

THE HAUNTING OF THE ORION QUEEN

By Monica Hughes

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holders. If anyone feels their copyright has been inadvertently infringed, please get in touch with me via the contact form on the website.

THE STAR CRUISER *Orion Queen* had always been a clean, well-run ship, and Captain Mirador was proud of every meter of it, from the sleek consoles in the control room to the neat plastiwood paneling of the crew's quarters along the starboard gangway and the passenger quarters on the port side. He reveled in the quiet hum of the thrusters as they sweetly drove his ship through the galaxy, and in the sight of the huge cargo bay, its pods neatly packed from floor to ceiling with farm machinery, seeds, cryogenically frozen sheep, and all the other necessities for the new colony on the planet Obduran.

Captain Mirador would have been a lot happier if the fifteen orphan children he had been ordered to take along could have been put into cryogenic suspension as well and stacked in a cargo pod with the sheep. "I hate kids," he protested to the port authorities on Earth. "They don't belong on a star ship."

But the authorities insisted. The children were nothing but unwanted mouths to feed down on Earth. On a young colony they would be extra muscle power. Though they were not paying passengers, they were to be treated as such.

"Just keep them out of my way, Number One," the captain snapped at First Officer Haprin.

Judy Haprin did her best, but it wasn't easy, given the children's age ranges. Anthea and Bill, who were fourteen, were the oldest, but Natalie and Madeline were only eight. They had comic books to read, as well as a stock of books for the new colony's library, and the first officer taught them card games in her spare time. But with three to a cabin and a passengers' lounge no more than five by four meters, something had to give.

"You can play along the port gangway," the first officer told them. "But stay away from the starboard side and out of the captain's hair. All right?"

THE *Orion Queen* was three Earth-calendar months away from Obduran when the trouble started. Judy Haprin was walking along the starboard gangway when she encountered a man dressed in a blue jacket, tight breeches, and a three-cornered hat.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” demanded the first officer. “And who in space are you?”

“Pieces of eight, pieces of eight.”

The first officer blinked. Had the large green bird the man’s shoulder said that? “Now you see here . . .”

The man ignored her. She could hear him singing as he went: “Fifteen men on a dead man’s chest. Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum.”

“Wait!” she shouted. But though he had a wooden stump in place of one leg, he was gone by the time she reached the turn in the passage. “I must be going space crazy,” she muttered and reported to sick bay.

“So what’s the trouble, Judy?” Doctor Biggs asked.

The first officer opened her mouth to describe the one-legged man and the talking bird, but when she saw the doctor’s hand poised over her chart, she shut her mouth again. She could imagine what the diagnosis would look like in her annual report.

“Well?” the doctor asked once more. “Nothing, really. Just a bit edgy.”

“Hmm. That’s not like you. I can give you a shot of neurorelaxant if you like.” Doctor Biggs filled a syringe and held it against the first officer’s neck. “Don’t know what’s wrong with the crew the last couple of days. I’m almost out of this stuff. If it goes on like this, we’ll be back to . . .” She was interrupted by a series of piercing yells. “What the . . .?”

By the time the first officer and the doctor had followed the sound across the ship to the port gangway, a large crowd had collected. Natalie Pushkin was lying in the middle of it, drumming her heels on the metal floor and screaming. Doctor Biggs pushed through the crowd, picked her up, and took her to sick bay. She gave Natalie a shot of neurorelaxant, one of the last in her supply, listened to her ravings, and went to see Captain Mirador.

“I knew there’d be trouble with a cargo of kids!” he ranted.

“Only fifteen of them, sir.”

“Fifteen or fifty, they’re still trouble. Is the child able to talk coherently?”

“I suppose...”

“Then send all fifteen to my office, Doctor. And call Number One.”

“What’s up?” whispered Anthea to her friend Bill as the children filed down the corridor and into the captain’s office. “He looks awfully mad.”

“Silence,” snarled Captain Mirador. “Be seated. You. . . Natalie Pushkin. Inform the court of inquiry of what you saw.”

Natalie sniffed and hiccupped. “It was a horrible man, sir. In funny clothes.”

“Did he have a green parrot on his shoulder?” the first officer found herself asking. Sixteen pairs of eyes turned to her, and she blushed and dropped her pen.

“Does that question have any particular significance, Number One?” asked the captain sarcastically.

“N-no, sir. Sorry, sir.” Her voice shook and she took a deep breath.

“Carry on, Natalie. What did the man do?”

“Nothing, sir. He . . . he just smiled.” She shuddered violently.

“Is that *all*? You made that appalling row for that?”

“But, sir . . . His head, sir ...”

“Smiled.”

“Yes, sir. But it wasn’t on his shoulders, sir. It was under his *arm*.” Natalie burst into tears.

Captain Mirador glared at the other fourteen children. “I might have known it. Trouble! Which of you dressed up to frighten Natalie? Speak up at once or you will be severely punished.”

The children stared blankly at each other. “Maybe he’ll make us walk the plank,” Bill whispered and Anthea snorted.

“Who said that? You, boy, speak up.”

“I just said you might make us walk the plank, sir. It was a joke, sir. Like pirates in the old stories.”

Pirates. The word jolted the first officer’s memory of her apparition. A wooden leg. And a talking parrot. The kids couldn’t have done that, could they? And if not them, then who? Or *what*? She looked down and found she had written on her note pad: “Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum.” She crossed it out hastily. I am not going crazy, she told herself firmly.

The captain glared at Bill. "You look like the oldest. What have you to say about it? A game, is that what it was? Speak up now."

"It's nothing to do with us, sir. Honest. We don't have anything to dress up in, even if we did want to scare Natalie."

"That's true enough," put in the first officer. "The young people have only what they are wearing plus one change of clothing for onboard use. Everything else is stowed away in cargo."

"They must be guilty. Own up. Who frightened Natalie?"

The children looked blankly at each other and at the captain.

"Very well. Minimum rations until I get a confession."

"But, sir, you can't do that," protested First Officer Haprin.

"Can't I, indeed? They're not registered as paying passengers, they're registered as cargo. If I had my way, that's where they'd be. Minimum rations."

I should tell him about the one-legged pirate, thought First Officer Haprin. "*Space crazy,*" that's what he'll say. "Go back to your quarters, children," she said flatly.

Meekly they filed out behind the officers' chairs.

". . . and if you hadn't made such a stupid fuss, Talie," Bill said as soon as they were back in their own living area, squabbling for seats on the settees that lined the walls or sitting cross-legged on the tiled floor, "we wouldn't be in this mess. Nutribars and water twice a day. Yuck!"

"I couldn't help it. Honest. If you'd seen it, you'd have yelled too. It was gross!"

"It's a mystery, that's what it is. And it's up to us to investigate it," said Anthea practically. "Look for clues and stuff like that. Talie, tell us again."

"Well, he was wearing a funny red jacket with tears in the sleeves and his shirt poking out of them. And he had a collar that stood out all round as big as a plate and . . .and . . ." She gulped.

"Don't start again, Talie, or you'll get this pitcher of water over your head," Anthea warned.

"You wouldn't."

"Try me. Come on, you'd got to his collar."

"His neck was sticking out of it, and there was a trickle of blood down the front of his throat."

Madeline LeBlanc screeched. “Was his head really...? How gross!”

Natalie nodded. “Under his arm, with its eyes shut. Then ... then the eyes opened and stared, like they were really seeing me. And he smiled. I could s-see his t-teeth shining. So I screamed.”

“I take it back,” said Bill. “I’d have screamed too.”

“It’s a headless ghost,” Mark Harrison said in a dramatic voice and the smaller ones screeched again. Natalie began to cry.

“A ghost? On a star cruiser? That’s crazy,” Bill objected.

“Maybe it was a hologram,” suggested Ollie Olafsen.

“That makes more sense. Only who set it up? And why did they do it? Just to scare Talie?”

“Maybe it’s a psychological test, something they do to you when you go to a space colony.”

“Who’d want to give us tests, Ollie? We’re just going to grow up to be farmers.”

Anthea sighed. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. We’re going to have to find out exactly what’s going on and fast! We don’t want to stay on minimum rations any longer, do we?”

“Listen, kids,” said Bill. “You’ve got to stay together in twos and threes from now on, just in case the headless man appears again and we have to prove that it wasn’t us. So, no wandering off on your own. Anthea and I’ll look for clues.”

“If I see him again, I’ll just die,” moaned Natalie.

“No, you won’t. You’ll know it’s just a hologram. Stick your tongue out at it. That’ll show whoever’s playing this game on us that we’re not taken in,” Anthea said encouragingly.

“I can’t wait.” Bill rubbed his hands together.

TWO DAYS later Captain Mirador was strolling from his private quarters to the bridge, mellow after eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. He felt he had handled the rebellious children rather well. Suddenly he became aware of an unfamiliar figure ahead of him. “Halt! Who goes there? You’re in restricted quarters.”

The person sauntered on as if he had not heard.

At first glance the captain had thought he was in white coveralls, but now he could see that the stranger was swathed in bandages from head to foot. An accident? Burn victim? But surely Doctor Biggs would have notified him. “Identify yourself. That’s an order.” He stood in front of the figure, barring its way. The dark glasses that hid the eyes gave the bandaged face an insolent look. Captain Mirador reached up and snatched them off. “I said identify yourself, mister. I…”

His throat tightened and his mouth was suddenly dry, for behind the glasses there were no eyes, not even the horror of empty sockets. He was looking at . . . nothing. Where skin and bone and brain should have been, he could see the concave shape of the wrappings at the back of the person’s head. From the inside.

Captain Mirador yelled and ran. Doors opened and crew members stared. Wordlessly he pointed behind him, saw the bewilderment on their faces, and turned. The white figure had vanished.

He pulled himself together. “Search the ship,” he snapped.

“Sir!... What for, sir?”

“Intruders. Kids dressed up. Oh, use your intelligence. Just search!” He stamped onto the bridge. “They’ve been at it again,” he snarled at the duty officer. “Those brats, trying to scare people with Halloween masks. That’s it! Just papier-mâché masks. But I got the glasses. I’ll nail those kids with fingerprints this time.”

He placed the dark glasses on the console in front of him. As soon as they were out of his hand they began to fade, glass and frame alike, to a pale gray, then a paler gray. In a moment they no longer cast a shadow on the white console top. They were like a wisp of smoke. Then they vanished.

Captain Mirador pointed a shaking finger. “D’you see that?”

“I . . . I don’t see anything, sir,” stammered the duty officer.

“Moron! Did you see what it was before it wasn’t there?”

“A... a pair of sunglasses, sir?”

Captain Mirador snorted. “Some sort of conjuring trick. Get me those children!”

“*Now*, sir? It’s only six in the morning.”

“*Now*. This minute. In my office. And call Number One.”

AT THE door of his office Captain Mirador was confronted not by the children, but by First Officer Judy Haprin. “The duty officer reported that you’d ordered the children to be woken for a court of inquiry. That is ridiculous, sir. They have all been in their beds since ten last night.”

“Not all of them, I’ll bet. Running around wrapped in sheets with papier-mâché masks!”

“You’re wrong, sir. And I’ll swear to it in court.”

The captain groaned. Even his first officer had turned against him. It was more than he could cope with before his first cup of coffee.

By breakfast time every person on the *Orion Queen* knew that the mysterious stranger had struck again. The crew looked distrustfully at each other and went about their work silently, stopping occasionally to look over their shoulders suspiciously.

“It can’t be one person, Bill,” argued Anthea. “First a man with his head under his arm. Now a person with no head at all.” And *what about the parrot?* she asked herself, suddenly remembering the odd behavior of the first officer during the court of inquiry. She went to investigate and found Haprin in the saloon, brooding over a cup of coffee. She sat down beside her.

“Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum,” Anthea said softly.

First Officer Haprin jumped violently and spilled hot coffee all over her hand. “So it *was* you kids after all. How did you do the one-legged pirate? Where did you get that bird? And how did you get out of your cabins last night? I locked you in.”

“It wasn’t us. Honest.”

“Then how d’you know about . . . ‘yo, ho, ho’ and all that?” The first officer lowered her voice.

“I saw it on your note pad when we left the captain’s office. And after Bill talked about pirates, you said something about a parrot. You’ve seen something too, haven’t you? Why didn’t you tell the captain at the court of inquiry? He’d know we couldn’t have got hold of a parrot, and then maybe he wouldn’t have put us on half rations.”

“And have him call me space crazy? I want to captain a star cruiser myself one day. That’ll never happen with a bad medical report.”

“You’re no more space crazy than the captain, are you? He saw a man with no head. I wish you’d tell me exactly what you did see. It could be useful. Bill and I are collecting clues.”

First Officer Haprin looked at her doubtfully. “I suppose I might as well. . .”

After she’d heard the story, Anthea sighed. “It makes no sense at all. Are you sure it’s not being done with holograms?”

“Of course not. We have no equipment like that on board. Why would we?”

“To test us kids, we thought. But if it’s not that, it’s got to be ghosts, and you’ll *have* to tell the captain.”

ONCE the first officer had confessed to what she had seen, the captain grimly interrogated the entire crew and, at last, the extent of the haunting was finally revealed. One by one, on pain of instant dismissal, at least a third of the crew admitted glimpsing green slime or blood dripping from the bulkheads, white wailing figures flitting along the gangways, and other bizarre apparitions. There was no doubt about it. The *Orion Queen* was lousy with ghosts. And the crew was dangerously jittery.

An urgent message to Earth brought the following cryptic response: *Try exorcism.*

“Nonsense,” stuttered Captain Mirador. “I’ve never heard of anything so outrageous. I don’t believe...I won’t believe...”

“But, sir, the ghosts are here. And the crew’s morale is getting worse by the day. It’ll be ten weeks before we make landfall in Obduran. By then...” First Officer Haprin shook her head. “We can’t risk someone having a real mental breakdown. The doctor’s already got more cases of nerves in sick bay than she can handle. If one of the crew should go berserk, we could have a nasty accident on our hands. We’ve got to do something.”

Captain Mirador sighed heavily and called the ship’s chaplain. “Try exorcism,” he ordered briefly.

“I... I beg your pardon, sir?”

“You know what exorcism is, don’t you? It’s a religious rite to get rid of ghosts.” The captain swallowed. “We have ghosts. Get rid of them.”

“I’ve never . . . I don’t really know the form . . .” The chaplain’s voice faded at the look in Captain Mirador’s eyes, and he left the bridge hastily.

Half an hour later, walking the main gangway with a lit candle in one hand and a bell in the other, the chaplain slipped in a newly manifested blob of green slime and cracked his shin. The candle went out. He got to his feet and limped on, ringing the bell until, just outside sick bay, he encountered a hideous hunchback clothed in nineteenth-century rags. He shut his eyes and swallowed. “Begone, unquiet spirit,” he stammered. When he opened his eyes, the hunchback was smiling at him. The chaplain moaned and checked himself into sick bay.

“What do we do now?” Captain Mirador asked the first officer. “The shipping line has no other bright ideas. Exorcism indeed! I knew it wouldn’t work. It’s those children. I’ve never carried children before. It must have something to do with them. But how? And why?”

IN THE passengers’ lounge Bill and Anthea had come to the same conclusion. “Do you think we brought something aboard with us? A stray poltergeist, maybe?” Anthea suggested.

“They only throw stuff around, don’t they? And they’ve no imagination,” objected Bill. “D’you know, I saw something that looked like Darth Vader at the end of the corridor near engineering.”

“Who?”

“Don’t be ignorant, Anthea. A villain out of an old, old comic book called *Star Wars*.”

Anthea stared and then slapped the table with the flat of her hand. “Comics, of course! I couldn’t figure out where the green slime was coming from. You’ve got it, Bill. We’re being haunted by our books.” She began rummaging through the antique books the children were taking to the colony library. “A one-legged pirate . . . an invisible man . . . and a headless ghost.” She tossed three books onto the table. “*The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells. See the picture on the cover? And the pirate in *Treasure Island*.” She picked up one of the books and leafed through the pages. “Just listen to this:

There, advancing from the door of the powdering-room, a figure in doublet and hose, a ruff round its neck—and no head! The head, sure enough, was there; but it was under the right arm, held close in the slashed-velvet sleeve of the doublet. The face looking from under the arm wore a pleasant smile.

“That’s it,” screamed Natalie. “That’s what I saw.”

“But it’s just a novel,” Ollie put in. “*The Enchanted Castle*. I was reading it last week. Not bad.”

“I don’t understand,” said Bill. “Do you mean whoever is testing us is getting the ideas out of our books?”

“I don’t know. First Officer Haprin says they weren’t testing us, I mean. And she should know. But if it isn’t holograms, then it really is ghosts, isn’t it?” She shivered. “Somehow they’re coming out of our books. We’ve got to tell the captain what we’ve found out.”

“Do we dare? He still thinks it’s our fault.”

“You don’t want to stay on water and nutribars another day, do you? After all, what else can he do to us? Come on, fellow detective, let’s confront him with the evidence.”

ANTHEA dumped the books by the captain’s chair on the bridge. “You see, here’s the man in bandages. And this is Natalie’s ghost.”

The first officer picked up *Treasure Island* and stared at the picture on the cover. “This is exactly like the one-legged pirate with the parrot that I saw!”

“It’s a ridiculous idea,” snapped Captain Mirador. “How can my ship be haunted by imaginary characters out of a collection of old books?”

“Hold on, sir,” the first officer interrupted. “I think maybe Anthea here is onto something. A wandering space entity. We know they exist, Captain. I’ll bet you’ve been aboard a ship where one of them glitched the computer. Luckily, they only survive out in space. As soon as a ship approaches a planet, they leave.”

“I’ve never seen one, though. Seeing is believing, First Officer.”

“Space entities have no corporeal bodies. You *can’t* see them. But suppose these children brought some different kind of energy aboard with them, something powerful enough to permit this entity to adopt the physical appearance of the characters in their books?”

The captain looked thoughtful. “No, that won’t work. It’s never happened before and there are plenty of books around.” He waved his hand at the *Star Atlas*, *The History*

of *Space Colonization*, and *Who's Who in the Galaxy*, all gathering dust on a shelf. "Used to look at them myself once."

"Maybe our books are more interesting," suggested Bill.

"Imagination," said the first officer. "That's it, sir!"

"Imagination?" Captain Mirador stared blankly. "What has imagination to do with anything?"

"Everything, I think. I'm sure Anthea is right. Her theory fits the facts: the kind of hauntings, each appearance traceable to a book that some, if not all, of the youngsters have read. They invest their reading with imagination, and the space entity has sucked up that energy to give itself a physical appearance."

"Never heard of such a thing," grumbled Captain Mirador.

"We are carrying young people for the first time." "And the last. So what do you suggest we do?"

"We could starve the entity by destroying all the books..."

"Oh, no," Anthea cried. "You can't!"

"Great idea, Number One. Incinerate the books. That should do it."

"But you can't destroy our books, sir. They're for the colony," protested Anthea.

"And we're bound to go on thinking about what we've read. You can't just turn off our imaginations like a tap," added Bill. "Especially when we're bored."

"Then what in space are we to do? The crew's jumpy and I don't blame them."

"We can't turn off our imaginations," said Anthea slowly. "But maybe we could try to fill them with something less scary. Just till we get safely to Obduran."

The bridge was silent while they thought. A knife-edged pendulum suddenly appeared suspended from the ceiling and swung slowly to and fro. Someone on board was reading *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

They all leapt back. The duty officer screamed and punched the alarm bell. Klaxons hooted throughout the ship. The *Orion Queen* lurched and gained speed as someone in engineering boosted the thrusters.

Captain Mirador sprang to the helm. "What in space are you doing down there? Resume normal speed," he yelled. "First Officer, kill the alarm and get that man to sick bay." He caught sight of Anthea and Bill cowering in a corner. "As for you kids . . . Off my bridge. I'm sick of the sight of you."

BILL and Anthea gathered up every book and comic and locked them safely away. Then they looked blankly at each other.

“What’ll we do now?” Bill asked.

“We could tell the kids stories, I suppose. D’you know any good ones?”

Bill thought about it and shook his head. “I can’t think of anything but videos I’ve seen. And they’re all about haunted houses and homicidal maniacs. Stuff like that.”

“Ssh!” Anthea put her hand over his mouth. “Don’t even *think* . . .” From the corridor outside there came a horrendous scream.

“I can’t stop!” Bill jumped to his feet, his hands to his head. “It’s awful. The more I don’t think about it, the more I do.”

“You’ve got to try,” Anthea begged. “I think the entity is getting stronger.”

The klaxon sounded again and the Orion Queen shuddered. Natalie and Madeline whimpered and hugged each other.

“Do something,” Ollie yelled. “You two are the oldest.”

Anthea stared blankly at the box of books that had been the start of all their troubles. Then she dropped to her knees and unlocked it.

“Anthea, are you crazy?”

“It’s in here somewhere, I know it is. Ah!” She held up a small brown-backed book. “Now gather round, kids, and listen hard. *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame.” She turned to the first page. “The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring cleaning his little home...”

IT WORKED like a charm. Anthea and Bill took turns reading to the younger kids. When they had finished, they began again at the beginning. There was no more green slime. There were no headless men. The crew became quite fond of Rat and Mole, strolling arm in arm along the starboard gangway. Badger spent his days on the bridge, while Toad was always to be found in the engine room.

The only remaining problem was a vague haunting, a whistling, a pattering, the gleam of eyes—evil, sharp, malicious, and hateful—in the side corridors. It terrified the smaller children, and after a while, even the stoutest crew member became uneasy.

Anthea and Bill looked at each other. “Got it!” exclaimed Bill, and the kids made signs and fastened them to the walls of the haunted corridors. All the signs read “To

the Wild Wood” and they pointed toward a small, locked storeroom right next to the cargo bay.

As the weeks went by, and the terrors faded from the minds of the smaller children, they dared each other to tiptoe down the port gangway and listen at the storeroom door. They said you could hear, on the other side, the urgent pitter-patter of the weasels and ferrets in the Wild Wood.

That, except for Rat, Mole, and Badger, was the last, the very last, of the haunting of the *Orion Queen*.