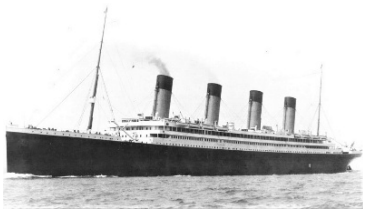
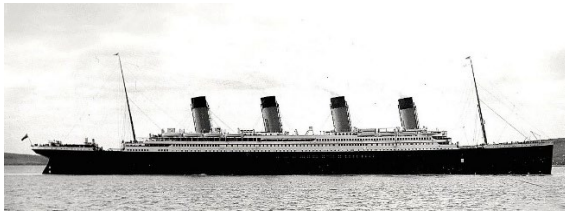
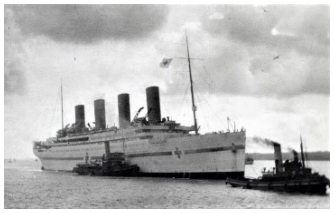
A QUIET SEA

RMS TITANIC







VIOLET JESSOP
STEWARDESS & NURSE

VIOLET CONSTANCE JESSOP

INTRODUCTION

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, young women growing up in affluent families with financial resources were seemingly better positioned to undertake various professions. Nevertheless, many were discouraged from doing so. Attending private school was a formality to prepare for marriage and a domestic environment that asked little more than that they speak well and deport themselves with poise and sophistication. And although many of the same restrictions stood in the way of women with lower social standing, their anonymity and lack of resources presented more employment opportunities. Although many were physically taxing, a young woman who chose to go to sea could experience travel, camaraderie with her shipmates and, with luck, survive extraordinary events.

THE STIGMA of HISTORY

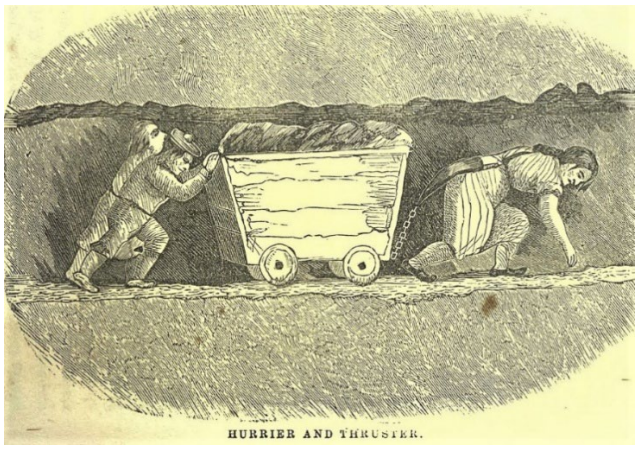
Cliché expressions like the weaker sex and fairer sex were used for centuries to define and pigeonhole women into specific societal roles, dominated by the risks of childbirth and the unending duties of child rearing and housekeeping. Poor wives supplemented household income by taking in laundry and additional housecleaning. Marital rape was common, and family planning was not a choice. Working outside the home was frowned upon and considered unsuitable. Major religions enforced gender roles advocating patriarchal authority; men were in charge, women were not. Married women were considered property with no rights, including no right to think. There were some exceptions in early Christianity (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus), but even women who were canonized stayed in the male shadow and usually assumed an idealized yet subservient role. Hebrew and Islamic religions shared these views. Some Indigenous and Asian religions carved out special spiritual status for women and non-binary individuals, who were accorded un-traditional standing within the cultures.

Repentant Mary Magdelene by Claudio Coello (1642–1693)
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

A HARD CLIMB

Personal independence evaded women, but there were glimmers of hope with the industrial revolution. Alhough conditions were grueling and women were paid less than men, factories

offered a choice other than working as a launderess, charwoman or maid. The Victorian era saw incredible and rapid shifts in technological and social change. However, the Industrial Revolution also brought with it the exploitation of child labor in mills and mines. It wasn't until the late 1880s that children were required to attend school. In juxtaposition with this abuse, the Victorian era embraced a sense of morality encouraged and followed by the middle and upper classes. The general opinion was that character and morality was wasted on those of low station.



Two thrusters and hurrier, child labor, 1853
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Photographs of a Glasgow slum by Thomas Annan, 1868 / British Library, Public Domain
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Special condemnation was reserved for impoverished, unwed mothers. Stigmatized by society, their lot was harsh. Many gave up their babies. Some turned to suicide. Single mothers and their children carried the burden of shame. Foundling hospitals were established in the early 1700s to provide for abandoned or illegitimate children, but only for infants less than 2 months old and disease-free. Once placed in the foundling hospital, all contact between mother and child was lost. There, children were raised until the age of 14, when boys would be apprenticed and girls put to domestic work.

Women who chose to work often had to answer many questions before being hired. (Was she a mother, daughter, or widow? Was she healthy? Did she have children, and if so, who would care for them?) Critics declared that working women were eroding the family structure and undermining the role of men as the sole breadwinner. Nevertheless, one in 10 workers in the UK in Titanic's day were women.


Woman at a lathe in a machine shop
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Advances in mass production extended opportunities to women. Affordable sewing machines made it possible for housewives to indulge their dressmaking creativity, earn extra income and develop a small business by selling clothing.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Despite women's second-class status in British society, the heartbeat of female entrepreneurial spirit was strong. Minimally acknowledged in history, women owned a considerable number of businesses in late 19th century Britain. Daring to enter trades considered unladylike, they established or inherited businesses that flourished. Although inheriting a business from a deceased husband might be used as a cudgel to ridicule such a woman, it took brains and ingenuity to successfully continue the business. Fathers quietly helped as well and took pride when their daughters followed in their footsteps. These independent businesswomen proved themselves every bit as capable as their male competitors, and many were generous with their philanthropy. Men made uneasy by female entrepreneurs claimed that they put the family structure at risk. But their enduring examples inspired future generations of women to stand on their own.

In the 1870s, burgeoning inventions like the telephone and typewriter expanded positions available to young women, who became switchboard operators, clerks and secretaries. While women often were segregated from male employees (including separate building access), they proved themselves through their solid work ethics and efficiency. There was grudging acceptance, to be sure, but acceptance, nonetheless. Mildred Ransom, a young typist in the early 1900s said, "I wanted to stretch my brains and learn endlessly and make a path for myself through the clamour and hideousness all round me." * Education was key. Improved educational opportunities opened new spheres for women, including in education, business, the arts, science and medicine.

Secretary 1912
Credit: Wikimedia Commons & Flickr

MEDICINE

In the days when most women were integrated into their husband's identity, midwifery offered considerable opportunity for an independent woman to earn an above-average living. Most women who gave birth in Britain before World War 1 were tended to by a midwife. In the 19th century, death by childbirth was common. The belief that infection was spread by "bad air" was still widely accepted. As early as 1790, naval physician Alexander Gorden (1752-1799) suspected

“putrid particles” carried by those who tended mothers were the cause of postpartum fever. Yet the medical community considered this heresy, dirty hands and instruments notwithstanding. Doctors and midwives continued their unsanitary practices, and women continued to die in childbirth. The acceptance of germ theory, antiseptic medicines and cleaning surgical tools with carbolic acid gradually brought such deadly practices to an end.

Midwives became certified and organized in 1902 through the Midwives Act and in 1913 through the Central Midwives Board. By Royal Decree, it was decided that midwives receive formal training as part of Britain’s medical system. Standards were high, and references attesting to good character were required. Independent female inspectors, answering to a male obstetrician, ensured that practices were sound. In 1900 Britain, women doctors were exceedingly rare; there were fewer than 200. That same year, America boasted more than 7,000 female physicians.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson became the first female doctor in Britain. Born in 1836 in Whitechapel, London, Garrett had a highly regimented life. With no suitable school available, she was homeschooled by her mother and a governess. At 13, Garrett and her younger sister Millicent were sent to a private school, where they were taught several languages, deportment, behavior, and cultural rites. The curriculum didn’t include science or math, and Garrett detested the school and her teachers, but she cultivated a love of reading. Stuck in a world of domestic duties after graduating, she struggled to learn more about the world and politics. It is not known when she developed an interest in medicine, but it is likely she got her inspiration from reading about Elizabeth Blackwell, who in 1849 became the first female doctor in the United States.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836-1917)
Credit: Wikipedia

Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910)
Credit: Wikipedia

Blackwell was on a speaking tour in London in 1859, organized through The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women. Garrett joined the group to attend Blackwell’s “Medicine as a Profession for Ladies.” Garrett hoped for an opportunity to meet with Blackwell, and they eventually did. Although her father was initially opposed to women becoming doctors, he had a change of heart and supported his daughter’s ambition to be a medical professional. Garrett initially became a surgery nurse and proved highly skilled and competent. Seeking higher credentials, she applied for The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, the only woman. She passed the qualifying examination with the highest score and was licensed to publicly practice medicine. (Dr. James Barry, born female but appearing male, was the first). Reaction by the medical establishment proved swift, and The Worshipful Society immediately closed the door to other

women applying for a medical license. Eventually, the 1876 Medical Act was passed and made excellence the only qualifying criterion to earn a license.

Unable to get a job in a medical facility, Garrett opened her own practice in 1865. It took time for people to trust a woman doctor, so Garrett concentrated on poor women who could not otherwise get medical care. When, that same year, cholera ran rampant in Britain, the terror it induced lay aside any reservations about being treated by a woman. Garrett cared for 3,000 patients with 9,300 outpatient visits. Her results convinced the established medical community that a woman could be a skilled medical practitioner. Garrett vigorously argued against the notion that women were ill-suited to higher education and that the resulting mental stress would affect their ability to become pregnant. She considered this nonsense and stated that the problem wasn't education but the stifling restrictions against women. Garrett attained distinction in her practice, established hospitals for women and children (staffed entirely by women), and ultimately gained membership in prestigious medical associations that formerly excluded women. Garrett married in 1871 and continued her practice. She remarked, "a doctor leads two lives, the professional and the private, and the boundaries between the two are never traversed." In 1908, Garrett took on another role, mayor of Aldeburgh, and became the first female mayor in Britain. She died in 1917 and was buried in the cemetery of St Peter and St Paul's Church, Aldeburgh. The Elizabeth Garrett Anderson hospital was named after her in 1918.

HIDDEN TALENTS

'I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.' – *Virginia Woolf.*

Society's attitudes also made it difficult for women to become published authors. Such an occupation was considered unseemly. Critics said female writers lacked originality, leaned too far into romance novels, were unable to produce great writing and were downright dull. Some attacked their work as a dangerous influence on other women. To get published, some chose a male nom de plume. Jane Austen chose to be unnamed, signing her work, "By a Lady."

George Sand (1804-1876)
Credit: Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, Wikipedia

Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin was born in 1804 in Paris. Married to a nobleman, she detested her confined life. Convinced that using her name would get her nowhere as a writer, she took the name George Sand, based in part on her lover Jules Sandeau. She defiantly wore men's clothing and smoked cigars in public, leading many to question her sex. Her writing explored gender mystery and uncertainty, class distinctions, love and romance, rural life, the restrictions against women in music and the confining nature of life dominated by the patriarchy. She wrote an autobiography that included her many lovers, her political positions and intellectual interests. In her novel, "A Winter in Majorca," she recorded her passionate and creative time with composer Frédéric Chopin and the island's natural beauty. Some of her contemporary male writers quietly considered her the "king of novelists." Sand died in France in 1876.

George Eliot (1819 – 1876)
Credit: Wikipedia and National Portrait Gallery, London

Mary Ann Evans, born in 1819 in Warwickshire England, wrote as George Eliot. Knowing that her work as a female author would not be taken seriously. she took the first part of her pen name from her lover George Lewes, who was in an open relationship with his wife. Charles Dickens, much taken by her writing, sent her a letter (the writing style suggested to Dickens that the author was a woman) with the compliment, "The exquisite truth and delicacy, both of the humor and the pathos of those stories I have never seen the like of." Many thought Eliot's work some of the greatest in the English language. Both "The Mill on the Floss" and "Silas Marner" received critical acclaim. Her realistic novels redefined the accepted views of rural life in England with a vivid new realism. However, her 24-year affair with Lewes appalled Victorian society, and she was roundly denounced. Nevertheless, Eliot was invited to meet with one of her greatest admirers, Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Louise. After Lewes died in 1878, Eliot married the younger John Cross in May 1880. Now in a respectable relationship, harsh public opinions toward Eliot dissipated. Unfortunately, after returning from a honeymoon in Venice, Eliot developed a throat infection. Also suffering from kidney disease, she died in December 1880 in London.

VIOLET CONSTANCE JESSOP

A ship traveling across the ocean has needs similar to those of a small town. To function efficiently, the ship's crew must be skilled in a variety of professions and trades. Navigation and engineering may be most obvious. But the health and contentment of the ship's passengers are also important, and this is the responsibility of the victualling crew. Before a ship sails, it must be fully stocked and, in coal-burning ships like Titanic, thoroughly cleaned after refueling. With Titanic's total capacity of more than 3,500 persons, the victualling crew faced the formidable daily task of preparing and distributing food and tending to passengers' other needs. Of the more than 500 members of the victualling crew, there were 14 stewardesses in First Class, four in Second Class, a Third-Class matron and two restaurant cashiers. The Third-Class matron's duties included introducing new immigrant passengers to the use of flushing toilets, looking out for illnesses and protecting single women from the advances of male passengers and crew. All stewardesses collected the laundry, to be washed when the ship reached port.

In 1908, the White Star Line began producing the three Olympic class ships. That two of the three ships would never reach New York did not diminish their impressive industrial accomplishment. Violet Jessop first went to sea in 1908 and served in all three vessels: in Olympic and Titanic as a First-Class stewardess, and in Britannic as a nurse. She experienced one of Olympic's mishaps, when the liner was rammed by a cruiser, and survived the sinking of the other two ships. She stayed at sea and wrote her memoirs for a writing contest in 1934. They lay dormant until transcribed by British author John Maxtone-Graham and published in 1997.

Violet Jessop (1887-1971)
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

YOUTH

Violet Jessop was born to Irish emigrants in Argentina in 1887, the first of nine children. Her father William was a sheep farmer and migrated to Argentina from Dublin in the mid-1880s. Violet's mother Katherine followed a year later. Violet grew up in a humble adobe house on the fertile Argentine pampas.

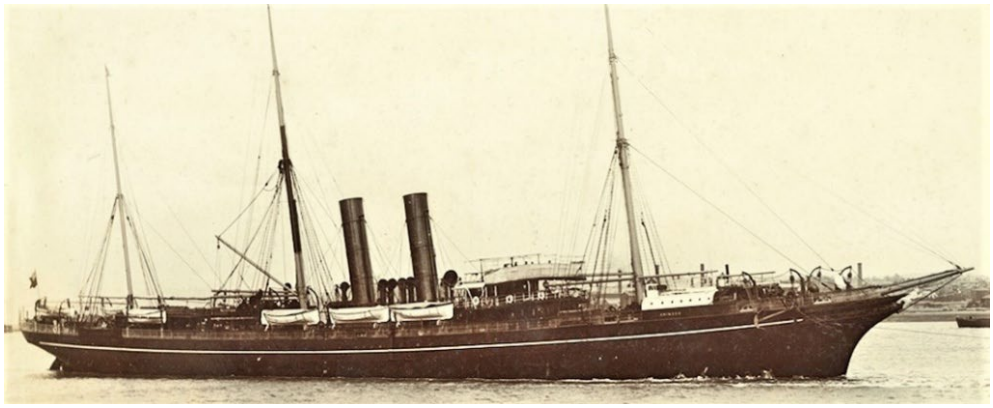
Argentine pampas
Credit: Wikipedia & Alex Pereira

T

As a child, Violet contracted but survived typhoid and tuberculosis. (Sadly, she helped bury three of her siblings.) When she was a teenager, Violet was nearly molested by an elderly neighbor; only the unexpected arrival of the assailant's daughter saved her. Following the death of her father, when she was 16, Violet, her siblings and her mother left Argentina for Great Britain. Violet had wonderful memories of the beauty of Argentina and was shocked by London's filth. The family's search for housing was complicated by landlords who did not allow children. Their uncle Cecil found them temporary lodging in a hotel, and the younger children stayed with Katherine's mother until they secured their own home.

Katherine's next task was getting the boys into school and finding a job. Violet was smart and old enough to care for her siblings, so Katherine found work as a steamship stewardess in 1903 with the Royal Mail Steam Packet (RMSP) Company. She was gone a great deal and sent money to her family while Violet took care of the household. When the boys were able to attend Catholic School, Violet went with her sickly younger sister to a convent boarding school to relieve some of the burden on her mother. The convent was in a large and solid house run by kindly Breton nuns from France. It was the first time that Violet was unburdened from caring for her family and could devote herself to her sister Eileen, studying and pursuing an academic career.

As Violet got older, the Mother Superior told her that a governess position was available and that she should apply but could stay at the convent if she chose. The family had three children, two of whom would be Violet's responsibility. The husband was aloof and distant, the mother beautiful, kindly but lonely. When alone with the father, his vulgar comments chilled Violet, his behavior reminding her of the neighbor's predatory behavior. She maintained her distance and concentrated on building a friendship with the wife. She also turned her attention to her future and her academic aspirations. Then, she received word that her mother's health was suffering and that it would be difficult for her to continue as a seagoing stewardess. Now 21, and determined to keep the family going, Violet put aside her goals and followed in her mother's footsteps. She interviewed with the RMSP but wasn't hired; they thought she was too young and pretty. Not one to easily be deterred, she hid her good looks and went for another interview looking as unattractive and frumpy as possible; she was hired on the spot. Her first ship was the 1886-built, 400-foot RMSP liner Orinoco (the second ship of that name), which carried passengers and mail between Southampton and the West Indies.

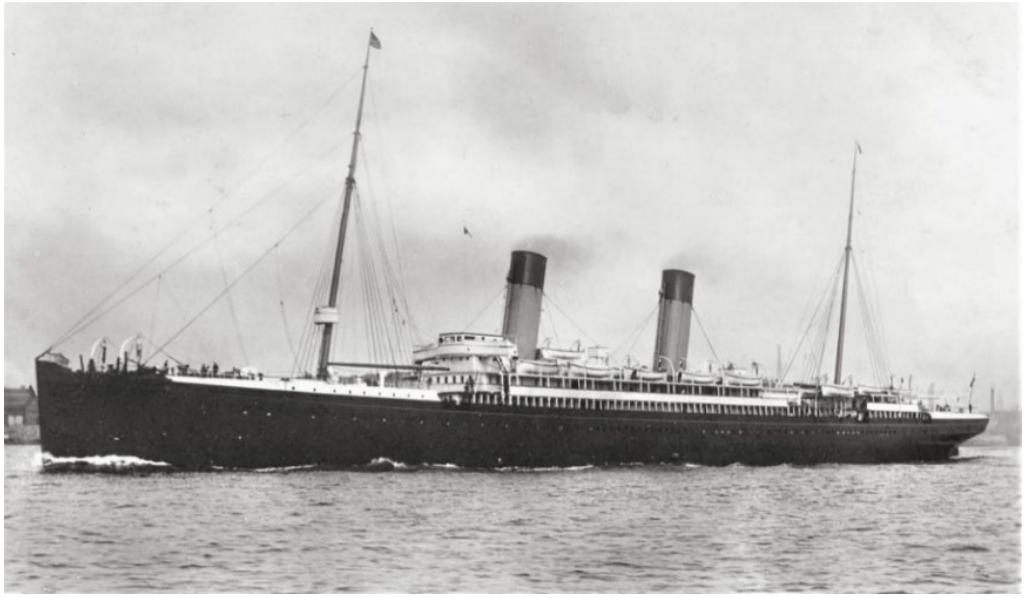


S.S. Orinoco
Credit: Caledonia Research Ship Trust

SHIPPING OUT

Violet wasn't keen about crossing the North Atlantic because of storms, so sailing to the Caribbean suited her just fine. She loved the Jamaican vendors and the local shops and even got a chance to visit the Panama Canal, which was under construction. As part of the victualling department, one of her duties was to collect laundry that was washed ashore by local laundresses, providing a good source of income to the local economy. At about this time, she became involved with an officer, Ned Tracy. Although she fell in love and considered marriage, the relationship deteriorated because he treated her like a child, and they eventually split up. She met many American men on board ship but remained wary. She was amazed that they found her attractive; she turned down numerous marriage proposals. One philandering captain sent her love notes in boxes of chocolate. Her ship visited New York on occasion, and although she was impressed with the city and its people, she was put off by the frenetic pace and materialism.

In less than 2 years, Violet sailed on no fewer than four RMSP ships. Casting about for a routine that would allow regular visits home without extended time away, Violet applied to various steamship lines, still staying away from the stormy North Atlantic route. Her options were limited, and hearing only good about White Star, Violet decided to give the company a go. With the company's reputation for passenger service, she knew the work would be demanding and the hours long. Applying to White Star, she got a berth on the 1890-built RMS Majestic on September 28, 1910.

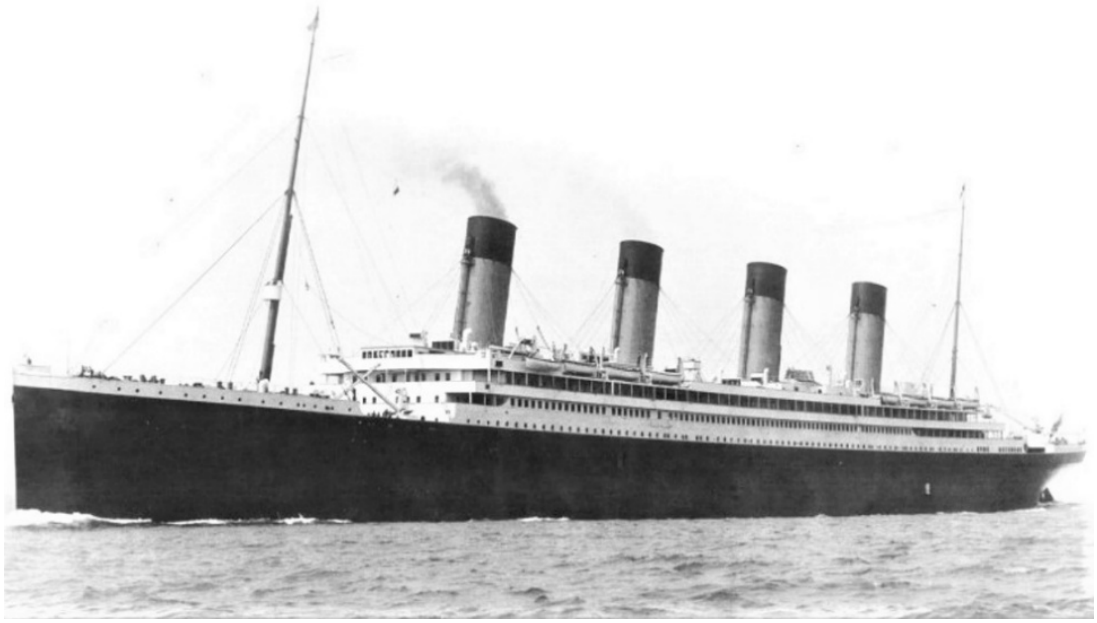


RMS Majestic
Credit: Wikipedia

Violet's fears about the stormy Atlantic were well-founded; Majestic took a battering on some of her ocean crossings. Violet carried on with her duties and found comfort among her new shipmates. Foremost was Ma Maine, an elderly stewardess who worked with Violet in Second Class. Ma Maine, her portly figure struggling to navigate passageways, would tend to her passengers whatever the weather. She was shopworn from years of service on transatlantic liners. With the day's work done, they would share a bottle of stout (left by one of the crew under Ma Maine's pillow) as she regaled Violet with stories of gales and passengers and what a grand life it was to be at sea.

OLYMPIC

Violet was very popular with her employers, and she was hand-picked to join the largest ship afloat in 1911, RMS Olympic, the first of a new class of superliners. Thrilled to be part of this major event, Violet immediately took a liking to the new liner. The person Violet and the other stewardesses loved the most was Mr. Thomas Andrews, one of Titanic's designers whom she met on Olympic. He found time to listen to their ideas on how to improve crew accommodations and amenities. Violet would encounter Andrews when she was doing her rounds; he was consumed with inspecting the ship and making her better. But as tired as he was, he always had kind words when meeting any of the stewardesses or other crew members. They attributed their liking of Olympic to his care and consideration of the crew.



Olympic, 1911
Credit: Wikipedia

Although assigned to Second Class, White Star took note of how well Violet took care of her passengers (she was offered domestic positions but declined) and soon transferred her to First Class. As a First-Class Stewardess, she had numerous passenger cabins to take care of and was on call for a grueling 18 hours a day. Getting the Olympic ready for her first crossing required all hands to do their utmost to prepare the ship. Once underway, Violet and the other stewardesses responded to incessant cabin bell calls. The call bells would continue their nerve-racking ringing even when the stewardesses were standing for inspection by their superiors. The maiden voyage was a success, and Violet was impressed with the tugs and small vessels dressed with flags and the traditional boisterous New York greeting for a new ship. It seemed like flags and handkerchiefs

waved from every window. After getting the passengers ashore, the crew had to clean the ship, host a White Star party, show guests around and get Olympic ready to sail on her first eastbound leg. It was rushed and exhausting work. Violet's time on Olympic passed swiftly, and although happy aboard Olympic, White Star valued her experience and transferred her to Titanic.

TITANIC

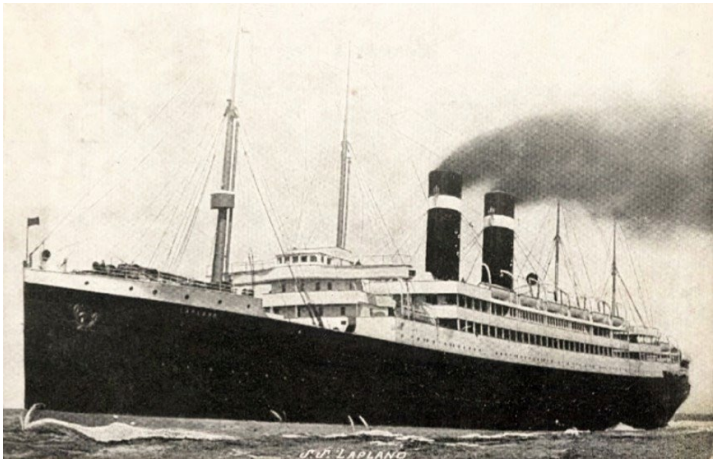
One of the first things Violet and her crewmates appreciated when they boarded Titanic was that Thomas Andrews was good for his word. The new crew cabins incorporated their suggestions. When they met with Andrews, he thanked them for their insights, and a sense of pride and family permeated the crew. Violet was assigned a cabin with stewardess Ann Trumball, and the two hit it off as friends. She met passengers who were to become famous, including the Astors, Strauses and others. There were gamblers as well, hoping for a bonanza during the maiden voyage. Violet met her shipmates, bartenders, pantry men, stewards and the ship's doctor. Many of the crew were veterans of Olympic, so it was expected that Titanic, being the second ship of the class, would have a less hectic maiden voyage. Some of the affluent female passengers, many carrying Pekinese and tended to by dispirited-looking maids, were so difficult that they were banned by some steamship companies, but the stewardesses politely dealt with them.

On the fourth day out, high, grey clouds dominated the sky, but the sea remained calm. Violet wound down from her work by taking a stroll about the weather decks, until it became too cold. The decks were deserted and the ship very quiet, so she returned to her cabin. She was lying in her bunk, reading and getting drowsy, when she heard and felt Titanic crunching against the iceberg. The sounds faded as she felt the ship's machinery stop. Doors soon opened, and she heard voices asking what had happened. Feeling that they might be needed, Violet and Ann dressed and headed to their cabin charges. They ran into one of the bedroom stewards, who told them that Titanic was sinking. As Violet tended to her sleepy passengers, getting them dressed and adjusting their and their children's life jackets, she fought her mounting fear while reassuring them that all would soon be back to normal. Checking unlocked cabins for stragglers, she worried that the passengers' possessions were strewn about and vulnerable to theft. She decided that she should return to her cabin for a quilt to keep her warm in the cold night, and for what might lie ahead. With the increasing activity of people making their way topside, she headed to the boat deck to help the passengers. Few wanted to enter the boats, preferring the apparently still solid Titanic.

Titanic, 1912
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Twenty-five-year-old Sixth Officer James Moody oversaw handing out lifeboat assignments to the crew. Dealing with insufficient seamen to man the lifeboats and struggling with language barriers while trying to get emigrant families into the boats, he asked Violet and other stewardesses to get into boat 16 to encourage families to join them. Violet saw the exhaustion on Moody's face when he handed her an abandoned infant while rushing her into boat #16. With a faint smile, he asked Violet to, "Look after this, will you?" As the boat descended, the porthole lights cast a glare interrupted by the black hull as the boat passed each deck. Violet felt it as some kind of dream. The baby started crying as the boat bumped down the side. It was so cold, she was afraid the baby wouldn't live. As the lifeboat reached the water, she closed her eyes and held the child close to her face.

With Titanic's stern rising, the strain became too much, and the huge hull began tearing itself apart. Violet, clutching the child in her quilt to keep it warm, was shocked by the loud crashing and looked up to see Titanic vanish, taking James Moody with her. The sounds of those struggling in the sea filled the night and, like the great ship, slowly vanished. Violet felt despondent in the empty night, but the child's soft whimpering signaled a need for care, and she turned her attention to the baby. Dawn arrived revealing icebergs about, the sunlight turning them a pink hue. Dawn also brought Carpathia and rescue. When on board Carpathia, she searched for Andrews and the others she so admired but to no avail. [i]Along with other surviving crew, she returned to England aboard the chartered Belgian Red Star liner Lapland. Titanic's crew were apprehensive about crossing the ocean; Lapland's captain took a more southerly route so as not to pass where Titanic sank. Subsequent rumors falsely claimed that the crew profited from the tragedy. The London Daily Telegraph gave each surviving crew member 25 pounds (about $34 US dollars) to start over. White Star policy was that the crew's wages ended when the ship sank. However, given the extraordinary circumstances, the company made an exception, and the crew was paid a full voyage wage.

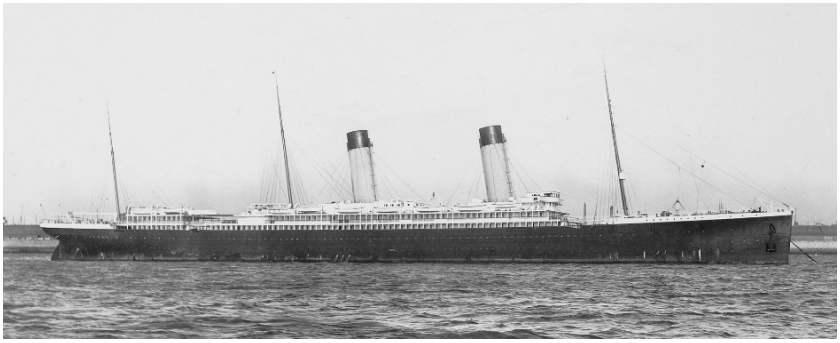


Red Star Liner Lapland
Credit: Wikipedia

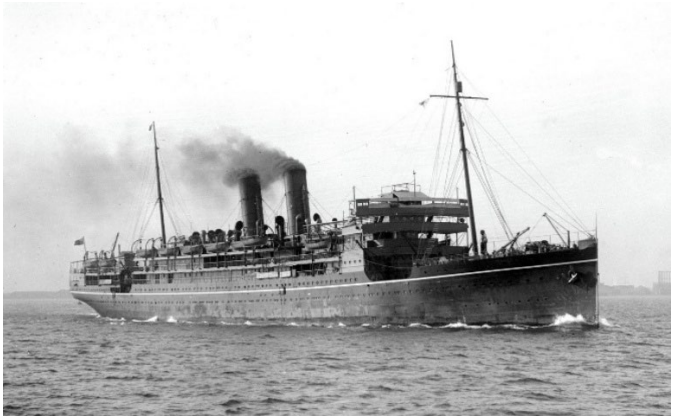
Violet, scared and uncertain, pondered her future. She knew that if she didn't go right back to sea, she never would. After the American and British inquiries were over, she returned to Olympic. Still stunned and exhausted by the Titanic, she considered the famous names and wealth of passengers to be meaningless. She saw much of the affluent world as superficial and was no longer intimidated by unreasonable or demeaning passenger requests.

Olympic was taken out of service in October 1912 and retrofitted with lifeboats, a double hull and additional bulkheads to be able to survive the damage that befell Titanic. Violet did a brief stint on White Star's Oceanic, then left White Star and interviewed with Peninsular & Oriental (P&O).

An arrogant old fellow talked down to Violet, unimpressed with her work record but distracted by her youthful appearance, which he saw as a disadvantage. She left discouraged but secured a second interview. As she had done several years earlier, she made herself unattractive and secured a position on the P&O liner Malwa. Coincidentally, Violet received a letter from Ned, her former romantic interest. He may have sent it after hearing about Titanic, but he had also heard that Violet's brother Phillip had been killed in the war, and he wanted to offer his condolences. He also wanted to rekindle their relationship. He was in Australia, where Malwa was bound, and they briefly reunited. Violet hoped for a new, more equitable relationship and that Ned would resettle in England but again, it did not last.



RMS Oceanic
Credit: Wikipedia



P&O liner Malwa
Credit: Benji Research Group

WORLD WAR 1

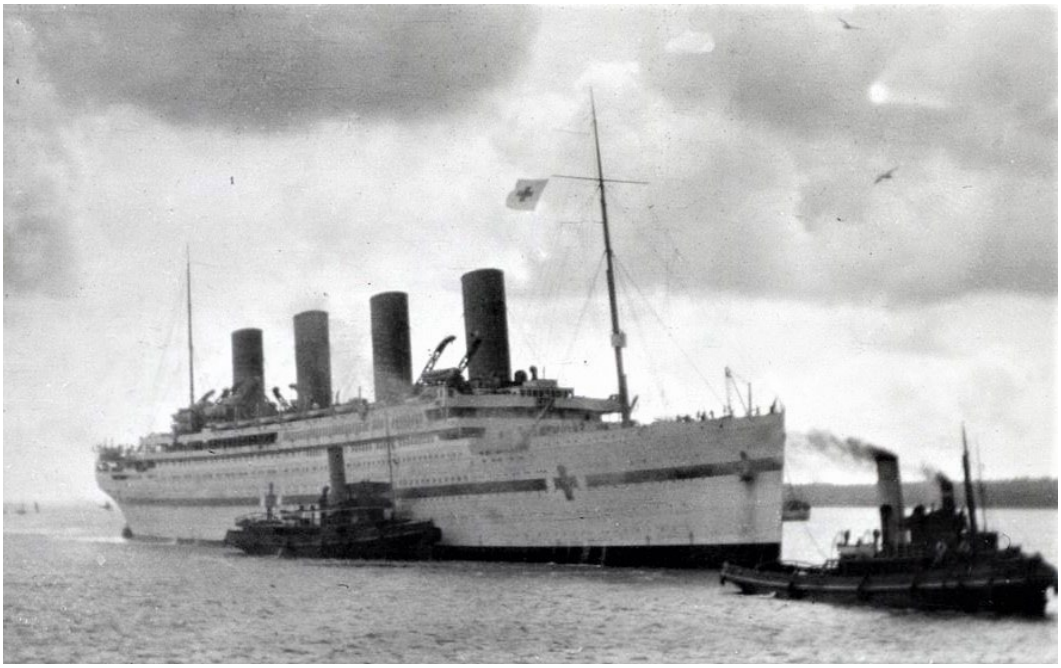
After 4 months aboard Malwa, Violet was back with Olympic when war came. Eastbound on her last commercial voyage while the war was raging, Olympic, under the command of Captain James Haddock, was bound for Glasgow with only about 150 passengers. While passing the north coast of Ireland, she came upon the heavily damaged battleship Audacious. The warship had struck a mine and was being abandoned. Taking a huge risk in submarine-infested waters, Haddock stopped Olympic and lowered her boats. Her lifeboats made numerous trips between the liner and battleship that proved invaluable in saving 250 of the crew. Haddock skillfully maneuvered his big liner to attempt to tow the battleship. A destroyer helped rig the towing hawser, but the seas and size of the ships proved too great, and the hawser parted. After several more failed attempts, and with the battleship's stern now awash, the effort was abandoned. Later that night, Audacious capsized and exploded.

HMS Audacious with Olympic's lifeboats evacuating the crew
Credit: Creative Commons and Mabel and Edith Smith, Olympic passengers

After her first wartime adventure, Violet decided to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment and became a nurse with the British Red Cross. Having seen her share of the inside of hospitals, caring for her siblings and tending to passengers, Violet was well suited to hospital work. She spent long nights caring for her patients, hurt and troubled by the trauma of war. Draining wounds and changing dressings, Violet once stabbed herself with a dirty needle, and her hand became badly infected. But she kept at it, working at all hours without proper rest. A doctor, concerned that she was run down and listless, suggested that she go back to sea for her health. Violet applied to White Star and was promised a berth on the great third sister of the Olympic trio, Britannic.

BRITANNIC

Before joining Britannic, Violet made a brief crossing on White Star's Cedric, filling in for a stewardess who was ill. False alarms warning of submarines were constant. Voilet was very relieved to arrive in New York. As soon as she was home, she received word that she was to sign Articles for Britannic the next day. She was impressed with the huge vessel, painted in the white colors of a hospital ship. To Violet, Britannic looked like a giant white swan. There was a small reunion with former White Star shipmates, and Violet got organized for her new job.



HMHS (His Majesty's Hospital Ship) Britannic
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

On the calm, bright morning of Tuesday, November 21, 1916, Britannic was steaming in the Aegean Sea, heading to Moudros, Greece on the island of Lemnos to discharge the wounded on board. Morning daily Mass was over, and the crew was finishing breakfast when Britannic gave a fearsome heave; she had hit a mine. Violet relived the shock of Titanic, but this time, rather than a slow awakening of disaster as on Titanic, the crew sprang into action. Violet hurried to her cabin to get her prayer book and toothbrush. (She had not been able to find one when rescued by Carpathia 4 years earlier.) Britannic was rapidly going down by the bow. Badly holed forward with her hull structure twisted, a critical watertight door forward couldn't be closed. In addition, being close to her destination, many portholes were open to help ventilate the interior. If not for the huge davits fitted because of post-Titanic modifications, rapid evacuation would have been impossible. Britannic's lifeboats were loaded and lowered in 30 minutes with more than 1,000 crew and patients, saving nearly everyone.

Captain Charles Bartlett, whose nickname was Iceberg Charlie for his uncanny ability to detect icebergs, had been assigned as master of Britannic in 1915. Since Britannic was close to land, Bartlett wanted to beach the ship and so kept her moving ahead. The hospital staff helped the wounded on board the boats. Evacuation was orderly, as boat assignments, unlike Titanic, were clear and practiced. Tending to the wounded, Violet got into one of the last lifeboats on the forward end of the boat deck. But Britannic was moving ahead with her stern slowly rising, and everyone became aware of the giant, whirling portside propeller that was ominously rising above the surface. Her boat, alternately stuck on porthole scoops that gather air on each deck, finally reached the water.

Violet was horrified to see the previous boat and its occupants get chopped to pieces by the 38-ton propeller. The forward advance of Britannic, and the group of assembling lifeboats fumbling to escape the ship's side, pressed Violet's boat toward the spinning propeller. Others jumped overboard, leaving Violet and one doctor in the boat. She was mesmerized by the bright metal of the propeller. But just as the boat was drawn into the revolving mass of blades, the two abandoned the boat. Immediately pulled under water, she was surrounded by the thundering din of the propeller cleaving the sea. Violet felt something hit her head and leg and wondered if she would be found dead or alive. Clutching her lifejacket, she felt a nearby arm and recoiled. She struggled to the surface in time to see the ship lay over on her starboard side, with her funnels toppling into the sea and her hull disappearing into the Mediterranean.

Shaken, Violet saw maimed bodies around her. Twenty-eight were killed in the evacuation because of Captain Barlett's efforts to beach his ship and save the lives on board. Unable to swim, Violet stayed very still in the calm sea and was kept afloat by her life jacket. Soon, one of Britannic's motorboats came upon her, and she was hauled aboard. Her leg was badly wounded, and she was bleeding severely from her head. She figured that the blow to her head had been cushioned by her thick hair, which had been partially pulled from her scalp. Her clothes were shredded and ripped. Yet, even in her injured state, Violet tended to the wounded and gave hope to a soldier who said he was going to die. Cutting up lifebelts for bandages while giving him encouragement, she aided a doctor and saved his life.

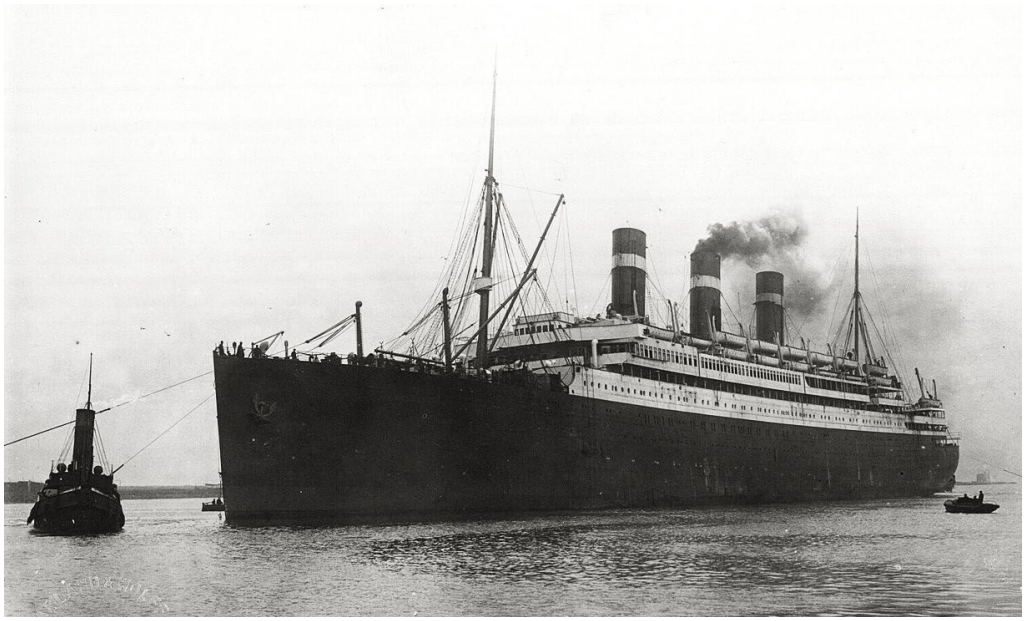
The wounded were taken to the nearby island of Kea. Leaving the island by a destroyer, Violet found solace in the speed and spray and distanced herself by taking in the beautiful, sunny day. What she craved most was a bath, and to use her precious toothbrush. She recuperated with the injured aboard a small ship in Greece before taking the train to Rome. The injured eventually returned to England, this time overland to the English Channel. Violet, unfit for further duty, took a long time to heal. When she was released from the hospital, she took employment in a bank. Always good at math, she found that she couldn't compute simple figures. A dental X-ray revealed that she had a fractured skull from her ordeal with Britannic's propeller. Miraculously, she healed with no long-term effects.

EPILOGUE

Eventually, the sea drew Violet back, and she rejoined White Star Line in 1920 on her favorite, Olympic. Three years later, she found herself on RMS Majestic, the former German liner Bismarck, and the largest ship afloat.

RMS Majestic
Credit: Wikipedia

Violet married in 1923 but quickly learned that married life wasn't for her and ended the marriage. Between 1926 and 1931, she made round-the-world voyages on the SS Belgenland of the Red Star Line, her days again dictated by the clanging of cabin bells calling for service. But this time, unlike in 1908, her ship sailed through the Panama Canal.



SS Belgenland
Credit: Wikipedia

In the 1930s, she sailed on several other Red Star and Royal Mail liners. During World War 2, Violet worked in a censorship office, putting her bilingual skills to good use snipping and pasting

Spanish correspondence. After the war, she did clerical and factory work. But ships and the sea still tugged at her, and she signed on as stewardess one last time in 1948, sailing for South America on her last ship, the Royal Mail liner Andes. Violet had begun her seagoing career on the RMSP Company's Orinoco 40 years earlier on the same route. By this time, Violet was known to her family not only as Auntie Vi but as Miss Unsinkable.

RML Andes
Credit: Blogue de Navios

In 1950, Violet sold the home she shared with her mother and retired to a little cottage, where she raised chickens for extra income. Late one night, she got a phone call. The voice on the line asked if she was the Violet Jessop who had saved a baby on Titanic. Annoyed at being disturbed, Violet said she was. The woman on the other end said, "I was that baby," then hung up. Baffled, Violet thought it might be a prank. But she had never told anyone about her time on Titanic, much less the baby, and that made the call all the more mysterious. In early 1971, Violet suffered a fall. Nothing was broken, but she lay on the floor overnight. Found the next morning by a neighbor, Violet was taken to the hospital by ambulance. While in the hospital, a nurse suggested that she remove her teeth. Indignant, Violet said that every tooth in her head was hers. Her two nieces came to attend to her. Violet lingered for a few more weeks before succumbing to congestive heart failure. She died in May 1971. The local vicar arranged for her to be buried in the town churchyard near her sister Eileen.

Sources: Titanic Survivor by John Maxtone-Graham; Milestones; Encyclopedia Titanica; Wikipedia; *Titanic Voyage and History Center; ART UK; Arts & Culture; Wikipedia; Research Gate; National Library of Medicine; Memories of Nursing; The Last Taboo of Motherhood; Synapsis; Google Arts & Culture; Women's Occupations; Striking Women; Encyclopedia Titanica.