

The image is a dramatic, monochromatic scene. In the upper left, a large, bright full moon illuminates the sky. To its right, a flock of birds is captured in flight, their silhouettes stark against the dark, cloudy sky. Below the sky, the sea is turbulent, with white-capped waves crashing. In the foreground, the dark, curved hull of a wooden boat is visible, partially submerged in the churning water. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

William Hope Hodgson

It was a dark, starless night. We were in the Northern Pacific ocean, on a calm sea. There was no wind at all, and our little ship was not moving. Our exact position I do not know. For a Week, the sun had been hidden by a thin mist which had seemed to float above us, about the height of our masts, sometimes descending to cover the surrounding sea like a blanket.

As there was no wind, there was little to do, and I was the only man on deck. The crew, consisting of two men and a boy, were sleeping in their cabin, while Will - my friend, and the captain of our boat - was asleep in the other cabin.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness, came a cry:

'Schooner, ahoy!'

It was so unexpected that I did not answer immediately. It came again - a voice strangely low and inhuman, calling from somewhere on the dark sea to our left.

'Schooner, ahoy!'

'Hello!' I cried. 'What - What are you? What do you want?'

'You need not be afraid,' answered the strange voice, having probably noticed some uncertainty in my words. 'I am only an old... man.'

The pause sounded odd, but it was only afterwards that I considered its importance.

'Why don't you come nearer then?' I asked, annoyed that he had thought I was afraid.

'I - I can't. It wouldn't be safe. I-' He stopped, and then there was silence.

'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Where are you?'

I listened for a moment, but there was no answer. A sudden suspicion I could not explain came over me, and I quickly got a lighted lamp and knocked on the deck with my foot to wake up Will. Then I was at the side of the boat, throwing the yellow stream of light into the silent darkness.

I heard a slight, low cry and then the sound of a splash, as if someone had dipped oars into the water. Yet I cannot be certain I saw anything, except that with the first flash of light, there had been something on the water, where now there was nothing.

'Hello there!' I called. 'What game is this?'

But there were only the sounds of a boat being rowed away into the night.

Then I heard Will's voice. 'What's wrong, George?' he asked, coming across the deck.

I told him about the strange thing that had happened. He asked several questions, then, after a moment's silence, raised his hands to his lips and shouted:

'Boat, ahoy!'

From a long distance away came a faint reply, and my companion repeated his call. After a short silence, we heard the sound of oars, and a voice said: 'Put away that light.'

'Never!' I replied, but Will told me to do as the voice asked, so I did.

'Come nearer!' shouted Will. 'There's nothing to be frightened of here!'

'Will you promise not to show the light?' said the voice.

'Why are you so afraid of the light?' I shouted.

'Because-' began the voice, then stopped.

Will put his hand on my shoulder 'Be quiet for a minute, George,' he said. 'Let me talk to him.'

He looked out into the darkness.

'Listen, friend,' he said. 'This is a strange thing to happen, you appearing out of the darkness in the middle of the Pacific. How can we know you're not dangerous? You say you're alone, but how can we be sure unless we see you? Why are you objecting to the light, anyway?'

As Will finished speaking, I heard the noise of the oars again, and then the voice came; but now from a greater distance, and sounding sad and without hope.

'I am sorry - sorry! I would not have troubled you, only I am hungry, and - so is she.' The voice died away, leaving only the sound of the oars again.

'Stop!' shouted Will. 'Come back! We'll keep the light hidden, if you don't like it.' He turned to me. 'This is all very strange, but I don't think there's anything to be afraid of, do you?'

'No,' I replied. 'I think the poor man's been wrecked around here, and gone crazy.'

The sound of the oars came nearer.

'Put the lamp away,' Will said, then went to the side of the boat and listened. I hid the lamp then stood beside him. The dipping of the oars stopped about ten metres away from us.

'Will you come nearer now?' asked Will. 'We have hidden the lamp.'

'I - I cannot' replied the voice. 'I do not dare to come nearer. I do not dare even to pay you for the - the food.'

'That's all right,' said Will, and hesitated. 'You're welcome to as much food as you can take.'

'You are very good,' said the voice. 'May God, who understands everything, reward you -' it stopped suddenly.

'The - the lady?' said Will. 'Is she -?'

'I have left her behind on the island,' said the voice.

'What island?' I asked.

'I do not know its name,' answered the voice. 'I wish to God-!' it began, then stopped quickly.

'Can we send a boat for her?' asked Will.

'No!' shouted the voice. 'My God! No!' There was a moment's pause, then the voice went on, 'It was because we needed food that I came, because of her terrible hunger.'

'Just wait, and I will bring you something at once,' said Will. And in a couple of minutes he was back, his arms full of food. 'Can you come nearer for it?' he asked.

'No - I do not dare,' replied the voice. And I realized, suddenly, that the poor old creature out there in the darkness was suffering because of his need for the things Will held in his arms; and yet, because of some terrible fear he could not express, was too afraid to come nearer our little schooner and receive them. And in the same moment I knew that he was not mad, but sanely facing some impossible horror.

Full of sympathy now, I said, 'Get a box, Will. We must float the stuff to him in it.'

This we did - pushing the box out into the darkness. A slight cry came from the creature out there, and we knew that he had it. A little later, he called out goodbye and warm thanks. Then we heard the dipping of oars in the darkness.

'I think he'll come back,' I said to Will. 'He must have badly needed that food.'

'He and the lady,' said Will.

For a moment he was silent, then he continued: 'It's the strangest thing that ever happened to me at sea.'

'Yes,' I said. 'And me.'

And so the time went past - an hour, and another, and still Will stayed with me, all desire to sleep gone after the strange adventure.

After nearly three hours, we heard the sound of oars again on the silent ocean.

'Listen!' said Will, excitement in his voice.

'He's coming,' I said.

The dipping oars came nearer, then stopped a little distance away. The voice came through the darkness again.

'Schooner, ahoy!'

'Is that you?' asked Will.

'Yes' replied the voice. 'I left you suddenly, but - but there was great need.'

'The lady?' questioned Will.

'The - lady is grateful now on earth. She will be more grateful soon in - in heaven. She and I have spoken together. We had decided to leave this life without telling anyone about the terror which has come into our lives. Now she agrees with me that it is God's wish that we should tell you all that we have suffered since - since-'

'Yes?' said Will, softly.

'Since the sinking of our ship, the Albatross.'

'The Albatross left Australia to sail to San Francisco six months ago!' I said. 'And hasn't been seen or heard of since.'

'Yes,' answered the voice. 'We were caught in a terrible storm and the Albatross's masts were broken. When the next day came, it was found that the ship was leaking badly, and when the sea was calm enough, the sailors took the small boats, leaving the lady - the lady I love - and myself on the wreck.'

'We were in our cabin, getting a few of our things together, when they went, cruelly leaving us behind. When we came up on to the deck, they were far away. Yet we did not despair. We got to work and made a small raft. Upon this we put some food and water. The ship was now very low in the water, so we got on to the raft and pushed it off into the sea.'

'We floated away and, after three hours, all we could see of the ship was its broken masts. Then, during the evening and through the night, it became misty. It remained that way for four days, and we floated through this strange mist until, on the evening of the fourth day, we could hear waves breaking against a shore in the distance.'

'When morning came, we saw the shape of a large ship through the mist. It was close by, and we immediately thanked God because we thought here was an end to our dangers. We had much to learn.'

'The raft got near to the ship and we shouted, but there was no answer. Soon after, the raft touched against the side of the ship and, seeing a rope hanging down, I seized it and began to climb. It was difficult because of a grey fungus which had wrapped itself around the rope and which was on the side of the ship.'

'I reached the top and climbed on to the deck. Here I saw that the decks were covered in more of the grey fungus, some of it in shapes about two metres high. But at the time I was more interested in finding people on the ship. I shouted but nobody answered. Next I looked into some of the cabins, but there was a damp, sour smell in all of them and I knew immediately that there was nothing alive in there.'

'I went back to the side where I had climbed up. My sweet love was still sitting quietly on the raft. She saw me and called up, asking if anyone was on the ship. I replied that the ship seemed to have been deserted for some time. Then I told her to wait while I looked for some sort of ladder for her to climb up, then we could search the ship together. A little later, on the opposite side of the deck, I found a rope ladder. I carried it across, and a minute afterwards, she was beside me.

'Together we explored the cabins, but there was no sign of life. Here and there we found some of that strange fungus. But this, we told ourselves, could be cleaned away.

We were soon certain that there was nobody on the ship except the two of us and we began to make ourselves comfortable. Together we cleaned two of the cabins, then I searched the ship for anything we could eat. I soon found some food and fresh water, and thanked God for this.

'For several days we stayed on the ship without attempting to go to the shore. We started cleaning away pieces of fungus from the floors and walls of the cabins, but they returned to their original size within twenty-four hours which depressed us and also made us feel uneasy. And by the end of the week, the fungus had spread into other places, as though by touching it we had somehow encouraged it to travel elsewhere.

'On the seventh morning, my dear love woke to find some of it on her pillow, close to her face. She dressed quickly and came to fetch me.

"Come and look at this, John," she said. And after I saw the fungus on her pillow, we agreed to leave the ship and try to get to the shore and make ourselves comfortable there.

'We hurried to gather together our few things, and even among these I found that the fungus had been at work. One of her dresses had a little piece of it growing near one edge. I threw the dress into the sea without saying anything to her.

'The raft was still in the water below, but I lowered a small boat that hung on the side of the ship, and in this we rowed across to the shore. But

as we got near to it, I saw that the fungus was growing wildly there. In places it rose in horrible, fantastic shapes, which seemed almost to move like something alive when the wind blew across them. Here and there it took the shape of huge fingers, and in other places it just spread out flat and smooth and dangerous.

'At first there did not seem to be a part of the shore which was not hidden beneath the fungus. But after moving along the coast a little distance, we found a smooth white piece of what appeared to be fine sand, and there we landed. It was not sand. What it was I do not know. But I know now that the fungus will not grow on it. Everywhere else, except where the sand-like earth wanders like strange paths through the fungus, there is nothing but that horrible greyness.

'It is difficult to make you understand how happy we were to find one place free from the fungus, and here we put down our things. Then we went back to the ship for anything it seemed we might need. This included one of the ship's sails from which I made two small tents. In these we lived and kept our food, and for about four weeks everything went well.

'It was on the thumb of her right hand that the fungus first appeared. It was only a small circle but - my God! Fear filled my heart when she showed it to me. We cleaned it off, washing it with soap and water, but by the following day the thing had returned. Without speaking, we started to remove it again. Suddenly she said: "What's that on the side of your face, dear? Under the hair by your ear." I put a hand up to feel the place, and then I knew. "Let's get your thumb clean first," I said.

'I finished washing her thumb, and then she washed my face. After that we sat together and talked of many things, as sudden, very terrible thoughts had come into our lives. We were, all at once, afraid of something worse than death. We spoke of loading the boat with food and water and rowing out to sea, but we decided to stay. We would wait. God would decide what was to happen to us.

'A month, two months, three months passed and the fungus grew bigger, and more grew on our faces and bodies. From time to time we went back to the ship to get more food. We had now stopped thinking about

leaving the island. How could we go among healthy humans? It was not possible. Knowing this, we were careful with our food and water, since we might continue to live for many years yet. But then I discovered that there was very little left of the ship's store of hard bread. So I began fishing in the sea. Sometimes I caught a fish but it was little help in keeping us from the hunger which threatened. It seemed to me that we were more likely to die from hunger than from the fungus that was growing on our bodies.

'Then, one morning when the ship's bread was almost gone, I saw my sweet love eating something in her tent. When she saw me, she quickly threw away whatever it was. Suddenly suspicious, I walked across and picked it up. It was a piece of grey fungus. I carried it across to her in my hand, and she turned deadly pale, then red.

'I was frightened. "My dear! My dear!" I said, and could say no more. She began to cry bitterly. When at last she was calm again, she admitted that she had tried eating it the day before and she liked it. I got her to promise not to touch it again, however great our hunger.

'Later that day I walked along one of the paths through the fungus. I went much farther than usual, and suddenly I heard a strange, rough sound on my left. Turning quickly, I saw something move among an extraordinary shape of fungus, close to my elbow. As I stared, the thought came to me that the thing looked like the bent figure of a human creature. Even as this thought flashed into my brain, there was a slight, sickening noise of tearing, and I saw that one of the branch-like arms was separating itself from the surrounding grey fungus, and coming towards me. The head of the thing, a shapeless grey ball, nodded at me. I stood stupidly, and the horrible arm brushed across my face. I screamed and moved away. There was a sweet taste on my lips, where the thing had touched me. I licked them, and was immediately filled with a desire that was not human. I seized some of the fungus and pushed it into my mouth. More - and more! I could not stop myself!

'Suddenly, I remembered my discovery that morning, my sweet love's face, her shame - and I threw the fungus in my hand on to the ground. Then, feeling a terrible guilt, I walked back to our little camp.

'I think she knew as soon as she saw me. Her quiet sympathy made it easier for me, and I told her of my sudden weakness. I did not mention the thing which had happened just before - the 'arm' that had brushed my face. I wanted to save her from unnecessary terror.

'But, for myself, this new knowledge filled me with unending terror, I had no doubt that I had seen, in that monstrous grey shape, the end of one of those men who had come to the island in the ship. And in that dreadful ending I had seen our own.

'After that, we kept away from the horrible food, although the desire for it had entered our blood. But day after day the fungus took hold of our poor bodies. There was nothing we could do to stop it. And we, who had been human, became - well, it does not matter now. Every day the fight against the hunger for the fungus is more dreadful. A week ago we ate the last of the ship's bread, and since then I have caught three fish. I was out fishing tonight when your schooner came out of the mist. I called to you, and - well, you know the rest.'

There was the dip of an oar, and then another. Then the voice came again, and for the last time, through the mist.

'God be with Goodbye!'

'Goodbye!' we shouted together, our hearts full of many emotions.

I looked around, and became aware that daylight had crept up on us. A thin line of sunlight cut through the mist to shine down on the boat as it moved away. I saw something nodding between the oars - a great, grey, nodding shape. The oars and the boat were also grey. Then the boat moved out of the light, and the - the thing went nodding into the mist.

- THE END -

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