

**УИЛЪЯМ ХОУП
ХОДЖСОН**

THE GHOST PIRATES

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The Ghost Pirates

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William Hope Hodgson

The Ghost Pirates

*"Strange as the glimmer of the ghastly light That shines from some vast
crest of wave at night."*

To Mary Whalley

*"Olden memories that shine against death's night—
Quiet stars of sweet enchantments,
That are seen In Life's lost distances..."*

The World of Dreams

Author's Preface

This book forms the last of three. The first published was "*The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*"; the second, "*The House on the Borderland*"; this, the third, completes what, perhaps, may be termed a trilogy; for, though very different in scope, each of the three books deals with certain conceptions that have an elemental kinship. With this book, the author believes that he closes the door, so far as he is concerned, on a particular phase of constructive thought.

The Hell O! O! Chaunty

Chaunty Man . . . Man the capstan, bullies!
Men Ha!-o-o! Ha!-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . . Capstan-bars, you tarry souls!
Men Ha!-o-o! Ha!-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . . Take a turn!
Men Ha!-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . . Stand by to fleet!
Men Ha!-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . . Stand by to surge!
Men Ha!-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . . Ha!—o-o-o-o!
Men TRAMP!
And away we go!
Chaunty Man . . . Hark to the tramp of the
bearded shellbacks!
Men Hush!
O hear 'em tramp!
Chaunty Man . . . Tramping, stamping—
treading, vamping,
While the cable
comes in ramping.
Men Hark!
O hear 'em stamp!
Chaunty Man . . . Surge when it rides!
Surge when it rides!
Round-o-o-o
handsome as it slacks!
Men Ha!-o-o-o-o!
hear 'em ramp!
Ha!-oo-o-o!
hear 'em stamp!
Ha!-o-o-o-o-oo!
Ha!-o-o-o-o-o-o!
Chorus They're shouting now; oh! hear 'em
A-bellow as they stamp:—
Ha!-o-o-o! Ha!-o-o-o!

Ha!-o-o-o!
A-shouting as they tramp!
Chaunty Man . . O hark to the haunting chorus
of the capstan and the bars!
Chaunty-o-o-o
and rattle crash—
Bash against the stars!
Men Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Tramp and go!
Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . Hear the pawls a-ranting: with
the bearded men a-chaunting;
While the brazen dome above 'em
Bellows back the 'bars.'
Men Hear and hark!
O hear 'em!
Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . Hurling songs towards the
heavens—!
Men Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . Hush! O hear 'em!
Hark! O hear 'em!
Hurling oaths among their spars!
Men Hark! O hear 'em!
Hush! O hear 'em!
Chaunty Man . . Tramping round between the
bars!
Chorus They're shouting now; oh! hear
A-bellow as they stamp:—
Ha-a!-o-o-o-o! Ha-a!-o-o-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o-o-o!
A-shouting as they tramp!
Chaunty Man . . O do you hear the
capstan-chaunty!
Thunder round the pawls!
Men Click a-clack,
a-clatter
Surge!
And scatter bawls!
Chaunty Man . . Click-a-clack, my bonny boys,
while it comes in handsome!
Men Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Hear 'em clack!
Chaunty Man . . Ha-a!-o-o-o! Click-a-clack!
Men Hush! O hear 'em pant!
Hark! O hear 'em rant!

Chaunty Man . . Click, a-clitter, clicker-clack.
Men Ha-a!-o-o!
Tramp and go!
Chaunty Man . . Surge! And keep away the slack!
Men Ha-a!-o-o!
Away the slack:
Ha-a!-o-o!
Click-a-clack
Chaunty Man . . Bustle now each jolly Jack.
Surging easy! Surging e-a-s-y!!
Men Ha-a!-o-o!
Surging easy
Chaunty Man . . Click-a-clatter—
Surge; and steady!
Man the stopper there!
All ready?
Men Ha-a!-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . Click-a-clack, my bouncing boys:
Men Ha-a!-o-o!
Tramp and go!
Chaunty Man . . Lift the pawls, and come back
easy.
Men Ha-a!-o-o!
Steady-o-o-o-o!
Chaunty Man . . Vast the chaunty!
Vast the capstan!
Drop the pawls! Be-l-a-y!
Chorus Ha-a!-o-o! Unship the bars!
Ha-a!-o-o! Tramp and go!
Ha-a!-o-o! Shoulder bars!
Ha-a!-o-o! And away we blow!
Ha-a!-o-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o-o-o!
Ha-a!-o-o-o-o-o!

I

The Figure Out of the Sea

He began without any circumlocution.

I joined the *Mortzestus* in 'Frisco. I heard before I signed on, that there were some funny yarns floating round about her; but I was pretty nearly on the beach, and too jolly anxious to get away, to worry about trifles. Besides, by all accounts, she was right enough so far as grub and treatment went. When I asked fellows to give it a name, they generally could not. All they could tell me, was that she was unlucky, and made thundering long passages, and had no more than a fair share of dirty weather. Also, that she had twice had the sticks blown out of her, and her cargo shifted. Besides all these, a heap of other things that might happen to any packet, and would not be comfortable to run into. Still, they were the ordinary things, and I was willing enough to risk them, to get home. All the same, if I had been given the chance, I should have shipped in some other vessel as a matter of preference.

When I took my bag down, I found that they had signed on the rest of the crowd. You see, the "home lot" cleared out when they got into 'Frisco, that is, all except one young fellow, a cockney, who had stuck by the ship in port. He told me afterwards, when I got to know him, that he intended to draw a pay-day out of her, whether any one else did, or not.

The first night I was in her, I found that it was common talk among the other fellows, that there was something queer about the ship. They spoke of her as if it were an accepted fact that she was haunted; yet they all treated the matter as a joke; all, that is, except the young cockney—Williams—who, instead of laughing at their jests on the subject, seemed to take the whole matter seriously.

This made me rather curious. I began to wonder whether there was, after all, some truth underlying the vague stories I had heard; and I took the first opportunity to ask him whether he had any reasons for believing that there was anything in the yarns about the ship.

At first he was inclined to be a bit offish; but, presently, he came round, and told me that he did not know of any particular incident which could be called unusual in the sense in which I meant. Yet that, at the same time, there were lots of little things which, if you put them together, made you think a bit. For instance, she always made such long passages and had so much dirty weather—nothing but that and calms and head winds. Then, other things happened; sails that he knew, himself, had been properly stowed, were always blowing adrift *at night*. And then he said a thing that surprised me.

"There's too many bloomin' shadders about this 'ere packet; they gets onter yer nerves like nothin' as ever I seen before in me nat'ral."

He blurted it all out in a heap, and I turned round and looked at him.

"Too many shadows!" I said. "What on earth do you mean?" But he refused to explain himself or tell me anything further—just shook his head, stupidly, when I questioned him. He seemed to have taken a sudden, sulky fit. I felt certain that he was acting dense, purposely. I believe the truth of the matter is that he was, in a way, ashamed of having let himself go like he had, in speaking out his thoughts about "shadders." That type of man may think things at times; but he doesn't often put them into words. Anyhow, I saw it was no use asking any further questions; so I let the matter drop there. Yet, for several days afterwards, I caught myself wondering, at times, what the fellow had meant by "shadders."

We left 'Frisco next day, with a fine, fair wind, that seemed a bit like putting the stopper on the yarns I had heard about the ship's ill luck. And yet—

He hesitated a moment, and then went on again.

For the first couple of weeks out, nothing unusual happened, and the wind still held fair. I began to feel that I had been rather lucky, after all, in the packet into which I had been shunted. Most of the other fellows gave her a good name, and there was a pretty general opinion growing among the crowd, that it was all a silly yarn about her being haunted. And then, just when I was settling down to things, something happened that opened my eyes no end.

It was in the eight to twelve watch, and I was sitting on the steps, on the starboard side, leading up to the fo'cas'le head. The night was fine and there was a splendid moon. Away aft, I heard the timekeeper strike four bells, and the look-out, an old fellow named Jaskett, answered him. As he let go the bell lanyard, he caught sight of me, where I sat quietly, smoking. He leant over the rail, and looked down at me.

"That you, Jessop?" he asked.

"I believe it is," I replied.

"We'd 'ave our gran'mothers an' all the rest of our petticoated relash'ns comin' to sea, if 'twere always like this," he remarked, reflectively—indicating, with a sweep of his pipe and hand, the calmness of the sea and sky.

I saw no reason for denying that, and he continued:

"If this ole packet is 'aunted, as some on 'em seems to think, well all as I can say is, let me 'ave the luck to tumble across another of the same sort. Good grub, an' duff fer Sundays, an' a decent crowd of 'em aft, an' everythin' comfortable like, so as yer can feel yer knows where yer are. As fer 'er bein' 'aunted, that's all 'ellish nonsense. I've comed 'cross lots of 'em before as was said to be 'aunted, an' so some on 'em was; but 'twasn't with ghostesses. One packet I was in, they was that bad yer couldn't sleep a wink in yer watch below, until yer'd 'ad every stitch out yer bunk an' 'ad a reg'lar 'unt. Sometimes—" At that moment, the relief, one of the ordinary seamen, went up the other ladder on to the fo'cas'le head, and the old chap turned to ask him "Why the 'ell" he'd not relieved him a bit smarter. The ordinary made some reply; but what it was, I did not catch; for, abruptly, away aft, my rather sleepy gaze had lighted on something altogether extraordinary and outrageous. It was nothing less than the form of a man stepping inboard over the starboard rail, a little abaft the main rigging. I stood up, and caught at the handrail, and stared.

Behind me, someone spoke. It was the look-out, who had come down off the fo'cas'le head, on his way aft to report the name of his relief to the second mate.

"What is it, mate?" he asked, curiously, seeing my intent attitude.

The thing, whatever it was, had disappeared into the shadows on the lee side of the deck.

"Nothing!" I replied, shortly; for I was too bewildered then, at what my eyes had just shown me, to say any more. I wanted to think.

The old shellback glanced at me; but only muttered something, and went on his way aft.

For a minute, perhaps, I stood there, watching; but could see nothing. Then I walked slowly aft, as far as the after end of the deck house. From there, I could see most of the main deck; but nothing showed, except, of course, the moving shadows of the ropes and spars and sails, as they swung to and fro in the moonlight.

The old chap who had just come off the look-out, had returned forrard again, and I was alone on that part of the deck. And then, all at once, as I stood peering into the shadows to leeward, I remembered what Williams had said about there being too many "shadders." I had been puzzled to understand his real meaning, then. I had no difficulty *now*. There *were* too many shadows. Yet, shadows or no shadows, I realised that for my own peace of mind, I must settle, once and for all, whether the thing I had seemed to see stepping aboard out of the ocean, had been a reality, or simply a phantom, as you might say, of my imagination. My reason said it was nothing more than imagination, a rapid dream—I must have dozed; but something deeper than reason told me that this was not so. I put it to the test, and went straight in amongst the shadows— There was nothing.

I grew bolder. My common sense told me I must have fancied it all. I walked over to the mainmast, and looked behind the pinrail that partly surrounded it, and down into the shadow of the pumps; but here again was nothing. Then I went in under the break of the poop. It was darker under there than out on deck. I looked up both sides of the deck, and saw that they were bare of anything such as I looked for. The assurance was comforting. I glanced at the poop ladders, and remembered that nothing could have gone up there, without the Second Mate or the Time-keeper seeing it. Then I leant my back up against the bulkshead, and thought the whole matter over, rapidly, sucking at my pipe, and keeping my glance about the deck. I concluded my think, and said "No!" out loud. Then something occurred to me, and I said "Unless—" and went over to the starboard bulwarks, and looked over and down into the sea; but there was nothing but sea; and so I turned and made my way forrard. My common sense had triumphed, and I was convinced that my imagination had been playing tricks with me.

I reached the door on the portside, leading into the fo'cas'le, and was about to enter, when something made me look behind. As I did so, I had a shaker. Away aft, a dim, shadowy form stood in the wake of a swaying belt of moonlight, that swept the deck a bit abaft the main-mast.

It was the same figure that I had just been attributing to my fancy. I will admit that I felt more than startled; I was quite a bit frightened. I was convinced now that it was no mere imaginary thing. It was a human figure. And yet, with the flicker of the moonlight and the shadows chasing over it, I was unable to say more than that. Then, as I stood there, irresolute and funky, I got the thought that someone was acting the goat; though for what reason or purpose, I never stopped to consider. I was glad of any suggestion that my common sense assured me was not impossible; and, for the moment, I felt quite relieved. That side to the question had not presented itself to me before. I began to pluck up courage. I accused myself of getting fanciful; otherwise I should have tumbled to it earlier. And then, funnily enough, in spite of all my reasoning, I was still afraid of going aft to discover who that was, standing on the lee side of the maindeck. Yet I felt that if I shirked it, I was only fit to be dumped overboard; and so I went, though not with any great speed, as you can imagine.

I had gone half the distance, and still the figure remained there, motionless and silent—the moonlight and the shadows playing over it with each roll of the ship. I think I tried to be surprised. If it were one of the fellows playing the fool, he must have heard me coming, and why didn't he scoot while he had the chance? And where could he have hidden himself, before? All these things, I asked myself, in a rush, with a queer mixture of doubt and belief; and, you know, in the meantime, I was drawing nearer. I had passed the house, and was not twelve paces distant; when, abruptly, the silent figure made three quick strides to the port rail, and *climbed over it into the sea*.

I rushed to the side, and stared over; but nothing met my gaze, except the shadow of the ship, sweeping over the moonlit sea.

How long I stared down blankly into the water, it would be impossible to say; certainly for a good minute. I felt blank—just horribly blank. It was such a beastly confirmation of the *unnaturalness* of the thing I had concluded to be only a sort of brain fancy. I seemed, for that little time, deprived, you know, of the power of coherent thought. I suppose I was dazed—mentally stunned, in a way.

As I have said, a minute or so must have gone, while I had been staring into the dark of the water under the ship's side. Then, I came suddenly to my ordinary self. The Second Mate was singing out: "Lee fore brace."

I went to the braces, like a chap in a dream.

II

What Tammy the 'Prentice Saw

The next morning, in my watch below, I had a look at the places where that strange thing had come aboard, and left the ship; but I found nothing unusual, and no clue to help me to understand the mystery of the strange man.

For several days after that, all went quietly; though I prowled about the decks at night, trying to discover anything fresh that might tend to throw some light on the matter. I was careful to say nothing to any one about the thing I had seen. In any case, I felt sure I should only have been laughed at.

Several nights passed away in this manner, and I was no nearer to an understanding of the affair. And then, in the middle watch, something happened.

It was my wheel. Tammy, one of the first voyage 'prentices, was keeping time—walking up and down the lee side of the poop. The Second Mate was forrard, leaning over the break of the poop, smoking. The weather still continued fine, and the moon, though declining, was sufficiently powerful to make every detail about the poop, stand out distinctly. Three bells had gone, and I'll admit I was feeling sleepy. Indeed, I believe I must have dozed, for the old packet steered very easily, and there was precious little to do, beyond giving her an odd spoke now and again. And then, all at once, it seemed to me that I heard someone calling my name, softly. I could not be certain; and first I glanced forrard to where the Second stood, smoking, and from him, I looked into the binnacle. The ship's head was right on her course, and I felt easier. Then, suddenly, I heard it again. There was no doubt about it this time, and I glanced to leeward. There I saw Tammy reaching over the steering gear, his hand out, in the act of trying to touch my arm. I was about to ask him what the devil he wanted, when he held up his finger for silence, and pointed forrard along the lee side of the poop. In the dim light, his face showed palely, and he seemed much agitated. For a few seconds, I stared in the direction he indicated, but could see nothing.

"What is it?" I asked in an undertone, after a couple of moments' further ineffectual peering. "I can't see anything."

"H'sh!" he muttered, hoarsely, without looking in my direction. Then, all at once, with a quick little gasp, he sprang across the wheel-box, and stood beside me, trembling. His gaze appeared to follow the movements of something I could not see.

I must say that I was startled. His movement had shown such terror; and the way he stared to leeward made me think he saw something uncanny.

"What the deuce is up with you?" I asked, sharply. And then I remembered the Second Mate. I glanced forrard to where he lounged. His back was still towards us, and he had not seen Tammy. Then I turned to the boy.

"For goodness sake, get to looard before the Second sees you!" I said. "If you want to say anything, say it across the wheel-box. You've been dreaming."

Even as I spoke, the little beggar caught at my sleeve with one hand; and, pointing across to the log-reel with the other, screamed: "He's coming! He's coming—" At this instant, the Second Mate came running aft, singing out to know what was the matter. Then, suddenly, crouching under the rail near the log-reel, I saw something that looked like a man; but so hazy and unreal, that I could scarcely say I saw anything. Yet, like a flash, my thoughts ripped back to the silent figure I had seen in the flicker of the moonlight, a week earlier.

The Second Mate reached me, and I pointed, dumbly; and yet, as I did so, it was with the knowledge that *he* would not be able to see what I saw. (Queer, wasn't it?) And then, almost in a breath, I lost sight of the thing, and became aware that Tammy was hugging my knees.

The Second continued to stare at the log-reel for a brief instant; then he turned to me, with a sneer.

"Been asleep, the pair of you, I suppose!" Then, without waiting for my denial, he told Tammy to go to hell out of it and stop his noise, or he'd boot him off the poop.

After that, he walked forward to the break of the poop, and lit his pipe, again—walking forward and aft every few minutes, and eyeing me, at times, I thought, with a strange, half-doubtful, half-puzzled look.

Later, as soon as I was relieved, I hurried down to the 'Prentice's berth. I was anxious to speak to Tammy. There were a dozen questions that worried me, and I was in doubt what I ought to do. I found him crouched on a sea-chest, his knees up to his chin, and his gaze fixed on the doorway, with a frightened stare. I put my head into the berth, and he gave a gasp; then he saw who it was, and his face relaxed something of its strained expression.

He said: "Come in," in a low voice, which he tried to steady; and I stepped over the wash-board, and sat down on a chest, facing him.

"What was *it*?" he asked; putting his feet down on to the deck, and leaning forward. "For God's sake, tell me what it was!"

His voice had risen, and I put up my hand to warn him.

"H'sh!" I said. "You'll wake the other fellows."

He repeated his question, but in a lower tone. I hesitated, before answering him. I felt, all at once, that it might be better to deny all knowledge—to say I hadn't seen anything unusual. I thought quickly, and made answer on the turn of the moment.

"What was *what*?" I said. "That's just the thing I've come to ask you. A pretty pair of fools you made of the two of us up on the poop just now, with your hysterical tomfoolery."

I concluded my remark in a tone of anger.

"I didn't!" he answered, in a passionate whisper. "You know I didn't. You know *you* saw it yourself. You pointed it out to the Second Mate. I saw you."

The little beggar was nearly crying between fear, and vexation at my assumed unbelief.

"Rot!" I replied. "You know jolly well you were sleeping in your time-keeping. You dreamed something and woke up suddenly. You were off your chump."

I was determined to reassure him, if possible; though, goodness! I wanted assurance myself. If he had known of that other thing, I had seen down on the maindeck, what then?

"I wasn't asleep, any more than you were," he said, bitterly. "And you know it. You're just fooling me. The ship's haunted."

"What!" I said, sharply.

"She's haunted," he said, again. "She's haunted."

"Who says so?" I inquired, in a tone of unbelief.

"I do! And you *know* it. Everybody knows it; but they don't more than half believe it ... I didn't, until tonight."

"Damned rot!" I answered. "That's all a blooming old shellback's yarn.

She's no more haunted than I am."

"It's not damned rot," he replied, totally unconvinced. "And it's not an old shellback's yarn ... Why won't you say you saw it?" he cried, growing almost tearfully excited, and raising his voice again.

I warned him not to wake the sleepers.

"Why won't you say that you saw it?" he repeated.

I got up from the chest, and went towards the door.

"You're a young idiot!" I said. "And I should advise you not to go gassing about like this, round the decks. Take my tip, and turn-in and get a sleep. You're talking dotty. Tomorrow you'll perhaps feel what an unholy ass you've made of yourself."

I stepped over the washboard, and left him. I believe he followed me to the door to say something further; but I was half-way forward by then.

For the next couple of days, I avoided him as much as possible, taking care never to let him catch me alone. I was determined, if possible, to convince him that he had been mistaken in supposing that he had seen anything that night. Yet, after all, it was little enough use, as you will soon see. For, on the night of the second day, there was a further extraordinary development, that made denial on my part useless.

III

The Man up the Main

It occurred in the first watch, just after six bells. I was forward, sitting on the fore-hatch. No one was about the maindeck. The night was exceedingly fine; and the wind had dropped away almost to nothing, so that the ship was very quiet.

Suddenly, I heard the Second Mate's voice—

"In the main-rigging, there! Who's that going aloft?"

I sat up on the hatch, and listened. There succeeded an intense silence.

Then the Second's voice came again. He was evidently getting wild.

"Do you damn well hear me? What the hell are you doing up there? Come down!"

I rose to my feet, and walked up to wind'ard. From there, I could see the break of the poop. The Second Mate was standing by the starboard ladder. He appeared to be looking up at something that was hidden from me by the topsails. As I stared, he broke out again:

"Hell and damnation, you blasted sojer, come down when I tell you!"

He stamped on the poop, and repeated his order, savagely. But there was no answer. I started to walk aft. What had happened? Who had gone aloft? Who would be fool enough to go, without being told? And then, all at once, a thought came to me. The figure Tammy and I had seen. Had the Second Mate seen something—someone? I hurried on, and then stopped, suddenly. In the same moment there came the shrill blast of the Second's whistle; he was whistling for the watch, and I turned and ran to the fo'cas'le to rouse them out. Another minute, and I was hurrying aft with them to see what was wanted.

His voice met us half-way:

"Up the main some of you, smartly now, and find out who that damned fool is up there. See what mischief he's up to."

"i, i, Sir," several of the men sung out, and a couple jumped into the weather rigging. I joined them, and the rest were proceeding to follow; but the Second shouted for some to go up to leeward—in case the fellow tried to get down that side.

As I followed the other two aloft, I heard the Second Mate tell Tammy, whose time-keeping it was, to get down on to the maindeck with the other 'prentice, and keep an eye on the fore and aft stays.

"He may try down one of them if he's cornered," I heard him explain. "If you see anything, just sing out for me, right away."

Tammy hesitated.

"Well?" said the Second Mate, sharply.

"Nothing, Sir," said Tammy, and went down on to the maindeck.

The first man to wind'ard had reached the futtock shrouds; his head was above the top, and he was taking a preliminary look, before venturing higher.

"See anythin', Jock?" asked Plummer, the man next above me.

"Na'!" said Jock, tersely, and climbed over the top, and so disappeared from my sight.

The fellow ahead of me, followed. He reached the futtock rigging, and stopped to expectorate. I was close at his heels, and he looked down to me.

"What's up, anyway?" he said. "What's 'e seen? 'oo're we chasin' after?"

I said I didn't know, and he swung up into the topmast rigging. I followed on. The chaps on the lee side were about level with us. Under the foot of the topsail, I could see Tammy and the other 'prentice down on the maindeck, looking upwards.

The fellows were a bit excited in a sort of subdued way; though I am inclined to think there was far more curiosity and, perhaps, a certain consciousness of the strangeness of it all. I know that, looking to leeward, there was a tendency to keep well together, in which I sympathised.

"Must be a bloomin' stowaway," one of the men suggested.

I grabbed at the idea, instantly. Perhaps—And then, in a moment, I dismissed it. I remembered how that first thing had stepped over the rail *into the sea*. That matter could not be explained in such a manner. With regard to this, I was curious and anxious. I had seen nothing this time. What could the Second Mate have seen? I wondered. Were we chasing fancies, or was there really someone—something real, among the shadows above us? My thoughts returned to that thing, Tammy and I had seen near the log-reel. I remembered how incapable the Second Mate had been of seeing anything then. I remembered how natural it had seemed that he should not be able to see. I caught the word "stowaway" again. After all, that might explain away *this* affair. It would—

My train of thought was broken suddenly. One of the men was shouting and gesticulating.

"I sees 'im! I sees 'im!" He was pointing upwards over our heads.

"Where?" said the man above me. "Where?"

I was looking up, for all that I was worth. I was conscious of a certain sense of relief. "It is *real* then," I said to myself. I screwed my head round, and looked along the yards above us. Yet, still I could see nothing; nothing except shadows and patches of light.

Down on deck, I caught the Second Mate's voice.

"Have you got him?" he was shouting.

"Not yet, Zur," sung out the lowest man on the lee side.

"We sees 'im, Sir," added Quoin.

"I don't!" I said.

"There 'e is agen," he said.

We had reached the t'gallant rigging, and he was pointing up to the royal yard.

"Ye're a fule, Quoin. That's what ye are."

The voice came from above. It was Jock's, and there was a burst of laughter at Quoin's expense.

I could see Jock now. He was standing in the rigging, just below the yard. He had gone straight away up, while the rest of us were mooning over the top.

"Ye're a fule, Quoin," he said, again, "And I'm thinking the Second's juist as saft."

He began to descend.

"Then there's no one?" I asked.

"Na'," he said, briefly.

As we reached the deck, the Second Mate ran down off the poop. He came towards us, with an expectant air.

"You've got him?" he asked, confidently.

"There wasn't anyone," I said.

"What!" he nearly shouted. "You're hiding something!" he continued, angrily, and glancing from one to another. "Out with it. Who was it?"

"We're hiding nothing," I replied, speaking for the lot. "There's no one up there."

The Second looked round upon us.

"Am I a fool?" he asked, contemptuously.

There was an assenting silence.

"I saw him myself," he continued. "Tammy, here, saw him. He wasn't over the top when I first spotted him. There's no mistake about it. It's all damned rot saying he's not there."

"Well, he's not, Sir," I answered. "Jock went right up to the royal yard."

The Second Mate said nothing, in immediate reply; but went aft a few steps and looked up the main. Then he turned to the two 'prentices.

"Sure you two boys didn't see anyone coming down from the main?" he inquired, suspiciously.

"Yes, Sir," they answered together.

"Anyway," I heard him mutter to himself, "I'd have spotted him myself, if he had."

"Have you any idea, Sir, who it was you saw?" I asked, at this juncture.

He looked at me, keenly.

"No!" he said.

He thought for a few moments, while we all stood about in silence, waiting for him to let us go.

"By the holy poker!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "But I ought to have thought of that before."

He turned, and eyed us individually.

"You're all here?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," we said in a chorus. I could see that he was counting us.

Then he spoke again.

"All of you men stay here where you are. Tammy, you go into *your* place and see if the other fellows are in their bunks. Then come and tell me. Smartly now!"

The boy went, and he turned to the other 'prentice.

"You get along forrard to the fo'cas'le," he said. "Count the other watch; then come aft and report to me."

As the youngster disappeared along the deck to the fo'cas'le, Tammy returned from his visit to the Glory Hole, to tell the Second Mate that the other two 'prentices were sound asleep in their bunks. Whereupon, the Second bundled him off to the Carpenter's and Sailmaker's berth, to see whether they were turned-in.

While he was gone, the other boy came aft, and reported that all the men were in their bunks, and asleep.

"Sure?" the Second asked him.

"Quite, Sir," he answered.

The Second Mate made a quick gesture.

"Go and see if the Steward is in his berth," he said, abruptly. It was plain to me that he was tremendously puzzled.

"You've something to learn yet, Mr. Second Mate," I thought to myself.

Then I fell to wondering to what conclusions he would come.

A few seconds later, Tammy returned to say that the Carpenter, Sailmaker and "Doctor" were all turned-in.

The Second Mate muttered something, and told him to go down into the saloon to see whether the First and Third Mates, by any chance, were not in their berths.

Tammy started off; then halted.

"Shall I have a look into the Old Man's place, Sir, while I'm down there?" he inquired.

"No!" said the Second Mate. "Do what I told you, and then come and tell me. If anyone's to go into the Captain's cabin, it's got to be me."

Tammy said "i, i, Sir," and skipped away, up on to the poop.

While he was gone, the other 'prentice came up to say that the Steward was in his berth, and that he wanted to know what the hell he was fooling round his part of the ship for.

The Second Mate said nothing, for nearly a minute. Then he turned to us, and told us we might go forrard.

As we moved off in a body, and talking in undertones, Tammy came down from the poop, and went up to the Second Mate. I heard him say that the two Mates were in their berths, asleep. Then he added, as if it were an afterthought—

"So's the Old Man."

"I thought I told you—" the Second Mate began.

"I didn't, Sir," Tammy said. "His cabin door was open."

The Second Mate started to go aft. I caught a fragment of a remark he was making to Tammy.

"—accounted for the whole crew. I'm—"

He went up on to the poop. I did not catch the rest.

I had loitered a moment; now, however, I hurried after the others. As we neared the fo'cas'le, one bell went, and we roused out the other watch, and told them what jinks we had been up to.

"I rec'on 'e must be rocky," one of the men remarked.

"Not 'im," said another, "'e's bin 'avin' forty winks on the break, an' dreemed 'is mother-en-lore 'ad come on 'er visit, friendly like."

There was some laughter at this suggestion, and I caught myself smiling along with the rest; though I had no reason for sharing their belief, that there was nothing in it all.

"Might 'ave been a stowaway, yer know," I heard Quoin, the one who had suggested it before, remark to one of the A.B's named Stubbins—a short, rather surly-looking chap.

"Might have been hell!" returned Stubbins. "Stowaways hain't such fools as all that."

"I dunno," said the first. "I wish I 'ad arsked the Second what 'e thought about it."

"I don't think it was a stowaway, somehow," I said, chipping in. "What would a stowaway want aloft? I guess he'd be trying more for the Steward's pantry."

"You bet he would, hevry time," said Stubbins. He lit his pipe, and sucked at it, slowly.

"I don't hunderstand it, all ther same," he remarked, after a moment's silence.

"Neither do I," I said. And after that I was quiet for a while, listening to the run of conversation on the subject.

Presently, my glance fell upon Williams, the man who had spoken to me about "shadders." He was sitting in his bunk, smoking, and making no effort to join in the talk.

I went across to him.

"What do you think of it, Williams?" I asked. "Do *you* think the Second Mate really saw anything?"

He looked at me, with a sort of gloomy suspicion; but said nothing.

I felt a trifle annoyed by his silence; but took care not to show it.

After a few moments, I went on.

"Do you know, Williams, I'm beginning to understand what you meant that night, when you said there were too many shadows."

"Wot yer mean?" he said, pulling his pipe from out of his mouth, and fairly surprised into answering.

"What I say, of course," I said. "There *are* too many shadows."

He sat up, and leant forward out from his bunk, extending his hand and pipe. His eyes plainly showed his excitement.

"'ave yer seen—" he hesitated, and looked at me, struggling inwardly to express himself.

"Well?" I prompted.

For perhaps a minute he tried to say something. Then his expression altered suddenly from doubt, and something else more indefinite, to a pretty grim look of determination.

He spoke.

"I'm blimed," he said, "ef I don't tike er piy-diy out of 'er, shadders or no shadders."

I looked at him, with astonishment.

"What's it got to do with your getting a pay-day out of her?" I asked.

He nodded his head, with a sort of stolid resolution.

"Look 'ere," he said.

I waited.

"Ther crowd cleared"; he indicated with his hand and pipe towards the stern.

"You mean in 'Frisco?" I said.

"Yus," he replied; "'an withart er cent of ther piy. I styied."

I comprehended him suddenly.

"You think they saw," I hesitated; then I said "shadows?"

He nodded; but said nothing.

"And so they all bunked?"

He nodded again, and began tapping out his pipe on the edge of his bunk-board.

"And the officers and the Skipper?" I asked.

"Fresh uns," he said, and got out of his bunk; for eight bells was striking.

IV

The Fooling with the Sail

It was on the Friday night, that the Second Mate had the watch aloft looking for the man up the main; and for the next five days little else was talked about; though, with the exception of Williams, Tammy and myself, no one seemed to think of treating the matter seriously. Perhaps I should not exclude Quoin, who still persisted, on every occasion, that there was a stowaway aboard. As for the Second Mate, I have very little doubt *now*, but that he was beginning to realise there was something deeper and less understandable than he had at first dreamed of. Yet, all the same, I know he had to keep his guesses and half-formed opinions pretty well to himself; for the Old Man and the First Mate chaffed him unmercifully about his "bogy." This, I got from Tammy, who had heard them both ragging him during the second dog-watch the following day. There was another thing Tammy told me, that showed how the Second Mate bothered about his inability to understand the mysterious appearance and disappearance of the man he had seen go aloft. He had made Tammy give him every detail he could remember about the figure we had seen by the log-reel. What is more, the Second had not even affected to treat the matter lightly, nor as a thing to be sneered at; but had listened seriously, and asked a great many questions. It is very evident to me that he was reaching out towards the only possible conclusion. Though, goodness knows, it was one that was impossible and improbable enough.

It was on the Wednesday night, after the five days of talk I have mentioned, that there came, to me and to those who *knew*, another element of fear. And yet, I can quite understand that, at *that* time, those who had seen nothing, would find little to be afraid of, in all that I am going to tell you. Still, even they were much puzzled and astonished, and perhaps, after all, a little awed. There was so much in the affair that was inexplicable, and yet again such a lot that was natural and commonplace. For, when all is said and done, it was nothing more than the blowing adrift of one of the sails; yet accompanied by what were really significant details—significant, that is, in the light of that which Tammy and I and the Second Mate knew.

Seven bells, and then one, had gone in the first watch, and our side was being roused out to relieve the Mate's. Most of the men were already out of their bunks, and sitting about on their sea-chests, getting into their togs.

Suddenly, one of the 'prentices in the other watch, put his head in through the doorway on the port side.

"The Mate wants to know," he said, "which of you chaps made fast the fore royal, last watch."

"Wot's 'e want to know that for?" inquired one of the men.

"The lee side's blowing adrift," said the 'prentice. "And he says that the chap who made it fast is to go up and see to it as soon as the watch is relieved."

"Oh! does 'e? Well 'twasn't me, any'ow," replied the man. "You'd better arsk sum of t'others."

"Ask what?" inquired Plummer, getting out of his bunk, sleepily.

The 'prentice repeated his message.

The man yawned and stretched himself.

"Let me see," he muttered, and scratched his head with one hand, while he fumbled for his trousers with the other. "'oo made ther fore r'yal fast?" He got into his trousers, and stood up. "Why, ther Or'nary, er course; 'oo else do yer suppose?"

"That's all I wanted to know!" said the 'prentice, and went away.

"Hi! Tom!" Stubbins sung out to the Ordinary. "Wake up, you lazy young devil. Ther Mate's just sent to hinqure who it was made the fore royal fast. It's all blowin' adrift, and he says you're to get along up as soon as eight bells goes, and make it fast again."

Tom jumped out of his bunk, and began to dress, quickly.

"Blowin' adrift!" he said. "There ain't all that much wind; and I tucked the ends of the gaskets well in under the other turns."

"P'raps one of ther gaskets is rotten, and given way," suggested Stubbins. "Anyway, you'd better hurry up, it's just on eight bells."

A minute later, eight bells went, and we trooped away aft for roll-call.

As soon as the names were called over, I saw the Mate lean towards the Second and say something. Then the Second Mate sung out:

"Tom!"

"Sir!" answered Tom.

"Was it you made fast that fore royal, last watch?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How's that it's broken adrift?"

"Carn't say, Sir."

"Well, it has, and you'd better jump aloft and shove the gasket round it again. And mind you make a better job of it this time."

"i, i, Sir," said Tom, and followed the rest of us forrard. Reaching the fore rigging, he climbed into it, and began to make his way leisurely aloft. I could see him with a fair amount of distinctness, as the moon was very clear and bright, though getting old.

I went over to the weather pin-rail, and leaned up against it, watching him, while I filled my pipe. The other men, both the watch on deck and the watch below, had gone into the fo'cas'le, so that I imagined I was the only one about the maindeck. Yet, a minute later, I discovered that I was mistaken; for, as I proceeded to light up, I saw Williams, the young cockney, come out from under the lee of the house, and turn and look up at the Ordinary as he went steadily upwards. I was a little surprised, as I knew he and three of the others had a "poker fight" on, and he'd won over sixty pounds of tobacco. I believe I opened my mouth to sing out to him to know why he wasn't playing; and then, all at once, there came into my mind the memory of my first conversation with him. I remembered that he had said sails were always blowing adrift *at night*. I remembered the, then, unaccountable emphasis he had laid on those two words; and remembering that, I felt suddenly afraid. For, all at once, the absurdity had struck me of a sail—even a badly stowed one—blowing adrift in such fine and calm weather as we were then having. I wondered I had not seen before that there was something queer and unlikely about the affair. Sails don't blow adrift in fine weather, with the sea calm and the ship as steady as a rock. I moved away from the rail and went towards Williams. He knew something, or, at least, he guessed at something that was very much a blankness to me at that time. Up above, the boy was climbing up, to what? That was the thing that made me feel so frightened. Ought I to tell all I knew and guessed? And then, who should I tell? I should only be laughed at—I—

Williams turned towards me, and spoke.

"Gawd!" he said, "it's started agen!"

"What?" I said. Though I knew what he meant.

"Them syles," he answered, and made a gesture towards the fore royal.

I glanced up, briefly. All the lee side of the sail was adrift, from the bunt gasket outwards. Lower, I saw Tom; he was just hoisting himself into the t'gallant rigging.

Williams spoke again.

"We lost two on 'em just sime way, comin' art."

"Two of the men!" I exclaimed.

"Yus!" he said tersely.

"I can't understand," I went on. "I never heard anything about it."

"Who'd yer got ter tell yer abart it?" he asked.

I made no reply to his question; indeed, I had scarcely comprehended it, for the problem of what I ought to do in the matter had risen again in my mind.

"I've a good mind to go aft and tell the Second Mate all I know," I said. "He's seen something himself that he can't explain away, and—and anyway I can't stand this state of things. If the Second Mate knew all—"

"Garn!" he cut in, interrupting me. "An' be told yer're a blastid hidiot. Not yer. Yer sty were yer are."

I stood irresolute. What he had said, was perfectly correct, and I was positively stumped what to do for the best. That there was danger aloft, I was convinced; though if I had been asked my reasons for supposing this, they would have been hard to find. Yet of its existence, I was as certain as though my eyes already saw it. I wondered whether, being so ignorant of the form it would assume, I could stop it by joining Tom on the yard? This thought came as I stared up at the royal. Tom had reached the sail, and was standing on the foot-rope, close in to the bunt. He was bending over the yard, and reaching down for the slack of the sail. And then, as I looked, I saw the belly of the royal tossed up and down abruptly, as though a sudden heavy gust of wind had caught it.

"I'm blimed—!" Williams began, with a sort of excited expectation. And then he stopped as abruptly as he had begun. For, in a moment, the sail had thrashed right over the after side of the yard, apparently knocking Tom clean from off the foot-rope.

"My God!" I shouted out loud. "He's gone!"

For an instant there was a blur over my eyes, and Williams was singing out something that I could not catch. Then, just as quickly, it went, and I could see again, clearly.

Williams was pointing, and I saw something black, swinging below the yard. Williams called out something fresh, and made a run for the fore rigging. I caught the last part—

"—ther garskit."

Straightway, I knew that Tom had managed to grab the gasket as he fell, and I bolted after Williams to give him a hand in getting the youngster into safety.

Down on deck, I caught the sound of running feet, and then the Second Mate's voice. He was asking what the devil was up; but I did not trouble to answer him then. I wanted all my breath to help me aloft. I knew very well that some of the gaskets were little better than old shakins; and, unless Tom got hold of something on the t'gallant yard below him, he might come down with a run any moment. I reached the top, and lifted myself over it in quick time. Williams was some distance above me. In less than half a minute, I reached the t'gallant yard. Williams had gone up on to the royal. I slid out on to the t'gallant foot-rope until I was just below Tom; then I sung out to him to let himself down to me, and I would catch him. He made no answer, and I saw that he was hanging in a curiously limp fashion, and by one hand.

Williams's voice came down to me from the royal yard. He was singing out to me to go up and give him a hand to pull Tom up on to the yard. When I reached him, he told me that the gasket had hitched itself round the lad's wrist. I bent beside the yard, and peered down. It was as Williams had said, and I realised how near a thing it had been. Strangely enough, even at that moment, the thought came to me how little wind there was. I remembered the wild way in which the sail had lashed at the boy.

All this time, I was busily working, unreeving the port buntline. I took the end, made a running bowline with it round the gasket, and let the loop slide down over the boy's head and shoulders. Then I took a strain on it and tightened it under his arms. A minute later we had him safely on the yard between us. In the uncertain moonlight, I could just make out the mark of a great lump on his forehead, where the foot of the sail must have caught him when it knocked him over.

As we stood there a moment, taking our breath, I caught the sound of the Second Mate's voice close beneath us. Williams glanced down; then he looked up at me and gave a short, grunting laugh.

"Crikey!" he said.

"What's up?" I asked, quickly.

He jerked his head backwards and downwards. I screwed round a bit, holding the jackstay with one hand, and steadying the insensible Ordinary with the other. In this way I could look below. At first, I could see nothing. Then the Second Mate's voice came up to me again.

"Who the hell are you? What are you doing?"

I saw him now. He was standing at the foot of the weather t'gallant rigging, his face was turned upwards, peering round the after side of the mast. It showed to me only as a blurred, pale-coloured oval in the moonlight.

He repeated his question.

"It's Williams and I, Sir," I said. "Tom, here, has had an accident."

I stopped. He began to come up higher towards us. From the rigging to leeward there came suddenly a buzz of men talking.

The Second Mate reached us.

"Well, what's up, anyway?" he inquired, suspiciously. "What's happened?"

He had bent forward, and was peering at Tom. I started to explain; but he cut me short with:

"Is he dead?"

"No, Sir," I said. "I don't think so; but the poor beggar's had a bad fall. He was hanging by the gasket when we got to him. The sail knocked him off the yard."

"What?" he said, sharply.

"The wind caught the sail, and it lashed back over the yard—"

"What wind?" he interrupted. "There's no wind, scarcely." He shifted his weight on to the other foot. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Sir. The wind brought the foot of the sail over the top of the yard and knocked Tom clean off the foot-rope. Williams and I both saw it happen."

"But there's no wind to do such a thing; you're talking nonsense!"

It seemed to me that there was as much of bewilderment as anything else in his voice; yet I could tell that he was suspicious—though, of what, I doubted whether he himself could have told.

He glanced at Williams, and seemed about to say something. Then, seeming to change his mind, he turned, and sung out to one of the men who had followed him aloft, to go down and pass out a coil of new, three-inch manilla, and a tailblock.

"Smartly now!" he concluded.

"i, i, Sir," said the man, and went down swiftly.

The Second Mate turned to me.

"When you've got Tom below, I shall want a better explanation of all this, than the one you've given me. It won't wash."

"Very well, Sir," I answered. "But you won't get any other."

"What do you mean?" he shouted at me. "I'll let you know I'll have no impertinence from you or any one else."

"I don't mean any impertinence, Sir—I mean that it's the only explanation there is to give."

"I tell you it won't wash!" he repeated. "There's something too damned funny about it all. I shall have to report the matter to the Captain. I can't tell him that yarn—" He broke off abruptly.

"It's not the only damned funny thing that's happened aboard this old hooker," I answered. "You ought to know that, Sir."

"What do you mean?" he asked, quickly.

"Well, Sir," I said, "to be straight, what about that chap you sent us hunting after up the main the other night? That was a funny enough affair, wasn't it? This one isn't half so funny."

"That will do, Jessop!" he said, angrily. "I won't have any back talk." Yet there was something about his tone that told me I had got one in on my own. He seemed all at once less able to appear confident that I was telling him a fairy tale.

After that, for perhaps half a minute, he said nothing. I guessed he was doing some hard thinking. When he spoke again it was on the matter of getting the Ordinary down on deck.

"One of you'll have to go down the lee side and steady him down," he concluded.

He turned and looked downwards.

"Are you bringing that gantline?" he sang out.

"Yes, Sir," I heard one of the men answer.

A moment later, I saw the man's head appear over the top. He had the tail-block slung round his neck, and the end of the gantline over his shoulder.

Very soon we had the gantline rigged, and Tom down on deck. Then we took him into the fo'cas'le and put him in his bunk. The Second Mate had sent for some brandy, and now he started to dose him well with it. At the same time a couple of the men chafed his hands and feet. In a little, he began to show signs of coming round. Presently, after a sudden fit of coughing, he opened his eyes, with a surprised, bewildered stare. Then he caught at the edge of his bunk-board, and sat up, giddily. One of the men steadied him, while the Second Mate stood back, and eyed him, critically. The boy rocked as he sat, and put up his hand to his head.

"Here," said the Second Mate, "take another drink."

Tom caught his breath and choked a little; then he spoke.

"By gum!" he said, "my head does ache."

He put up his hand, again, and felt at the lump on his forehead. Then he bent forward and stared round at the men grouped about his bunk.

"What's up?" he inquired, in a confused sort of way, and seeming as if he could not see us clearly.

"What's up?" he asked again.

"That's just what I want to know!" said the Second Mate, speaking for the first time with some sternness.

"I ain't been snoozin' while there's been a job on?" Tom inquired, anxiously.

He looked round at the men appealingly.

"It's knocked 'im dotty, strikes me," said one of the men, audibly.

"No," I said, answering Tom's question, "you've had—"

"Shut that, Jessop!" said the Second Mate, quickly, interrupting me. "I want to hear what the boy's got to say for himself."

He turned again to Tom.

"You were up at the fore royal," he prompted.

"I carn't say I was, Sir," said Tom, doubtfully. I could see that he had not gripped the Second Mate's meaning.

"But you were!" said the Second, with some impatience. "It was blowing adrift, and I sent you up to shove a gasket round it."

"Blowin' adrift, Sir?" said Tom, dully.

"Yes! blowing adrift. Don't I speak plainly?"

The dullness went from Tom's face, suddenly.

"So it was, Sir," he said, his memory returning. "The bloomin' sail got chock full of wind. It caught me bang in the face."

He paused a moment.

"I believe—" he began, and then stopped once more.

"Go on!" said the Second Mate. "Spit it out!"

"I don't know, Sir," Tom said. "I don't understand—"

He hesitated again.

"That's all I can remember," he muttered, and put his hand up to the bruise on his forehead, as though trying to remember something.

In the momentary silence that succeeded, I caught the voice of Stubbins.

"There hain't hardly no wind," he was saying, in a puzzled tone.

There was a low murmur of assent from the surrounding men.

The Second Mate said nothing, and I glanced at him, curiously. Was he beginning to see, I wondered, how useless it was to try to find any sensible explanation of the affair? Had he begun at last to couple it with that peculiar business of the man up the main? I am inclined *now* to think that this was so; for, after staring a few moments at Tom, in a doubtful sort of way, he went out of the fo'cas'le, saying that he would inquire further into the matter in the morning. Yet, when the morning came, he did no such thing. As for his reporting the affair to the Skipper, I much doubt it. Even did he, it must have been in a very casual way; for we heard nothing more about it; though, of course, we talked it over pretty thoroughly among ourselves.

With regard to the Second Mate, even now I am rather puzzled by his attitude to us aloft. Sometimes I have thought that he must have suspected us of trying to play off some trick on him—perhaps, at the time, he still half suspected one of us of being in some way connected with the other business. Or, again, he may have been trying to fight against the conviction that was being forced upon him, that there was really something impossible and beastly about the old packet. Of course, these are only suppositions.

And then, close upon this, there were further developments.

V

The End of Williams

As I have said, there was a lot of talk, among the crowd of us forrard, about Tom's strange accident. None of the men knew that Williams and I had seen it *happen*. Stubbins gave it as his opinion that Tom had been sleepy, and missed the foot-rope. Tom, of course, would not have this by any means. Yet, he had no one to appeal to; for, at that time, he was just as ignorant as the rest, that we had seen the sail flap up over the yard.

Stubbins insisted that it stood to reason it couldn't be the wind. There wasn't any, he said; and the rest of the men agreed with him.

"Well," I said, "I don't know about all that. I'm a bit inclined to think Tom's yarn is the truth."

"How do you make that hout?" Stubbins asked, unbelievably. "There haint nothin' like enough wind."

"What about the place on his forehead?" I inquired, in turn. "How are you going to explain that?"

"I 'spect he knocked himself there when he slipped," he answered.

"Likely 'nuffli," agreed old Jaskett, who was sitting smoking on a chest near by.

"Well, you're both a damn long way out of it!" Tom chipped in, pretty warm. "I wasn't asleep; an' the sail did bloomin' well hit me."

"Don't you be impertinent, young feller," said Jaskett.

I joined in again.

"There's another thing, Stubbins," I said. "The gasket Tom was hanging by, was on the after side of the yard. That looks as if the sail might have flapped it over? If there were wind enough to do the one, it seems to me that it might have done the other."

"Do you mean that it was hunder ther yard, or hover ther top?" he asked.

"Over the top, of course. What's more, the foot of the sail was hanging over the after part of the yard, in a bight."

Stubbins was plainly surprised at that, and before he was ready with his next objection, Plummer spoke.

"'oo saw it?" he asked.

"I saw it!" I said, a bit sharply. "So did Williams; so—for that matter—did the Second Mate." Plummer relapsed into silence; and smoked; and Stubbins broke out afresh.

"I reckon Tom must have had a hold of the foot and the gasket, and pulled 'em hover the yard when he tumbled."

"No!" interrupted Tom. "The gasket was under the sail. I couldn't even see it. An' I hadn't time to get hold of the foot of the sail, before it up and caught me smack in the face."

"'ow did yer get 'old er ther gasket, when yer fell, then?" asked Plummer.

"He didn't get hold of it," I answered for Tom. "It had taken a turn round his wrist, and that's how we found him hanging."

"Do you mean to say as 'e 'adn't got 'old of ther garsket?," Quoin inquired, pausing in the lighting of his pipe.

"Of course, I do," I said. "A chap doesn't go hanging on to a rope when he's jolly well been knocked senseless."

"Ye're richt," assented Jock. "Ye're quite richt there, Jessop."

Quoin concluded the lighting of his pipe.

"I dunno," he said.

I went on, without noticing him.

"Anyway, when Williams and I found him, he was hanging by the gasket, and it had a couple of turns round his wrist. And besides that, as I said before, the foot of the sail was hanging over the after side of the yard, and Tom's weight on the gasket was holding it there."

"It's damned queer," said Stubbins, in a puzzled voice. "There don't seem to be no way of gettin' a proper hexplanation to it."

I glanced at Williams, to suggest that I should tell all that we had seen; but he shook his head, and, after a moment's thought, it seemed to me that there was nothing to be gained by so doing. We had no very clear idea of the thing that had happened, and our half facts and guesses would only have tended to make the matter appear more grotesque and unlikely. The only thing to be done was to wait and watch. If we could only get hold of something tangible, then we might hope to tell all that we knew, without being made into laughing-stocks.

I came out from my think, abruptly.

Stubbins was speaking again. He was arguing the matter with one of the other men.

"You see, with there bein' no wind, scarcely, ther thing's himpossible, an' yet—"

The other man interrupted with some remark I did not catch.

"No," I heard Stubbins say. "I'm hout of my reckonin'. I don't savvy it one bit. It's too much like a damned fairy tale."

"Look at his wrist!" I said.

Tom held out his right hand and arm for inspection. It was considerably swollen where the rope had been round it.

"Yes," admitted Stubbins. "That's right enough; but it don't tell you nothin'."

I made no reply. As Stubbins said, it told you "nothin'." And there I let it drop. Yet, I have told you this, as showing how the matter was regarded in the fo'cas'le. Still, it did not occupy our minds very long; for, as I have said, there were further developments.

The three following nights passed quietly; and then, on the fourth, all those curious signs and hints culminated suddenly in something extraordinarily grim. Yet, everything had been so subtle and intangible, and, indeed, so was the affair itself, that only those who had actually come in touch with the invading fear, seemed really capable of comprehending the terror of the thing. The men, for the most part, began to say the ship was unlucky, and, of course, as usual! there was some talk of there being a Jonah in the ship. Still, I cannot say that none of the men realised there was anything horrible and frightening in it all; for I am sure that some did, a little; and I think Stubbins was certainly one of them; though I feel certain that he did not, at that time, you know, grasp a quarter of the real significance that underlay the several queer matters that had disturbed our nights. He seemed to fail, somehow, to grasp the element of personal danger that, to me, was already plain. He lacked sufficient imagination, I suppose, to piece the things together—to trace the natural sequence of the events, and their development. Yet I must not forget, of course, that he had no knowledge of those two first incidents. If he had, perhaps he might have stood where I did. As it was, he had not seemed to reach out at all, you know, not even in the matter of Tom and the fore royal. Now, however, after the thing I am about to tell you, he seemed to see a little way into the darkness, and realise possibilities.

I remember the fourth night, well. It was a clear, star-lit, moonless sort of night: at least, I think there was no moon; or, at any rate, the moon could have been little more than a thin crescent, for it was near the dark time.

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