

The Ship of Silence

by Albert Richard Wetjen

We needn't tell you of the mystery of the Mary Celeste, because Albert Richard Wetjen tells you about it and its companion vessels in the story of "The Ship of Silence." Suffice to say that the ocean is a place of many mysteries, that men who sail above the unplumbed depths are known for their unwillingness to scoff at superstitions and hints of the inexplicable, and that perhaps they have good reason to keep open minds on such subjects.

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ECAUSE this is a true story, there is no ending. . . . It was early in the night and very hot, the sticky tropical darkness pressing all about us, seeming to muffle the lights of the city ashore and rendering to a soft velvet the waters of the harbor as they rippled through the anchor chains and along the hull of the little coffee freighter that had brought me to Santos, Brazil. I had been sitting with Captain Massey and old Billings under the awning of the after-deck, drinking long, cold gin *tonicas* and talking of the sea in general and of ships that had vanished into its mysterious immensity. Old Billings never romanced, let it be said. He was a dignified man, red of face and with silvery hair, in his eightieth year and at that time the Lloyds surveyor and agent at Santos. He had followed the sea for some forty years before leaving it to take his present position, and so he spoke as a sailor.

"It's not so hard perhaps to account for the foundering of most ships," he said. "They get into bad weather and have their hatches burst in; or they're built or loaded top-heavy and capsize. That's all in the run of the game. What isn't so easy to explain is how they can sometimes drop out of sight without leaving a trace, especially in these days of wireless and with the regular sea-lanes all well traveled. But we know they do. And we know too that it's hard to sink a vessel without something floating clear—a boat, life-buoys, hatches, oars and what-not. Of course the sea's big and it's not hard to believe that searching vessels can overlook such small things. You've only a visibility of from ten to fifteen miles on the clearest of days from a ship's deck, and hatches and lifebuoys and even bodies are level with the water, easily hidden behind the swells.

"Yet even at that it seems curious that nothing comes to light. Take the *Waratah* now. You'll remember her—a modern liner of over fifteen thousand tons, newly built and on her second voyage. Carrying over two hundred souls, what with passengers and crew, and running on a regular route, down the coast from Durban to Capetown in South Africa. Of course she carried no wireless. That was before the day it became compulsory for liners to carry it, and it hadn't come into general use.

"But there she was, on a thickly traveled run. Soon after leaving Durban she speaks to the freighter *Clan McIntyre*; drops her astern and then proceeds to disappear. Of course there was a heavy gale reported soon after and it seems reasonable to suppose she foundered. But a new ship, remember—absolutely vanished! They sent out searching vessels, of course, when she was reported overdue. For months Government and private craft patrolled the coast waters. One vessel searched for over ninety days and covered close to twenty thousand miles of sea, and there was even a vessel sent to follow the normal current-drift far to the south. But nothing was ever found. Not a body, not a hatch, not a plank!

"Then there was that American transport the *Cyclops* that dropped out of sight—and she *did* have wireless. Then only this year there was that Danish training-ship the *Kobenhaven*, clearing from Buenos Aires for Australia. Been overdue for months and nothing found; must have gone down—and she's taken the flower of Danish youth with her, sons of the best families. My personal opinion is that she got too far southerly, into the Antarctic ice, struck a berg and crumpled. You know.

"But that isn't really what I started out to tell you. You can set up some sort of reasonable explanation for ships that just vanish. It's the other vessels that make the real mystery—the ships that don't drop out of sight, but turn up like a lot of wandering ghosts, sound above and below but without a soul on board. In '23 or '24, I forget which, there was a schooner picked up off Diamond Shoals, to the north. Sails set, boats in place, no unreasonable amount of water below. But never a sign of her men. . . . *Why?* Foundering doesn't cover that—for there's the ship!

"Somewhere in the records too you'll find notice of a Japanese steamer discovered drifting in the South Atlantic. Carried a crew of forty-odd and all they found were eight dead men on the main deck, and nothing to show how they had died. Boats all in place there too. No sign of heavy weather. No sign of fire or disease. . . . *Queer, isn't it?* And then of course there was the *Mary Celeste* in the '70's; I suppose she's the classic of what I am trying to say.

"They found her in mid-Atlantic in calm weather, you'll remember, with all the usual signs of mystery. Everything in order. Hull and spars sound. Fair-weather sails set; not a lifeboat missing. Everything as it should be, except she had no crew. What makes her case a classic are the number of altogether peculiar features.

"There were the men's clothes hung on a line to dry. Breakfast, half eaten, was on the fo'c'stle and the main cabin tables; and the food was still good, proving she had not long been abandoned. Under the needle of a sewing-machine in the Captain's room was a child's dress, half-finished, where the Captain's wife had obviously hurriedly left it. Then they found a cutlass in its scabbard, with stains like blood on the blade, and on the rail in the starboard bow they found a deep new cut with stains about it also. Cut into the bow itself, a little above the water-line, were two deep grooves, gouged out each side, as it were, and quite fresh. Most curious of all, the only thing missing on board was the chronometer. But again—*why?* . . . *Why?*

"Where had everyone gone? There was no sign of mutiny or of a raid, shall we say, by pirates. How had the men left the ship—and why had they left, it, obviously in haste, in the middle of breakfast? We don't know. There have been a lot of theories put forward, but for one reason or another they can be discounted. If it were only the *Mary Celeste* we might let the matter go, just write it off. But there are all those other ships, not only those that drop out of sight, without trace, but those that are found, abandoned for no earthly reason. New cases still turn up too, once every decade or so—and there you are.

"I think I'm a hard-headed man. I've had lot of experience one way and the other. I don't take much stock in ghosts and I believe everything has a reasonable explanation if we could locate what it is. And yet sometimes—well, I don't know. The sea is pretty big and we haven't learned much about it and what's in it. Remember the land only covers one-fifth, or is it a quarter, of the earth's surface—and we haven't fully explored the land yet. As for the sea, we have only gone down a few hundred feet—a few hundred feet in five miles of depth, remember. Ships stick to narrow and clearly defined lanes as a rule. There are tremendous areas where I suppose vessels only wander once in fifty years, or perhaps never go into at all and never have been.

"Is it something in the sea that comes out and loots these abandoned ships of their men? I know and you know that there are queer things in the sea. There're the giant squids on which the sperm whales feed; I've heard they sometimes are a hundred feet from the tip of one arm to the other. Then there's the sea-serpent. Yes, I know landmen laugh at us for believing in that. But why shouldn't we believe in it? It's been known from ancient times. It's been seen more than once, even if we acknowledge that a length of kelp, a barnacle-covered log or a school of porpoises in line might often have been mistaken for it. But how can you argue away the report of the *Daedalus*?

"Here is a British warship, certainly in command of a reliable man, certainly officered by some few gentlemen whose integrity cannot be questioned. They sight a long snakelike animal, observe it for some time and are even able to sketch it. The scientists and public may laugh, but you can't argue away the testimony of a whole ship's crew. Nor is it only the crew of the *Daedalus* you have to figure on. Captain Hope of another British war vessel, the *Fly*, saw a large animal with the body of a crocodile, a long neck and four paddlelike arms, in the Gulf of California. A Lieutenant Hayne, in command of the yacht *Osborne*, sighted something as queer, but I forget where. There are two other men who filed a joint report also, and they were members of the Zoölogical Society cruising in a yacht off the coast of Brazil. They saw a creature with a neck seven or eight feet long alone and as thick around as a man's body. I say you can't laugh away all this, and you can read the full accounts yourself if you doubt me. I've gone into the matter pretty thoroughly because—well, you'll understand in a minute.

"I don't say, mind, that any sort of animal such as the giant squid or the sea-serpent can account for these mysterious and deserted ships, nor for the

actual complete disappearances. I don't know. No one knows, and we can only wonder. I do hear that some scientists have recently suggested the survival in deep waters of some of those gigantic animals that occupied the world in ancient times, before man came. It doesn't seem unreasonable to me.

"But we'll let that pass. What I wanted to tell you when I started out was of an experience that came to me. I shall never forget it. No man could. It was one of those nightmarish things that remain with a man all his life, and I suppose everyone goes through something as ghastly at least once before he dies, if he follows the sea. . . . Yes, I'll take another drink!

"It all happened a long time ago. I was just a young third mate then, around twenty, serving my first voyage as an officer on the bark *Doyon* out of Sydney for Callao. We had good sailing weather, as I remember, and we were coming up to the South American coast after a couple of weeks out, when we sighted just such a ship as I have been talking of.

"I don't want to exaggerate or to imagine things after all these years, but I'll swear there was something eerie about her from the moment we first saw her. It was early in the morning, as I recall, and I had just come up from breakfast to take over from the mate—a decent sort of chap named Mathews, tall and well-built, not many years older than I was myself but very highly strung, as I afterwards discovered.

"That's a queer-looking packet ahead of us,' he remarked when I joined him on the poop. He had been staring through the glasses and now he handed them to me. 'Looks like she's not under control,' he said. I stared through the glasses myself and saw a small barkentine some distance ahead of us and apparently crossing our bow. She was under plain sail but her after-booms were jarring crazily and it was obvious that she was yawing all over the sea. I could discover no sign of life on her decks, nor could I locate anyone at her wheel and I suggested to Matthews that he'd better call the skipper.

"I've sent for him,' he observed and so we both continued to inspect the strange ship until the skipper came on deck. The morning was very calm, with a gentle wind from the south. There was no sea, just a long oily swell almost a bottle-green in color, and the sky was a clear blue dotted with a few clouds on the weather horizon. It was warm, too, but I remember I felt uneasy and a little chilled, just as if I had a presentiment of what was to come. The skipper came on the poop rubbing his eyes, for he always slept late, and he took the glasses from the mate with considerable impatience.

"What is it now?' he said bad-temperedly, and he stared through the glasses for some time. Then he said, 'By George, it looks like she's abandoned!' and I knew from the sound of his voice he was feeling pleased, thinking of the salvage.

"Well, to cut a long story short, we hove the *Doyon* to and the skipper sent the mate and myself away in our longboat, together with four of the men. We came up under the barkentine's counter and read her name, painted in white letters, '*Robert Sutter*—SAN FRANCISCO,' and it didn't need a second look to tell she was abandoned all right. One of the men got aboard over her midship rail when she rolled down, and he threw us a line so the rest of us could swing up. We left two men in the boat and proceeded to inspect

our prize, telling the two men who had boarded with us to look over the fo'c'stle while Mathews and myself went aft.

"It is a curious thing—but I swear I had gooseflesh all over from the first moment I put foot on the *Robert Sutter's* main deck. There was something so lonely about her, so—how shall I say?—*uncanny!* You could feel by the swing of her she was not water-logged. There was no sign of fire that a first casual inspection brought to light, and she was clean and had evidently been newly painted. Every rope and line was in place and her two boats were secure in their chocks on top of the galley house. We searched her from stem to stern and found no hint of life, save that in a large iron cage, suspended from a hook outside the galley 'midships, there was a parrot.

"The bird seemed in a bad way. It was crouched down on the bottom of the cage, lying half on its side and sort of pulsing all over, its eyes glazed and half closed. From the look of it—it was all but bald—it was a very old bird and it made no move when we approached it. 'It needs some water,' said Mathews, a fact which was obvious, and after we had brought it water, which it eagerly dragged itself up to, we went on with our search.

"Near the break of the poop, on the starboard side, we discovered what must have once been a cat. The creature had been smashed flat—as flat as a pancake, I tell you! It was just a thin sheet of black fur and dried flesh, literally sticking to the planking. But there was nothing to show how it had been killed, and at the time we did not pause to ask ourselves about it. We had to complete our searching and get back to the *Doyon* to make our report, you understand.

"Well, in the scuppers right opposite the port galley door we found a revolver, a bright nickel affair somewhat rusted and with every shell fired. And that was all, except that over the whole vessel there hovered a curious sort of smell, dried-up, if you know what I mean, like the stale, weedy, fishy smell you get from mud-flats when the tide runs out. But even that we didn't particularly notice at the time.

"Anyway, that was all, as I said. The ship's cargo was cut lumber, which we ascertained by lifting the hatches, and when we sounded the well we found only the usual amount of bilge water which every healthy wooden ship will take through her seams. It was all very mysterious, though, and if you can picture us staggering about the swaying deck with the spars jarring above us, the canvas thundering and slatting, the wheel and rudder creaking, every block and line making its own individual noise, and not a soul to be found, you can understand how we felt. Mathews was getting the jumps even before we were through with the inspection and I noticed he wiped the sweat from his face repeatedly.

"We went back to the *Doyon* at last and made our report, and the skipper didn't take much stock in what we had to say. 'She must have had a third boat,' he observed carelessly. 'They probably thought she was foundering or something and just left her. I've known whole crews to panic before. You say there's no sign of disease, and no bodies? Well, there's nothing to be afraid of, then!' He did admit it was queer that we had found her hull sound and that none of her navigation instruments appeared to be missing. Even in

a panic the master and the officers of a vessel are not liable to forget their working-tools. And then in the log-book we'd discovered and brought back there was no hint of anything amiss. It was written up to within four days previously and reported only fair weather. I remember I pointed out to the skipper that no crew would be likely to abandon a vessel and leave the log-book and ship's papers behind, but he brushed all that aside. He was a man almost completely without imagination, and all he could think of was salvage.

"I'll give you six men," he said to Mathews, "and you can take the third mate along with you. Bring her to Callao and we can go into the whole matter there with the port officials."

"Mathews wasn't a bit pleased with the prospect, though most mates would have jumped at the opportunity of making themselves a nest-egg and enjoying a first command, even if it would be only for a short time. 'I don't like the idea at all, sir,' he said. 'There's something queer about the whole business!'

"The skipper waved all that away. 'Nonsense!' he said. 'You ought to thank your stars for the chance!' But then, you see, he hadn't been on board the *Robert Sutter*, and we had to admit—now we were back on the *Doyon*, surrounded by the curious crew—that our feelings did seem rather silly. So the long and short of it was we picked out six men, or rather the skipper appointed the six most useless we had on board, and we pulled back to the deserted barkentine, four other men coming with us in the longboat to take it back. The *Doyon* squared away on her course again and I can remember that Mathews and I stood on the *Robert Sutter's* poop and watched her with something of the feeling of being deserted to our fate.

"There wasn't any use of our worrying about that, however. There we were with a perfectly sound and well-built ship, amply found with water and provisions, rolling at will on a bottle-green sea and with a fair wind blowing for Callao. Mathews pulled himself together and we got the vessel on a course, set watches, wound up the rundown chronometers, setting them from a spare one we had brought from the *Doyon*, and so prepared to make port.

"It was somewhat uncanny to clear out two of the cabins below ready for our occupancy, for the gear of the previous inhabitants was scattered about, and in the room I chose, which had been the mate's, there was even the imprint of his head still on the pillow and a half-whittled plug of chewing-tobacco tossed on the blankets, together with an open clasp-knife. I shook off my feelings however, before very long. I was young, healthy, usually in good spirits and it was not long before I was whistling to myself. Mathews came and stood in the doorway while I was fixing my bunk and his face was very serious, more serious than I had ever seen it. I think I have said he was a highly strung man.

"'I don't see how the devil you can whistle!' he burst out irritably. 'Good God, man, doesn't it bother you? The crew—fourteen men, according to the articles—all gone!'

"I stopped whistling and looked at him. 'It is queer,' I agreed. 'But it doesn't do us any good to worry about it.'

"Mathews shivered and looked over his shoulder. 'But where did they

go?' he said, his voice dropping. '*Where and why?* It's all right for the skipper to talk of a third boat, but this ship carried no third boat. I've been over her again. There isn't a sign of one.' He went away and I could hear him muttering to himself as he straightened up the room that had been the Captain's.

"A fine sort of business, wasn't it? Yet we could have probably carried on all right and accepted things as we found them, if it hadn't been for Mathews and—something else. When I went on deck I found Mathews staring down at the splotch of black fur and dried flesh that must have once been a cat.

"'You can figure it out,' he told me in a strained voice. 'That poor little devil was running away from something and then it was killed. Think how fast it must have been, whatever it was killed it. You know how a frightened cat can run.'

"'What makes you think it was frightened?' I asked him. But he only shook his head. Since that time I have seen a python smash flat a running dog with a blow of its snout—and that was quick work. Yet a dog isn't as agile as a cat. You see what I mean? And that python's snout only caught the dog in the small of the back. This, that was stuck to the deck, was *all* flattened, head, body and tail, and all about it there was a faint but perceptible depression in the hard teak planking, a sort of circle about four feet across.

"'Then there's this gun,' said Mathews later on, coming back to the subject. He held in his hand the nickel-plated revolver we had found in the scuppers. 'Every shot fired. What at? Why?'

"I tried to talk him out of his somber mood, but each time I did so he would only shake his head and ask further questions—until I swear he had the whole crew of us completely jumpy when we might easily have forgotten the matter, or at least relegated it to the back of our minds. . . . Until, of course, the next thing occurred.

"This was late that same afternoon, or rather close to evening. The men had gone for'ard, all except the helmsman, of course, and Mathews and I were pacing up and down the poop waiting for the seaman we had delegated as cook, to serve supper. The day was still fair, the sea calm and smooth. We were under full sail and making about six knots before a freshening wind which was coming up with the approach of nightfall. And then, all of a sudden, there came the most terrible scream and quite distinctly some one shouted, '*My God, Collins!*'

"I can't describe the electrifying effect of the thing. That scream sent all our spines cold, froze the very blood in our veins. And that voice! There was everything in it that told of utter terror. More than that, it was a strange voice—it belonged to no one of the men we had with us.

"Mathews and I had stopped pacing the poop and were riveted to the planking. 'Good heavens!' said Mathews in a strained voice at last. 'What—who was that?'

"Before I could even venture a reply there came a whole series of screams, splitting our very ear-drums. And then we heard another voice, a different voice from the first: '*It's coming aft. It's coming aft!*' And if ever there was sheer, pitiful and desperate horror in any man's tones there was in these. The

crew had come running up from the fo'c'stle. The cook had come out his galley and was standing open-mouthed, looking dazedly around, one hand clutching his apron and the other holding a cleaver.

"Mathews let out an oath and dropped down the poop companion to the main deck. He was badly shaken, and he ran 'midships toward the men. I was close behind him too!

"'Who the hell's making that racket?' he shouted hysterically.

"No one answered him. The men had stopped and were looking ungasily about. Again came those awful screams, ringing all over the ship, and the strange voice thick and hoarse with utter fear: *'It's coming aft! It's coming aft!'*

"Mathews stopped short and stared about him. 'My God!' he whispered to me. 'Am I going mad?' And then we both saw the men were pointing at something and after a moment the cook exclaimed in a relieved voice, 'Why, it's only the parrot, sir!'

"I can remember the vast flood of relief that came over me. I stopped shaking and let out a big sigh, and I could see that Mathews visibly relaxed. 'I'd forgotten the parrot,' he said with a queer laugh, and he walked round to the forepart of the galley where the bird's cage hung. The men gathered about too and some of them laughed, though there was nothing of mirth in the sound and not much of reassurance. Mathews looked into the cage and I peered over his shoulder. Since we had given the bird some water that morning it had apparently recovered, for now it was sitting on its swing perch—but sort of crouched down. And I tell you it acted like no parrot I have ever seen, before or since.

"Every one of its tattered remaining feathers was erect. Its eyes were fixed and staring and did not blink. It shivered the whole length of its body at regular intervals and did not move when Mathews shoved a tentative finger through the bars and spoke to it in a soothing voice. Even as we watched it the bird crouched lower, opened its beak and gave vent to one of those horrible screams. And this time it was the sound of a man in awful pain, wave on wave, abruptly cut off. There was an aching silence for a second and then the parrot croaked distinctly, with a queer tremulous catch in its voice: *'You can't shoot it! You can't shoot a thing like that!'* And the voice was again strange, the third we had heard, distinct in *timbre* and pitch. The voices of three separate men!

"I can remember that for at least a minute there was a tense and frozen silence. I could hear my heart thumping and the cold sweat was running down my throat. Mathews had pulled his finger back from the cage as if it burned him and he was the first to speak. 'I never thought of it,' he said, his words flat and strangely without expression. 'I never thought of it, but it's simple enough. . . . He knows what it's all about! He knows what happened. He *saw!*' He spoke like a man half asleep, staring wide-eyed and ashen-faced at the crouching, shivering parrot. The men began to stir uneasily and one or two of them looked hastily over their shoulders.

"I nudged Mathews in the back. 'Pull yourself together,' I whispered. 'We can't have the men getting all jumpy.'

"But you couldn't get him away. You couldn't get the men away either; they all seemed riveted to the spot, watching that poor devil of a parrot. It mumbled to itself nearly all the time. Then it would chatter out some words we could not understand—not English words. Nor did it always use the same language. Mathews had a little command of Spanish and swore the bird often talked in that tongue. I am certain I caught German words and once or twice certain phrases in Polynesian which I'd picked up while on a trading-schooner through the Islands.

"You understand that the parrot was certainly old, incredibly old, I would say. It was almost featherless; it must have had many masters in its time. You know they say those birds live for a century or longer. And God knows where this bird had been and what it had seen. The things it muttered must have come from its ancient memory of many masters of many nationalities. And between its mutters it would let out those awful screams, exquisitely different screams—the screams of different men in agony and terror. And immediately after each scream it would choke out some phrase, not always in English, as I've said, but in other languages too.

"I don't know if a bird can go insane, but if one can that parrot was very close to it. There was only one thing we could deduce from its actions. It had been frightened almost out of its life, and the screams it gave and the words it shouted had been hammered into its head by some awful happening. The words it muttered half-mechanically were from long ago; the words it shouted were of recent memorizing. It was horrifying. It seemed trying to tell us something. From behind its fixed, unwinking eyes there seemed to hover a shadow; I even felt there was an uncanny flicker of pleading. It wanted to make us understand that it had seen something no living thing had seen before, something so monstrous and ghastly it had penetrated at once and indelibly even into its own cynical and calloused brain.

"How long we all remained about that cage, silent and shuddering, I do not know. But it was the night chill coming into the wind that roused us, that and the smell of the supper burning on the galley stove. We had all insensibly crowded together, as if each man feared to stand alone. The man at the wheel began to shout, his voice frightened. He wanted to know what was the matter and he wanted to be relieved. I told one of the other men to go aft and he went, but only with the greatest reluctance, his hand on the haft of his sheath-knife and his head continually turning to glance over his shoulder or at the darkening sea. And still at irregular intervals that crazy parrot let out its blood-curdling screams and shouted blindly at us: '*It's coming aft. It's coming aft!*' or that desperate, '*My God, Collins!*' or that flat, despairing, '*You can't shoot it. You can't shoot a thing like that!*'

"I shook Mathews finally and told him we ought to be getting back to the poop. We hadn't eaten yet, and it was getting dark. 'Eaten?' he said, literally staggering as he went aft with me. 'Eaten? How can you talk of eating?' He stumbled up on the poop and leaned against the main cabin skylight, mopping his wet forehead. 'What was it that came aft?' He whispered hard, shivered and tried to straighten himself. 'The mate of this ship, was named Collins, according to the articles we found,' he said. 'And only

the Captain would be likely to call him Collins. So it was the Captain who called out, "My, God Collins!" And what was it that came aft?"

"You're acting like a damned fool!" I told him bluntly, though I was all but unnerved myself. You would have been too, to hear those terrible screams ringing through the ship every minute or so, and those strange voices of vanished men repeating those terror-stricken words! But I still had enough sense to face the fact it was only a parrot talking and that we had to get the *Robert Sutter* into port. I got Mathews below at last and we had a stiff drink together, after which we ate some canned beef and sea biscuit, the supper that had been preparing in the galley being hopelessly ruined. We knew for certain now there had been no third boat!

"Well, that night we faced another complication, for none of the men would remain for'ard, but insisted on bringing their mattresses aft and crouching down by the break of the poop. The helmsmen refused to be left alone and we had to let two men steer through the dark hours. Neither Mathews nor myself could sleep, with those screams ringing out, and we paced the night away together. It was uncanny to be on deck. We all had the feeling that at any moment something would loom up out of the sea and come toward us.

"You'd have thought that parrot would have grown tired, or that its throat would have worn out. But it never ceased its clamor. Hour after hour there was that terrible screaming, exquisitely depicting everything that vanished crew must have suffered in that last hour or those last minutes. And between the screaming, the voices and words of dead men shouted across the noises of the flying ship! Can you wonder we all had the same terrors a child has in the dark, a darkness it peoples with dragons and burning-eyed bogies? I have always considered myself a moderately courageous man, but I tell you that on the *Robert Sutter* I really knew fear, the sort of utter fear that gets you by the throat and turns your stomach and knees to water.

"As for Mathews, he was half insane, and he kept going below for a drink until he finally brought the bottle on deck with him. 'We ought to kill the damned thing!' he kept saying over and over. 'We ought to kill it!' But no one would go 'midships and kill it. I would not have gone 'midships myself that night for all the money in the world. And by the time the dawn came the sheer panic of the night had subsided enough to give Mathews some element of reason. Perhaps it was the whisky he had consumed, but he certainly evidenced more control with the coming of the tropical sun all red and gold along the horizon. And still, remember, that parrot was screaming and shouting, with never a let-up! I would never have thought any creature could survive such exhaustion as must have sapped its body.

"'No, you're right, we can't kill the damned thing,' Mathews agreed after we'd talked it over. 'It's the only clue we have. We've got to turn it over to the authorities and let them see what they can make of it.' He swore thickly to himself. 'But I'll go mad if it doesn't stop!' He plugged up his ears with some oakum, but he did not seem able to shut out the noise. He looked exhausted, drained out by the light of dawn. I think we were all drained out and I gave the men a tot of whisky apiece and made them go for'ard.

"We tried every means to make that confounded parrot shut up. We covered its cage with a cloth, which only seemed to drive it into new frenzies; and we tried lowering it in the hold on top of the cargo, but that had an even worse effect. It would not eat but occasionally would dip its beak in water. And nearly all the time, pulsing and rising and falling, the ship was wracked with screaming and the voices of those dead men. Mathews went below, half drunk and with a false bravado at last, and with his ears still stuffed up he managed to fall asleep. With the coming of full morning and the continued repetition of that parrot's noise I recovered some of my nerve.

"I drew some comfort from the fact that we were fully a hundred miles from the spot where we had picked up the *Robert Sutter*, and whatever it was that had made her a crewless derelict, was far away. I went 'midships, shuddering, to listen to the bird with the same morbidness that draws you to the scene of a murderer's crime, and tried to count the different remarks it kept making. There were, as I have said, only three in English but there were several in frenzied Spanish and one of the seamen who had been on German vessels assured me there were at least a dozen words shouted in that tongue. I thought I caught snatches of French too, but I was not sure. I am speaking now only of those words obviously registered on the bird's memory in that time of recent horror.

"I got hold of a copy of the ship's original articles and discovered that to judge from the names she must have carried a mixed crew all right, as most vessels do. There had been a cook named José Alvarez, obviously Spanish. There had been two men with Teutonic names, and one with a French-sounding name. I judged the officers had been Americans and it seemed reasonable to suppose that each man, in the moment of stress, would have reverted to his native tongue.

"The more I thought of the matter, under the comforting bright sun of day, the more I began to see the possibilities, and to grow curious. Somewhere in all that jargon the mad parrot kept giving forth there must be a clue, must be some word that would tell what it was that had come aft. It was not unreasonable to suppose that while the men were running madly about the deck some one of them must have shouted out a word, a sentence or a fragment giving a hint as to its appearance. And if that were so such a sentence or fragment might have registered on the quivering parrot's brain to be eventually spewed forth. I thought to myself: 'If once we get that damned bird to Callao alive there'll be linguists to take down everything it's shouting out. Then we might know!'

"You see, it really was intriguing, apart from all the terror and horror those racking words and screams provided—coming, as it were, out of nothing. We were on the track of a genuine mystery. We might have in our grasp the clue that would account for those other ships that had been found as we'd found the *Robert Sutter*. We might even be able to understand why ships had totally disappeared, without trace. We might catch a glimpse of Something that should have died in the youth of the world. The parrot knew! Why had those men vanished? What was it that had come on them out of the calm sea, sending them into stark convulsive terror, causing one of them,

undoubtedly the Captain, to empty a nickel-plated revolver at Something which someone else had declared you could not shoot? The parrot knew—and it was trying to tell us.

“Mathews came on deck soon after noon, quite drunk, his whole body shaking and his eyes burning in his face. The parrot had not fallen silent at all, and it kept up its incredible screaming and shouting all through the day. I could hear Mathews grinding his teeth together as he paced up and down, his fingers twitching, and he kept saying to himself, ‘If it would only shut up until we get to port! If it would only shut up!’ But it didn’t shut up and I began to find myself twitching and grinding my teeth too. I knew that Mathews would never stand the strain. Nor could he. . . . About three bells in the first dog-watch he stopped pacing and gave a terrific oath. ‘I can’t stand this!’ he jerked out suddenly—and he took a running jump down the poop companion to the main deck and raced ’midships. ‘*It’s coming aft. It’s coming aft!*’ screamed the parrot and then I saw Mathews rip one of the fire-axes from its metal holder on the bulkhead of the galley house. He disappeared round the house and there came the furious sound of metal on metal. The screaming rose continuously: ‘*It’s coming aft! It’s coming aft!*—and then sudden new words, words in English we had not heard before, thick, choking, horribly sickening and despairing, ‘*Collins! Collins! It’s got me!*’ What else there was, was drowned out by the high-pitched hysterical swearing of Mathews and the vicious noise of the swung ax. And then there was silence—sudden, almost ominous—and Mathews staggered back into view, rocking as if hardly able to keep his feet, and backing right to the rail against which he leaned, breathing hard, the fire-ax limp in one shaking hand. ‘Throw the damned thing overboard!’ he said viciously and I saw one of the men go reluctantly forward, very slowly, to drag to the side a mangled iron cage in which, bloody and limp, was what was left of the parrot.

“We all watched in utter silence as the cage curved up in the air and fell into the sea. And it seemed as if with the splash there was something oppressive lifted from the ship. She seemed to pick up, grow more buoyant.

“Probably I was the only one on board the *Robert Sutter* who had even a faint tinge of regret, and that mine was perhaps morbid I must admit. But I could not help reflecting that we might have found some clue, a clue to the mysteries of the sea, if we could only have brought that parrot into Callao and before men who knew languages. But there you are. The bird was gone—and we took that barkentine into port without further mishap.

“I remember I told the story to the consul there, told him what I had wondered and hoped, and he laughed at me for a fool. Mathews did not even mention the matter. He was, I fancy, rather ashamed of it. He wanted to forget it. And so whatever it was that befell the *Robert Sutter* remains unknown to this day. I cannot even guess. I have given up trying to guess. . . . Nobody knows. But that parrot knew, and there are times when I wake up at night, in a cold sweat, and can hear its clamor, and see its crouching, palpitating body, and feel ringing in my ears those wild, mad words of men who had been dead for days, screaming while *It* came aft—and trying to shoot Something which could not be shot!”