

Brave Musicians of Ship Meet Fate Trying To Drown Cries of the Perishing Passengers

Worcester Evening Gazette

Saturday 20 April 1912

New York, April 19.-Of all the heroes who went to their death when the Titanic dived to its ocean grave, none, in the opinion of Miss. Hilda Slater, a passenger in the last boat to pull off, deserved greater credit than the members of the vessel's orchestra. According to Miss. Slater, the orchestra played until the last. When the vessel took its final plunge the strains of a lively air, mingled gruesomely with the cries of those who realized that they were face to face with death.

"It was terrible," said Miss. Slater, who had come from her home in England to visit a brother, an architect in this city. "From the moment the vessel struck, or as soon as the members of the orchestra could be collected, there was a steady round of lively airs. It did much to keep up the spirits of everyone and probably served as much as the efforts of the officers trying to prevent panic."

When the ship struck the iceberg, Miss Slater went on deck. She was ordered to go back to bed, which she did on being assured there was no danger. A half-hour later she heard confusion on deck and heard someone cry, "Order everyone to don life belts."

After dressing again, Miss. Slater returned to the deck and was ordered to the boat deck aloft.

"When I got there," she said, "I found an indescribable scene. A number of the steerage men passengers had attempted to seize one of the boats and there was a brisk revolver fire: many men fell under it. The prompt, and drastic action of the officers restored order."

"There were many touching scenes as the boats put off. I saw Col. John Jacob Astor hand his young wife into a boat tenderly and then asked an officer whether he might also go. When permission was refused he stepped back and coolly took out his cigarette case. "Good-bye, dearie" he called gaily, as he lighted a cigarette and leaned over the rail. "I'll join you later." Another man, a Frenchman, I think, approached one of the boats about to be lowered. He had with him two little boys. An officer waved him back sternly. "Bless you" he said "I don't want to go, but for God's sake take the boys. Their mother is waiting for them in New York." The boys were taken aboard."

Miss. Slater dwelt at length on the large percentage of the crew saved. On the boat that carried her away from the sinking ship were nine other women and more than 40 men stokers.

Courtesy of Julie Downen

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Hilda Slayter's Diary

by Alan Hustak

Titanica!

Friday 17 May 2013



Hilda Mary Slayter
Courtesy of Alan Hustak

[Hilda Mary Slayter](#) (1882-1965), the daughter of a prominent Halifax doctor, knew nothing about *Titanic* until she boarded the tender that took her to the huge ship anchored off shore in Queenstown harbor. “I didn’t know anything about her size, maiden voyage, etc,” she confided to her diary, “she loomed prodigious as we approached. It was colossal. It shone from the masthead down. Something to boast about.”

Slayter had been in Europe shopping for her wedding trousseau and before sailing back to Canada she had stopped in Ireland to celebrate her 30th birthday on April 5 at Millgrove House, Clonmel, County Tipperary where her sister Margaret Haslam lived. Her mother was also visiting at the time and it would be easy for her brothers William F and J. Howard, Harley to attend and her sister Clarina Hartley. Originally, Slayter had planned to return directly to

Halifax aboard the *Tunisian*, but because of the coal strike, she was transferred to another ship that would take her, instead to New York. The ship of course was *Titanic*.

Slayter's tantalizing diaries are privately owned but have been transcribed and are being annotated by Garry Shutlak, senior archivist at the Nova Scotia Archives and Alan Ruffman. Their contents were only recently revealed in detail for the first time aboard the *Balmoral* during the *Titanic memorial cruise* in April.

Slayter the 10th in a family of 11 children was born in Halifax and was related through marriage to shipping magnate Samuel Cunard. She was said to be the first girl to ride a bicycle on the streets of Halifax; one of her childhood friends was the Anna Fyshe, grand-daughter of Anna Leonowens, who lived in Halifax. One of her older brothers, William, was a naval officer who had served under Prince George of Wales (King George V) and aboard King Edward VII's yacht. He was later captain of the *Oceanic* when it sank in 1914. Her youngest brother Charles went to study architecture in Paris. In 1902, her mother, Clarina U., Hilda and her sister Margaret left Nova Scotia join him in France where she studied music. As a child living in Bamberg, Germany, 1885-1887 she met Engelbert Humperdink and Johannes Brahms, friends of her mother's music teacher Philipp Wolfrum who taught at the University of Heidelberg.

For the next ten years, Slayter depended on her brothers to move through the social circles that she did. She had a pleasant voice, gave a number public and intimate private recitals, including aboard the Kaizer's yacht *Hohenzollern* but her voice was not suited for grand opera. Her career was going nowhere, and nearing the age of 30 she met and agreed to marry a Canadian-born, British blue-blood, Henry Reginald Dunbar Lacon, whose grandfather was Sir Edmund Henry Knowles Lacon was the third baronet, a title created in 1818. Reginald's older brother Edmond Beecroft Francis Heathcote Lacon became the fifth baronet and then his George Haworth Ussher Lacon became the sixth baronet. Packed in her trunks as she went aboard *Titanic* was the satin opal and pearl dress she planned to wear at the wedding as well as gifts from family and friends to start her new life at Witley Park, Denman Island, BC. As well there was a blue satin silver net dress, silver and blue scarf, silver tissue and osprey and handmade Italian embroidered blouses.

Once aboard, Slayter had trouble locating the cabin on D-Deck to which she had been assigned. A steward was not especially helpful. "Lady you know as much about this ship as I do. I only came aboard yesterday," he told her. She was taken to a cabin but the paint in the room was still wet, so the steward asked her whether she would mind sharing a starboard cabin on E-Deck with [Florence "Fannie" Kelly](#), a widow from Southampton on her way to visit her son in New York. Kelly had witnessed *Titanic's* near collision with the *New York*, and was obviously unsettled by the experience. She was so agitated, that when Slayter asked Kelly whether there was anything she could do to calm her nerves, Kelly replied, "No, no, nothing you can do. But I know this ship is going to the bottom. A voyage badly begun always ends in disaster."

Slayter was not superstitious, but she too became uneasy about the voyage, because as she writes in the diary, "Kelly was a Celt. Second sight is their due." Once they set sail, Slayter

complained because the ship's vibrations "buzzed up your neck and head." On Sunday morning, April 14, Slayter attended the hymn sing in the second class dining room where she heard an "elderly clergyman", [Ernest Carter](#) (who was 54) preach a sermon on The Promised Land. Carter, she writes, and his wife, [Lillian Hughes](#), the daughter of author Thomas (Tom Brown's Schooldays) Hughes, had been given the holiday trip by his congregation "in appreciation of his & his wife's work."

That evening Slayter had washed her hair and was in her berth drying it when she heard a dull thump. She thought perhaps *Titanic* had hit a "wooden vessel." But a steward dashed into her cabin and told the women the ship had run into an iceberg. "Can't you smell it. There was a tangy amonania (sic) aroma," Slayter wrote. Assured that the *Olympic* was on its way and that all aboard would be rescued, Slayter left her cabin to go up on deck leaving her fur coat behind, because she thought "the damp sea air might harm it." When they went outside they saw two men "working a 2 handled flat wrench on the floor" trying to shut a water tight door. "One said, 'we can't make this one work, we had better try another.'" She went up on deck where "crowds and everyone were very polite & men asked to see if we had our belts adjusted and tied correctly. A stewardess came & told us to go up to B-Deck. We tried to go up the main staircase, but it was packed, so coming out on deck again I said to the stewardess, "It's too crowded there, we can't get up. She broke down then & rung her hands in her apron. "They must. It's their only chance," she said.

Slayter and Kelly found themselves near a sailor's ladder bolted to the wall. Someone was already climbing up the ladder, and with Kelly clinging to Slayter's arm, Hilda suggested they follow him up the rungs. "Oh but dearie I can't, I haven't any drawers on!" Kelly said. Hilda shoved the stout woman up, and then, leaving Mrs. Kelly, she walked forward the length of D deck. "We were listing to starboard badly...I thought all the boats would have gone, and I wanted to be alone," she explained. "They had told us the *Olympic* would be here in eight hours, but would she stay afloat that long? Looking over the side I saw the heavy list and the strangely calm sea." Turning away she saw Reverend Carter and his wife, "talking quietly," and not wanting to intrude on their privacy she hurried aft down the deserted D. Deck to where a young petty officer was standing. Just then, she writes, "there was a rattle of a boat being lowered, and the officer cried, "There goes MY boat, I have got orders to keep the mob back. He had a revolver, but there was no panic and the lights still burning. The riggings were black with men looking like monkeys silhouetted (sic) against the side climbing up and up." Hilda found herself surrounded by a throng of men, who made way for her to make her way to lifeboat Number 13 and passed her quickly forward, from hand to hand. She was, she says, then thrown into the boat which was already on its way down with 63 other people aboard. She found herself in the stern, "standing, & the boat dipped & heaved – never level. Hilda found herself holding ten month old [Alden Caldwell](#) and sitting next to [Lawrence Beesley](#). A man next to me (almost certainly [Percy Oxenham](#)) said, 'You're lucky to be on.' They called three times, 'Are there any more women?' As there were none, he let me get in." Lifeboat 13 had never been used before and as its falls began sticking, water from the ship's condenser exhaust streamed from *Titanic*'s side into the path of its descent. The boat stalled, but another lifeboard, Number 15, was descending on top of them. "We were under another life boat, stuck and creaking," Slayter writes. "We yelled to stop lowering the boat above us. I actually had my raised finger tips touching the bottom & was in a panic. Just then a man crawling along the

outside of our boat with a knife in his mouth – he slashed the ropes that held us, & then we were driven by the flow from the pumps to one side & the other boat with a creak, came down beside us, both afloat. Thanks to our rescuer, some 100 lives (were saved) from drowning.” As they rowed away from the sinking ship, with its light still ablaze, Slayter “felt something shuddering against me, a small dark man. I thought he was a foreigner who had lost his nerve. He had on a sketchy stoker’s hat, so I took off my fur lined coat & tucked it around him and patted him as one might reassure a child. After a little he got up saying, ‘Who does this coat belong to?’ ‘It’s mine but you keep it.’ He was standing on the deck & beating his chest. ‘Oh No – I am all right now, I don’t want it.’ Hilda then asked if anyone else aboard wanted her coat. “A muffled call near said, ‘Christ I am perished,’ so I passed the coat on to one of the Irish girls I had seen by the ladder on C deck.”

Slayter watched as Titanic’s stern “seemed to heave up” and watched spellbound as her stern collapsed “and little by little & she slid down into the depths!” As the ship sank, Slayter said she was reminded of a painting, *The Soldiers Dream Before the War* by Edouard Detaille. “the whole atmosphere seemed to be a warring struggle of spirits. Those in the lifeboat 13 “expected a wave to catch us, but there was hardly a lift.” Then she writes, “the night was rent with screaming.

Are they calling for the boats to get together?” she asked.”

“Calling miss,?” someone on board replied, “That ain’t calling. That’s drowning.”

TITANIC: APRIL 1912;

By Hilda Slayter

Launched –and just completed, “Titanic.”
Pride of man’s achievement?
Fall? Had no concievement.
Starts maiden voyage across Atlantic.

Crash! From ice barrier and iceberg
Massive gleaming in the sun.
First class journey begun.
Nightfall pales, its bulk with sea mists merge.

Fates decree: Challenge Leviathans!
Fast spray splashing from the bow.
Slow – scarce a ripple now.
What the issue? Nature or humans.?

*Ponderous – inexorable – loomed:
Cut through “Titanic’s” side,
left sinking in her pride.
Too late, lookout’s warning, She is doomed.*

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