
her lush appointments; her state-of-the-art mechanics;  
her ingenious safety features. Ismay and White Star  
cut no costs to build her, I assure you of that.  
But in matters of handling, she is mostly just big.  
And my plan is to pilot her as I would any other big ship.  
I will go as fast as I can and as straight as I can,  
from one point to the next until we see New York Harbor.

It seemed like a dream: the name Thomas Andrews  
forever associated with *Titanic*!  
Even as a young boy, I loved ships.  
Lucky for me, my uncle William,  
the great Lord Pirrie, was chairman of Harland and Wolff.  
Naturally I visited the shipyard often,  
and eventually I found work there.  
But not as some high-ranking executive.  
Uncle would not have that. No. At sixteen,  
I began the five-year apprenticeship that would seal my fate.  
It meant spending less time tending my bees,  
but with my admittance into this shipbuilders' hive,  
everything else was of secondary importance.  
No job was too small or menial  
that I did not work at it for weeks, or months if necessary:  
heater boy, riveter, catcher, holder-upper, and carpenter.  
I learned from the joiners and cabinetmakers,  
the shipwrights, the painters, the fitters, and smiths.  
Belowdecks I watched the workings  
of the stoker, the greaser, the trimmer.  
Above I watched the workings  
of the baker, the waiter, the steward.  
My longest training came in the drafting department,  
learning machine and freehand drawing, applied mechanics,  
and the theories of naval architecture.  
I adopted and improved upon my uncle's designs.  
And eventually the *Titanic* project was given to me.  
I feel as though I built her with my own two hands.  
And like her loyal minion, I will tend to her needs,  
no matter the cost, whatever the tide.

## THE ICEBERG

I am the ice. I see tides ebb and flow.  
I've watched civilizations come and go,  
give birth, destroy, restore, be gone, begin.  
My blink of an eye is humankind's tortoise slow.  
Today's now is tomorrow's way back when.  
Bright Arctic night gives way to coal-black morn.  
Tall masts and canvas sails give way to steam.  
One iceberg melts away. Another's born.  
I am the sum of all that I have seen.  
I am the ice. I know the ebb and flow.  
Ten thousand years ago, I fell as snow,  
and as I fell, my bulk began to grow,  
and as I grew, I watched as worlds arose.  
The caveman's spear, the woolly mammoth tusk,  
arose and clashed and then returned to dust.  
I am the ice. I've seen the ebb and flow.  
I watched as Abraham and Moses spoke.  
I watched the prophets met with wine or stone.  
I watched as Christ was nailed upon the cross.  
I watched Muhammad forced to flee his home.  
I've watched the holy battle to and fro.  
I am the ice. I've seen the ebb and flow.  
Conceived by water, temperature, and time,  
gestating within Greenland's glacial womb,  
I carved out massive valleys as I moved.  
At last the frozen river made its way  
and calved me with a splash in Baffin Bay.  
Since then I've traveled southward many weeks,  
for now that my emergence is complete,  
there is a certain ship I long to meet.

OLAUS ABELSETH ∞ THE IMMIGRANT

Miss Marie Stene  
Ørskog P.O.  
via Ålesund, Norway

1 April 1912  
Monday

My dearest Marie,

I cannot bear the thought of returning to  
North Dakota without you. I know that you do not  
trust steamships. But will you trust me?

Yours very truly,  
Olaus

The day my father sold his beloved mill,  
I knew we would be leaving Lebanon for good.  
I finished packing my suitcase  
only to discover I could not lift it.  
Father turned to look at me struggling—  
his one eye infected, his other just tired.  
“Whatever you pack, Jamila, you must carry yourself.  
Remember, ‘The one who takes the donkey up to the roof  
should be the one who brings it down.’”

It was Father’s favorite proverb.

I am my father’s youngest girl of three.  
My two sisters, my older brother, and my mother  
had already relocated to a place in America.  
A place called Jacksonville, Florida.  
That left just Father and me and my little brother, Elias.  
Now, finally, it was our turn to flee Hakoor  
and the mill that my father had worked all his life.  
Our turn to flee the Ottoman Turks, who have ruined everything.

Everyone here is out of work, Muslim and Christian alike.  
And rather than helping us, as they should,  
the Turkish soldiers make our hard times worse.  
They enter any house they like, taking whatever they want.  
The livestock, the food, and the grain are not safe.  
The women—and the girls—are not safe.

So I packed my suitcase onto the handcart.  
And under cover of darkness we slipped away from Hakoor.  
Father breathed heavily. Elias hummed a tune.  
I walked in silence beside the cart,  
trying not to look over my shoulder  
as we descended our much-loved mountains.

Imagine, if you will, the richest woman in the world . . .  
sitting upon a donkey.

I have the photo to prove it: See here?

That beauty atop the beast is my new wife, Madeleine.

And she's laughing, there upon a humble donkey,  
as the ancient Sphinx looks on.

Wouldn't the papers love to get ahold of *this* photo?

We wished to linger longer in the Valley of the Kings,  
but it just wasn't meant to be. A private matter had come up.

I sent my manservant to arrange the steamer.

Tickets for myself, my servant, my Madeleine,  
my Madeleine's nurse, and, of course, my dog:  
he's a rather large Airedale named Kitty.

A little joke there, you see. A dog named Kitty.

(Hem, hem.)

My man procured first-class accommodations for us  
on what I was told is the most luxurious, well-appointed liner in the world.

The great *Titanic*! But I *was* a bit skeptical.

I'm something of a hotel man myself. (I own several.)

The name is Astor—John Jacob Astor the Fourth—  
*Colonel* Astor. And they call me the richest man in the world.

That's not all they call me, of course. . . .

They also call me spoiled. They call me idle.

They call me shallow and vain.

Then *lecher* began to appear on the menu.

And *fornicator*. And *cradle robber*.

*Adulterer* and *blasphemer*—

these latest monikers brought on in consequence  
of my divorcing Ava Lowle Willing, that celebrated beauty.

Do not pity her. The feelings were mutual;  
Ava Willing was all too *willing* to be done with me.

Well, the divorce caused shock enough in itself.  
But when I married Madeleine within the year,  
the outcry surprised even me.  
You'd think I'd been found out as Jack the Ripper!  
The churches cried out sacrilege. The papers cried out scandal.  
I divorced a woman who despised me;  
I married a woman who adored me.  
Society calls that common? I call that common sense.

Somewhere between the Sphinx and the pyramids,  
Madeleine discovered she was with child.  
So naturally we were determined to return to New York,  
and why shouldn't we? I *own* half of it.

(Hem, hem.)

And what is more, New York is our home.  
So let them ostracize us from their galas and teas.  
I say make the most of your life while you can.  
We may all of us be dead tomorrow.

Even the richest man in the world.

Say what you will about John Jacob Astor, the man knows who he is—  
even if the whole world thinks he's someone else.

That's how it is when you're rich;

you're fair game for every gossipmonger from Denver to Newport.

And believe me, I would know.

I can't sneeze without reading about it in *Town Topics*.

And if Jack Astor thinks *he's* got it rough,

that's nothing compared to how bad rich *women* have it!

We can't hold a real job: our only employment

is motherhood, social work, and tea parties.

We are judged according to the elegance of our hats,

not the wisdom in the heads upon which the hats sit.

My daughter, Helen, and I were in Cairo with the Astors  
when we received the Marconi-gram informing us that  
my little grandson, Lawrence Jr., had taken ill in America.

I traveled to Paris at once and booked passage

on the next available steamer back to the States—

they're calling it *Titanic*, the world's largest.

I'm told Captain Smith is in charge of things.

Three months earlier, Smith had brought me east without drowning me.

I imagined he could take me back west the same way.

Helen went on to London to have her fun.

And to tell you the truth,

I was rather glad to have some time alone.

*Titanic* was due to set sail in two days.

My children were grown. My husband and I rarely spoke.

There were no parties to organize. No rallies to attend.

The entire week lay before me with no one to tend but myself.

The prospect delighted and terrified me.

When I was a boy in Comber, I kept nine hives.  
The honeybees were a wonder to me.  
How they always knew exactly what to do,  
each bee's movements in perfect harmony with the others.  
If one queen died, they would make another;  
if the hive was threatened, they would swarm,  
as if they all shared a solitary mind.

You might call Harland and Wolff a shipyard hive,  
with no less than fifteen thousand workers,  
and I would not ask any one of those men  
to risk a job I would not do myself.  
I place myself among the workers as often as I can,  
walking the yard, clapping a weary man on the back,  
lending a hand to handle a beam, swinging  
a heavy hammer here, chalking  
a well-driven rivet there. One day a red-hot rivet,  
dropped from above, fell fifty feet to splat near my shoe,  
missing my head by inches. But that was not my day to die.  
You take such events in stride. A shipyard is a deadly place,  
and *Titanic* has seen its share of tragedy.

Such is the life of a shipyard hive—  
sacrifice is made for the sake of the whole.  
I remember well, as a boy, watching my bees going about their work.  
Through endless exertion and industry, they built their honeycomb palaces  
much as men make a huge, luxurious ship. I watched the collectors  
return with their pollen-laden legs; I watched the sentries defend the entrance;  
and I watched, of course, the dead worker bees dragged outside,  
their bodies piling up on the ground.

From death, a wondrous buzzing city born.

## THE ICEBERG

I am the ice. I watched *Titanic's* birth.  
I saw the mighty iron keel laid down.  
Beneath the gantry and giant floating cranes  
it rose, as the limestone pyramids rose  
(to transport the souls of the royal and rich)  
amid the din of many bustling men.  
First they lay down iron Leviathan ribs,  
to which workers riveted overlapped seams,  
a patchwork quilt of thick metal skin.  
And as she grew, I passed down Davis Strait.  
I knew what course the iceberg had to take:  
southward toward the ship, the ice goes forth.  
*Titanic* is my compass needle's North.  
For no sooner did this wondrous ship take shape  
than it dumbly took its toll of human lives.  
I am the ice. I watched the workers die.  
The first: Sam Scott, unlucky catch boy  
who walks the scaffold high up in the air.  
Distracted by some loud, well-meant "Ahoy,"  
he steps upon a board that isn't there.  
And at *Titanic's* long-awaited launch:  
James Dobbins (last to die), not jumping clear,  
while he himself Hail Marys and huzzahs,  
is crushed by timbers as the people cheer.  
Inside Queen's Island's massive shipyard cradle,  
where men midwived the mighty ship to life,  
where those to whom the job did not prove fatal  
send up a raucous roaring at the sight,  
the dead add mournful moaning to the roar.  
Remember it. You'll hear that moan again  
before the Iceberg's tale comes to an end.

During *Titanic's* sea trials in Belfast  
it fell to me and Sixth Officer Moody  
to test the starboard lifeboats, lowering away  
with a bosun and seven able seamen each.  
We rowed to the dock and back again.  
I was appalled by one of the ABs' lack of skill with an oar,  
and I told him so. And I didn't tell it gently.  
You see, most sailors are not boatmen.  
And most boatmen are not sailors.  
I happen to be both — at full ease  
with the lowliest rowboat or the grandest ship.

Be aware that on these big passenger vessels,  
the “crew” are mostly window washers,  
waiters, bellboys, and stewards, and most  
don't know a scupper from a teacup. Oh,  
they're nice enough to have around  
if you need to have your pillows fluffed,  
but they aren't of much use in a real crisis.  
When it came time to report back to Commander Bartlett,  
the White Star Line's marine superintendent,  
I said,

“We have tested and inventoried the lifeboats, sir.  
And we find them stocked and ready.”

But I was thinking,

*God help us if we actually need them,  
since half the crew won't know  
which end of an oar goes in the water.*

Do not speak to me of lifeboats.  
*Titanic* has twenty lifeboats all told.  
Four boats more than regulations require.  
The Board of Trade inspectors approved them at once  
without so much as a second look.  
At least that's what I understand;  
I was home in Southampton at the time.  
It was Commander Bartlett who actually ran her through her paces.  
And I assure you, lifeboats were far from his mind.  
A captain's main concern must be with his ship,  
the ship herself, and how she maneuvers.

For four hours under Bartlett's hand,  
*Titanic* performed her dance on Belfast Lough.  
She executed her massive ballet of S curves and turns.  
He rang down Reverse Engines to test her stopping distance:  
she took three minutes, fifteen seconds,  
and all of eight hundred fifty yards  
before she came to a dead stop.  
Not so agile as a fish perhaps, but what whale is?  
Oh, at forty-six thousand tons, she is a whale, to be sure.  
But my *Titanic*, she is a *graceful* whale.

I feel that her trials went exceedingly well.  
According to what I'm told.  
So do not speak to me of lifeboats.  
A stable ship like *Titanic* is lifeboat enough.  
Of course I am not so foolish as to call her unsinkable.  
But I will say this: it would take a fool to sink her.

I may be many things, but I am no fool.

**BRUCE ISMAY** ∞ **THE BUSINESSMAN**

For years someone or other in Parliament has attempted  
to increase the number of lifeboats required on a ship.  
Of course safety comes before all else,  
and we've got more boats aboard than the present laws require.

So don't speak to me of lifeboats.

The shipbuilders refer to the uppermost deck as the boat deck.

But I prefer its alternate name: the sun deck.

Let us not forget that our first-class passengers

use this deck as a promenade so they might take in the sun.

Imagine their disappointment when they arrive up top

hoping to experience a spectacular sunrise at sea,

only to find their view blocked by a bunch of boats?

Lifeboats?

Why clutter a ship's boat deck with lifeboats?

First-class passengers would rather see the sunrise.

We reached Beirut at sunrise. Father sold his cart  
to add to the cash he had. Then he had to bribe  
an inspection official who “failed to notice” his sick eye.  
The ship’s whistle blasted, and finally we got under way.

During the entire boat ride to Marseilles, I worried  
that the Turks would be waiting when we arrived.  
I worried that I’d be taken from my father.  
Though I was frightened, I tried my best not to show it.  
But Elias’s knees were not weak, like mine.  
My brother is not smart enough to be scared.  
He was everywhere at once, exploring our small ship.  
He tried to drag me with him.  
“You act like an old woman,” he said.  
I tried to be polite and patient like Mama would be,  
but I wanted to hit him with my shoe!  
“Yalla! Yalla! Yalla!” he yells.  
Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! His mouth is never shut.

Once we were in France, a man who said he was a travel agent  
approached us and offered us lodging at a boardinghouse,  
a place to stay while we waited for the next ship bound for America.  
Father suspected the hotel man was charging us more than was fair.  
Since none of us spoke much French, it was difficult to know.  
So we waited. And we waited. Elias ran up and down  
the dirty halls of the boardinghouse. “Yalla! Yalla! Yalla!”  
In my heart, I thought,

*Perhaps the hotel man charges high rates  
because Elias is so loud.*

Mr. Theobald says we'll take a train to London.  
Daddy says we're going to America on a big ship.  
Alfred says that nine-year-olds shouldn't believe in dragons.  
Mummy just cries.

I turned nine last year, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December.  
My parents gave me a cap pistol and a book about dragons.  
It was the best birthday ever.

I used to like that my birthday was right before Christmas.  
The holiday feeling would go on and on and never stop.  
Then last year, just after my birthday, my baby brother, Bertie, died.  
Now no one is looking forward to my Christmas-birthday,  
and it's really not fair, since *I* didn't give Bertie the diphtheria—

it was God who did that. Isn't that right?

Sometimes Mum will hug me so hard I can barely breathe—  
then she'll cry and I'll ask her if I did something wrong.  
But she'll say, "No. You're perfect, Frankie."  
And she looks at me, but I can tell she doesn't see me.  
Dad says to give 'er time. Dad is a Frank, just like me.  
And even though he's the best tool-and-die man in Strood,  
he says, "They's some things can't be fixed."

Dad said we all need a fresh start,  
so we're moving to a city called Detroit in America.  
Dad's friend Mr. Theobald is going with us.  
So is Alfred Rush, an older boy who lives nearby.  
I asked Daddy if we couldn't rather take a lad my own age,  
but Dad said, "No. Alfred's the only other lad we've got."

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That's my name, *Harold Bride*, in Morse code.

I'm the kind of fellow who wants to be heard!

And I'll bet they heard me shout as far away as Egypt  
the day the Marconi office issued my latest assignment:

**Assistant Telegraphic Operator  
Second to Jack Phillips  
RMS *Titanic***

I didn't care so much that *Titanic* was a floating palace  
or that it was the largest ship in the world;  
what excited me most was that *Titanic* was equipped  
with the most powerful wireless system on the sea!  
Add to this an opportunity to work with Jack Phillips,  
and I just couldn't believe my luck.

So I boarded *Titanic* in Belfast, where Phillips showed me around  
the wireless shack: the operating table, where we sit at the apparatus,  
the system for logging in messages and calculating sender fees.  
And the apparatus itself! What a jewel:  
a 5-kW installation with synchronous rotary spark discharger  
connected to a huge twin T aerial running mast to mast.  
And she's never been used!

I have no idea how *Titanic's* sea trials went.  
Phillips and I were bent over the equipment the whole time.  
But that's the way of it: with our earphones and key,  
we can converse across a thousand miles  
and never leave our seat!

All the way from Belfast to Southampton  
we tested the apparatus—sending messages  
to the Liverpool and Malin Head wireless stations.  
We even reached Port Said, three thousand miles away.  
Phillips allowed me to send my own personal message:  
I couldn't help but tap out a boast to my friend Harold Cottam,  
wireless man on the steamship *Carpathia*.

**To H. Cottam, S S *Carpathia***

... .- -. / --- -- /  
-... .- . .- -. / --- .. - /  
-.-. .... .- -- .-. .- -. . .

**Say, Old Man. Break out champagne.**

**New orders.**

**Second to Phillips. Sailing *Titanic*.**

**Bet you wish you had my luck.**

**Bride**