

## "The Mysterious Flask"

by Simo Sakari Aaltonen

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"Cap'n! Cap'n!" yelled Antony Wyndham excitedly. "Thar be a rum flask i' t'e water!"

The cabin door was flung open and Captain William Quinn stumbled into the glaring sunlight. One arm nursed the side of his head and another flailed for balance before successfully landing on the rail.

"God blind ye and yer rum flasks. I well remember the raw deal we got for our troubles the last time ye spotted one of yourn infernal bottles."

Wyndham could hardly dispute the point but he looked crestfallen all the same. Captain Quinn slumped to lean against the rough planks of the cabin.

Long moments passed. Waves lapped to the leeward, and waves lapped to the windward.

The fact was that Quinn was feeling exceptionally salty this July morning of 1864. Then again he always felt unkempt and itchy.

But the sun and the air worked on him and soon he was casting glances at the glint receding into the distance.

He pushed up with a visible air of annoyance, and deliberately avoided the hopeful stare tickling his sideburns.

"God blind ye, I say. We will have a look at the infernal thing. But if it be full of empty or half to chokin' with seaman's piss, God blind us all! *And* send an albatross to peck out our sightless eyes!"

He added to himself, "Let a man waste in peace."

But Wyndham was already working the rudder.

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It was quite a surprise when Wyndham reached for the flask only to see it disappear under the waves and then bob back to the surface. The sight of the rope around the neck of the bottle went some way towards explaining the event.

When the same thing happened again, it was decided Wyndham should take a closer look. He stripped naked and splashed beneath the waves.

Having recovered his interest in the undertaking, Captain Quinn paced nervously on the deck of the small catboat. But his eyes never left the flask in the water. The only sign of the other man for a time was the abrupt jerking of the bottle at the end of the rope.

But the sea was too murky to make out anything.

Wyndham nearly hit his head on the boat when he emerged gasping for air. "Thar's sommat alive down thar, Cap'n!"

Quinn suppressed a feeling of nameless dread as quickly as it arose. He shook his head. No sea monster tied that knot.

Armed with a crowbar and with lungs once more full, Wyndham went down for the second time.

The waiting was made doubly long for Quinn when he recalled what he had previously forgotten, wild stories about monsters of the deep that could separate a man from his head with one tentacle while uncorking a bottle of rum with another and hoisting a sail with yet a third.

However it was not three tentacles but a naked man and a clumsy diving suit that emerged from the waters. The helmet was covered with seaweed, but judging from the movement of the limbs the suit was not empty.

Indeed *The Green Claw* had become the saviour of one Archibald Castaldi, a seafaring adventurer of English-Dutch-Italian extraction. As soon as the suit was removed, colourful if gently spoken expressions poured forth from the rescued man regarding the heritage and expected longevity of the owners of the firm from which he had chartered the schooner.

Quinn and Wyndham listened to the dark-haired man's tale with interest.

Evidently the firm had considered it not worth their while to trust the notorious but hard-up treasure hunter with one of their best. When the ship had sprung a leak halfway to Castaldi's destination, his prospects had appeared dim.

Most particularly so in view of the fact he had never learnt to swim. Nor was there anything on the ship to keep one afloat on the surface. At least once the few men he had managed to scrounge up had made off with the lifeboat.

All he could do was make use of the three luxuries left on the hulk now rotting on

the ocean floor; namely the diving suit, the bottle of rum, and the length of rope—that and pray the adventurous spirit of yore had yet to leave the breast of every captain sailing the Australian coast.

When Quinn hefted the flask in his hand and remarked with a smirk that it seemed quite empty, Castaldi merely shrugged and pointed out it was better to run out of air with a belly full of rum.

But no one questioned his choice at dinner to stick to the supply of fresh water onboard.