



# How to Survive the Titanic: The Sinking of J. Bruce Ismay

*Frances Wilson*

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A brilliantly original and gripping new look at the sinking of the *Titanic* through the prism of the life and lost honor of J. Bruce Ismay, the ship's owner

Books have been written and films have been made, we have raised the *Titanic* and watched her go down again on numerous occasions, but out of the wreckage Frances Wilson spins a new epic: when the ship hit the iceberg on April 14, 1912, and one thousand men, lighting their last cigarettes, prepared to die, J. Bruce Ismay, the ship's owner and inheritor of the White Star fortune, jumped into a lifeboat filled with women and children and rowed away to safety.

Accused of cowardice and of dictating the *Titanic*'s excessive speed, Ismay became, according to one headline, "The Most Talked-of Man in the World." The first victim of a press hate campaign, he never recovered from the damage to his reputation, and while the other survivors pieced together their accounts of the night, Ismay never spoke of his beloved ship again.

In the *Titanic*'s mail room was a manuscript by that great narrator of the sea, Joseph Conrad, the story of a man who impulsively betrays a code of honor and lives on under the strain of intolerable guilt. But it was Conrad's great novel *Lord Jim*, in which a sailor abandons a sinking ship, leaving behind hundreds of passengers in his charge, that uncannily predicted Ismay's fate. Conrad, the only major novelist to write about the *Titanic*, knew more than anyone what ships do to men, and it is with the help of his wisdom that Wilson unravels the reasons behind Ismay's jump and the afterlives of his actions.

Using never-before-seen letters written by Ismay to the beautiful Marion Thayer, a first-class passenger with whom he had fallen in love during the voyage, Frances Wilson explores Ismay's desperate need to tell his story, to make sense of the horror of it all, and to find a way of living with the consciousness of lost honor. For those who survived the *Titanic*, the world was never the same. But as Wilson superbly demonstrates, we all have our own *Titanics*, and we all need to find ways of surviving them.

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