

The Flying Dutchman

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The old fishermen of Gansbaai were known for their stories of ghosts and legends. The damp, misty nights and the waiting at their fires for daybreak before taking their fishingboats out to sea, were a perfect setting for their imaginative stories. Surely there had to be something more than pure imagination in the Flying Dutchman legend. This ghost ship of the Cape is the most famous of all sea phantoms. It had inspired poets, novelist and dramatists. Wagner even based an opera on the fearful tale.

Sir Walter Scott referred to a phantom ship in one of his poems, and his notes reveal that it was the Flying Dutchman he had in mind. He gave the impression that the legend was known to seamen in the first half of the seventeenth century. His version is an unusual one, for he speaks of a flying Dutchman loaded with great wealth. Murder and piracy on board the ship were followed by an outbreak of plague among the crew. She sailed from port to port offering the ill-gotten wealth in return for shelter; but every harbour shut out the Flying Dutchman because of the plague. According to Scott the cause of her wandering was not altogether certain, and declared that the sighting of the doomed ship was considered by mariners to be the worst of all possible omens.

Far more familiar is the Van derDecken version, in which the captain is driving his ship mercilessly off the Cape in heavy weather. Sails are lost, decks are flooded, and the seamen beseech him to give up the attempt to round the Cape. Van der Decken lashes himself to the wheel and carries on, swearing that even God will not force him to change his mind. His blasphemous oath is heard. Out of the dark and ominous sky falls a brilliant shaft of light, and the Holy Ghost steps on to the deck. Van der Decken draws a pistol from his belt and fires. His arm falls withered at his side, and the Holy Ghost delivers sentence:

"You have defied the wrath of God, and now you will sail these seas until the end of time. You will know thirst and hunger, but never will you know calm seas again. Henceforward you will bring misfortune to all who sight you."

Captain Owen, R.N., who charted long stretches of the South African Coast, declared that he saw the flying Dutchman. The encounter appears in the logbook of H.M.S. Leven, dated 6 April, 1823. Owen was near Danger Point and bound for Simon's Bay when he thought he saw his consort, H.M.S. Barracouta. This appearance surprised him as Barracouta had been ordered elsewhere. The Leven did not attempt to make close contact. When she reached Simons's Bay she waited for a week before the Barracouta arrived. They compared log-books, and it was found that the two naval ships were three hundred miles apart when Owen intercepted the mystery ship.

Far more famous was the encounter near Danger Point witnessed by Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales, later King George V. The young princes were both midshipmen, cruising in H.M.S. Bachante. The meeting was entered in the log-book as follows:

"July 11, 1881. During the middle-watch the so called Flying Dutchman crossed our bows. She first appeared as a strange red light, as of a ship aglow, in the midst of which light her masts, spars and sails, seemingly those of a normal brig, some two hundred yards distant from us, stood out in long relief as she came up."

The report in the log-book went on, describing the ship in the smallest detail. Thirteen people altogether saw the ghost-ship, but whether it was the Flying Dutchman or one of the other few alleged phantom ships which are reputed to haunt this area, must remain unknown. The sad fact were that the seaman who had first reported the phantom vessel fell from the fore-topmast crosstrees and was killed instantly. This was not the only death. The admiral in command of the squadron died at the next port of call.

London newspapers in 1911 published a message describing an American whaler off the Cape that had almost collided with a sailing ship believed to be the Flying Dutchman. Cape Town papers early in 1939 described a queer experience in False Bay, when people on the beaches saw a sailing ship beating up towards Muizenberg. It seemed that the ship would run into the breakers, but just before reaching the shallows she vanished. They all swore they had seen the Flying Dutchman.

Koen Kano, the baron Von Münchhausen of Gansbaai, was one of the best storytellers in the Strandveld. He used to tell that he met Captain Van der Decken and his fateful ship while fishing off Dyer Island. He thought they would like to have some fish and went nearer. Van der Decken asked him to fetch anybody in Gansbaai who could beat him at swearing. Maybe such a man could help him round the Cape of Storms. Koen fetched a well known fisherman, full of grog at the local bar and between the two of them they helped the Flying Dutchman round the Cape.

"For keeps. That devil would not dare to fish again in Gansbaai seas!" said Koen.

Almost forgotten, never told - Lawrence G. Green

Wisselstrale oor die Strandveld - Jan Fourie