

# Weird Tales


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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

# The Harbor of Ghosts

By M. J. BARDINE

*A strange and curious weird tale of the sea, and the ghosts of ships  
that had foundered*

**I**T ALWAYS came to me just at the edge of twilight, that strange figure.

Never was there spoken word, yet I knew there was a message for me could I but find the key. That was when I was very young and could not put into words the idea which so dimly presented itself. The figure never came to me except in the old attic of my grandfather's house where I loved to go in the afternoons after school hours, there to dream over the many strange things he had brought with him from the fascinating countries he had voyaged to in his ship, *The Golden Girl*, the ship that had disappeared that last fatal trip the year in which I was born.

I was never afraid, for it seemed to be a natural thing, and the figure, vague and gossamer, not unfriendly. These excursions into the attic lapsed during my term of apprenticeship in my father's ship-building yards. My family were all more or less seafaring; it was in the blood, and my father carried on the traditions of the family by building the more modern carriers of our flag in the merchant trade, and I was destined for the service.

Thus it was that when I had finished my poring over maps, plans and instruments, my father found a berth for me on the *Joseph B.*, which followed in the paths of the long-gone *Golden Girl* in the China trade.

I was soon ready for sea; my sea-chest was aboard, and then before the ship sailed the next morning, I journeyed the short distance down to the old house where I had spent so many of my child-

hood days with the old aunt who still lived there.

Once more I was drawn to the attic to say good-bye to the strange weapons—the feathered head-dresses, the sandalwood boxes and embroidered shawls that had journeyed with my grandfather through wind and rain, salt spume and torrid sun. And then once more the veiled figure came to me from the shadow of the carved screen whence it had always appeared. The eery sensation of my youngster days came back to me as I felt its presence. The lips moved, and in the recesses of my brain echoed the whisper, "Go back! Go back!" What I was to go back from I did not know. Now, too late, I know. The figure faded and melted into the shadows as I pretended a bravery I did not feel. I left the attic telling myself it was all imagination built up from some remembrance of my childhood days.

The *Joseph B.* sailed next day with me at the rail. I felt very important and part of the great world as I stood there gazing back at the little group of relatives and family friends whom I now seem fated never to see again.

I am writing this by the fitful gleam of a lantern hung at the taffrail on the *Golden Girl*—my God, yes! the *Golden Girl*! But wait, after I have set down a story so strange, so unbelievable, I will place what I have written in a bottle, cork it and set it adrift, hoping that even should there be no escape for me from this ghastly place, some strange tide may carry word of my fate back to the world of living men.

**T**HE first half of the voyage in the *Joseph B.* was uneventful to my shipmates, who had gone over the way so many times. But for me, who for the first time gazed upon the colorful ports, it was all strange and wonderful, the jargon of unfamiliar tongues, the noisome odors of the oriental waterfront making it all an epic of adventure. In Ceylon we took on a load of teas and spices; silks and Chinese merchandize in Hong Kong, and so after loading turned to the long journey home. Then in the straits the glass started to fall, ominous clouds gathered and the wind blew until it seemed we were caught in a maelstrom of fury. The wheel refused to respond to human intelligence, and we were whirled hither and thither in the vortex of a sea seemingly gone mad with hatred of the puny thing which was our ship, now tossed like a cork, with straining seams and laboring engines. We had been taking turns at the pumps; for by now the ship was leaking badly, and after my period of duty I went to my cabin and, utterly exhausted, threw myself on my bunk. I was asleep before my head touched the pillow.

I must have slept quite some time; for I had dream after dream, or I should say nightmares, wherein the veiled figure was trying to hold me back from something. I was awakened by a terrific crash, the impact of which hurled me from my bunk against the door opposite. I shook myself together and gradually came back to the reality of what was going on. I could dimly hear the shouted orders of the captain on the deck outside, while the ship quivered in every timber and listed sharply.

I managed to get the door open and staggered onto the sea-swept deck. A terrific flare of lightning showed our position. We were hard fast on a jutting rock thrust up in the midst of the boiling

sea—a rock which must have been the result of some submarine upheaval. We had struck almost amidships, or else the rock had been forced up under us; for the deck was splintered, telling me we were broken in two. Giant waves dashing against the rock drenched our bows, and the ship was being rapidly pounded to pieces.

Drenched and shivering, I held onto a stanchion until I could steady myself in a slight measure. A wave tore loose my hold, and sliding, gasping for breath, I slid down against the rail, which I grasped with desperate strength and held while fresh seas poured over me.

The captain, clinging to the splintered rail on the foredeck, stood shouting his orders, his stentorian voice heard even above the roar of the elements. "Man the boats" was the order now given, though how a boat could live in that seething pit of hell I could not guess. As rapidly as possible the crews responded and the boats were swung out. One was smashed against the side of the ship and the other capsized as it struck the water, spilling its human freight into the sea. And now I think our captain must suddenly have gone mad, for, with uplifted fists and screaming an imprecation to the heavens above, he dived into the black depths that had claimed his crew.

I was left alone, clinging as best I could to whatever had not been washed overboard. How long I struggled against being swept into the sea I do not know, but at length the wind died down; but the first faint streaks of dawn told me as I gazed at the sharp tongue of rock which pierced our vitals, that I could not long remain aboard and live; for at any moment the ship might break. There was still one boat in the davits; so I hurriedly provisioned it from the cook's galley. The food and a plentiful supply of water I placed in the boat, and then set about

getting over the side. This was not so difficult, as the side of the ship on which the boat was swung had listed until it was almost at the water line. I cast off and slowly moved away, wallowing in the trough of the sea.

I had gone only a short distance when there occurred a boiling of the water; a geyser shot up, and ship and rock sank from sight. I was now in very truth alone. I had no compass or sextant; I could only trust that I would drift to land or the path of some ship left alive by the storm.

**I** AM going to keep a log. As near as I can determine I have now been adrift ten days. Our ship struck September thirteenth, on a Friday. This must be then September twenty-third. It has been a period of sleeping and awakening, the sun has burned steadily down upon me, and I have sheltered myself as best I could under the canvas boat covering.

*Sept. 24th*—I have seen no sail of any kind. I seem to be caught in some current carrying me steadily forward in the same direction.

*Sept. 26th*—I did not enter any happening in the log yesterday. Was it my imagination, born of my loneliness and despair, or did my fancy conjure up the veiled figure of my childhood? It seemed to sit there in the bow of the boat last night. Perhaps I am going mad.

*Sept. 27th*—Still drifting. It is getting colder.

*Sept. 28th*—Still colder. I cannot understand this. Could I be drifting toward the Antarctic circle? I must be traveling faster than I am aware of.

*Later*—I cannot date this for I have been very ill, and unconscious, and do not know how many days have elapsed. It is now very cold and I have had to wrap myself in the canvas covering my stores. I hope I am not deluding myself, but I

seem to see the vague outlines of mountainous land. I am too weak to row. I can only let the sea carry me; perhaps it will cast me upon some strange shore.

*Later*—I am still steadily drifting. The land—for it is land—is nearer. It is too dark now to write further in this undated log.

**T**HAT was the last entry I was fated to make in my log; for during the night I entered what seemed to be a subterranean passage. I had a feeling of being closed in, and the water seemed to be lapping against walls. I had given up hope of ever seeing the sky again, when suddenly I came out into a bay or harbor surrounded by towering cliffs of ice. I could only gaze in amazement and wonder if in some bygone age this could be the crater of a volcano which the sea entered during the forming of the ice age, and so it has stood unchanged through countless centuries. High above the cliffs the moon, pale and full of distant mystery, shone down upon the icy water. And then, as I grew accustomed to the half-light, I made out the outlines of many ships all vague and silent, the shapes strange and different from any I had ever seen except in pictures of the old sailing-ships of my grandfather's day.

For the first time in weeks I pulled upon my oars. The ice seemed to draw away and make a lane of clear water, which I followed to the nearest ship, and as I drew closer a hope formed in my heart that I would find someone to share the now almost insupportable loneliness.

"Ahoy!" I called, as my boat touched the side of the ship, but only an echo came back to me, thrown from the towering cliffs. With numb fingers I made my boat fast to the rusted chain hanging from the ship's side, and then as I started to climb aboard I looked up at the almost obliterated name and with a feeling of

astonishment made out the lettering. The *Golden Girl!* My own grandfather's ship, and I of all the world knew now where that ship rested.

A chill ran down my spine, yet I crawled over the rail. The moonlight threw into relief the coiled ropes on the deck as I slowly made my way to the chartroom. I entered, and there seated at his table with the log-book open before him was a man. I spoke to him but received no answer. I laid my hand upon his shoulder but he did not move. Bending down, I peered into the bearded face, and it was the face I had seen in pictures in my childhood home. It was the face of my own grandfather, cold and immovable in death. The figure sat stony and rigid, the quill pen still held in the stiff fingers. I peered over his shoulder and read the last entry in the log before him; it was in the cramped handwriting I had seen in old letters and documents penned by my grandfather. I turned with tears coursing down my cheeks, and looked again at that kindly dead face, and then once more read the log's entry:

"Dec. 8th, 1888—I put over the side today all that was mortal of Leather-breeches, otherwise James Cogswell the ship's carpenter. This freezing cold has done its work well. I will have to carry on as best I can, hoping that I may be delivered from this haunted harbor of lost souls. If only the storm had left us one boat I might find a way out. If I can endure this cold I will build a boat or raft and try to find——"

The entry stopped, broken off as though he had been interrupted. I left the chartroom and made an inspection of the deck; everything was shipshape and the deck as clean as though it had been holystoned that day. I returned to the chartroom and in the captain's quarters adjoining found his bunk neatly made up.

Somehow I was not made nervous by

that dead presence outside. I felt almost as if he protected me from some evil which seemed to be all about me. I lay down and drew the covers up about my face and fell asleep almost at once. I was awakened by the ghostly sound of a ship's bell. It was one o'clock. And then my hair rose on my head, for I heard in that graveyard of dead ships the words: "All's well!" And then the culminating horror, for the chair was pushed back in the chartroom and I heard the measured tread of footsteps. I raised up my head and looked through the door and saw my dead grandfather come back to seeming life. My senses reeled and I fell back upon the pillow.

When next I opened my eyes it was daylight. I again looked through the door into the chartroom; once more that rigid figure sat there, the glassy eyes staring down at the log. I arose, wondering if it had all been hallucination born of the terrible experiences I had passed through. Quickly I left the captain's quarters and went on deck and looked over the harbor. The ships lay silent, wrapped in mystery, no sign of life or sound.

FROM the stores in my boat I made a frugal breakfast, after which I decided to investigate the nearest ship. I slid down the chain into my boat. The ice in the harbor moved restlessly, showing here and there lanes of clear water. I took the chance of being crushed between the ice cakes rather than remain on the *Golden Girl* with its silent watcher. After a long time, during which I stood in my boat poling with one oar through the icy lanes, I reached the other ship, made fast and clambered aboard. I looked about me. Oh, that I could erase from my memory the sight of what met my eyes! Sprawled about the deck were the dead members of what I now know to be that ship's unholy crew; one with a knife

in his breast, another with his head crushed and half his face torn away, while a third, whom I took to be the captain, stood with a marlin-spike in his hand, snarling down at the mutilated face, all frozen and immovable.

I ran, stumbling, to the side and half fell into my boat. The *Golden Girl* with its dead master seemed a friendly place, and glad I was when I once more stood upon its deck. I took the lantern from the taffrail, and going below found a few pieces of old lumber, with which I made a fire in the cook's galley. The awful cold has settled in my very marrow and I will try to warm myself as long as fuel lasts. Tonight I am resolved to stay awake and learn what I can of this strange harbor of ghosts. I must have dozed off despite my resolution; for the fire was out and there was a deadly chill in the air when I awoke.

Just then the ship's bell sounded one, and "All's well!" echoed over the harbor. I looked out, and lights flickered from the silent ships about me. I heard again the measured tread of footsteps from the chartroom and watched the figure of my grandfather come out.

He stood near me for a moment, looking across at the ship I had visited that day, and I heard the dead lips mutter: "How long, O Lord, how long?" Then he moved to the rail, where he stood as though listening to the terrible oaths and bloodthirsty yells which came from that other strange ship. Frozen with horror I

too looked as lurid flames sprang up and revealed the fighting on that deck. All night long I watched the awful scenes repeated over and over until they died with the coming of dawn, as I have watched every night since, until now, when I feel that I too am doomed to become one of this ghastly company in the harbor of dead ships.

I have watched the dead man in the chartroom, in my loneliness have tried to talk to him, but he never turns his head to listen. I watch him go to the rail, stooping for something which he casts over the rail, perhaps the phantom form of Leatherbreeches the ship's carpenter; then that unholy ship whereon men go through the form of murder nightly. Oh, that I could not see the happenings there! but something impels me to look and listen.

It is bitter cold and I feel the chill reaching to my heart, and I have just enough life left to place what I have written in this bottle and cast it over the side, with the hope it will drift out of this ice-locked harbor and fare to the pathway of ships on the bosom of some sunny sea. After I have done this I will go to the chartroom and sit down by my dead grandfather and remain with him in his silent vigil, believing that when the chill which is nearing my heart reaches my brain, I too will become one of this ghostly company in this graveyard of lost ships, and when one o'clock comes I also will rise and walk again.

