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No. 3



THIS magazine is the answer to thousands of requests that we have received over a period of years, demanding a second look at famous fantasies which, since their original publication, have become accepted classics. Our choice has been dictated by your requests and our firm belief that these are the aces of imaginative fiction.

—The Editors.



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The January Issue Will Be On Sale December 6

Lights

By PHILIP FISHER

Author of "The Devil of the Western Sea," "Beyond the Pole," etc.

Hazard on the high sea and a ghostly warning that the eyes of one sailor only could see

I

THERE had never been any question of Carey's seamanship. Officers who knew had testified to that. The captain himself had declared so to the court. And he had added further the unsolicited opinion that he knew no officer he would more fully trust to keep safe position when the destroyer division was making twenty-five knots in close column.

Furtive glances flickered between the officers grouped about the green baized wardroom table. A disagreeable duty, this trying a brother at arms. The judge advocate himself hesitated. Then, pushing aside a thought not entirely complimentary to naval regulations, he sighed almost audibly and put another question.

Captain Kennart shook his head with grim decision.

"No," he said emphatically. "Carey never used the stadimeter. Always judged the distance with his naked eye."

A member of the court cleared his throat. Another tapped the table top with his pencil. The judge advocate sighed within himself again.

"That's all," he said finally.

Carey's counsel nodded. The president of the court looked inquiringly at his confrères. Each shook his head in turn.

The president made the routine admonition regarding silence and Captain Kennart left the room.

Lieutenant, junior grade, Warren Carey relaxed somewhat in his seat. He had felt that his captain would do his best by him. He thrilled with a growing faith in his fellow man at this positive evidence that despite what had occurred the captain bore no grudge. Yet had Captain

Kennart given testimony inspired by an active hate, he could have found no fault.

Hope again grew in his breast. These officers about him, too, he had shopped and partied with all over the China coast. The admiral had ordered them on this court. A regulation duty. They were to ascertain facts, impartially weigh them, give judgment in accordance with navy law. This they would do, Carey knew. Yet when one's fate is to be settled by real men, mercy ever tempers justice. Real men can understand.

A fluttering breath escaped Carey, nevertheless.

He dared not succumb to optimism. Between him and these others, all other men indeed, he still sensed something inexplicable, as if he were befogged in vibrations of a different plane. He could not see this clouding envelope. It was a thing to be felt, but not by a normal perceptive faculty. He wondered if he really differed in any strange way from ordinary men. It appeared almost that he did.

He shuddered slightly in recollection of that night on the lower Yangtze when he, and only he, had seen those lights. Every man who had been on the bridge when the thing had occurred had sworn to having seen not a single light. He, Carey, witness at the captain's own trial, had been alone in the affirmative. He had not been told this of course. Yet instinctively he knew it must be so. That night they had declared themselves. Before the court they assuredly had done the same thing.

Another witness was summoned.

Through the haze of strange introspection Carey heard fragments of his testimony.

To think that this companion of many an upper Yangtze rice-bird hunt, this doctor who had brought him through the dengue fever down in Cavite, should now have to vouch for him in a general court. To think—could something about him really be different from other men? Was he—gifted? Why had it been given to him, and him only, to see what had been withheld from the sight of all other men on the ship—those lights? Or was he prone to temporary hallucination such as his captain pityingly had hinted in an endeavor to extenuate his—Carey's—crime? And was the medico now—

“No.” The doctor's voice rose. “I have fished, hunted, shopped, seen the sights with Carey, and doctored him, for the last year and a half. He is not insane.”

Carey's heart leaped in gratitude at the man's vehement assertion. The medico, too, was a man!

But—insane!

Surely the court had understood the captain's hint. Not by any possible chance could they bring that dread judgment of his case. Never!

And yet—he, and only he, had been the man to see. And then, that trouble with the captain. Carey shook his head. Surely he had not been even temporarily mad. Persons laboring under mental delusions promptly forgot, he had heard, the vagaries of their period of aberration. And too clearly could he still recall those lights, still envision that horrid struggle on the destroyer's bridge. From the first order he had given the man at the wheel every incident was indelibly impressed on his memory, and with a clarity not to be confuted. Even to the final catastrophe and the terror inspired by the crew. No, no, the medico was quite right. He, Carey, was not insane.

Yet, somehow, he was the only one.

Dimly the doctor's voice drifted again through the cloud.

“No, sir.” He was answering the judge advocate's question. “I tested Carey's eyes when he went up for full lieutenant just before we sailed from the Philippines.

They were perfect then. And I examined them yesterday again. His eyes are perfect now.”

Carey quivered slightly. If it wasn't his eyes what could it be?

The captain had declared that he was a trustworthy seaman; the medico swore that he was neither insane nor visually defective. Then what? He had seen.

And ever since the thing had occurred he had been in this daze. He could not understand.

THE judge advocate put another question.

The doctor answered with promptness and certitude.

“Yes, I have heard of such cases. They are not of uncommon occurrence. I have heard them discussed in many a ward-room. Last spring, when the division was proceeding from Manila to Lingayen Gulf for torpedo practice there happened an instance of it. I was on the flagboat, leading the column. It was during the first watch. I was on the bridge, and the captain and navigator were there with the officer of the deck.

“We had just rounded Cape Bolinao and expected to pick up the light across the gulf. We were all peering dead ahead—there's always a little rivalry to sight a light first. The division commander ordered one-third speed until we got a bearing on that light. Then he was going to turn column right and go down the gulf and anchor off Dagupan.

“For half an hour every man on the bridge gazed straight ahead and strained to see the light we knew must show up. Suddenly one of the men on the lookout sang out that he saw it. He pointed almost due west, about a point on the port bow. We all strove to make it out. The lookout insisted it was there. Then one after another we saw it. It was an occulting light, and we could even discern its pulsations and check its rate. The column swung south at standard speed.

“Ten minutes later we had to change course several degrees to westward to avoid

going on the beach. The next day we received a radio to the effect that that light had not been in order for two nights. Yet we had seen it. We had expected it to be there, and our straining eyes had actually envisioned the thing. It's a common enough occurrence, as I said before. The eye often sees what we want it to see."

The members of the court nodded understandingly. The judge advocate made a pertinent query.

"Is it really the eye that sees this specter of a light that doesn't exist?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I would say not," he answered slowly.

"In my estimation it is not the eye that sees it at all. It's the brain behind the eye. The brain knows that the light ought to be seen and deludes itself into the belief that it actually does see it. No, it's the brain in such a case rather than the eye."

"But in the defendant's case," came the logical question, "there was no such expectation. How do you account for that?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. Carey moved uneasily in his chair.

That was the very question that had troubled him ever since that night a week ago. He had not expected to see the things that so clearly impressed themselves on his vision. He had not even been thinking about such a thing. The lower reaches of the Yangtze had few enough lights; and sparse were ships that ran the river at night. His own destroyer had attempted it solely because ordered down from Chefoo for emergency missionary protection upstream. For above Hankow was a local uprising led by a Taoist priesthood. The river gunboats were five hundred miles farther up stream, and turtle slow. The destroyer, though north in Pechili Gulf, could reach the threatened area first. So they had entered the river's upper channel at night.

No, he had not expected to see a thing. And yet of the half dozen men on the bridge he had, and only he. The medico had just stated that such hallucination

was of the brain rather than the eye. Could it have been his brain—his alone? The fog closed in upon Carey again. He found it hard to think.

"In the defendant's case," he felt more than heard the doctor say, "I find no precedent. I can simply testify that he is a steady man, entirely sane, and has perfect eyesight. And yet I do believe that he was dead certain that he saw those lights. And as certain, too, that the others did not. What he saw must have been a delusion of the mind, yet of a mind that was normal. Such things also do occur. Yet his eyes are perfect, and he is as balanced mentally as any officer here."

Carey's hands bit into each other.

His captain was for him. And now the medico.

And yet—and yet? What could the court do? He had committed a crime for which in olden days he might have hanged. And his excuse for the offense was what? Simply that he had seen something that no other man had seen. The mere fact that the catastrophe he saw coming overwhelmed them on the very heels of the captain's interference could have but little weight with a court that must decide his fate on tangible fact.

And yet—good Heaven, it must be excuse enough! He had seen the lights, the captain had interfered, disaster had followed. It would not have closed upon them had the captain let him alone. Surely the court must understand that. He had explained it all so carefully, in minutest detail, when his counsel had put him on the stand as witness in his own behalf.

The doctor was dismissed. The court was cleared.

II

CAREY had the freedom of the ship. For a moment he felt that the fresh breeze sweeping from the rice paddies of the lower Whampoo and the Yangtze beyond would clear his head and give a little friendly stimulation. Then he recalled that other officers would be topside. Friends they all were, indeed. But Carey did not

desire brotherly companionship just now, nor did he care to feel the pitying glances of old shipmates. He wanted to be alone; to think; to go over again the events of the past week; of that night. He turned down the passageway to the stateroom assigned him since the disaster. Now that he was away from the atmosphere of the court he already felt better.

The doctor had said that his eyes were normal. He had also declared that his brain was as rational as that of any officer on the court—a fine thing and a daring one for a destroyer medical officer to say. He must have meant it, must have wanted to strongly impress the court with his earnestness and his belief. Carey drew a breath of relief.

Good eyes, good mind. The chill fog that in fear for the latter had penetrated his very being, gradually began to dissipate.

How clearly it all came back.

He had been officer of the deck. The captain had snatched a hasty meal from the food brought up by his Filipino boy to the emergency cabin on the bridge. The navigator had plotted changes of course, and was below finishing off his coffee with the other officers.

A half hour remained of the second dog watch. Carey had been going over some points he wished to impress upon the chief boatswain's mate when he took the eight o'clock reports. A tear in the awning canvas where it stretched tight over the freezing apparatus on top of the ice locker just abaft the bridge was one of these.

The awning was beginning to flap, and this night Carey demanded silence on the bridge. He could sense better, then, any variation in the hum of the forced draft blowers. And in the currents of the lower Yangtze all things must be anticipated. The officer of the deck must know as soon as the fire-room watch that something was going wrong. Must have the fo'c's'le gang ready to let go the anchor even before word of the lost steam came through the voice tube.

He stood on the starboard side of the bridge, near the rack of tubes, leaning on the sill of the open port. Fleet sparks from the captain's pipe indicated his almost identical position near the engine room telegraphs to port. Carey was almost tempted to call the boatswain's mate at once to have that awning repaired. He had all but turned to give the order when his eye caught something yet dim in the distance.

For a minute or more he gazed steadily at the object. Then, from where they were hanging on one of the searchlight directing wheels on the bulkhead of the emergency cabin, he took up his binoculars. Faintly through the glass he could make out that there were three lights instead of one.

He softly called the starboard lookout. "Do you see any lights about three points on the bow?" he asked. "Pretty far off?"

The lookout stared into the blackness of the night, blinking as the damp breeze bedewed his eyelashes. Then he shook his head. "No, sir."

"Try the glass," Carey suggested.

The lad shook his head as before.

"Don't see a thing, sir."

"Certain of it?" demanded Carey.

"Absolutely, sir," was the answer.

CAREY remembered all this with extreme clearness—every detail. Lying on the bunk in his stateroom, he found himself living over again that fifteen-minute period in which so much had happened.

He had taken the binoculars from the lookout, and ordered him back to his post. Then he glanced at the clock on the emergency cabin bulkhead just behind the man at the wheel. This was a matter of habit. There was nothing to record. He had not expected to see any lights, anyway. And the flapping of the canvas over the ice locker did not disconcert him now. It had become part of the normal respiration of the ship, and Carey decided that he would not disturb the boatswain's mate about it until the eight o'clock reports.

He turned back to his open port, but discovered the captain staring out into the blackness, charging his pipe with one of the patent fillers he had bought from the Greek in Chefoo. He paused tentatively at his elbow, undecided whether to stay there or assume the captain's former position near the annunciators.

Then something urged him to remain. The captain acknowledged his presence with a grunt.

"Did you see something?"

Carey nodded rather hesitantly.

"Thought I did, sir. Looked to me like a ship's light off to starboard."

The captain lifted his binoculars and focused them in the direction Carey had indicated. The latter raised his own glass. He recalled that he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"The lights are there, sir, all right. Seem nearer now, too."

"Humph! I don't make anything out," grunted the captain.

Carey stepped back of him and leveled an arm over his shoulder with the edge of his hand up, as in aiming.

"About two points on the bow, sir. Left a trifle, captain. There—that's it. See them now, sir?"

Intently the captain gazed, slowly changing focus with his forefinger on the adjusting wheel. Then he dropped the glass.

"Don't see a thing, Carey."

He bent to gain the protection of the bulkhead, and a match scratched, then glowed over his pipe.

"That's funny," Carey answered, somewhat mystified.

He wondered if perhaps his last look at the light-flooded chart had left dancing gleams on the retina of his eye. He carefully wiped his eyes with his handkerchief, and cleaned the binoculars with a bit of lens paper. Then raised them again—and started.

"But the lights are close now, captain." He lowered his glass slightly. "Why, I can see them with my naked eye! Right there, sir." He leveled his arm again.

"Hanged if I can see 'em, Carey. But this river breeze blurs everything. Let's try your glass."

Carey ducked from under the leather strap and handed the binoculars over. The captain rapidly found focus, then shook his head again.

"Not a thing, not a thing. Better have your eyes examined, young fellow."

"But they're holding steady, captain!" Carey expostulated. "A ship as clear as day. Heading from starboard across our course. I can see her masthead and port running light. And cabin lights topside." Suddenly he swung to the wheelsman. "What's your compass?"

"Right on, sir. Two forty-eight."

"Come on two sixty," Carey ordered.

"What's that?" demanded the captain.

"Get the time of that change, quarter-master," snapped Carey. Then in answer to the captain: "Shifting course a bit to right, sir. She's got the right of way, and there's no use taking any chances."

"Who's got the right of way?" the captain demanded again.

"That ship, sir—"

"Dammit, Carey, your eyes must have gone bad. There's no ship in sight."

"But, Captain Kennart—"

The captain turned sharply to the wheelsman.

"Back on your former course!" To the quarter-master: "Get that time." He swung back to the open port, and snapped for the lookouts. Sensing something unusual in the very atmosphere, the whole bridge force was now tensely on the alert. "Do you lads see anything ahead—lights?"

All hands intently stared out into the blackness of the night.

Their opinion was unanimous. "Not a thing, sir."

Carey gave a cry of alarm. "Captain!" He turned savagely on the man at the wheel. "Fifteen degrees right. On the jump now!"

The captain's suddenly livid face glared in the glow of the binnacle light.

"Dammit, sir, get off the bridge!" he cried peremptorily. To the wheelsman:

"Back to your former course. Snap into it! You're taking your orders from me now. Lively!"

Carey recalled how the men had looked at each other in consternation. He recalled his own utter dismay. For the first time in his career he was ordered off the bridge. That ship—lights looming up now not a cable length away. Holding steadily on the same angle—collision sure! And he, officer of the deck, when the life of his ship was a matter of seconds and every one blind but him, ordered below. Good Heaven! It meant shipwreck; the captain was bound for destruction. Mad! He resolved on one last frantic appeal.

"But Great God, captain—it's on our very bows! We'll hit sure! We'll—"

The captain turned on him with an oath. Then as Carey stood his ground the captain's face became hard and grim. A deadly implication chilled in the ice-level tone his voice held.

"Mr. Carey, consider yourself under arrest. You're either mutinous or mad. This will be reported when we finish the business up river and return to Shanghai. Get out!"

The lights were within a hundred yards, Carey saw. He was ordered off in disgrace. The captain was mad himself. The whole bridge force had gone mad. That ship—

His answer was literally forced from him. "By Heaven, sir, I will not leave!" he cried in utter desperation.

And he leaped to the annunciators and jerked the signals for both engines to full reverse. Then jumped for the steering gear, shoved the man aside, and madly spun the wheel to starboard.

With an oath the captain seized him, cried to the lookout to drag him below. A struggle ensued. The ship throbbled as the power of thirty thousand horses strove to stop its forward rush. Carey remembered the cloud of horror and impotence that almost overcame him. His one thought was for the ship, and of the vessel even now across their knifelike stem.

He recalled his last hopeless words, for-

getful of naval discipline and the men about.

"The lights! Too late! Too late! Captain, you damn fool—"

And then the crash had come.

III

LYING in the bunk, the racking shock of it was a physical blow again. Carey recalled sickeningly his own release—too late. The startled outcries of the men; the intermittent raucous honking of the general alarm some one had retained command enough to switch on from the bridge. The shrill piping of the boatswain's mate, his bellowing roar of: "All hands abandon ship!"

And then the siren's scream.

His station in such an emergency was in charge of No. 2 life raft. Later he found himself clinging to this bobbing float, mind and body benumbed by the whispering waves of the swirling Yangtze.

Rescue. Court martial.

The captain for the loss of his ship. He punished for mutinous insubordination.

And yet—he had seen those lights.

A fog gathered about him again.

IV

PULSATIONS beat upon his brain. Dimly he recognized them as rapid footsteps in the passageway outside his room. He aroused somewhat as his door was flung open and a shipmate burst in upon him. Blinking, he noted that the newcomer was excited to an extreme.

"News, by thunder, news for you, Warren! The admiral says he's going to quash every court martial that came out of the wreck. News from the divers down the river just came up, and set him all in a daze. He's pacing the deck now. We did not hit an uncharted rock last week, Warren. We tore our bottom out on the hulk of the Kew Li, whose boilers blew up, and only two men left to tell the tale. And what gets the admiral, Warren, is that you swore you saw those lights on the night of the wreck, but the Kew Li went down four months ago!"