

Occult Inhabitants of the Sea and Rivers

By Elliott O'Donnell

Phantom Ships

From time to time, one still hears of a phantom ship being seen, in various parts of the world. Sometimes it is in the Straits of Magellan, vainly trying to weather the Horn; sometimes in the frozen latitudes of the north, steering its way in miraculous fashion past monster icebergs; sometimes in the Pacific, sometimes in the Atlantic, and only the other day I heard of its being seen off Cornwall. The night was dark and stormy, and lights being suddenly seen out at sea as of a vessel in distress, the lifeboat was launched. On approaching the lights, it was discovered that they proceeded from a vessel that mysteriously vanished as soon as the would-be rescuers were within hailing. Much puzzled, the lifeboat men were about to return, when they saw the lights suddenly reappear to leeward. On drawing near to them, they again disappeared, and were once more seen right out to sea. Utterly nonplussed, and feeling certain that the elusive bark must be the notorious phantom ship, the lifeboat men abandoned the pursuit, and returned home.

A fisherman of the same town—the town to which the lifeboat that had gone to the rescue of the phantom ship belonged—told me, when I was out with him one evening in his boat, that one of the oldest inhabitants of the place had on one occasion, when the phantom ship visited the bay, actually got his hands on her gunwales before she melted away, and he narrowly escaped pitching headlong into the sea. Though the weather was then still and warm, the yards of the ship, which were coated with ice, flapped violently to and fro, as if under the influence of some mighty wind. The appearance of the phenomenon was followed, as usual, by a catastrophe to one of the local boats.

I very often sound sailors as to whether they have ever come across this ominous vessel, and sometimes hear very enthralling accounts of it. An old sea captain whom I met on the pier at Southampton, in reply to my inquiry, said: “Yes! I have seen the phantom ship, or at any rate a phantom ship, once—but only once. It was one night in the fifties, and we were becalmed in the South Pacific about three hundred miles due west of Callao. It had been terrifically hot all day, and, only too thankful that it was now a little cooler, I was lolling over the bulwarks to get a few mouthfuls of fresh air before turning into my berth, when one of the crew touched me on the shoulder, and ejaculating, ‘For God’s sake—’ abruptly left off. Following the direction of his glaring eyes, I saw to my amazement a large black brig bearing directly down on us. She was about a mile off, and, despite the intense calmness of the sea, was pitching and tossing as if in the roughest water. As she drew nearer I was able to make her out better, and from her build—she carried two masts and was square-rigged forward and schooner-rigged aft—as well as from her tawdry gilt figurehead, concluded she was a hermaphrodite brig of, very possibly, Dutch nationality. She had evidently seen a great deal of rough weather, for her foretop-mast and part of her starboard bulwarks were gone, and what added to my astonishment and filled me with fears and doubts was, that in spite of the pace at which she was approaching us and the dead calmness of the air, she had no other sails than her foresail and mainsail, and flying-jib.

“By this time all of our crew were on deck, and the skipper and the second mate took up their positions one on either side of me, the man who had first called my attention to the strange ship, joining some other seamen near the forecabin. No one spoke, but, from the expression in their

eyes and ghastly pallor of their cheeks, it was very easy to see that one and all were dominated by the same feelings of terror and suspicion. Nearer and nearer drew the brig, until she was at last so close that we could perceive her crew—all of whom, save the helmsman, were leaning over the bulwarks—grinning at us. Never shall I forget the horror of those grins. They were hideous, meaningless, hellish grins, the grins of corpses in the last stage of putrefaction. And that is just what they were—all of them—corpses, but corpses possessed by spirits of the most devilish sort, for as we stared, too petrified with fear to remove our gaze, they nodded their ulcerated heads and gesticulated vehemently. The brig then gave a sudden yaw, and with that motion there was wafted a stink—a stink too damnably foul and rotten to originate from anywhere, save from some cesspool in hell. Choking, retching, and all but fainting, I buried my face in the skipper's coat, and did not venture to raise it, till the far-away sounds of plunging and tossing assured me the cursed ship had passed. I then looked up, and was just in time to catch a final glimpse of the brig, a few hundred yards to leeward, (she had passed close under our stern) before her lofty stern rose out of the water, and, bows foremost, she plunged into the stilly depths and we saw her no more. There was no need for the skipper to tell us that she was the phantom ship, nor did she belie her sinister reputation, for within a week of seeing her, yellow fever broke out on board, and when we arrived at port, there were only three of us left."

The Sargasso Sea

Of all the seas in the world, none bear a greater reputation for being haunted than the Sargasso. Within this impenetrable waste of rank, stinking seaweed, in places many feet deep, are collected wreckages of all ages and all climes, grim and permanent records of the world's maritime history, unsinkable and undestroyable. It has ever been my ambition to explore the margins of this unsightly yet fascinating marine wilderness, but, so far, I have been unable to extend my peregrinations further south than the thirty-fifth degree of latitude.

Among the many stories I have heard in connection with this sea, the following will, I think, bear repeating:—

"A brig with twelve hands aboard, bound from Boston to the Cape Verde Islands, was caught in a storm, and, being blown out of her course, drifted on to the northern extremities of the Sargasso. The wind then sinking, and an absolute calm taking its place, there seemed every prospect that the brig would remain where it was for an indefinite period. A most horrible fate now stared the crew in the face, for although they had food enough to last them for many weeks, they only had a very limited supply of water, and the intense heat and terrific stench from the weeds made them abnormally thirsty.

"After a long and earnest consultation, in which the skipper acted as chairman, it was decided that on the consumption of the last drop of water they should all commit suicide, anything rather than to perish of thirst, and it would be far less harrowing to die in a body and face the awful possibilities of the next world in company than alone.

"As there was only one firearm on board, and the idea of throat-cutting was disapproved of by several of the more timid, rat poison, of which there was just enough to go all round, was chosen. Meanwhile, in consideration of the short time left to them on earth, the crew insisted that they should be allowed to enjoy themselves to the utmost. To this the captain, knowing only too well what that would mean, reluctantly gave his consent. A general pandemonium at once ensued, one of the men producing a mouth accordion and another a concertina, whilst the rest, selecting

partners with much mock gallantry, danced to the air of a popular Vaudeville song till they could dance no longer.

“The next item on the programme was dinner. The best of everything on board was served up, and they all ate and drank till they could hold no more. They were then so sleepy that they tumbled off their seats, and, lying on the floor, soon snored like hogs. The cool of the evening restoring them, they played pitch and toss, and poker, till tea-time, and then fooled away the remainder of the evening in more cards and more drink. In this manner the best part of a week was beguiled. Then the skipper announced the fact that the last drop of liquor on board had gone, and that, according to the compact, the hour had arrived to commit suicide. Had a bombshell fallen in their midst, it could not have caused a greater consternation than this announcement. The men had, by this time, become so enamoured with their easy and irresponsible mode of living, that the idea of quitting it in so abrupt a manner was by no means to their liking, and they evinced their displeasure in the roughest and most forcible of language. ‘The skipper could d—d well put an end to himself if he had a mind to, but they would see themselves somewhere else before they did any such thing—it would be time enough to talk of dying when the victuals were all eaten up.’ Then they thoroughly overhauled the ship, and on discovering half a dozen bottles of rum and a small cask of water stowed away in the skipper’s cabin, they threw him overboard and pelted him with empty bottles till he sank; after which they cleared the deck and danced till sunset.

“Two nights later, when they were all lying on the deck near the companion way, licking their parched lips and commiserating with themselves on the prospect of their gradually approaching end—for they had abandoned all idea of the rat poison—they suddenly saw a hideous, seaweedy object rise up over the bulwarks on the leeward side of the ship. In breathless expectation they all sat up and watched. Inch by inch it rose, until they saw before them a tall form enveloped from head to foot in green slime, and horribly suggestive of the well-known figure of the murdered captain. Gliding noiselessly over the deck, it shook its hands menacingly at each of the sailors, until it came to the cabin-boy—the only one among them who had not participated in the skipper’s death—when it touched him gently on the forehead, and, stooping down, appeared to whisper something in his ears. It then recrossed the deck, and, mounting the bulwarks, leaped into the sea.

“For some seconds no one stirred; and then, as if under the influence of some hypnotic spell, one by one, each of the crew, with the exception of the cabin-boy, got up, and, marching in Indian file to the spot where the apparition had vanished, flung themselves overboard. The last of the procession had barely disappeared from view, when the cabin-boy, whose agony of mind during this infernal tragedy cannot be described, fell into a heavy stupor, from which he did not awake till morning. In the meanwhile the brig, owing to a stiff breeze that had arisen in the night, was freed from its environment, and was drifting away from the seaweed. It went on and on, day after day, and day after day, till it was eventually sighted by a steamer and taken in tow. The cabin-boy, by this time barely alive, was nursed with the tenderest care, and, owing to the assiduous attention bestowed on him, he completely recovered.”

I think this story, though naturally ridiculed and discredited by some, may be unreservedly accepted by those whose knowledge and experience of the occult warrant their belief in it.

Along the coast of Brittany are many haunted spots, none more so than the “Bay of the Departed,” where, in the dead of night, wails and cries, presumably uttered by the phantasms of drowned sailors, are distinctly heard by the terrified peasantry on shore. I can the more readily believe this, because I myself have heard similar sounds off the Irish, Scottish, and Cornish

coasts, where shrieks, and wails, and groans as of the drowning have been borne to me from the inky blackness of the foaming and tossing sea. According to Mr Hunt in his *Romances of the West of England*, the sands of Porth Towan were haunted, a fisherman declaring that one night when he was walking on them alone, he suddenly heard a voice from the sea cry out, "The hour is come, but not the man." This was repeated three times, when a black figure, like that of a man, appeared on the crest of an adjacent hill, and, dashing down the steep side, rushed over the sands and vanished in the waves.

In other parts of England, as well as in Brittany and Spain, a voice from the sea is always said to be heard prior to a storm and loss of life. In the Bermudas, I have heard that before a wreck a huge white fish is often seen; whilst in the Cape Verde Islands maritime disasters are similarly presaged by flocks of peculiarly marked gulls.

On no more reliable authority than hearsay evidence, I understand that off the coast of Finland a whirlpool suddenly appears close beside a vessel that is doomed to be wrecked, and that a like calamity is foretold off the coast of Peru by the phantasm of a sailor who, in eighteenth-century costume, swarms up the side of the doomed ship, enters the captain's cabin, and, touching him on the shoulder, points solemnly at the porthole and vanishes.

River Ghosts

In China there is a strong belief that spots in rivers, creeks, and ponds where people have been drowned are haunted by devils that, concealing themselves either in the water itself or on the banks, spring out upon the unwary and drown them. To warn people against these dangerous elementals, a stone or pillar called "The Fat-pee," on which the name of the future Buddha or Pam-mo-o-mee-to-foo is inscribed, is set up near the place where they are supposed to lurk, and when the hauntings become very frequent the evil spirit is exorcised. The ceremony of exorcism consists in the decapitation of a white horse by a specially selected executioner, on the site of the hauntings. The head of the slaughtered animal is placed in an earthenware jar, and buried in the exact spot where it was killed, which place is then carefully marked by the erection of a stone tablet with the words "O-me-o-to-fat" transcribed on it. The performance concludes with the cutting up and selling of the horse's body for food. Amongst the numerous other creeks that have witnessed this practice in recent years are those adjoining the villages of Tsze-tow (near Whampoa) and Gna-zew (near Canton).

Various of the lakes, particularly the crater lakes of America, were once thought to be haunted by spirits or devils of a fiery red who raised storms and upset canoes.

Sirens

But by far the most fascinating of all the phantasms of the water are the sirens that haunted (and still occasionally haunt) rivers and waterfalls, particularly those of Germany and Austria. Not so very long ago on my travels I came across an aged Hungarian who declared that he had once seen a siren. I append the story he told me, as nearly as possible in his own words.

"My brother Hans and I were wandering, early one morning, along the banks of a tributary of the Drave, in search of birds' eggs. The shores on either side the river were thickly wooded, and so rough and uneven in places that we had to exercise the greatest care to avoid getting hurt. Few people visited the neighbourhood, save in the warmest and brightest time of the day, and, with the exception of a woodcutter, we had met no one. Much, then, to our astonishment, on arriving

at an open space on the bank, we heard the sound of singing and music. ‘Whoever can it be?’ we asked ourselves, and then, advancing close to the water’s edge, we strained our heads, and saw, perched high on a rock in midstream a few feet to our left, a girl with long yellow hair and a face of the most exquisite beauty. Though I was too young then to trouble my head about girls, I could not help being struck with this one, whilst Hans, who was several years older than I, was simply spellbound. ‘My God! how lovely!’ he cried out, ‘and what a voice—how exquisite! Isn’t she divine? She is altogether too beautiful for a human being; she must be an angel,’ and he fell on his knees and extended his hands towards her, as if in the act of worship. Never having seen Hans behave in such a queer way before, I touched him on the shoulder, and said: ‘Get up! If you go on like this the lady will think you mad. Besides, it is getting late, we ought to be going on!’ But Hans did not heed me. He still continued to exclaim aloud, expressing his admiration in the most extravagant phrases; and then the girl ceased singing, and, looking at Hans with her large blue eyes, smiled and beckoned him to approach. I caught hold of him, and begged and implored him to do nothing so foolish, but he wrenched himself free, and, striking me savagely on the chest, leaped into the water and swam towards the rock.

“With what eagerness I counted his strokes and watched the dreaded distance diminish! On and on he swam, till at length he was close to the rock, and the lady, bending down, was holding out her lily hands to him. Hans clutched at them, and they were, I thought, already in his fevered grasp, when she coyly snatched them away and struck him playfully on the head. The cruel, hungry waters then surged over him. I saw him sink down, down, down: I saw him no more. When I raised my agonised eyes to the rocks, all was silent and desolate: the lady had vanished.”