

## Captain Bobalong's Ghost Ship

Three old newsmen drank and mourned an absent friend. "He had a nose for news. He could smell a story," the departed's editor said. "It was a sixth sense."

"Smell is one of the five senses," said the copy editor, who couldn't stop quibbling even at wakes.

The third newsman, an ancient reporter named Wilson, put down his glass. "Smell, hear, see, touch and taste. All are important. But no error, it helps a newsman to have a sixth sense."

The copy editor wasn't ready to let go of the olfactory angle. "Ever smell a story, Wilson?" he asked.

"I did," Wilson said. "There was a story I smelled, heard, saw, touched and tasted. And I never wrote it."

"Why not?"

"My sixth sense told me it was malarkey. My five senses were cockeyed. I'll give you the inside dope, if you like."

"Please proceed."

"It was a long time ago. I was a young reporter in Oregon working for a newspaper in Astoria. On my first day, the editor sent me to Hart's Drug Store to work up an item about a new remedy for kidney disease. 'Try a bottle,' the druggist said. 'It won't kill you.' On my way back to the newsroom, I was cornered by Captain Bobalong Kornahon, who heard I was the paper's new reporter. I later learned he was the town's old crank.

"He cheerfully claimed that a ghost ship sailed just beyond the mouth of the Columbia. He was ridiculed, of course. But he didn't hold grudges. 'People can't help it. They don't like hearing about things they can't control or tax, like a ghost ship,' he said.

"I didn't take him seriously, but he was a colorful and friendly codger. I asked the editor if the paper had ever written about Bobalong. 'Every reporter asks that

their first week,' Mr. Ireland said. 'No, we haven't. We report the news, not mad ravings.'

"Mr. Ireland was right, of course, but I still enjoyed listening to the lunatic.

"He'd light his pipe and adjust his fisherman's cap and ramble on in a guileless way.

" 'Folks blame storms or poor seamanship or a strong ebb tide for lost ships, but some shipwrecks ain't rational. It's the ghost ship. It capsizes little boats and rams big ones. The ghostly crew of cutthroats boards the biggest vessels and tosses everything and everyone overboard.

" 'Come with me and see for yourself.' "

"I thought he was non compos mentis. But, what the heck. One pleasant summer evening, I caught the last train from Astoria to Seaside and met Captain Bobalong on the beach.

"The moon was full and the sea was calm. I got into Bobalong's skiff to look for his 'ghost ship.'

"He was a small man and probably past 70, but he was strong with the oars. We were soon a couple hundred yards off the beach. As we moved farther out to sea and night came, I questioned my sanity. I was in the dark ocean in a small boat commanded by a deranged septuagenarian. When you're young, you don't think about those things until it's too late.

"I was getting a little nervous when Bobalong stopped rowing and started talking.

" 'Look toward the north. That's where the ghost ship sails from. Look for a silhouette. Look for two masts and shadows moving on deck.' "

"I looked north and saw fog.

"Bobalong whispered, 'Listen. Hear the wind filling the sails and the bow lifting the spray?'

"I heard water lapping against the skiff."

“ ‘The ship is almost close enough to smell,’ ” the captain said.

“What’s it smell like?” I asked.

“ ‘Death,’ ” he said.

“I jotted down in my notebook. ‘Smells like death.’

“ ‘The smell is strong enough to taste,’ he said.

“I made another note, ‘Tastes like death, too.’

“This was ridiculous. Mr. Ireland was right: mad ravings.

“Bobalong Kornahon relit his pipe. ‘Do you not perceive the ghost ship?’ he asked. ‘Do you not understand what you hear?’

“All I said was, ‘Well, um ... ’ ”

“ ‘Water covers three-quarters of the earth,’ he said. ‘If a man walked over every inch of land, he wouldn’t have seen half there was to see. If a man spent his life sailing the seven seas, he wouldn’t see mountains and valleys and deserts and forests. Yet, people say, “We know what’s possible and what isn’t. If we do such and such a thing, such and such will happen.”

“ ‘Ha! Men paddled across the ocean and sailed toward dragons not knowing what would happen. They lived in doubt and thrived on faith.’

“Bobalong pointed to the north. ‘Do you perceive how vast and complex and perilous this is? Seaworthy ships mastered by brilliant captains sink to the bottom, but others carry on. What we’ll see tonight is the spirit of those who took risks.’

“I didn’t say a word. I stopped taking notes. What was the point? This wasn’t news. This was mad ravings. But I sensed I wasn’t with a madman. I began sensing other things too.

“I looked where Bobalong was pointing and saw the silhouette of a two-masted ship and shadows moving on deck.

“The ship approached and I heard the wind rippling the sails. I smelled and tasted something foul and thought Bobalong must be a hypnotist.

“ ‘ Soon the ship will be close enough to touch,’ he said.

“The silhouette came right at us. The skiff rocked, and I thought it would flip over. The ghost ship veered slightly and brushed the little boat. I reached out and touched the side of the ship. The hull was solid, and the harder I pushed the more solid it was.

“ ‘We’re too small to ram,’ ” Bobalong said.

“We’re not too small to capsize! I said.”

“ ‘No, we’re not. Hang on and have faith,’ he said.

“The ship moved away and gradually the skiff stopped rocking. The silhouette, the sound, the smell, the taste vanished, and the sea was as calm as before, and Bobalong rowed toward shore.

“It was an odd thing. I didn’t ask about what happened, and Bobalong got quiet. We made small talk. ‘Nice night,’ I said. ‘Fine weather,’ he said.

“In the morning, I caught the first train back to Astoria and went straight to the newspaper office. I told my editor that I went with Captain Bobalong Kornahon in his skiff and hallucinated.

“ ‘Do you have a story?’ Mr. Ireland asked.

“I sat down and banged out a lead.

*A foul-smelling ghost ship charged at a skiff carrying two men last night off Seaside, nearly capsizing the light craft, which miraculously stayed upright as the ship vanished in the fog. One occupant was befuddled, but somehow feels humbler and wiser today.*

“Mr. Ireland read it and laughed. He read it several times aloud that day and laughed each time. It never ran in the paper, but Mr. Ireland pinned it to the wall. I heard it stayed up in the newsroom long after he and I were gone.”





