

# A Bewitched Ship

By W. Clark Russell

‘About ten years ago,’ began my friend, Captain Green, ‘I went as second mate of a ship named the *Ocean King*. She’d been an old Indiaman in her time, and had a poop and topgallant forecastle, though alterations had knocked some of the dignity out of her. Her channels had been changed into plates with dead-eyes above the rail, and the eye missed the spread of the lower rigging that it naturally sought in looking at a craft with a square stern and windows in it, and chequered sides rounding out into curves that made a complete tub of the old hooker. Yet, spite of changes, the old-fashioned grace would break through. She looked like a lady who has seen better days, who has got to do work which servants did for her in the times when she was well off, but who, let her set her band to what she will, makes you see that the breeding and the instincts are still there, and that she’s as little to be vulgarized by poverty and its coarse struggles as she could be made a truer lady than she is by money. Ships, like human beings, have their careers, and the close of some of them is strange, and sometimes hard, I think.

‘The *Ocean King* had been turned into a collier, and I went second mate of her when she was full up with coal for a South African port. Yet this ship, that was now carrying one of the dirtiest cargoes you could name, barring phosphate manure, had been reckoned in her day a fine passenger vessel, a noble Indiaman, indeed—her tonnage was something over eleven hundred — with a cuddy fitted up royally. Many a freight of soldiers had she carried round the Cape, many an old nabob had she conveyed—aye, and Indian potentates, who smoked out of jewelled hookahs, and who were waited upon by crowds of black servants in turbans and slippers. I used to moralize over her, just as I would over a tomb, when I had the watch, and was alone, and could let my thoughts run loose. The sumptuous cabin trappings were all gone, and I seemed to smell coal in the wind, even when my head was over the weather side, and when the breeze that blew along came fresh across a thousand miles of sea; but there was a good deal of the fittings left—fittings which, I don’t doubt, made the newspapers give a long account of this “fine great ship” when she was launched, quite enough of them to enable a man to reconstruct a picture of the cuddy of the *Ocean King* as it was in the days of her glory, when the soft oil lamps shone bright on the draped tables and sparkled on silver and glass, when the old skipper, sitting with the mizzenmast behind him, would look, with his red face and white hair, down the rows of ladies and gentlemen eating and drinking, stewards running about, trays hanging from the deck above, and globes full of gold fish swinging to the roll of the vessel as she swung stately, with her stunsails hanging out, over the long blue swell wrinkled by the wind. The ship is still afloat. Where are the people she carried? The crews who have worked her? The captains who have commanded her? There is nothing that should be fuller of ghosts than an old ship; and I very well remember that when I first visited the *Victory*, at Portsmouth, and descended into her cockpit, what I saw was not a well-preserved and cleanly length of massive deck, but groups of wounded and bleeding and dying men littering the dark floor, and the hatchway shadowed by groaning figures handed below, whilst the smell of English, French and Spanish gunpowder, even down there, was so strong—phew! I could have spat the flavour out.

‘Well, the old *Ocean King* had once upon a time been said to be haunted. She had certainly been long enough afloat to own a hundred stories, and she was so staunch and true that if ever a superstition got into her there was no chance of its getting out again. I only remember one of

these yarns; it was told to me by the dockmaster, who had been at sea for many years, was an old man, and knew the history of all such craft as the *Ocean King*. He said that, in '51, I think it was, there had been a row among the crew: an Italian sailor stabbed an Englishman, who bled to death. To avenge the Englishman's death, the rest of the crew, who were chiefly English, thrust the Italian into the forepeak and let him lie there in darkness. When he was asked for, they reported that he had fallen overboard, and this seems to have been believed. Whether the crew meant to starve him or not is not certain; but after he had been in the forepeak for three or four days, a fellow going behind the galley out of the way of the wind to light his pipe—it being then four bells in the first watch—came running into the forecabin with his hair on end, and the sweat pouring off his face, swearing he had seen the Italian's ghost. This frightened the men prettily; some of them went down into the forepeak, and found the Italian lying there dead, with a score of rats upon him, which scampered off when the men dropped below. During all the rest of the voyage his ghost was constantly seen, sometimes at the lee wheel, sometimes astride of the flying jibboom. What was the end of it—I mean, whether the men confessed the murder, and if so what became of them—the dockmaster said he didn't know. But be this as it may, I discovered shortly after we had begun our voyage that the crew had got to hear of this story, and the chief mate said it had been brought aboard by the carpenter, who had picked it up from some of the dockyard labourers.

'I well recollect two uncomfortable circumstances: we sailed on a Friday, and the able and ordinary seamen were thirteen in number, the idlers and ourselves aft bringing up the ship's company to nineteen souls! when, I suppose, in her prime the *Ocean King* never left port short of seventy or eighty seamen, not to mention stewards, cooks, cooks' mates, butcher, butcher's mate, baker, and the rest of them. But double topsails were now in; besides, I understood that the vessel's masts had been reduced and her yards shortened, and we carried stump fore and mizzen topgallantmasts.

'All being ready, a tug got hold of our tow-rope, and away we went down the river and out to sea.

'I don't believe myself that any stories which had been told the men about this ship impressed them much. Sailors are very superstitious, but they are not to be scared till something has happened to frighten them. Your merely telling them that there's a ghost aboard the ship they're in won't alarm them till they've caught sight of the ghost. But once let a man say to the others, "There's a bloomin' sperrit in this ship. Lay your head agin the forehatch, and you'll hear him gnashing his teeth and rattlin' his chains," and then let another man go and listen, and swear, and perhaps very honestly, that he "heerd the noises plain," and you'll have all hands in a funk, talking in whispers, and going aloft in the dark nervously.

'In our ship nothing happened for some days. We were deep and slow, and rolled along solemnly, the sea falling away from the vessel's powerful round bows as from a rock. Pile what we could upon her, with tacks aboard, staysails drawing, and the wind hitting her best sailing point, we could seldom manage to get more than seven knots out of her. One night I had the first watch. It was about two bells. There was a nice wind, the sea smooth, and a red moon crawling up over our starboard beam. We were under all plain sail, leaning away from the wind a trifle, and the water washed along under the bends in lines through which the starlight ran glimmering. I was thinking over the five or six months' voyages which old waggons after the pattern of this ship took in getting to India, when, seeing a squall coming along, I sung out for hands to stand by the main royal and mizzen topgallant halliards. It drove down dark, and not knowing what was behind I ordered the main royal to be dewed up and furled. Two youngsters went aloft. By the

time they were on the yard the squall thinned, but I fancied there was another bearing down, and thought it best to let the ordinary seamen roll the sail up. On a sudden down they both trotted hand overhand, leaving the sail flapping in the clutch of the clewlines.

‘I roared out, “What d’ye mean by coming down before you’ve furled that sail?”’

‘They stood together in the main rigging, and one of them answered, “Please, sir, there’s a ghost somewhere up aloft on the foretopsail-yard.”’

‘“A ghost, you fool!” I cried.

‘“Yes, sir,” he answered. “He says, ‘Jim, your mother wants yer.’ I says, ‘What?’ and he says, ‘Your mother wants yer,’ in the hollowest o’ voices. Dick here heard it. There’s no one aloft forrards, sir.”’

‘I sung out to them to jump aloft again, and finding that they didn’t move I made a spring, on which they dropped like lightning on deck, and begin to beg and pray of me in the eagerest manner not to send them aloft, as they were too frightened to hold on. Indeed, the fellow named Jim actually began to shiver and cry when I threatened him; so as the royal had to be furled I sent an ableseaman aloft, who, after rolling up the sail, came down and said that no voice had called to him, and that he rather reckoned it was a bit of skylarking on the part of the boys to get out of stowing the sail. However, I noticed that the man was wonderfully quick over the job, and that afterwards the watch on deck stood talking in low voices in the waist.

‘Jim was a fool of a youth, but Dick was a smart lad, aged about nineteen, and good-looking, with a lively tongue, and I heard afterwards that he could spin a yarn to perfection all out of his imagination. I called him tome, and asked him if he had really heard a voice, and he swore he had.

‘“Did it say,” said I, “ ‘Jim, your mother wants you’?”’

‘“Ay, sir,” he answered, with a bit of a shudder, “as plain as you yourself say it. It seemed to come off the foretopgallantyard, where I fancied I see something dark a-moving; but I was too frightened to take particular notice.”’

‘Well, it was not long after this, about eleven o’clock in the morning, that, the captain being on deck, the cook steps out of the galley, comes walking along the poop, and going up to the skipper, touches his cap, and stands looking at him.

““What d’ye want?” said the captain, eyeing him as if he took him to be mad.

““Didn’t you call, sir?” says the cook.

““Call!” cries the skipper. “Certainly not.”’

‘The man looked stupid with surprise, and, muttering something to himself, went forward. Ten minutes after he came up again to the skipper, and says, “Yes, sir!” as a man might who answers to a call. The skipper began to swear at him, and called him a lunatic, and so on; but the man, finding he was wrong again, grew white, and swore that if he was on his deathbed he’d maintain that the captain had called him twice.

‘The skipper, who was a rather nervous man, turned to me, and said, “What do you make of this, Mr Green? I can’t doubt the cook’s word. Who’s calling him in my voice?”’

‘“Oh, it’s some illusion, sir,” said I, feeling puzzled for all that.

‘But the cook, with the tears actually standing in his eyes, declared it was no illusion; he’d know the captain’s voice if it was nine miles off. And he then walked in a dazed way towards the forecastle, singing out that whether the voice he had heard belonged to a ghost or a Christian man, it might go on calling

“Cook!” for the next twenty years without his taking further notice of it. This thing coming so soon after the call to Jim that had so greatly alarmed the two ordinary seamen, made a great

impression on the crew; and I never regret anything more than that my position should have prevented me from getting into their confidence, and learning their thoughts, for there is no doubt I should have stowed away memories enough to serve me for many a hearty laugh in after years.

‘A few days roiled by without anything particular happening. One night it came to my turn to have the first watch. It was a quiet night, with wind enough to keep the sails still whilst the old ship went drowsily rolling along her course to the African port.

Suddenly I heard a commotion forward, and, fearing that some accident had happened, I called out to know what the matter was. A voice answered, “Ghost or no ghost, there’s somebody a-talking in the forehold; come and listen, sir.” The silence that followed suggested a good deal of alarm. I sang out as I approached the men, “Perhaps there’s a stowaway below.”

‘“It’s no living voice,” was the reply; “it sounds as if it comes from a skelington.”

‘I found a crowd of men standing in awed postures near the hatch, and the most frightened of all looked to me to be the ordinary seaman Dick, who had backed away on the other side of the hatch, and stood looking on, leaning with his hands on his knees, and staring as if he was fascinated. I waited a couple or three minutes, which, in a business of this kind, seems a long time, and hearing nothing, I was going to ridicule the men for their nervousness, when a hollow voice under the hatch said distinctly, “It’s a terrible thing to be a ghost and not be able to get out.” I was greatly startled, and ran aft to tell the captain, who agreed with me that there must be a stowaway in the hold, and that he had gone mad. We both went forward and the hatch was lifted, and we looked on top of the coal; and I was then about to ask some of the men to join me in a search in the forepeak, for upon my word I had no taste single-handed for a job of that kind at such a moment, when the voice said, “There’s no use looking, you’ll never find me. I’m not to be seen.”

‘“Confound me!” cried the skipper, polishing his forehead with a pocket-handkerchief, “if ever I heard of such a thing. I’ll tell you what it is,” he shouted, looking into the hatch, “dead men can’t talk, and so, as you’re bound to be alive, you’d better come up out of that, and smartly too—d’ye hear?—or you’ll find this the worst attempt at skylarking that was ever made.”

‘There was a short silence, and you’d see all hands straining their ears, for there was light enough for that, given out by a lantern one of the men held.

‘“You couldn’t catch me because you couldn’t see me,” said the voice in a die-away tone, and this time it came from the direction of the main hatch, as though it had flitted aft.

‘“Well,” says the captain, “may I be jiggered!” and without another word he walked away on to the poop.

‘I told the men to clap the hatches on again, and they did this in double-quick time, evidently afraid that the ghost might pop up out of the hold if they didn’t mind their eye.

‘All this made us very superstitious, from the captain down to the boys. We talked it over in the cabin, and the mate was incredulous, and disposed to ridicule me.

‘“Anyway,” said he, “it’s strange that his voice is only heard in your watch. It’s never favoured *me* with any remarks. The creaking and groaning of an old wooden ship is often like spoken words, and what you’ve been hearing may be nothing but a deception of the ear.”

‘“A deception in your eye!” cried the skipper. “The timbers of an old wooden ship may strain and creak in the Dutch language, but hang me if they ever talked good sensible English. However, I’m not going to worry. For my part,” said he, with a nervous glance around him, “I don’t believe in ghosts; whatever it is that’s talking in the hold may go on jawing, so long as he

sticks to that, and don't frighten the men with an ugly mug, nor come upon us for a man's allowance."

' "If it's anybody's ghost," said I, "it must be the Italian's, the chap that was starved in the forepeak."

' "I doubt that," said the skipper. "I didn't detect anything foreign in what he said. To my ear it sounded more like Whitechapel than Italiano."

'Well, for another week we heard little more of the ghost. It's true that one middle watch a chap I had sent aloft to loose the mainroyal had hardly stepped out of the lower rigging, after lingering in the crosstrees to overhaul his clewlines, when he comes rushing up to me and cries out, "I've been hailed from aloft, sir! a voice has just sung out, 'Tommy, jump aloft again that I may have a good look at you!'" "

' "Who's up, there?" I asked him, staring into the gloom where the mast and yards went towering.

' "There's no one up there, sir: I'll swear it. I was bound to see him had anyone been there," he answered, evidently very much frightened.

'It occurred to me that some one of the crew might belying hid in the top, and that if I could catch him I might find out who the ghost was. So I jumped into the rigging and trotted aloft, keeping my eye on the lee rigging, to make sure that no one descended by it. I gained the top, but nobody was there. I mounted to the crosstrees, but the deuce a sign of any one could I see. I came down, feeling both foolish and scared; for you see I had heard the voice myself in the hold, there was no question that there *was* a voice, belonging to nobody knew what, knocking about the ship, and consequently it was now impossible to help believing a man when he said he heard it.

'However, it was necessary to keep the men in heart, and this was not to be done by captain and mates appearing scared; so I reasoned a bit with the man, told him that there were no such things as ghosts, that a voice was bound to come from a live person, because a spectre couldn't possibly have lungs, those organs being of a perishable nature, and then sent him forward, but no easier in his mind, I suspect, than I was. Anyhow I was glad when eight bells were struck and it was my turn to go below. But, as I have said, nothing much came of this—at least, nothing that reached my ears. But not many nights following the ship lay becalmed—there wasn't a breath of air, and the sea lay smooth as polished jet. This time I had the middle watch again. I was walking quietly up and down the poop, on the look-out for a deeper shadow upon the sea to indicate the approach of wind, when a man came up the ladder and said, "There's someone a-talking to the ship under the bows."

' "Are you awake?" said I.

' "Heaven help me, as I stand here, sir," exclaimed the fellow, solemnly, "if that there voice which talked in the hold t'other day ain't now over the side."

'I ran forward, and found most of the watch huddled together near the starboard cathead. I peered over, and there was a dead silence.

' "What are you looking over that side for? I'm here!" said a thin, faint voice, that seemed more in the air than in the sea.

' "There!" exclaimed one of the seamen, in a hoarse whisper, "That's the third time. Whichever side we look, he's on the other."

' "But there must be someone in the water," said another man. "Anybody see his outline? cuss me if I couldn't swear I see a chap swimmin' just now."

‘ “No, no,” answered some one gruffly, “nothing but phosphorus, Joe, and the right sort o’ stuff too, for if this ain’t Old Nick—”

““You’re a liar, Sam!” came the voice clear and as one could swear, plain from over the side.

‘There was a general recoil, and a sort of groan ran among the men.

‘At the same moment I collared a figure standing near me, and slewed him round to bring his face fair to the starlight, clear of the staysail. “Come you along with me, Master Dick,” said I; and I marched him off the forecastle, along the main deck, and up on to the poop. “So *you’re* the ghost, eh?” said I. “Why, to have kept your secret you should have given my elbow a wider berth. No wonder the Voice only makes observations in my watch. You’re too lazy, I suppose, to leave your hammock to try your wonderful power on the mate, eh? Now see here,” said I, finding him silent, and noticing how white his face glimmered to the stars, “I know you’re the man, so you’d better confess. Own the truth and I’ll keep your secret, providing you belay all further tricks of this same kind; deny that you’re the ghost and I’ll speak to the captain and set the men upon you.”

‘This fairly frightened him. “Well, sir, it’s true; I’m the Voice, sir; but for God’s sake keep the secret, sir. The men ’ud have my life if they found out that it was me as scared them.”

‘This confession was what I needed, for though when standing pretty close to him on the forecastle I could have sworn that it was he who uttered the words which perplexed and awed the sailors, yet so perfect was the deception, so fine, in short, was his skill as a ventriloquist that, had he stoutly denied and gone on denying that he was the “voice,” I should have believed him and continued sharing in the wonder and superstition of the crew. I kept his secret as I promised; but, somehow or other, it leaked out in time that he could deceive the ear by apparently pitching his voice among the rigging, or under the deck, or over the side, though the discovery was not made until the “ghost” had for a long time ceased to trouble the ship’s company, and until the men’s superstitious awe had faded somewhat, and they had recovered their old cheerfulness. We then sent for Dick to the cabin, where he gave a real entertainment as a ventriloquist, imitating all sorts of animals and producing sounds as of women in distress and men singing out for help in the berths; indeed, such was the skill that I’d often see the skipper and mate turning startled to look in the direction whence the voices proceeded. He made his peace with the men by amusing them in the same way; so that, instead of getting the rope’s-ending aft and the pummelling forward which he deserved, he ended as a real and general favourite, and one of the most amusing fellows that a man ever was shipmate with. I used to tell him that if he chose to perform ashore he was sure to make plenty of money, since such ventriloquial powers as his were the rarest thing in the world; and I’d sometimes fancy he meant to take my advice. But whether he died or kept on going to sea I don’t know, for after he left the ship I never saw nor heard of him again.”