

The Haunted Ship

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

The following true account of a ghost on board H.M.S. *Asp* was written by Captain Alldridge, R.N., commander of the vessel, after his retirement, and is reproduced here by special permission. Captain Alldridge declared himself completely at a loss to account by natural causes for what actually took place. His story is as follows—

“In the year 1850 the *Asp* was given me by the Admiralty as a surveying vessel. On taking possession of her, the superintendent of the dockyard where she lay remarked to me, ‘Do you know, sir, your ship is said to be haunted, and I don’t know if you will get any of the dockyard men to work on her.’ I, of course, smiled as I said, ‘I don’t care for ghosts, and dare say I shall get her all to rights fast enough.’

“I engaged the shipwrights to do the necessary repairs to the vessel, but before they had been working on her a week they came to me in a body and begged me to give the vessel up, as she was haunted and could never bring anything but ill-luck. However, the vessel was at length repaired, and arrived in safety in the river Dee, where she was to commence her labours. After my tea in the evening I generally sat in my cabin, and either read to myself or had an officer of mine (who is now master of the *Magician*) to read aloud to me. On such occasions we used frequently to be interrupted by strange noises, often such as would be caused by a drunken man or person staggering about, which appeared to issue from the after (or ladies’) cabin.

“The two cabins were only separated from each other by the companion ladder. The doors faced each other, so that from my cabin I could see into the after one. There was no communication between either of them and the other parts of the ship excepting by the companion ladder, which no one could ascend or descend without being seen from my cabin. The evening shortly after our arrival the officer I mentioned was reading to me in my cabin, when all at once his voice was drowned by a violent and prolonged noise in the aft cabin. Thinking it must be the steward, he called out, ‘Don’t make such a noise, steward! and the noise ceased. When he began to read again, the noise also recommenced. ‘What are you doing, steward—making such a noise for?’ he called out, and, taking the candle, rushed into the next cabin. But he came back quicker than he went, saying there was nobody there.

“He recommenced reading, and once more began the mysterious noise. I felt sure there was some drunken person there whom my officer had overlooked, and accordingly rose and looked myself, and, to my very disagreeable surprise, found the cabin empty.

“After that evening the noises became very frequent, varying in kind and in degree. Sometimes it was as though the seats and lockers were being banged about, sometimes it sounded as though decanters and tumblers were being clashed together. During these disturbances the vessel was lying more than a mile off shore.

“One evening I and the above-named officer went to drink tea at a friend’s house at Queen’s Ferry, near Chester, the vessel at the time being lashed to the lower stage opposite Church’s Quay. We returned on board together about 10 p.m. While descending the companion ladder I distinctly heard some one rush from the after cabin into the fore cabin. I stopped the officer who was behind me at the top of the ladder, and whispered to

him, 'Stand still! I think I have caught the ghost!' I then descended into my cabin, took my sword, which always hung over my bed, and placed it, drawn, in his hand, saying, 'Now, allow no one to pass you. If any one attempts to escape, cut him down. I will stand the consequences.' I then returned to the cabin, struck a light, and searched everywhere, but nothing could I find to account for the noise I had heard, though I declare solemnly that never did I feel more certain of anything in my life than that I should find a man there. So there was nothing to be done but to repeat, for the hundredth time, 'Well, it is the ghost again!

"Often when lying in my bed at night have I heard noises close to me, as though my drawers were being opened and shut, the top of my washing-stand raised and banged down again and a bed which stood on the opposite side of the cabin pulled about; while of an evening I often heard, while sitting in my cabin, a noise as though a percussion-cap were snapped close to my head; also very often—and I say it with godly and reverential fear—I have been sensible of the presence of something invisible about me, and could have put my hand, so to say, on it, or the spot where I felt it was; and all this occurred, strange to say, without my feeling in the least alarmed or caring about it, except so far that I could not understand or account for what I felt and heard.

"One night, when the vessel was at anchor in Martyn Roads, I was awoken by the quartermaster calling me and begging me to come on deck, as the look-out man had rushed to the lower deck, saying that a figure of a lady was standing in the paddle-box, pointing with her finger to heaven. Feeling angry, I told him to send the look-out man on deck again and keep him there till daybreak, but on attempting to carry my orders into execution the man went into violent convulsions, and the result was I had to go myself upon deck and remain there till morning.

"This apparition was often seen after this, and always as described, with her finger pointing towards heaven.

"One Sunday afternoon, while lying in the Haverfordwest river, opposite to Lawrenny, the crew being all ashore and I being at church, my steward (the only man on board), whilst descending the companion ladder, was spoken to by an unseen (*sic*) voice. He immediately fell down with fright, and I found his appearance so altered that I really scarcely knew him! He begged to be allowed his discharge and to be landed as soon as possible, to which I felt obliged to consent, as he could not be persuaded to remain on board for the night. The story of the ship being haunted becoming known on shore, the clergyman of Lawrenny called on me one day and begged me to allow him to question the crew, which he accordingly did. He seemed very much impressed by what he heard, and seemed to view the matter in a serious light. His opinion was that 'some troubled spirit must be lingering about the vessel.'

"During the years that I commanded the *Asp* I lost many of my men, who ran away on being refused their discharge, and a great many others I felt forced to let go, so great was their fear, one and all telling me the same tale, namely, that at night they saw the transparent figure of a lady pointing with her finger up to heaven. For many years I endeavoured to ridicule the affair, as I was often put to considerable inconvenience by the loss of hands, but to no purpose. I believe that when officers went out of the vessel after dark none of the crew would have ventured into the cabin on any account. One night I was awoken from my sleep by a hand, to all sensations, being placed on my leg outside the bedclothes. I lay still for a moment to satisfy myself of the truth of what I felt, and then

grabbed at it, but caught nothing. I rang my bell for the quartermaster to come with a lantern, but found nothing. This occurred to me several times, but on one occasion, as I lay wide awake, a hand was placed on my forehead. If ever a man's hair stood on end, mine did then. I sprang clean out of bed; there was not a sound. Until then I had never felt the least fear of the ghost, or whatever you like to call it. In fact, I had taken a kind of pleasure in listening to the various noises as I lay in bed, and sometimes when the noises were very loud I would suddenly pull the bell for the look-out man, and then listen attentively if I could hear the sound of a footstep or attempt to escape; but there never was any, and I would hear the look-out man walk from his post to my cabin, when I would merely ask him a few questions as to the wind and weather.

“At length, in 1857, the vessel, requiring repairs, was ordered alongside the dockyard wall at Pembroke. The first night the sentry stationed near the ship saw (as he afterwards declared) a lady mount the paddle-box, holding up her hand towards heaven. She then stepped on shore and came along the path towards him, when he brought his musket to the charge: ‘Who goes there?’ But the figure walked through the musket, upon which he dropped it and ran for the guard-house. The next sentry saw all this take place, and fired off his gun to alarm the guard. The figure then glided past a third sentry, who was placed near the ruins of Pater Old Church, and who watched her, or it, mount the top of a grave in the churchyard, point with her finger to heaven, and then stand till she vanished from sight. The sergeant of the guard came, with rank and file, to learn the tale, and the fright of the sentries all along the dockyard wall was so great that none would remain at their post unless they were doubled, which they were, as may be seen by the ‘Report of Guard’ for that night. Singularly enough, since that the ghost has never been heard of again on board the *Asp*, and I never heard the noises which before had so incessantly annoyed me. The only clue I could ever find to account for my vessel being haunted is as follows: Some years ago, previous to my having her, the *Asp* had been engaged as a mail packet between Port Patrick and Donaghadee. After one of her trips, the passengers having all disembarked, the stewardess, on going into the ladies’ cabin, found a beautiful girl, with her throat cut, lying in one of the sleeping berths, quite dead. How she came by her death no one could tell, and though, of course, strict investigations were commenced, neither who she was or where she came from, or anything about her, was ever discovered. The circumstances gave rise to much talk, and the vessel was remanded by the authorities, and she was not again used until handed over to me for surveying service. Here ends my tale, which I have given in all truth.

“Much as I know one gets laughed at for believing in ghost stories, you are welcome to make what use you please of this true account of the apparition on board the *Asp*.”