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Opening extract from
**Titanic : Death
on the Water**

Written by
Tom and Tony Bradman

Published by
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Titanic

Death on the Water

For Sally/Mum,
who had to put up with all the complaining

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Chapter One

A Well-Respected Man

It was a terrible thing to admit even to himself, but Billy was glad his Da was dead.

Maybe *glad* was a bit strong, he thought as he looked down at the coffin in the open grave; *relieved* would be a better word. He was definitely relieved.

Billy glanced guiltily at Ma. She was standing beside him in the circle of mourners and stared straight ahead, her eyes dry, although her face was pale and drawn from all the crying she had done over the last week. Beyond her, Billy's sisters sobbed uncontrollably. Ada, Nelly, Daisy and little six-year-old Mabel were dark-haired and brown-eyed like Da, and pretty too, while

Billy had Ma's sandy looks and blue eyes. But Billy was tall like his Da.

It was a bitterly cold March day in Belfast and a sharp wind brought the salt tang of the Irish Sea into the graveyard. Ma gripped Billy's hand. The Reverend Magill – vicar of Trinity, their local church – was coming to the end of the service. 'Therefore O Lord, we commit thy servant's body to the ground,' he droned. 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ...'

Then it was over. A couple of men began shovelling dark soil into the grave and the crowd of black-clad mourners moved away. The Reverend came up to shake Ma's hand. 'A fine turn-out today, Mrs Fleming,' he said. 'But that's no surprise. Your Robert was always a well respected man.'

'Aye, so he was,' said Ma. She looked at Billy and he quickly lowered his gaze. Sometimes he felt she could see right inside his mind. 'You'll be coming back to the house for some tea and cake, Reverend?' she went on.

'Of course,' said the Reverend. 'It's kind of you to ask.'

Ma, Billy and the girls went home in the undertaker's carriage that had brought them. Mabel stopped crying, so fascinated was she by the horses, a pair of coal-black stallions with black feather head-dresses.

Billy stared out at the terraces of red-brick houses. His Da had been a well respected man right enough, but he had also been a difficult man to live with. Especially if you were his son and didn't want to follow the path he had chosen for you.

Da had been a fitter at the Harland and Wolff shipyard, a skilled man, and he'd said it was the best job in Belfast. He'd started as a fourteen-year-old apprentice and couldn't understand why Billy didn't jump at the chance to do the same. They had argued, and Ma had tried to make peace between them, but there could only have been one end to their quarrel.

Two months ago, on the day he'd turned fourteen, Billy had left school and started at the shipyard.

Ma had laid the table in the parlour before they had left for the funeral. As soon as they were indoors she uncovered the cakes and sandwiches.

‘Will I be pouring the tea, Ma?’ said Billy, keen to help.

‘You most certainly will not,’ said Ma, giving him a stern look. ‘You’re the man of the house now, Billy. Your job is to welcome our guests.’

Someone was already knocking at the door, and for the next half hour Billy was kept busy ushering people in until the small house was packed. There were aunts and uncles and cousins galore, friends of the family and Da’s workmates and plenty of people Billy didn’t know from Adam. They all murmured their condolences to Ma then stood talking to each other in hushed voices.

Da’s workmates stayed in the hall and ended up sitting on the stairs. They reminded Billy of a picture he’d seen at Sunday school, a line of angels ascending to heaven. But Da’s workmates were no angels, they were hard like Da. How could they be anything else? Working in the

shipyard was dangerous and they risked their lives every day. Da had been hammering rivets fifty feet up the side of a hull when the plank he was standing on had given way.

‘Have you not got anything a wee bit stronger, Billy?’ said one of the men. It was strange to see them in their Sunday best and not their caps and working clothes and heavy boots. It was even stranger not to hear them continually swearing and cursing and taking the Lord’s name in vain. ‘We can’t give your Da a proper send-off with nothing to drink but tea. Did he not keep a bottle hidden from your Ma somewhere? Find it for us, there’s a good lad.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said Billy, and headed for the scullery. He was used to being given orders. For the last two months Da and his workmates had sent him on errands all over the shipyard, many of them practical jokes. Not that he’d minded being told to ask at the stores for a left-handed bolt wrench or a packet of sky-hooks, even though such things didn’t exist. He had been more worried by the fact that everything in the shipyard terrified him.

Da had sometimes taken him to the shipyard when he was younger and it had always reminded him of other pictures he'd seen at Sunday school – those of Hell. The shipyard was a place of sound and fury and constant movement, of sudden showers of sparks and clanging steel and men having to do ridiculously dangerous things as a normal part of their jobs.

Da and his workmates made light of it and told black jokes about men being crushed unexpectedly or mistakenly sealed into tiny compartments at the bottom of hulls. Billy had listened, taking it all in, and a small, frightened voice inside him had said, *I will never be brave enough to work in this place.*

He couldn't have admitted that to Da, although Da had eventually guessed how he felt. Da had taken him to one side and said that everyone was scared at first, but he just had to get over it and not let himself down in front of the other men.

Billy had said nothing, and knew he would never be the man his Da wanted him to be.

What was going to happen now? He hated

the idea of staying on at the shipyard, but he hadn't talked to Ma about it, and with Da gone they might need his wage to help support the family. What else could he do, anyway?

Mabel popped up and pulled his sleeve. 'Ma wants you, Billy,' she piped.

Billy sighed. Apparently Ma could read his mind through several walls and a whole crowd of people. He turned round and headed for the parlour. It looked like Da's workmates wouldn't get their hands on his whiskey just yet.

Ma was sitting on the best sofa with the Reverend Magill. He was sipping tea, a plate of crumbs balanced on one knee. 'The Reverend wanted to see if you're all right,' said Ma, her eyes telling him to *stand up straight and behave.*

'It's a hard thing for a boy to lose his father, Billy,' said the Reverend. 'But at least you have your mother and sisters and a job with good prospects. You must be proud to know you'll be following in your father's footsteps.'

Not if I can help it, thought Billy, seeing in his mind a picture of Da walking along that plank and falling. 'I'll do my best, Reverend,' he said.

‘It must be a grand time to be working at the shipyard,’ said the Reverend. ‘The big ship is a wonder, so it is. You can see it ten streets away.’

‘Grand, yes,’ said Billy. He did feel proud to be working on the big ship, as everyone called it, even if he only did lots of fetching and carrying.

‘And unsinkable, at least according to the newspapers,’ said the Reverend. ‘Mind you, anyone who knows his classics might call that *hubris*.’

Billy hadn’t a clue what he meant. The Reverend often came out with stuff that went over his head. ‘The ship’s near finished. Then it’s sea trials.’

‘I know,’ said the Reverend. ‘I hear they’ve already taken on some crew. Tom Gibson’s son has signed up and he’s not much older than you.’

Billy stared at him, then glanced at Ma, their eyes meeting before he looked away.

‘Well, thanks for the tea and cake, Mrs Fleming, but I must be off,’ the Reverend went on. ‘I’ll see you and your family next Sunday.’

‘Fetch the Reverend his hat, Billy,’ said Ma.

Billy saw the Reverend out. But all he could think of was what he’d just heard. Maybe there *was* something else he could do.

Maybe he could get a job on the Titanic.