



Library podcast

Thrilling Tales, A Storytime for Grownups presents: “On the Bridge” and “The Mystery of the Derelict” by William Hope Hodgson

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[00:00:40] Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to Thrilling Tales, Seattle Public Library’s Story Time for Grownups. My name is David, I’m a librarian here. I work on the third floor in the Reader Services Department. We’ve got all kinds of great books up there, thrilling and otherwise. We’d love to see you sometime. Thrilling Tales generally happens on the first and third Monday of every month right here. However, this July, we’ve got weekly stories in honor of Seafair and all of the stories have something to do with ships and the sea. Today we have two stories by a writer named William Hope Hodgson. He was a British writer, his dates are 1877 to 1918, and he was very well known for his stories of weird and strange, a big influence on *Lovecraft* and other later writers. His novels include *The House on the Borderland* and the *Ghost Pirates*. He had a nautical background, he was a sailor when he was young. Today’s stories come from a collection that was published exactly a century ago called *Men of the Deep Waters*. And soon after publishing that collection, he joined countless other young men to enlist and die in the Great War that also started a century ago, this month. At that time in 1914, the horrors of the war to come could not be imagined. And if you asked people what was a really kind of a great exemplar of terror and tragedy, they would have thought of the Titanic, which had recently happened, as witnessed by our first brief story from Mr. Hodgson. It’s called, “*On the Bridge*”.

[00:02:29] The eight to 12 watch, and ice was in sight at nightfall. In memory of April 14th, 1912, latitude 41 degrees, 16 minutes north, longitude 50 degrees, 14 minutes west. Two bells has just gone. It is nine o’clock. You walk to the windward and sniff anxiously. Yes, there it is, unmistakably the never to be forgotten smell of ice, a smell as indescribable as it is unmistakable.

[00:03:06] You stare, fiercely anxious, almost incredibly anxious to windward, and sniff again and again. And you never cease to peer, until the very eyeballs ache, and you curse almost insanely because some door has been opened and lets out a shaft of futile and dangerous light across the gloom, through which the great ship is striding across the miles. For the least show of light about the

deck blinds the officer of the watch temporarily, and makes the darkness of the night a double curtain of gloom, threatening hatefully. You curse, and phone angrily for a steward to go along and have the door shut or the window covered, as the case may be. Then once again to the dreadful strain of watching.

[00:03:52] Just try to take it all in.

[00:03:56] You are perhaps, only a young man of 26 or 28, and you are in sole charge of that great bulk of life and wealth, thundering across the miles. One hour of your watch has gone, and there are three to come, and already you are feeling the strain. And reason enough too, for though the bridge telegraph pointer stands at half speed, you know perfectly well that the engine room has its private orders, and speed is not cut down at all. And all around, to windward and looward, you can see the gloom pierce dimly in this place and that, everlastingly, by the bursts of phosphorescence from breaking sea crests. Thousands and tens of thousands of times, you see this ahead, upon either beam, and you sniff and you're trying to distinguish between the coldness of the half gale and the peculiar and what I might term personal, brutal, ugly chill of death that comes stealing down to you through the night as you pass some ice hill in the darkness. And then, those countless bursts of dull phosphorescence that break out eternally from the chaos of the unseen waters about you become suddenly things of threatening that frighten you. For any one of them may mean broken water about the unseen shore of some hidden island of ice in the night. Some half submerged, inert, insensate monster of ice lurking under the wash of the seas, trying to steal unperceived athwart your hawse.

[00:05:39] You raise your hand instinctively in the darkness and cry, "Hard to starboard", literally trembles on your lips, and then you are saved from making an overanxious spectacle of yourself.

[00:05:49] Or you see now that the particular burst of phosphorescence that had seemed so pregnant of ice, is nothing more than any one of the 10,000 other bursts of sea light that come and go among the great mounding's of the sea foam in the surrounding night. And yet, there is that infernal ice smell again. And the chill that I have called, the chill of death is stealing in again upon you from some unknown quarter of the night. You send word forward to the lookouts and to the man in the nest and redouble your own care of the thousand humans who sleep so trustfully in their bunks beneath your feet, trusting you.

[00:06:34] A young man with their lives, with everything.

[00:06:39] They, and the great ship that strides so splendid and blind through the night, the dangers of the night are all, as it were, in the hollow of your hand.

[00:06:51] A moment of inattention and a thousand deaths upon the head of your father's son.

[00:06:57] Do you wonder that you watch, with your very heart seeming dry with anxiety on such a night as this?

[00:07:07] Four bells!

[00:07:09] Five bells! Six bells! And now there is only an hour to go, yet, already you've nearly given the signal three times to the quartermaster to port or starboard, as the case may be, but each time the conjured terror of the night, the dree, suggestive foam lights, the infernal ice smell and the chill of death have proved to be no true prophets of disaster

[00:07:33] in your track. Seven bells! My God. Even as the sweet silver sounds wander fore and aft into the night, and are engulfed by the gale, you see something close upon the starboard bow.

[00:07:53] A boil of phosphorescent lights, over some low lying sea buried thing in the darkness. Your night glasses are glaring at it, and then, even before the various lookouts can make their reports, you know. My God! Your spirit is crying inside you. "My God!" But your human voice is roaring words that hold life and death for a thousand sleeping souls. "Hard to starboard! Hard to starboard!" The man in the wheelhouse leaps at your cry, at the fierce intensity of it. And then, with a momentary loss of nerve, whirls the wheel the wrong way. You make one jump, and are in the wheelhouse. The glass is tinkling all about you, and you do not know in that instant that you are carrying the frame of the shattered wheelhouse door upon your shoulders. Your fist takes the frightened helmsman under the jaw, and your free hand grips the spokes, and dashes the wheel round toward you, the engine roaring, away in its appointed place. Your junior has already flown to his post at the telegraph, and the engine room is answering the order you have flung at him as you leaped from the wheelhouse.

[00:09:03] But you, why, you are staring, half mad, through the night, watching the monster bows swing to port, against the mighty background of the night. The seconds are the beats of eternity, in that brief, tremendous time.

[00:09:24] And then aloud to the wind and the night, you mutter, "Thank God!" For she has swung clear. And below you the thousand sleepers sleep on.

[00:09:39] A fresh quartermaster has come aft to use the old term to relieve the other, and you stagger from the wheelhouse, becoming conscious of the inconvenience of the broken woodwork around you. Someone, several people, are assisting you to divest yourself of the framework of the door. And your junior has a queer little air of respect for you, that, somehow, the darkness is not capable of hiding.

[00:10:05] You go back to your post then.

[00:10:07] But, perhaps you feel a little sick, despite a certain happy elation that stimulates you. Eight bells! And your brother officer comes up to relieve you. The usual formula has gone through, and you go down the bridge steps, to the thousand sleeping ones. Next day a thousand passengers play their games and read their books and talk their talks and make their usual sweepstakes, and never even noticed that one of the officers is a little weary looking.

The carpenters replaced the door, and a certain quartermaster will stand no more at the wheel. For the rest, all goes on as usual, and no one ever knows. I mean no one outside of official circles, unless an odd rumor leaks out through the stewards. And a certain man has no deaths to the name of his father's son.

[00:11:03] And the thousand never know.

[00:11:08] Think of it, you people who go down to the sea in floating palaces of steel and electric light. And let your benedictions fall silently upon the quiet, grave, neatly uniformed man in blue upon the bridge.

[00:11:24] You have trusted him unthinkingly with your lives, and not once in ten thousand times has he ever failed you. Do you understand better now?

[00:11:47] That's our little appetizer to get you in the mood. Just as to the North, there were the terrors of ice, to the South

[00:11:55] there was this Sargasso Sea, sort of a great floating island of seaweed, approaching solid land in points.

[00:12:07] And that at the time, or in the 19th and early 20th century, had the same era of mystery that we later gave to the Bermuda Triangle. Hodgson wrote several of his stories and some of his novels as well about the Sargasso Sea, including our main story today, which is called, "*The Mystery of the Derelict*".

[00:12:29] All night had the four-masted ship, *Tarawak* lain motionless in the drift of the Gulf Stream, for she had run into a calm patch, into a stark calm which had lasted now for two days and nights. On every side, had it been light, might have been seen dense masses of floating gulf weed, studding the ocean even to the distant horizon. In places, so large were the weed masses that they formed long, low banks that, by daylight, might have been mistaken for low lying land. Upon the lee side of the poop deck.

[00:13:04] Duthie, one of the apprentices, leaned with his elbows upon the rail, and stared out across the hidden sea, to where in the eastern horizon, showed the first pink and lemon streamers of the dawn faint, delicate streaks and washes of color. A period of time passed, and the surface of the leeward sea began to show a great expanse of grey, touched with odd, wavering belts of silver. And everywhere the black specks and islets of the weed. Presently, the red dome of the sun protruded itself into sight above the dark rim of the horizon. And abruptly, the watching Duthie saw something, a great shapeless bulk that lay some miles away to starboard, and showed black and distinct against the gloomy red mass of the rising sun. "Something in sight to looward, Sir,"

[00:13:59] he informed the Mate, who was leaning, smoking over the rail that ran across the break of the poop. deck. "I can't just make out what it is." The Mate rose from his easy position, stretched

himself, yawned, and came across to the boy. "Whereabouts, Toby?" He asked, wearily, and yawning again. "There, Sir, said Duthie, alias Toby, "Broad away on the beam, and right in the track of the sun.

[00:14:25] It looks something like a big houseboat, or a haystack."

[00:14:30] The Mate stared in the direction indicated, and saw the thing which puzzled the boy, and immediately the tiredness went out of his eyes and face. "Pass me the glass off the skylight, Toby," he commanded, and the youth obeyed. After the Mate had examined the strange object through his binoculars for, maybe a minute, he passed them to Toby, telling him to take a "squint" and say what he made of it. "Looks like an old powder hulk, Sir! exclaimed the lad, after a while, and to this description, the Mate nodded agreement.

[00:15:02] Later, when the sun had risen somewhat, they were able to study the derelict with more exactness. She appeared to be a vessel of exceedingly old type, mastless, and upon the hull of which had been built a roof like superstructure, the use of which they could not determine. She was lying just within the borders of one of the weed banks, and all her side was splotched with greenish growth. It was her position, within the borders of the weed, that suggested to the puzzled Mate, how so strange and unseaworthy looking a craft had come so far abroad into the greatness of the ocean. For suddenly, it occurred to him that she was neither more nor less than a derelict from the vast Sargasso Sea. A vessel that had possibly been lost to the world, scores and scores of years gone, perhaps hundreds. The suggestion touched the Mate's thoughts with solemnity, and he fell to examining the ancient hulk with an even greater interest, and pondering on all the lonesome and awful years that must have passed over her as she had lain desolate and forgotten in that grim cemetery of the ocean. Through all that day, the derelict was an object of the most intense interest to those aboard the *Tarawak*, every glass in the ship being brought into use to examine her. Yet, though within no more than some six or seven miles of her, the Captain refused to listen to the Mate's suggestions that they should put a boat in the water, and pay the stranger a visit.

[00:16:38] For he was a cautious man, and the glass warned him that a sudden change might be expected in the weather, so that he would have no one leave the ship on any unnecessary business. But, for all that he had caution, curiosity was by no means lacking in him, and his telescope, at intervals, was turned on the ancient hope through all the day. Then, it would be about six bells in the second dog watch, a sail was sighted astern, coming up steadily but slowly. By eight bells, they were able make out that a small barque was bringing the wind with her, her yard squared, and every stitch set. Yet the night had advanced apace, and it was 9 to 11 o'clock before the wind reached those aboard the *Tarawak*. When at last it arrived, there was a slight rustling and quaking of canvas, and odd creaks here and there in the darkness amid the gear, as each portion of the running and standing rigging took up the strain. Beneath the bows, and alongside, there came gentle rippling noises, as the vessel gathered way.

[00:17:47] And so, for the better part of the next hour, they slid through the water at something less than a couple of knots in the 60 minutes. To starboard of them, they could see the red light of the little barque, which had brought up the wind with her, and was now forging slowly ahead, being better able

evidently than the big, heavy *Tarawak* to take advantage of so slight a breeze. About a quarter to 12, just after the relieving watch had been roused, lights were observed to be moving to and fro upon the small barque, and by midnight it was palpable that, through some cause or other, she was dropping astern. When the Mate arrived on deck to relieve the Second, the latter officer informed him of the possibility that something unusual had occurred aboard the barque, telling of the lights about her decks, and how that, in the last quarter of an hour, she had begun to drop astern. On hearing the Second Mate's account, the First sent one of the prentices for his night glasses, and when they were brought, studied the other vessel intently, that is, so well that he was able to through the darkness, for even through the night glasses, she showed only as a vague shape, surmounted by three dim towers of her masts and sails.

[00:19:04] Suddenly, the Mate gave out a sharp exclamation, for beyond the barque, there was something else shown dimly in the field of vision. He studied it with great intentness, ignoring for the instant, the Second's queries as to what it was that had caused him to exclaim. All at once, he said, with a little note of excitement in his voice, "The derelict! The barque's run into the weeds around that old hooker!"

[00:19:30] The Second Mate gave a mutter of surprise assent and slapped the rail. "That's it!" he said. "That's why we're passing her. And that explains the lights. If they're not fast in the weed, they'd probably run slap into the blessed derelict!"

[00:19:45] "One thing," said the Mate, lowering his glasses and beginning to fumble for his pipe, "she won't have had enough way on her to do much damage." The Second Mate, who was still peering through his binoculars, murmured in absent agreement, and continued to peer. The Mate, for his part, filled and lit his pipe, remarking meanwhile to the unhearing Second, that the light breeze was dropping. Abruptly, the Second Mate called his superior's attention, and in the same instant, so it seemed, the failing wind died entirely away, the sails settling down into ruckles with little rustles and flutters of sagging canvas. "What's up?" asked the Mate and raised his glasses.

[00:20:28] "There's something queer going on over yonder," said the Second. "Look at the lights moving about it, did you see that?" The last portion of his remark came out swiftly, with a sharp accentuation of the last word. "What?" asked the Mate, staring hard. "They're shooting", replied the Second. "Look! There again!"

[00:20:46] "Rubbish!" said the Mate, with a mixture of unbelief and doubt in his voice. With the falling of the wind, there had come a great silence upon the sea. And, abruptly, from far across the water, sounded the distant, dullish thud of a gun, followed almost instantly by several minute, but sharply defined reports, like the cracking of a whip out in the darkness. "Jove!" cried the Mate. "I believe you're right."

[00:21:14] He paused and stared. "There!" he said. "I saw the flashes then. They're firing from the poop deck. I believe, I must call the Old Man."

[00:21:21] He turned and ran hastily down into the saloon, knocked on the door of the Captain's cabin, and entered.

[00:21:27] He turned up the lamp, and shaking his superior into wakefulness, told him of a thing that he believed to be happening aboard the barque. "It's a mutiny, Sir, they're shooting from a poop. We ought to do something." The Mate said many things breathlessly, for he was a young man, but the Captain stopped him, with a quietly lifted hand.

[00:21:47] "I'll be up with you in a minute, Mr. Johnson," he said, and the Mate took the hint and ran up on deck. Before the minute had passed, the Skipper was on the poop, and staring through his night glasses at the barque and the derelict. Yet now, aboard of the barque,

[00:22:04] the lights had vanished, and there showed no more the flashes of discharging weapons, only there remained the dull, steady red glow of the port sidelight, and behind it, the night glasses showed the shadowy outline of the other vessel.

[00:22:20] The Captain put questions to the Mates, asking for further details.

[00:22:25] "Well, it all stopped while the Mate was calling you, Sir, explained the Second. "We could hear the shots quite plainly."

[00:22:30] "They seem to be using a gun as well as a revolver," interjected the Mate, without ceasing to stare into the darkness. For a while, the three of them continued to discuss the matter, whilst down on the main deck the two watches clustered along the starboard rail, and a low hum of talk rose fore and aft.

[00:22:50] Presently, the Captain and the Mates came to a decision. If there had been a mutiny, it had been brought to its conclusion, whatever that conclusion might be. And no interference from those aboard the *Tarawak*, at that period, would be likely to do good. They were utterly in the dark, in more ways than one, and for all they knew, there might not even have been any mutiny. If there had been a mutiny, and the mutineers had won, then they had done their worst, whilst if the officers had won,

[00:23:21] well and good. They had managed to do so without help.

[00:23:26] Of course, if the *Tarawak* had been a man of war with a large crew, capable of mastering any situation, it would have been a simple matter to send a powerful, armed boat's crew to inquire. But as she was merely a merchant vessel, undermanned, as is the modern fashion, they must go warily.

[00:23:44] They would wait for the morning and signal. In a couple of hours it would be light. And, then they would be guided by circumstances. The Mate walked to the break of the poop, and sang out to the men. "Now then, my lads, you better turn in, the watch below and have a sleep, we may be

wanting you by five bells.” There was a muttered chorus of “aye, aye sir” and some of the men began to go forrard to the fo’cas’le,

[00:24:09] but others of the watch below remained, their curiosity overmastering their desire for sleep. On the poop, the three officers leaned over the starboard rail, chatting in a desultory fashion as they waited for the dawn. At some little distance hovered Duthie, who as elder ‘prentice, just out of his time, had been given the post of acting Third Mate.

[00:24:37] Presently, the sky to starboard began to lighten with the solemn coming of the dawn. The light grew and strengthened and the eyes of those in the *Tarawak* scanned with growing intentness, the portion of the horizon where showed the red and dwindling glow of the barques sidelight.

[00:24:57] And then.

[00:24:58] It was in that moment, when all the world is full of the silence of dawn, something passed over the quiet sea.

[00:25:08] Coming out of the east. A very faint, long, drawn out, screaming piping noise.

[00:25:18] It might almost have been the cry of a little wind wandering out of the dawn across the sea.

[00:25:24] A ghostly piping skirl, so attenuated and elusive was it.

[00:25:31] But there was in it a weird, almost threatening note. That told the three on the poop, it was no wind that made so dree and inhuman a sound.

[00:25:45] The noise ceased, dying out in an indefinite mosquito like shrilling, far and vague and minutely shrill.

[00:25:56] And so came the silence again.

[00:26:00] I heard that last night, when they were shooting, said the Second Mate, speaking very slowly and looking First at the Skipper and then at the Mate. It was when you were below calling the Captain, he added. “Shh,” said the Mate, and held up a warning hand. But though they listened, there came no further sound. And so they fell to disjointed questionings, and guessed their answers as puzzled men will and ever and anon. They examined the barque through their glasses, but without discovering anything of note, save that when the light grew stronger, they perceived that her jibboom had struck through the superstructure of the derelict, tearing a considerable gap therein. Presently, when the day had sufficiently advanced, the Mate sung out to the Third to take a couple of apprentices and pass up the signal flags and the codebook. This was done and a hoist made.

[00:26:58] But those in the bark took not the slightest heed.

[00:27:03] So that finally, the Captain made them to make up the flags and return them to the locker. After that, he went down to consult the glass. And when he reappeared, he and the Mates had a short discussion. After which, orders were given to hoist out the starboard lifeboat. This, in the course of half an hour, they managed. And after that, six of the men and two of the prentices were ordered into her. Then half a dozen rifles were passed down with ammunition and the same number of cutlasses. These were all apportioned among the men, much to the disgust of the two apprentices who were aggrieved that they should be passed over. But their feelings altered when the Mate descended into the boat and handed them each a loaded revolver, warning them, however, to play no monkey tricks with the weapons. Just as the boat was about to push off, Duthie the eldest prentice, came scrambling down the side ladder and jumped for the after thwart. He landed and sat down, laying the rifle which he had brought, in the stern. After that, the boat put off for the bark. There were now 10 in the boat and all well-armed so that the Mate had a certain feeling of comfort that he would be able to meet any situation that was likely to arise. After nearly an hour's hard pulling, the heavy boat had been brought within some 200 yards of the barque and the Mate sung out to the men to lie off their oars for a minute. Then he stood up and shouted to the people on the barque. But though he repeated his cry of, "Ship Ahoy!"

[00:28:34] Several times, there came no reply.

[00:28:38] He sat down and motioned to the men to give way again. And so brought the boat nearer to the barque by another hundred yards. Here, he hailed again. But still receiving no reply, he stooped for his binoculars and peered for a while through them at the two vessels, the ancient derelict and the modern sailing vessel. The latter had driven clean in over the weed, her stern being perhaps some two score yards from the edge of the bank. Her jibboom, as I've already mentioned, had pierced the green blotched superstructure of the derelict so that her cutwater had come very close to the grass grown side of the hulk. That the derelict was indeed a very ancient vessel, it was now easy to see, for at this distance the Mate could distinguish which was hull and which superstructure. Her stern rose up to a height considerably above her boughs and possessed galleries coming round the counter. In the window frames some of the glass still remained, but others were securely shuttered and some missing frames and all, leaving dark holes in the stern.

[00:29:49] And everywhere grew the dank green growth, giving the beholder a queer sense of repulsion.

[00:29:58] Indeed, there was that about the whole of the ancient craft that repelled in a curious way something elusive, a remoteness from humanity

[00:30:11] that was vaguely abominable.

[00:30:15] The Mate put down his binoculars and drew his revolver, and at the action, each one in the boat gave an instinctive glance at his own weapon. Then he sung out to them to give way and steered straight for the weed. The boat struck it with something of a sog, and after that they advanced slowly yard by yard, only with considerable labor. They reached the counter of the bark and the Mate

held out his hand for an oar, this, he leaned up against the side of the vessel and a moment later was swarming quickly up it. He grasped the rail and swung himself aboard. And then after a swift glance fore and aft, gripped the blade of the oar to steady it, and bade the rest follow as quickly as possible, which they did. The last man bringing up the painter with him and making it fast to a cleat.

[00:31:03] They commenced a rapid search through the ship.

[00:31:08] In several places about the main deck, they found broken lamps and aft on the poop deck, a shotgun, three revolvers and several capstan bars lying about the deck.

[00:31:19] But though they pried into every possible corner, lifting the hatches and examining the lazarette, not a human creature was to be found.

[00:31:30] The barque was absolutely deserted.

[00:31:35] After the first rapid search, the Mate called his men together. But there was an uncomfortable sense of danger in the air and he felt that it would be better not to straggle. Then he led the way forward and went up to the gallant forecastle head. Here, finding the port sidelights still burning, he bent over the screen, as it were, mechanically lifted the lamp, opened it and blew out the flame, then replaced the affair on its socket. After that, he climbed into the boughs and out along the jibboom, beckoning to the others to follow, which they did, no man saying a word and all holding their weapons handily for each felt the oppressiveness of the incomprehensible about them.

[00:32:21] The Mate reached the hole in the great superstructure and passed inside, the rest following.

[00:32:28] Here they found themselves in what looked something like a great gloomy barracks, the floor of which was the deck of the ancient craft. The superstructure as seen from the inside was a very wonderful piece of work, being beautifully shored, and fixed so that at one time it must've possessed immense strength. Though now it was all rotted and showing many a gape and rip. In one place near the center or midship's part, was a sort of a platform high up which the Mate conjectured might have been used as a lookout. The reason for the prodigious superstructure itself, he could not imagine.

[00:33:10] Having searched the decks of this craft, he was preparing to go below when suddenly, Duthie caught him by the sleeve and whispered to him tensely to listen. He did so.

[00:33:22] And heard the thing that had attracted the attention of the youth. It was a low, continuous, shrill whining that was rising from out of the dark hull beneath their feet, and abruptly the Mate was aware that there was an intensely disagreeable animal like smell in the air. He had noticed it in a subconscious fashion when entering through the broken superstructure, but now, suddenly, he was aware of it.

[00:33:49] And then as he stood there, hesitating, the whining noise rose all at once into a piping, screaming squeal that filled all the space in which they were enclosed with an awful, inhuman and threatening clamor. The Mate turned and shouted at the top of his voice to the rest to retreat to the barque, and he himself, after a further quick, nervous glance round hurried towards the place where the end of the barque's jibboom protruded in across the decks. He waited with strained impatience, glancing ever behind him, until all were off the derelict, and then sprang swiftly onto the spar that was their bridge to the other vessel. Even as he did so, the squealing died away into a tiny, shrilling, twittering sound that made him glance back, for the suddenness of the quiet was as effective as though it had been a loud noise.

[00:34:47] And what he saw seemed to him in that first instance so incredible and monstrous, that he was almost too shaken to cry out.

[00:34:56] Then he raised his voice in a shout of warning to the men and a frenzy of haste shook him in every fiber, and he scrambled back to the barque, shouting ever to the men to get into the boat. For in that backward glance, he had seen the whole decks of the derelict a move with living things, giant rats, thousands and tens of thousands of them. And so in a flash had come to an understanding of the disappearance of the crew of the barque. He had reached the forecastle head now, and was running for the steps, and behind him, making all the long slanting length of the jibboom black, were the rats, racing after him. He made one leap to the main deck and ran. Behind, sounded a queer, multitudinous pattering noise, swiftly surging upon him. And he reached the poop steps, and as he sprang up them, he felt a savage bite in his left calf. He was on the poop deck now, and running with a stagger. A score of great rats leapt around him, and half a dozen hung grimly to his back, whilst one that had gripped his calf, flogged madly from side to side as he raced on. He reached the rail, gripped it, and vaulted clean over and down into the weed. The rest were already in the boat, and strong hands and arms hove him aboard, whilst the others of the crew sweated in getting their little craft round from the ship.

[00:36:27] The rats still clung to the Mate, but a few blows with a cutlass eased him of his murderous burden. Above them, making the rails and half round of the poop deck black and alive, raced thousands of rats. The boat was now an oar's length from the barque and suddenly, Duthie screamed out that they were coming. In the same instant, nearly 100 of the largest rats launched themselves from the boat. Most fell short, into the weed, but over a score reached the boat and sprang savagely at the men. And there was a minute's hard slashing and smiting before the brutes were destroyed. And once more the men resumed their task of urging their way through the weed, and so in a minute or two, had come within some fathoms of the edge, working desperately. And then a fresh terror broke upon them. Those rats which had missed their leap, were now all about the boat, and leaping in from the weed, running up the oars, and scrambling in over the sides, and as each one got inboard, straight for one of the crew it went, so that they were all bitten and be bled in a score of places. There ensued a short but desperate fight, and then when the last of the beasts had been hacked to death, the men lay once more to the task of heaving the boat clear of the weed. A minute passed and they had come almost to the edge

[00:37:57] when Duthie cried out, "Look!"


[00:38:01] And at that, all turned to stare at the bark and perceived

[00:38:05] the thing that had caused the prentice to cry out. For the rats were leaping down into the weeds in black multitudes, making the great weed fronds quiver as they hurled themselves in the direction of the boat. In an incredibly short space of time, all the weed between the boat and the barque was alive with the little monsters coming at breakneck speed. The Mate let out a shout, and snatching an oar from one of the men, leapt into the stern of the boat and commenced to thrash the weed with it whilst the rest labored infernally to pluck the boat forth into the open sea. Yet despite their mad efforts and the death dealing blows of the Mate's great 14-foot oar, the black living mass were all about the boat and scrambling aboard in scores before she was free of the weed. As the boat shot into the clear water, the Mate gave out a great curse, and dropping his oar, began to pluck the brutes from his body with his bare hands, casting them into the sea. Yet fast, almost as he freed himself, others sprang upon him so that in another minute he was like to have been pulled down. For the boat was alive and swarming with the pests, but that some of the men had got to work with their cutlasses, and literally slashed the brutes to pieces, sometimes killing several with a single blow, and thus in a while the boat was freed

[00:39:33] once more, though, it was a sorely wounded and frightened lot of men that manned her. The Mate himself took an oar, as did all those who were able. And so they rode slowly and painfully away from that hateful derelict, whose crew of monsters even then made the weed all a heave with hideous life. From the *Tarawak*, came urgent signals for them to haste, by which the Mate knew that the storm, which the Captain had feared, must be coming down upon the ship. And so spurred each one to greater endeavor until at last they were under the shadow of their own vessel with very thankful hearts, and bodies bleeding, tired, and faint. And slowly and painfully, the boat's crew scrambled up the side ladder, and the boat was hoisted aboard, and they had no time to tell their tale, for the storm was upon them. It came half an hour later, sweeping down in a cloud of white fury from the eastward, and blotting out all vestiges of the mysterious derelict and the little barque which had proved her victim.

[00:40:40] And after that, for a weary day and night, they battled with the storm. When it passed, nothing was to be seen either of the two vessels or of the weed which had studded the sea before the storm. For they had been blown many a score of leagues to the westward of the spot, and so had no further chance, nor I ween, inclination, to investigate further the mystery of that strange old derelict of a past time, and her habitants of rats.

[00:41:11] Yet many a time, in many a forecastle, has this story been told. And many a conjecture has been passed as to how came that ancient craft abroad there in the ocean. Some have suggested, as indeed I have made bold to put forth as fact that she must have drifted out of the lonesome Sargasso Sea. And in truth, I cannot but think this is the most reasonable supposition. Yet, of the rats that evidently dwelt in her, I have no reasonable explanation to offer. Whether they were true ships rats or a species that is to be found in the weed haunted plains and islets of the Sargasso



Sea, I cannot say. It may be that they are the descendants of rats that lived in ships long centuries lost in the weeds sea and which have learned to live among the weed, forming new characteristics and developing fresh powers and instincts. And yet I cannot say, for I speak entirely without authority and do but tell this story as it is told in the forecandle of many an old time sailing ship, that dark brine tainted place where the young men learned somewhat of the mysteries of the all mysterious sea.

[00:42:50] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

