

While the Passengers Slept

by **Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932**

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THE dismal clang of the bell came plainly enough to Jordan's ears, and he leant over the side of the bridge and peered into the black waters. It seemed quite close, otherwise Jordan would not have looked, but to-night there was a thin, white haze on the sea.

He was one of the five men on the bridge of the ORTHANIC—five men heavily overcoated and muffled, for the night was bitterly cold. Captain Manson, a cigar clenched between his teeth, his hands in his overcoat pockets, stood close to the rail. Burton, the „second“, in the snug of the canvas screen, peeked vainly through his night glasses; a quartermaster, wheel in hand, showed dimly in the binnacle light, and there was a hint of another figure at the telegraph. Jordan was nervous and jumpy, all on edge, and small blame to him; he was a good seaman, and good seamen are superstitious, and the Carponic had gone down in these waters, as a warning to all optimistic ship officers who relaxed their vigilance in the English Channel. Not that the CARPONIC had been lax...

„Toll—toll!“

The sad, harsh clash of the bell came to him again, and he turned:

„You heard it, sir?“ he asked fretfully.

The skipper grunted over his cigar.

„Yes—a wreck-buoy probably.“

„A wreck-buoy, sir,“ repeated Jordan with polite scorn, „in forty fathoms of water? There’s no chance of a wreck fouling the shipping here. No, that’s Calderwood’s buoy.“ He said this with grim decision, and the second officer shuddered behind the wind-screen.

„You give me the creeps, Jordan!“

Captain Manson chuckled.

„What a superstitious devil you are, Jordan!“ he said, with a note of admiration in his voice, as though superstition was a rare gift, to be appreciated.

Jordan implicitly believed, and was not alone in his faith, that a wealthy syndicate existed in London which insured ships and employed men to cast them away.

„This is the twentieth century, Jordan. Things don’t happen like that nowadays,“ said the captain complacently.

„Human nature doesn’t change,“ growled the other.

„And you really believe that poor Calderwood puts a ghostly buoy in the water to warn mariners of danger!“ Captain Manson laughed, and turned his kindly eyes upon the stolid figure of his chief officer. „You ought to write a story about it,“ he said drily.

„Pilot boat right ahead, sir!“

The vigilant Burton’s voice split the conversation, and Captain Manson jerked an order over his shoulder. „Stop her.“

The distant jingle of the engine-room bell and the answering clang were followed by a sudden cessation of sound as the pounding engines came to a rest.

„I know what I know, sir,“ insisted Jordan doggedly. „Calderwood and I were old friends. I don’t believe his death was the result of an accident. I’ve heard that bell before—every seaman in this water has heard it in foggy weather.“

„If it wasn’t an accident it was murder,“ said the captain sharply—for him. „You mustn’t say that—very likely the man you accuse is coming on board in a minute.“

„Yes, I’ve a horrible feeling that he is,“ said the other in a low voice. He was nervous and worried, all jarred and jangled with a fear which he could not analyse. It had been a hard crossing. Two days of fog across the Banks with meandering and vagrant ice-floes to increase the difficulties of navigation, and now fog again. The skipper realised something of the strain the man had endured, and dropped his big hand on the other’s shoulder.

„Come, come, you mustn’t let your prejudices run away with you,“ he said kindly. „Calderwood was a fine pilot—the best ever—I grant you that; but Grimwald, his mate, isn’t a bad chap—a bit dour, but a good pilot.“

„He was on the CARBERRY QUEEN when she went down,“ said Jordan.

„In a fog,“ snapped the skipper; „going dead slow. She ran into a barque—you can’t make him responsible for that.“

„Pilot boat coming alongside, sir.“

The dancing masthead light of the pilot came under the starboard bow of the steamer.

„Slow astern,“ said the captain, and the telegraph bell repeated his order. „Take my tip,“ he said, addressing the first. „I’m an older man than you; get

these ideas about ghosts and warning bells, and—bogies and things out of your head. It's not good for a young man to think like that—it's unhealthy."

"Perhaps it is, sir." Jordan walked to the side and looked over. The pilot cutter was fast, and a dark figure was reaching up for the ladder.

"Will he make it?"

"He's got it, sir." He was impatient of delay at the best of times; now he lifted his megaphone.

"Stow that monkey ladder... What 'n thunder are you doing? All clear?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" shouted a distant voice.

"Cast off there, pilot cutter. Cast off, curse you! Are you deaf?" He turned with his hand at his cap. "Pilot aboard, sir."

"Full ahead!"

The telegraph bell jingled and the *thump, thump* of the engines shook the bridge deck.

The deep voice of the quartermaster from the fo'c'sle hailed the bridge.

"Fog lifting, sir."

"It was only a patch," nodded the skipper. "You ought to pick up the land as soon as she shifts."

"Start light on the port bow, sir," reported Burton.

He turned to the companionway. An awkward shape of a man was climbing up to the bridge. A big man, revealed by the bulkhead light, which he must needs pass in climbing, as one whose shapelessness did not end at a certain uncouthness of figure. The big, white face was unevenly assembled. The nose was crooked and the mouth twisted. His deep-set eyes burnt fiercely like a man consumed by an internal fever. All this Jordan saw looking down at the man with frank antagonism. Then he turned to the captain as the newcomer came to the bridge.

"Pilot, sir," he reported.

"Come aboard, sir," growled the pilot.

"Ah, pilot! Nice night." The skipper nodded a smiling welcome.

"Nice enough," said the other shortly. He looked at the binnacle.

"Strong tide running?" asked the captain.

"Bit of a tide—always is at this time of the year."

"I suppose so." He blew his whistle, and the pilot started suddenly. There were evidently two nervous men on the bridge that night. "Get the pilot some cocoa," he said to the quartermaster, who had come at the signal. "Nervous, pilot?"

"I don't know about being nervous," said the man gruffly. "Sitting out in that pilot boat for four hours makes you a bit jumpy."

Captain Manson nodded.

"So poor Calderwood used to say. You remember Calderwood?"

"Yes."

"Lost his life in your boat, didn't he?" asked the chief officer carelessly.

"I remember"—Captain Manson was in his reminiscent mood—"you were coming out to pilot the CARPONIC. He was bringing her to Dover, and you were taking her up the river and you smashed into a sailing vessel that carried no lights—and you went down."

"That's it. It wasn't my fault!"

There was almost a challenge in the pilot's voice, and the skipper laughed.

„Not your fault! Of course it wasn't, pilot. Both ships were sunk. How did you get away?“

„I grabbed a lifebelt and swam for it,“ said the man laconically.

„You were lucky,“ Jordan broke in. „It cost the underwriters a pretty penny. They said a lot of funny things, too.“

The man turned upon him fiercely.

„What do I care what they said! I did my duty. That's enough for me. They said somebody had insured cargo that wasn't on board, and that somebody made a quarter of a million through that barque gettin' in the way of the CARPONIC.“

„Without lights,“ said Jordan significantly. „Nobody ever discovered what ship she was. None of her crew were ever picked up. It wouldn't be a bad dodge for some scoundrel to abandon a ship at a certain point—a nice iron ship,“ he said slowly, „anchor her in the track of a steamer, and insure the unfortunate devil that struck her—What?“

The captain was going into the chart-room, but he stopped.

„Ah, but the pilot would have to know all about that,“ he smiled. „You could only do that if you could square the pilot. But you couldn't square the pilot. See?“

Grimwald thrust his big face almost into that of the first officer. Jordan did not flinch. In the half darkness of the bridge he stared into the eyes of the pilot, and after a moment George Grimwald turned with a growl in his throat to the man at the wheel.

„Half a point east, quartermaster,“ he said.

„Why?“ asked Jordan.

„I am piloting this ship,“ snarled the other.

„I only asked out of curiosity.“

„Strong tides, I tell you.“

„But the tide should be running south now,“ persisted Jordan.

„There's a bad current round here.“

What else he might have said in his rage was checked by the sing-song report of the look-out man on the fo'c'sle. The pilot stared ahead.

„Steamer on the starboard bow, sir.“

„Coasting boat,“ he said gruffly.

The quartermaster brought him his cocoa. He would much rather have had a nip of whisky, and said as much.

„Not on this ship,“ Jordan replied shortly. „We're rather a nervous lot of people. When you're carrying six hundred human souls you can't take risks.“

Jordan walked across the bridge to where the second cuddled up to the wind-screen.

„What glasses have you got?“ he asked.

„My own. What's the matter with 'em?“ answered the other resentfully.

„Nothing. But use mine; they're much better for night work.“

Grimwald eyed the two men anxiously. All things were significant to him that night. People who gathered to speak in low tones were talking about him. What else could they discuss? He showed his yellow teeth in a contorted smile. Then he glanced at the man at the wheel.

„Quartermaster“—he dropped his voice so that it should not carry—„what are they whispering about?“

The wheelman spat thoughtfully on the grating.

„Nothing as I know of, sir.“

They were talking about him. They blamed him for the wreck of the CARPONIC. Curse them!

„You knew my mate Calderwood, didn't you?“

„Yes, sir. A nice young man he was.“

Grimwald nodded.

„Fell overboard out of my boat. Only him and me in it. Do you think that looked suspicious?“

He asked the question eagerly, and the unimaginative seaman gasped.

„Lor' bless your life, no, sir!“ he said.

„People might say that I was trying to make him do something he didn't want to do, and that I got scared when he refused and shot him. They would say that, would they? Look!“

The quartermaster looked down, and nearly jumped. In Grimwald's hand was a long, black-barrelled revolver, and the nervous hands of the big man trembled at the trigger.

„Shot him with this,“ he whispered hoarsely, „that's what they'll be saying next. They put it about that I'm a rich man, that I grew rich suddenly after the CARPONIC was wrecked. But that's a lie. I had money left me, quartermaster, by an uncle in America. See?“

„I think you're worrying yourself about nothing,“ soothed the seaman politely.

„Put her another point east.“ He looked furtively at a little chart which he had taken from his pocket. „Yes, a point. Calderwood fell out of my boat—accidentally.“

Jordan turned suddenly.

„You've shifted her course again, pilot,“ he said sharply.

Grimwald nodded.

„There's a fishing fleet right ahead,“ he answered.

Two pairs of glasses examined the sea.

„By Jove, you've got good eyesight!“ said Burton. „I can just see 'em.“

„I gotter have good eyesight,“ growled the man. „I don't believe in these glasses. Let me have a look.“

He took the binoculars in his hand, fumbled with them a moment, then let them fall with a crash to the ground.

„Be careful!“ Jordan picked up his pet glasses with a curse.

„I haven't broken 'em?“ asked Grimwald slowly.

The chief officer swore softly as he examined his damaged glasses. Then he crossed to the little battery of speaking-tubes by the glass screen of his observation house.

„That the captain?“ he asked, when an answering whistle shrilled. „Jordan speaking, sir! Yes, everything all right; but I'm leaving the bridge for a moment to find my other glasses. Ay, ay, sir! Watch like the devil, Burton!“ he muttered, as he passed his subordinate.

The pilot's eyes followed him, striving, as it seemed, to pierce the darkness which swallowed his antagonist—for such he knew him to be. Then he turned again to the binnacle with a shrug of his shoulders. He slipped a flat flask from his pocket, half-raised it to his lips; then, catching the steersman's eye, he extended his arm.

„Have a drink?“ he whispered.

„No, thank you, sir; not on duty!“ he said stiffly.

„Well, there's more for me!“ growled the other; and strolled across to Burton.
„We've passed that fishing fleet?“

Burton nodded. He was peering anxiously ahead. The stars which had been hanging on the horizon were blotted out again.

Jordan came back to the deck with a second pair of binoculars, and so they stood for ten minutes, none speaking, staring ahead at the slow-heaving sea; and little by little, the belt of darkness on the horizon rose like a curtain.

„Looks like a fog-bank right ahead,“ said Burton suddenly.

„It's nothing; you get these patches in the Channel. We shall be through it in five minutes,“ said Grimwald.

Jordan crossed again to his protecting screen and pressed a little bell. He walked briskly over to the port telegraph, and laid his hand on the lever.

„You're not going to reduce speed?“ growled Grimwald.

„I am.“

„For a bit of smoke?“ sneered the other.

„For a bit of smoke,“ repeated Jordan; and rang the engines to half-speed.
„There are six hundred people on board this ship, pilot, and a very valuable cargo.“

„I'm in charge of this ship!“ said the pilot loudly.

„You can tell us the way“—Jordan was brusque to the point of rudeness—
„but I will decide how fast we go!“

The skipper, summoned by the bell, came up the companion-way buttoning his great-coat.

Jordan turned.

„Fog ahead, sir! I've reduced her to a half.“

Captain Manson clicked his lips impatiently.

„You're right! In a minute we shan't see the foc's'le!“

Through the patchy mist ahead came the melancholy boom of a siren. He turned with a little smile to the pilot.

„This is the kind of weather when I liked to have your poor friend Calderwood on my bridge. Slow ahead!“

A signal had brought the quartermasters to their stations.

Obedient to the command, the telegraph rattled over, and the clang of the answering bell came before a slower thud of engines told of the reduced speed.

The fog came with a rush. A grey cloud rose under the bows and swept over the foc's'le head, a swirling, wreathing blanket of wet smoke that hid even the foc's'le lights from view. Then of a sudden all the bulkhead lights went off, and the bridge was in absolute darkness.

„Who put out those bulkhead lights? Quartermaster, what the devil is the matter with the lights?“

„Fuse gone, I think sir,“ said a muffled voice.

„Dead slow!“ It was the captain's voice, and again the telegraph clanged.

„Calderwood, Calderwood—always Calderwood!“ muttered Grimwald. Can't they talk of something else? „Calderwood could see; Calderwood would pilot with his cursed eyes shut! But Calderwood is dead—dead—dead!“

He was speaking to himself, aloud. He was oblivious of the fog, forgetful of all else save that he could not get away from Calderwood—could not forget the face of the man, the despairing eyes of him as he went swirling to death in the wake of the pilot-boat, the waters all dull-red with his blood. Thus Grimwald had watched him, as he stood pistol in hand, hypnotised.

„Barque right ahead!“

The voice was at Grimwald's elbow.

„Who is that?“ he gasped; and, as he asked, he knew.

His hair went up; he could feel his face shrivel and pucker with fear. He wanted to scream, and opened his mouth; but no sound came.

Then he saw.

Faintly in the fog the ghostly figure of a man by the quartermaster's side.

Calderwood!

Calderwood, white of face and horribly wet, little strips of seaweed hanging from his dripping clothes. Slowly the figure turned its head, and the mouth fell pitifully.

„Don't shoot me, Grimwald!“ it whined. „I've a young wife and a child! Don't shoot me, Grimwald! I can't wreck a ship; I can't do it! A point to the north!“

This last to the steersman, and the wheel went round slowly.

„Ay, ay, sir!“

The quartermaster answered mechanically, his eyes fixed on the compass before him. Grimwald went cringing forward, his shaking hands outstretched—

„I didn't mean to kill!“ he croaked; and went stumbling to his knees. „I swear it! Don't follow me! We were friends once—mercy, mercy!“

A shout from the captain.

„What's that ahead? Look out, man!“

„Nothing ahead, sir; fog lifting!“

„God, I almost felt it!“

The captain wiped his streaming forehead, but Grimwald neither saw nor heard. He was looking at Calderwood, a twisted grin on his face, his big hands waving persuasively.

„Get back—get back!“ he stammered. „Get your lifebelt; we're going to strike, Calderwood!“ He laughed long and terribly. „Come along; get your lifebelt,“ he whispered. „I've got mine. They'll pick us up. Don't stand there looking at me, damn you!“ he snarled, and whipped out his revolver. „I shot once; I can shoot again!“

„What's that?“

Jordan saw it first and almost shrieked the words.

„Something ahead, sir!“

The warning was a terrified roar from the look-out man.

„Port your helm! Port your helm!“

It was Calderwood who spoke, and the wheel spun under the quartermaster's hand.

„My God! Full astern!“

The engines clanged as the big liner heeled over. The clang and the shot came together.

Jordan heard the shot, but he was glaring at the hull ahead—the black, lightless hull that went sweeping past on the starboard bow, so close that one might jump aboard.

Captain Manson spun round as he saw the danger drop away into the darkness of the night.

He crossed to the prostrate figure of Grimwald.

„What's wrong?“ he asked.

„I don't know, sir; someone told me to port my helm!“ said the white-faced quartermaster.

Jordan joined the captain, and together they knelt by his side.

„This man is dead,“ said the captain, in a hushed voice.

„Dead?“

Burton turned, too full of his business to heed the minor tragedy.

„Fog lifted, sir!“

„Dead?“ Manson picked up the revolver. „Not shot?“

Jordan was examining the dead man by the light of an electric torch.

„His face is the face of a man who has seen—“ He looked seriously down at the distorted features. „I wonder what he saw?“ he said, half to himself.

