

Going Under

Jack Dann

When I first met Jack Dann, he had one arm in a cast and a pretty woman, feebly protesting, slung over the other shoulder, and what can one say? No one else at the party seemed surprised that he should show up that way.

Jack is bawdy and hilarious, irrepressible—a very social and sociable creature invading a profession supposedly full of introverted bookworms. You might expect his writing to be lighthearted, slick; but it's not.

There's a phenomenon, familiar to people who have writers as friends, that I call The Buchwald Paradox. The name comes from an article in the Washington Post Sunday magazine, some years back, about the problems of making up a guest list for an upper-crust Washington party. Never ever invite Art Buchwald, it advised; this man who is so funny on paper is an absolute sea anchor at a party. He sits behind his cigar and mumbles that the world is going to hell. The author of this article found it to be generally true that funny writers were rather morose people. But the converse is also true. If you want to liven up your party, she says you should invite a writer whose work is unrelentingly serious. And nail down the lampshades.

So it is with Jack. Most of his writing is rather deep and dark, carefully crafted, thoughtful, intense. When he emerges from the chrysalis of work he is quite a different sort of animal. (This paradox also characterizes at least two other contributors to this volume, Gene Wolfe and Gardner Dozois.)

Jack has published four novels, a book of short stories, and a chapbook of poetry; he has edited or co-edited nine anthologies of science fiction. His stories have appeared in most of the science fiction magazines and the more prestigious original anthologies, as well as the occasional slick journal of popular gynecology. This one, from Omni magazine, takes us oddly forward and back in time, centering around an event that is a mod-

ern archetype of helpless terror. -

She was beautiful, huge, as graceful as a racing liner. She was a floating Crystal Palace, as magnificent as anything J. P. Morgan could conceive. Designed by Alexander Carlisle and built by Harland and Wolff, she wore the golden band of the company along all nine hundred feet of her. She rose 175 feet like the side of a cliff, with nine steel decks, four sixty-two foot funnels, over two thousand windows and side-lights to illuminate the luxurious cabins and suites and public rooms. She weighed 46,000 tons, and

her reciprocating engines and Parsons-type turbines could generate over fifty thousand horsepower and speed the ship over twenty knots. She had a gymnasium, a Turkish bath, squash and racquet courts, a swimming pool, libraries and lounges and sitting rooms. There were rooms and suites to accommodate 735 first-class passen -

gers, 674 in second class, and over a thousand in steerage.

She was the R.M.S. Titanic, and Stephen met Esme on her Promenade Deck as she pulled out of her Southampton dock, bound for New York City on her maiden voyage.

Esme stood beside him, resting what looked to be a cedar box on the rail, and gazed out over the cheering crowds on the docks below. Stephen was struck immediately by how beautiful she was. Actually, she was plain-featured, and quite young.

She had a high forehead, a small, straight nose, wet brown eyes that peeked out from under plucked, arched eyebrows, and a mouth that was a little too full. Her blond hair, though clean, was carelessly brushed and tangled in the back. Yet, to Stephen, she seemed beautiful.

"Hello," Stephen said, feeling slightly awkward. But colored ribbons and confetti snakes were coiling through the air, and anything seemed possible.

Esme glanced at him. "Hello, you," she said.

"Pardon?" Stephen asked.

"I said, 'Hello, you.' That's an expression that was in vogue when this boat first sailed, if you'd like to know. It means 'Hello, I think you're interesting and would consider sleeping with you if I were so inclined.'"

"You must call it a ship," Stephen said.

She laughed and for an instant looked at him intently, as if in that second she could see everything about him—that he was taking this voyage because he was bored with his life, that nothing had ever really happened to him. He felt his face become hot. "Okay, 'ship,' does that make you feel better?" she asked. "Anyway, I want to pretend that I'm living in the past. I don't ever want to return to the present, do you?"

"Well, I . . . ' _

"Yes, I suppose you do, want to return, that is."

"What makes you think that?"

"Look how you're dressed. You shouldn't be wearing modern clothes on this ship. You'll have to change later, you know." She was perfectly dressed in a powder-blue walking suit with matching jacket, a pleated, velvet-trimmed front blouse, and an ostrich feather hat. She looked as if she had stepped out of another century, and just now Stephen could believe she had.

"What's your name?" Stephen asked.

"Esme," she answered. Then she turned the box that she was resting on the rail and opened the side facing the dock. "You see," she said to the box, "we really are here."

"What did you say?" Stephen asked.

"I was just talking to Poppa," she said, closing and latching the box.

"Who?"

"I'll show you later, if you like," she promised. Then bells began to ring and the ship's whistles cut the air. There was a cheer from the dock and on board, and the ship moved slowly out to sea. To Stephen it seemed that the land, not the ship, was moving. The whole of England was just floating peacefully away, while the string band on the ship's bridge played Oscar Strauss's *The Chocolate Soldier*.

They watched until the land had dwindled to a thin line on the horizon, then Esme reached naturally for Stephen's hand, squeezed it for a moment, then hurried away. Before Stephen could speak, she had disappeared into the crowd, and he stood looking after her long after she had gone.

Stephen found her again in the *Cafe Parisien*, sitting in a large wicker chair beside an ornately trellised wall.

"Well, hello, you," Esme said, smiling. She was the very model of a smart, stylish young lady.

"Does that mean you're still interested?" Stephen asked, standing before her. Her smile was infectious, and Stephen felt himself losing his poise, as he couldn't stop grinning.

"But *mais oui*," she said. Then she relaxed in her chair, slumped down as if she could instantly revert to being a child—in fact, the dew was still on her—and she looked around the room as though Stephen had suddenly disappeared.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"That's French, which no one uses anymore, but it was the language of the world when this ship first sailed."

"I believe it was English," Stephen said smoothly.

"Well," she said, looking up at him, "it means that I might be interested if you'd kindly sit down instead of looking down at me from the heights." Stephen sat down beside her and she said, "It took you long enough to find me."

"Well," Stephen said, "I had to dress. Remember? You didn't find my previous attire ac—"

"I agree and I apologize," she said quickly, as if suddenly afraid of hurting his feelings. She folded her hands behind the box that she had centered perfectly on the damask-covered table. Her leg brushed against his; indeed, he did look fine, dressed in gray striped trousers, spats, black morning coat, blue vest, and a silk cravat tied under a butterfly collar. He fiddled with his hat, then placed it on the seat of the empty chair beside him. No doubt he would forget to take it.

"Now," she said, "don't you feel better?"

Stephen was completely taken with her; this had never happened to him before. He found it inexplicable. A tall and very English waiter disturbed him by asking if he wished to order cocktails, but Esme asked for a Narcodrine instead.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but Narcodrines or inhalors are not publicly sold on the ship," the waiter said dryly.

"Well, that's what I want."

"One would have to ask the steward for the more modern refreshments."

"You did say you wanted to live in the past," Stephen said to Esme, and ordered a Campari for her and a Drambuie for himself.

"Right now I would prefer a robot to take my order," Esme said.

"I'm sorry, but we have no robots on the ship either," the waiter said before he turned away.

"Are you going to show me what's inside the box?" Stephen asked.

"I don't like that man," Esme said.

"Esme, the box . . ."

"It might cause a stir if I opened it here."

"I would think you'd like that," Stephen said.

"You see, you know me intimately already." Then she smiled and winked at someone four tables away. "Isn't he cute?"

"Who?"

"The little boy with the black hair parted in the middle." She waved at him, but he ignored her and made an obscene gesture at a woman who looked to be his nanny. Then Esme opened the box, which drew the little boy's attention. She pulled out a full-sized head of a man and placed it gently beside the box.

"Jesus," Stephen said.

"Stephen, I'd like you to meet Poppa. Poppa, this is Stephen."

"I'm pleased to meetcha, Stephen," said the head in a full, resonant voice.

"Speak properly, Poppa," Esme said. "Meet you."

"Don't correct your father." The head rolled his eyes toward Stephen and then said to Esme, "Turn

me a bit, so I can see your friend without eyestrain." The head had white hair, which was a bit yellowed on the ends. It was neatly trimmed at the sides and combed up into a pompadour in the front. The face was strong, although already gone to seed. It was the face of a man in his late sixties, lined and suntanned.

"What shall I call, uh, him?" Stephen asked.

"You may speak to me directly, son," said the head. "My given name is Elliot."

"Pleased to meetcha," Stephen said, recouping. He had heard of such things; but had never seen one before.

"These are going to be all the rage in the next few months," Esme said. "They aren't on the mass market yet, but you can imagine their potential for both adults and children. They can be programmed to talk and react very realistically."

"So I see," Stephen said.

The head smiled, accepting the compliment.

"He also learns and thinks quite well," Esme continued.

"I should hope so," said the head.

The room was buzzing with conversation. At the other end, a small dance band was playing a waltz. Only a few Europeans and Americans openly stared at the head; the

Africans and Asians, who were in the majority, pretended to ignore it. The little boy was staring unabashedly.

"Is your father alive?" Stephen asked.

"I am her father," the head said, its face betraying its impatience. "At least give me some respect."

"Be civil, or I'll close you up," Esme said, piqued. She looked at Stephen. "Yes, he died recently. That's the reason I'm taking this trip, and that's the reason for this" She nodded to the head. "He's marvelous, though. He is my father in every way." Then, mischievously, she said, "Well, I did make a few changes. Poppa was very demanding, you know."

"You ungrateful-

"Shut up. Poppa."

And Poppa simply shut his eyes.

"That's all I have to say," Esme said, "and he turns himself off. In case you aren't as perceptive as I think you are, I love Poppa very much."

The little boy, unable to control his curiosity any longer, came over to the table, just as Esme was putting Poppa back in the box. In his rush to get to the table, he knocked over one of the ivy pots along the wall. "Why'd you put him away?" he asked. "I want to talk to him. Take him out, just for a minute."

"No," Esme said firmly, "he's asleep just now. And what's your name?"

"Michael, and please don't be condescending."

"I'm sorry, Michael."

"Apology accepted. Now, please, can I see the head, just for a minute?"

"If you like, Michael, you can have a private audience with Poppa tomorrow," Esme said. "How's that?"

"But-"

"Shouldn't you be getting back to your nanny now?" Stephen asked, standing up and nodding to Esme to do the same. They would have no privacy here. -

"Stuff it," Michael said. "And she's not my nanny, she's my sister." Then he pulled a face at Stephen; he was able to

contort his lips, drawing the right side toward the left and left toward the right, as if they were made of rubber. Michael followed Stephen and Esme out of the cafe and up the staircase to the Boat Deck.

The Boat Deck was not too crowded; it was brisk out, and the breeze had a chill to it. Looking forward, Stephen and Esme could see the ship's four huge smokestacks to their left and a cluster of four lifeboats to their right. The ocean was a smooth, deep green expanse turning to blue toward the horizon. The sky was empty, except for a huge, nuclear-powered airship that floated high over the Titanic-the dirigible California, a French luxury liner capable of carrying two thousand passengers.

"Are you two married?" Michael asked, after pointing out the airship above. He trailed a few steps behind them.

"No, we are not," Esme said impatiently. "Not yet, at least," and Stephen felt exhilarated at the thought of her really wanting him. Actually, it made no sense, for he could have any young woman he wanted. Why Esme? Simply because just now she was perfect.

"You're quite pretty," Michael said to Esme.

"Well, thank you," Esme replied, warming to him. "I like you too."

"Watch it," said the boy. "Are you going to stay on the ship and die when it sinks?"

"No!" Esme said, as if taken aback.

"What about your friend?"

"You mean Poppa?"

Vexed, the boy said, "No, him," giving Stephen a nasty look.

"Well, I don't know," Esme said. Her face was flushed. "Have you opted for a lifeboat, Stephen?"

"Yes, of course I have."

"Well, we're going to die on the ship," Michael said.

"Don't be silly," Esme said.

"Well, we are."

"Who's 'we'?" Stephen asked.

"My sister and I. We've made a pact to go down with the ship."

"I don't believe it," Esme said. She stopped beside one of the lifeboats, rested the box containing Poppa on the rail, and gazed downward at the ocean spume curling away from the side of the ship.

"He's just baiting us," Stephen said, growing tired of the game. "Anyway, he's too young to make such a decision, and his sister, if she is his sister, could not decide such a thing for him, even if she were his guardian. It would be illegal."

"We're at sea," Michael said in the nagging tone of voice children use. "I'll discuss the ramifications of my demise with Poppa tomorrow. I'm sure he's more conversant with such things than you are."

"Shouldn't you be getting back to your sister now?" Stephen asked. Michael responded by making the rubber-lips face at him, and then walked away, tugging at the back of his shorts, as if his undergarments had bunched up beneath. He only turned around to wave good-bye to Esme, who blew him a kiss.

"Intelligent little brat," Stephen said.

But Esme looked as if she had just now forgotten all about Stephen and the little boy. She stared at the box as tears rolled from her eyes.

"Esme?"

"I love him and he's dead," she said, and then she seemed to brighten. She took Stephen's hand and they went inside, down the stairs, through several noisy corridors-stateroom parties were in full swing-to her suite. Stephen was a bit nervous, but all things considered, everything was progressing at a proper pace.

Esme's suite had a parlor and a private promenade deck with Elizabethan half-timbered walls. She led him right into the plush-carpeted, velvet-papered bedroom, which contained a huge four-poster bed, an antique night table, and a

desk and a stuffed chair beside the door. The ornate, harp sculpture desk lamp was on, as was the lamp just inside the bed curtains. A porthole gave a view of sea and sky. But to Stephen it seemed that the bed

overpowered the room.

Esme pushed the desk lamp aside, and then took Poppa, out of the box and placed him carefully in the center of the desk. "There." Then she undressed quickly, looking shyly away from Stephen, who was taking his time. She slipped between the parted curtains of the bed and complained that she could hear the damn engines thrumming right through these itchy pillows-she didn't like silk. After a moment she sat up in bed and asked him if he intended to get undressed or just stand there.

"I'm sorry," Stephen said, "but it's just-" He nodded toward the head.

"Poppa is turned off, you know."

Afterward, reaching for an inhaler, taking a long pull, and then finally opening her eyes, she said, "I love you too." Stephen only moved in his sleep.

"That's very nice, dear," Poppa said, opening his eyes and smiling at her from the desk.

Little Michael knocked on Esme's door at seven-thirty the next morning.

"Good morning," Michael said, looking Esme up and down. She had not bothered to put anything on before answering the door. "I came to see Poppa. I won't disturb you."

"Jesus, Mitchell-"

"Michael."

"Jesus, Michael, it's too early for-"

"Early bird gets the worm."

"Oh, right," Esme said. "And what the hell does that mean?"

"I calculated that my best chance of talking with Poppa was if I woke you up. You'll go back to bed and I can talk with

him in peace. My chances would be greatly diminished if-"

"Awright, come in."

"The steward in the hall just saw you naked."

"Big deal. Look, why don't you come back later, I'm not ready for this, and I don't know why I let you in the room."

"You see, it worked." Michael looked around the room. "He's in the bedroom, right?"

Esme nodded and followed him into the bedroom. Michael was wearing the same wrinkled shirt and

shorts that he had on yesterday; his hair was not combed, just tousled.

"Is he with you, too?" Michael asked.

"If you mean Stephen, yes."

"I thought so," said Michael. Then he sat down at the desk and talked to Poppa.

"Can't we have any privacy?" Stephen asked when Esme came back to bed. She shrugged and took a pull at her inhaler. Drugged, she looked even softer, more vulnerable. "I thought you told me that Poppa was turned off all night," he continued angrily.

"But he was turned off," Esme said. "I just now turned him back on for Michael." Then she cuddled up to Stephen, as intimately as if they had been in love for days. That seemed to mollify him.

"Do you have a spare Narco-drine in there?" Michael shouted.

Stephen looked at Esme and laughed. "No," Esme said, "you're too young for such things." She opened the curtain so they could watch Michael. He made the rubber-lips face at Stephen and then said, "I might as well try everything. I'll be dead soon."

"You know," Esme said to Stephen, "I believe him."

"I'm going to talk to his sister, or whoever she is, about this."

"I heard what you said." Michael turned away from Poppa, who seemed lost in thought. "I have very good hearing, I heard everything you said. Go ahead and talk to her,

talk to the captain, if you like. It won't do you any good. I'm an international hero, if you'd like to know. That girl who wears the camera in her hair already did an interview for me for the poll." Then he gave them his back and resumed his hushed conversation with Poppa.

"Who does he mean?" asked Esme.

"The woman reporter from Interfax," Stephen said.

"Her job is to guess which passengers will opt to die, and why," interrupted Michael, who turned around in his chair. "She interviews the most interesting passengers, then gives her predictions to her viewers—and they are considerable. They respond immediately to a poll taken several times a day. Keeps us in their minds, and everybody loves the smell of death." Michael turned back to Poppa.

"Well, she hasn't tried to interview me,"

"Do you really want her to?" Stephen asked.

"And why not? I'm for conspicuous consumption, and I want so much for this experience to be a success. Goodness, let the whole world watch us sink, if they want. They might just as well take bets." Then, in a conspiratorial whisper, she said, "None of us really knows who's opted to die. That's part of the excitement. Isn't it?"

"I suppose," Stephen said.

"Oh, you're such a prig," Esme said. "One would think you're a doer."

"What?"

"A doer. All of us are either doers or voyeurs, isn't that right? But the doers mean business," and to illustrate she cocked her head, stuck out her tongue, and made gurgling noises as if she were drowning. "The voyeurs, however, are just along for the ride. Are you sure you're not a doer?"

Michael, who had been eavesdropping again, said, referring to Stephen, "He's not a doer, you can bet on that! He's a voyeur of the worst sort. He takes it all seriously."

"Mitchell, that's not a very nice thing to say. Apologize or I'll turn Poppa off and you can go right-"

"I told you before, it's Michael. M-I-C-H-A-"

"Now that's enough disrespect from both of you," Poppa said. "Michael, stop goading Stephen. Esme says she loves him. Esme, be nice to Michael. He just made my day. And you don't have to threaten to turn me off. I'm turning myself off. I've got some thinking to do." Poppa closed his eyes and nothing Esme said would awaken him.

"Well, he's never done that before," Esme said to Michael, who was now standing before the bed and trying to place his feet as wide apart as he could. "What did you say to him?"

"Nothing much."

"Come on, Michael, I let you into the room, remember?"

"I remember. Can I come into bed with you?"

"Hell, no," Stephen said.

"He's only a child," Esme said as she moved over to make room for Michael, who climbed in between her and Stephen. "Be a sport. You're the man I love."

"Do you believe in transmigration of souls?" Michael asked Esme.

"What?"

"Well, I asked Poppa if he remembered any of his past lives, that is, if he had any. Poppa's conscious, you know, even if he is a machine."

"Did your sister put such ideas in your head?" Esme asked.

"Now you're being condescending." However, Michael made the rubber-lips face at Stephen, rather than at Esme. Stephen made a face back at him, and Michael howled in appreciation, then became quite serious and said, "On the contrary, I helped my sister to remember. It wasn't easy, either, because she hasn't lived as many lives as I have. She's younger than me. I bet I could help you to remember," he said to Esme.

"And what about me?" asked Stephen, playing along, enjoying the game a little now.

"You're a nice man, but you're too filled up with philosophy and rationalizations. You wouldn't grasp any of it; it's too simple. Anyway, you're in love and distracted."

"Well, I'm in love too," Esme said petulantly.

"But you're in love with everything. He's only in love with one thing at a time."

"Am I a thing to you?" Esme asked Stephen.

"Certainly not."

But Michael would not be closed out. "I can teach you how to meditate," he said to Esme. "It's easy, once you know how. You just watch things in a different way."

"Then would I see all my past lives?" Esme asked.

"Maybe."

"Is that what you do?"

"I started when I was six," Michael said. "I don't do anything anymore, I just see differently. It's something like dreaming." Then he said to Esme, "You two are like a dream, and I'm outside it. Can I come in?"

Delighted, Esme asked, "You mean, become a family?"

"Until the end," Michael said. '~

"I think it's wonderful, what do you think, Stephen?"

Stephen lay back against the wall, impatient, ignoring

them. w ,

"Come on, be a sport," Michael said. "I'll even teach you how to make the rubber-lips face."

Stephen and Esme finally managed to lose Michael by lunchtime. Esme seemed happy enough to be rid of the boy, and they spent the rest of the day discovering the ship. They took a quick dip in the pool, but the water was too cold and it was chilly outside. If the dirigible was floating above, they did not see it because the sky was covered with heavy gray clouds. They changed clothes, strolled along the glass-enclosed lower Promenade Deck, looked for the occasional flying fish, and spent an interesting half hour being interviewed by the woman from Interfax. They took a snack in the opulent

first-class smoking room. Esme loved the mirrors and stained glass windows. After they explored cabin

and tourist class, Esme talked Stephen into a quick game of squash, which he played rather well. By dinnertime they found their way into the garish, blue-tiled Turkish bath. It was empty and hot, and they made gentle but exhausting love on one of the Caesar couches. Then they changed clothes again, danced in the lounge, and took a late supper in the Cafe.

He spent the night with Esme in her suite. It was about four o'clock in the morning when he was awakened by a hushed conversation. Rather than make himself known, Stephen feigned sleep and listened.

"I can't make a decision," Esme said as she carefully paced back and forth beside the desk upon which Poppa rested.

"You've told me over and over what you know you must do," said Poppa. "And now you change your mind?"

"I think things have changed."

"And how is that?"

"Stephen, he . . ."

"Ah," Poppa said, "so now love is the escape. But do you know how long that will last?"

"I didn't expect to meet him, to feel better about everything."

"It will pass."

"But right now I don't want to die."

"You've spent a fortune on this trip, and on me. And now you want to throw it away. Look, the way you feel about Stephen is all for the better, don't you understand? It will make your passing away all the sweeter because you're happy, in love, whatever you want to claim for it. But now you want to throw everything away that we've planned and take your life some other time, probably when you're desperate and unhappy and don't have me around to help you. You wish to die as mindlessly as you were born."

"That's not so, Poppa. But it's up to me to choose."

"You've made your choice, now stick to it, or you'll drop dead like I did."

Stephen opened his eyes; he could not stand this any longer. "Esme, what the hell are you talking about?"

She looked startled and then said to Poppa, "You were purposely talking loudly to wake him up, weren't you?"

"You had me programmed to help you. I love you and I care about you. You can't undo that!"

"I can do whatever I wish," she said petulantly.

"Then let me help you, as I always have. If I were alive and had my body, I would tell you exactly what I'm telling you now."

"What is going on?" Stephen asked.

"She's fooling you," Poppa said gently to Stephen. "She's using you because she's frightened."

"I am not!"

"She's grasping at anyone she can find."

"I am not!" she shouted.

"What the hell is he telling you?" Stephen asked.

"The truth," Poppa said.

Esmesat down beside Stephen on the bed and began to cry, then, as if sliding easily into a new role, she looked at him and said, "I did program Poppa to help me die."

Disgusted, Stephen drew away from her.

"Poppa and I talked everything over very carefully, we even discussed what to do if something like this came about."

"You mean if you fell in love and wanted to live."

"Yes."

"And she decided that under no circumstances would she undo what she had done," Poppa said. "She has planned the best possible death for herself, a death to be experienced and savored. She's given everything up and spent all her money to do it. She's broke. She can't go back now, isn't that right, Esme?"

Esmelooked at Stephen and nodded.

"But you're not sure, I can see that," Stephen insisted.

"I will help her, as I always have," said Poppa.

"Jesus, shut that thing up," Stephen shouted.

"He's not a-"

"Please, at least give us a chance," Stephen said to Esme. "You're the first authentic experience I've ever had, I love you, I don't want it to end"

Poppa pleaded his case eloquently, but Esme told him to go to sleep.

He obediently closed his eyes.

The great ship hit an iceberg on the fourth night of her voyage, exactly one day earlier than scheduled. It was Saturday, 11:40 P.m. and the air was full of colored lights from tiny splinters of ice floating like motes of dust. "Whiskers 'round the light" they used to be called by sailors. The sky was a canopy of twinkling stars, and it was so cold that one might imagine they were fragments of ice floating in a cold, dark, inverted sea overhead.

Stephen and Esme were again standing by the rail of the Promenade Deck. Both were dressed in the early-twentieth century accouterments provided by the ship: he in woolen trousers, jacket, motoring cap, and caped overcoat with a long scarf; she in a fur coat, a stylish Merry Widow hat, high button shoes, and a black velvet, two-piece suit edged with white silk. She looked ravishing, and very young, despite the clothes.

"Throw it away," Stephen said in an authoritative voice. "Now!"

Esme brought the cedar box containing Poppa to her chest, as if she were about to throw it forward, then slowly placed it atop the rail again. "I can't."

"Do you want me to do it?" Stephen asked.

"I don't see why I must throw him away."

"Because we're starting a new life together. We want to live, not--"

Just then someone shouted and, as if in the distance, a bell rang three times.

"Could there be another ship nearby?" Esme asked.

"Esme, throw the box away!" Stephen snapped; and then he saw it. He pulled Esme backward, away from the rail. An iceberg as high as the fore-castle deck scraped against the side of the ship; it almost seemed that the bluish, glistening mountain of ice was another ship passing, that the ice rather than the ship was moving. Pieces of ice rained upon the deck, slid across the varnished wood, and then the iceberg was lost in the darkness astern. It must have been at least one hundred feet high.

"O my god!" Esme screamed, rushing to the rail and leaning over it.

"What is it?"

"Poppa, I dropped him, when you pulled me away from the iceberg. I didn't mean to"

Stephen put his arms around her, but she pulled away. "If you didn't mean to throw it away--"

"Him, not it!"

"-him away, then why did you bring him up here?"

"To satisfy you, to . . . I don't know, Stephen. I suppose I was going to try to do it."

"Well, it's done, and you're going to feel better, I promise. I love you. Esme."

"I love you, Stephen," she said distractedly. A noisy crowd gathered on the deck around them. Some were quite drunk and were kicking large chunks of ice about, as if they were playing soccer.

"Come on, then," Stephen said, "let's get heavy coats and blankets, and we'll wait on deck for a lifeboat. We'll take the first one out and watch the ship sink together."

"No, I'll meet you right here in an hour."

"Esme, it's too dangerous, I don't think we should separate." Stephen glimpsed the woman from Interfax standing alone on the elevated sun deck, recording this event for her millions of viewers.

"We've got time before anything is going to happen."

"We don't know that," Stephen insisted. "Don't you realize that we're off schedule? We were supposed to hit that iceberg tomorrow."

But Esme had disappeared into the crowd.

It was bitter cold, and the Boat Deck was filled with people, all rushing about, shouting, scrambling for the lifeboats, and, inevitably, those who had changed their minds at the last moment about going down with the ship were shouting the loudest, trying the hardest to be permitted into the boats, not one of which had been lowered yet. There were sixteen wooden lifeboats and four canvas Englehardts, the collapsibles. But they could not be lowered away until the davits were cleared of the two forward boats. The crew was quiet, each man busy with the boats and davits. All the boats were now swinging free of the ship, hanging just beside the Boat Deck.

"We'll let you know when it's time to board," shouted an officer to the families crowding around him.

The floor was listing. Esme was late, and Stephen wasn't going to wait. At this rate, the ship would be bow-down in the water in no time.

She must be with Michael, he thought. The little bastard must have talked her into dying.

Michael had a stateroom on C Deck.

Stephen knocked, called to Michael and Esme, tried to open the door, and finally kicked the lock free.

Michael was sitting on the bed, which was a Pullman berth. His sister lay beside him, dead.

"Where's Esme?" Stephen demanded, repelled by the sight of Michael sitting so calmly beside his dead sister.

"Not here. Obviously." Michael smiled, then made the rubber-lips face at Stephen.

"Jesus," Stephen said. "Put your coat on, you're coming with me."

Michael laughed and patted his hair down. "I'm already dead, just like my sister, almost. I took a pill too, see?"

and he held up a small brown bottle. "Anyway, they wouldn't let me on a lifeboat. I didn't sign up for one, remember?"

"You're a baby, they-"

"I thought Poppa explained that to you." Michael lay down beside his sister and watched Stephen like a puppy with its head cocked at an odd angle.

"You do know where Esme is, now tell me."

"You never understood her. She came here to die."

"That's all changed," Stephen said, wanting to wring the boy's neck.

"Nothing's changed. Esme loves me, too. And everything else."

"Tell me where she is."

"It's too late for me to teach you how to meditate. In a way, you're already dead. No memory, or maybe you've just been born. No past lives. A baby." Again, Michael made the rubber-lips face. Then he closed his eyes. He whispered, "She's doing what I'm doing."

An instant later, he stopped breathing. ,

Stephen searched the ship, level by level, broke in on the parties, where those who had opted for death were having a last fling, looked into the lounges where many old couples sat, waiting for the end. He made his way down to F Deck, where he had made love to Esme in the Turkish bath. The water was up to his knees; it was green and soapy. He was afraid, for the list was becoming worse minute by minute; everything was happening so fast.

The water rose, even as he walked.

He had to get to the stairs, had to get up and out, onto a lifeboat, away from the ship, but on he walked, looking for Esme, unable to stop. He had to find her. She might even be on the Boat Deck right now, he thought, wading as best he could through a corridor.

But he had to satisfy himself that she wasn't down here.

The Turkish bath was filling with water, and the lights

were still on, giving the room a ghostly illumination. Oddments floated in the room: blue slippers, a comb,

scraps of paper, cigarettes, and several seamless plastic packages.

On the farthest couch, Esme sat meditating, her eyes closed and hands folded on her lap. She wore a simple white dress. Relieved and overjoyed, he shouted to her. She jerked awake, looking disoriented, shocked to see him. She stood up and, without a word, waded toward the other exit, dipping her hands into the water, as if to speed her on her way.

"Esme, where are you going?" Stephen called, following. "Don't run away from me."

Just then an explosion pitched them both into the water, and a wall gave way. A solid sheet of water seemed to be crashing into the room, smashing Stephen, pulling him under and sweeping him away. He fought to reach the surface and tried to swim back, to find Esme. A lamp broke away from the ceiling, just missing him. "Esme!" he shouted, but he couldn't see her, and then he found himself choking, swimming, as the water carried him through a corridor and away from her.

Finally, Stephen was able to grab the iron curl of a railing and pull himself onto a dry step. There was another explosion, the floor pitched, yet still the lights glowed. He looked down at the water that filled the corridor, the Turkish bath, the entire deck, and he screamed for Esme.

The ship shuddered, then everything was dead quiet. In the great rooms, chandeliers hung at angles; tables and chairs had skidded across the floors and seemed to squat against the walls like wooden beasts. Still the lights burned, as if all were quite correct, except gravity, which was misbehaving.

Stephen walked and climbed, followed by the sea, as if in a dream.

Numbed, he found himself back on the Boat Deck. But part of the deck was already submerged. Almost everyone had moved aft, climbing uphill as the bow dipped farther into the water.

The lifeboats were gone, as were the crew. Even now he

looked for Esme, still hoping that she had somehow survived. Men and women were screaming "I don't want to die," while others clung together in small groups, some crying, others praying, while there were those who were very calm, enjoying the disaster. They stood by the rail, looking out toward the lifeboats or at the dirigible, which floated above. Many had changed their clothes and looked resplendent in their early twentieth-century costumes. One man, dressed in pajama bottoms and a blue and gold smoking jacket, climbed over the rail and just stepped into the frigid water.

But there were a few men and women atop the officers' quarters. They were working hard, trying to launch collapsible lifeboats C and D, their only chance of getting safely away from the ship.

"Hey!" Stephen called to them, just now coming to his senses. "Do you need any help up there?" He realized that he was really going to die unless he did something.

He was ignored by those who were pushing one of the freed collapsibles off the port side of the roof. Someone shouted, "Damn!" The boat had landed upside down in the water.

"It's better than nothing," shouted a woman, and she and her friends jumped after the boat.

Stephen shivered; he was not yet ready to leap into the twenty-eight-degree water, although he knew

therewasn't much time left, and he had to get away from the ship before it went down. Everyone on or close to the ship would be sucked under. He crossed to the starboard side, where some other men were trying to push the boat "up" to the edge of the deck. The great ship was listing heavily to port.

This time Stephen didn't ask; he just joined the work. No one complained. They were trying to slide the boat over the edge on planks. All these people looked to be in top physical shape; Stephen noticed that about half of them were women wearing the same warm coats as the men. This was a game to all of them, he suspected, and they were enjoying it. Each one

was going to beat the odds, one way or another; the very thrill was to outwit fate, opt to die and yet survive.

But then the bridge was underwater.

There was a terrible crashing, and Stephen slid along the float as everything tilted.

Everyone was shouting; Stephen saw more people than he thought possible to be left on the ship. People were jumping overboard. They ran before a great wave that washed along the deck. Water swirled around Stephen and the others nearby.

"She's going down," someone shouted. Indeed, the stern of the ship was swinging upward. The lights flickered. There was a roar as the entrails of the ship broke loose: anchor chains, the huge engines and boilers. One of the huge black funnels fell, smashing into the water amid sparks. But still the ship was brilliantly lit, every porthole afire.

The crow's nest before him was almost submerged, but Stephen swam for it nevertheless. Then he caught himself and tried to swim away from the ship, but it was too late. He felt himself being sucked back, pulled under. He was being sucked into the ventilator, which was in front of the forward funnel.

Down into sudden darkness . . .

He gasped, swallowed water, and felt the wire mesh, the air shaft grating that prevented him from being sucked under. He held his breath until he thought his lungs would burst; he called in his mind to Esme and his dead mother. Water was surging all around him, and then there was another explosion. Stephen felt warmth on his back, as a blast of hot air pushed him upward. Then he broke out into the freezing air. He swam for his life, away from the ship, away from the crashing and thudding of glass and wood, away from the debris of deck chairs, planking, and ropes, and especially away from the other people who were moaning, screaming at him, and trying to grab him as buoy, trying to pull him down.

Still, he felt the suction of the ship, and he swam, even

though his arms were numb and his head was aching as if it were about to break. He took a last look behind him, and saw the Titanic slide into the water, into its own eerie pool of light. Then he swam harder. In the distance were other lifeboats, for he could see lights flashing. But none of the boats would come in to rescue him; that he knew.

He heard voices nearby and saw a dark shape. For a moment it didn't register, then he realized that he was swimming toward an overturned lifeboat, the collapsible he had seen pushed into the water. There were almost thirty men and women standing on it. Stephen tried to climb aboard and someone shouted,

"You'll sink us, we've too many already."

"Find somewhere else."

A woman tried to hit Stephen with an oar, just missing his head. Stephen swam around to the other side of the boat. He grabbed hold again, found someone's foot, and was kicked back into the water.

"Come on," a man said, his voice gravelly. "Take my arm and I'll pull you up."

"There's no room!" someone else said.

"There's enough room for one more."

"No, there's not."

A fight threatened, and the boat began to rock.

"We'll all be in the water if we don't stop this," shouted the man who was holding Stephen afloat. Then he pulled Stephen aboard.

"But no more, he's the last one!"

Stephen stood with the others; there was barely enough room. Everyone had formed a double line now, facing the bow, and leaned in the opposite direction of the swells. Slowly the boat inched away from the site where the ship had gone down, away from the people in the water, all begging for life, for one last chance. As he looked back to where the ship had once been, Stephen thought of Esme. He couldn't bear to think of her as dead, floating through the corridors of the ship. Desperately he wanted her, wanted to take her in his arms.

Those in the water could easily be heard; in fact, the calls seemed magnified, as if meant to be heard clearly by everyone who was safe, as a punishment for past sins.

"We're all deaders," said a woman standing beside Stephen. "I'm sure no one's coming to get us before dawn, when they have to pick up survivors."

"We'll be the last pickup, that's for sure, that's if they intend to pick us up at all."

"Those in the water have to get their money's worth."

"And since we opted for death . . ."

"I didn't," Stephen said, almost to himself.

"Well, you've got it anyway."

Stephen was numb, but no longer cold. As if from far away, he heard the splash of someone falling from the boat, which was very slowly sinking as air was lost from under the hull. At times the water was up to Stephen's knees, yet he wasn't even shivering. Time distended, or contracted. He measured it by the splashing of his companions as they fell overboard. He heard himself calling Esme, as if to say good-bye,

or perhaps to greet her.

By dawn, Stephen was so muddled by the cold that he thought he was on land, for the sea was full of debris: cork, steamer chairs, boxes, pilasters, rugs, carved wood, clothes, and of course the bodies of those unfortunates who could not or would not survive; and- the great icebergs and the smaller ones called growlers looked like cliffs and mountainsides. The icebergs were sparkling and many-hued, all brilliant in the light, as if painted by some cheerless Gauguin of the north.

"There," someone said, a woman's hoarse voice. "It's coming down, it's coming down!" The dirigible, looking like a huge white whale, seemed to be descending through its more natural element, water, rather than the thin, cold air. Its electric engines could not even be heard .

In the distance, Stephen could see the other lifeboats.

Soon the airship would begin to rescue those in the boats, which were now tied together in a cluster. As Stephen's thoughts wandered and his eyes watered from the reflected morning sunlight, he saw a piece of carved wood bobbing up and down near the boat, and noticed a familiar face in the debris that seemed to surround the lifeboat.

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There, just below the surface, in his box, the lid open, eyes closed, floated Poppa. Poppa opened his eyes then and y looked at Stephen, who screamed, lost his balance on the hull,

and plunged headlong into the cold black water.

The Laurel Lounge of the dirigible California was dark and filled with survivors. Some sat in the flowered, stuffed chairs; others just milled about. But they were all watching the lifelike holographic tapes of the sinking of the Titanic. The images filled the large room with the ghostly past.

Stephen stood in the back of the room, away from the others, who cheered each time there was a close-up of someone jumping overboard or slipping under the water. He pulled the scratchy woolen blanket around him, and shivered. He had been on the dirigible for more than twenty-four hours, and he was still chilled. A crewman had told him it was because of the injections he had received when he boarded the airship.

There was another cheer and, horrified, he saw that they were cheering for him. He watched himself being sucked into the ventilator, and then blown upward to the surface. His body ached from being battered. But he had saved himself. He had survived, and that had been an actual experience. It was worth it for that, but poor Esme . . .

"You had one of the most exciting experiences," a woman said to him, as she touched his hand. He recoiled from her, and she shrugged, then moved on.

"I wish to register a complaint,"-- said a stocky man dressed in period clothing to one of the Titanic's officers; who was standing beside Stephen and sipping a cocktail.

"Yes?" asked the officer.

"I was saved against my wishes. I specifically took this voyage that I might pit myself against the elements."

"Did you sign one of our protection waivers?" asked the officer.

"I was not aware that we were required to sign any such thing."

"All such information was provided," the officer said, looking uninterested. "Those passengers who are truly committed to taking their chances sign, and we leave them to their own devices. Otherwise, we are responsible for every passenger's life."

"I might just as well have jumped into the ocean early and gotten pulled out," the passenger said sarcastically.

The officer smiled. "Most people want to test themselves out as long as they can. Of course, if you want to register a formal complaint, then . . ."

But the passenger stomped away.

"The man's trying to save face," the officer said to Stephen, who had been eavesdropping. "We see quite a bit of that. But you seemed to have an interesting ride. You gave us quite a start; we thought you were going to take a lifeboat with the others, but you disappeared belowdecks. It was a bit more difficult to monitor you, but we managed—that's the fun for us. You were never in any danger, of course. Well, maybe a little."

Stephen was shaken. He had felt that his experiences had been authentic, that he had really saved himself. But none of that had been real. Only Esme . . .

And then he saw her step into the room.

"Esme?" He couldn't believe it. "Esme?"

She walked over to him and smiled, as she had the first time they'd met. She was holding a water-damaged cedar box. "Hello, Stephen. Wasn't it exciting?"

Stephen threw his arms around her, but she didn't respond. She waited a proper time, then disengaged herself.

"And look," she said, "they've even found Poppa." She opened the box and held it up to him.

Poppa's eyes fluttered open. For a moment his eyes were vague and unfocused, then they fastened on Esme and sharpened. "Esme. . ." Poppa said uncertainly, and then he smiled. "Esme, I've had the strangest dream." He laughed. "I dreamed I was a head in a box . . ."

Esme snapped the box closed. "Isn't he marvelous," she said. She patted the box and smiled. "He almost had me talked into going through with it this time."

