

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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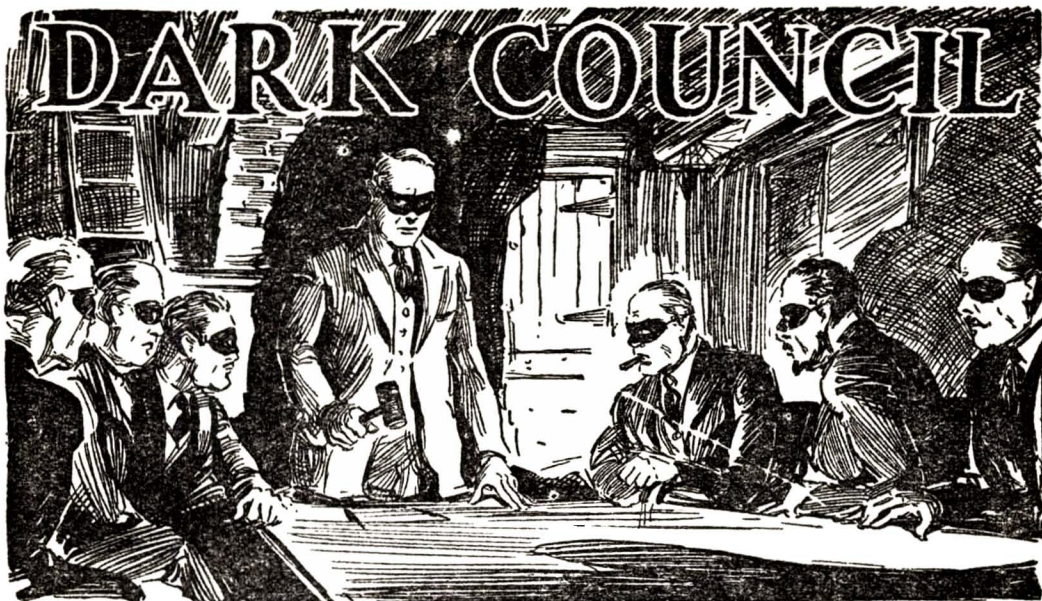
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THE manuscript, which is written in faded ink on pages torn out of a ship's log, was found by a geologist named John Norman. Engaged in a mapping tour which extended from Juneau east to the western slope of the Canadian Rockies, he records that he discovered it near the center of the great basin which lies in latitude 59, long. 128 west, sealed in a glass jar. No other information is furnished by Mr. Norman save the small item of geological information which concludes this story. We present it verbatim, and leave to the reader the task of explaining it according to his prejudices and convictions:

I am making this record—so begins the MS.—more for the purpose of giving myself something to do for an hour or so, rather than in the hope that it serve any useful purpose to us who are condemned to a living death in eternity, or to those who may conceivably discover it after I have thrown it overboard. What has happened is so strange, so weirdly horrible, that I can find no words to describe it in terms that a possible reader might understand. Nevertheless, I shall try, in a three-dimensional form of expression, to describe what can only be a sort of fourth-dimensional experience, and hope that some day science and metaphysics will have advanced to the point where human beings may be able to understand what has happened to us.

The *Queen Charlotte*, bound north from Tacoma, was a fantastically alarming spectacle—especially to one conversant with the superstitions and mores of the sea—when I went down to board her on that cloudy, cold afternoon in late February. For one thing, she had a decided list to port. For another, the rats were pouring out of her like disturbed flies from a rotting carcass. These things added to the mood of profound melancholy that had plagued me all day—and gave very definite evidence that the voyage ahead of me was a thing to be dreaded. For there is hardly a man who follows the sea but believes in the unfailing omens of disaster that a merciful Providence affords to sailormen.

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Nevertheless, since I had signed the articles as second mate, I was honor-bound to make the voyage; so in spite of my certain knowledge of impending doom, I boarded the vessel.

I found the ship in almost a state of mutiny. The captain and first officer, Mr. Williamson, held the crew aboard at pistol's end. I had no sooner boarded than the order was given to cast off, and only after we had hoisted sail and were many miles at sea did the captain relax his vigilance and abandon the poop. He called me into his cabin, for I was a new man to him and to the *Queen Charlotte*.

He gazed at me speculatively for a few moments as I stood before him, his cold grey eyes seeming to plunge into the hidden recesses of my mind; and I could feel the icy inhumanity of the man as it had struck me at our first meeting. Indeed, I regretted the necessities that had forced me to take this voyage with a strange master of no very savoury reputation, and on a hulk which was generally regarded as a hell ship.

"I trust, Mr. Sanders," were his first words, "that you take no stock in the childish nonsense that is being babbled for'ard?"

It was a question and a challenge at the same time. I met it according to the dictates of my conscience. "As a matter of fact, Captain Doone," I replied, "I cannot truthfully say that

I do not believe in the significance of rats leaving a ship about to embark on a voyage. . . . However, my presence here should be proof to you that I shall do my duty and carry out the orders of my superior officers to the end."

Again he subjected me to that cold, unemotional scrutiny that was like the malevolent glare of ice-blink in the north latitudes. After a time he grunted—a sound in which infinite contempt was mingled with frigid anger.

"It seems," he said, "that I have shipped a gang of milk-sops and idiots. . . . That will be all, Mr. Sanders. Your watch below, I believe . . ."

That night in my first watch the men seemed quiet, if sullen and despondent. I went forward past the break of the poop, leaned on the rail, and gazed out to sea with a feeling in my heart that no words can describe. It was not so much the feeling—nay, the conviction—that I and all this ship's crew were going to our death; it was something infinitely more terrible—more devastatingly unbearable than that. I felt that we were literally sailing into another world. I was like one who has turned his face from the earth, leaving all dear, familiar, and comfortable sights, sounds, and experiences behind him. My *hopes* were burned—I was facing a cold, alien world from which there would be no returning. And yet, many and many a time I had made this self-same voyage on good ships and bad. From Tacoma to Seward and back. From San Francisco, from Seattle and Vancouver, to Nome and Bristol Bay and the Aleutians—many, many times. I was more at home on these seaways than on any land—and yet. . . .

Nothing was *right* about this voyage. The atmosphere of the ship was strange and alien. It was as though, somewhere, somehow we had turned a corner and did not know how to get back. . . .

Turned a corner! How often in the months that followed I would think of that phrase! How thin a partition separates human beings from the unknown land that has somehow trapped us and our vessel. There would be some point in writing this if I could send back a warning—specific directions—of how to avoid the fate that has befallen us. But I cannot. I can only tell what happened.

The next day we made a disturbing discovery. Apparently every atom of food aboard was spoiled. The flour was mildewed and mouldy. The meat was rotten and maggot-infested. Even the jerked meat was all but inedible, and such canned goods as we had aboard showed bulging tops and bursting seams from the gaseous pressure of the corruption within. This discovery nearly precipitated another riot, and strident demands came from the fore-castle that we return

immediately to reprovision. The captain refused, and quieted the men with the promise that we would restore the larder at the first port of call. That would be Vancouver which we could be sure of reaching before the month was out.

But on the day following it was found that the water-butts had started seams, and practically every drop of fresh water aboard had been lost, trickling down through the course of the night into the bilge.

Then, indeed, we had our *hands* full. The men had secured a few firearms, somewhere, and headed by a huge Swede by the name of Larsen, they charged the poop. The first officer and Captain Doone each killed a man. I fired over their heads, thus incurring a black look from the master, but I could not bring myself to shoot the poor devils. At length quiet was restored, the leaders of the mutiny clapped into the lazarette, and we sailed on.

No need to recount the minor trials of the remainder of that horrible voyage. Suffice it to say that it soon appeared that we had, indeed, sailed into an alien world. Our instruments still recorded with seeming accuracy. The sextant, the chronometer, and the compass *appeared* to register our position as faithfully as of yore—but we were nonetheless lost as surely as though every instrument has been thrown overboard.

The time came when we should have been nearing Vancouver—but we made no landfall. Our instruments told us that we must be directly opposite Juan de Fuca Strait—but we saw no sign that this was so. We turned and sailed directly east—according to our instruments—and we never saw land. We sailed for weeks. We sailed until we should have been half-way across the American continent—near the 100th meridian, our instruments said—and still nothing met our perishing gaze but trackless, endless, illimitable miles of ocean. And then, again, we turned north.

It is strange that we lived for those weeks and months. We had no water or food. We were starving and dying of thirst—but we did not die! We suffered the tortures of the eternally lost and damned in the deepest pit of hell—but death would not come to end our agonies. We were a wasted, shrivelled company of walking skeletons; our skin blackened, our hair sere and dank, our eyes staring metal globes ringed by fevered, fiery flash. Each man gazed upon his neighbor with livid horror writhing in his brain, plain to see on his ghastly, cadaverous face. But we could not die. . . .

And on and on, forever on we sailed.

One day the captain threw the sextant and the chronometer into the sea. With an ax, then, he shattered the binnacle and destroyed the compass. "Liar!" he screamed in a voice that was

like the shrieking of a loon. "Liar—liar—liar!" And swung the ax crashing down. And then he lay stricken upon the poop and made no move for many days. . . .

It was I who first saw the ship.

Strangely, I could make no move, for a time. It was like a horrible nightmare. I would not—could not believe that my eyes were not playing me false. I was frozen by the fear that it was but an illusion of my fevered brain—and then, when I would scream the gladsome news to my mates, my voice failed me. Only a choking, dry husk came from my throat that hardly sounded in my own dulled ears. I remembered, then, that other seaman the poet wrote about—that Ancient Mariner whose ship had likewise transgressed the law of the sea and sailed into an ocean of nothingness. I remembered the line: ". . . I bit my wrist, I sucked the blood and cried 'A sail! A sail!'"

As he had done, I bit my wrist and the turgid blood oozed out enough to moisten my palate and the chords of my throat. I shouted, "Sail—ho!" and sank upon the deck.

But none answered that call. All lay about the deck where they had been lying these many weeks and not a man showed by the slightest movement that he had heard.

For a long time I lay there, watching that ship come on, and the weakness and pain of my body would not permit me to signal her nor even to give her a hail as she drew close enough for them to hear me. But it was plain that she had sighted us, that she was coming on to investigate this strange derelict that rolled in the trough of the sea and yet forged onward at good speed with sails flapping listlessly on the masts. And soon I could see the men about the fore-castle deck, others in the rigging, and all occupied with the business of sailing their vessel as all normal ships are sailed. . . . And yet, I thought, it is strange that all goes so quietly aboard that ship. For never had I seen men behave that way when a passing vessel is sighted. It is a rare enough occurrence to draw the attention of the entire crew on ships maintaining even the most rigorous discipline—but not a head was turned toward us save that of the helmsman.

The ship came on. And now, desperation drove me to my feet and I found the strength to lift a shout of terror. For the vessel was closing down upon us under full sail. If she kept her course another minute she would ram us and send both ships to the bottom of the sea. But my shrieks were in vain.

The bowsprit of the oncoming vessel loomed amidships and I grabbed the rail and set my body for the shock—but there was no shock!

The ship sailed on—cleaving through our middle as though ours was a vessel of cob-webs; and not a tremor, not a sound signalled to my straining, anguished senses that we had been

rammed. The body of the vessel shot through ours—and was gone. And with it went my consciousness, and I fell upon the deck like a storm-felled mast. . . .

I know not how long I lay senseless upon the deck of the accursed ship, but when I awakened it was to find our vessel gliding into what seemed a great inland bay. A shoreless expanse of mirror-calm water shown beyond the rocky abutments of the entrance, and somehow I knew that an end to our suffering was in sight.

As the ship swept through that narrow passage I looked in growing wonder and awe upon the rocky walls that rose on either side. Like opalescent glass, they were—but like no glass I had ever seen before. They shimmered with the colors of the rainbow, and seemed glossed over with a flowing, swirling sheen of light that was never still and never twice the same. It made me dizzy and sick to watch—for all that it was the most beautiful sight I have ever looked upon—but the strangeness of it all drove fresh anguish of fear into my heart, and I dreaded the unguessable things their weird appearance portended.

And yet, those beautiful walls were, indeed, the herald of the end of our physical suffering. We had no sooner left them behind and passed into the quiet, shoreless sea beyond than every man rose from the deck and gathered at the rail. I felt the hunger and drought leave my body, to be replaced by a feeling of lightness and health, and I knew that what had happened to me had happened to all the crew. It was strange, though, that this physical change occasioned me no joy—nor brought an expression of happiness to the faces of my companions. They stood there at the rail, where I joined them, and stood gazing back at the rocky escarpment of the coast we were rapidly leaving behind—but they spoke no word and I felt no urge to speak to them.

Time . . . what is time? I thought we might have stood there for hours as the ship plowed onward through that quiet sea—but perhaps it was weeks. We never moved nor felt any need for movement. The captain came down from his poop and joined us, but he spoke no word to us and we did not address him. We stood and waited—and at long length the ship came to rest. . . .

As I finish this account of the strange last voyage of the *Queen Charlotte* I feel a vague restlessness stealing over my senses. Is it the beginning of the thing that has driven all the crew but myself into the quiet, turgid waters of this eerie sea? Is it the thing that drove them shrieking to throw themselves over the rail in search of surcease from the madness that writhed in their brains?

There is no sun nor moon nor stars above this sinister water, so I cannot say how long ago it was that the first man went over. It was little

Cox, the cabin boy. For a time he ~~Tan~~ shrieked about the ship, crying in a strange high voice without words—and at last cast himself into the water. We watched him listlessly, no man making a move to rescue him—for we knew that we were all beyond rescue. He lay there quietly, buoyed up, somehow, so that most of his small body was above the surface of the water. He stared up at us with a strange, questioning look on his drawn, young face—and we gazed back at him, blankly, stupidly. Then, slowly he turned over and began swimming away. Slowly, he went, at first, with smooth, rhythmic strokes—then faster, and still faster, until it seemed he was swimming with a speed far beyond the powers of any mortal. We watched him until, at last, he disappeared—a diminishing speck on the measureless breast of that still, oily ocean. . . .

One by one they went like that—all in the same direction. All with an accelerating speed that no man ever swam with before.

What shore awaits them? Is there, beyond that sinister, far horizon release from terror and pain? Is there forgiveness for the transgressions of this ship, release from the doom brought down upon all our heads by its master? For I know, now, that a curse has been upon us from the start.

Captain Doone was the last man to go over the side. Before he sprang into the sea his voice was given back to him and he seemed to pray.

"Forgive me!" he shrieked and lifted his face to the empty sky. "Forgive me for not answering your call. You men who died on the ship I passed while you signalled for aid—forgive me!"

Then he rose and flung himself from the rail.

It is true, then, the tale that was told about the wharfs in Tacoma. Captain Doone, on his last trip down from Alaska, had disregarded a distress signal. . . .

But I must end this. My blood boils in my veins. I seem obsessed with fiends who twist my brain in its skull, who pluck at my nerves and claw at my throat so that I long to shriek aloud. I must make an end. . . . I must go to whatever shore my shipmates have found—for there lies my destiny . . . I know it. . . .

Thus ends the only available account of the last voyage of the *Queen Charlotte*, reported lost at sea many decades ago. And the account is accompanied by a statement, from the man who found the MS., which may or may not possess significance:

"The basin in which this MS. was found," notes Mr. Norman, "was once the site of a great inland sea which, geo-

logical records show, extended, from what is now the western coast of Canada, east to approximately the location of Great Slave Lake. This sea disappeared at the time the northern Canadian Rockies were formed—many hundreds of thousands of years ago.”

Men, there are, who claim to have come back from the dead. Others have stories to tell which have the ring of truth—and yet are as strange as the one we have presented here. All over the world, and in all ages, records of experiences that seem to surpass what is known of normal, human life have sprung up to set men wondering and speculating. We are not able to judge what is true and what is not—unless we adopt some rigid standard of comparison that admits nothing not capable of physical proof. But, at least, we may thrill to the unusual, the weird, and the inexplicable. Readers of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE have become connoisseurs of such stories.
