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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Ship

That Committed Suicide

By A. J. MORDTMANN

*A tender and pathetic story about a weird experience
in the Antarctic*

IT WAS back in the days of sailing-vessels. I was second mate on the British freighter *Carnatic*. On a trip from Rio de Janeiro to Batavia, heavy storms drove us far to the south and into the Antarctic ice-belt.

Bart Clifford, our captain, had brought his young wife along. Her name was Fanny, and she was a charmer. She was the commander of that boat, you may be sure of that. You never saw a crew on their good behavior the way ours was. Mrs. Clifford was a great lover of plants and flowers, and she had big boxes of them growing and blooming all the time. We moved them back and forth for her, out into the sun and rain, and—when we got down into the cold latitudes—away from the sleet and the frost. We watered them for her, budded and trimmed and all the rest of it, and when one of us got a nosegay for his labor, pinned on by her own white hands, he was as proud as a peacock. It goes without saying that the captain had his buttonhole posy every day. He couldn't have given his orders without it.

The north winds drove the *Carnatic* farther and farther down into the drift-ice, and for a long time we hadn't had much doubt that we were done for. One night, when it was black as pitch and blowing a hurricane, the ship drove in among the blocks of ice and stuck fast. She didn't seem to have been hurt particularly, but there she was; and all of a

sudden the thermometer dropped and she froze into a solid mass with the cakes of ice.

There was nothing to do but get away from her as fast as possible. The captain called a council of war, and everybody agreed to that.

The two boats were got free of the ship and equipped with compass, water and supplies. The big boat was put under the command of the first mate, and the captain ordered his wife to go in that one, since it was more comfortable and much safer. But as all ship-captains worthy of the name have done since there have been ships and captains, he kept the harder and more dangerous job for himself and took command of the little boat.

When the first boat was out of the way, Captain Clifford ordered his crew into his little egg-shell, went back for his log-book, and took a last look about his cabin to see if there was anything else important which he could carry easily. There was no time to waste. An ugly white mist was settling down, one of those solid polar fogs that you can cut with a jack-knife. When you are in one of them, you can't see three steps away. When the captain climbed over the railing, the fog was closing down on the ship, and he and the five men that made up his crew pushed off in a hurry. The other boat was nowhere to be seen, but they knew in a general way where they

were going. Fortunately, the storm had died down.

They crawled toward the north in the thick fog, keeping a sharp eye out for the big boat, but a day and a night passed without their finding it. Just as day was dawning, a strong southeast wind came up and drove the fog away. Toward noon, the air was quieter and the gray curtain over the sky began to break up and show the first scraps of blue. In half an hour the sun was shining brightly on the restless, white-capped waves.

The boat had long since come clear of the ice-field. And in the course of the afternoon, a heartening sight greeted the sailors. Off on the horizon, with her sails reefed, lay a handsome brig. She was evidently scanning the sea, no doubt for them. Only a few minutes after they sighted her, it was clear that she was maneuvering to come in their direction. Captain Clifford declared that the brig had already picked up the big boat, and learning the situation from its crew, had been searching for the small one. The event proved that he was right. When Clifford climbed on the deck of the brig, the first person he set eyes on was his mate, who had been in command of the big boat.

But the captain's blood froze in his veins, and the mate's face was as pale as death.

"Captain," the mate stammered, "where is your wife? Didn't she come in your boat?"

"My boat? My wife? I told her to go with you! Didn't she do it?"

"Good God, no!" The crew gathered about the two officers, puzzled and aghast. If Mrs. Fanny Clifford had not been saved, nothing else seemed of much importance. We had called her the *Car-natic's* mascot, and we knew that she brought us good luck.

From the frightened report of the first mate, it gradually became clear that Mrs. Clifford had been the victim of a terrible misunderstanding, and that the captain's wife, whom every man on board had been secretly in love with, the beautiful guiding star of two dozen rough sailors, had been left behind on the deserted ship in the ice-jam, lonely, helpless, doomed to death.

IN THE course of time it became clear to all of us exactly how it had all happened.

Mrs. Clifford had been in the act of climbing down into the larger boat, when she had caught sight of the approaching fog, and her seaman's experience had told her instantly that it would be impossible for the two boats to stay together in that fog. The prospect of a separation from her husband was more than she could endure. "I must stay with Bart!" she cried excitedly, and drew away from the group. The first mate and all others understood her feeling perfectly, and no one made any attempt to change her decision.

The big boat pushed off, made its way through the ice, and was out of sight of the ship almost instantly.

That was the last any of us had seen of the unfortunate woman. The second boat had taken off a few minutes later in frantic haste. Mrs. Clifford had no doubt gone back, as the captain had done, to make some last arrangements. Perhaps an accident had happened to her, she had sprained an ankle, had fainted. . . . There was no profit in speculating, although none of us could help doing it. The cruel fact was, the captain had come away from his ship and left on it the one object that made life worth living for him.

The poor fellow was half crazy, or worse than that. He tried to jump overboard, with some mad idea of swimming

back to the ice-field. We had difficulty in holding him, and he was deaf to our reasoning and our sympathy. The captain of the brig was so affected that he did a great deal more than he would have been able to justify to his owners. He left his course and steered south, clear into the drift-ice. He cruised about in that dangerous territory for two days, but all to no avail. The *Carnatic* was never sighted, and the brig came back at last to her course and sailed on, with nothing to show for her kindly efforts but a three or four days' delay.

Clifford's desperation had given way to a condition of dull indifference. He seemed like a man who lives only because he lacks the energy to end his life. But as the days wore on, we began to notice an improvement in him. As we approached Cape Town, he became calm and almost cheerful. It was clear that his hope was returning.

In Cape Town, Clifford fitted out a tight little schooner and undertook, at his own expense, a trip to the Antarctic country. He was convinced that his wife was still alive and could be found. A number of us shipped with him. But although we risked our lives a hundred times, and although we stuck to the mad enterprise till our provisions gave out, we limped back into a friendly port at last, with our wreck of a little vessel, exactly as wise as we had set out.

We tried it once more, with a larger boat, but with the same result. Clifford had beggared himself by this time, and there seemed nothing more to do. Several of us had spent months at the forlorn hope, and had accomplished nothing. But the captain was as sure as ever that if we could keep at it a little longer he would find his wife alive and save her. "The third time," he kept repeating, "the third time—I could find her the third time. . . ."

WHEN we had left the *Carnatic*, the ship had been, as far as we had been able to tell, entirely seaworthy and uninjured. It might easily turn out that she would hold together for months and even years. It was true that she had the ice to contend with, but the ice might prove rather a protection than otherwise. Since neither of the expeditions had sighted her, it was likely that she had been drawn into the drifting ice-field still farther south, into the girdle of solid ice, and had been completely frozen in. There were a year's supplies for twenty-seven men aboard her, and there was no reason why Mrs. Clifford should starve in a long, long time. And anyway, it seemed like sheer murder to desert the captain yet. . . .

To make a long story short, a number of us clubbed together and put in what savings we had. That didn't make very much, but Clifford had wealthy friends in Great Britain, South Africa, the United States, Brazil, everywhere. We got his case before a lot of them. We had pretty much the whole world stirred up about the painful business, and we fitted out the handsome *Lady Godiva*, specially equipped—wonderfully so for those days—to stand an icy reception. We had a tough time of it.

But we found the *Carnatic*.

It may seem that what we found didn't help anybody much. But I have always been glad we stuck to it.

We made straight for the spot where the log showed that the *Carnatic* had been frozen in and deserted. There was nothing to be found, either above or below the surface. There was a little drift-ice in the neighborhood, but only a very little.

We kept on toward the south for several hours. By that time the ice was packed so close that we could go no farther. We turned east and skirted as near the ice-pack as we dared come. At night we furled sail and brought the ship to,

so as not to run any risk of missing the derelict in the darkness.

We sailed east for another day. We were following the direction in which, in view of the prevailing winds, the *Carnatic* was most likely to have drifted. We were hunting for a needle in a haystack. Yet every one of us, and not merely poor Captain Clifford—he was forty-three years old, but his hair had turned white in a few months, and he walked like a man of sixty-five—had a feeling that something was due to happen.

We heard the bell strike twice. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. The weather was beautiful. Suddenly the call came down from the crow's nest:

"Ship ahoy!"

A ship, in this Sahara of the South Seas? It could be no ship but one!

"Where away?" Captain Clifford called up, in a shaking voice.

The man called the direction, and pointed with his hand. Clifford sprang to the helm and set the ship's course in accordance with the lookout's instructions.

"There—steady!" Clifford's instructions to the helmsman had grown sharp and determined. "North-northwest—2 west——"

"Ay, ay," said the sailor.

The captain took his telescope and climbed the mast himself.

For five minutes he studied the horizon without a word. Then he pushed his glass together and came slowly down.

"It's a three-master," he said. "It's—it's the *Carnatic*!"

Then his worn face began to quiver, and the tears gushed out of his eyes. He took off his cap and held it in his folded hands in front of his face, as if he were praying. A sailor pulled his sleeve across his eyes. Everybody stared at the horizon, although nobody could see even a spot on it. The masts creaked, the wind whistled in the rigging. Otherwise, it

was as still on the *Lady Godiva* as if we had been in church.

The keel-water foamed and gurgled behind us. In a quarter of an hour, most of us could see the ship with the naked eye. A quarter of an hour more, and we could tell distinctly that she was drifting helplessly without sail or rudder.

We got a boat ready. Everybody was nervous and unsteady.

We could see now that the vessel was a neglected, floating ruin. She rose and fell on the troubled water, as soulless and purposeless as so much driftwood.

Then all at once she swung slowly around, and we could read the name, in faded gilt letters: CARNATIC.

The hull was paintless and weather-beaten. A few scraps of sail-cloth clung to the yards. The ropes and shrouds hung loose and neglected. We were so near that we could hear the masts groaning and the rusty rudder-chains grinding.

We manned the boat. Captain Clifford, the faithful Norwegian mate Ole Johanneson, who had been with him from the beginning, six sailors, and I, made up its crew, and we rowed to the uncanny ship. As we rowed over, nobody spoke a word.

It would have been quite a proposition for a landsman to reach the high deck of the tricky bobbing vessel. We skirted around her a little, till we spied a scrap of rope hanging down from the stern. Johanneson was on board in a jiffy, and the rest of us were not long in following him. The captain made for his cabin at once. The others of us scattered over the ship and began a careful search of every nook and corner.

WE HUNTED for two hours and found nothing. The ship was deserted. There was nothing for it but to go back. Our months of anxious, danger-

ous and tedious searching had come to an end. Fruitless—useless. . . .

I met Johanneson on the upper deck.

"Must we give it up?" I asked.

"I suppose so," he assented, sadly. "But, do you know—I can't find anything—but I have a feeling all the time that—that *she* isn't gone—that she's here somewhere—and not just her dead body—but——"

I stared at him. "Ole," I said, "I have the same feeling, exactly—especially down in the captain's cabin. I wonder——"

The captain's head and shoulders came in sight above the hatchway. An old man, weary and discouraged. Yet there was a light in his eyes that I had never seen in them before. I have often wondered what he had seen or heard, even by that time. But that is something I shall never know.

"Men," he said, "I guess we might as well go, now. We've looked everywhere, and there isn't—*anyone* here. Let me take just one last look about the cabin. Then we'll put off——"

And he was gone again. We waited, five minutes, ten minutes. . . .

All at once we heard a shrill cry. I don't think any of us was able to tell whether it was a cry of alarm, of agony, of surprize, or even of joy. But we all rushed down in the direction it seemed to come from. . . .

We ran into the cabin. The captain sat bolt upright on his sofa. He was stone-dead. His heart had stopped beating. On his thin face there was an expression of rapturous happiness, which settled slowly into one of peaceful calm.

And in his hand he held a pink geranium blossom.

Puzzled, dazed, unable to believe the evidence of our own senses, we neverthe-

less busied ourselves with the dead man—we had even begun to make plans for the disposition of the body.

"We must get him back some way to the *Lady Godiva* and have Hubbell examine him," Johanneson was saying. "It might be that he isn't——"

Just then one of the sailors glanced at the port-hole and rushed toward the door with a wild yell of terror.

"Get overboard, all of you, as fast as you can," he screamed. "*She's turning over!*"

He was right. The ship was capsizing.

Leaving the dead man where he was, we stumbled blindly up the steps and rushed to the side of the vessel. The tilt was so steep that some of us made the last few feet on our hands and knees. We paid no attention to the boat we had come in. There was no time to fool with boats. We dropped into the water and swam desperately to get as far away as possible from the rolling monster. They had been watching us from the *Lady Godiva*, and another boat picked us up and carried us to safety.

The *Carnatic* heeled over, slowly, slowly, then more and more rapidly; first to starboard, then her bow began to sink. All at once, so suddenly that it left us gasping as we gazed at it from the deck of the *Lady Godiva*, that sound, water-tight vessel plunged her nose down into the ocean—how it could have happened I have no idea—and was gone. She left so big a hole in the water that the waves ran into the pool in a maelstrom. For a few seconds it sucked strongly at the *Lady Godiva*. The foam spurted high in the air. Then the ocean was as empty and silent again as if the *Carnatic* had been only a phantom ship, after all.

We talked it over, standing on the deck and trying to get our wits about us,

And we all agreed that we had done the right thing, even though we couldn't understand what had happened.

"He found her, after all," said Ole. "Where did the flower come from, unless——"

"And that cry," said one of the men.

"That wasn't the captain. *That was a woman's voice!*"

Then we all remembered. It *had* been a woman's voice, we were sure.

"She was there," said Ole. "And they had their burial at sea—the two of them —and their ship——"
