Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Women and Children First

Written by Gill Paul

Published by AVON

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

WOMEN and CHILDREN FIRST

THEY SURVIVED THE *TITANIC*, BUT THEIR LIVES WERE CHANGED FOREVER...

GILL PAUL



AVON

By the same author:
Titanic Love Stories (published by Ivy Press)

The facts surrounding the sinking of the *Titanic* are portrayed accurately in this novel, but otherwise it is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

AVON
A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2012
1

Copyright © Gill Paul 2012

Gill Paul asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

Images on page 465, 466, 469, 470 and 473 courtesy of the Library of Congress

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
ISBN: 978-1-84756-325-5

Set in Minion

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St. Ives plc.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.



FSC is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.
Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

For Ana, Rhuaridh, Barnaby, Harvey and Florence

Prologue

Reg's hands were shaking so hard he couldn't hold the newspaper still enough to read. He sat on a bunk and smoothed the pages open on the shabby grey blanket, ironing the creases with his hand. Lists of names in tiny type covered the surface, organised into uneven columns of surnames, forenames, the class in which each person had travelled, and finally their country of origin.

Straight away he saw an error: Luigi Gatti was listed as Spanish rather than Italian. How could he trust this list if they could make such a simple mistake? Was anything in it reliable? Abbing, Abbott, Abelson . . . Ernest Abbott. That must be Ernie who worked in the mess, but they had him down as a third class passenger. Poor old Ernie.

His finger scrolled down the page. There was Colonel Astor, with the same number of words by his name as anyone else. All that money couldn't buy him a place on the other, shorter list, the list of survivors. There was Bill, who had slept in the next bunk, and Ethel from the pantry, the one they called Fat Ethel. If only they'd been kinder . . .

A couple of columns across, at the 'J's, his stomach turned over and his heart began pounding hard. It was a most peculiar feeling to see yourself listed as dead. He looked away and refocused his eyes just outside the window where he could see unfurling buds on the topmost branches of a linden tree. Someone was moving around in a grey-stone office building opposite. He couldn't make out if it was a man or a woman, but they were holding some papers, which they put down then disappeared from view. For a few minutes he breathed quietly, keeping his head empty, until he felt able to look at the newspaper again.

The first name that appeared before his eyes was 'Grayling, Margaret, 1st class, American', and his eyes filled with tears for the generous old woman who had been his favourite passenger. Not even that old: she was probably only in her forties, about the same age as his mum. Then into his head came the peculiar scene he had witnessed between her husband and a striking young girl on the boat deck. Everything in his mind was now divided into 'before' and 'after', and that had been before: exactly forty-eight hours before the unthinkable happened.

PART ONE

Chapter One

It was one in the morning and first-class victualling steward Reg Parton should have been asleep in his bunk, but a restlessness took him to the ship's galley where he knew Mr Joughin would be pulling steaming trays of bread out of the ovens. Joughin was a good sort and always ready to slip you a fresh roll or two, especially at this time of night when he'd had a few whiskies. Chief baker was the right job for him, because he liked feeding people.

The ship was almost twelve hours out of Queenstown, on the southern tip of Ireland, and gliding her way across the Atlantic. There was less swell than with any other ship Reg had been on. She was as steady as if you were in your own parlour at home, with only the muffled roar of the engines indicating that you were on the move. The *Titanic* was a beautiful beast, with everything brand new and sparkling. It was nice being on a maiden voyage – there was the sense of every surface being untouched and pristine, and this ship was the most magnificent he'd ever seen. Woodwork gleamed, chandeliers shot pinpricks of light around the vast salons, and every surface that could possibly be decorated was clad in gilt, mosaic or milky mother-of-pearl.

Reg had been on board for two days and he'd spent all his off-duty time exploring. There were ten separate decks, each almost 300 yards long, joined up by elevators and staircases in hidden corners. Every deck had a different layout of interminable corridors with faceless doors and he'd got lost more times than he could count. It would take months to get to know this ship properly. He doubted anyone knew it from bowl to stern, except maybe the designers. Mr Andrews, the chief designer, was on board and was often seen wandering the decks making notes in a little notebook. Reg burnt the roof of his mouth on the hot roll and swore.

'That's what you get for being a gannet,' Mr Joughin remarked in his broad Birkenhead accent.

Reg ran to the sink to pour a glass of water, and while he was drinking, Second Officer Lightoller put his head round the door.

'Tea and biscuits for the bridge, Mr Joughin.' He didn't so much as glance at Reg.

'Right you are, sir.'

Lightoller disappeared and Mr Joughin began to set a tea tray. ‘Where’s that bloody Fred when you need him? He went for a fag half an hour ago and hasn’t come back. Who’s going to take this tray?’

‘I’ll do it!’ Reg nearly jumped with excitement. ‘Please let me.’

He was dying to see the bridge with all its gleaming, state-of-the-art equipment. Maybe Captain Smith would even be there.

‘It’s not your place,’ Joughin grumbled. ‘It should be Fred.’

‘But Fred’s not here. They won’t even notice who brings their tea. Let me do it.’

‘Go on with you, then.’

Reg took the elevator up to the boat deck and walked to the short flight of steps that led up to the bridge. The moon was waning, the night was so black there was no dividing line between sea and sky, and the few stars were distant dots in some other galaxy. Onboard lights had been turned to a dim glow as the 1,300 passengers slept below. The steps were slippery with salt spray and Reg took them slowly so as not to slosh tea from the pot.

When he entered the bridge, he was disappointed to see that it wasn’t the captain on duty but another officer, one he didn’t recognise, who was standing alone by the wheel gazing out at the ocean ahead.

‘Put it down there,’ he said, without looking round, just pointing vaguely.

Reg had hoped he might be able to get into conversation and ask questions about the function of all the fancy modern buttons and levers and dials, but there was no encouragement to friendliness in the square set of the officer’s shoulders.

‘Thank you, sir,’ Reg said before turning to leave. If it had been Captain Smith, he could have asked his questions. He’d sailed under the captain two years earlier, had been his personal dining steward on the voyage, and he’d found the grizzly-bearded old man to be a genial, fatherly sort. Whenever he was dining on his own, he’d been happy to answer questions about the propellers and bulkheads and top speed of the ship. He loved his ships, and encouraged Reg’s boyish curiosity.

Reg stopped just outside the bridge to examine the sextant, with which the captain checked the ship’s position at noon every day, then he gazed down the length of the vessel, past the huge funnels and towards the stern. It was a floating hotel, like the Ritz at sea. Of course, he’d never been to the Ritz Hotel, never even been to London, but he’d read all about it in the papers when it had opened six years earlier. The upper classes went there to sip tea in the opulent Palm Court, among real palm trees. Even King George was sometimes glimpsed there. One day Reg would like to visit, he thought, but in the meantime, they had their very

own Palm Court and Verandah Restaurant on the *Titanic* and it too had real palm trees in exotic wooden tubs. No detail had been spared; there was nothing but the best for their well-heeled clientele.

A movement caught his eye and he turned to see a girl standing behind one of the lifeboats, right next to the railing. Her back was to him but he could see that she was very slim, with copper hair secured by a diamond clasp, and wearing a shimmery white dress. She was holding something bulky and brown and, if he wasn't mistaken, furry. Could it be an animal, perhaps a pet dog? It seemed rather large for that.

She turned and Reg shrank back, not wanting to be caught staring, but she didn't once glance up towards the bridge. She was gazing beyond the lifeboat towards the entrance to the Grand Staircase and shifting her weight from foot to foot as if she were agitated about something. Suddenly she turned back towards the ocean, lifted her brown bundle and tossed it high into the air, right over the railing. Reg jumped in horror and opened his mouth to yell, the thought that it might be a dog foremost in his mind, but as it flapped in the air he saw that it was a coat. A fur coat. It seemed to float in slow motion, caught on an ocean breeze, before disappearing from view.

Why would anyone do that? It was a gesture of such extravagant abandon that he was struck dumb.

The girl glanced over her shoulder, presumably to check whether anyone had witnessed her bizarre behaviour. In the lamplight, her face was small and exquisite, like a flawless china doll. She had diamond earrings to match her hair clasp, and her robe plunged open at the front in quite the most revealing manner Reg had ever seen on an upper-class lady.

Yet, there was no doubt that she was upper class. Everything about her seemed genteel and expensive, and the gown was cinched in around a waist so tiny Reg felt sure he could have linked his hands round it.

'She's perfect,' he thought to himself. 'Truly perfect.' But what was she up to? She took a step towards the Grand Staircase, then turned back again as if not sure what to do for the best. She leaned against the railing and bent over to look at the ocean 75 feet below. Reg took an instinctive step towards her. Was she planning to jump? Or just trying to see where her coat had landed? Should he rush over and be ready to grab her if she started to climb the railing? She would die instantly on impact with the water. That tiny neck would snap as surely as if she had leapt off a ten-storey building and hit the pavement below.

He stood, torn by indecision. What if she leapt and he didn't get there in time to stop her because he'd been too busy gawping? He'd feel terrible, knowing he could have prevented it. Should he make some kind of sound so she knew he was there? He could approach and ask if he might fetch anything for her. He rehearsed the words in his head. 'Good evening, ma'am. May I be of assistance?'

She turned again and just at that moment, Reg noticed a figure coming up the Grand Staircase and emerging onto the deck. He walked past a lamp and Reg saw that it was Mr Grayling, an American gentleman whose table he waited on in the first-class dining saloon. He could easily have spotted Reg hovering on the steps to the bridge, but he didn't look that way. Instead, he strode directly towards the lifeboat where the girl was waiting. As she saw him approach, she gave a little cry, ran towards him, and threw herself into his arms. Her tiny white figure was enveloped in his large, dark-suited one.

Mr Grayling held her close for a while then he leaned back to cup her chin in his hands. He said something to her, but Reg could only catch the word 'sorry', before he bent to kiss her full on the mouth. She raised her pale, thin arms around his neck, while he placed a protective hand in the small of her back. It was a posture so intimate Reg knew that they had to be lovers, and not just new lovers. There was a familiarity about their passion. Perhaps they had been apart for some time and this was their reunion.

An awful fact nagged at Reg's brain as he stood watching. Mr Grayling was married to a woman Reg knew and liked, who was with him on this trip. He'd waited on Mrs Grayling on a Mediterranean cruise the previous year, when she'd been travelling with a woman friend, and they'd had several friendly conversations. Reg had been touched that she remembered him this time and professed herself delighted to see him once more. She was nicer than any other passenger in first class, where familiarity with the staff was somewhat frowned upon. How could Mr Grayling betray her? What kind of a man would bring his mistress onto the same ship as his wife?

The lovers slipped in behind the lifeboat, still caught up in their embrace, and Reg decided he had best get a move on before he was spotted. They wouldn't be at all pleased if they thought they were being spied upon. He knew to his cost that if a first-class passenger made a complaint against a steward it would always be believed, no matter how unjust the circumstances. On his last voyage, an elderly gentleman had lost a silver cigar case and accused Reg of stealing it. His belongings were searched and of course it wasn't found. It finally turned up under a table in the smoking room, but Reg knew the incident was recorded in his particulars at the White Star Line office. He'd seen it with his own eyes when he signed

on for this voyage. There was an indelible shadow on his record because of it. He'd protested indignantly to the secretary at the employment office but was told it was just a record of an event, and nothing would make them remove it.

Reg stamped his foot on the step and walked down with a heavy footfall, so no one could accuse him of sneaking around. At the bottom of the steps he turned left towards the port side of the ship so as not to pass Mr Grayling and the girl, who were on the starboard. When he reached the Grand Staircase, he didn't look back but hurried down. He caught the elevator to D deck, said good night to the night shift operator, then descended a further flight of stairs to Scotland Road, a corridor stretching half the length of the ship, where he had a berth in a dormitory with twenty-seven other saloon stewards. It was one-thirty, and he had precisely four hours to sleep before it was time to get up and prepare for breakfast service.

Chapter Two

Lady Juliette Mason-Parker knelt on the bathroom floor, acid scorching her throat and the taste of vomit in her mouth. The floor was tiled with a black and white diagonal diamond-within-diamond motif. Some diamonds had black centres while others were white. She counted the number from the toilet across to the bath: exactly fourteen. Who decided that? Was it calculated precisely to work that way? She supposed it must be. Everything on the *Titanic* seemed meticulously designed, nothing left to chance.

The bathroom fittings were real marble. It seemed remarkable to her that the ship could stay afloat with the weight of all its fixtures and fittings: the library full of books, the swimming pool, the extravagant cut-glass chandeliers in every public room, the carved oak panelling on the walls and the enormous pieces of mahogany furniture. It was much more luxurious than their draughty family pile in Gloucestershire. A student of decorative styles could learn all they needed on board, Juliette mused, as they wandered from the Jacobean dining saloon to the Louis XIV restaurant to the Georgian-style lounge. Their suite had a French feel, with tapestries in rococo frames on the walls and heavy patterned drapes closing off the sleeping areas during daytime.

In the next room, her mother slept soundly, occasionally snuffling and murmuring in her sleep. The last thing Juliette wanted was for her to awake and start fussing. If ever there was a woman who enjoyed fussing, it was Lady Mason-Parker. She had been irritating Juliette beyond measure on this voyage. If it wasn't her endless advice on which hat to wear for breakfast, and which gown was suitable for walking on the promenade in the afternoon, then it was her lectures on how to ensnare a husband, with methods that Juliette considered had gone out with Jane Austen. Men nowadays liked women with a bit of conversation in them rather than smiling fools, but Lady Mason-Parker felt that Juliette's forthright opinions scared them off. So far mother and daughter hadn't argued outright but tetchy barbs had been fired back and forth.

Suddenly Juliette spotted the lid of her pot of cherry tooth powder in the gap between the washbasin and the toilet. Throwing up in the middle of the night had its uses after all. She squeezed her hand in to retrieve it, then considered whether the nausea had subsided enough

for her to wash out her mouth and return to bed. She rose tentatively, holding onto the basin's edge, and regarded herself in the mirror.

Her blonde hair was pinned into waves, which were supposed to hold it in the style of the moment once the pins were removed in the morning. Whoever designed it had paid no regard to the fact that ladies had to attempt to sleep while being stabbed in a dozen different spots on their heads. Her eyes had bruised circles underneath and her skin without makeup had a faint greenish tinge. She would never get a husband looking like this, certainly not the rich American one her mother had in mind. And there was the added complication that it had to be done within a couple of months, from first meeting to proposal to marriage ceremony. The problem was that Juliette was pregnant. It was only eight weeks since the one and only time she'd had intercourse, but the signs were unmistakable. When she first caught her daughter throwing up and prised the truth out of her, Lady Mason-Parker had swung into action like a military commander.

'We need to find you a husband straight away. English men dither so, but a rich American would be ideal. They would be over the moon to get themselves a real English Lady for a wife, and they tend to be more impulsive than Englishmen when they fall in love.'

Juliette was horrified. 'Mother, you can't be serious! I'm not interested in tricking some poor Yankee dupe into holy matrimony. It's hideously immoral.'

'What you did to get yourself into this condition was immoral. Getting married is the way to fix it, and your husband will be delighted to have a child so soon. It will prove you're good breeding stock.'

'I'm not a farm animal! And I refuse to cooperate with your schemes.'

Juliette's protests were in vain. Her mother booked them a passage on the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage, calculating that the ship would be overflowing with eligible American millionaires. Since they sailed, she had occupied herself making enquiries of crusty dowagers in the lounge and arranging introductions to crass Americans who sold automobile components or garden fencing. Juliette had no choice but to converse with the men in question, but at some stage she would find a way to put them off. Mentioning her support for women's suffrage seemed a foolproof method.

'Have you chained yourself to the railings at Parliament yet?' one gent had asked tentatively at dinner that evening.

‘No, but I rather think I might some time,’ Juliette had replied. ‘It looks fun.’

‘She’s joking, of course.’ Her mother leapt in to try and salvage the relationship, but the merest hint was usually enough for them to take fright. No man wanted a suffragette for a wife. Quite apart from the dishonesty of tricking someone into marriage, Juliette didn’t want to be legally entwined for eternity to an American millionaire. She had a strong suspicion she wouldn’t like living in America, even though she had never been there before. She liked Gloucestershire and her horses and her friends; she enjoyed the fundraising she did for charity, which she knew she was good at. If only this whole unfortunate pregnancy could be over as quickly as possible then life could go back to normal.

She favoured Plan B, which was that, in the event her mother failed to entice some rich gent to propose to her during the crossing, they would rent a small house in upstate New York, sit out the remainder of the pregnancy then have the baby adopted through a Christian adoption society. Juliette could return to England and the life she’d known before with no one any the wiser. Even her own father and brother had no idea about her pregnancy; they thought she and her mother were simply visiting some distant American cousins. And as for the baby’s father, he would never find out.

Charles Wood was their local member of parliament, and quite high up in the Liberal party. Juliette had been introduced to him because of her charity work, and one weekend he had invited her to a house party on his estate. It was there, after an invigorating evening of discussion with distinguished guests who even included the prime minister’s daughter, Violet Asquith, that Juliette had allowed Charles to come to her bedroom while the others slept. She had been flattered by his interest in her. Her head was turned. She had heard whispers of other girls who had done ‘it’, but not of any who got caught out. It was her own stupidity to develop a crush on a married man and get carried away without the least thought for the consequences.

There had been no point in telling Charles. What could he have done? In the unlikely event he offered to divorce his wife and marry her, he would have destroyed his parliamentary career. In 1912, no one would countenance a divorced MP. Besides, her mother would never have allowed the marriage. She had much grander plans for her eldest daughter. Juliette must either marry money or she must marry landed gentry, as her younger brother would inherit the Mason-Parker estate. She had been born to a titled family and must

uphold the standards set by her own upbringing, which meant no commoner was good enough (unless he happened to be sufficiently loaded to make such criteria insignificant).

Juliette dabbed a little cherry tooth powder onto her brush and scrubbed her teeth, then rinsed and spat. She wouldn't let herself think about the creature growing inside her belly because she knew it would be the undoing of her. Their Labrador Tess had given birth to five puppies just last Christmas – little blind pink wriggly things – and they had given away four of them as soon as they could. Her baby would be the same. It would go to decent people and have a happy life, and one day in the future when Juliette was married to a man she loved, she would have children of her own.

She crept back into bed and pulled the satin coverlet up to her chin. Why was it always women who had to do the hardest things? How much easier it must be to be a man. Juliette wished with all her heart that she could fast-forward time to seven months from now when they would be on the return voyage to Southampton, footloose and unencumbered.