

# NO ESCAPE

Jacques  
Futrelle

and the

TITANIC

By Jeffrey Marks



“There was not the slightest thought of danger in the minds of those who sat around the tables in the luxurious dining saloon of the *Titanic*. It was a brilliant crowd. Jewels flashed from the gowns of the women, how fondly they wore their latest Parisian gowns! It was the first time many of them had an opportunity to display their newly acquired finery.”

—Mrs. Jacques [May] Futrelle, all quotes are from *The Boston Post*, April 21/22, 1912

The sinking of the *HMS Titanic* during its maiden voyage on the night of April 14, 1912 seemed to usher in the end of an age of unprecedented peace, prosperity and progress. When the “unsinkable” ship was lost so were more than 1,500 lives, including some of the richest and most powerful figures in America.

By now, everyone in the country has heard of James Cameron’s 1997 movie of

Jacques Futrelle (1875-1912) was an admirer of Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and accordingly created his own intellectual detective, Dr. F. S. X. Van Dusen. Better known as “The Thinking Machine,” Futrelle’s sleuth appeared in over forty short stories from 1905 to 1912.

the same name. Yet despite the overall historical accuracy of the movie, one of the ill-fated ship’s notable passengers wasn’t mentioned: the mystery writer and jour-

nalist Jacques Futrelle.

“The last I saw of my husband,” his wife, 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, 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."

Jacques Futrelle was born in 1875 in Pike County, Georgia. He started writing early, taking a job at the *Atlanta Journal* by the age of 18. Within a year, he had moved to Boston to take a new position although he grew homesick and returned quickly to Atlanta and the *Journal*. Shortly after his return in 1895, he married Lily May Peel, who went by the name May. The couple then moved to New York so that Jacques could take a job as the telegraph editor at the Hearst paper, *The New York Herald*. The Futrelles lived at 71 Irving Place in the lovely Gramercy Park area of the city; his neighbors included Edith Wharton and O. Henry. In 1897, their first child Virginia was born, followed in 1899 by John.

In addition to penning feature stories and articles at the *Herald*, Futrelle started writing detective short stories. This fiction writing appealed to his creativity as well as his love of the mystery genre, particularly the Sherlock Holmes stories.

During the next year, the long hours and stress of covering the Spanish American war took a physical and mental toll on young Jacques, and eventually left him exhausted and too ill to work. His sister loaned him a home in Scituate, Massachusetts, where he and May lived until he recuperated.

After this fallow period, Futrelle didn't return to journalism instead taking a two-year contract as a theatrical manager. He and May moved to Richmond, Virginia where Jacques traveled for the small repertory company and tried his hand at dramatic writing.

At the end of his stint with the theater, Jacques took a job at the *Boston American* where he continued to write short stories. Soon Futrelle introduced an unusual new detective who was an immediate success with the American public.

Taking the intellectual Sherlock Holmes one step further, Futrelle imagined a

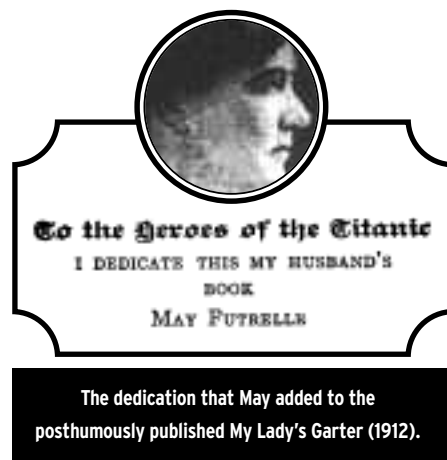
character who was the ultimate cerebral detective. Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, better known as "The Thinking Machine," appeared in over forty short stories from 1905 to 1912. The Thinking Machine was a small, nearsighted man with a huge head and an even larger ego. Unlike Holmes with his cocaine habit, Van Dusen appeared to have no human frailties. His deductive power was unhindered by emotion and human connections. A journalist by the name of Hutchinson Hatch brought suitable crimes to Van Dusen's attention and served as his assistant and foil.



Professor S. F. X. Van Dusen ponders his escape in his most famous outing, "The Problem of Cell 13."

In the most celebrated case of the Thinking Machine, "The Problem of Cell 13," Van Dusen makes a seemingly miraculous escape from a maximum security prison. In Van Dusen's world, the mind is the master of all things. Cement is no match for cerebrum.

The stories were published in the *Boston American* to much popular success. In 1906, Jacques left the newspaper business for good, this time turning his attention to novels. The next few years were busy and successful ones for the young family. They spent much time in Scituate, where Jacques



and May built a house known as "Stepping Stones" that overlooked the harbor.

In 1912 the couple traveled in Europe for several weeks while Jacques wrote magazine articles, visited a number of publishers and promoted his work amongst European readers. In pursuit of more technical information about criminal investigating, he also made a research visit to Scotland Yard.

The couple had left their children with Jacques' parents, and decided to come home early to see them. On the night before sailing, friends had gathered in London to celebrate Jacques' 37th birthday. The party did not end until 3:00 a.m. and the Futrelles never went to bed. Instead, they packed and headed for Southampton. Mrs. Futrelle was later to lament that "if my husband had got drunk that night, he might not have sailed, and he might be alive today. But he never did drink much."

On the fateful night of April 14, she and Jacques were in their first class stateroom when they felt a "slight concussion." Jacques reassured his wife that it was 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." May wanted more assurance, and insisted that her husband investigate further. "In a moment, we...understood that the situation was desperate."

Soon both had donned life jackets, but discovered only women and children were allowed to board the lifeboats. May threw her arms around her husband, refusing to leave him. Jacques insisted that she board. In an incident which was fictionalized in

# Jacques Futrelle and the Titanic

JACQUES FUTRELLE  
HOMEPAGE

www.futrelle.com

THE FUTRELLE FAMILY  
WEBSITE

www.dreklaw.tripod.com/futrelle.htm

ENCYCLOPEDIA TITANICA

www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/  
bio/p/1st/futrelle\_j.shtml

ARTICLE ABOUT  
MAY FUTRELLE

www.law.uga.edu/academics/profiles/  
dwilkes\_more/his24\_survived.html

THE TITANIC MURDERS

by Max Allan Collins

(Penguin Books, ISBN 0425168107)

\$5.99.

In which a fictionalized Jacques  
Futrelle investigates a murder.

## Works of Jacques Futrelle

THE CHASE OF  
THE GOLDEN PLATE

1906

THE THINKING MACHINE

1907

THE SIMPLE CASE OF SUSAN

1908

THE THINKING MACHINE  
ON THE CASE

1908

ELUSIVE ISABEL

1909

THE DIAMOND MASTER

1909

THE HIGH HAND

1911

MY LADY'S GARTER

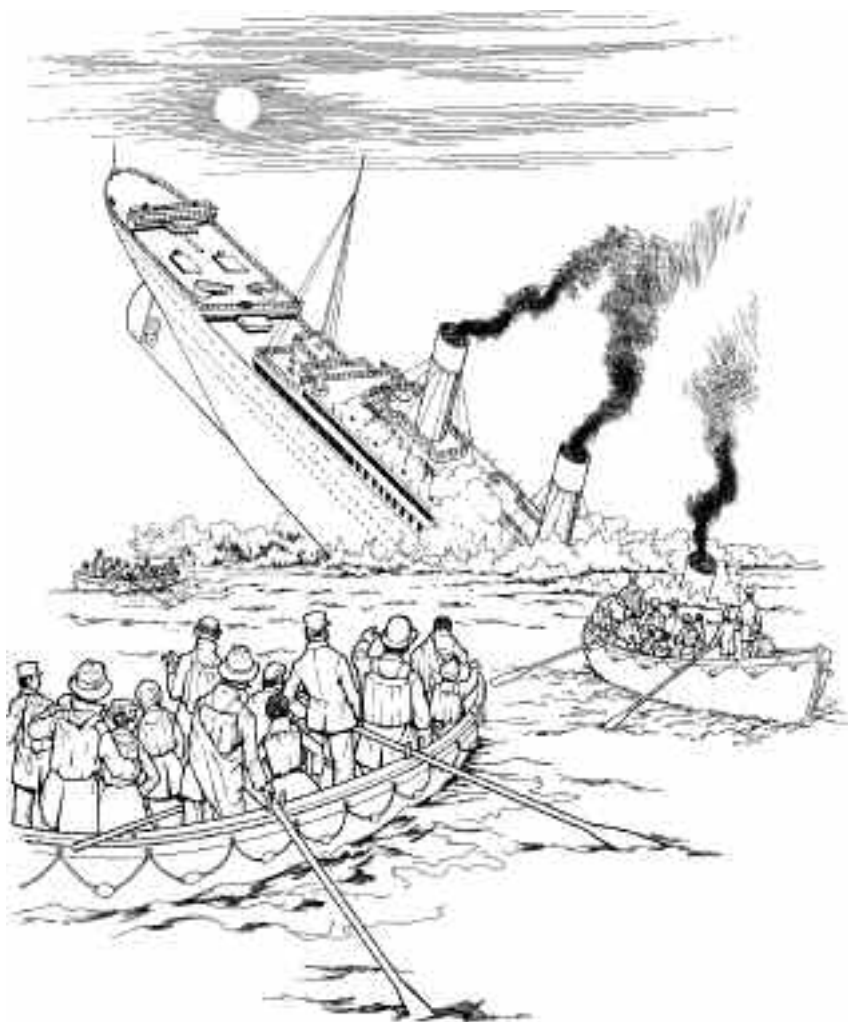
1912

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

1914

LIEUTENANT  
WHAT'S-HIS-NAME

(ed. by May Futrelle), 1915



the 1997 film, May leapt from the lifeboat just as it started its descent to the water and frantically fought her way back to her husband. Jacques assured her repeatedly that he would survive the disaster by holding on to the side of one of the lifeboats, neglecting to mention the frigid waters of the North Atlantic would surely kill him.

“For God’s sake, go! It’s your last chance, go!” May later remembered him pleading. He reminded her of her duty to their young children, finally convincing her.

Lifeboat No. 9 was launched only half full, as so many of the lifeboats were that chaotic night. As the boat descended, May “gave up hope that my husband could be saved.”

Jacques Futrelle’s body was never recovered.

Two weeks after the *Titanic* sank, May Futrelle wrote a vivid account of the tragedy which was published in *The Boston Post*. She was one of the eyewitnesses who re-

ported that the band continued to play as the doomed ship sank.

Ironically enough for a writer best remembered for a tale of brilliant escape, Futrelle heroically chose to stay aboard the *Titanic* in the hope that others might be saved. All of the stories that Jacques Futrelle wrote during his stay in Europe were lost as well that terrible night, leaving his canon far short of what it might have been.

May would live until 1967. She kept her husband’s memory alive by finishing his last uncompleted novel and promoting his works. And every year, on the anniversary of Jacques’ death, she cast a bouquet of flowers off the cliffs at Scituate into the chilly North Atlantic. ♦♦

.....  
*Jeffrey A. Marks is the Agatha and Anthony nominated author of The Ambush of My Name, a General Grant mystery published by Silver Dagger Press.*