



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of
Margaret Ann Brady*



*Voyage on
the Great Titanic*

ELLEN EMERSON WHITE

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For Holly



While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Margaret Ann Brady is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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and ask him if—wait, something is different. I am not sure what, but everything seems different.

There has been a change in the atmosphere that I cannot quite distinguish. My ears feel a little hollow, and — *that* is the difference. I can no longer hear the soothing, constant vibration of the engines. Over the past few days, that has become a comforting background noise — and now, just like that, it is gone. I wonder why.

Voices out in the hall keep saying the word “iceberg,” but no one seems upset. Maybe this sort of event is routine in ocean travel. It seems odd that the engines would stop, so I hope they are not damaged in any way. Maybe they are just running more slowly, which is why I can no longer hear them.

I think I will go out and find Robert now, since I know that he will relieve my curiosity.

This must be routine. What *else* could it be?

Monday, 15 April 1912

My hands are shaking, I feel hot tears struggling against my eyes, and I have no idea where to begin. I

feel a driving need to tell everything *properly*, exactly as it happened, but my mind is cluttered with confusion, and exhaustion, and despair. And *grief*; I am overcome by grief.

The Boat Deck. I will go back to the Boat Deck, and follow the evening through from there. Or – no, the story begins earlier, so that is where I will start.

It was after midnight, and I could still hear people moving about in the passageway. Before I had time to go out and join them, there was a sharp knock on my door. I opened it to see Robert. He was smiling, but his eyes looked urgent.

“Good evening, Miss Brady,” he said. “You need to put on something warm, and report to the Boat Deck with your life belt.”

Miss Brady? When I heard that, I felt alarmed for the first time, but I was also startled. Had I done something to offend him? That would be terrible. I must have looked upset, because he reached out to pat my arm.

“A routine drill,” he said. “No need to fret.”

I knew he needed to get on with his duties, so I found a smile for him and nodded. If he said it was

routine, it must be routine. Robert started for the next stateroom, but then stopped.

“You’ll not want to take your time, Margaret,” he said in a very quiet voice.

It did not seem possible—but maybe this was *not* a drill.

“Robert,” I started.

“Please,” he said. “There’s no time to waste.”

He looked so worried that I did not want to trouble him with any questions, so I just nodded.

“I have already woken Mrs. Carstairs, but you will want to urge her along,” he said.

I nodded again, and he patted my arm once more before moving on to the next stateroom.

My hands trembled as I swiftly pulled on my warmest clothes. My button-boots, the thickest petticoat, the grey skirt, a white blouse, and my old brown sweater. Over all of this, I wore Father’s black wool coat, tucking gloves into one pocket, and this diary into the other. On further reflection, I slipped his copy of *Hamlet* in as well, and checked to make sure Mummy’s locket was safely around my neck. Then I pulled my life belt over my

head and fastened it securely. The belt was so bulky that it was hard to walk, or even move my arms.

Across the hall, Mrs. Carstairs was vexed at the prospect of going outside.

“Why on earth are you so bundled up?” she asked me. “They are merely taking precautions.”

If Robert wanted us to hurry, I trusted that he had a good reason. “I believe you should approach this situation as though it were serious,” I said calmly. “We must do as we have been instructed.”

“Well, I hope they lock the staterooms,” Mrs. Carstairs grumbled. “I have far too many valuables to risk.”

We had a short argument when Mrs. Carstairs decided that she did not want to expose Florence to the cold night air, and that she should remain resting safely in the cabin. I would not hear of that, and put Florence into her sweater at once. Mrs. Carstairs found this cheeky; at the moment, I found *her* downright stupid.

Mrs. Carstairs also balked at putting on her life belt, because it seemed too cumbersome. I was losing patience by now, but fortunately Robert came

in just then and took over, giving quiet, but firm, instructions.

“Will my valuables be safe?” Mrs. Carstairs asked. “Ought we not go to the Purser?”

He told her not to worry, because he would be certain to secure the cabins, and that she must now go to the Boat Deck without further delay. As we were leaving, I looked at him, still smiling but looking very pale in his white uniform jacket.

“Everything will be fine, Margaret,” he said. “The crew is terribly well trained.”

Surely that must be so, but why was he avoiding my eyes? “Should we wait for you?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Then you will join us up there?” I asked.

“Straight away,” he said.

Still, I felt hesitant. “Ought I to stay down here and help you? I could—”

He shook his head more firmly, and Mrs. Carstairs sighed.

“All right, come along, Margie,” she said. “The sooner we go up, the sooner we can come back down.”

Robert was nodding, so I bent to attach

Florence's leash and lead her upstairs.

"Just one more thing," Robert said, and then he reached out and checked to make sure that I had fastened my life belt properly. Then he pointed me in the direction of the Grand Staircase and lifts, and hurried off down the hall as a bell rang in one of the other cabins.

"This is utterly ridiculous," Mrs. Carstairs sniffed, as we started up the Grand Staircase, accompanied by a stream of passengers in various states of dress. "We should never have been roused from our beds like this."

"Has this ever happened to you before?" I asked. "You and Mr. Carstairs have taken so many trips."

"In the middle of the night?" she said. "Certainly not! I find it *outrageous*, frankly."

The steps seemed somehow crooked, and I could not figure out why. Was something on the ship broken? How could any of this *possibly* be routine? My heart began to pound, and I was finding it a little difficult to swallow.

On the whole, the other passengers seemed to think this was either a jolly game, or an irritating

inconvenience. There was no running or pushing, or even any raised voices. Mostly, people were just joking or grumbling. I relaxed a little, deciding that there must be no good reason to be afraid.

When we stepped outside, the sudden exposure to the icy air made me suck in a short breath. Then again, how could anyone think that the ship would hold a routine *drill* when it was this cold? Such an event would be sheer madness. There must be something terribly wrong here.

“I wonder how soon they will let us go back downstairs,” Mrs. Carstairs grouched.

“This is absurd. The White Star Line will certainly be hearing from *me*,” someone else was saying behind us.

The ship’s officers and seamen were uncovering the lifeboats and hurling the canvases aside. The passengers were standing in small groups, watching with perfunctory interest and chatting among themselves. A number of people had merely tossed coats on over their nightclothes and wore slippers on their feet. Since they all seemed to expect to go back inside momentarily, I assumed that my nerves

must only be a result of my inexperience.

But if that was so, why did the deck seem to tilt forward? Surely, it ought not to do that. Then again, the *Titanic* was the finest and safest ship ever built, so there must be a reasonable explanation.

The officers were calling for people to board the lifeboats, but almost no one volunteered. The *Titanic* was so warm and safe, with its bright lights, and the dark ocean looked lonely and dangerous. For the time being, it seemed the better part of wisdom to stay aboard.

I saw Captain Smith pass by, with ship designer Andrews, and they were both so carefully expressionless that once again, I felt a stirring of fear. If there was no problem, they would have been making reassuring remarks, and their faces would lack that tightness. Mrs. Carstairs interpreted their calm manner to suggest that everything was perfectly fine, and most of the people around us agreed with her.

I wished that Robert would come out here soon. It was so dark, and crowded, that I was going to

have to keep out a very sharp eye for him. There did not seem to be any cabin stewards out here yet, so they must still have had things to do below decks.

In the meantime, the officers at the lifeboats were trying very hard to convince people to get aboard. A brave few did so, which encouraged others to follow along. But the first boat appeared to be barely half full. I was sure that there were plenty of boats, so this did not concern me. We would all have our chance.

A tremendous amount of steam was bursting noisily out of the funnels above us, and I felt a surge of hope, even though it made my ears hurt. Maybe they were getting ready to start the engines again!

Someone was saying that a great crush of ice had fallen upon the aft decks, and that some of the third-class passengers had come up to play an impromptu game of football with the chunks. A few first-class passengers wandered down in that direction to watch, and maybe collect some ice for themselves.

Mrs. Carstairs, who was among the impractically dressed group, shivered next to me. "I cannot

be bothered with this tomfoolery,” she said. “I am going inside to get warm.”

Faint music was coming from the First-Class Lounge, where the band must have been playing. Tentatively, I started to follow her.

“No, you stay out here, M. J.,” she said, “so you can come and report on the progress.”

So I stayed outdoors. I was on the port side, and the officers were repeatedly requesting that women and children *only* step forward. The first boat on our side was slowly filling up, and the second was being lowered to the next deck, so it would be easier to board. A group of women and children were ushered downstairs to meet it. No sooner had they gone than they returned, because the Promenade windows had blocked their way. So the boat behind it began to be loaded, instead.

The passengers were still very quiet, waiting cooperatively to be told where to go, and what to do. The only shouts came from the men manning the lifeboats, who yelled things like, “Lower away!” and, “We need an able-bodied seaman over here!” and the ever-present, “Women and children first!”

The forward tilt of the deck was, to my eyes, growing more and more pronounced. I could think of no explanation, unless – but we couldn't actually be *sinking*, could we? Suddenly, there was a blinding white light and a strange whistling sound, followed by the boom of an explosion up in the sky. The noise made everyone duck, and now I saw fear in formerly confident faces. My heart was pounding harder than ever, and my stomach began to ache.

“Distress rockets,” someone murmured.

Distress rockets?! Impossible as it seemed, that could only mean one thing.

Immediately, I went inside to tell Mrs. Carstairs, and try to convince her to come back out. I was having little success, but then Mr. Hollings came over and echoed my concerns, and she peevishly returned to the Boat Deck. I took hold of Florence's leash and went after them.

“Is there *really* a problem here?” she asked Mr. Hollings.

He glanced around, and then nodded slowly, as though making sure no one else was listening. “The word came down from Mr. Ismay himself, I heard.

You must find yourself a seat, at once.” Ismay was the Managing Director of the White Star Line, who I had been told was traveling on this voyage. He would be one of the people most likely to know the true extent of the damage.

Now Mrs. Carstairs’s eyes widened, and she allowed Mr. Hollings to guide her over to Boat 8. The boat was already partially occupied, and women were hesitantly stepping inside. An elderly woman allowed an officer and a strapping sailor to help her aboard with her maid. Then, just as suddenly, she got back out and went to stand next to an elderly gentleman still on the deck, saying something to the effect of, “Where you go, I go.” Her husband, and the men nearby, tried to dissuade her, but she could not be convinced to leave him behind. So the men turned their attention to her husband, suggesting that he get in the lifeboat as well. He refused them with quiet good humour, and the next thing I saw was the elderly couple going off to sit down in deck chairs. They were holding hands tightly, and seemed unaware of anything in the world beyond each other.

We were sinking. We were *actually sinking*. My legs felt weak, and I had to swallow hard to keep my expression as calm and brave as everyone else's seemed to be.

The officers were still trying to fill Boat 8, and Mr. Hollings implored Mrs. Carstairs to do as they were advising and climb in.

"I-I don't know," she wavered. "It seems so very dark out there. Perhaps I should—"

Was there really time to squander quibbling right now? After all, the word had come from the Managing Director himself, hadn't it? "Just *get in* the boat, Mrs. Carstairs," I snapped.

She stared at me, looking confused.

"Mrs. Carstairs," I said again, through clenched teeth. "Get in the—"

Before I could finish, she nodded shortly and moved toward the boat with something of an offended flounce.

"Here you go, ma'am," one of the officers kept saying patiently, as he tried to coax people into the lifeboat. "Step aboard, ma'am. Women and children only, sir."

Husbands and teenage sons were escorting their wives and sisters forward, and then calmly promising to join them later on. Some of the women meekly obeyed; others refused to leave at all. I saw a couple of women literally being *dragged* into lifeboats, sobbing, while their husbands stayed behind, smiling wanly.

And yet, there was still no real sense of panic. I could not tell whether this was because so many did not want to believe that there was any genuine danger, or if everyone was just extraordinarily courageous. I, for one, was growing increasingly frightened.

Halfway into the lifeboat, Mrs. Carstairs stopped short.

“Wait! I’ll not go another step without her!” she cried out.

Mr. Hollings and the nearest officer looked at me expectantly. Without a word, I held out Florence’s leash, and Mrs. Carstairs scooped her up and clutched her against her life belt.

“Wait until the other first-class ladies board, dear,” she said to me over her shoulder. “Then come along, and we will meet up later.”

I had been on the verge of stepping in after her,

and this caught me off guard. *Should* I let the others go first? Considering my station, maybe it would be better to wait my turn. Maybe it was only right. Besides, I had not seen Robert up here yet. I certainly did not want to leave until I was sure that he was safe, too.

“Come on!” the officer said to me, his temper starting to fray. “There’s no time to waste!”

I shook my head and stepped away, doing my best to melt into the crowd. I think Mr. Hollings tried to follow me, but it was easy to elude him with the confusion of people milling about, and the deafening explosions of the distress rockets still being fired into the air.

There were plenty of other boats; I would wait my turn.

Later

Writing about all of this is very difficult. There really are no words to describe what those hours were like. I cannot bear to talk, or eat, or — most of all — *think*. And yet, what can I do *but* think?

At the time, I remember feeling dazed, but also