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No Sinking Violet

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Milestones

No Sinking Violet

Anne-Taylor Cahill

Miss Violet Jessop was known as “Miss Unsinkable” because she survived 3 shipwrecks.

Those ships were the RMS *Titanic*, the HMHS *Britannic* and the RMS *Olympic*. It was quite a record, but in true British fashion Violet kept calm and carried on. She never let any of it get her down. Born in Argentina of Irish parents, Violet spent her early life on a sheep farm and later in Buenos Aires.

When she was sixteen her father died unexpectedly and the idyllic Argentine days came to an end. Her mother, wishing for proper schooling for her children, moved the family to London. Family there helped them adjust. However, finances were low and so Violet’s mother secured a position as a stewardess on the HM Royal Mail Line. The family now had income but their mother was away at sea for long periods of time. This left Violet to care for her many siblings. Eventually they all ended up in convent schools and Violet had some respite. Sadly, this did not last long as Mrs. Jessop became ill. Violet decided to provide for the family by following in her mother’s footsteps. Upon applying to the Royal Mail Line there was concern that Violet, at twenty-one, was too young and too pretty. The company felt that this might “cause problems,” as most stewardesses were middle aged and not terribly attractive. In the end, by making herself look as frumpy as possible, Violet got the job.



Violet Jessop, as a Red Cross nurse c. 1915.

Violet’s first run was to the British West Indies. She tells of visiting the then-under-construction Panama Canal. She was horrified to learn that mosquitoes were actually killing off workers. The highlight of her trip was the opportunity to enjoy “a true Spanish dinner with wine.” Apparently she had not had a Spanish meal since leaving Argentina.

Stewardess work was hard and very fatiguing but despite this Violet found life at sea fascinating, “every new face and different character was fresh ground to explore; so the wracking weariness of limb and feet were often forgotten.” Americans were a special fascination and trips to New York afforded her several marriage proposals. She describes Americans as being eager to make friends and “to my astonishment I received 3 perfectly serious proposals of marriage within a few days of acquaintanceship!”

Violet’s first misadventure occurred in 1910 on the RMS *Olympic*. This White Star Line vessel was the largest civilian ship of the time. On leaving Southampton it collided with the HMS *Hawke*, a British warship. Fortunately, there were no fatalities but the *Olympic* was badly damaged. Taking on water, it limped back to port.

Oddly, Violet’s next ship also had a near collision on leaving port. That ship was the RMS *Titanic*. The story of the *Titanic* is well known as it struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic and sank within 2 hours. Violet’s memoirs tell of her last minutes in her cabin, having no coat and trying to decide what hat to wear. Racing to the lifeboats she snatched up an eiderdown from an abandoned

cabin. Upon getting into lifeboat #16, someone called to her from above “look after this,” and tossed a baby into her arms. Violet tells of the penetrating cold and her concern that the infant would not survive. Once rescued by the RMS *Carpathia*, Violet tells of a strange woman rushing up to her and snatching the child from her arms. No words of thanks were uttered and Violet never saw the woman again!

Not to be deterred, Violet continued her seafaring life on the HMHS *Britannic*, which had been converted to a hospital ship. Violet served here as a Red Cross nurse during the first World War.

Cruising the Aegean Sea, the *Britannic* suddenly exploded. It was thought that a German naval mine had done its evil work. The *Britannic* sank in 55 minutes. No patients were on board but 30 of the 1,066 crew perished. Violet’s description of the event is a great deal more horrific than her *Titanic* experience. She writes of having to jump out of the lifeboat to avoid being dragged underwater by the churning propellers. She describes quite graphically what it was like to nearly drown. She remarks, “the wonder of finding myself alive will always remain in my memory.” She sustained a serious leg injury and a fractured skull. After a brief recuperative stay in Greece, Violet and her colleagues were sent to Malta for more R&R. Eventually, they returned to London by land in order to avoid another sea journey.

Finally having recovered from her injuries, Violet went to work in a London bank but the sea continued to lure her. In 1920 she went back to sea! In 1950 she finally retired to a charming cottage in Suffolk, England where she raised chickens and enjoyed a quiet county life.



Anne-Taylor Cahill is a professor of philosophy at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and serves on the national board of the Victorian Society in America. She is also founding member and former president of the Eloise Hunter Chapter of the VSA.

For further reading:

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