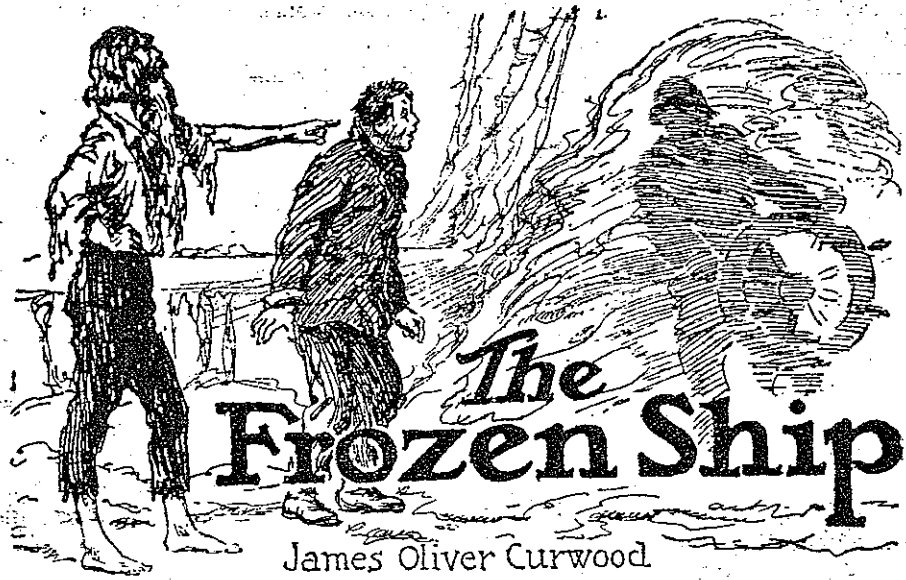


Sea Stories  
20 May 1923



# The Frozen Ship

James Oliver Curwood

Those who know the Great Lakes have the habit of regarding Lake Superior as a sea—a fresh-water sea, the greatest fresh-water sea of the earth. It is three hundred and fifty miles long and two hundred miles broad at its widest. A terrible sea in wintertime. The furious blast from the north piles up mountains of ice upon its surface. Sailormen shun it each year from November until April. In this story Mr. Curwood draws a memorable picture of the lake and weaves into the picture an intensely dramatic story.

THE last ship down from Duluth floated like a great shadow in the Lake Superior snow gloom. A thousand-million ice devils bit and snapped at her like angry dogs, and half-frozen swells swished against her in monotonous complaint because her sides were of steel. From his perch in the crow's nest, Danny McHann could hear them, and for the twentieth time he delivered thanks into the chaos of the day—because he was riding in metal instead of wood.

Except for the sound of ceaseless strife between iron and sea, and the drifting up of voices that sounded half a league away, McHann might have imagined himself above the clouds. Falling snow shut out all vision deckward.

Even the freighter's bow lights were obliterated. Above him and ahead, there was a shifting, tantalizing nothingness, into which he stared hard, a

blurring sweep of snow and mist, out of which the storm wraiths formed themselves, like ghostly pictures smothered in sea foam.

It was the man's first experience in a last trip down, and the phantasms had worked upon his nerves. He had seen ships come up out of the swirl ahead, only to dissolve before his eyes as he leaned to shriek down warning; grotesque monsters seemed created by every veer and lunge of the wind, until at last, his vision was stung to uselessness by the intangibility of the world about him, and he bowed his head in his arms. There was relief in this.

So he crumpled himself back in the nest, and cursed softly, but fully, at the greed of men who had sent him out upon this death race with winter, for the toll of a three-hundred-thousand-bushel cargo of grain.

As he swore, he looked out again, in a fleeting, half-blind way, and, as he

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looked, there seemed to creep up out of the snow clouds the network of a ship, with dead-white masts and frozen shrouds. He rubbed his eyes with a mittened hand, and, when he uncovered them again, there fell from his lips a cry of warning, that ended in a shriek.

The blow came then. Above the rhythmic throb of the engines and the cries of startled men below, there came a jar of mighty objects meeting, and above that the grinding, hissing rush of a thousand tons of ice.

McHann reached out, but his arms were filled with air. Like a back-broken thing, he shot from the kick of the steel mast, and his wailing cry died away in the twisting whiteness of the storm. To those on the freighter who heard, it was the death call of the crow's-nest man.

And McHann, after that one cry, closed his mouth tight, and held a long breath; and, when he figured that he was near the end, he held out his arms to meet the ice-choked sea. In place of it, he was crumpled up against something that set him rambling off into half consciousness.

Some time afterward, he seemed awakening from a dream. Things seemed to come and go before his eyes, and something that was growing brighter and stronger in him every moment made him feel that he was out of danger, and that there were tangible objects about him, which he would reach up and investigate when the numbness went out of him.

He knew that, straight above him, there towered the mast of a ship. It did not seem strange to him that there was no canvas about this mast, and that its spars and shrouds were thick with ice and snow. Rather, he argued in a negative way that, where there is a mast there must be a ship, and a ship is run by men. So he waited for some one to come and help him.

After a little, when his vision had

grown stronger, he could see that he was under a foremast, for halfway up it was the lookout nest, and in the nest was a man. The man was leaning far out, and was beckoning to him, in a weird, aimless sort of way. McHann made a huge effort, and sat up.

"Hello, Bill!" he called weakly.

He grinned up at the object. He was very happy to know that he was saved. But the man aloft did not respond. He beckoned, and his head bobbed; and, the more he beckoned and bobbed, the straighter sat Danny McHann; until, at last, he staggered to his feet, and, with his hands against the mast, stared straight up at the crow's-nest man.

His senses were readjusting themselves rapidly. When he backed away through the drifted snow, there was in his face the look of a man who has witnessed something bad, and a grim sort of horror was filling his soul, for he knew that the man was as dead as a herring floater.

It was only for a moment that the thing remained in his brain. He went back into the snow, and sat down, with his head between his knees. From his forehead blood dripped upon his feet. He made an effort to rise, and felt the warm flow of it over his face.

Instinct, more than reason, impelled him aft. He did not know that at times he dragged himself on hands and knees through the snow, and that frequently his progressive movements were no more than convulsions, a sprawling of legs and arms and an unconscious struggle with hands and feet. When he reached the galley door he pulled himself up to it, like a wounded animal. It was unlatched, and under his weight burst inward.

He drew in his head and shoulders, and lay upon the floor. There was warm, stale air inside. His comprehension of the virtue of all things but warmth was gone. Even this warmth he seized upon, in a subconscious worm-

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like way, and encouraged himself into it, inch by inch, only realizing that, after every effort, he became more comfortable.

It was a long time before he aroused himself to the meaning of things. It occurred to him, for the first time, that he had suffered a hurt, and that this hurt was keeping him down. So, when he strove to throw off the oppression that was binding him, it was with new caution.

He lifted himself slowly, gripping at the fact that it was his head which hurt him most, and that, when he moved too fast, as under the crow's nest, he became dizzy almost to the point of nausea.

The thought of the man in the crow's nest set him back at the beginning of things, and, when his head became clear enough, he went to the door. For many minutes, he stood there; listened to the creaking of ice-stiffened shrouds, stared into the ghostly gloom forward, and always his eyes circled from other things to the figure which hung against the foremast. To his disordered vision, it was a shapeless, illusive blotch, suspended in the chaos of snow. After this, he searched until he knew that the silent watch and himself were the only human creatures, living or dead, who rode with the frozen ship.

There came an overwhelming sense of drowsiness in him, so he dragged a cot into the galley, and stretched himself upon it. For a long time, he listened to the moaning of the gathering night wind, the rustling run of the ice-choked sea against the wooden sides of the ship, and the crackling of frozen ropes and spars. He had to listen hard to hear these sounds. Even the ticking of his watch rose above them. This watch troubled him. Its ticking kept him awake. He pulled it from his pocket, and placed it as far out on the floor as he could reach.

When he fell back upon the cot, there was a buzzing in his brain. The

effort of reaching out sickened him. And it had done no good. He could hear the watch plainer than before.

Tick! Tick! Tick!

It seemed working in his head. The sound came louder and nearer, as though the watch was creeping across the floor to him. Soon it ceased to tick. It tapped! It was like a small hammer, beating on wood just under his ear. He dragged himself out upon the floor, and gave the watch a shove with his hand, that sent it to the opposite side of the room. When he came back, he held his breath to listen.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

It was still under his head, so close that he thought he could feel the jar. He groped out in the darkness, as though expecting to touch some one. Then he felt under his pillow. The tapping stopped. Before it continued again, he had fallen off into a stupor. The tapping under his head grew louder after that, but failed to arouse him.

It was many hours before he opened his eyes. His face was turned to the wall. Instantly, he knew that it was day, and that the cabin was filled with light. He was very comfortable, too, and the pain had gone from his head.

The incidents of the evening before crowded into his memory—the ghost ship climbing, wraithlike, out of the snow gloom; then the real ship, with that thing swinging and beckoning in the crow's nest; and, after that, his rush into what he thought would mean eternity for him. Curious how he had landed on the deck of the abandoned schooner!

There came a thought of the mysterious tapping, and he listened. The ticking of his watch came to him faintly. He held his breath—a strange thrilling sensation growing in him; another sound came to his ears, an almost inaudible sound, that seemed coming nearer and nearer to him. It was like the cautious,

smothered working of human lungs—the breath of a creature struggling, like himself, to maintain silence.

He turned his eyes, without moving his head, but nothing came within vision. There came the soft fall of something, that might have been a bare foot, and the breathlike sound near his ear ceased. With a powerful effort, he nerved himself, and swung his head and shoulders around.

"Gawd!" he exclaimed. "How you frightened me!"

In the middle of the floor there stood a grotesque monster of a man. He was old—very old. Long gray hair fell about his shoulders. A beard almost white spread over his chest. He was a giant in breadth and height. He wore no coat, no hat, no shoes; his grimy shirt was open at the throat, the sleeves of it were torn into shreds. Enough to frighten a man at first glance, but benignity shone in his eyes as he looked down.

"Good morning, my son!" he greeted.

"Good morning!" replied McHann.

He brought himself to a sitting posture on the edge of the cot. The movement made him dizzy, and he knew that he had not fully recovered from his injury.

"I hope you are better," said the other. "You had a good sleep. I stopped work so as not to awaken you. I thought the pounding might annoy you. Have you seen my crew?"

He smiled down at McHann, and there was something in the smile that made the young man shudder.

"Crew!"

"Yes, of course—my crew. Would you like to meet the boys?"

He walked to the door and McHann followed him. Shoeless he trod ahead through the snow until he stood under the foremast. He pointed up to the dead man swinging in the nest.

"That's Joe, the best watch that ever run Superior!"

His gray eyes were clear and expressionless. No shadow of a smile lurked on his lips. McHann's face whitened.

"He was bad until I tied him up there—*very bad!* He said I wasn't captain, and wouldn't obey me. I knocked him down with a club. That's his punishment for not obeying me—no sleep, no food, work all the time!"

The old man turned and made a new trail through the snow. Where the wheel should have been was a miniature mountain of ice and close beside this he stopped, peering in, as though looking through a window. McHann knew what had happened. The ceaseless wash of the sea had gradually smothered the wheel in ice. The mass was higher than his head.

"Look!"

McHann drew close. He stared hard into the crystal mass. He could see the outline of the big old-fashioned wheel, and beside the wheel was a shadow—a horrible specterlike shadow that his vision soon formed into the shape of a man. One arm of it reached out and gripped a spoke of the wheel; its head, hatless, was inclined forward, as though watchful eyes were peering into a danger-lurking sea; from the waist down it was lost in the opaque whiteness of the mass.

"That's Tom!" whispered a terrible voice. "Ugh! But he was a hard one! 'Twas an awful task to master him. Once he nearly had me—but I gripped him by the throat and hung like a dog. Then I tied him there. He's a clever wheelsman. Ain't you, Tom? Eh?"

A hard crackling laugh sounded so close that McHann shivered. He could feel the other's hot breath on his neck.

"Tom thought *he* was captain of the ship. I think he was a little wrong in his head. The queen thought he was captain, too. So did Joe. They were all wrong!"

"The queen!" echoed McHann.

"Yes, the queen."

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The old man drew McHann about. A strange glow had come into his eyes. The grip of his fingers was like that of a steel clamp.

"You know that I'm captain here, don't you?" he asked.

McHann nodded and the grip on his arm loosened.

"Does the queen?" he dared softly.

The old man's yellow teeth showed in a leering grin.

"Yes. Would you like to meet the queen?"

Without waiting for an answer he turned in the direction of the galley. Inside he motioned McHann to seat himself on a cot. For a few moments he stood looking down upon him. In his eyes there came slowly a dull, threatening fire; his bony fingers crooked themselves until his hands looked like talons, his breath came quickly, his huge form seemed nerving itself for a spring.

"I'm the captain, you say?" he demanded again.

"Of course you're the captain!" cried McHann.

He tried to laugh, but he knew that something akin to terror filled his face. He saw the talonlike fingers relax. The old man turned slowly away, and with one of his bare feet kicked aside a piece of rag carpet that lay near the galley stove. The movement exposed a trap. He raised this, and step by step, descended through the opening, evidently by means of a ladder. At last only his great head remained above the floor. For an instant he stared hard at McHann—then disappeared.

The other was listening! Then there came the soft fall of bare feet, gradually dying away, and then—

A thrill shot through McHann. He heard voices; the shrill frightened cry of a woman—and then a sound of scuffling. Again came the cry, muffled, choking—and there went out from McHann an answering yell that boomed through the hold of the ship like the

report of a gun. He shot down through the trap, and another cry burst from his lips as he landed. For an instant he stood silent to get his bearings. Not a sound came from the dense blackness about him.

"Where are you?" he cried. "Where—"

He did not finish. Instinctively he felt that something was very near to him, and coming nearer—something living and breathing like himself, and with him as its objective point. He half crouched, as if to meet an enemy, and soon he was sure that he heard a sound. It became more and more distinct, and the sweat burst from his tense muscles. It was the ticking of a watch!

Foot by foot the telltale sound approached him until he knew that he could almost reach out and touch the creature that was creeping upon him. Then it stopped. He could feel that the other was gathering himself for a spring. A second more and he had launched himself into action. One arm and a knotted fist shot out with terrific force; the blow missed, and McHann stumbled and pitched to his knees with the weight of it.

Before he could rise the other was upon him with a mad half-human cry. His long fingers clutched the sailor's throat; his huge form crushed down upon him like a weight of iron. With a sidewise wrench McHann twisted himself until he could throw an arm around the old man's neck, tightening the grip until the other gave a choking gasp.

The fingers at his throat closed in like pieces of steel. He relinquished his hold; in a frenzied fight for breath he tore with both hands at the clutch that was throttling him—in his dizzy brain there rang the cackling, triumphant laugh of the madman.

He fell forward upon his face; his arms sprawled out powerless, there came a splitting pain in his head, and a sound

like the rushing, hissing roar of a cataract drowned his senses. Again, as if coming to him through a great void, he heard that gloating laugh.

The first thing after this that McHann was conscious of was a face. It seemed to be very near to his own—a staring, wild-eyed face, sometimes so close that he imagined he could feel the breath of it, at others slipping away until it dissolved into air. Twice he saw its lips move, as if speaking to him, but his eyes closed, and his ears seemed powerless to grasp sound. At last it appeared to him with vivid distinctness; a thin, terrified face of starved whiteness, with dark wide eyes burning into his own.

With a powerful effort he dragged himself another step into consciousness. He realized then that the face was down from him; that somebody was crouching upon the floor at his knees, and that the face was that of a girl.

"You're—the queen?" he managed. It was the first thought that came to him. He could hardly bear himself because of the dizzy sickness he was struggling to overcome.

A weight rested upon his knees, and the face came nearer to him.

"I thought he had killed you! Oh, if I could only help you—get you water——"

The words helped to drag him from his stupor. He attempted to straighten himself and found that something held him from behind. His thoughts returned to him quickly now. He was tied in a chair. His hands were bound. In an instant the situation flashed upon him. He looked about for the old man. Then his eyes rested upon the upturned face of the girl. He was struck with the prettiness of it, the terror in it, the feverish luster that shone in her eyes.

"He's down there!" she whispered. She turned on her knees so that she might point to the open trap, and Mc-

Hann saw that her hands were tied. "He's mad! He's sinking the ship! Oh, God——"

She looked up at him wildly.

McHann listened. From beneath him there came the peculiar tapping of the night before. The girl heard, and shuddered.

"Hear him pounding? He's digging a hole through the bottom! It's almost through——" Suddenly she raised herself until her bound hands rested against McHann's breast. "Tell me," she breathed. "Tell me—has he—killed them?"

McHann knew what she meant. His own hands were tied behind him, but he leaned over until his face swept her tumbled hair.

"Who—killed who?" he asked.

"Tom—and the others. Tom is my brother. This is his ship. Johnson was the wheelman—and he went mad. One morning he came to me and said that he had killed them all during the night, and that the ship was his—that he would not kill me, but would take me to the bottom of the sea with him! Tell me——"

"I haven't seen them," lied McHann.

From out of the trap there came the cackling laugh of the madman. With a frightened cry the girl dragged herself to the edge of the cot and drew herself upon it. Hardly had she done so when Johnson's head appeared through the opening. His lips were drawn back over his yellow teeth; a terrible gleam filled the eyes that fell upon McHann.

"We'll soon be going," he said. "It's coming in fast. Listen!"

Faintly there came to McHann's ear a sound which he knew was the intruding of the sea. The old man laughed gleefully. For a few moments he stood with his head and shoulders out of the trap; then he slowly descended. McHann strained at the thongs which bound him. In his effort the

chair toppled over with him, and he fell face down upon the floor. He was surprised at his weakness. Vainly he struggled to bring himself to his knees, and at last rolled upon his side, facing the girl.

"There's a knife!" he gasped. He nodded toward the stove. "Can you get it?"

Instantly the girl slipped from the cot and began crawling across the floor. She moved by inches. Her long hair dragged under her knees. At the stove she reached up and gripped the knife between her two hands.

"Quick!" whispered McHann. "Quick—"

Soon she reached the cord that bound his wrists. He could feel the knife sawing upon the cord. How light the pressure was! Each second seemed a minute—each minute an hour.

"Is it cutting?" he asked.

"A little!"

The girl's voice came in a terrified whisper. McHann could hear her breathing hard at his back. He strained at the thongs to tighten them, and never for an instant did his eyes leave the black opening of the trap. Each moment the sound of water pouring into the hold came to him more distinctly. A dozen times he fancied he heard the old man climbing up the ladder. Once the thrilling triumphant laugh came to him as if from far amidships. He twisted his head about, and looked up at the girl.

"It's almost through!" she whispered.

There came a sudden snap, and the sailor's hands were free. Quickly he cut the ropes about his waist and feet, then freed the girl.

"Now!" he cried, "Now damn y'!"

He rose to his feet, gripping the knife, and staggered to the edge of the trap. Again came the terrible laugh from below. It was nearer than before.

"He's coming!"

McHann swayed. He was conscious

of an almost overmastering dizziness. The girl saw his weakness and caught him by his arm.

"Come with me—quick!" she pulled him toward the galley door. "You're hurt. We must get to the boat—"

McHann followed, resisting slightly. The girl's strength seemed greater than his own.

"Guess I am," he acknowledged weakly. "Didn't know he got me so hard."

He stumbled out into the snow, the girl darting ahead of him to the schooner's small boat, swinging in davits amidships. When he came to her she was tearing with her naked hands at the tarpaulin covering which protected it from the wash of the sea. Even as they pulled off the sheet, a yell of rage sounded from the cabin. In a last tremendous effort, McHann caught the girl in his arms and lifted her into the boat. Then he swung the davit arms out over the sea. Behind him, Johnson appeared in the galley door. Where the two ends of the falls were tied the sailor slashed blindly with his knife, and the boat pitched downward. A single glance behind—a vision of the great gray giant within a dozen feet of him—a cry of warning to the girl, and McHann flung himself over the side.

Half an hour later McHann lifted himself on his elbow. With a piece of her dress the girl had been bathing the blood from his face.

"She's getting pretty low!" he said.

For the hundredth time they turned their eyes in the direction of the sinking schooner. She lay three-quarters of a mile away, and with the sun lighting up her glistening shrouds. A little sob broke from the lips of the girl. McHann, sitting up, took one of her cold little hands and held it tightly in both his own.

"Tom was the only one I had on earth. If he's gone—"

"If he's gone, I'm going to take you to one of the dearest mothers in the world," said McHann softly. "She's waiting for me at Algonac, and perhaps—little girl—"

He stopped. The end of the distant ship had come. For a time the hull had been visible, but now only her spars seemed riding above the sea, and these went down slowly, until the black run

of Superior rose and fell where they had been.

From the girl's staring face, McHann turned his eyes toward the Michigan shore, looming up half a dozen miles away.

"Got off just in time, didn't we?" he asked cheerfully.

Mentally he was wondering how long it would take him to row that distance.



#### INTERESTING RELIC DISCOVERED

IT has been reported that Major H. D. Selton, United States army, has discovered the helmet which was supposed to have been worn by Magellan on his trip to discover a new sea route to the spice isles of the Pacific. While on this voyage Magellan landed on one of the islands of what now constitutes the Philippines, for food and water. During his stay one of the chiefs from whom he received provisions became involved in a quarrel with a neighboring tribe and Magellan to show his appreciation for many kindnesses took part in a battle between the two tribes. It was during this engagement that he was killed.

As history records that two of Magellan's party were marooned on the islands and never returned to Spain it may be that the helmet belonged to one of them. It has undoubtedly passed through many hands before Major Selton purchased it from a Morro chief. Of brass, very graceful in design and beautifully tooled it shows few signs of having been in a moist climate for several hundred years.



#### QUEER ANIMAL LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA, scientists aver, is the oldest land on the surface of the globe. They also tell us that it has changed less than any other portion of the earth's surface. In proof of this they offer the fact of geologic formation, vegetable and animal life which cannot be found anywhere outside of Australia and New Zealand.

Among the many queer animals to be found there, the platypus, or ornithoryncus is perhaps the strangest and is found nowhere else on this globe. It has fur much like a seal, feet that are as much flappers as claws, is webfooted, yet burrows with great facility, has the bill of a duck, and lays eggs, yet suckles its young and carries them in a pouch. Surely a bundle of contradictions is the platypus!

Hunting and feeding in the water, it sleeps out of it in a burrow, the mouth of which is under water. It feeds only at night, puddling the soft banks and weed beds in exactly the same way as a duck does in the mud of a pond. Although it has no external ears, it has a keen sense of hearing, and the hunter finds it hard work to creep upon it unawares.

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