

# The Thirteenth Boat

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*A Ghostly Light Guides an Eerie Craft to Safe Harbor Where Unseen Hands Stretch Out in Greeting!*

*Anabelle always guided Jesse in with a lantern*

I'VE never seen a ghost—properly speaking. As I take it, a ghost is a disembodied spirit, or maybe an animated corpse, or perhaps a Zombie, and I can't say I've ever seen either. But you have to believe in a lot of things you don't really see—like the wind in that jib sail, say. You don't see the wind, yet you know it's there. If you knew nothing about wind, and saw its effect only once in a lifetime, you'd call it supernatural!

Maybe it was something like that with Jesse Autrey and Anabelle Tate. Never heard of anybody meeting up with the ghost of either of them. They're both dead and properly buried by now, over on the mainland, and I reckon they'll stay that way! But there was a time when Anabelle— Well, what I mean to say is that when fifteen or twenty men all see the same thing at the same time, and

there's no reasonable way to account for what they see, it sort of gets you to wondering.

It was this way—to begin at the beginning. Less than a dozen families lived on Pelican Key, and in a little settlement like that everybody knows everybody else's business. So it wasn't any secret that Jesse was going to marry Anabelle as soon as he could buy a boat of his own.

Jesse operated a little ketch which somebody let him have on shares, and you don't get rich fishing when you have to divide the profits. It was a small, seaworthy boat, name *Kingfisher*, but the auxiliary had gone haywire and couldn't be depended on. Jesse relied mostly on his sails.

We didn't have any strict organization on Pelican Key. By common consent, old Cap'n Ludberry sort of managed things. We pooled our

catch, and he bargained with the run-boats that brought us ice down from Miami and bought our fish.

We fished beyond the outer reef in the edge of the Gulf Stream, and generally stayed in sight of each other. In the afternoon we'd all come in together. If Jesse's motor quit on him—which it usually did—he'd be left behind and get in after dark.

**W**HEN that happened, especially if the weather was squally, Anabelle would cross the mangroves to the beach on the ocean side of the island, and swing a lantern to guide Jesse in! It wasn't at all necessary, but she liked to do it and he got a big kick out of it. Of course we kidded him a lot, and got to calling her the "Lantern Girl."

Then came that hurricane of two summers ago. We knew about it several days before, but the fish were running and the price was right, so we went out every day. It certainly seemed safe enough! The radio reported on the storm every three hours. We could follow its path on the chart and were ready to run if it turned our way.

The morning of the day that the strange thing happened that nobody could explain—though they saw them with their own eyes—the weather looked fine and the barometer stood at 29.90. The hurricane had worked up through the Bahamas to a point east of us. Everybody predicted it would keep on going northward and miss us entirely. We felt as safe as we'd ever felt when we left Pelican Key that morning.

The fishing was the best I've ever seen and we were making a real haul. We kept following the schools farther and farther out into the Stream. About noon, the wind dropped, but by the middle of the afternoon it began to blow a little out of the northwest.

I stopped hauling in fish long enough to look around me, and saw Cap'n Ludberry's boat high-tailing it for shore with the old man's shirt flying from the masthead. One glance at the sky was enough! I pulled my lines and followed him with my six cylinders wide-open.

We rounded Pelican Key and ran into the lagoon just as it began to blow in dead earnest. For the next half-hour everybody worked like mad putting out hurricane moorings and tightening down everything aboard. At last my boat was snug, and I crawled into my cabin. Not until then did I

have time to wonder about Jesse, and if he'd made it to the key with the *Kingfisher*.

That's all I could do—wonder. For after a hurricane strikes there's nothing much you can do but stay put. That is, if the thing you're holding onto doesn't get up and leave you! So I rode it out aboard my boat.

The hurricane had suddenly moved shoreward. The center passed to the north of us, so we caught the west wind in the southern half of it, blowing straight out to sea. . . .

Not until the wind died the next morning could we get out to check up on the damage. It was plenty!

Then we discovered that Jesse hadn't made it! He and the *Kingfisher* were missing—had never reached the lagoon!

When I went ashore, Anabelle's folks were carrying her in from the beach. They'd forbidden her to go out in such weather, but she slipped from the house after dark. With the wind behind her she had crossed the Key to the beach on the ocean side, in an effort to show her lantern and guide Jesse in! An impossible job!

The lantern got smashed and she lost it. She couldn't get back home against that wind, and got pretty badly banged up! How she managed to live through it, out there all night in the open with tree limbs flying through the air, is by me!

Well, we notified the Coast Guard about Jesse. They searched the area with planes and asked ships in the vicinity to look for him. It seemed almost useless for us to go looking for him, too, but we did. That offshore wind might have blown him clear to the Bahamas, if the *Kingfisher* hadn't gone down, so we covered the sea as best we could all the way to Andros Island. All we found was part of a cabin roof which we thought belonged to the *Kingfisher*!

As time went on, hope for Jesse died. A fishing ketch can ride out most any squall, but a hurricane's a different thing! There wasn't a chance in a hundred that his boat hadn't swamped. Still, he might have been picked up by some ship without radio, bound for the Lord knows where.

By the time Anabelle recovered from that night on the beach, people began saying her mind was affected. A lot of gossip among the women, I thought. But it wasn't! She knew Jesse was dead, yet wouldn't admit it even to herself!

She would talk to you about Jesse like he'd

come back any day, and tell you all the things they were going to do. Then if you mentioned any other subject she would just stare off into space and didn't even hear you.

As soon as she was able, she started going back to the beach every evening with a lantern. Her folks tried to talk her out of it, but it wasn't any use. I tell you it was pitiful—her waiting and longing, and waving that lantern for Jesse, dead sure he would come back to her.

Whenever we'd come in after dark we'd see her lantern swinging along the beach. It got to be right spooky! Gave you kind of a creepy feeling! Boats from other keys saw it, too, and pretty soon everybody knew about the "Lantern Girl." The name we had given her in that laughing way wasn't funny anymore.

It was so pitiful it kind of squeezed your heart.

Then one night Anabelle didn't come home. They found her sitting on the beach leaning against a palm stump, her new lantern beside her. Her hands were folded in her lap, and her eyes were wide-open staring out to sea—where Jesse had gone! She was stone dead! She'd been dead quite a while. . . . But her lantern still burned!

They buried Anabelle on the mainland. Maybe I oughtn't say it, but I found it quite a relief not to see her lantern swinging to and fro on the black shoreline every time you brought your boat in after dark!

That was in the late fall. Winter tourists began to arrive. The Keys are pretty busy in tourist season, what with sports fishermen coming down and millionaires' luxury yachts basking in our winter sunshine. As usual, some of us painted up our boats and left Pelican Key. We shaved every day, put on yacht uniforms and went into charter-boat service for the winter months.

**I**N THE spring, as tourist business went slack we drifted back to commercial fishing, and old Cap'n Ludberry welcomed us again to Pelican Key. By then, Anabelle had become just a legend to most of us.

That was a trying summer. Hot and still, with lots of nasty weather between times. And then something happened that was eerie enough in itself, even if you wasn't squeamish. But it wasn't a patch on what was coming.

I forget now who first saw the thing but it happened on an afternoon when we ran in ahead of

a stiff squall. One of the fellows had motor trouble, and came in after dark, looking kind of pale around the gills. He was pretty mad, too, of two minds whether to have the shivers about what he'd seen, or to jump whoever had been playing a pretty gruesome joke on him.

"Who waved that lantern down on the beach?" was the first thing he asked.

Nobody, as far as we knew, and it was some time before he would believe it. Then finally he admitted it looked awfully like Anabelle's lantern.

Well, sir, we kidded him high about that. Told him a lightning bug had scared him. But if we'd had any slightest idea of what was coming our laughs might have been more like the soundless ones of grinning skulls.

The same thing happened again several times that summer. Always to different people, and always during bad weather. A few of us still laughed about it, and the rest just tried to. Things like that have a way of sticking in your mind, and a man doesn't spend his life on the open sea where he's pretty close to the stars and the wide ocean that just seems to go on and on without coming to think a lot of things might happen that plenty of folks would never believe *could* happen.

It must have been close to a year since Jesse had been lost in the *Kingfisher*, that my boat went on the ways with a broken rudder. While waiting shipment of parts, I helped Cap'n Ludberry on his boat. We were fishing farther out than usual when a big squall began making up. Ludberry signaled the other boats and we started for shore.

"Course this ain't no hurricane," he said to me, "but the weather looks just like it did a year ago when we lost Jesse."

Funny! Neither of us had mentioned Jesse, but I'd been thinking exactly the same thing.

That squall came up in no time. The wind hit us long before we reached the reef. Inside the reef is shallow water, and three miles of narrow channel with coral bottom on either side. No place to be in a blow, when you can't see twenty yards through the rain.

The wind had risen to a gale in no time. Ludberry saw the rain would catch us in the channel if we kept on our course, so he circled back out to sea, all the other boats following, and headed into the storm. Better to ride it out in deep water than risk ripping a bottom on the coral.

**T**HAT was some blow! The wind came straight out of the east, and lasted until after dark. Then it was over as suddenly as it started. Squalls are like that down here.

We had already run up our lights, and when the rain stopped I spotted the lights of several of our boats. When we crossed the reef and entered the channel it looked like the whole fleet was following us.

“Count ‘em up,” said Cap’n Ludberry. “Ought to be twelve boats, counting us.”

I counted as we rounded an elbow in the channel. “Thirteen,” I said.

“Can’t be,” said Ludberry, and he named them off. “Take the wheel while I count ‘em.”

“Thirteen’s right!” he said, after a while.

There was something in his voice that made you shiver as hard as knowing there was thirteen boats—and deep down inside you knowing who was steering that extra boat. Though you wouldn’t have said a word about that to save your life. You just *knew* somehow. That was enough. And it made your tongue stick tight to the roof of your mouth, and feel like you didn’t have anything but water in your veins. It was that spooky.

“Must have picked up a stranger somewheres,” Ludberry said, calmly, but you could tell easy he didn’t feel so calm.

We said no more about it then, for Pelican Key loomed black ahead of us.

Then something caught my eye and I just about stopped breathing. It filled in with this other thing that already had my skin crawling and my heart in my mouth.

First time I’d seen the thing! Along the shore of Pelican Key a light was moving. A light like somebody waving a lantern! Anabelle’s lantern?

I’d laughed at the other fellows for getting scared of a speck of light a mile away. I didn’t laugh now! I had a feeling like a trickle of ice water was running down my back. When Ludberry spoke, right at my elbow, I’d of jumped out of my shoes if I hadn’t been barefooted!

“Do you see what I do?” he asked, and I’d never heard Ludberry’s voice sound so shaky and uncertain, ever before.

I swallowed hard. “Cap’n, it—it’s Anabelle’s light.”

“It’s some darn fool playing a trick on us,” said the old man. He was trying to convince himself—I could see that—but wasn’t making such a good job

of it. For from the looks of his eyes, if ever a man was seeing ghosts, Cap’n Ludberry was.

I hoped he was right, though, and said so.

Ludberry swallowed hard.

“I’m going to find out who it is,” Ludberry said, kinda tight and anxious, though, “and wring his neck.”

He knew who was holding that lantern just as well as I did—but neither one of us would admit that it was Anabelle. Why, she was lying quiet in her grave over the mainland, and how could she—

As we rounded Pelican Key, the light still waved. I watched it till the mangrove trees on the point of the island hid the beach from sight, and I got an idea that sure enough there was something about that light that sure wasn’t like any light that ever was in this world.

**W**E SLIPPED into the lagoon and tied up in a hurry. The other boats came in close behind us. I counted them again. In fact, I counted them several times. Twelve! Only twelve! Had another boat come in with the fleet, and then somehow disappeared? Because there wasn’t a chance in the world that Cap’n Ludberry and I hadn’t seen and counted thirteen boats outside!

Everybody was talking at once about Anabelle’s light. No laughing now! They had all seen it. Every man in every boat!

“Quick, some of you fellows,” Cap’n Ludberry shouted in the darkness. “Grab flashlights and come with me. We’re going over to the beach and look into this!”

It took some doing, and I’ll admit my own knees were shaking, but anyhow all of us went.

Well, sir, nobody was playing a joke on us! That is, I’m as sure as I ever was of anything in my life that nobody was. We didn’t find anybody on the beach. Or properly speaking, what I mean to say is we didn’t find any living person there!

What we did find was the weather-beaten wreck of a boat. Her paint was peeling. Both masts had been broken off short. The low, forward cabin had its roof blown away. Obviously an old derelict washed ashore in the squall—yet there was something very familiar about the lines of her. Was this the thirteenth boat?

Across the stern we could still make out the name—you guessed it—*Kingfisher!*

In the open cockpit, half covered by sun-bleached clothing which the birds had torn to

ribbons, lay the chalk-white skeleton of Jesse Autrey!

A few yards back on the beach—not buried in the sand, but laying like someone had dropped it there—we found a battered and rusty old lantern. The lantern Anabelle had lost the night of the hurricane!

We buried all that was left of Jesse in a grave beside Anabelle.

A good many months have passed, but no one since then has seen a ghostly light waving on stormy nights along the beach of Pelican Key. I'm pretty certain nobody ever will see it again!

No, I've never seen a ghost. Unless a dancing light that might be a firefly could be called a ghost. But as I said before, you've got to believe in a lot of things you don't really see!