

The Mystery of the Herbert Fuller

A True Sea Tale of A Tragedy in the North Atlantic



The Steward turned just in time to catch the Swede, Brown, about to strike him down with a piece of plank.

As Told by the Steward's Daughter

Thirty-five years ago a barkentine with 12 persons on board sailed from Boston for South America with a cargo of lumber. A short time later it put into the port of Halifax, N.S., with the white captain and his wife and the second mate foully murdered and the first mate in irons. The colored steward was in charge of the ship. Who committed this crime?

By Louise Spencer Hassell

It was a balmy day, the third of June, 1896, when the Herbert Fuller, a barkentine, sailed from the port of Boston with a cargo of lumber for a port in South America with twelve persons on board. How little did the owners know of the great tragedy that would befall this ship just one week later on the high seas which would send her name to all parts of the world.

The days seemed to pass as all days do on a ship of that type, but there seemed to be a feeling of unrest among the crew. I had seen signs of trouble and suspected that something was wrong, but I really did not know just what it was.

Trouble Feared

The first realization of real trouble came one night as I lay in my berth. I overheard two of the seamen talk-

ing outside of my room in the forward house. "The steward is asleep," said one, referring to me. "No, he isn't," replied the other.

For such words to fall on the ears of some people would mean nothing, but to me they spelled trouble of a nature that I could not define.

For the previous three days the first mate, Mr. Bram, had not been acting just the way a mate should act in the fulfilling of his duties. I could see it, but others on board could not, or if they did, paid little or no attention to it.

We were having fine weather, although the wind was almost dead ahead, but the vessel was sailing along at a fair clip. All hands were going about their duties in handling the ship to get the most speed out of her, but in doing so they were sullen and not as jolly as sailors usually are in handling sails and tending sheets. What caused this feeling was a mystery to me, and above all, for the mate to act so strangely was still more mysterious.

A Mysterious Passenger

Among the twelve persons on board was a passenger by the name of Les-

ter Monks. He was the son of a wealthy man, and had thought more of wine, women, and song than of his studies while attending the college to which his father had sent him. While at the college he had gotten into trouble and his father sent him on this ship as a passenger for a trip until everything had been forgotten at home.

On the day of the fourteenth, after my duties were finished, I walked off and laid down on the coil of the main sheet to get a little rest. I was very pleasant to lie there; at least it seemed so to me. The captain and Mrs. Nash were pacing fore and aft on the quarterdeck chatting quite merrily and enjoying life in general.

The first mate was on watch, and by his actions there seemed to be something of an unusual nature on his mind, for suddenly he walked over to the captain very quickly and said something to him and then came toward the place where I was reclining and, as if talking to me, said: "That is not natural." The meaning of his words I did not know, but his queer actions puzzled me.

I then arose and walked forward to the galley and prepared night lunch for the watch, after which I again went off, lit the binnacle and cabin lights and also the side lights and retired for the night to dream of home and my loving wife.

The Captain is Killed

It was about three in the morning of the fifteenth when I was awakened by someone calling, "Steward!" I arose, dressed and went out on deck to see what was wanted of me at that hour of the night.

Upon looking around I saw the passenger up on the deck load of lumber. "What do you want?" I asked. "Come off," he replied, "the captain is dead—murdered." "The hell you say," said I with astonishment. "It is only too true," the passenger replied.

The steward of the Herbert Fuller, the hero of this tale, is still alive. He is now steward on the S.S. Luckinbach. The Herbert Fuller was sunk during the World War.

Upon going off, I looked in the port hole of the cabin, but from where I was standing I could see only the legs of a man lying on the cabin floor. Then I walked down the companionway and entered the cabin. By my startled eyes, I beheld the body of my captain—hacked to pieces. I then went to Mrs. Nash's room to break the sad news to her.

Tragedy Follows Tragedy

I found the door open and on locking in—God!—the awful sight I saw was enough to make a man go insane. There on the deck in a pool of blood lay the captain's wife. She had been hacked to pieces, too. I almost lost my mind and did not know what to do, for the moment, but I began to realize that two horrible murders had been committed. Little did I suspect that I was still to discover another.

On my way out to inform the first mate of my discovery, I had to pass the second mate's room. As I passed, I noticed his room door was partly open and, thinking that he might have heard the murderer, I opened the door and started to enter.

As I looked into the room the sight which greeted my eyes caused me to stop—dead in my tracks. There on his bed lay the second mate stretched full length with his head crushed to a pulp and blood all over the room.

I was stunned—God in Heaven—what next would I see? I knew there was a murderer on board who would stop at nothing and would attempt to kill all hands as they slept if given the chance.

To find out who was responsible for the gruesome murder of the man and woman whom I had learned to love, having been with them so long and having received so much kindness from them (something that was seldom received on sailing vessels at that time), I realized that I had quite a job ahead of me. I steeled myself to the task, however, and went on deck to notify the first mate.

First Mate Under Suspicion

I realized that the person or persons who had done this terrible deed had a reason for it, so I asked the mate to call all hands off. After he had done so, I explained to them what had happened.

As I related my discoveries, I watched the mate very closely and also the sailor who had been at the wheel that night, and was not surprised to see both of them turn very pale and uneasy and exchange glances. I suspected that the mate knew more about the tragedy than the Swede, Charlie Brown, who had been at the wheel at the time of the murders, as it would take some time to kill three people.

For my own safety I thought it best to go below and collect all the firearms that I knew were on board with the exception of the captain's revolver. I knew it must be somewhere on board, and after a long search I discovered it between the mattress and the springs in the passenger's room. I questioned the passenger as to how the revolver had come to be there, but he seemed surprised and denied any knowledge of its being there.

When I again went on deck I met the mate who suggested that the bodies be thrown overboard and to continue on our voyage. I was opposed to this idea and said we had