

# Fantastic Novels

## Magazine

Vol. I

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No. 4

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"There was no rigging against the moonlit sky; the signals and other lights hung suspended in thin air . . . the boat had been drifting for months. . . ."

# The Ship That Died

By JOHN DEWITT GILBERT

**T**HE voice of the lookout boomed from the crow's nest, "An abandoned cutter about two miles to the sou' sou' east."

The second mate paused in his monotonous pacing of the bridge, lifted his head and scanned the sea off the starboard bow. He could not see the drifting boat against

the deep-blue of the noon sea, but binoculars brought it out.

Quietly he ordered the man at the wheel to alter his course and run toward the discovery. Then he sought the captain, displaying quoits on the after-deck with the officers of the regiment which the Alaska was bringing home from the Philippines.

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Unexcitedly the captain looked the derelict over. At a distance of a quarter of a mile from the cutter the big transport stopped her engines and lowered a boat. With the second mate in command, the investigator drew away from the mother ship with eight rough sailors rowing easily.

From the deck of the Alaska, the soldiers watched the two small boats draw together; saw the mate board the foundling. Then a tar wig-wagged that they were bringing the find back with them.

The Alaska steamed to meet them. Over the derelict cutter a tarpaulin had been lashed by the second mate to hide its contents. Eager, peering eyes saw nothing but a ship's cutter, badly weather-worn and storm-beaten, hoisted, with trailing moss and green sea-growths, into the waist of the vessel, whence all persons but the captain and his two mates were excluded. Throughout a good part of the afternoon their investigation was continued. The curiosity of the army officers and their wives, to say nothing of the enlisted men, had to go unappeased until the evening meal. Then rapping on the table, the captain rose.

"A few of you may be interested in the boat which we picked up this afternoon," he said. "I think that we can tell the world the last chapter of a strange story. If you wish to hear an account of it all, I will meet you in the after-cabin at seven bells."

The officers of the ship and regiment were there, with their wives and dress uniforms. The captain entered, a great scrapbook under his arm. Dropping this on a table, open to a certain page, he began the story.

**Y**OU have all heard of the mysterious case of the Carnivordshire, whose disappearance and apparent reappearance has been one of the baffling problems that has thrown a mysticism over the sea. I will tell the story briefly, in case some phases of it have not come to you in the Philippines.

"The tramp Carnivordshire, A & A Company, left Honolulu for San Francisco February 26, 1914. Two days later she was spoken by the Southern Cross, but since that time no word or message has been heard of her from that day to this. She did

not report on time and never has really been seen. Her wireless call has never stirred the antennas of ship or shore station. Her crew numbered thirty-five; with the wives of the captain and the two mates, as well as the captain's children and their nurse also aboard.

"The really strange phase of the mystery began six weeks later, when the steamer Sioux, a liner running between Portland and San Francisco, docked at Astoria, and her master, David Johnston, filed this affidavit with the port commissioners."

Picking up his scrapbook, the captain read from a newspaper clipping:

"Eighteen hours after leaving the Golden Gate I went on the bridge. It was about two in the morning. The sea was perfectly calm and the night as fine as I have seen. Taking my position, I caught the lights of a vessel some distance ahead and well off to the west.

"For an hour or more nothing happened. I loitered about the bridge admiring the night, but paying no attention to the other vessel, even though I noted that she was nearing us quite rapidly. Suddenly, however, I realized that she was steaming directly toward us, making much noise. By the beating of her wheel and the thunder of her engines, above the sound of my own boat, I knew her to be a tramp.

"The intruder made no sign or signal as to the course she expected me to take. I waited a moment or two and then gave her my siren—no reply. She was close now. I could see her sidelights plainly. All her ports were shining. Suddenly a word in code lanterns flashed in her rigging. It was Carnivordshire! I ran for the first mate.

"The moon was just setting into the sea. Part of it had already disappeared. I could see that the on-coming vessel would soon obscure it from our view. I shut the Sioux down to half speed and whistled again.

"Because of our slowing speed, the stranger had to alter her course to once more head directly for us. As she did it I became convinced that she was trying to run us down.

"I started a steady whistle and set my engines hard astern. On came the mad ship; she was crossing in front of the moon, but the moon shone on! Her hull was directly in line with it and still the great disk remained unhid. My vessel was quivering with the strain of her reversed engines and was drawing back with increasing rapidity. The other ship swung also, but I had the start of her and she was unable to swerve quickly enough to run us down.

"She crossed our bows with not a dozen feet between our nose and her sidelights. Still no vessel was there.

"There simply was not a boat in sight, only those lights and the noise of her running. I could see plain water where her hull should have been; could see the waves through her sides. There was no rigging outlined against the moonlit sky. The signals and other lights hung suspended in thin air. No solid thing was near, and yet there was the noise of a ship moving at full speed.

"She passed—but there was no sign. The smooth waves were undisturbed by any wave save our own."

"This statement was made over the affidavit of Captain Johnston, the first mate and several passengers who had witnessed the apparition," explained the master of the transport.

"There are many similar stories here," he added, showing the pages of his book in which were pasted numerous accounts paralleling in general the experience of the Sioux. "All of them tell of the appearance of the lights of a vessel which bore down upon them, refusing to answer their whistles and apparently attempting to ram them. All vessels reporting this phenomena seem to have barely escaped when the skipper reversed his engines. Always the lights were suspended in air; always the noise of the vessel was audible.

"Never was there a ship. Never was the sea disturbed. There were no visible signs of solid matter, but, whenever the incident occurred, there burned, where the rigging should have been, signal lights that spelled Carnivordshire.

"Some of the experiences were different in a way. An operator would catch a distress call—close by. The s.o.s. would come sharp and distinct, so urgent that the skipper would quickly put his boat about and rush to the rescue. Before proceeding far in the given direction, lights would be seen low down upon the water. They would sink closer to the sea as the approaching vessel drew up. The word Carnivordshire would be burning in colored lights from the rigging.

"Even as the rescuer would dash up, lowering her boats as she came, the distressed ship would slide beneath the water without showing any solid thing or showing the least sign of a vortex. There would be no blowing up of decks by compressed air, no shouts or cries. There was always the gradual sinking when help was just at hand. Boats would be lowered and the sea scoured for some sign of wreckage, but no trace of the ship or anything that might have caused the disaster was ever found.

"THESE reports came from all over the ocean," continued the captain. "One ship would put in to Pago-Pago saying that she had encountered the phantom the previous night about ten. Later advices would come from Seattle that a tug had gone on a wild-goose chase in response to an s.o.s. shortly before morning of the same day off the straits of Juan de Fuca. Such reports have been coming in quite regularly down to the present time. This morning we made a real find—the first definite evidence with bearing on the case that has come to hand.

"When the second mate went aboard the cutter which we picked up this morning he found six human skeletons—four women, a small boy and a girl. The bodies had been picked clean by birds. The boat had been drifting for months.

"After the find had been brought aboard we carefully removed the skeletons and made a search of the boat. In a far corner of a food-locker were found some pieces of paper such as are used in wrapping pilot bread. On them was written a record left

by the occupants. It is this that I have here," and he carefully produced a folded packet of yellow paper. "I will read the account:

"There are six of us drifting, we know not where, in a life-boat. We have food and water enough for our immediate needs but, if help does not come at once, we shall die of thirst and starvation.

"I am wife of the captain of the Carnivordshire. With me are the wives of the two mates of the same vessel, my two children and their nurse. We were like a large family making the passage a few days ago. Then something happened which I cannot explain and which you will not understand, nor believe. Nevertheless, it is true. -

"One night while Amos, my husband, and I were reading in our cabin the wireless operator came in to speak with the captain. They talked together for some time and soon went out, leaving me alone. I was never very much interested in the affairs of the ship and so had not noticed what they were saying. In half an hour Amos returned. He was frowning and seemed troubled. I asked if something was wrong.

"Trouble with the wireless instruments," he said. "The things are affected in some way. All parts of them are kind of rotten. Metal and wood seem to be deteriorating or getting punky. I guess they are done for."

"I went to bed soon and knew nothing more until I was awakened about three in the morning by the stopping of the engines. I lay listening for some time. Even at that hour men were moving about everywhere—an unusual thing. It was not long before the machinery started again; but now it seemed to be running unevenly, with jerky, uncertain beatings. Finally they died out altogether and the vessel lay idle in the sweeping swell of the sea. I was astonished at the halt, for we had stopped only the day before to repack some piston boxes. The men had gone swimming for an hour or two.

"Without waiting for breakfast, I dressed and went on deck. My husband and

the chief engineer were talking just outside the companion way as I came up. Not wishing to disturb them, I stopped before reaching the deck. The engineer was saying, "The whole thing is corroding. I can gouge the cylinders with a chisel and the boilers are as soft as cheese—" The men walked away. Something was wrong, that was certain, but I could make nothing of the wild words I had heard. I went on deck.

"Up forward the two mates were bending over something on the deck. As I drew near, I saw to my bewilderment a ragged hole gaping in the iron plates. The men were picking at it with their hands. I drew back and grasped the rail in horror. As I leaned my weight against it a great chunk broke out and dropped overboard. I recoiled aghast.

"Keeping my eyes on the men about the hole, I backed up to seek the support of the cabin wall. Groping blindly behind me, I touched the iron house. The cold surface of the metal slipped beneath the heel of my hand. I looked and saw that I had rubbed off a great scale of the steel. My foot slumped into something soft. I was standing in a semisolid, muddy pile that had melted down from the wall of the cabin.

"I gaped about me, dumfounded, wild-eyed. At the junction of the cabin wall and the deck ran a long crack that narrowed and widened with the strain of the vessel's rising and falling in the steady sea. I hear something break and looked up in time to see one of the stays swinging loose and lashing in the air. I slipped, half-fainting, to the deck. I could dent it with my fist. Where I dug my heel, a long rip was scrubbed in the iron plating. The metal rubbed up in rolls like freshly baked bread. I heard my husband call, "All hands aft."

"There was a moment of quiet and the crew began to swarm up from below. I had not noticed their absence. The other women sought me out. They were white and wide-eyed. They also knew. We stood together near the rail.

"My husband was not very big, but he was every inch a man and master as he

stood there, addressing the crew. He looked them over for a minute and then:

““Men, there is, as you know, something decidedly wrong with our vessel. She has been attacked by some mysterious malady which has caused her plates to rot and her engines to sluff off and melt away. You could cut the deck beneath your feet with your fingernail. The trouble started last night with the wireless apparatus. It is an electrolysis or ray of some sort that is corroding wood and metal alike. Now every part of our vessel is decayed. The whole ship is like a mushroom. There is not a solid thing aboard. You could poke your finger through every life-boat. There is no escape.”

““There are four women and two children aboard. If there were a way for ten people to leave this vessel, would not these six be among them?”

““Ay-e-e-e-e,” growled the men, assuringly.

““You were swimming yesterday, men. The cutter I lowered for you to use is still being towed astern. It is sound and unaffected by the trouble that has rendered our ship useless. In it there is room for ten persons. Four others may be selected from the crew. The two mates and myself waive our chances. Is it all right? You have said that the women might go if there were a chance. May they get in? The matter is in your hands.”

“The crew moved to the rail, looking at the boat bobbing a few fathoms away. The line to it was already fraying and rotting with the malady. They looked up.

““Ay-e-e-e-e,” they promised.

“**T**H**ERE** was a general murmur and debate for some moments about the men who were to go in the boat. Amos and the mates had come down and they were bidding us good-by. He was calm and I did not weep. “You have a chance—a chance. God go with you and save your boat from this plague. Good-by—”

“He was interrupted by one of the sailors who had stepped up above the others. “Mates,” he said, “the line to yonder

cutter is about parted. We ain’t got no time to argue or cast lots. If we did and some one yelled cheat when he lost out there’d be a big row. These women are goin’ aboard and we are goin’ to stay here, ain’t we?”

““Ay-e-e-e-AYE,” first doubtfully and then with conviction.

“The speaker went on. “The master of this vessel and mates are married men. They are the ones that should go with their wives. Aren’t they to go, too?”

““Ay-e-e.”

“But Amos rebelled. “I’m captain and I stay with my vessel till she sinks. The wife and children may go, but my duty is here even more than it is with them.” The mates said the same.

“The boat was drawn up to the side and we were bundled over and told to slide down the rope. The others got safely down, but the rope broke beneath me, throwing me into the water close beside the other craft. The women dragged me aboard. The faces leaning over the rail above wept good-by. My husband shouted, “Push clear of the ship and row away. Don’t allow any one to get in when we sink. Good-by. God bless you.”

“We clumsily rowed our boat off for a few hundred yards and waited the end. The vessel was going fast. Her masts were bent far over, like candles in summer, and her sides were bulging out with the weight of her decks. The rigging was hanging in tatters. Great flat chunks from her sides kept up a continuous splashing as they fell into the water. Long cracks appeared in her plates. Widening and gaping, they spread along her sides.

“The men could be seen moving about. The sagging deck slowly forced the boat apart and she flattened out upon the water in a great mass of scum. For an acre or more this loathsome coating of rotted ship smeared the surface. What had been left of the Carnivordshire rose and fell on the rollers like a blotch of mud. No heads forced their way through the mess. We kept close to it till night fell.

“Sleep was impossible so we lay there—looking, watching. Suddenly we heard the

sound of a vessel and looked to see the lights of a ship where we thought the scum was. She was steaming our way. We screamed and yelled. On she came. Down upon us, never swerving to right or left. She was fully lighted. In her rigging were signal lights that one of the women, who knows something of nautical matters, said spelled Carnivordshire.

"We stood up and yelled until I thought I should go mad. Still she made no sign of seeing us. She was upon us now. I bowed my head, expecting the blow. The lights passed over us. The vessel slipped through us. Her flares were all about and still there was no sign of any solid thing. The great fantom continued on her way, leaving us undisturbed by wake or swell.

"That was yesterday. We have seen no sign of ship or help and are waiting for the end. I can think calmly of my husband's death for I know we will be with him soon. He went like a brave man and

as the master of his ship should go. I would rather have him die there than here. The children suffer most, for the sun is very hot.

"Another day has passed. We are in actual need of water now. Tomorrow I may not be able to write. Nothing has happened since yesterday. We have not even seen a bird.

"All around is blue sea and sky. The sun is maddening. If only a storm would come to kill us before we die of this awful thirst.

"The next day. The rest are dead. Kenneth died in my arms but a moment ago. I think I am happy. Last night the lights of the Carnivordshire ran us down again. How pink the midnight is. I am coming, Amos. Wait for me. I am coming with the children. Wait—"

The captain of the Alaska brushed his sleeve across his eyes, picked up his scrap-book, and hurried from the cabin.