

General Warren

by Emily Townsend

It began in 1852. Of course wrecks preceded it, the *Peacock* in '41, the *Shark* in '46. But it wasn't until the *General Warren* that the trouble began.

She was enroute to San Francisco when weather required Captain Flavel to board her again. He was wary to test the bar, but the *Warren's* passengers pleaded for land. His attempt left them grounded on the spit, taking on water. Flavel agreed to go for help, promising, "I'll come back if I'm alive."

Fortune smiled and the party returned to the spit with aid. Nothing remained, all aboard had perished.

The loss was deadening for the Captain. He had left and forty-two souls had departed soon after. Astoria rallied behind him, singing his praises for the attempt, but George would have none of it. Darkness emanated from his person and any boat he commanded. Crews drew lots for stations on other vessels.

Flavel was impervious. His gaze took on a cloudy impenetrable quality, lost in the culpability of his actions. He began to take dangerous trips, painfully close to the spit where the *Warren* had been lost. It was his penance, looking for signs of the passengers, but nothing George did could raise them. For months we stepped back and let him wallow.

It took nearly two years before Mary broke the spell. A beauty, she caught his eye, despite his desolation.

Mary enchanted a change in George. Soon, we all forgot the darkness, we dismissed those months and we even forgot the *Warren*.

Soon after, the *Firefly* sank. The tug was out pulling logs when the current caught it. Five were lost. No doubt we all endured a few somber days, but loss at sea was somewhat routine.

Conversely, George was triggered and his shrouded look returned. His young, now pregnant bride, watched him transform, powerless. I wish I could claim we supported her or even commiserated, but the town reverted back to avoidance. We waited for the Captain to return from the deep.

He didn't, and neither did the wrecks. The *Desdemona* was next, then the *Industry*. It didn't matter the type or the weather, frigates were beaten and demolished in terrifying numbers year after year. At first we talked it away, we gave excuses and told stories of worse times. Then we prayed. We lit candles and gave offerings. Nothing worked, casualties rose, as did the fear. In 1883 the *J.C. Cousins* was lost. Not the boat, but everything aboard. It pushed ashore the Clatsop Spit one afternoon, unmanaged. No one could explain the disappearance. Captain George quickly organized a search party, we left around dusk.

It seems foolish looking back, to have left shore at such a late hour, but we were compelled. The abandoned vessel was the last straw. We'd sat idle too long. When we finally pushed off, the sun was sitting on the horizon.

We headed toward the spit without discussion. The Captain hadn't ordered it, the boat just sailed in that direction, as if hooked. We were being reeled in by the empty vessel.

The rufous and crimson sky lit the craft's deck from behind as we approached. Shadows filled the crevices and played games with our vision. More than once I almost cried out to report a man aboard. Then the light would shift to reveal I was mistaken. That must be why no one mentioned the music either. We were all certain our judgement was polluted. So, by the time our bow gently nudged the *Cousins* on its perch, the vibrations from the vessel were exigent. Someone suggested it was a fiddle, but I knew better. It was a violin. It was the Nøkk, a water spirit that had stolen the *Cousins* crew already. His sweet songs were set to lure us to our graves. I was stricken and urged them to depart.

"Captain, the late hour leaves us at a disadvantage."

Flavel looked at me, bemired, and stepped aboard. The team quickly followed with me in the rear. When Flavel opened the cabin door the music ceased. A stench of putrid fish billowed out from below as if the hold contained a catch from Jonah himself. It stuck to you, it dewed up on clothing and nestled into every orifice. The weight of it brought us to our knees.

George started down the steps. I couldn't comprehend. Having been closest, I had the easiest time getting back to our boat. I knew we had to escape.

So, when I saw George take that step, I cried out. He turned, and again I gazed into his muddied eyes. I saw George's guilt of abandoning the Warren, I saw his dogged need to preserve life and I saw him take another step.

He was half turned when he did and his boot missed. His hands peddled and his legs swung overhead. Then he was gone. Everyone else was doubled over, hats and kerchiefs plastered to their faces. I was the only witness.

I ran to the stairs, certain I would see him broken at the bottom.

But what I discovered was worse. Down in the hold, a brackish mildew encased the Columbia's depths. Not just a few inches or a foot seeping in, but all of it. All one thousand miles of the river were there, stacked beneath us in the hold. The fathomage of the water was impossible. Ships of all ages hung in levels below the stairs, tucked into Carroll-like hollows leading to a polluted wonderland below. Torn masts, cracked hulls, and crew purpled by age floated in the river's expanse, but no Captain. George had fallen into the Columbia and become part of it, his promise to return upheld.

A time later I was carried back to the boat. I knew not what I had perceived, but was certain the Columbia would be a safer waterway, since the Captain had been atoned. I was ready to be off and perhaps never set foot in a frigate again, when I saw him.

The Captain was aboard. His left leg was twisted and he was clearly in agony, but he wasn't lost. His eyes had cleared and he was shouting orders. The boat began to push off, the men doing everything to retreat from the encompassing odor. I sat beside the Captain and leaned close.

"What happened?"

A look of confusion, then anger lit his features. "Your damned nonsense caused my fall. The men had to return me to the boat."

I stared and conceded. The smell must have badgered my senses, I was delirious.

I stood to go and he caught my arm. The clear waters of his gaze started to recede and the sludge resurfaced. A smirk appeared where a rigidity had been. "A profound thanks to you from us all. His return was long-awaited."

My breath quickened as I watched the Captain contort, fighting a presence within. He triumphed and his stern countenance reappeared.

"Well, get on man, we're homebound."

I turned. The Captain had repressed the spirits this time, but I knew they were only obscured. Released from their watery hold, they would not be submerged in George for long.

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