

## *The Mysterious Blood Stain*

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In the year 185- I was in command of the Dolphin, a fine bark of six hundred tons. We had been on a whaling voyage, and had obtained an unusually good cargo of oil. With our course laid for home, the crew in good health, and a fair prospect of percentage money on the cargo, what more could we want to keep the song and the jest upon the lips of the crew.

One night, about eleven o'clock, I was sitting at the upper end of my cabin table, consulting a chart on which the vessel's course was laid down. I had been reading Dante's 'Inferno,' and the horrible nature of the work had aroused my sensitive feelings to such an extent that I had determined to try how far a cigar and a walk on deck would steady my nerves. Just as I was about rising from my chair to go on deck, I noticed a figure descending the companionway before me. A single glance told me that it was not one of the crew. Slowly he descended the steps, grasping the hand-rail to support himself, as if he were too feeble to descend without support.

His feet were bare, while his head was enveloped in a piece of old sail-cloth in place of a cap. His left arm hung by his side, carefully rolled up in his coat, which had evidently been taken off for that purpose, and the arm itself appeared to be broken. Quietly and without uttering a word he approached me, and at last he sat down at the end of the table.

He then slowly raised his head, and a sight was presented to my astonished gaze, the like of which I hope I may never see again. The features had been good and regular, but now the cheeks were sunken and hollow; the teeth, white and even, were firmly set together; the thin, parched lips were drawn back from them. The eyes were as black as coal, but sunk far back into the head, and I saw they were fixed on me with a dull, unmeaning stare. The figure now stood up just opposite to me, and I felt myself spell bound to my seat without the power to address it.

Reaching out his arm, he laid a bony finger on the chart which was on the table, and before I could muster courage to articulate, lo! he had disappeared.

Recovering my composure somewhat, I sprang with a bound up the companion-way and shouted for the mate. He speedily replied to my call, and came aft, dragging something behind him which kept up a continual howling. As he came nearer to me I saw that it was my dog, Caspar, and I enquired the meaning of what he was doing.

'Why, sir,' he replied, 'the dog lay on the companion-hatch until a few moments ago, apparently sound asleep, when all of a sudden he sprang up with a horrible howl, and ran to his kennel, forward, with his tail between his legs. I then went after him, and found him in his kennel shaking with fright; and when I put my hand in to pat him, he attempted to bite me. Hearing you call, I dragged him after me, by the collar to see if he had not been hurt in some manner, for I never saw him act so before.'

I did not examine the terrified dog. I felt that he had seen my visitor as well as myself. With some difficulty I soothed him, and then went down below. Walking up to my table, I cast a look down at the chart. At the exact spot where my visitor had placed his attended finger, I saw a dull red mark, and on a closer examination I had perceived that it was a drop of blood.

The mark indicated a position on the chart which was about a day's sail from and at right angles to our course. For two hours I paced the deck, wondering what had happened. The visitor was too surely no creation of my imagination, for the dog had seen the figure as well as myself; and the chart was plain evidence. What could it mean? I half determined to ask the mate's advice.

He was a firm believer in spiritual manifestation, and would endeavor to solve the enigma in some way or other. But then I always ridiculed his notions, and it was too galling to my pride to ask his advice now on that of which I had always denied the existence, save in a heated imagination; so I determined to keep my counsel. Turning in soon after, I slept well and awoke refreshed.

When I got on deck I found that we were becalmed. Not a ripple was on the water. The day passed away monotonously enough.

Eleven o'clock that night found me in my chair at the head of the table in the cabin.

Caspar, who had quite got over his fears, lay on the hatch at the head of the cabin stairs. I was reading a volume of poems when I heard a howl from Caspar and the scurry of his feet as he scampered forward.

Looking up, I saw my visitor of the previous night again descending the companion-way. He seemed much weaker, and his respiration was heavy and labored when he reached the table. He glanced at the table with an anxious look, as if to see whether the chart was still there. It was [not]. He then gazed at me with a disappointed and sorrowful stare and disappeared.

I remained quietly in my seat for about ten minutes after the spectre had departed. When I went on deck I found the mate again endeavoring to soothe the dog, who snapped and snarled in his kennel until it was unsafe to approach him. Leaving him there I went below and throwing myself, dressed as I was, on my cot, tried to sleep.

Unrefreshing and feverish was the sleep which visited me that night, and I arose in the morning totally unfit for work of any kind, and my nerves entirely unstrung. What was expected of me? For what purpose had I been warned? What must I do? Thus I mused during the entire day. Caspar kept close to his kennel all the time and steadily refused to eat or drink. The calm had continued during the entire day, and we made no progress whatever.

Again evening approached and the same hour found me, as on the two previous nights,

sitting at my table. This time I eagerly awaited my visitor. Would the figure again appear? I found myself hoping that it would. The same chart with the blood-stain on it lay on the table before me.

This time there was no Caspar to warn me, but I felt that the figure was coming, even ere it appeared. Presently I saw it again coming down the stairs. This time it was evidently far weaker than before, for with difficulty could it stand, and it toiled down the steps in manifest suffering and agony. At last it reached the cabin door and attempted to advance towards me; but no sooner had it let go the hand-rail than it sank down exhausted. I sprang up and rushed towards it; but the moment I moved the spectre vanished, and when I attempted to raise the fallen figure my hands touched the cabin floor.

And now a light seemed to break upon me. I rushed upon deck where I found the mate and crew sitting all sail to catch the breeze which had just sprung up. I immediately gave orders that the Dolphin's course should be altered to that which would bring us in the spot marked so plainly on the chart by the drop of blood.

All that night I paced the deck. No sleep seemed possible to me until this hidden mystery should be revealed.

The dawn brought a disappointment. A dense fog lay on the—[text damaged]—of the ocean. We could discern nothing at ten yard's distance from the vessel's side according to my circulations and by the log we should have been not far from that spot on the wide sea where I hoped to find a solution of the mystery. Toward noon the fog slowly arose and I at once, glass in hand, ascended the rigging. With eager gaze I scanned the horizon.

Almost directly in our wake but far astern of us lay an object, which, by the aid of my glass, I made out to be an open boat.

The gig was soon lowered according to my orders, and a mate and boat's crew were dispatched to inspect the boat as it lay far astern. I felt quite unequal to going myself, so agitated was I, but I had presence of mind enough to order some brandy and nourishment suitable to the sick and famished to be brought upon deck.

I felt as assured that my visitor was there as if I had seen him in the boat; but whether alive or dead I dared not speculate.

I thought over the wonderful incidents which had caused me to find the boat.

Half an hour's more wind and the mystery would never have been revealed. Scarce could I restrain my impatience.

After hours of suspense I at last beheld the gig approaching slowly with the other boat in tow. Unable to endure the terrible suspense I went down into the cabin. Soon I heard the gig touch the ship's side and the mate giving orders to lower away the chair from the yard arm.

Then I thought they had found him; but he must be too feeble to climb the ship's side. A few moments and I heard approaching footsteps, and down the stairs was brought with the assistance of the crew my visitor for the fourth time; but now really and truly in the flesh.

He was supported in the arms of the mate, but he held on to the hand-rail just as I had seen him in the three visions. His left arm hung loosely at his side and was bandaged up just as I had observed on the three occasions of the spectre's visits.

We gave him proper refreshment and put him to bed. He gradually revived and in a few days were able to tell his story. He had been captain of a large vessel trading in the Pacific. The crew had mutinied and had cast him adrift in the open boat with nothing to eat but a few biscuits, which were thrown into the open boat in derision by one of the mutineers.

When these were eaten he had tried to eke out life by eating his shoes, and with water wrung from his clothes after rain and heavy dews he had quenched in a manner his thirst. When found by the mate he lay extended in the bottom of the boat in a death-like swoon, and owed his recovery perhaps chiefly to the brandy which I had sent him in the gig.

In a few days more we assisted him on deck. Caspar no sooner saw him than he flew at him, and but for my interference would have torn him in pieces. During the rest of the voyage we were obliged to keep the dog chained up.

I now felt satisfied that omens and signs were vouchsafed to mortal men for certain grave reasons, and though not superstitious I still believe that they are more frequent than is usually supposed. As we neared the port for which we were bound Captain Williams (for such was the name of my visitor) was one day sitting with me in the cabin, when he asked to see the chart as he wished to pick out the spot where I had found him.

I gave him an entirely new chart and he busied himself sharpening a pencil with which to mark the place where he had so nearly lost his life. Suddenly I heard an exclamation from him which he followed up by saying:

'My dear —, I am very sorry; but I have cut my finger and have dropped some blood on your new chart, and I see that I have soiled the very spot which I was going to point out as that where you found me. But,' he added with a light laugh, 'that will do instead to mark the place.'

I have the two charts now both of them marked exactly alike; one done by Captain Williams in the flesh accidentally; the other by —. Reader can you tell whom?

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