

## A New Anticipation of *Titanic*

*John Wilson Foster*

I have long since ceased to be startled by the extraordinary *Titanic* phenomenon. The great ship has not only cast a long shadow in the decades since she sank, but as we know, she cast a *foreshadow* too. No doubt all the anticipations of the ship and what befell it can be explained, but even so, it is the *number* of anticipations, of coincidences, of premonitions, that impresses—the sheer critical mass. So I was surprised but not startled by coming across a short story set on board *Titanic*—in 1908! This was four years before the tragedy, three years before the launch, two years before the keel was laid.

Anticipations in literature of the ship and/or the tragedy are various. An early one was the poem “A Tryst,” written by the American poet Celia Thaxter and published in the 1870s. It recounts the fateful and fatal conjunction of an iceberg sailing from the North and a “stately ship” in the Atlantic. In 1886 W.T. Stead, the campaigning English journalist, published a story, “The Sinking of a Modern Liner,” in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. In it a liner leaves Liverpool and picks up passengers and mailbags in Queenstown and heads across the Atlantic. The liner is in a collision five days out in its journey to New York and when it becomes clear that there are insufficient lifeboats, there is panic and the captain is forced to brandish a revolver to keep men in steerage from storming what boats there are (some of which leave without their full complement of passengers).

In 1892 Stead published “A Dramatic Incident” in the Christmas number of the *Review of Reviews*. English tourists travel to the New World on the White Star liner *Majestic*, captained by Captain E.J. Smith, with whom Stead had travelled in real life. The liner follows another ship that collides with an iceberg in mid-Atlantic, and seven passengers manage to clamber on board an icefloe. The shipwreck had been foretold by a passenger on board *Majestic* who ‘sees’ it happening beforehand. Smith is unconvinced when the seer ‘sees’ the fate of the survivors, so a hypnotised passenger ‘precedes’ the *Majestic* and commentates on what she ‘sees’. An ice-warning sounds on *Majestic*, the ice-fog lifts, Captain Smith sees the last man alive on the floe and saves him. The story justifies extra-sensory perception, in which Stead was a campaigning believer.

Some of the anticipations are just commonsense applied to the precautions taken or not taken when large liners head across dangerous waters with people on board. But in “A Dramatic Incident,” Stead thought that tragedies such as the *Titanic*’s could be foreseen in vision. How ironic that he did not foresee the tragedy in which he lost his life. Indeed, Stead’s spirit contact, ‘Julia,’ sent a message of good wishes on April 3<sup>rd</sup> for his voyage on *Titanic*. Stead’s knowledge was not foreknowledge but hindsight, for he allegedly communicated the story of his death on *Titanic* to several clairvoyants.

In May 1912 a story called “The White Ghost of Disaster” was published in *Popular Magazine*. By Mayn Clew Garnett, it had been written and had gone to press when disaster struck *Titanic*. The story was brought to the attention of readers by an intrigued reporter on the *San Francisco Examiner* on April 16<sup>th</sup>. In the first half of the story, a liner 800’ feet long (*Titanic* was 882’) tears through a smooth sea at 22 knots (*Titanic*’s speed) despite the conviction of the second officer (Mr Smith!) that there is ice amidst the fog. The lookout sees an iceberg too late, the liner plunges headlong into it and there is panic among the thousand passengers as the officers and crew try to maintain discipline. The captain returns to the chart-room while the ship sinks, retrieves his revolver and shoots himself.

The most famous anticipation was revealed by Walter Lord in *A Night to Remember* (1955): Morgan