

On the Bridge

By William Hope Hodgson

(The 8 to 12 watch, and ice was in sight at nightfall)

IN MEMORY OF

APRIL 14, 1912.

LAT. 41 deg. 16 min. N.

LONG. 50 deg. 14 min. W.

Two-Bells has just gone. It is nine o'clock. You walk to wind'ard and sniff anxiously. Yes, there it is, unmistakably, the never-to-be-forgotten smell of ice . . . a smell as indescribable as it is unmistakable.

You stare, fiercely anxious (almost incredibly anxious), to wind'ard, and sniff again and again. And you never cease to peer, until the very eye-balls ache, and you curse almost insanely because some door has been opened and lets out a shaft of futile and dangerous light across the gloom, through which the great ship is striding across the miles.

For the least show of light about the deck, "blinds" the officer of the watch temporarily, and makes the darkness of the night a double curtain of gloom, threatening hatefully. You curse, and 'phone angrily for a steward to go along and have the door shut or the window covered, as the case may be; then once again to the dreadful strain of watching.

Just try to take it all in. You are, perhaps, only a young man of twenty-six or twenty-eight, and you are in sole charge of that great bulk of life and wealth, thundering on across the miles. One hour of your watch has gone, and there are three to come, and already you are feeling the strain. And reason enough, too; for though the bridge-telegraph pointer stands at HALF-SPEED, you know perfectly well that the engine-room has its private orders, and speed is not cut down at all.

And all around, to wind'ard and to loo'ard, you can see the gloom pierced dimly in this place and that, everlastingly, by the bursts of phosphorescence from breaking sea-crests. Thousands and tens of thousands of times you see this . . . ahead, and upon either beam. And you sniff, and try to distinguish between the coldness of the half-gale and the peculiar and what I might term the "personal," brutal, ugly Chill-of-Death that comes stealing down to you through the night, as you pass some ice-hill in the darkness.

And then, those countless bursts of dull phosphorescence, that break out eternally from the chaos of the unseen waters about you, become suddenly things of threatening, that frighten you; for any one of them may mean broken water about the unseen shore of some hidden island of ice in the night . . . some half-submerged, inert Insensate Monster-of-Ice, lurking under the wash of the seas, trying to steal unperceived athwart your hawse.

You raise your hand instinctively in the darkness, and the cry "HARD A STARBOARD!" literally trembles on your lips; and then you are saved from making an over-anxious spectacle of yourself; for you see now that the particular burst of phosphorescence that had seemed so pregnant of ICE, is nothing more than any one of the ten thousand other bursts of sea-light, that come and go among the great moundings of the sea-foam in the surrounding night.

And yet there is that infernal ice-smell again, and the chill that I have called the Chill-of-Death, is stealing in again upon you from some unknown quarter of the night. You send word forrard to

the look-outs, and to the man in the “nest,” and redouble your own care of the thousand humans who sleep so trustfully in their bunks beneath your feet . . . trusting you—a young man—with their lives . . . with everything. They, and the great ship that strides so splendid and blind through the Night and the Dangers of the Night, are all, as it were, in the hollow of your hand . . . a moment of inattention, and a thousand deaths upon the head of your father’s son! Do you wonder that you watch, with your very heart seeming dry with anxiety, on such a night as this!

Four bells! Five bells! Six bells! And now there is only an hour to go; yet, already, you have nearly given the signal three times to the Quartermaster to “port” or “starboard,” as the case may be; but each time the conjured terror of the night, the dree, suggestive foam-lights, the infernal ice-smell, and the Chill-of-Death have proved to be no true Prophets of Disaster in your track.

Seven bells! My God! Even as the sweet silver sounds wander fore and aft into the night, and are engulfed by the gale, you see something close upon the starboard bow. . . . A boil of phosphorescent lights, over some low-lying, sea-buried thing in the darkness. Your night-glasses are glaring at it; and then, even before the various look-outs can make their reports, you KNOW. “My God!” your spirit is crying of you. “My God!” But your human voice is roaring words that hold life and death for a thousand sleeping souls:—“HARD A STARBOARD!” “HARD A STARBOARD!” The man in the Wheel-house leaps at your cry . . . at the fierce intensity of it; and then, with a momentary loss of nerve, *whirls the wheel the wrong way*. You make one jump, and are into the Wheel-house. The glass is tinkling all about you, and you do not know in that instant that you are carrying the frame of the shattered Wheel-house door upon your shoulders. Your fist takes the frightened helmsman under the jaw, and your free hand grips the spokes, and dashes the wheel round toward you, the engine roaring, away in its appointed place. Your junior has already flown to his post at the telegraph, and the engine-room is answering the order you have flung at him as you leapt for the Wheel-house. But You . . . why, you are staring, half-mad, through the night, watching the monster bows swing to port, against the mighty background of the night. . . . The seconds are the beats of eternity, in that brief, tremendous time. . . . And then, aloud to the wind and the night, you mutter, “Thank God!” For she has swung clear. And below you the thousand sleepers sleep on.

A fresh Quartermaster has “come aft” (to use the old term) to relieve the other, and you stagger out of the Wheel-house, becoming conscious of the inconvenience of the broken woodwork around you. Someone, several people, are assisting you to divest yourself of the framework of the door; and your junior has a queer little air of respect for you, that, somehow, the darkness is not capable of hiding.

You go back to your post then; but perhaps you feel a little sick, despite a certain happy elation that stimulates you.

Eight bells! And your brother officer comes up to relieve you. The usual formula is gone through, and you go down the bridge steps, to the thousand sleeping ones.

Next day a thousand passengers play their games and read their books, and talk their talks and make their usual sweepstakes, and never even notice that one of the officers is a little weary-looking.

The carpenter has replaced the door; and a certain Quartermaster will stand no more at the wheel. For the rest, all goes on as usual, and no one ever knows. . . . I mean no one outside of official circles, unless an odd rumour leaks out through the stewards.

And a certain man has no deaths to the name of his father’s son.

And the thousand never know. Think of it, you people who go down to the sea in floating palaces of steel and electric light. And let your benedictions fall silently upon the quiet, grave,

neatly-uniformed man in blue upon the bridge. You have trusted him unthinkingly with your lives; and not once in ten thousand times has he ever failed you. Do you understand better now?