

The Ghost of a Live Man

By Anonymous

We were in the South Atlantic Ocean, in the latitude of the island of Fernando Noronha, about 40 degrees 12 minutes south, on board the barque H. G. Johnson, homeward bound from Australia. I was the only passenger, and we had safely rounded Cape Horn, with the barometer at 28 degrees 18 minutes, and yet had somehow miraculously escaped any extremely heavy gale—had had light northerly and easterly winds till we reached 20 degrees, and thence the southeast trades were sending us fast on our way to the equator. I sat on deck smoking my pipe, with a glorious full moon shedding its bright pathway across the blue waters, and chatting with the first mate, a man some fifty-eight years of age, who had followed the sea since he was a boy. For twenty years or more he had been mate or captain, and many and varied were the experiences he could relate. A thorough sailor and skillful navigator, he was as honest as the day is long—had a heart as big as an ox and was an all-round good fellow and genial companion. Some of his yarns might be taken cum grano salis, yet he always positively assured me that he “was telling me the truth.” An account of a voyage that he made in a whaler from the Southern Ocean to New Bedford seemed to me worthy to be repeated. He had rounded Cape Horn six times and the Cape of Good Hope twenty-six times, besides making many trips across the Western Ocean and to South American ports. I give his account as near as possible in his own words:

“It was in '71 that I commanded the whaler Mary Jane. We had been out from home over three years, and had on board a full cargo of whale oil, besides 2,000 pounds of whalebone, which was then worth \$5 per pound. I also had been fortunate enough to find in a dead whale which we came across a large quantity of ambergris, and our hearts were all very light as we began our homeward voyage, and our thoughts all tended to the hearty welcome which we should receive from wives and sweethearts when we reached our journey's end. Many a night as I lay in my berth I had thought with great pleasure of the amount of money that would be coming to me from the proceeds of our voyage when we arrived in New Bedford.

“I calculated that I had made \$12,000 as my share of the proceeds of the whalebone and oil to say nothing of the ambergris, which I well knew would bring at least \$20,000, and one-half of which belonged to nine. You can therefore imagine that I was well pleased with myself as we went bounding along through the southeast trades. We crossed the equator in longitude 36 and soon after took strong northeast trades, and all was going as well as I could wish. We had put the ship in perfect order, painted her inside and out, and you would never have recognized her as the old whaling ship that had for three years been plying the Southern Ocean for whales. Never shall I forget an old bull whale that we tackled about two degrees to the south of Cape horn—but that is another story, which I will give you another time.

“We had just lost the northeast trades and were entering the Gulf Stream. I sat in my cabin with my chart on the table before me rolled up. I had just picked our location on it, and was thinking that in a week more I should be at home, surrounded by those near and dear to me, and relating to them the story of my great good fortune.

“It was always my custom to work up my latitude and longitude about four o'clock in the afternoon, and then after supper pick off her position on the chart, have a smoke and perhaps just before retiring a nip of grog, and then at 8.30 o'clock, as regular as a clock, I would turn in.

“I am a great smoker, and this day I had been smoking all the afternoon, besides having had two or three nips. We had a dog on board whom we called ‘Bosun,’ who had been out with us all the voyage, and who was afraid of nothing. He had endeared himself to every man on board, and when Bosun ‘took water’ something very serious was in the wind. This night as I sat in the cabin I heard a most dismal howl from Bosun, and called out to the mate to know what was the matter with the dog. He replied that he ‘reckoned some of the men had been teasing him,’ and the occurrence soon passed from my mind.

“Suddenly I saw someone coming down the after companion way into the cabin. I supposed at first it was the mate and wondered that he had not first spoken to me, but then I noticed that he wore clothes I had never seen on the mate, and as he advanced into the cabin I saw his face. It was the face of a man I had never seen in my life. He was thin and pale and haggard, and as he advanced he looked about the cabin and at the rolled up chart on the table. There seemed to be an appeal in his eyes, and then there swept over his face a look of intense disappointment, and before I could move or speak, he had vanished from my sight.

“Now I am a very practical man, and I at once straightened myself in my chair and said to myself: ‘Well, old man, you have smoked one too many pipes to-day, or else you have had one drink too much, for you have been asleep in your chair and seen a ghost.’ I was quite satisfied that I had had a dream, especially as I called to the mate and asked him if he had seen anyone come below. He said no; that he had not left the deck for the last hour, and the man at the wheel, directly in front of the door, was sure no one had entered the cabin, so I convinced myself that I had had a very vivid dream—though I could not help thinking of the matter all through the next day.

“At eight o’clock the next evening I sat in the same place with my work just finished and the chart lying rolled up on the table before me, when suddenly the dog’s dismal howl rang through the ship, and looking up I saw those same legs coming down the after companion. My hair fairly stood on end, and yet to-day surely I was wide awake. I had only smoked one pipe all day, and had not touched a drop of liquor. The same wan, emaciated figure walked into the cabin, glanced inquiringly and appealingly at me, and again there spread over his face that look of utter disappointment as if he had sought something and failed to find it, and again he disappeared. I rushed on deck to the mate and told him all I had seen during the last two nights; but he made light of it, and assured me I had been asleep or smoking too much. He did not like to suggest that I had been drinking. Still, I could see that the thought that came into his mind was ‘The old man has seen ’em again.’ I gave up trying to convince him, but requested that the next night, from 8 to 8.30, he should sit with me in the cabin.

“How the next day passed I cannot tell. I only know that my thoughts never left that ghostly visitant, and somehow I felt that the evening would reveal something to me and the spell be broken. I made up my mind I would speak to the thing, whatever it was, and I felt a sort of security in the presence of the mate, who was a daring fellow and feared neither man nor the devil. Neither rum nor tobacco passed my lips during the next day, and eight o’clock found the mate and I sitting in the cabin, and this time the chart lay open on the table beside us. Just as eight bells struck the dog’s premonitory wail sounded, and looking up we both saw the figure descending the cabin stairs. We both seemed frozen to our seats, and the strange weirdness of the whole proceeding cast the same spell over the mate and me alike, and we were both unable to move or speak. Slowly the figure proceeded into the cabin and glanced around without a word, but with the same expectant look on his face. His form was even more wasted, his cheeks sunken and his eyes seemed almost out of sight so deeply were they set in their sockets. As his

eye fell on the open chart a look of supreme joy fairly irradiated his features, and advancing to the table he placed one long, bony finger on the chart, held it for a moment and then again disappeared from our sight.

“For five minutes after he had left us we sat speechless. Then I managed to say: ‘What do you think of that, Mr. Morris?’ ‘My God! sir, I don’t know—it’s beyond me.’ Then my eyes fell on the open chart and there where the finger had been was a tiny spot of blood, exactly on the point of longitude 63 degrees west and latitude 37 degrees north. We were then only about fifty miles distant from that position, and immediately there came to me the determination to steer the ship there; so I laid her course accordingly, and posted a lookout in the crow’s nest. At five o’clock in the morning, just as the east began to grow gray, the lookout called out: ‘Boat on the lee bow,’ and as we came up to it we found four men in it—three dead and one with just a remnant of life left in him. We sewed the three bodies in canvas and buried them in the ocean, and then gave all our attention to restoring life to the poor emaciated frame, which, I then recognized, was the very man who for three successive nights had visited me in my cabin.

“By judicious and careful nursing life gradually came back to him, and in four days’ time he was able to sit up and talk with me in the cabin. It seems he commanded the ship Promise, and she had taken fire and been destroyed, and all hands had to take to the boats. Ten were in the boats at first, but their food had given out, and one by one he had seen them die, and one by one he had cast the bodies overboard. Finally he lost consciousness and knew not whether his three remaining companions were dead or alive.

“Then he said he seemed in a dream to see a ship and tried to go to her for help, but just as he would be going on board of her something would seem to keep him back; three times in his dreams he tried to visit this ship, and the last time there seemed to come to him a certain satisfaction, and he felt that he had succeeded in his object. Turning to my table, he said: ‘Let me take your chart; I’ll show you just where we were.’

“ ‘Stop,’ said I, ‘don’t take that chart, it is an old one and all marked over. Mark your position on this new one.’ He took my pencil and knife, and carefully sharpened his pencil. Then, taking my dividers, he measured his latitude and longitude and placed a pencil dot at a point on the clean chart. As he lifted his hand he said: ‘Oh, excuse me, captain, I cut my finger in sharpening the pencil and have left a drop of blood on the chart.’

“ ‘Never mind,’ said I, ‘leave it there.’ And then I produced the old chart and there, in an exactly corresponding place was the drop of blood left by my ghostly visitor.”

Then looking steadily into my face the mate solemnly added “I can’t explain this, sir, perhaps you can; but I can tell you on my honor it is God’s own truth that I have told you.”