

Strange STORIES

VOL. II, NO. 3

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DECEMBER, 1939

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VOICES IN THE WIND

(Concluded from page 100)

note written by him on the day of his death. The note read:

Captain Joshua Ripley was master of this ship in 1910 and 1911. I was his mate, and I murdered him in his cabin, the same cabin, the same bunk that I now occupy. The medallion on the bulkhead is a likeness of him. Can anyone understand the hell through which I've been passing, sleeping on the very spot where I killed him, staring his likeness in the face, every hour of the day and night? Lord! have mercy on me!

"This explains many things," said Fanchley, "But not all. For instance, where is the medallion?"

For the medallion was no longer on the bulkhead, and not so much as a scratch indicated that such a thing had ever rested there.

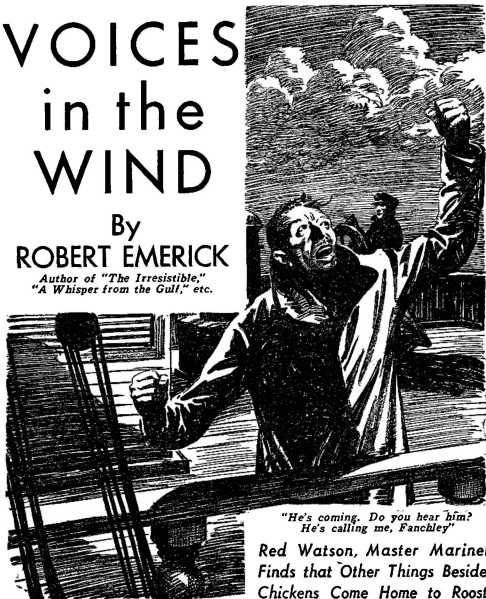
Summerfield and Hogan, to whom Fanchley addressed his question had no explanation to offer.

They could only shiver.

VOICES in the WIND

By
ROBERT EMERICK

Author of "The Irresistible,"
"A Whisper from the Gulf," etc.



*"He's coming. Do you hear him?
He's calling me, Fanchley"*

*Red Watson, Master Mariner,
Finds that Other Things Besides
Chickens Come Home to Roost!*

THE ship was making good southing, for the wind was fair and steady, and most skippers would have congratulated themselves on making such good progress.

"Red" Watson, however, was not pleased. He was new to the ship; this was his first voyage in her, having taken the command at short notice to replace her regular skipper who had fallen down a hatch and broken his leg.

What displeased him was something his mates could not see.

With his pale eyes cold under the flaming thatch that gave him the name of "Red" throughout the seven seas, he paced the deck in a sullen temper almost from the day the ship cleared New York with a cargo of non-rush goods for Matthewtown and ports in the West Indies. From time to time, he paused and canted his head as though he were listening for some strange sound, far away and faint.

"Summerfield," he questioned his first mate, "do you hear anything in the wind?"

The lanky mate, red-nosed and watery-eyed, was startled.

"In the wind, sir?"

Summerfield shook his head and covertly sniffed his captain's breath. A man given over-strongly to liquor himself, he at once suspected the promptings of alcohol in so senseless a question.

"I hear the creaking of the rigging and the swishing of the wind itself, sir," he responded.

The captain's brows fell still lower.

"Don't lie to me, Summerfield. I'll strip the hide from your bones if you lie to me."

HE hesitated a moment, then with an obvious effort like a swimmer diving into cold water for the first time, he elaborated on his question more thoroughly.

"I want to know, Summerfield, if you can hear words in the wind. Words like these, 'You and your ship, Red Watson, will never see land again.' Words said over and over, half a dozen times a watch. You've never heard them, Summerfield?"

The lanky mate fell backward a step and laid a lanky forefinger against his bulbous nose. For a single instant the nose seemed to suffer an extraordinary paleness.

"Good Lord, no! Nothing like that, sir."

His eyelids blinked up and down several times rapidly over his watery eyes. His scrawny neck craned appreciatively.

"What does it mean, Captain? Does it mean we're going to be lost with all hands?"

"It means," began Captain Watson, and suddenly stopped.

Before him stood half his crew, and in their van, standing side by side, was Larson the big Swede and the little, wizened, middle-aged cook.

Larson spoke first.

"The grub on dis ship," he grumbled angrily, waving a tin plate, "bane swill. I tell—"

"It ain't," screamed the cook. "It's good grub."

He stabbed a finger dramatically at the Swede.

"That hellion," he went on shrilly, "threw it in my face. I won't take it, I won't. It's that big, dumb—"

Captain Watson took one step forward. He didn't yell at his squalling crew. He merely spoke, but the words dripped from his thin lips like quiet poison.

"I'm going to count ten," he said, "and when I get to ten, I'm going to begin laying open the head of every man in reach. One—two—three—"

They began to edge backward, un-easily. There was something in his face told them this was no fooling. The cook broke first. He began to run, as the captain's count mounted. They were all moving by then, all except Larson, who stood his ground stubbornly, staring at his skipper with hard, contemptuous eyes. Of a tough crew, many of whom had blood on their records, Larson was the toughest.

"Ten!" finished Red Watson.

With a single step, he reached a fid and hurled it with a motion so swift that Larson had no time to dodge. The big Swede went down with a kind of dumb astonishment on his face, and the blood from his cut head oozed slow and dark across the deck in a widening pool.

"Take him below," the captain ordered. "Do what you can for him, and if anyone wants to complain about the grub, speak up. What, no grumblers?"

As Larson was dragged away, the captain said to Summerfield,

"I'm as tough as any man on this ship, Mister. I've been around. It won't do any harm for my officers to understand that, too."

He listened a moment to the wind, canting his head in that characteristic gesture, and as he listened, his bulldog jaw jutted out like an iron-bound cape on the rugged coastal line of his face. Slowly he turned until he was looking full into the wind, that fine strong trade which was whipping the blue Gulf Stream into white-trimmed, vivid life, and he spoke to the wind as though to a material being.

"You saw what I did to Larson? I do that to everything that crosses my

path. And I mean to take this ship to port regardless of hell and man."

TURNING to Summerfield again, he said:

"Send the carpenter aft. Tell him to bring a hatchet, a jimmy, and a cold chisel."

When the carpenter appeared on the quarter, Captain Watson pointed down the hatch to his own cabin.

"On the bulkhead," he said, "you will find a wooden medallion—the face of a black man. Remove it. If necessary, chop it off. But get it off!"

He then smiled at Summerfield with smirking satisfaction.

"A woman's face, now," he grinned, "would be all right. But who wants to stare at an ugly blackamoor first thing in the morning?"

The mate had seen the medallion. An odd bit of sculpture, the bas-relief of a man's face, sardonic of expression and with staring eyes. A bit creepy at that, Summerfield thought, but certainly it was not the face of a black man. The features were more incisive than his own, the dark hue of the thing apparently resulting from age and weathering.

"It looked to me like a white man's face," Summerfield commented.

Captain "Red" Watson's face, always a rich red, mottled swiftly at the contradiction.

"It's black," he grated. "Don't you suppose I know an African when I see one? I'll show you, my man. I'll show you it's black. Right here in the daylight."

He turned his back on Summerfield, stalked aft and for a moment inspected the patent log, spinning around steadily on the taff rail. The ship was making her southing, and the wake lay behind her almost as sharp and long as that of a steamer. The sun was steady and clear and hot, and the shadows of the ship's canvas danced in the fine weather on the sea, and the heart of the skipper should have been light.

Abruptly, however, he flung himself once more to a full facing of the wind, and his voice was like a bellow, rising from his big chest.

"I will see land again! Do you hear

me? I'm master of this ship, and, by heaven, I'm going to take her into port! Every shred and spar and rope of her. D'you understand?"

Scowling, he stamped forward to meet the carpenter who was just emerging from the cabin. In the man's hands were his hatchet, jimmy and chisel.

"Where's the medallion?"

The carpenter looked frightened.

"I couldn't get it off, sir. There's something funny about that thing, sir. It ain't wood, sir, but I don't think it's iron. I don't know what it is, sir."

He held out his tools helplessly. "I couldn't make any impression on it, sir."

Captain Watson snatched the implements from the man's grasp.

"By heaven, I'll get it down!"

He lunged down the ladder, and almost at once came the rising sound of violent, slogging blows which gave evidence of the fury of his attack on the medallion.

The mate and carpenter looked at each other, and the carpenter shook his head.

"I don't think he ought to do that," said the carpenter in an awed voice. "I think that medallion means something, Mr. Summerfield."

HE HAD hardly finished speaking when a sudden darkness fell over the sea. The ship heeled far over in the wild grasp of a violent squall. The sea, boiling suddenly gray and dirty white, swept aboard through the scuppers. In an instant the hatch covers became little islands in a storm of ugly water; the cook shrieked in terror as the unexpected combers flung pots and pans helter-skelter in the galley.

Summerfield flung himself on the wheel, aiding the wheelsman to ease her off before the onslaught, shouting all the while for all hands on deck. The groaning of the masts filled his ears, together with the pistol-like reports of bursting canvas and the screaming of the wind in the rigging, the shouting of the watch below leaping in panic from the fore-castle.

"This is the end," he thought, his

eyes filled with the confusion of ship and water. "We'll never have time to get her under control."

But as suddenly as the squall had fallen on the ship, it lifted. Dazed, Summerfield raised his face to the sunshine, to the fine warm sun, to the live blue sea. He wiped his eyes, as though to clear away a veil of impossible texture and hue, and there was Captain Watson standing in front of him.

"I never saw anything like it," panted the mate.

The captain nodded, and Summerfield observed with a start that his left hand was wrapped in a towel, and on the white surface of the towel, a disc of bright red was slowly widening.

"The hatchet slipped," Watson said. "Nearly took off my finger."

He regarded Summerfield quietly.

"No, I never saw anything like it, either," he went on. "The damn thing wouldn't give an inch."

"I meant the squall, sir," said the mate. "Look at the ship. Canvas half in ribbons, deck gear half over the side. Maybe half the crew gone, for all I know."

"All right," commented Red Watson. "You know what to do. I don't need to tell you. I've got to think."

And with that he turned his back on the mate and went aft to the taff rail, where he leaned moodily beside the spinning log, and stared silently into the smoky wake.

Night came, but Captain Watson refused to leave the deck. The watches changed under the stars, and the phosphorescent water ran luminous with its strange fire along the sides of the ship as she steadily plowed her way south. Every hour the wings of the trades carried her nearer to her destined port, and in all the seas of the world, no ship could have sailed more satisfyingly.

But when dawn came, and the sun once more floated up from the sea, Red Watson's face was strained, and his eyes gleamed redly in the brassy reflections from the water.

Fanchley, the second mate, a chunky young fellow who had been trained on a schoolship and could take a sight

with speed and precision, had the deck.

"A fine day, sir," said Fanchley. "Why don't you go below and caulk off a while?"

Watson regarded him with cold unfriendliness.

"When I feel the need for sleep, I'll sleep. But I intend from now on to sleep on deck, my man. I learned long ago to sleep on the topside in low latitudes. Only a fool or a boy will put up with the heat between decks."

"I never thought of that, sir," said Fanchley, reddening. "But I think the wind is keeping the ship pretty cool, so far."

"Wind? Wind? What do you know about wind?"

FOR a moment the captain stared at him with blazing eyes. Then a thin smile slipped over his hard red face.

"I know what to do with the wind, my lad. The way to beat the wind is to face it twenty-four hours a day. Never go below. Never look at the thing hanging above your bunk. Keep your eyes where they belong, and the wind will lose its voice. I know, my lad."

He smiled widely then, a cunning, smirking smile, the smile of a man who has won a point in a battle of wits.

"The wind hasn't spoken to me since last night. I've beaten it, my lad, beaten it badly. All it can do now is take us safely into port."

He began humming to himself, and young Fanchley, recognizing the tune, fitted the words in his mind:

Oh I never give a damn,
For I fear not hell nor man!
I'm Bloody Billy Bird,
The Buccaneer.

Captain Watson stopped and said with finality:

"There's a way to beat everything, my lad. Even powers from beyond life. I know, because I've just done it, with the wind."

He began again his humming, then abruptly stopped. For on the instant, there was no longer any wind at all.

The fine steady wind that had been urging the ship so staunchly, gave up suddenly and quit. The ship lost her way and wallowed in the swell. Her sails emitted a brief, exhausted flapping, then hung from the yards like rags on the arms of a scarecrow.

The captain turned his gaze from left to right in a sweep of the horizon, and what he saw caused his face to darken. For all around the ship, save only in that precise spot where she lay, the wind was fair and strong on the sea. The waves were losing their tops in white spindrift, and far off to port, the smoke of a steamer with the wind full astern, was whipping forward faster than the ship, so that it rippled like a dark plume in projection from her bow.

Captain Watson began solemnly and profoundly to curse.

"So that's your idea, is it?" he growled, his eyes blazing into the distance. "Well, I'm not beaten for a moment. By heaven! I'll wait you out. You hear? I'll lie here forever, before I'll go below. You blasted devil!"

Mr. Fanchley said timidly:

"According to the chart, sir, the Gulf Stream is running northeasterly at this spot at more than two knots an hour. We'll lose plenty I'm afraid, sir, if the wind is long in picking us up again."

The captain turned away, snarling something in the way of a reply over his shoulder. It sounded to Fanchley as though he said:

"We'll be under weigh again any minute. This calm is a freak."

But the sun moved across the meridian, and the ship still lay immobile on the sea. All her people came on deck to watch the wind stirring the sea everywhere save in the precise spot where she lay.

By mid afternoon, the crew began to whisper among themselves, all except Larson, the big Swede, who strode among them with his head in a white bandage. Larson, when he spoke, spoke so that all with ears could hear.

"Dis ship," he bellowed, "bane hell ship. Look! She no move. We dead for sure."

Captain Watson, leaning stolidly on the quarter railing, heard him. Then his big jaw clicked.

"Mr. Summerfield," he shouted. "Mr. Fanchley!"

The two mates snapped to attention. "Mr. Summerfield, take the starboard quarter lifeboat, and Mr. Fanchley, you take the port boat and call out the boat crews. We'll carry lines to the forward towing bits, and tow her."

"I don't think we can do it, Captain," Summerfield said. "She's a big ship, heavily loaded, and in a two-knot current."

"If you don't do it," Captain Watson said coldly, "there'll be no supper tonight for any of you, officers or men."

So the boat crews manned the boats and lowered them, but when they let go the falls, the current picked up the boats and whipped them astern of the ship despite all they could do.

For a solid hour the men sweated and panted at the oars, and their only progress was to relieve a little the slack on the lines which still connected them with the ship.

AT SUNSET, the captain permitted them to return on board.

"Didn't I told you?" bellowed Larson. "Dis bane hell ship all right. We good like dead, sure."

Captain Watson said nothing at all, just stared at them with hard, red eyes. However, as the short twilight fell, darkening swiftly, he said to Summerfield:

"Either I go below again to face that damnable thing on my bulkhead, or the ship and all in her are fated to rot here on the sea. So I'm going below, my man, but I'm not finished yet. Oh, no, there's a trick or two yet to be played."

He dropped down the hatch, and five minutes later the wind poured inboard in a tumbling flood, filled the sails in an instant. The water turned white in the dusk under the vessel's forefoot, the sudden roil of the wake danced in a whirl of phosphorescent fires, and the ship, with an enormous sigh, resumed her fast progress.

That night, during the mid-watch,

there was a fire in Captain Watson's cabin. The man at the wheel, standing his lonely silent watch, suddenly saw the stars mistily through a haze of smoke, and coughed with the odor of burning wood sharp in his nostrils. A moment later he had filled the night with the clangor of the ship's bell, and the bellow of his voice, spreading the alarm. The men tumbled out of their bunks half-dressed, clumsy with sleep, falling over each other in the darkness as they ran for their stations.

The captain met them at the doorway to his cabin. The light from the swinging saloon lamp showed him to be fully dressed, but his stubborn red hair was badly singed, and his eyebrows and lashes had been burned almost entirely off.

"It's out, you swabs," he greeted them, his big frame blocking the doorway. "The whole blasted ship would burn up if I waited for you to put out a fire. Get back to your stations, all of you. And hereafter when I upset a lantern, see that you're on hand a damn sight quicker than this time. Next time it takes you an hour to show up, I'll break every bloomin' head in the bunch."

Next morning the carpenter went to the cabin to repair the damage. He found the bulkhead at the foot of the captain's bunk to be badly charred, but the old medallion, around which the fire seemed to have burned most fiercely, showed no damage whatever and clung to the bulkhead as securely as ever.

FROM that night, Captain Watson began to change in temperament rapidly, and not for the better. Always quick-tempered and irascible, he grew almost ferocious. Talking with him was nearly impossible. He seemed to sink into himself, and spent his time on deck pacing interminably, his head canted to the side, hearing voices in the wind.

"I think he's losing his mind," said Fanchley to the first mate.

Summerfield, being neglected by his skipper, relapsed to his bottle. He became more and more muddled as he stood his watches, to the extent that Fanchley began to fear for the ship

when Summerfield had the deck. The crew sneered at the first mate openly.

"I never saw such a ship," he sniveled on Fanchley's shoulder. "The captain's crazy, always hearing things in the wind. And the crew—the crew, boy, it's made up of gutter-scum and pirates, who have no respect for years or authority."

He wiped his bulbous nose on his sleeve and went below for another drink. In the end, it had to happen.

Summerfield put his arm around Captain Watson's shoulder and tolled off his troubles maudlinly. Red Watson measured him carefully, and the crack of his big fist on the mate's jaw was heard as far forward as the mainmast.

"Now, my man," said the captain, stirring the prostrate figure with his foot. "If you're not already dead, let this be a lesson to you. I'll have no damned drunken officer on my ship."

He wheeled to face the wind.

"It is my ship," he shouted into the wind. "You hear? My ship! And you're not going to take it from me, either."

They carried Summerfield below, his jaw broken, and young Fanchley found his duties doubled. He called Hogan the boatswain and said:

"Hogan, you'll have to act as a mate for the remainder of this cruise. And, things being as they are, that means standing watch and watch for the two of us. Four hours on, four hours off. It'll be pretty hard on us, but there's nothing else for us."

"Aye, Mr. Fanchley. But what about the captain?" Hogan peered at the burly, sullen figure warily out of the corner of his eye. "What'll the captain say, Mr. Fanchley, about me acting as a mate?"

"To hell with what the captain says, Hogan. Somebody's got to navigate the ship. I've logged both him and Mr. Summerfield as being too ill for duty. That leaves me in command."

But things were not so easily settled as that. On the following day, during the morning watch, Captain Watson came storming on deck looking for Fanchley.

"What the hell do you mean, Mister, taking over my ship? By God!

you're under arrest. For mutiny, d'you hear? For mutiny. I'll show you who's master of this ship. Bos'un!" he bellowed. "Bos'un! I'm going to put you in irons, Mister. I'll show you."

He glared at Fanchley, his blood-shot eyes wild and eerie beneath their lashless lids and smooth brows. He resembled some strange hairless, inhuman doll.

"I'm working for the safety of the ship, sir," Fanchley said quietly. "You won't put me in irons, and you won't put me under arrest. Somebody's got to stand the watches. And you know it."

HE STOPPED abruptly as the captain walked away from him, going to the taffrail to shake his fist into the wind.

"You put him up to it. You did it, you devil from hell! But I'll show you! I'll take this ship into Matthewtown, and no man alive or dead will stop me. You hear me?"

Hogan, half-asleep and frightened, appeared on deck in answer to the captain's call. Watson looked at him without seeing him, then strode past him and went down the companion to his cabin, his red face working, his mouth muttering profound curses.

Almost immediately there came a shriek from below, muffled, broken, but unmistakably the voice of a man in a panic.

Fanchley stiffened.

"Take the deck, Hogan. He's murdering Summerfield."

Snatching up a fid, Fanchley flung himself down the cabin hatch. Watson met him at the doorway to Summerfield's cabin, his great bearlike figure and turbulent red hair silhouetted against the faint glow from the compartment behind him. Fanchley raised the fid and swung with all his strength. He thought he had hit hard enough to kill any man, but Watson bore down on him without any apparent damage, knocked him flat with a single lurch of his big shoulders, and continued on to his own quarters.

Fanchley got to his feet, a little breathless, and went in to Summerfield. The first mate was lying on the

deck of his cabin, quite alive, and mumbling in mixed fear and indignation.

"He tried to choke me, the damned murderer," he whispered through the bandages that held his broken jaw together. "Wanted to know where I kept my whiskey, wanted it for himself, the dirty hypocrite."

Back on deck, Fanchley said to Hogan:

"I think we'd better put him in irons before he kills somebody."

Hogan nodded, and Fanchley went below and got two big revolvers, one of which he gave to the boatswain.

"Shoot if you must," he said grimly. "Otherwise, positively not."

However, to put a man in irons, he must first be caught. And Captain Red Watson seemed to have disappeared. Alternately, Fanchley and Hogan searched the ship from stem to stern, their weapons in their hands. The mad skipper was not to be found.

The day passed with the ship fleeing steadily to the southward, a thing alive in a perfect world of sky and water. In the second dog watch, the appearance of things changed. The wind fell off to nothingness, and in the southeastern sky lightning began to flicker like brilliant streamers waving from a Maypole.

Fanchley said to Hogan:

"We're in for a blow. I wish I knew if it were an honest blow, or another of those damn things the captain and his crazy medallion seem to inspire."

Darkness moved on the ship like a curtain, the great black thunderheads of the storm rolling across the stars one by one. The lightning frolicked in alternate white and purple, and the thunder rumbled and echoed between the dark veil and the silent sea.

"I'll take a turn around the ship and see that everything's fast, sir," said Hogan, "And if you think it advisable, I'll begin taking in the tops'ls."

Fanchley nodded.

"Keep all hands standing by, Hogan."

FANCHLEY was wondering where the captain was all this time. Had he killed himself by leaping over the side, to drown in the darkness, or was

he carrying on his struggle with forces from beyond life in some obscure bilge of the ship? Would it be necessary to find him and make of him some sort of occult sacrifice in order to preserve the safety of all hands?

He looked again at the approaching storm, and the heart of young Fanchley trembled with misgivings. What a way, he thought, to die, to be the innocent bystander caught in a struggle he did not understand, and to vanish forever in a stormy sea, the victim of an unearthly madness.

And then, suddenly, Captain Watson was standing beside him.

"Don't shoot," said Watson moodily. "Keep your hands clean, lad, I'll be dead presently, anyway."

He leaned dejectedly against the rail, that great, red-haired brute of a man, and his figure slumped as though every bone in his body had become soft. Ruin, utter demoralization, shrieked from every line of him.

"You think I'm insane, lad," he said, talking over his shoulder. "Maybe I am. But, Fanchley, I've been through a thousand hells since I came aboard this ship. You know that head, fastened by the Devil to my bulkhead? It grins at me eternally, and its eyes are of fire. It is the head of man severed from the shoulders. I can hear the blood dripping, Fanchley, dripping like a warm rain, dripping and clotting, dripping and clotting. And when I look at my hands they are red, too, all red with the blood of a murdered man."

He stopped momentarily and shuddered, his frame shaking so violently with the chill, that Fanchley could hear his teeth clicking in the silence of the thunder.

"No wonder I am covered with blood, Fanchley. How it spurted! It was like red water from a burst hose. I never believed he had so much blood in him."

"Pull yourself together, sir," Fanchley soothed. "Your imagination is running away from you."

Watson shook his head wearily.

"No, lad. It's all true. It all happened. But it was very long ago. Twenty-five years or more. I thought it was all forgotten. And now, out of

the past, that head appears, his head, to make me pay, and it grins while I writhe."

The lightning by this time had become continuous, a kaleidoscopic weaving of colorful darts of vicious flame such as Fanchley had never witnessed before. It illuminated the sea and the ship, and the staring, agonized face of Red Watson in every uncanny detail. The ship lay on the black sea like a fragment of wood on a pool of ink, and the ends of the bare yards and masts stood like gibbet-fingers, empty and hungering, against the flaming sky.

The man at the wheel called out, his white face strained in the dancing lights:

"She has no way, sir. The wheel is dead."

"Hold her as she is," Fanchley shouted. "The squall will be down on us any moment now."

"No, Fanchley," said Captain Watson, his great bellowing voice subdued, "the squall will not be down on us any minute. It will not be down on the ship until I die. He is coming for me, lad. He is coming for me tonight, on the storm. When you first feel the wind, you will know I'm dead."

THE second mate shivered.

"Captain, you're overwrought," he said shakily. And thought grimly that with the elements as they were, the captain's words would soon have him in the same condition. "You'd better go below, sir. I can handle the ship."

"This morning," went on Red Watson dully, "just before daybreak, as I lay in my bunk with my face in the pillow to keep out the sight of that horrible head, it spoke to me. 'I shall fall from this bulkhead within a day', it said, 'and my fall shall be the signal of your death.'"

"Nonsense," said Fanchley. "You dreamed it. Inanimate things don't talk."

The captain wheeled on him with a recrudescence of his usual temper.

"Are you trying to tell me I am hearing things? Don't be a fool, my man. D'you suppose I don't know

voices when I hear them? Hasn't the wind been telling me of my death for days?"

Fanchley shrugged. There seemed nothing to say. Also he was becoming more and more disturbed by the storm. It seemed to be settling down on the ship, as though finding in that little bark a target for its hurtling spears of lightning. He imagined that the flashes were darting into the black sea, throwing up hissing waterspouts in a white fence around the vessel, a fence that was converging steadily on the doomed craft. Yard and mast tips were glowing weirdly, appearing to be sheathed in pale pompoms of blue light.

He told himself, "This is only St. Elmo's fire you are seeing. Only superstitious sailors are afraid of St. Elmo's fire. Buck up, Fanchley."

His knees felt strangely weak. And there was a coldness running over his entire body.

It was at that moment Watson suddenly stood up, and clutched the second mate by the shoulder.

"He's coming. He's coming. Do you hear him? He's calling me, Fanchley. He's saying: 'Watson! Red Watson!'"

"I hear nothing but the thunder, Captain. Let go my shoulder, sir. You are breaking my bones."

The fingers of the mad skipper bit even deeper.

"Aye. He has fallen from the bulkhead. Did you hear the crash as he fell, Fanchley?"

"I tell you I hear nothing, sir. Nothing but the thunder."

"He is coming closer," Watson whispered, crouching closer to the trembling mate. "The air is chilled with the presence of the dead, and I can smell the fresh blood on his beard."

"It is the coolness of the coming storm, and the smell is only the salty smell of the sea. Let me go, Captain. Let me go."

"See!" Watson cried sharply, "Here he comes," and he pointed over Fanchley's shoulder. "Look, Fanchley! There he is. I didn't dream it Fanchley. He has come to kill me."

As Fanchley turned his head, peal

after peal of wild laughter burst from the lips of Red Watson.

"But he won't kill me, Fanchley. He won't. Because I know how to cheat him even now, the devil."

Pushing the mate from him, he backed up to the rail, all the while pouring out that wild insane laughter across the waters.

IN THAT moment the storm fell inexplicably silent. Not so much as a thread of light showed across the black sky, no whisper of thunder disturbed the profound stillness of the air. The ship lay as before, immobile and still on the invisible sea; Fanchley had the sensation of being alone in the middle of an illimitable void.

Then he saw something moving across the deck, something faint and luminous, like a ball of St. Elmo's fire falling from the yards. Through the darkness it moved, silent and uniform, traveling steadily at the pace of a slow walk, and suspended at the height of a tall man's head. It passed the paralyzed Fanchley almost within reach and once again he sought to regain sanity by saying over and over again: "It's St. Elmo's fire! It's St. Elmo's fire."

The pale luminous globe moved straight toward Captain Watson. Without turning his face from the pale radiance, the skipper began climbing the rail. The light illumined his ghastly face, his bulging eyes. Fanchley saw him as clearly in that moment as though it were daylight, saw his mouth drop open, his bull-dog jaw jut forward. The bellow that burst from his big throat echoed through the silence of the night.

"I'll cheat-you yet, you devil!"

With that he poised on the rail for a single instant, laughing his wild laugh. Then he stepped backward into space.

His laughter ending abruptly as the sea received him.

Simultaneously the storm broke, and as he heard the wind shrieking in the rigging, Fanchley cried aloud:

"Captain Watson is dead!"

Later, in going through Captain Watson's effects, Fanchley found a

(Concluded on page 129)