



*"The maniac sprang, and the old man went down heavily"*

This was the skipper's opinion also, and the direct cause of his uneasiness; but he tried rather lamely to hide it from the mate.

"Losh, mon," he answered, irritably, "put yer bit opinions in yer pipe; they're more use there." Further speech was caught in his teeth as the scared face of Andy Macbrain appeared on a level with the bridge planks, and the old engineer stood holding shakily to the handrail.

"Save us, Andy! Hae ye seen a spook?" the skipper exclaimed.

"A've no seen one, but as sure as death A've heard one," the old man whispered, fearfully.

Despite his hearers' uneasiness neither could resist a broad smile.

"Why Andy, mon, ye couldna hear a fog-horn at three yards," Bell replied, with a hunch.

"A dunno ken how A heard it, but A'm no mistaken. 'Twas an awful cry frae the engine-room, mon. 'Twas like a soul in torment."

Captain Bell's impatient laugh was cut short by the stamp of his sea-boot.

"What's come to us?" he exclaimed, irritably. "'A soul—torment!' Ye're as fey as the doctor! Get ye down and awa, and let me hear no more sic tosh. I've more on my mind than spooks the night," and he turned curtly to the binacle.

Andy Macbrain dropped to the deck again, door-lid still fearful, and sought the shelter of the deck-house to chew the end of his startled thoughts and suspicions. The old man had just had a bad scare. He knew well enough that he was deaf, very deaf. It was his bugbear. Had he not to keep his eyes glued to the indicator when standing his lonely watch? How, then, did this strange, distant cry reach his brain and for a moment muddle his faculties? Old Andy was no coward as men go, but the sea breeds the supernatural to confound many theories, and Andy Macbrain was as wide a receptacle as any of his calling.

Two hours later the skipper tumbled off the bridge, utterly fagged out. The fog-bank had closed down upon the ship again, lay and dense, obliterating every object at half a cable's length. The worries and strange happenings of the last few days had got badly on his nerves, rendering him silent and irritable.

His mood, therefore, scarcely prepared him for subsequent events.

With the exception of the men on duty on the bridge the decks were deserted, and only the light in the chart-house showed where old Andy had retired to ruminate. This light brought a feeling of compunction to the skipper's naturally kind heart. He had certainly been abrupt, almost brutal, with the old man, and he paused in the alley-way, dog-tired as he was. A little light chaff at old Andy's expense might put matters right between them. He had, however, scarcely placed a furred hand upon the handle when he started backward with the breath caught in his throat. From out of the fog-laden void there seemed to come a weird, despairing cry that set his every nerve tingling—a cry resembling that of a seabird, but far more insistent and human. For a minute the skipper stood rigid, scarcely breathing, in dread expectancy of its repetition. But, though he waited with every nerve at full tension, no sound rose again above the creaking of the running-gear. A deck-plate covering one of the air-shafts to the disused engine-room lay only a yard away. Could it have been by this means that this eerie wail had reached the deck? But Jock Bell was by no means sure that his ear had been the receptacle; that strange cry now seemed to him to have been more felt than heard.

How long he stood a prey to a strange apprehension, utterly foreign to his nature, he could not himself have told, but his listening attitude was cut short by a sudden sharp hail from the bridge, and as he moved into view the mate's startled "Will you come up here, sir?" brought him in half-a-dozen strides to the man's side. All round the ship the fog-bank lay as thick as ever, but to leeward a deep rift had appeared in the veil, through which the white line of surf could be plainly seen breaking against the black loom of rock in its rear.

"She's drifted a full mile inshore during the last few hours, sir, without making a fool of easting!"

A glance showed Bell, that, but for this providential glimpse, the old ship would in a few hours, despite all his efforts, have piled herself up under the Cape, and the watch jumped to work

under a volley of orders from the bridge.

With the Plethora standing out to the southward on the wind, Jock Bell felt easier in his mind, but such a puzzling procession of events left an eerie atmosphere about the ship that he could not account for, and determined to wipe away before turning in.

Old Andy still sat ruminating over a pipe, and lifted a sullen, scared face when the skipper entered the chart-house. But Bell's first words brought him to his feet, all resentment gone, and eager to share his fears with another.

"I'm takin' back me words, Andy," the skipper began, soberly; "I've heard it too. Get yon lamp and come along; I'll be searching the engine-room."

The old engineer was into his thick pilot jacket in less than five seconds, and, snatching the swinging lamp from its bracket above the table, he followed the skipper out on to the fog-laden deck.

At the engine hatch both of them paused to listen, but the black void below gave up no sound. Men, as they were, used to sudden dangers and quick decisions, this eerie happening lay quite outside any experience in their past, and as such seemed over-dangerous to meddle with.

The dull rays of the lamp, lowered at arm's length, showed Andy that everything was in order, and that, apparently, no presence, human or otherwise, had visited his domain. Breathing more freely, and secretly ashamed of the extent to which they had shown their feelings, both men proceeded to make a tour of inspection.

The skipper, followed closely by old Andy, had almost completed the circuit of the engines, and had reached the doors of two or three store cupboards, on the starboard side, when he became uneasily conscious of a huddled heap in the alley-way.

"Sakes, mon!" the skipper exclaimed, in a startled whisper. "What'll this be? Show the light!" Before Andy could bring the lamp to play upon it, however, the heap resolved itself into a human shape that sprang erect and backed, with arms outstretched, against one of the doors. For a moment both men were too startled to move, and then Andy, with a smothered exclamation, swung the light aloft.

The skipper's duties during the last twenty-four hours had given him little time for thought upon other matters aboard his ship, and Dr. Muttletory's strange case had for the moment quite passed from his mind. It was to be brought back to him now in startling fashion.

The apparition was the doctor, certainly, but all resemblance to the spick-and-span, self-possessed young scientist had departed, leaving behind a crouching, dishevelled, haggard creature, in whose wild eyes shone a mad, hunted terror that held its audience of two fascinated and tongue-tied.

When the skipper found his voice again it was uncertain with the shock of the sight before him.

"Why—what's come to ye, doctor?" he exclaimed, huskily.

But any answer that might have been vouchsafed was drowned by a cry from old Andy, who sprang in front of his skipper, and pointed excitedly at the door against which the madman crouched.

"The dark-room! He'll be hiding something. 'Tis the verra place to search, I'm thinkin'!" the old man exclaimed, vindictively. All his pent-up resentment surged up, obliterating his fears.

But old Andy had scarcely taken a step forward, with the evident intention of carrying out his idea, when, with a howl like a famished wolf, the maniac—for it was now no other—sprang, and the old man went down heavily and lay stunned beneath a twelve-stone body propelled by frenzied strength. The onslaught was so sudden that the skipper had no time to shout a warning, or do more than avoid the lamp which flew past his head and crashed against the bulk-head opposite, leaving the engine-room in total darkness.

Jock Bell's subsequent account of that night's events was disjointed. He could remember groping blindly to his engineer's assistance, being thrown violently against the rail circling the engines, dashing up the steel ladder in pursuit of the madman, and arriving at the hatch-coping barely in time to see his quarry vault the rail and disappear without a cry into the fog.

No boat was called away. Such an act would be useless in so thick a fog.



*"The two men gazed down, horror-struck, face-nerved."*