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The GHOST by SHIP ARLTON EADIE



"From her lips came the song she had sung the night the Valhalla went down."

THE port of La Guayra does not boast of a harbor, so that when I came to board the *Emperatriz* I was forced to charter one of the local ruffians to ferry me across the half-mile or so of sea which separated her from the mole. Viewed from the shore, the ship—a tramp steamer of some 8,000 tons—had seemed smart enough. But I quickly discovered that, in her case, distance decidedly did lend enchantment to the view, for a nearer approach rendered only too obvious her dingy, sun-blistered paintwork and her rust-streaked, dented plates.

But I was not in a position to be over particular—anything that was capable of floating and bearing me out of Venezuela would have looked

good to me just then. My last voyage had terminated with some abruptness owing to a difference of opinion with the *guardacostas* farther down the coast. They had pried open some of the cases in our hold, which were down in the manifest as "machinery," and found them to contain machine-guns; in consequence, for the past three weeks it had needed all my ingenuity to steer clear of the local *carcel*. So that when a greasy, garlic-scented individual had sidled up to me with the offer of a berth, I had not asked too many questions before accepting.

The moment I clambered aboard I was confronted by a red-faced giant clad in a uniform cap and a suit of pajamas. I handed him the agent's

letter by way of introduction, but he merely glanced at the superscription and handed it back.

"My name's Hawes, and I'm first mate of this old water-pusher," he told me. "The new captain hasn't come aboard yet."

"The *new* captain?" My voice must have betrayed my surprize.

He nodded, his eyes fixed on mine the while. "We lost the old man and the second mate coming down. They died of fever."

"Both of them?" I cried.

"Ay—it's been a sickly trip."

Then he turned and walked aft as a hint that the interview was finished.

This certainly did not sound very reassuring, but I made no comment as I descended to my cabin and proceeded to stow away my traps. Then, after having a cursory look round, I went on deck for a quiet smoke.

The fiery, copper-red disk of the sun was just preparing to dip behind the western horizon, tinging everything with its fierce and vivid hue. It turned the waters of the roadstead to a pool of molten gold; it smote upon the mountains which, like mighty bulwarks, tower above the little port, turning their jagged peaks to flaming beacons against the cold purple shadows of the coming night. Slowly the sun disappeared; for a brief instant the red afterglow hovered high up in the zenith; then, with the abruptness of an extinguished candle, it was night.

I was just on the point of turning in when I noticed a shore boat heading toward us, and I at once concluded that it must be bringing the new captain. Being somewhat curious to know what sort of a shipmaster they had managed to pick up in that out-of-the-way port, I shifted my position so that I could get an uninterrupted view of the accommodation ladder. Scarcely had I taken my stand than the boat came alongside and a tall man sprang nimbly on

to the grating. Our navigation lights had already been shipped preparatory to putting to sea, and as he paused to pay his boatman, the green rays of the starboard light fell full upon his face, the unreal, ghostly glare revealing a countenance so striking and unusual that it has remained indelibly photographed on my mind.

In former days he must have been more than passably handsome, for the features were regular and finely formed; but now they were scamed with deep-graven lines which spoke of every base and lawless passion. I do not suppose that he was more than fifty at the most, for the full beard showed no trace of gray, and his step, as he mounted to the bridge, was quick and firm. But he appeared like a man who had drained the cup of life until nothing but the very dregs remained, and in the depths of his sunken eyes there lay a look, at once apprehensive and defiant, of a man who is dogged by some long-feared, unavoidable fate. "If it be possible for a man to be haunted in this world," I found myself muttering as I turned away, "then that man is!"

But, haunted or not, Captain Frewin seemed a capable seaman. Orders followed each other in quick succession. The ancient winch on the forecastle wheezed and leaked steam as the anchor was hove short and hoisted. Then, taking the wheel himself, he ordered "Full speed," and the old lumbering freighter came round like a yacht and set her bows to the broad Atlantic.

Our voyage had begun. Little did I—or any aboard—dream how it was to end.

ONCE clear of soundings, it is remarkable how quickly you settle down to the routine of ship-board life. All ships are, broadly speaking, very much alike and the round of duties practically the same. But one's shipmates are likely to vary

considerably, and I must admit that mine on board the *Emperatriz* did not endear themselves to me on closer acquaintance. To put the matter bluntly, I do not think a more out-and-out mob of incompetents and undesirables were to be found in the length and breadth of the seven seas. And my estimate of their character was upheld by the mature experience of the chief engineer, who had probably sailed the seas for as many years as I had months. Like so many of his calling, he was a Scotsman, hailing from that home of engineers—Clydeside. He was a kindly old soul, with an intense appreciation of everything which had its origin in his native land, from ships' engines to whisky. No sooner did he learn that my mother's name had been Campbell, and that I had served in one of the kilted regiments in the war, than he took me—metaphorically—to his oily bosom with all the patriotic fervor of the true Scot.

"I've nae wish tae appear inquisitive, laddie," he said to me one night as we sat smoking, "but hoo comes ye tae be aboard a packet like this?"

I told him what had happened at La Guayra and he nodded sympathetically.

"Ay, ay, 'tis the same auld tale the world over. Obey the orders if ye brak' the owners, and obey the owners if ye brak' yerself. I'll no' be denying that I was a wee bit under a cloud when I signed on here—otherwise I'd no' be doctoring the heap o' scrap that masquerades as engines aboard this ship. Losh, laddie, but we're a fine, gay shipload! I dinna think there's a mon of us but what's got a mark agin his ticket. An' I'm no' excepting the skipper, for he's got the blackest mark o' the lot!"

"Captain Frewin?" I cried. "How could he get command if his certificates were not in order?"

McPherson laughed and spat contemptuously over the side.

"The Dago firm that owns the *Emperatriz* are nae so particular as tae yon! Mon, I tell ye, they'd employ a deil red-hot frac hell so long's he could handle a ship, and came cheap enow. As for the skipper, there's no' a reputable shipowner that'll employ him since he piled up the *Valhalla* in 1906."

"How did it happen?" I asked, scenting a yarn.

"He was a guid five miles oot o' his course. I was on the ship as fourth engineer at the time, and I canna help thinking the mon was just demented."

"Drunk?"

"Ay—but no' with liquor. He was just mad with love for one o' the lassies on board. Mind ye, the captain was a smart young fellow in those days, and the *Valhalla* was his first command. She was a big, twin-screw passenger and cargo steamer, running between London and the Australian ports by way of the Cape of Good Hope. It was on the return trip of her maiden voyage that it happened.

"We'd had fine weather 'most all the way across, and it looked like as if we were going to make what in those days was considered a record run. We were three parts of the way across the Bay of Biscay, and we expected to be off the Wight by the following morning, so the passengers had made up a merry party in the saloon to mark the last night of the voyage. Puir souls, 'twas the last night o' life for mony a one of them!"

"During the last part of my spell in the engine room I'd heard the fog-horn going, but as we'd had nae orders to slacken her down I thought we'd run into a bit of a haze in the Channel. But, ma conscience! when I cam' on deck I got the shock o' ma life. It was thick as pea-soup, and there we were snorting along as though we had the open sea in front of us. As I looked at the bow-wave

over the side I remember asking myself what sort of a captain it was who risked precious lives to pull down a bit of a speed record. But that wasn't the worst, either. Instead of being at his post on the bridge, where d'ye think Cap'n Frewin was? In the saloon, whispering sweet nothings into the ear of his lady-love! I looked through the saloon skylight and I see him wi' ma' ain eyes, else I never had believed it possible.

"Mind ye, I'm no' saying but that they made a well-matched couple. He was good-looking more 'n common, and so was she, though in a different sort o' way. She was as fair as he was dark, with long curling hair, yellow as the sands of the sea when the sunlight falls on it. She used to wear a dress of some green silky stuff which somehow always seemed to remind me of wet seaweed—everything about her, from her coral-red lips to her little shell-like ears, reminded you of the sea. As I peered at her I couldna help thinking she'd make a bonny sailor's bride. But this was nae time for love-making, as they were very soon to find out.

"Presently someone struck a few bars on the piano and the young lassie began to sing. Eh, but she had a sweet, tender voice. There was nae fancy trills and screeches about it, like ye sometimes hears on the stage, but it seemed to gang straight to your heart. As I stood listening to it I forgot the ship, I forgot the fog, I forgot the rocks of Ushant. And dootless the cap'n did as weel. He sat there drinkin' in the melody like a man fascinated—bewitched. Before she'd finished, one of the officers from the bridge came to the saloon door in his wet oilskins and whispered in the cap'n's ear, but he waved him away impatiently and turned again to the girl. It must ha' been some important message, for I saw the mon raise his eyebrows when it was ignored. And so it went on—the ship racing ahead, the song floating up sweet and

low as the lapping of the waves when the tide is on the turn, the blaring of the foghorn overhead. . . .

"Weel, the crash had tae come, and come it did. Ye can imagine what happens when a 16,000-ton boat takes a sunken reef at full speed. It just ripped the keel clean out of her, and doon she went to the bottom like a stane, taking with her maist o' the passengers and crew. I was one of the lucky ones. I managed to get to the shore, and so did Captain Frewin."

"And the girl in green—what became of her?"

"Nae doot she went doon with the ship, for she was never seen afterward," replied McPherson. "The cap'n was like a madman for days, searching the seashore for her body, cursing the sea that had stolen her from him. That night's work ruined him body and soul, and sometimes I think it would ha' been better for him if he'd gone to the bottom with his ship."

And I, remembering the look I had seen in his eyes when first we met, felt inclined to agree.

WE SKIRTED along the coast, passed the island of Trinidad, then set our course almost due east, for our next port of call was Freetown, Sierra Leone. There we lay for over a week while a gang of negro stevedores leisurely discharged part of our cargo, afterward loading us with bales of copra and barrels of palm-oil until we were down to our Plimsoll's mark once more. Clearing from there, we began to round the great shoulder of Africa, making for our final port, London.

On the third day out, when I came on the bridge to relieve the first mate at eight bells noon, I found him staring aft through the binoculars. So engrossed was he that he failed to note my approach until I touched him on the arm. Then he handed me the glasses.

"What do you make of that trail of smoke on the horizon?" he asked in a slightly puzzled tone, at the same time indicating a spot about three points off the starboard quarter.

I focused the glasses and took a long look. "It belongs to a fairly big ship, with two funnels," I said presently.

"Two?" he asked quickly.

"Sure. I can distinctly make out the two plumes."

He looked at me and rubbed his hand thoughtfully across his chin. "Well, that's damned queer," he muttered.

"How?"

"It's mighty seldom that you come across a slow cargo steamer with a couple of smokestacks. Twin-funneled craft are usually liners of sorts, and have some turn of speed. Our old tub is barely making eight knots, yet that ship has kept the same position right from the moment we left Free-town. Why, she should have overhauled us days ago!"

"Perhaps she's developed trouble in her engine room," I suggested.

Hawes' face lit up at my words. Hopes of salvage are never far distant from a sailor's thoughts, and a broken-down liner in need of a tow might mean a small fortune. But the next moment he was shaking his head despondently.

"Whatever her game is, she's still capable of keeping under way. No chance of earning the price of a freehold farm ashore this trip, worse luck!" And, with a disgusted glance astern, he turned and quitted the bridge.

At intervals during my watch I glanced toward that distant smudge on the horizon, but its position with regard to our own ship appeared to be unchanged. At eight bells the captain came on the bridge, and it was at once clear that he was not in the best of tempers.

"Anything to report?" he growled

as he came across to take a squint at the compass.

"There's a liner astern that seems to be making poor speed, sir."

"Indeed?" He favored me with a sardonic grin. "What then? Do you want me to unship my donkey-engine and make 'em a present of it to help 'em up to time?"

"If we slowed down a few revolutions, so that she could come up with us——" I began, but he cut me short as though the suggestion were a personal insult.

"Slow down nothing! My economical speed's seven-point-eight, and that's what I'm going to steam at—if there's fifty flaming liners astern! Haven't I got troubles of my own without seeking others? If she's in distress, why the blazes don't she send up rockets? Didn't they teach you any sense in the girls' school where you learnt navigation? Keep her as she goes, quartermaster."

For a moment I boiled inwardly at the open affront. Then, with an effort, I choked down the words I was about to say and, touching my cap with what I intended to be a dignified salute, I went below.

My next spell of duty was the morning watch, and as soon as the sun was up I found my eyes turning toward the strange ship. There she was, in the same position as before, no nearer, no closer. The respective positions could not have remained more constant if an invisible tow-rope had connected the two ships.

It does not take much to set men's tongues wagging at sea. By this time the news of the strange behavior of the unknown vessel had penetrated even to the stokehold. I heard two of the firemen discussing it half jestingly as they performed their ablutions after coming off duty.

"We're bein' shadowed, that's what it is, matey," declared one. "Got anyfink on yer conscience, (Ginger?"

"Not 'arf so much as wot the old man has, if all yer 'ears abart 'im is right. 'Struth! I've got through a few mucky jobs in my time, but I reckon I'm a plaster himage compared with 'im. Who the 'ell is it that's following us?"

"Never heard of the Phantom Ship, Ginger?" grinned the first speaker. "She's been fitted out with triple expansions specially to bring us the sailors' last warning. Mark my words, this old hooker is going to make her last big 'ole in the water before long!"

DESPITE the contempt with which he had greeted my reference to the subject, I could see that as the time went on Captain Frewin began to grow uneasy in his mind. Many a time I caught him glancing furtively at the faint and distant blur that followed so persistently in our wake; but it was not until a week had passed that he made the first move to solve the mystery.

A big P. & O. mailboat had been sighted ahead, traveling in the opposite direction to ourselves. When she was but a mile distant, Captain Frewin suddenly rang off the engines, and the *Emperatriz*, gradually losing way, remained motionless save for the slow movement imparted to her by the long Atlantic rollers. Attracted by the unusual maneuver, the approaching boat shifted her helm and bore down, a string of colored bunting breaking from her forward signal yard.

"What ship?" it said.

"*Emperatriz*, Freetown to London," was our answer.

"*Ballarat*, for Adelaide. Are you in need of assistance?"

"No. Stopped because of heated bearing. Good-bye. Pleasant voyage."

"Thanks, same to you. Good-bye."

As the ocean greyhound again settled into her stride, I turned my eyes toward the distant smoke of the

mystery ship. As I looked I felt my breath catch in my throat. For the thin double plume soared straight upward in the breathless air, showing that, like ourselves, the stranger had hove to. There could be no doubt about it now—she was dogging us. But why?

I faced about and looked at Captain Frewin. He was standing motionless on the swaying bridge, his eyes fixed on the *Ballarat*, which, having swung past us, was now rapidly approaching the unknown ship. Minutes passed, and still he made no attempt to resume our voyage. What was he looking at? What was he expecting to see? Why had he stopped the ship in mid-ocean? Then like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, the answer came.

I felt a hand grip my arm and an awestruck voice whispered into my ear in broadest Doric:

"Canna ye understand, mon? The *Ballarat's* passing her—passing a stationary liner without sac much as a dip of her ensign! An' I'll tell ye for why. *They canna see her!* She's a ghost ship, haunting us alone. She's the old *Valhalla*, following the mon who sent her to the bottom twenty-two years ago, and—*she's freighted with the dead!*"

THE last days of that voyage will ever remain in my memory like a ghastly nightmare. There are some superior people who declare that the advent of steam has caused the sailor to abandon his old superstitions; but the dread of the unknown and unknowable has its roots too deeply planted in the human soul for that to be. If those armchair psychologists who lay down the law so glibly could have seen the demeanor of our crew during the next few days they would have had reason to revise their opinions. The men went about their duties sullen and fearful; the gloom of impending tragedy hung over the whole ship; mutterings and sidelong glances told of smoldering mutiny.

I firmly believe it was only the open display of the revolvers, which each of the officers carried, that prevented them rising in a body and heaving the skipper overboard.

Tension was at its highest when there came a sudden change in the weather. The light southwesterly wind which had accompanied us for the past two days gave place to a baffling mist, while the slow, oily swell changed to a heavy head sea. With our engines slowed down until they only gave us steerage-way, and with extra lookouts posted round the ship, we slowly crawled ahead. The only sounds were the steady pounding of our screw, deliberate now as the drum in a funeral march, and the wail of the siren as it sent its eldritch warning over the mist-hung waters.

It was during a pause between the blasts that we seemed to hear a faint echo coming out of the white obscurity. Immediately the lookout hailed the bridge:

"Big steamer in the offing, sir."

"Where away?"

After a pause the answer came. "Seems dead astarn, sir!"

Frewin gave a low-voiced order and the quartermaster shifted the spokes of the wheel.

Again came the faint, deep-booming sound, and again the lookout hailed.

"Steamer coming up astarn, sir!"

Captain Frewin turned to the steersman. "Keep her off another point." Then, to Hawes: "Give a toot to let 'em know there's someone in their track."

The first mate raised his hand to the lanyard and a long-drawn blast of our foghorn followed. Barely had the last vibrations died away when, as if in mockery, the *woom—w-o-o-o-m* of the other ship's foghorn floated out of the mist behind us. This time it was perceptibly nearer—so near indeed that it seemed as if the ship that sounded it must be traveling at

a speed that was, in weather like this, nothing short of reckless.

"I suppose the blighter thinks he's got the ocean to himself," I heard Hawes mutter. "These swell liners——" The remainder of the sentence was drowned in a frenzied shout from aft.

"Big liner coming up astarn, sir—traveling fast!"

Not a cable's length distant, looming wan and spectral through the misty veil, there appeared the shadow of a huge gray hull. She was steaming in the same direction as ourselves, and following the exact same course. Her forestay, masts and funnels lay in one straight line, showing that she was bearing directly down on us; her sheer, sharp bows pointed straight at our stern.

In one mad leap Hawes clutched the handle of the engine-room telegraph and threw it full over.

"Below there! Steam for full speed!" he roared down the speaking-tube. "Open her out all you know—it's life or death!" At the same time Frewin rammed the helm hard over to starboard.

Like a tired horse that feels the rider's spurs, the old freighter picked up speed. The slow drumming of our propeller rose to a rapid tattoo; dense volumes of smoke began to roll from our funnel as the stokehold crew fired up the furnaces, and the growing white cloud at the escape-pipe told of the increased head of steam which resulted from their efforts, while deep down in the fabric of the ship the panting and groaning of the worn-out engines proved that McPherson was making the old *Emperatriz* do her best.

But her best was poor enough compared with that of the rushing monster behind us. Her speed was more than three times as great as ours, and she never wavered or slackened in her headlong progress. Yard by yard, she began to overtake us. Nearer and nearer drew her

bows, until I found myself watching, as though hypnotized, the waves of creaming foam which curved on each side of her sharp forefoot as it clove through the sea. For a few breathless moments it seemed as if a collision were inevitable. Grasping the rail before me with all my strength, I waited for the crash, every nerve tingling with suspense. Nearer and ever nearer she came, until I could count the very rivets of her plates. Then the *Emperatriz* slowly came round to her helm and the strange ship swept past with a bare ten feet of water between her bows and our propeller.

Drawing a long breath of relief, I glanced at Captain Frewin. Heavens, what was the matter with the man? Surely the peril through which we had just passed was not sufficient to account for such a change! His face had turned a sickly grayish yellow beneath its tan, and wild panic shone in his staring eyes. His hand was shaking like an aspen as he pointed to the bows of the other ship, which, now on a course parallel to our own, had drawn level with the bridge.

"The *Valhalla!*" His voice had sunk to a hoarse croak. "My old ship!"

My heart turned to ice as I realized the meaning of his words. I turned my gaze upward—stared and stared again. For, high up on the towering side, in huge golden letters that could not be misread, was blazoned the name of the ship which, twenty-two years ago almost to the very day, had split on the rocks of Ushant—the ship whose bones at that moment lay rusting on the sea-bed far below the waters on which we sailed!

Like a man in a dream I read and reread the gilded letters, my mind struggling to convince itself that the whole thing was impossible—absurd. Then my eyes fell upon the single figure upon the liner's bridge, and my mind struggled no more. For, though his hair was a trifle darker

and his figure more upright, his face was, feature for feature, the same as Captain Frewin's might have been when he had paced the bridge of his first command in the full flush of his early manhood. And as I looked, the figure on the liner slowly raised its hands to the peak of its uniform cap, and like an automaton controlled by another will, our captain did the same. For a full minute they stood motionless, the living facing his dead self in grave salute; then the liner forged ahead and the curtain of fog descended on it.

But not before I had caught sight of another figure upon its decks—the figure of a young girl in a sea-green dress. In a flash I remembered the old engineer's description of the siren who had lured the captain to his ruin. Yes, it was she! There was the same pale face, wonderfully, supernaturally beautiful; the same full, coral-red lips, now parted in a smile so alluring that it seemed to draw my very soul to her like a compass-needle quivering to the north. Her long hair, bright as the sunlit sand of some tropic isle, flowed free upon her shoulders, and upon it the drops of flying spray shimmered like pearls.

"Lucy!" The cry came from Frewin like the wail of a soul in torment. "My Lucy!"

She leaned over the rail and stretched out her arms toward him, and from her lips there burst a song such as I have never heard before or since. I don't remember the tune and I don't remember the words—if there were words to it. But it seemed to tell of all that the sea can tell—of smiling calms, light breezes like lovers' sighs, hurricanes, tempests, the wild music of the breakers on lee shores, and of the cool green depths in which the bones of drowned men lay. It was such a song as few mortal men have listened to—and lived.

And so the ship passed on. But the moment her stern was clear,

Frewin ground the helm a-port and set our bows straight into her churning wake. He gave no heed to the compass-card before him; his eyes were fixed in a stony stare ahead; his ears strained to catch the siren's song that was leading him to destruction.

Obedience to one's superior officer comes as second nature on shipboard, but even discipline has its breaking-point. At all costs I must stop the ship. I stepped to the captain's side.

"Beg pardon, sir, but had we not better——"

He turned on me with a snarl like a wild beast.

"Take your hand away from that telegraph!" I felt a cold circle of steel pressed to the back of my neck as he gritted out the words. "If you attempt to move or cry out I'll blow your backbone through your teeth! Don't you hear Lucy calling me? There—there—I must go to her! I've waited for her too long!"

From out of the mist came the crooning song, low and sweet as a mother lulling her babe to sleep. But I had other things to think of. Ducking swiftly, I faced about. There was a crashing report, almost in my ear, and a bullet sang past and buried itself in the woodwork. Before he could pull trigger again I had closed with the madman, striving to get possession of the wheel. But he seemed to be endowed with the strength of three. I managed to wrest the revolver from him, but that only gave him another free hand. It closed upon my throat with a grip of iron as he forced me backward till my shoulders rested against the fore dodger of the bridge. I was like a child in his grasp. I felt my senses swim.

Then, when everything was growing black around me, I felt the touch of cold metal against my face. Turning my eyes, I caught the gleam of

brass, and a wave of hope surged through me. It was the mouth of the speaking-tube that communicated with the engine room. Loosening my grip on Frewin, I tore out the plug and bent as near as I could to the tube.

"Reverse the engines! Reverse for your life, Mac — we're heading straight for——"

A sudden crash came from our bows. The *Emperatriz* stopped dead, staggered for a moment like a great, stricken beast; then, as she lurched forward again, there came a series of long-drawn, grinding wrenches as she tore her keel into scrap-iron and passed over, settling fast into the deep water that surrounds the outlying rocks of Ushant.

WHEN, two days later, I recovered full consciousness, I was lying in the hut of one of the kindly Breton fisherfolk, and it was there that McPherson told me of the last plunge of the old *Emperatriz* and the death of Captain Frewin.

While supporting my senseless body on an overturned boat, the engineer had seen him swimming with slow and steady strokes for the shore.

"Then, straight in front of him, there appeared the woman frae the sea. Her shoulders and breasts were bare; her hair was floating out behind her like a golden cloud. From her lips there cam' the same song as she had sung the night the *Valhalla* went doon," the old man told me. "I saw her reach the struggling man, saw her slender white arms twine themselves around him, saw her wet lips, red as coral, pressed to his. Then, locked in each other's arms, they slowly sank, and the green waters closed above their heads. And there they'll bide until the sea gies up its dead."

