What was all this leading to? The mate stood and listened very respectfully. It was sufficient for him that the captain was in a particularly good humor. Things might so easily have been worse.

The captain yawned as he proceeded.

'To come to the point,' he said. 'Two or three times during my childhood, before I was five years old, I suffered severe frights through hearing a bell ring when there was no bell near me, and when no one else heard it. It was either a hallucination or it was a disease; something due, I mean, to some defect in my auditory organs. But I certainly heard a bell ring on several occasions when no bell rang, and was extremely frightened in consequence.'

'Enough to send any youngster into fits,' ventured the mate, not a little impressed.

'Quite so. Quite so. But I was, no doubt, a fairly healthy child in other ways. Now, I distinctly remember the last occasion, and the way in which I sobbed in my amazement and alarm. It made such an impression upon my mind that I can recall every detail.'

He moved to the end of the bridge and came back, staring intently but hopelessly into the white shroud on every side. The Northgate's siren gave a long, melancholy wail, and then dead silence fell.

'We lived in a country cottage, semi-detached,' said the captain carefully, 'and an old lady who lived next door was a great friend of ours. On this particular day my parents were sitting at a little round table in the cottage of this next-door neighbor, an old woman of eighty. She, too, was sitting at the table, knitting, and I was sitting idly on my father's knee listening to their talk. I was a rather quiet child, and loved the company of my elders. I cannot remember the talk, but I recall the scene very distinctly. I was not facing the table myself, but sitting sideways to it. I can even remember a point like that. Suddenly, it seemed to me, a very awkward and somewhat startling thing happened. The old lady, who was knitting, had her wools upon the little table. As she moved her arm she happened to bring it into contact with a small hand-bell standing near her, and swept it clean off the table. It fell with a sharp double-clang upon the stone floor, and there lay still.

That, of course, was to me simply an accident. I had no doubt that the thing had occurred, that such an accident had happened. Under that impression, I turned half-round, waiting to see the old lady stoop from her rocking-chair, pick up the bell, and replace it upon the table. I was simply interested, and on the alert to handle a new toy. Most children, as you may know, enjoy playing with a bell.

'To my astonishment, however, none of the others present paid the slightest attention to the accident. The conversation went on without a break, and neither the old lady nor my parents so much as glanced at the floor. I was surprised.

'After that came the sensation. I wanted to see for myself what had become of the bell, and in my movement to do so attracted my father's attention. He asked me what I wanted, and I told him I was looking for the bell which the old lady had knocked down from the table. They were so astonished that I had to repeat my explanation, and that more than once. Then I became alarmed, for I saw them look meaningly at one another; and my alarm developed into terror as I realised the truth. They had heard no bell fall, because no bell had fallen. There had been no such article on the table; there was no such article in the house!'

The captain paused, and the second officer pursed his lips in an expressive whistle. He felt that the shrouding fog gave a particularly uncanny cast to a story which was sufficiently mysterious without such a ghostly accessory. He also felt that henceforth the ship's bell, so ordinary a signal under the hands of the thoughtless apprentice, might have a new significance for him.

Captain Pritchard had finished his story and was satisfied with its effects. 'Well,' he concluded, as he took another turn, 'you can imagine how such an incident would influence a rather shy, quiet child of four or five. It simply terrified me, and it was a long time before I could remember the assurance which my parents used, backed by the grand-motherly consolation of our old neighbor. There was nothing wrong, they said, nothing to be afraid of. There was really no bell, and the noise I had heard was caused by nothing more than a little trouble in my ears. Many people had had the same experience, and I would soon grow out of it.'

There was a pause.

'I've heard, sir, of people suffering from fancies of that kind,' said the mate reflectively. 'But I never heard a case given with so much detail, and so altogether remarkable. Were you ever troubled again in the same way?'

'Never that I know of,' said the captain. 'Apparently I grew out of it, as my parents expected. The experience, however, made a deep and lasting impression, and I often recall it when I hear a ship's bell struck. Another result is a certain consideration which I feel for the sometimes unreasonable fancies of children.'

The captain was a family man, a master-mariner of the best modern type, with a skill in chess that almost equalled his love for the game, and with several good shelves in his cabin piled with the best writers in colonial and other editions. So the Northgate was a good and comfortable ship, and one of the best of a popular line.

'And that's a very good result, sir,' agreed the second mate. 'But have you ever told your story to a medical man?'

'No,' answered Captain Pritchard; 'I haven't. Somehow, the opportunity hasn't turned up, or if it has, I have been reluctant to relate what, after all, may be a very simple and easily explained affair. Indeed, I hardly know why I've told the yarn to you to-day. As far as I can recollect, I've never told it to any one else.'

The mate felt not a little flattered, but Captain Pritchard at once tried to cover the compliment with reservations. 'It is the weather, perhaps,' he said. 'It is bad enough to account for anything. Six times I've sailed this course before, but never have I seen it so thick—not even in January. One needs to feel sure that there's two hundred miles of blue water straight ahead still.'

'Yes, sir. But I think it won't last much longer. I notice the wind's going round a bit south.'

'Let's hope so. And now, Mr. Gibbs, I leave you on the bridge for a few minutes. I'm going to get a cup of coffee.'

So, after another unsatisfactory look round, the captain departed, and Mr. Gibbs roused himself to the responsibilities of his position. The Northgate was doing rather less than half her speed, and screaming at every step; but the fact remained that she was plunging along her course with little more than her own length clear before her. Her signals could be heard for perhaps a quarter of a mile, but still there was the element of risk and uncertainty. He stared straight ahead into the dense white wall, and in two minutes had succeeded in forgetting the captain's curious narrative. Almost immediately afterwards, considerably to his surprise, his chief once more mounted to the bridge and joined him.

'Almost as thick as ever,' he said grimly. 'Eh?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Gibbs. 'One might just as well stare straight into a marble mantlepiece.'

Captain Pritchard made no reply. He glanced at the compass, noted what speed the ship was making, and walked to the end of the bridge and back. Apparently he was uneasy, and he had certainly lost that pleasant communicativeness of the last half-hour.

'He's a bit rawed,' thought the mate. 'In ten minutes, unless it clears a little he'll put us on quarter-speed. And I shan't be the one to blame him.'

With that he descended the ladder. Moreover, one man on the bridge was as good as two, and only half as useless.