



An Adventure of the Deep Waters

by William Hope Hodgson

Due to an unfortunate production glitch, the last few lines of “An Adventure of the Deep Waters” were omitted from *The Collected Fiction of William Hope Hodgson Volume 5: The Dream of X and Other Fantastic Visions* (978-1-892389-43-5). What follows is a corrected version of that story. We at Night Shade Books sincerely regret the error.

An Adventure of the Deep Waters

THIS IS AN EXTRAORDINARY TALE. We had come up from the Cape, and owing to the Trades heading us more than usual, we had made some hundreds of miles more westing than I ever did before or since.

I remember perfectly the particular night of the happening. I suppose what occurred stamped it solid into my memory with a thousand little details that in the ordinary way I should never have remembered an hour. And, of course, we talked it over so often among ourselves that this no doubt helped to fix it all past any forgetting.

I remember the Mate and I had been pacing the weather side of the poop and discussing various old shellbacks' superstitions. I was third mate, and it was between four and five bells in the first watch (i.e. between ten and half-past). Suddenly, he stopped in his walk and lifted his head and sniffed several times.

"My word, Mister," he said, "there's a rum kind of stink somewhere about. Don't you smell it?"

I sniffed once or twice at the light airs that were coming in on the beam; then I walked to the rail and leaned over, smelling again at the slight breeze. And abruptly I got a whiff of it, faint and sickly, yet vaguely suggestive of something I had once smelt before.

"I can smell something, Mr. Lammart," I said. "I could almost give it name; and yet, somehow I can't." I stared away into the dark, to windward. "What do you seem to smell?" I asked him.

"I can't smell anything now," he replied, coming over and standing beside me. "It's gone again—No! By Jove! there it is again. My goodness! Phoo—"

The smell was all about us now, filling the night air. It had still that indefinable familiarity about it, and yet it was curiously strange; and, more than anything else, it was certainly simply beastly.

The stench grew stronger, and presently the Mate asked me to go

forward, and see whether the lookout man noticed anything. When I reached the break of the forecastle head, I called up to the man, to know whether he smelled anything.

“Smell anything, sir!” he sang out. “Jumpin’ larks! I sh’ud think I do. I’m fair p’isoned with it!”

I ran up the weather steps, and stood beside him. The smell was certainly very plain up there; and after savouring it for a few moments, I asked him whether he thought it might be a dead whale. But he was very emphatic that this could not be the case; for, as he said, he had been nearly fifteen years in whaling ships, and knew the smell of a dead whale “like as you would the smell of bad whisky, sir,” as he put it. “’Tain’t no whale, yon; but the Lord He knows what ’tis. I’m thinkin’ it’s Davy Jones come up for a breather.”

I stayed with him some minutes, staring out into the darkness, but could see nothing; for, even had there been something big close to us, I doubt whether I could have seen it, so black a night it was, without a visible star, and with a vague, dull haze breeding an indistinctness all about the ship.

I returned to the Mate and reported that the lookout complained of the smell; but that neither he nor I had been able to see anything in the darkness to account for it.

By this time the queer, disgusting odour seemed to be in all the air about us, and the Mate told me to go below and shut all the ports, so as to keep the beastly smell out of the cabins and the saloon.

When I returned he suggested that we should shut the companion doors; and after that we commenced to pace the poop again, discussing the extraordinary smell, and stopping from time to time to stare through our night glasses out into the night about the ship.

“I’ll tell you what it smells like, Mister,” the Mate remarked, once, “and that’s like a mighty old derelict I once went aboard in the North Atlantic. She was a proper old-timer, an’ she gave us all the creeps. There was just this funny, dank, rummy sort of smell about her, sort of century-old bilge-water and dead men an’ seaweed. I can’t stop thinkin’ we’re nigh some lonesome old packet out there; an’ a good thing we’ve not much way on us!”

“Do you notice how almighty quiet everything’s gone the last half hour or so?” I said, a little later. “It must be the mist thickening down.”

“It is the mist,” said the Mate, going to the rail and staring out. “Good Lord, what’s that?” he added.

Something had knocked his hat from his head, and it fell with a

sharp rap at my feet. And suddenly, you know, I got a premonition of something horrid.

“Come away from the rail, sir,” I said, sharply, and gave one jump, and caught him by the shoulders and dragged him back. “Come away from the side!”

“What’s up, Mister?” he growled at me, and twisted his shoulders free. “What’s wrong with you? Was it you knocked off my cap?” He stooped and felt around for it; and as he did so I heard something unmistakably fiddling away at the rail, which the Mate had just left.

“My God, sir!” I said, “there’s something there. Hark!”

The Mate stiffened up, listening; then he heard it. It was for all the world as if something was feeling and rubbing the rail, there in the darkness, not two fathoms away from us.

“Who’s there?” said the Mate quickly. Then, as there was no answer: “What the devil’s this hanky-panky? Who’s playing the goat there?” He made a swift step through the darkness towards the rail, but I caught him by the elbow.

“Don’t go, Mister!” I said, hardly above a whisper. “It’s not one of the men. Let me get a light.”

“Quick, then!” he said; and I turned and ran aft to the binnacle and snatched out the lighted lamp. As I did so I heard the Mate shout something out of the darkness, in a strange voice. There came a sharp, loud, rattling sound, and then a crash, and immediately the Mate roaring to me to hasten with the light. His voice changed, even whilst he shouted, and gave out something that was nearer a scream than anything else. There came two loud, dull blows, and an extraordinary gasping sound; and then, as I raced along the poop, there was a tremendous smashing of glass, and an immediate silence.

“Mr. Lammart!” I shouted. “Mr. Lammart!” And then I had reached the place where I had left the Mate, not forty seconds before; but the Mate was not there.

“Mr. Lammart!” I shouted again, holding the light high over my head, and turning quickly to look behind me. As I did so my foot glided on some slippery substance and I went headlong to the deck, with a tremendous thud, smashing the lamp and putting out the light.

I was on my feet again in an instant. I groped a moment for the lamp, and as I did so I heard the men singing out from the main-deck and the noise of their feet as they came running aft. I found the broken lamp and realised it was useless; then I jumped for the companionway, and in half a minute I was back, with the big saloon lamp glaring bright in my hands.

I ran forward again, shielding the upper edge of the glass chimney from the draught of my running, and the blaze of the big lamp seemed to make the weather side of the poop as bright as day, except for the mist, that gave something of a vagueness to things.

Where I had left the Mate there was blood upon the deck, but nowhere any signs of the man himself. I ran to the weather rail and held the lamp to it. There was blood upon it; and the rail itself seemed to have been wrenched by some huge force. I put out my hand and found that I could shake it. Then I leaned out-board and held the lamp at arm's length, staring down over the ship's side.

"Mr. Lammart!" I shouted into the night and the thick mist. "Mr. Lammart! Mr. Lammart!" But my voice seemed to go lost and muffled and infinitely small away into the billowy darkness.

I heard the men snuffing and breathing, waiting to leeward of the poop. I whirled round to them, holding the lamp high.

"We heard somethin', sir," said Tarpley, the leading seaman in our watch. "Is anything wrong, sir?"

"The Mate's gone," I said blankly. "We heard something, and I went for the binnacle lamp. Then he shouted, and I heard something smashing things; and when I got back he'd gone clean." I turned and held the light out again over the unseen sea; and the men crowded round along the rail, and stared, bewildered.

"Blood, sir," said Tarpley, pointing. "There's something almighty queer out there!" He waved a huge hand into the darkness. "That's what stinks—"

He never finished; for, suddenly, one of the men cried out something in a frightened voice: "Look out, sir! Look out, sir!"

I saw, in one brief flash of sight, something come in with an infernal flicker of movement; and then, before I could form any notion of what I had seen, the lamp was dashed to pieces across the poop deck. In that instant my perceptions cleared, and I saw the incredible folly of what we were doing; for there we were, standing up against the blank, unknowable night; and out there in the dark there surely lurked some thing of monstrousness; and we were at its mercy. I seemed to feel it hovering, hovering over us; so that I felt the sickening creep of gooseflesh all over me.

"Stand back from the rail!" I shouted. "Stand back from the rail!" There was a rush of feet as the men obeyed, in sudden apprehension of their danger; and I gave back with them. Even as I did so I felt some invisible thing brush my shoulder; and an indescribable smell was in my nostrils, from something that moved over me in the dark.

“Down into the saloon, everyone!” I shouted. “Down with you all! Don’t wait a moment!”

There was a rush along the dark weather deck, and then the men went helter skelter down the companion steps, into the saloon, falling and cursing over one another in the darkness. I sung out to the man at the wheel to join them, and then I followed.

I came upon the men huddled at the foot of the stairs, and filling up the passage, all crowding each other in the darkness. The Skipper’s voice was filling the saloon, and he was demanding in violent adjectives the cause of so tremendous a noise. From the steward’s berth there came also a voice, and the splutter of a match; and then the glow of a lamp in the saloon itself.

I pushed my way through the men and found the Captain in the saloon, in his sleeping gear, looking both drowsy and angry, though perhaps bewilderment topped every other feeling. He held his cabin lamp in his hand, and shone the light over the huddle of men.

I hurried to explain, and told him of the incredible disappearance of the Mate, and of my conviction that some extraordinary thing was lurking near the ship, out in the mist and the darkness. I mentioned the curious smell, and told how the Mate had suggested that we had drifted down near some old-time, sea-rotted derelict. And, you know, even as I put it into awkward words, my imagination began to awaken to horrible discomforts—a thousand dreadful impossibilities of the sea became suddenly possible.

The Captain (Jeldy was his name) did not stop to dress, but ran back into his cabin, and came out in a few moments with a couple of revolvers and a handful of cartridges. The second mate had come running out of his cabin at the noise, and had listed intensely to what I had to say. Now he jumped back into his berth and brought out his own lamp and a large-pattern revolver which was evidently ready loaded.

Captain Jeldy pushed one of his revolvers into my hands with some of the cartridges, and we began hastily to load the weapons. Then the Captain caught up his lamp and made for the stairway, ordering the men into the saloon out of his way.

“Shall you want them, sir?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s no use their running any unnecessary risks.” He threw a word over his shoulder: “Stay quiet here, men; if I want you, I’ll give you a shout; then come spry!”

“Aye, aye, sir,” said the watch, in a chorus; and then I was following the Captain up the stairs, with the second mate close behind.

We came up through the companionway on to the silence of the

deserted poop. The mist had thickened up, even during the brief time that I had been below, and there was not a breath of wind. The mist was so dense that it seemed to press in upon us; and the two lamps made a kind of luminous halo in the mist, which seemed to absorb their light in a most peculiar way.

“Where was he?” the Captain asked me, almost in a whisper.

“On the port side, sir,” I said, “a little foreside the charthouse, and about a dozen feet in from the rail. I’ll show you the exact place.”

We went forward along what had been the weather side, going quietly and watchfully; though, indeed, it was little enough that we could see because of the mist. Once, as I led the way, I thought I heard a vague sound somewhere in the mist; but was all unsure because of the creak, creak of the spars and gear as the vessel rolled slightly upon an odd, oily swell. Apart from this slight sound, and the far-up rustle of the canvas, slating gently against the masts, there was no sound at all throughout the ship. I assure you, the silence seemed to me to be almost menacing, in the tense, nervous state in which I was.

“Hereabouts is where I left him,” I whispered to the Captain, a few seconds later. “Hold your lamp low, sir. There’s blood on the deck.”

Captain Jelly did so, and made a slight sound with his mouth at what he saw. Then, heedless of my hurried warning, he walked across to the rail, holding his lamp high up. I followed him; for I could not let him go alone; and the second mate came too, with his lamp. They leaned over the port rail, and held their lamps out into the mist and the unknown darkness beyond the ship’s side. I remember how the lamps made just two yellow glares in the mist, ineffectual, yet serving somehow to make extraordinarily plain the vastitude of the night, and the possibilities of the dark. Perhaps that is a queer way to put it, but it gives you the effect of that moment upon my feelings. And all the time, you know, there was upon me the brutal, frightening expectancy of something reaching in at us from out of that everlasting darkness and mist that held all the sea and the night, so that we were just three mist-shrouded, hidden figures, peering nervously.

The mist was now so thick that we could not even see the surface of the water overside; and fore and aft of us the rail vanished away into the fog and the dark. And then, you know, as we stood here staring, I heard something moving down on the main deck. I caught Captain Jelly by the elbow.

“Come away from the rail, sir,” I said, hardly above a whisper; and he—with the swift premonition of danger—stepped back and allowed me to urge him well inboard. The second mate followed, and the three

of us stood there in the mist, staring round about us and holding our revolvers handy, and the dull waves of the mist beating in slowly upon the lamps in vague wreathings and swirls of fog.

“What was it you heard, Mister?” asked the Captain, after a few moments.

“S-s-s-t!” I muttered. “There it is again. There’s something moving, down on the main-deck!”

Captain Jeldy heard it himself, now; and the three of us stood listening intensely. Yet it was hard to know what to make of the sounds. And then, suddenly, there was the rattle of a deck ringbolt, and then again, as if something or someone were fumbling and playing with it.

“Down there on the main deck!” shouted the Captain, abruptly, his voice seeming hoarse close to my ear, yet immediately smothered by the fog. “Down there on the main deck! Who’s there?”

But there came never an answering sound. And the three of us stood there, looking quickly this way and that, and listening. Try to imagine how we felt! Abruptly the second mate muttered something:

“The lookout, sir! The lookout!”

Captain Jeldy took the hint, on the instant.

“On the lookout there!” he shouted.

And then, far away and muffled-sounding, there came the answering cry of the lookout man from the fo’cas’le head:

“Sir-r-r!” A little voice, long drawn out, through unknowable alleys of fog.

“Go below into the fo’cas’le, and shut both doors, and don’t stir out till you’re told!” sung out Captain Jeldy, his voice going lost into the mist. And then the man’s answering: “Aye, aye, sir!” came to us faint and mournful. And directly afterwards the clang of a steel door, hollow-sounding and remote; and immediately the sound of another.

“That puts them safe for the present, anyway,” said the second mate. And even as he spoke, there came again that indefinite noise, down upon the main deck, of something moving with an incredible and unnatural stealthiness.

“On the main deck there!” shouted Captain Jeldy, sternly. “If there is anyone there, answer, or I shall fire!”

The reply was both amazing and terrifying; for, suddenly, a tremendous blow was stricken upon the deck, and then there came the dull rolling sound of some enormous weight going hollowly across the main-deck. And then an abominable silence.

“My God!” said Captain Jeldy, in a low voice, “what was that?” And he raised his pistol, but I caught him by the wrist. “Don’t shoot, sir!” I

whispered. "It'll do no good. That—that—whatever it is—I—I mean it's something enormous, sir. I—I really wouldn't shoot—" I found it impossible to put my vague idea into words; but I felt there was a Force aboard, down on the main-deck, that it would be futile to attack with so ineffectual a thing as a puny revolver bullet.

And then, as I held Captain Jeldy's wrist, and he hesitated, irresolute there came a sudden bleating of sheep, and the sound of lashings being burst and the cracking of wood; and the next instant a huge crash, followed by another and then another, and the anguished m-a-a-ma-a-ing of the sheep.

"My God!" said the second mate, "the sheep pen's being beaten to pieces against the deck. Good God! What sort of thing could do that!"

The tremendous beating ceased, and there was a splashing over-side; and after that a silence so profound that it seemed as if the whole atmosphere of the night was full of an unbearable, tense quietness. And then the damp slatting of a sail, far up in the night, that made me start—a lonesome sound to break suddenly through that infernal silence, upon my raw nerves.

"Get below, both of you. Smartly now!" muttered Captain Jeldy. "There's something run either aboard us or alongside; and we can't do anything till daylight."

We went below, and shut the doors of the companionway, and there we lay in the wide Atlantic, without wheel or lookout or officer in charge, and something incredible down on the dark main-deck.

II

For some hours we sat in the Captain's cabin, talking the matter over, while the men slept, sprawled in a dozen attitudes on the floor of the saloon. Captain Jeldy and the second mate still wore their pajamas, and our loaded revolvers lay handy on the cabin table. And so we watched anxiously through the hours for the dawn to come in.

As the light strengthened, we endeavoured to get some view of the sea from the ports; but the mist was so thick about us that it was exactly like looking out into a grey nothingness, that became presently white, as the day came.

"Now," said Captain Jeldy, "we're going to look into this." He went out through the saloon, to the companion stairs. At the top he opened the two doors, and the mist rolled in on us, white and impenetrable. For a little while we stood there, the three of us, absolutely silent and listening, with our revolvers handy; but never a sound came to us except

the odd, vague slatting of a sail, or the slight creaking of the gear as the ship lifted on some slow, invisible swell.

Presently the Captain stepped cautiously out on to the deck; he was in his cabin slippers, and therefore made no sound. I was wearing gum-boots, and followed him silently, and the second mate came after me, in his bare feet. Captain Jeldy went a few paces along the deck and the mist hid him utterly. "Phoo!" I heard him mutter, "the stink's worse than ever!" His voice came odd and vague to me through the wreathing of the mist.

"The sun'll soon eat up all this fog," said the second mate, at my elbow, in a voice little above a whisper.

We stepped after the Captain, and found him a couple of fathoms away, standing shrouded in the mist in an attitude of tense listening.

"Can't hear a thing!" he whispered. "We'll go foward to the break, as quiet as you like. Don't make a sound."

We went forward, like three shadows, and suddenly Captain Jeldy kicked his shin against something, and pitched headlong over it, making a tremendous noise. He got up quickly, swearing grimly, and the three of us stood there in silence, waiting lest any infernal thing should come upon us out of all that white invisibility. Once I felt sure I saw something coming towards me, and I raised my revolver; but saw in a moment that there was nothing. The tension of imminent, nervous expectancy eased from us, and Captain Jeldy stooped over the object on the deck.

"The port hencoop's been shifted out here!" he muttered. "It's all stove!"

"That must be what I heard last night, when the Mate went," I whispered. There was a loud crash, just before he sang out to me to hurry with the lamp."

Captain Jeldy left the smashed hencoop, and the three of us tiptoed silently to the rail across the break of the poop. Here we leaned over and stared down into the blank whiteness of the mist that hid everything.

"Can't see a thing," whispered the second mate; yet, as he spoke, I could fancy that I heard a slight, indefinite, slurring noise somewhere below us, and I caught them each by an arm to draw them back.

"There's something down there," I muttered. "For goodness' sake, come back from the rail."

We gave back a step or two, and then stopped to listen; and even as we did so there came a slight air playing through the mist.

"The breeze is coming!" said the second mate. "Look, the mist is clearing already!"

He was right. Already the look of white impenetrability had gone; and suddenly we could see the corner of the after hatch coamings through the thinning fog. Within a minute we could see as far forward as the mainmast, and then the stuff blew away from us, clear of the vessel, like a great wall of whiteness, that dissipated as it went.

“Look!” we all exclaimed together. The whole of the vessel was now clear to our sight; but it was not at the ship herself that we looked; for after one quick glance along the empty main-deck, we had seen something beyond the ship’s side. All around the vessel there lay a submerged spread of weed, for maybe a good quarter of a mile upon every side.

“Weed!” sung out Captain Jeldy, in a voice of comprehension. “Weed! Look, by Jove! I guess I know now what got the Mate!”

He turned and ran to the port side and looked over. And suddenly he stiffened and beckoned silently over his shoulder to us to come and see. We had followed, and now we stood, one on each side of him, staring.

“Look!” whispered the Captain, pointing. “See the great brute! Do you see it? There! Look!”

At first I could see nothing except the submerged spread of the weed into which we had evidently run after dark. Then, as I stared intently, my gaze began to separate from the surrounding weed a leathery looking something that was somewhat darker in hue than the weed itself.

“My God!” said Captain Jeldy. “What a monster! What a monster! Just look at the brute! Look at the thing’s eyes! That’s what got the Mate. What a creature out of hell itself!”

I saw it plainly now. Three of the massive feelers lay twined in and out among the clumpings of the weed; and then, abruptly, I realised that the two extraordinary round disks, motionless and inscrutable, were the creature’s eyes, just below the surface of the water. It appeared to be staring, expressionless, up at the steel side of the vessel. I traced, vaguely, the shapeless monstrosity of what must be termed its head. “My God!” I muttered. “It’s an enormous squid of some kind! What an awful brute! What—”

The sharp report of the Captain’s revolver came at that moment. He had fired at the thing; and instantly there was a most awful commotion alongside. The weed was hove upward, literally in tons. An enormous quantity was thrown aboard us by the thrashing of the monster’s great feelers. The sea seemed almost to boil in one great cauldron of weed and water all about the brute, and the steel side of the ship resounded

with the dull, tremendous blows that the creature gave in its struggle. And into all that whirling boil of tentacles, weed and sea water, the three of us emptied our revolvers as fast as we could fire and reload. I remember the feeling of fierce satisfaction I had in thus aiding to avenge the death of the Mate.

Suddenly the Captain roared out to us to jump back; and we obeyed on the instant. As we did so the weed rose up into a great mound, more than twenty feet in height, and more than a ton of it slopped aboard. The next instant three of the monstrous tentacles came in over the side, and the vessel gave a slow, sullen roll to port, as the weight came upon her; for the monster had literally hove itself up almost free of the sea against our port side, in one vast, leathery shape, all wreathed with weed fronds, and seeming drenched with blood and some curious black liquid.

The feelers that had come inboard thrashed around, here and there, and suddenly one of them curled in the most hideous, snake-like fashion around the base of the mainmast. This seemed to attract it; for immediately it curled the two others about the mast and forthwith wrenched upon it with such hideous violence that the whole towering length of spars, through all their height of a hundred and thirty feet, were shaken visibly, whilst the vessel herself vibrated with the stupendous efforts of the brute.

“It’ll have the mast down, sir!” said the second mate, with a gasp. “My God! It’ll strain her side open! My—”

“One of those blasting cartridges!” I said to Captain Jelly almost in a shout, as the inspiration took me. “Blow the brute to pieces!”

“Get one, quick!” said the Captain, jerking his thumb toward the companion. “You know where they are.”

In thirty seconds I was back with the cartridge. Captain Jelly took out his knife and cut the fuse dead short; then, with a perfectly steady hand he lit the fuse and calmly held it until I backed away, shouting to him to throw it, for I knew it must explode in another couple of seconds.

Captain Jelly threw the thing, like one throws a quoit, so that it fell into the sea, just on the outward side of the vast bulk of the monster. So well had he timed it that it burst, with a stunning report, just as it struck the water. The effect upon the squid was amazing. It seemed literally to collapse. The enormous tentacles released themselves from the mast and curled across the deck helplessly, and were drawn inertly over the rail as the enormous bulk sank away from the ship’s side out of sight into the weed. The ship rolled slowly to starboard and then

steadied. "Thank God!" I muttered, and looked at the two others. They were pallid and sweating, and I must have been the same.

"Here's the breeze again," said the second mate, a minute later. "We're moving." He turned, without another word, and raced aft to the wheel, while the vessel slid over and through the weed field.

Meanwhile, Captain Jeldy had sung out to the men, who had opened the port fore-castle door, to keep under cover until he told them to come out. Then he turned to have a look at the vessel itself.

"Look where that brute broke up the sheep-pen!" cried Jeldy, pointing. "And here's the skylight of the sail locker smashed to bits!"

He walked across to it and glanced down. And suddenly he let out a thunderous shout of astonishment:

"Here's the Mate, down here!" he shouted. "He's not over board at all! He's here!"

He dropped himself down through the skylight on to the sails, and I after him; and, surely, there was the Mate, lying all huddled and insensible on a hummock of spare sails. In his right hand he held a drawn sheath knife, which he was in the habit of carrying, A.B. fashion, while his left hand was all caked with dried blood where he had been badly cut. Afterward we concluded he had cut himself in slashing at one of the tentacles of the squid, which had caught him round the left wrist, the tip of the tentacle being still curled, cruelly tight, about his arm, just as it had been when he hacked it through.

For the rest, it will please you, I am sure, to know that he was not seriously damaged; the creature having obviously flung him violently away, as he slashed at it, so that he had fallen in a stunned condition on to the pile of sails.

We got him on deck and down into his bunk, where we left the steward to attend to him. When we returned to the poop, the vessel had drawn clear of the weed field, and the Captain and I stopped for a few moments to stare astern over the taffrail. The second mate turned also, as he stood at the wheel, and the three of us looked in a silence at that Death Patch lying so quiet and sullen in the dawn.

As we stood and looked, something wavered up out of the heart of the weed—a long, tapering, sinuous thing, that curled and wavered against the dawn-light, and presently sank back again into the demure weed—a veritable spider of the deep, waiting in the great web that Dame Nature had spun for it, in the eddy of her tides and currents.

And we sailed away northward, with strengthening Trades, and left that patch of monstrosity to the loneliness of the sea.